
Blade 25: The Torian Pearls

By Jeffrey Lord

Chapter 1

A gray mist swallowed the downhill path less than a hundred yards ahead. The big man still came down the path at a steady lope. His eyes were fixed on the mist ahead, but his long legs never broke their rhythm and his feet in their scarred hiking boots always struck firm ground. He carried a heavy pack on his back and a long staff in one hand, while ragged hair and beard suggested that he'd been on the move for days if not weeks.

Richard Blade had indeed been moving across the Highlands of Scotland for fourteen days, living rough, traveling far, sleeping little and eating less, getting steadily more tired but also steadily happier. Now he was covering the last few miles as fast as his legs would carry him. Physically he was weary, but within he felt stronger and readier to face this world or any other world than he'd felt for months.

Richard Blade was a man who had to face many worlds. He was the only man on earth who could travel into other Dimensions and remain alive and sane. Even for him it wasn't easy. If Blade hadn't been a nearly perfect combination of mental and physical qualities, he would have long since lain in a grave in some other Dimension far away across infinity.

In fact, if Blade hadn't been that nearly perfect combination, no one would ever have known of those distant Dimensions. Lord Leighton, Britain's most original and creative scientific mind, conceived the experiment of linking a computer and a human brain, to form an instant genius. The human brain he chose was Richard Blade's.

Then came the accident. Instead of becoming the intended superbrain, Richard Blade vanished entirely from Britain. He appeared in a strange, violent, and primitive land where he had to use all his strength and wits to survive. Somehow he succeeded, and in time Lord Leighton managed to reverse the workings of the computer and bring him back to Britain.

It was an accident, but it was one that could be repeated over and over. It could be repeated as long as there was someone able to travel into what they called Dimension X and return alive and sane. So far that meant Richard Blade, and no other living human being.

Project Dimension X was balanced precariously on the life of one man. Such a vulnerable project would normally have never been allowed to grow to anything like the size of Project Dimension X. In Britain research money did not grow on bushes-as Lord Leighton had to be reminded frequently.

There was nothing normal about Project Dimension X, however. Carried far enough, it just might give Britain the ability to draw on the resources of Dimension X at will. Would the end of this be a new British Empire, stretching across infinity instead of across the earth? It could be. Certainly it was a magnificent dream.

So Project Dimension X would go on, whether it had one man or a hundred ready to send out. Meanwhile, the secret of the discovery would be kept, at whatever cost in lies, money, or human lives. It was easy to imagine what Britain's enemies might do with the secret of Dimension X. It was almost as easy to imagine how some of Britain's friends might suddenly become enemies if the secret got out.

Project Dimension X would go on its way, and Richard Blade would go out time after time, to face one new and nightmarish world after another. He'd gone out twenty-four times, he'd faced twenty-four

strange worlds, he'd returned to Britain twenty-four times.

Over the past two months he'd begun to wonder if he could do it again.

Richard Blade had always survived his adventures in Dimension X. Some of the people who'd been caught up in those adventures hadn't been so lucky. There were two in particular who preyed heavily on Blade's mind.

One was Katerina Shumilova, a Russian secret agent who'd made an involuntary trip into Dimension X after being detected trying to sabotage the Project. Lord Leighton decided that making her disappear into Dimension X was the best way of preserving the vital secret.

She survived her original trip into the hands of the savage Ganthi and a meeting with Blade. She even survived a second trip across the Dimensions, to the black jade city of Kano. By that time there was love between her and Blade, and both of them knew it.

Then in the battle to save Kano from the Raufi of the great desert, she died. A little of Blade died with her. She was a woman with all of his own strengths, and that made it seem unimportant that she'd begun as an enemy.

The other woman was named Galina Haran. She came from a Russia that was not Russia, a place called Russland in a monstrously strange Dimension where things were almost as they were in Home Dimension, but not quite. The Red Flames of Russland fought against the Empire of Englor. From Galina Haran's discoveries in genetics and cloning, they bred flying dragons to swoop down on Englor. In the end Blade led airborne commandos to destroy the dragons in their nest, deep inside Russland. Then the computer drew him home to Britain and Galina came with him, carrying all the notes on her discoveries as well.

That should have been a triumph, for Britain's biological sciences, for Project Dimension X, for Richard Blade. Perhaps it would be, in time. Meanwhile, the passage across the Dimensions left Galina with no more mind than a six-month old baby. Her brain was physically intact, so in theory the damage should not be permanent. But none of the doctors who'd examined Galina had much hope for her recovery. Galina Haran would spend years and perhaps the rest of her life as a helpless idiot. Blade couldn't escape the feeling that this was his fault.

Blade told himself that he had to go on doing his duty to Britain, at any cost to himself or to other people. Every other possible duty to himself or to anyone else had to take a back seat.

He told himself this every waking minute of the day, and in the daylight it seemed that he made sense. It was different by night. In the darkness Katerina came to him, her face twisted with her final agony, and also Galina, her face blank and drooling. They came so often and so vividly that he began to feel haunted.

He knew he had to get rid of this feeling, or it would sooner or later end his life and therefore Project Dimension X. Nightmares never killed a man outright. They would eventually slow a man's physical and mental reflexes. He would go off into Dimension X- in that condition, and from that journey he would not return.

Perhaps he could have driven away the nightmares with liquor or women. Too much liquor took the edge off mind and body as surely as any nightmares. As for the women, Blade could not use other people simply as weapons to fight his own nightmares. He would have to fight and win this battle alone.

So he pulled on his oldest clothes, slung a pack on his back, and walked off into the Highlands of Scotland.

Now it was fourteen days later, and he was walking out again. He was walking out with his pack nearly empty, his boot soles worn thin, bruises or blisters or a coat of dirt on every part of his body, and peace of mind for the first time in months. The two weeks in the Highlands had done the job he'd hoped they would do—two weeks of being alone, two weeks of walking himself into a healthy exhaustion every day and sleeping a dreamless sleep every night. He could look himself in the face now, without wondering if he was looking at a murderer. Once more he could face the world and his next trip into Dimension X.

Blade had chosen a part of the Highlands where human dwellings were rare and telephones were rarer. So it took several hours' more stiff hiking before he was on to a decent road. He had two more hours of traveling along the road, with the light fading and the mist thickening around him. At the end of it all lay a country hotel, where the owner and his wife waited for Blade with a hot bath, clean clothes, good whiskey, a meal large enough for two ordinary men, and finally a telephone connection to London.

"Good evening, Richard," said the voice on the line. It was a well-educated, quiet, and supremely calm voice. The man called J was getting very old, but nobody had ever guessed it from talking to him over the telephone.

"Good evening, sir," said Blade. "I'm back from the hills."

"Very good. How soon can you reach London?"

"Is His Lordship breathing down your neck again?"

"Not precisely. He hasn't got another Portal Case in mind. But he would be happier with you on call."

Over anything except a secure line, Blade and J always used language that suggested they were discussing an ordinary business matter to refer to the Project. A "Portal Case" was their name for one of Lord Leighton's brainstorms, which came at unpredictable intervals and usually left in their wake confusion, extra expense, and gray hairs on both Blade and J.

"I can easily be on call two days after reaching London," said Blade. "I trust His Lordship can wait that long?"

"Certainly," said J. "I'm very glad to hear you're coming back." His voice was no longer quite so calm.

"It will be good to be back, sir," said Blade. "Good night." His own voice wasn't quite calm either.

J listened to the line go dead, gently put down the receiver, and stood up. Then he stretched both arms as far as they would go, first to either side and then over his head. A great deal of tension flowed out of him with those movements. He was tall, so that his fingers brushed the ceiling overhead, and still limber in spite of his years. Not as limber as he'd been when he stalked Germans behind the Hindenberg Line in the winter of 1917-18, of course. But one couldn't expect that unless one found the Fountain of Youth, and so far even Richard Blade hadn't found that in Dimension X.

Richard hadn't found the Fountain of Youth in Dimension X, but he'd found something far more important in the Highlands. He'd found the ability to live with himself and his duties, an ability he'd been losing. J had been wondering if Blade would lose it for good, and he'd feared the worst.

In spite of this, he hadn't been angry with Blade. He loved the younger man like the son he'd never had, and also knew Blade's ordeal from bitter personal experience.

At some time in his life, every good secret agent realizes that he moves through life leaving behind him a steadily lengthening trail of bodies. It is something he has to face and learn to live with.

J had known agents who could not learn to live with this responsibility. He'd also known agents who never realized that they had any. In different ways both kinds became unreliable and even dangerous. Both kinds tended to end up dead or mad or both if they continued their careers as agents and didn't retire in time to something less demanding.

There were also those agents who faced their responsibilities in the same determined way they faced enemy guns. They were the good and even the great agents, who could be relied on for almost anything. J had always been sure that Richard Blade was one of those men, who would meet and master his personal crisis when it came. Now he had done so, and J could not help being immensely relieved.

He walked over to the sideboard and drew out the brandy decanter and a glass. Richard Blade's latest victory called for a celebration, not just a glass of brandy. But the brandy was all it would get.

That was nothing new. Blade and J had spent their lives in secret work, winning their victories and taking their defeats in the shadows, never able to either celebrate or mourn too loudly.

Chapter 2

Four dark-suited Special Branch men barred Richard Blade's path as he approached the secret entrance to the underground complex below the Tower of London. They checked his identification and looked him over closely. None of them knew exactly who or what he was, but all of them knew that he was someone authorized to enter the complex at will. That made him important, but there was no deference in their manner as they looked him over. A Special Branch man on critical security duty would not defer to the Queen of England without orders.

Blade entered the building that concealed the head of the elevator shaft. It was an old powder magazine, dating from the eighteenth century. The entrance was now fitted with a steel door three inches thick that could slide into place at the touch of a button. The whitewashed interior was brightly lit and continuously scanned by electronic monitoring devices. At the touch of another button the interior could be flooded with tear gas.

J was waiting for Blade by the elevator. They shook hands in silence. There was no need to refight the battle Blade had fought and won over the past few weeks. The calm smile on J's face and the firmness in his handshake said everything necessary. Then he turned and pressed the button set in the wall. A section of the wall slid aside, revealing the golden bronze of the elevator. The door slid open with a faint hiss and Blade and J stepped into the elevator car.

They stepped out again a few seconds later, two hundred feet below the Tower. The main corridor of the Project's complex stretched emptily away in front of them. Sometimes Lord Leighton himself was waiting to greet them here, but not today.

The corridor was empty, but it was neither silent or unguarded. The distant purr of machinery, the clatter of typewriters and computer terminals, faint footsteps and blurred voices all combined into sound that flowed along the corridor.

Every foot of the corridor was watched every minute of the twenty-four hours of the day by computerized systems of electronic monitors and sensing devices. Every few yards were archways concealing more sliding steel doors. Like a ship's hull, the complex was divided into compartments that could be sealed off in seconds against any attack. Trapped and immobilized, the attackers could be dealt with almost at leisure.

They would be dealt with harshly, Blade knew. The defenses of the complex included several of the latest, nastiest, and most expensive security devices. They also included some of Lord Leighton's own

devices, products of his endlessly fertile mind and somewhat gruesome sense of humor. Blade didn't know anything about most of Lord Leighton's devices and wasn't quite sure he wanted to know. He did know they would work, and that was enough.

The two men walked swiftly along the corridor, passing through eight successive archways before they reached the computer rooms at the far end. There were five of those rooms. The first four held the steadily increasing mass of auxiliary equipment and storage facilities for the computers and the technicians to handle it all. Katerina Shumilova had infiltrated the complex as one of those technicians.

As they passed through the rooms, it seemed to Blade that every inch of floor had something on it and every desk had at least three people using it. It would soon be time to add another room to the complex.

Blade wondered if the money would be available. Project Dimension X could not draw on regular Parliamentary appropriations for research and development. It depended on the Prime Minister's Special Fund and the sale of whatever Blade brought back from Dimension X.

When he brought back gold or jewels, that was easy money. Often he brought back materials or devices that defied the scientists' best efforts to duplicate them. Sometimes he brought back only the knowledge of something centuries beyond Home Dimension science. These exciting discoveries were invariably useless without many millions of pounds of additional research and development.

Sometimes luck was with him. From Englor Blade brought home knowledge of several new alloys and a new chemical fuel that could revolutionize aircraft design and performance. With luck they would need only a few years before they were in production, and meanwhile they'd generated a million pounds for the Project. But even a million pounds was only a fraction of what the Project could use.

The two men passed through the rooms of auxiliary equipment and reached the door to the main room. Beyond it lay the heart of the whole Project, the immense master computer that hurled Blade into Dimension X and drew him home again. So far it had always done both.

Lord Leighton was confident that it would go on doing so as reliably as it had done in the past. Blade could only hope the scientist was right. Certainly the old man would do his best. He found it hard to care about anyone or anything except the pursuit of knowledge and openly admitted as much. But he did care what happened to Richard Blade. There was no doubt about it, although Blade suspected Leighton would rather be burned at the stake than admit it.

The door slid open as Blade and J approached it. For once Lord Leighton was neither waiting to greet them or bustling about making last-minute checks on the computer. He was sitting calmly in a chair in front of the main control panel, a cup of tea in one hand and a well-thumbed copy of the *British Journal of Computer Research* in the other. In his stained, ragged, and rumpled laboratory coat and threadbare black trousers, he looked more like the computer's caretaker than its creator.

J looked at the scientist. Wry amusement spread across his face and sounded in his voice. "My goodness, Leighton. Is the pace getting to you?"

Leighton's bushy eyebrows rose. There was nearly as much white hair left in those eyebrows as there was on the scientist's head. "On the contrary. Everything is ready and the main sequence initiated. It would be quite pointless to do anything else until Richard is ready to be hooked up. I am not, after all, one of those types who feels obliged to demonstrate his energy by rushing about to no purpose."

That was quite true. Leighton had plenty of other chances to demonstrate his energy. He demonstrated a phenomenal amount of it, considering that he was past eighty and had lived most of those years with his legs twisted by polio and his spine bent into a hunchback. His daily routine often left men half his age

unable to keep up with him.

The next move in the familiar routine was Blade's. He made his way between the enormous gray crackle-finished consoles of the computer to the little changing room carved out of the solid rock of the wall. Inside the room he stripped naked, smeared himself with smelly black grease to guard against electrical burns, and pulled on a loincloth. The loincloth was more a gesture than anything else. He'd always arrived in Dimension X naked, sometimes with embarrassing results.

Once he'd been able to take a ruby ring with him, and another time a knife. This time he was taking nothing, since there was nothing on hand that might have a good chance of making the trip with him. Adding random bits and pieces of gear simply made still more complicated and dangerous a trip that was already complicated and dangerous enough.

He retraced his route to the center of the computer room. A glass booth stood there, with a metal chair on a rubber mat inside it. The chair looked as if its purpose was executing condemned criminals instead of sending Richard Blade off into Dimension X.

Blade sat down in the chair, leaned back against the cold rubber of the back, and stretched his legs. He began to breathe regularly and deeply, to saturate his system with oxygen and ease any tension as much as possible. J pulled the folding observer's seat down from the wall and sat on it.

As J sat down, Leighton rose from his chair with a speed and grace surprising in someone of his age and physical condition. He carefully marked his place in the magazine, put it on the chair, set the teacup on top of it, and came over to Blade.

Now Leighton seemed to explode into action, darting around and around the chair with the speed and agility of a whirling dervish. To every part of Blade's body he taped cobra-headed metal electrodes. Each electrode was attached to a wire running off into the computer. Leighton had once told Blade there were only a hundred and sixteen of the electrodes. Looking down on himself, Blade found it hard to believe there weren't several times that many.

Eventually all the electrodes were in place. Leighton made a final inspection, untangling a purple wire from a yellow one, shifting one electrode a few inches down Blade's thigh, putting on an extra piece of tape to hold another one firmly where it was. Then he backed away, wiping his hands on his laboratory coat.

He backed away until he stood by the main control panel, eyes scanning the flashing lights, hand within easy reach of the red master switch. He waited there until the familiar dance of the lights told him the main sequence was finished and the computer ready to do its work. Then the long-fingered hand on the end of the arm darted at the switch and drew it in a single smooth motion down to the bottom of its slot.

The room, the computer, the two men watching, the booth itself all vanished from around Blade in the time it took him to blink his eyes. He blinked again, and a vast cliff of fissured and scarred blue-gray stone reared itself before him and towered above him. He was still sitting in the chair, but now it rested on yellow sand.

Blade craned his neck upward, looking for the top of the cliff. He could not see it. So high above that he could not even guess how far, the blue-gray stone faded into a swirling gray sky. It was as if the cliff itself became the clouds, melting from solid blue-gray rock into gray mist.

Blade stretched his legs and started to rise from the chair. As he did, the ground under him shuddered violently, swaying from side to side and then heaving up and down. The movement was sharp enough to send the sand swirling up in clouds around him. He closed his eyes, but he could feel the grittiness

between his teeth as the sand found its way into his mouth.

After a little while the movements of the ground ceased. Again Blade started to rise, and realized that somehow he could not. It was as if the joints of his arms and legs were locked, or his back and buttocks were firmly glued to the chair. It was an annoying sensation.

Blade tried harder, and still harder, until the muscles stood out along his arms and thighs and neck in ridges and lumps. He put all of his enormous strength into trying to rise, until his chest was heaving and all his muscles began to ache.

As he tried to relax and gather strength for another effort to rise from the chair, the ground shuddered again. This time the movements were even more violent and went on longer. The sand rose up around Blade in a swirling yellow cloud that blotted out everything more than a foot in front of his nose.

The movements of the ground slowly faded away, and the cloud of sand subsided. As it did, a faint rumble sounded from high above. Blade looked upward, and his eyes opened wide.

A vast section of the solid gray-blue rock was peeling off the face of the cliff and dropping directly down on top of him. As it fell it crumbled and cracked, splitting into three pieces. Each one of those pieces seemed as large as a house, more than large enough to smash Blade like a bug under a hammer when it landed.

He was not in a real world, though, so nothing would happen to him even if the stone landed. Or was he? Was this weird world as real as Britain, and would his death here be as real and permanent? That chilling thought drove him to a still more desperate effort to rise from the chair and somehow get clear of the base of the cliff. He heaved himself upward as if he wanted to leap into the air. The chair quivered, but he did not rise.

There was still one thing he could do. He threw himself violently to one side, and the chair rocked under him. He did it three more times, and each time the chair tilted farther and farther. At last he threw it down on its side. With a tremendous twisting of his thighs and torso he landed on hands and knees, the chair riding on his back like the shell of a crab.

The chair now held his head down so that he could no longer look upward, but he knew he had no more than a few seconds. He heaved himself desperately forward, fingers and toes clawing at the sand.

He'd covered perhaps ten feet when the light above him was suddenly blotted out. He had a tiny part of a second to realize that this was some sort of end, if not the end of everything. Then a slab of stone the size of a small office building landed on him.

In that moment he knew pain that swept away all other sensations, all thoughts, all awareness even of his own body. Then the pain faded, and he knew that he was not dead—at least not except in this strange world he'd just left. He was aware of every separate molecule of his body, hurtling away on its own path into an immense chill dark emptiness. This awareness lasted long enough for relief to fill his mind, relief that he'd survived one more monstrous twisting of the laws of nature in the nightmare world between the Dimensions.

Then both relief and awareness vanished, and everything was blackness and the terrible cold void where his molecules darted about like meteors.

Chapter 3

Slowly Blade realized that his molecules no longer darted about in the great dark void. He felt them

slowly assembling themselves into the body and mind he knew so well. Then slowly that mind and body began to be aware of more than the void.

His head throbbed as if it really had been crushed and then roughly put back together. Every throb seemed to send a wave of pain through the rest of his body, so that all his bones seemed to shake in rhythm with the pounding in his head.

He lay still and let other sensations join the headache. Wetness was under him and all around him, except for his face. Some of it was a sticky, clinging wetness, like thick mud. Some of it felt more like warm muddy water.

All of the wetness smelled strongly of decaying vegetation. The warm air that blew over Blade's face smelled even more strongly and far more unpleasantly of dead animals, the foul scum on stagnant ponds, methane oozing from the black depths of swamps, a faint hint of sulphur.

Blade cautiously opened his eyes and sat up, ignoring the pain in his head. He sat motionless, bracing himself with his arms, until the pain in his head faded. Then he surveyed what lay around him.

He sat near the top of a half-submerged slope of black mud and dead, yellowing grass. His legs were submerged. The mud under him sucked and squelched unpleasantly every time he moved. Slowly he got his legs under him and started to rise. For a moment he had the unpleasant feeling that the mud would grip him and hold him here, as he'd been held in the chair under the falling cliff. Then the grip of the mud broke and he stood up.

All around him was a broad expanse of water, broken here and there by hillocks like the one he was on or by dead and dying trees. The surface of the water shimmered as if it had been polished. A closer look showed Blade that the water was dark with mud and spotted with floating bits and pieces. Blade saw dead animals, patches of dead leaves, floating bits of wood too straight to be natural, but nothing alive. He began to feel that he was looking out over a land just emerging from the waters of a universal flood-or perhaps slowly vanishing under those waters. Everywhere he looked, Blade could see no land rising more than a foot or two above the gently lapping water.

The western horizon was beginning to swallow the glowing ball of the setting sun. Blade noticed for the first time the incredible colors spreading across the sky. The sun itself was a raw red-orange with a faint tinge of gold and a stronger tinge of purple. Long streaks of crimson, purple, and salmon stretched along the horizon, layer on layer of color rising steadily upward. Everywhere Blade saw hints of other, less common colors-a rich mahogany tinged with red, an unmistakable shimmering green. The few clouds that hung in the western sky were tinged blue and pink-not a delicate blushing pink, but a raw, almost bloody color. Behind everything swirled a dozen shades and mixtures of gold and orange. The sky was so beautiful that it was almost frightening.

Blade stared at the western sky until he found the display of colors growing hypnotic. With a painful effort he lowered his gaze to the line of the horizon itself. That line showed humps and waverings, black against the flaming sky. It did not look like much-perhaps only a line of hilltops not drowned quite so deeply as the rest of the land around here. But it was certainly more than Blade could see in any other direction. If dry land lay anywhere within sight, it lay off toward that impossible and monstrously beautiful sunset.

Blade wasted no time in setting off. He had no idea how far he might have to go and he suspected that darkness would come fast when the sun vanished. He walked up over the crest and down the other side of his own hill. Before he'd gone a hundred yards the water was up to his knees. He picked up a floating branch and used it to feel his way along. Another two hundred yards and the water was up to his waist.

A few yards more and the bottom became so oozy that he found it easier to start swimming.

Blade set an easy stroke, one he knew he could keep up all night and most of the next day if he had to. Every few minutes he stopped briefly, treading water as he looked around him to take his bearings. The last thing he wanted to do was end up swimming in circles as darkness swallowed up the swamp. Each time he looked, the wavering line of dark humps was still there. At least it wasn't an optical illusion.

Once when Blade stopped he raised his eyes to look again at the display of colors in the sky. They were slowly fading, some lingering longer than others. The whole display was still something to take a man's breath away, and Blade found himself wondering what might be the cause. He remembered that volcanic dust in the atmosphere often led to such unnaturally colorful sunsets.

As he watched, he suddenly saw five lean winged shapes glide across the sky, black silhouettes against the blazing colors. They soared lightly and easily, sweeping upward from the horizon and losing themselves in the twilight that was spreading from the east. Blade watched them until they faded from sight, and did not much care for their looks. He had an impression of twenty-foot wings, long beaks, and spiked tails. Birds, bats, or giant reptiles of some sort? Certainly they looked like meat-eaters. Blade hoped they weren't hungry.

He swam on. He'd covered about a mile when he felt his feet strike into sticky mud. A few more strokes and he was able to walk again. He strode forward, water and mud and trailing weeds dripping from him, until the water was no more than knee deep. He passed a clump of trees with wilted green leaves still hanging from their branches. A few birds twittered cheerfully to themselves in the branches as they settled down for the night. Their sound made Blade feel better. They were the first healthy living things he'd seen or heard in a Dimension that otherwise seemed to be almost nothing but water and mud and weirdly glowing sky.

Blade walked through the knee-deep water across what once must have been level ground for nearly a mile, past several more clumps of trees. Far off to the left he saw what looked like the ruins of farm buildings. In the gathering twilight he could not be sure, and he had no time to spare for side trips.

Another three hundred yards, and the water began to deepen again as the ground sloped away under him. Blade could clearly see his goal to the west now. It was unmistakably a hilly, wooded shoreline. It seemed no more than three or four miles away, although it was hard to judge distances in this land. A long swim in the darkness, but worth it-Blade wanted dry land under him before he stopped for the night.

He covered another hundred yards, then the light was gone from the sky and the ground from under his feet. He started swimming again, looking up at the sky to see if there were any stars he could use to guide himself. There were none, and no moon either. Fortunately Blade's sense of direction was excellent. He focused his mind and body totally on swimming in a straight line and kept moving.

How long he swam in that state of concentration and how much distance he covered, he never knew. He only knew that in time he saw the land begin to rise ahead of him, dark enough to stand out even against the dark water. He also knew something much less pleasant. He was no longer alone in the water. Something large was swimming purposefully along behind him. He could hear the ripple of water around it, an occasional splash, and the sound of slow heavy breathing.

Blade fought down a moment's feeling that turning around would make the creature launch its attack, stopped, and looked behind him. He saw a broad head rising from the water and a bony crest rising above the head. Two eyes shone dimly on either side of a long snout. The snout lifted and Blade heard another puff of breath. He also saw the creature's jaws open to display two rows of teeth. He was relieved to see that the teeth were broad and blunt, not long and sharp. In spite of its size the creature

was a plant eater. That meant it wouldn't be interested in him as a meal.

It was interested in him, though, and it seemed to be a good forty feet long. Something that big could be dangerous out of curiosity or even playfulness. Blade turned and started swimming again. Behind him he heard the steady breathing and splashing as the creature did the same.

The naked man and the scaled creature swam slowly and steadily toward the land. Blade took great care to swim smoothly and steadily, with no jerky movements the creature might misinterpret. The teeth in its jaws might be blunt, but those jaws were powerful enough to crush his bones if they ever closed on him.

After too many long minutes, Blade again felt his feet strike oozy mud. He knew he could move faster if he kept swimming. He swam on, fighting the temptation to put on a last burst of speed and get out of the water. The creature might be amphibious, quite able to follow him into the shallows or even a short distance onto the land.

At last the water grew too shallow for swimming. Blade stopped and turned, resting on hands and knees with only his head above water as he looked back at the creature. It was still on his trail, floating submerged up to the eyes, apparently stopped.

Slowly Blade rose to his feet. Even more slowly he turned toward the land and started walking. He tried to walk without making a splash or even a ripple.

Foot by foot Blade moved toward the land. The water crept down his thighs until it reached his knees. Now he could take longer strides without making any noise. A dozen more steps should have him out of the water entirely. One, two, three, four-

On the fifth step Blade's right foot came down on a submerged root. Before he could react it broke under him, sending him lurching forward. He went to his knees with a splash.

To Blade's strained hearing the splash seemed to roll across the water like an explosion. It was certainly loud enough to reach the creature behind him. Blade heard a hissing roar as massive lungs took in air. Then came the tremendous splashing of a huge body heaving itself forward through the water.

Blade ran, charging through the last few yards of water in a few seconds, throwing up spray like a motorboat. His feet came down on drying mud and then on damp grass. Behind him the creature gave another hissing roar. Blade kept going. Even if it couldn't follow him onto the land, that long neck could reach well up past the waterline.

A bush loomed in his path, and this time he did jump. He landed on a moss-grown log which rolled out from under him, spilling him to the ground. A thick layer of dead leaves broke his fall.

As he rose the creature drove itself hard into the mud with a tremendous squelching splash. A miniature tidal wave poured up onto the land, reaching halfway to where Blade stood. The creature roared in surprise at finding itself aground, roared even louder at finding itself stuck fast in the mud, and began thrashing around frantically. Its tail lashed the water into foam, and its head struck here, there, and everywhere along the shore, its jaws snapping furiously.

Now that he could see it more clearly, Blade saw the creature had no legs, only flippers ending in long bony spurs. No doubt they would do a good job rooting up the water plants or striking at rivals or enemies, but they wouldn't take the creature a single inch on dry land.

Blade turned his back on the stranded creature and walked off inland. He rather hoped it would get itself unstranded before too long. It hadn't really done anything to him, so he had no reason to wish it dead. He

also didn't want the creature's struggles to get afloat to attract unwelcome visitors, either animal or human.

Apparently it succeeded. At any rate the roars and splashes died away by the time Blade was out of sight of the water. Trees began to rise more and more thickly on either hand. Blade realized that he'd climbed out onto a fairly substantial stretch of dry land, more than the crests of a few hills.

In that case it was time to stop for the night. He was tired, he was thirsty, and daylight was the time to explore what lay ahead.

Blade picked a nearby tree and scrambled up to where two thick branches jutted out from the trunk. Their bases formed a broad, solid platform. He could have slept more comfortably on the ground, but he didn't want to take the risk if he didn't have to. Not all of the large and bad-tempered creatures in this Dimension might be water-dwelling plant-eaters.

He shifted about, trying to find a position where his arms and legs didn't dangle and nothing dug painfully into his skin. The tree was taller than most of its neighbors, and through gaps in the leaves Blade could catch glimpses of the forest spreading away in all directions.

To the north and the west he saw beyond the forest the faint loom of more and higher hills. He saw hints of jagged summits, a thin silvery plume of steam or smoke, and then something that made him stop and look again.

In the shadows along the flank of one hill a small circle of orange light flickered. It was impossible to be certain what it was or how far away it lay. It might be volcanic activity, but Blade had also seen circles of campfires that looked exactly like this from a distance.

He looked again, and saw that the darkness behind that hill and its neighbors on either side was not quite perfect. A dim, diffused glow with a faint tinge of orange seemed to be spread along that portion of the horizon. More campfires—the campfires of an army whose scouts he could see on this side of the hill?

Blade started wedging himself firmly into place. He wasn't going anywhere tonight, even if a city of solid gold lay under that distant orange glow. He knew the value of doing his exploring with a rested body, a clear head, and the light of day to help him.

He willed himself to ignore the hardness of the branches under him, the roughness of the bark against his skin, the continuous whine of insects and the occasional raucous screech of a night bird. Slowly the world faded away, and he slept.

Chapter 4

Blade awoke with a watery sunlight in his eyes and a monumental uproar in his ears. It sounded like a hive of angry bees, a tribe of monkeys, and a rioting football crowd all rolled into one continuous roaring and screeching and droning.

Blade sat up, stretched to unkink his muscles, and started to climb down the tree. Ten feet above the ground he stopped abruptly and scrambled back up to the nearest branch.

A herd of low-slung, broad-snouted, grayish-brown animals was flowing past the tree, snorting and grunting and jostling each other. The smallest one must have weighed a lean and sinewy two hundred pounds, and all of them had long dirty yellow tusks. Blade carefully climbed back to a higher branch and waited there for the herd to pass. If those beasts were as bad-tempered as they were ugly, he didn't want to face them with his bare hands.

There seemed to be no end to the herd. The beasts trotted past by the hundreds, their gruntings and the thud of their hooves rising to drown out all the other sounds of the forest.

Then suddenly half a dozen dark-striped yellow shapes seemed to explode out of the underbrush or drop down from a nearby tree. Each of the attackers selected a victim from the herd, leaped on its back, and cut halfway through the neck with a single bite. Some of the older boars turned to face the enemy, but were swept away in a snorting, squealing flood as the rest of the herd panicked. The herd vanished with a tremendous thunder of hooves and a deafening crackling and crashing of flattened bushes. They left behind them a good many of their comrades knocked down and trampled, as well as the half dozen taken by the striped beasts.

These now settled down to feed. They were the size and shape of leopards, with large erect ears and dark bluish stripes instead of spots. Blade waited until they seemed to be paying attention to nothing but their meals. Then he clambered around to the far side of the tree, climbed down as quietly as possible, and ran.

He kept running until he was sure he was out of sight, scent, or hearing of the blue-striped cats. Then he slowed down to a brisk walk, eyes darting from, side to side, searching for possible attackers or weapons. He tried to follow a course toward the northwest, where he'd seen the lights during the night.

After an hour the overcast broke up and the sun came out. Now Blade was able to take a bearing every time he came to a clearing. As far as he could see the underbrush was trampled down or eaten bare. Small trees were completely stripped of bark to a height of six or eight feet. The remains of various predators' victims lay thickly, some bare dry skeletons, others sending up ghastly smells of decay and drawing ugly blue-green clouds of insects. In places the bodies lay so thick that Blade had to stuff leaves in his nose to shut out the smell.

The rising waters seemed to have driven the animals ahead of them. Now many times the usual animal population of the forest was packed into it. They were carrying on a deadly struggle for food and living space, and would be more than usually nervous and combative.

After another hour Blade found an untrampled stand of thorny bushes and broke off a long branch. The branch wouldn't be much protection against anything larger than a house cat, but it could at least beat off insects and snakes.

The insects swarmed still more thickly around Blade as the sun rose higher in the sky and the sweat poured down his body. He chewed on green leaves for their moisture and kept in the shade as much as possible. Last night he'd been in danger of drowning in a waste of undrinkable water. Now he was suffering from thirst in the middle of an apparently waterless forest.

As the afternoon passed the sky disappeared behind a screen of clouds. The clouds grew slowly thicker and darker, and a breeze began to ruffle the leaves. The breeze became a wind that made the branches and the smaller trees sway, gently at first. The wind blew deliciously cool on Blade's skin.

Thunder began to roll, rapidly coming closer and growing louder. The branches tossed more wildly, and a dazzling glare flashed across the forest as lightning darted down from the clouds. As the thunder rumbled away into silence Blade heard the crackling and crashing of a tree going over. Then all other sounds were drowned out as the skies opened like the sluice gates of a dam and poured down rain on the forest.

The rain stung Blade's bare skin like a hailstorm. He threw his head back until his open mouth was turned to the sky, closed his eyes, and drank and drank and drank. As he drank, he felt the rain scouring his skin free of sweat and dirt and the mashed bodies of countless insects.

He drank until he couldn't drink any more, then started on his way again. The rain settled into a steady downpour, lashed across the forest like a whip by the wind. Thunder crashed and lightning flared and crackled on all sides and directly overhead. Blade found he had to walk constantly looking upward, to avoid being brained by falling branches and whole trees.

The rain was still pouring down when Blade stepped between two trees and found nothing but saplings and low bushes ahead of him. He peered through the rain, one hand sheltering his eyes from the pelting drops. After a hundred yards of saplings the ground was level, covered with ragged grass swaying in the wind and stretching off to vanish behind the gray veil of the rain.

Blade stopped. There was no point in wandering aimlessly out onto the plain ahead to end up roaming in circles. He could be at the very foot of the hills where he'd seen the lights, but they would be invisible until the rain stopped.

Another hour, and the rain began to ease. It was like a series of curtains rising. As each curtain rose, Blade could see a few hundred yards farther out into the gray twilight that was settling across the open land.

Behind him the forest slowly began to come back to life, as Blade moved out into the open. He kept bearing to the right as he walked. That should bring him to some point along those hills, and after that

He'd gone barely half a mile when he stopped abruptly, to stare down at the grass in front of him. A wide trail was beaten down there, a trail a hundred yards across where the grass lay crushed flat under the prints of human feet and the hooves of animals. In many places the earth lay in parallel brown furrows, gouged up by the wheels of heavy carts or wagons. The trail came out of the rain to Blade's right and vanished in the misty twilight.

The grass was still green, without a trace of yellowing. Whoever had passed by here was only a few hours away. Blade knelt to examine the furrows. They were sunk deep into the earth, as if the wagons had been heavily laden. Along the furrows lay half-dissolved piles of purplish-brown dung and occasional bits of fresh reddish-brown meat. Blade picked up one that had a long strip of leathery gray hide still attached.

He was turning the hide over and over in his hands when he heard a human voice shout out a wordless cry. Three other voices echoed it. He whirled, to see four armed men trotting toward him on creatures that looked like slimmed down oxen.

Blade thrust the butt of his thorn branch into the mud and stood up, facing the oncoming riders with his hands at his sides. This was as good a time as any to meet the people of this Dimension.

Chapter 5

As they saw Blade waiting for them, the riders slowed to a walk. They spread out into a crescent with the points toward Blade and came on as if they had all the time in the world. Three of them weren't even looking at Blade.

Blade looked at all of them as they approached. All four wore kiltlike garments slit up the side, shapeless calf-length boots, and not a stitch above the waist except two or three necklaces apiece. Their heads were shaved except for a scalp lock running from front to back, and bone earrings dangled from their rather large ears. Their eyes were wide, dark, and totally expressionless; their skins were a dirt-smearred reddish-brown.

They rode without stirrups, sitting on leather pads tied across the backs of their mounts with rope. Each

man had a shortsword slung at his belt and a longsword, a bow, and a quiver of arrows tied on one side of his mount. On the other side hung leather pouches and water bottles.

The animals' horns curved forward, and each horn divided into two sharp points at the ends. All four points were painted red and one of the animals had a diamond-shaped patch shaved on its forehead. Otherwise they looked very oxlike—broad, thick bodies covered with grayish hair and supported by four heavy splayed-out limbs. They looked built for strength and endurance, not speed.

The four men reined their mounts to a stop when the nearest one was about ten yards from Blade. None of them dismounted. One of them picked up his bow, nocked an arrow to it, and held it with the arrow's point toward Blade. Two others shifted in their saddles so that between them they could look all around the horizon.

It was a display of military skill that impressed Blade. These people didn't look hostile, but they were obviously as suspicious of him as he would have been in their place. So they would be efficiently on their guard until they could be sure that he was harmless and alone.

The fourth man rode the ox with the diamond blazed on its forehead. He raised one hand in a gesture of greeting. Blade noticed he kept the other hand very close to the hilt of his shortsword.

"Ho, wanderer. Why do you wander here, alone on the trail of the Kargoi?" As always, the alterations in Blade's brain during his passage into this Dimension made the words reach him as plainly as English.

"The Kargoi have left their trail on the land where I choose to walk," replied Blade. His English thoughts left his lips as the clicking, hissing speech of the Kargoi. He'd chosen those words to give the impression of a man who wished the Kargoi no harm but did not fear them and would not. With warriors like these there was always a delicate balance. Be too proud, and provoke them to a pointless fight. Be too polite, and be considered a weakling or a coward who can be killed without a second thought.

The leader's face showed no reaction to Blade's words. There was a moment of silence, broken only by the faint sigh of the wind and the fainter dripping of the last of the rain.

Then he shifted his hand, until it actually rested on the hilt of his shortsword. It was a gesture meant to be noticed. Blade smiled politely to show he had noticed, met the leader's eyes and held them. Except for the smile and the fixed eyes, Blade's face was as expressionless as the warrior's.

Without saying a word, Blade wanted to send a vital message:

"You may be able to kill me, and you may not be. It does not matter to me whether you can or not, or whether you even try. It does matter to you, for you will certainly die whether I do or not."

It was a message Blade wanted to send and keep sending until it was firmly impressed on the leader's mind.

Few men will provoke a battle after they've been firmly assured they are certain to die in it.

The silence went on. Blade did not take his eyes off the leader, but he shifted his footing slightly. Now he could either stand to face an attack or run to deliver one. It would depend on whether the archer loosed his arrow, or the leader insisted on using his sword.

The silence went on for a little longer. Then the quiet, grim promise in Blade's leveled eyes and poised body sank into the leader's mind. Slowly he moved his hand away from his sword hilt, and rested it in his lap. Blade noticed that the movement was slightly jerky. He took his eyes off the leader, but didn't relax.

He'd met and held the man in a silent clash of wills. The man might take this gracefully, as from one warrior to another. Or he might feel a wound to his pride that could drive him to violence more surely than any wound in his body. It was impossible to guess, for the man's face remained expressionless. It seemed a face that would remain expressionless even if the man were being slowly tortured to death.

Then the leader's other hand flickered in a brief signal. The archer thrust the arrow back in its quiver and laid his bow across his lap. Blade took a deep breath, let it out, and relaxed his own stance, one arm dangling freely and the other hand braced against one hip. He smiled again, and this time the leader smiled back.

"It takes courage to speak harshly to warriors of the Kargoi," the man said. "It takes even more courage to speak harshly to them without saying a word."

Blade suddenly felt almost friendly toward the leader. The man had pride, but it was the pride of a warrior who knew he was so good that he didn't have to prove it by meaningless bloody little fights. It was also the pride of a warrior whose followers knew that he was good. He could refuse a fight in full sight and hearing of the other three men without losing their respect.

He looked like a good man to have on one's side in a new Dimension. Other warriors of the Kargoi would listen to him and his judgments. They might not obey him or follow him in battle, but they would hardly slip a knife into a stranger under his protection. Without shedding a drop of anyone's blood, Blade had won his first victory in this Dimension. To win the same victory in other Dimensions he'd had to kill as many as a dozen men.

The leader crossed his arms on his chest. "Who are you, and what do you seek in this land where the Kargoi have left their trail?"

"My name is Blade. I seek the Kargoi."

"I am Paor. You seek us alone and naked?"

"I have not heard that one needs to come to the Kargoi with an army, if one does not wish them harm. Their warriors can tell an enemy when they see one and do all that is needed. But those who are not enemies" Blade shrugged.

Paor smiled. He obviously recognized the flattery, but still enjoyed hearing it. Few men can resist being praised for their honorable behavior.

"Indeed, you know the ways of the Kargoi," said Paor blandly. "I think the time has come for you to know them better. You shall come to the camp of the Red People and speak before their baudzi." He turned to one of the other men. "Agik, join Bayus on his mount. Blade, mount upon Agik's drend and we shall take you with us."

In a minute the two warriors were doubled up on one drend. In another minute Blade was mounted on the back of the vacant one. Paor took the reins of Blade's mount and tied them with a length of rope to his own straps. Then he remounted and dug his heels into the flanks of his drend. The beast grunted irritably, then lurched into motion. The other warriors fell in behind Blade, and the little party trotted off across the plain, through the twilight.

Minute by minute, the drends slowly increased their pace from a leisurely walk to the rolling trot Blade had seen first. Soon they were moving fast enough so that a man would have had to run in order to stay ahead of them. More important, it seemed as though the drends would be able to keep going long after most men had run themselves breathless and collapsed, to be trampled underfoot.

Blade now understood why the mounted warriors of the Kargoi carried bows and swords, but no lances. The drends were too slow and solid. Even the best warrior mounted on one could hardly press home a charge against an opponent who was free to move.

On the other hand, this same slowness and solidity made the drends excellent platforms for archery and swordsmanship. Did the Kargoi rain arrows on their opponents from a distance, then close in and go to work with their swords? Blade was intrigued by the idea. He'd never fought a cavalry battle in slow motion before!

The light was almost gone now, but the sky was clearing. The drends trotted forward, staying in the trampled-down trail but instinctively avoiding the ruts left by the wagon wheels. Off to the left Blade saw the loom of the forest that lay between the plain and the sea. The trail seemed to be running almost parallel to the edge of the forest. No doubt the rich animal life of the forest offered the Kargoi excellent hunting.

By Blade's rough reckoning, it was two hours after dark when they turned off the trail and stopped. Blade saw they were surrounded by grass heavily grazed in spots but not trampled into the ground. The drends promptly lowered their heads to the standing grass and began munching busily. The warriors dismounted, took nuts and strips of salt meat from their pouches, and began to eat. They seemed to have forgotten Blade's existence.

Eventually Paor finished his meal, drank some water from his bottle, and came over to Blade. In the darkness his face was unreadable, but his tone was sympathetic.

"It is unbreakable law that a stranger can neither eat nor drink with warriors of the Kargoi until at least five of the baudzi, the War Guides, have called him worthy. I call you worthy and will go on calling you worthy, but I am alone. Four more baudzi must be found before I can give you food or drink without being cast down among the tent carriers and the dung gatherers."

Blade nodded silently. He could not help wondering where else he could eat and drink among the Kargoi, if not with the warriors. If the Kargoi were migrating, they and their chiefs might be scattered far and wide across a plain extending for many days' march. Blade didn't particularly want to fast until five chiefs could be tracked down and assembled in one place to judge his worthiness.

Something of this must have shown in his face. Paor smiled. "It will not be so hard to find four baudzi or perhaps even more. All six clans of the Red People are together. We will be up with them once more before it grows light."

"I understand," said Blade. "Do not worry. You ask of me no more than a warrior should be prepared to face, if he is worthy of the name." He did not say that in a boastful tone, but as quietly and politely as if he was discussing the weather. Blade's eyes met Paor's and held them for a moment. Paor smiled and turned away. In a few minutes they were on the move again.

They rode on through the empty, silent darkness for the rest of the night. One more time they swung off the trail to let the drends graze. The warriors dismounted, but neither ate nor drank.

An hour after that the sky began to turn gray. Blade watched the eastern horizon, to see if sunrise in this Dimension would match the sunset. He saw that the forest no longer marched parallel with them to the east. There were scattered groves and isolated trees, but much of the land was open. Once he saw what could only be the ruins of a small castle, with a stone keep rising blackened and grim against the lightening sky. Half a dozen cattle were grazing in the shelter of a half-tumbled wall. Once they must have been part of the castle's herds. Now they were wild things that galloped clumsily off in all directions as Blade and the Kargoi rode past.

The light to the east grew and began to flare. Once more Blade saw the sky lit up with a dozen different colors and a dozen different shades of each color, a display so overpoweringly beautiful that it was almost terrifying to watch as it grew steadily. It grew until it was possible to imagine that the colors would spread all across the sky, then pour down on the world and swallow it entirely.

Blade watched the faces of the Kargoi as the sunrise grew. He would have liked to ask them about the colors, but this might not be wise. So far they seemed to think that he was merely a wanderer from some other part of this Dimension. If he said anything to hint that he was not familiar with the Dimension's spectacular sunrises and sunsets, at least the sharp-witted Paor might wonder.

The baudz watched the sunrise in silence, until its raw beauty began to fade as daylight came to the land. Then he turned to Blade.

"What do your people say of the colors at the rising and the setting of the sun?"

"The sky is the face of the Worldmaster," he said with glib assurance. "The Worldmaster feels a mighty anger toward us below, his servants. From that anger the colors come, that pass across his face at the dawn and the sunset."

Paor laughed grimly. "There were those among us who said the same thing, when the sky changed after the shaking of the land and the burning of the mountains. But then the waters began to rise. Slowly they ate up our homeland so that we had to seek a new one. Then we no longer worried about what anger the gods might be showing in the sky. It was enough that their anger was on the earth-or rather, in the waters that were swallowing it." He paused, then fixed Blade with a not quite friendly stare. "Is your land yet uneaten by the waters?"

"Part of it," said Blade. "Some remains. But what remains is only enough for those people who live there now. Our hearts are not hard, but our swords would be swift against anyone else who came seeking a home among us." He laughed, to take the harshness out of his words. "There is also this. I sailed to this land in a ship that traveled for thirty days and nights before it was wrecked. Can the Kargoi ride their dreads and haul their wagons across such a width of sea?"

Paor relaxed visibly. "No, I think your land is safe from the Kargoi, if not from the gods. It is in our power to take our beasts and our wagons and ourselves across small rivers and perhaps large ones. So much water as you have crossed would stand in our path forever." He frowned. "Or at least until we learned the art of building ships. That is an art we may well wish to learn, when we have found our new home. If the gods take from the land and give to the sea, those who can sail the farthest may live the longest."

"Perhaps," said Blade politely. "But the wrath of the gods is abroad on the sea. Remember that although my ship came thirty days from my homeland, it was wrecked in the end. A storm overthrew it, a storm that made me think the bowels of the earth were being torn up. Then the creatures of the sea fell on my comrades, so many of them did not even live to drown."

Blade could now be reasonably sure what had happened in this Dimension. His guess about volcanic dust in the air causing the sunset colors had been right. There'd been a period of seismic activity, with volcanoes erupting all over the world and spewing dust into the air. That dust not only colored the sunsets and sunrises, it made the world warmer. Somewhere massive icecaps had begun to melt and gone on melting, pouring water into the seas until they started to rise and swallow the land. One by one, the people whose lands were vanishing beneath the water had to flee, fighting their way along as they searched for new lands. A grim picture.

Blade let no hint of his thoughts appear as he went on. "I shall gladly teach you as much as I can. I have

little chance of returning to my homeland. By the time the Kargoi have learned to build great ships, I will be dead or far too old for the voyage. Perhaps by that time the anger of the gods will also be no more, so that when the Kargoi and my people meet, they will do so in peace."

"We can indeed hope for an end to the anger of the gods," said Paor with a sigh. "I wish we could do more than hope."

They rode on in silence for another hour. Then the horizon ahead began to show squat black shapes. In a few more minutes they were in sight of the camp of the Red People of the Kargoi.

Chapter 6

The camp was laid out in a circle, a circle formed by more than three hundred immense wagons. Each wagon was a high-sided rectangular box, about thirty feet long and ten feet wide, set on four pairs of large solid wheels. The two pairs in front were smaller than the pairs in the rear. They were attached directly to the yoke and could swivel to steer the wagon. Each wagon was covered by a straight-sided canopy of heavy canvas.

The wagons formed a double circle nearly a mile in diameter. Between the inner and outer circles was a space about a hundred feet wide. In that space Blade saw tents with decorated poles from which banners flew, campfires whose smoke reeked of dung, blacksmiths and wheelwrights and other craftsmen hard at work. Warriors greased boots and weapons, mothers nursed babies, older children ran about, naked or wearing only leather breechclouts.

In the center of the circle Blade saw a solid mass of drends. They were unmistakably the same species as the beasts the warriors were riding, but obviously bred for pulling instead of riding. They were half again as large as the riding drends, thicker in the legs, and with only one blunt point on each horn. Their necks and shoulders looked as massive as the Rock of Gibraltar and were galled and darkened by yoke and harness.

Blade started to count the wagon drends, reached three hundred, then gave up. With six or eight drends to each of the wagons, plus spares, that meant between two and three thousand wagon drends.

Two or three riding drends were tethered to each of the wagons in the outer circle. At least twenty mounted warriors were riding slowly around the whole circle. Blade noticed that each carried a staff with a red pennant on the end and a small skin drum slung on one hip. Paor called one of the riders to him and sent the man off to bring word of a stranger's arrival to the other baudzi.

Paor and Blade rode on toward the wagons. Halfway around the circle, a party of nearly naked men was at work under the supervision of several guards. They were pulling away piles of brush from between two pairs of wagons, leaving a gap. Half a dozen mounted warriors rode in through the gap and started herding the wagon drends out to graze. The great beasts lumbered out slowly, swaying like drunkards and making little hoots and muttering noises from deep in their throats.

Blade had somehow expected that the wagons of the Red People would be painted that color. The wagon bodies and wheels were actually dirty brown or gray, and the canopies were ugly blotched patterns of brown and green. Ugly, but also good camouflage. The wagons would be hard to see from far away, and at night they would be almost invisible from any distance. Only the wheel hubs were painted red.

Definitely the Kargoi seemed to be a people well organized to search out a new homeland and fight to win and hold it when they arrived. Blade began to suspect he was in for a more than usually interesting time, here among the Kargoi in this Dimension of drowned lands and spreading swamps.

Paor took Blade to his own wagon and left him there, under the politely watchful eyes of several of Paor's clansmen.

"The women of my wagon know that you may eat meat at their fire if it is your wish," he said. "You may also drink from the water skins that hang below the wagon. Do not drink the kaum-the fermented milk of the she-drend. That is only for proven warriors."

"I do not think it will be long before I drink kaum and eat meat at the fire of the warriors," said Blade with a polite smile. "I will drink the water, but I think I would rather not eat with the women."

"Is that wise, if you wish to be strong enough for your test?"

"It is wise enough. The Kargoi seem an honorable people, and their baudzi more honorable still. Therefore I judge they will not wait until hunger makes me weak, but will test me soon. If this is so, I can hardly fail the tests."

"You have great faith in yourself," said Paor. His eyes narrowed. "Or perhaps you have some doubts about the strength of the Kargoi. Do not let such doubts grow, Blade. That would be unwise, and there is no place for the unwise among warriors of the Kargoi."

"That is as it should be," said Blade. "I have no doubts about the strength of the Kargoi. Neither do I have doubts about the strength in war of my own people, the English. Often they have fought off opponents greatly outnumbering them. I was a principal warrior among the English. Not a chief, but the most valued warrior of one of the great chiefs. So I do not think I will seem weak or helpless, even facing warriors as strong and wise as the Kargoi."

Blade crawled under Paor's wagon and drank from the water skin until he was no longer thirsty. Then he climbed into the wagon and tried to make himself comfortable inside.

He didn't succeed. The air inside the wagon was thick with a dozen different odors, each one worse than the last. Dry rot poorly-cured leather, rancid grease, spoiled milk and still more spoiled cheese, human sweat, and human filth-at that point Blade stopped trying to pick out the separate odors. He also felt half a dozen different kinds of vermin that crawled, leaped, or crept about.

Ignoring the tempting smell of roasting meat, Blade climbed out of the wagon. He picked a patch of dry grass that was reasonably free of drend-dung, lay down, and went to sleep.

He awoke in the middle of the afternoon, feeling hungry but otherwise refreshed, and strong enough to fight three Kargoi warriors with one hand tied behind his back.

He drank some more water and looked around. No one seemed to be paying any attention to him, so he started to explore the great camp, looking and listening as he went.

No one could mistake Blade for one of the Kargoi, not with his full head of hair, his beard, and his fairer skin. Everyone also appeared to believe that anyone wandering around the camp, Kargoi or not, had a right to be there. No one stopped him, and few were at all careful of what they said in his hearing. So Blade learned a good deal that afternoon.

The Kargoi were divided into three Peoples-the Red, the Green, and the White. The Greens and the Whites were following routes across the plain farther to the west. That was to ensure ample grazing for all the many thousands of drends. Mounted messengers rode back and forth among the three columns each day.

The Kargoi numbered about twenty-five thousand, divided almost equally among the three Peoples. Each

of the Peoples was in turn divided into five to eight clans, each with its own baudz or War Guide and traung or Wagon Guide.

Of the twenty-five thousand, about a quarter were warriors. About half of these could be mounted on riding drends, while the rest fought on foot or from the wagons themselves. There were also free craftsmen and a class of laborers who were hardly better than slaves. There were women in proportion to the men, many children, but only a few babies.

There seemed to be no old women, and the only old men were those highly skilled in some craft that did not demand strength or swiftness. Blade thought he knew what had happened to the old people, and it was not a pleasant thought. When the Kargoi started off in search of their new homeland, the old people had been left behind, to drown or starve. Or perhaps the Kargoi had shown more mercy and killed them outright?

So the Kargoi had set out in search of their new home. Each wagon was virtually a self-contained home for twenty to thirty people. It carried tools, clothes, bedding, weapons, household shrines, everything they'd chosen to carry away from the homes now sunk beneath the rising sea.

Practically everything else the Kargoi needed was provided by the drends. The beasts drew the wagons and carried the mounted warriors. Their meat and milk fed everyone, from warriors down to newly weaned infants. Their hides became clothing, harness, and a hundred other things. Their sinews became thread, their bones and horns were tools and needles. Nothing was wasted. Even a slaughtered drend's tail usually ended up as the tassel of some mounted herder's staff.

In short, the Kargoi seemed to have everything-except the hope of a future that would have made them happy. They were launched on a journey into the unknown. At the end of that journey there might be a new homeland, as good as the one they'd left. There might also be nothing but a barren desert, a steaming, disease-ridden jungle, or a battle against a people who could sweep the Kargoi away like children.

In spite of all this, Blade heard a good deal of laughter as he walked around the camp. But it was brittle laughter. The Kargoi seemed to be a people who laughed because otherwise they might weep. That was courage of a very high order, and more and more Blade began to hope he could do something important to help them.

Blade returned to Paor's wagon as the raw colors of sunset began to spread across the sky. Again he drank water, ignored the smell of roasting meat, and got ready to sleep on the ground.

He was just pulling the cloak over himself when Paor returned. He looked down at Blade, amusement flickering across his face.

"You fear the clan ghosts in our wagon?" The smile took any insult out of the words.

Blade sat up. "No. The warriors of England worship the Earth Wisdom, among other things. So before a battle or an ordeal, we sleep upon the ground, to draw upon the Earth Wisdom."

"I see," said Paor. "Well, you would do well to draw on it-heavily. We will be staying in this camp for some days, to prepare for our march along the shore. So your testing will take place tomorrow."

Chapter 7

"That is good," said Blade. "Indeed, the baudzi of the Kargoi are men of honor. They will not make even a stranger wait for his testing."

Paor nodded, but there was a look of doubt on his face that provoked Blade. "Or do I have too much faith in the baudzi of the Kargoi? I would not doubt them unless I have to, but-"

Paor raised a hand to stop Blade. "You must know that two of the baudzi had no wish to see you tested. One would have had you cast out of our camp, with food and water, while the other would have had you slain in the night. The decision went against them, so there is nothing they can do against you by law or custom. Still, there will be danger to you from their anger. Rehod, the one who would have had you slain, will be standing against you in the testing tomorrow."

"Then I will see to it that Rehod can do nothing against me without danger to himself. If I can do that, I think it will be enough. I know the ways of men like Rehod. They seldom strike at those who can strike back."

"I hope you are right, Blade," said Paor. "We can do nothing against Rehod ourselves, not without risking a blood feud with his kin. That we cannot have, when we need all our warriors standing together. But I would not rejoice to see you slain by treachery and the honor of the Kargoi stained with your blood."

"You will not see that," said Blade. "Not while I have eyes in my head, breath in my body, and arms to strike at my enemies." He made a contemptuous gesture. "Now, enough of this Rehod. What is the testing?"

It was much as Blade expected. He would be tested as an archer, both mounted and on foot. He would be tested as a rider of the drend, a runner, and a wrestler. Last of all he would be tested as a swordsman.

"You shall fight twice with the sword, once mounted and once on foot. There will be no great danger to either you or your opponents, for the swords will be blunted." Paor drew a longsword from a scabbard across his back and held it out to Blade.

Blade examined the sword carefully. A long heavy strip of boiled leather reinforced with drend bone was tied along the edge and around the point. A strong blow with this sword would bruise painfully and possibly break bones, but it would not leave gaping, deadly wounds.

Blade stepped back and began swinging the sword. He went through every movement that could be made with such a sword, then repeated the whole sequence twice more, faster each time. The padding made the sword considerably heavier and less well balanced, but not unwieldy. Blade was quite sure he could handle it well enough to prove himself a first-class warrior. For once his life didn't depend on the outcome of the fight.

At last Blade handed the sword back to Paor and raised a hand in farewell salute. "Until tomorrow, then?"

Paor raised his own hand and pressed his wrist against Blade's in the Kargoi's gesture of honorable friendship. "Until tomorrow." A moment later he was gone.

Blade sat down cross-legged on the ground, considering what he'd learned and making his plans for tomorrow. The testing seemed simple and straightforward, but there was always a wide range of possible surprises in something like this.

Fortunately, Blade could always draw on an equally wide range of talents plus the ability to think on his feet. The surprises tomorrow would not be all on one side.

Gradually the camp settled down for the night. The sounds of tools and crying children faded, the cook

fires died down, the mounted sentries took up their stations. Blade took a last drink of water, wrapped himself in the leather cloak, and lay down in the grass.

The testing began the next morning as soon as the colors of the sunrise faded into daylight. The testing place was on the open plain several miles west of the camp. Only a handful of baudzi and warriors were on hand, and mounted sentries rode about to make sure no one else approached. Fortunately Paor himself was on hand, so Blade knew that his back was as well-guarded as he could expect under the circumstances.

The first test was an easy one, a test of Blade's ability to handle a drend. The riding drends were not exactly docile, but they were too slow in their wits and on their feet to be able to do anything dangerous to an experienced rider. Blade had no trouble starting, stopping, or guiding a drend at a walk and a trot.

Then came the test in archery. The Kargoi bow was about four feet long, built up of layers of drend bone and hide and strung with drend sinews. It could easily send its short, thick arrows two hundred yards. It was not a bow to bring down large animals or armored opponents, but the Kargoi didn't need it for that. They'd never faced armored human enemies and didn't expect to. As for hunting, their method of killing even wild drends was to run up to them on foot, stun them with clubs, then cut their throats. So why a larger bow?

Blade could have given the Kargoi a long lecture on why. He also realized that until he passed all the tests it would be a waste of breath to say anything to the Kargoi about weapons or warfare.

So he kept his mouth shut and picked up his bow and arrows for the testing of his archery. The mark was the skull of a drend, mounted on a pole. Blade shot at it both sitting and standing, from fifty, a hundred, and a hundred and fifty yards. Then he mounted a drend and shot while it was standing still, while it was walking slowly, and while it was moving at full speed. Each time he fired six arrows, and five of the six times he was able to put all six into the target. From the looks on the faces of the baudzi watching him, thus was obviously more than good enough.

Then he decided it was time to put on a show. He turned to Paor and said quietly, "Have them take the skull off the pole. I will shoot again, using the pole alone as my mark."

Blade shot six arrows at the bare pole. All six of them were sticking out of the pole by the time he'd finished. Then he mounted a drend and rode at a walk past the pole, firing six more arrows as he passed. Five of those six arrows also hit the pole, which began to look like a porcupine.

When Blade dismounted, everyone who'd watched was wide eyed with surprise and admiration. Everyone, that is, except Rehod and the warriors who stood on either side of him. Rehod's eyes were narrowed and about as admiring as the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun.

For the test in running, Blade had to run three times around the testing area. Two strong warriors would run after him, and if they caught him, they could prod him in the buttocks with the points of their swords. Paor was asked to be one of the warriors, but refused.

"It is known well enough how much I favor your being accepted among the Kargoi. There are those who might doubt I could give you a true testing, and therefore doubt your fitness."

The substitute for Paor turned out to be one of Rehod's friends, a long-legged, rangy man who looked like a natural runner. Blade was quite certain he would not be easy for anyone to run down. Three times around the testing area was no more than three miles. Blade had kept pace with a party of Zungan hunters across fifty miles of open veldt.

Blade and his two pursuers started off at an easy pace, hardly more than a brisk jog. The other two ran level with him for a few hundred yards. Then step by step they began to fall back. After another hundred yards Blade looked behind him. The others were now holding their position, and the look on their faces was easy to read. He was not outrunning them at all. They were deliberately dropping back, to lull him into slowing his own pace. Nice try, he thought, but it won't work.

Instead of slowing his pace, Blade began to increase it. He did this so carefully that the gap between him and the men behind him nearly doubled before they realized what was happening. Blade saw the face of Rehod's friend harden. Then his long legs seemed to blur as he dashed forward after Blade.

Blade was plunging forward before the other man covered half a dozen steps. Blade's legs flew, devouring the ground in great leaping strides. His long arms pumped up and down like pistons, pushing air into the lungs in his massive chest. He raced along, working steadily up to the pace that had once taken him a mile in three seconds less than four minutes.

In moments of stress like this Blade had the ability to almost sense what lay behind him without seeing it. He knew that both men were making a desperate effort to close, that both had their swords reaching out for him, and that neither was anywhere near him. He ran on, still faster.

They finished the first lap with Blade still well out in front. Now Blade was able to look back. The sun glinted on the polished steel of the swords and also on the sweat pouring down the men's bodies. Rehod's friend looked as if he could run all day, but the second man's movements were becoming clumsy and his eyes stared blindly ahead.

Halfway through the second lap, the second man began to drop back. His face was twisted in frustration and pain, and he flailed away at the air with his sword as if he was hacking into the flesh of a hated enemy. Rehod's friend flashed a brief loop of contempt at his weaker comrade, then returned to his grim pursuit of Blade. His face was now set into a mask like the temple image of some particularly bad-tempered god. Blade suspected that if the man caught him he would do far more with that sword than merely prick Blade's buttocks. It would be an "accident;" of course.

The two men finished the second lap and charged into the third. The man behind still looked as if he could run all day, in spite of the sweat pouring down him. Blade felt exactly the same way. The spectators had been shouting, in excitement or in support of one side or the other. Now they stopped, watching the runners' duel in silence.

Halfway through the final lap Rehod's friend made his great effort. He raced after Blade at a pace good for breaking records in the hundred-yard dash, but no good for a long-distance run. Blade still knew he had no choice but to speed up. Otherwise the man would almost certainly catch him, and he'd run too far and too well to let himself be caught now.

Blade's own feet seemed to barely touch the ground as he poured all his strength into a pace to match the other man's. Once more his extra sense told him where his opponent might be. The man was gaining, but only a step at a time, and there was still a large gap between the two men. Would that gap last longer than the other's strength?

Blade ran now with total concentration, nothing on his mind but taking each step a little faster than the one before, making each breath a little deeper than the one before. His concentration was so complete that the man behind him could probably have caught up and stabbed deeply without Blade's feeling it at all.

Then suddenly Blade's sensation of someone behind him began to fade. He didn't look back until the sensation was completely gone. Then he saw his pursuer staggering like a drunk as he ran, stumbling and

weaving from side to side. The gap between the two men was widening at every step.

Blade didn't slow down until he was near the end of the third lap. As they reached the end of it Rehod's friend fell to the ground and lay there, writhing feebly and gasping like a dying fish. Blade ran on, completing half of a fourth lap at a run, then finishing it at a jog. As he came in from the fourth lap, everyone except Rehod and his friends was cheering.

Blade drank some water and took a short rest before the test in wrestling. "In fact," said Paor, "if you do not take the rest, I will knock you down and sit on you until you are strong enough to be fit for the testing. Show some of the wisdom you showed facing me and my comrades, and the day will be yours."

Blade really needed no such urging. The four-mile run in the hot sun on an empty stomach had taken a good deal out of him. He was happy to sit for a few minutes, drinking water, breathing deeply, and working the kinks and knots out of his muscles. Then he rose to be tested in wrestling.

Neither of Blade's opponents in the wrestling test was a friend of Rehod, so Blade did not worry about painful or fatal "accidents." He was able to relax and do his best.

The Kargoi's style of wrestling turned out to be highly formal, almost ritualistic. There were only a few standard moves. When Blade learned those, he had no more problems. In fact, he had to take care not to win so easily that he would humiliate the two warriors facing him. He flattened both opponents in less than ten minutes apiece, then drank some more water and got ready for the test of swordsmanship.

This would be the last test, and possibly the most important. Certainly it would be the most dangerous. The weapons lent themselves to "accidents" if anybody wanted to arrange one.

Somebody probably would. Blade's first opponent in the test of swords was Rehod, and open anger showed in the warrior's face every time he looked at the Englishman.

Chapter 8

For the testing of Blade's swordsmanship, everyone crowded closer. Blade had made quite an impression in the previous tests. Now everyone was openly curious to see what would happen when he came up against Rehod. Even the mounted sentries were riding as slowly and as closely as they dared.

Blade had taken the other tests wearing only a loinguard and sandals. For the test of swordsmanship he pulled on boots, kilt, belt, and leather wrist braces, as well as the two swords. None of the clothing would restrict his movements in the least-or protect him from Rehod's swords if the padding came off.

Blade stepped out into the middle of the circle and waited for Rehod. The boudz came trotting out, head lowered like a bull about to charge. The man looked rather like a bull, too. He was half a head shorter than Blade but a good deal wider. His arms were nearly as thick as Blade's legs and his legs looked like the trunks of young trees, while his hands made even his longsword look like a child's toy. Rehod moved well, though, so Blade knew he would be facing a man fast enough to put all his bull-like strength to effective use.

The two swordsmen moved toward each other. Blade held his longsword in his right hand, raised to slash down, and his shortsword in the left, ready to either guard or thrust home. Rehod, who was left-handed, did exactly the opposite.

As usual when he wanted to size up an opponent, Blade let Rehod make the first attack. Another minute of circling, then Rehod flew at Blade like something propelled by an explosion. He seemed to be all attack, no defense. His longsword whistled down toward Blade's head while his shortsword thrust at

Blade's stomach.

Blade easily blocked both attacks. His longsword rose to meet Rehod's with a ringing thud, while his shortsword locked hard against Rehod's. Blade tried to twist his own sword free and turn the block into a thrust at the other's groin, but Rehod was too strong for that. The swords scraped free of each other and the two fighters each moved back a step. Blade realized that Rehod had attacked with only part of his own strength and speed, also, testing his opponent. The next attack might be harder to meet.

Blade decided not to leave that much initiative in the hands of someone as dangerous as Rehod. Even with blunted swords those head-cuts of his might still scramble the brains inside Blade's skull so they could never be unscrambled by the medical skills of the Kargoi. Blade was never entirely at ease about the possibility of brain damage which could make it impossible for the computer to reach him and draw him home. He decided to let Rehod have two more attacks, then move in himself.

The pattern of the second attack was the same as the first, but as Blade expected it came in faster and hit harder. The impact of meeting it made Blade's arms tingle as if he'd touched a live wire.

This time Blade didn't take a backward step after Rehod's attack. He held his ground, then went straight into his own attack. Rehod was too strong and fast to be given that third attack. It was time to see what the baudz could do on the defensive.

Blade's attack came in low, the shortsword leading. Rehod blocked the shortsword with his own and struck down at Blade's arm with his longsword. If the blow had landed it would have snapped Blade's arm like a rotten twig. Blade snatched his arm back just in time. As he did his longsword whirled up and over, to smash its tip into Rehod's shoulder.

Shouts exploded from the watchers, wordless cries and hisses of indrawn breath, yells of "First struck!" Rehod seemed not to notice the pain of the blow, but he did notice the shouts. His face set into an even uglier mask than before, something Blade wouldn't have believed possible. Then he launched himself into the attack again, at the exact moment Blade did the same.

The two men came at each other with no defenses at all, but by some miracle neither of them got a single blow home. They even held onto their swords, although the head-on meeting jarred both of them. Then the fight dissolved into a continuous savage swirl of attack and counterattack, block, and thrust. Even the watchers around the circle could barely keep track of who was trying to do what to whom. As for the two fighters, each man's world had narrowed down to himself and his opponent, the weapons that whistled through the air, and the circle they were trampling down in the grass.

Blade had to pay less and less attention to his style as the fight went on. Rehod was too likely to take advantage of even the slightest mistake to land a blow that would be crippling or fatal even with a padded sword. Perhaps the watchers would judge that Blade had proven himself and stop the fight before either he or Rehod really gained the advantage? That was possible, but nothing to count on. Rehod was the type of man to claim that he'd been winning, unless he could no longer stand or lift a sword at the end of the fight. Letting the fight go on until one man collapsed would make the decision of the baudzi much simpler.

Besides, Blade suspected that he and Rehod were putting on the kind of show the Kargoi seldom saw. The fight was too good a piece of entertainment to be stopped before one of them lay flat on the ground.

So nothing and nobody except the two men themselves would end the fight. With that clear in his mind, Blade settled down to make sure that it was Rehod who ended up flat on the ground, not Richard Blade.

The swords whirled in the air and clattered against each other. The circle of trampled grass grew wider

and wider as two large pairs of booted feet pounded back and forth in a deadly dance. Sweat dripped down both men, leaving trails in the dust on their skins and dark stains on their leather garments, forcing them both to grip their swords tighter and tighter. Both sensed that the first man to lose a weapon would almost certainly be the first man down and out.

Against an opponent other than Rehod, Blade would not have been quite so concerned about that. The watchers would not end the fight before there was a definite winner, true. But certainly by now they would also be willing to admit that Blade was worthy to be a warrior of the Kargoi, even if he lost.

Against Rehod, though, losing the fight would mean losing life or limb. That was becoming more certain with each moment. Rage and hatred were growing in the man and blazing more and more savagely from his sweating face and wide-staring eyes. Blade knew that if he faltered even for a few seconds Rehod would use those seconds to kill or cripple. The watchers could not hope to prevent it or perhaps even notice it until the damage was done.

So Blade pressed his attacks harder and faster. He knew now that Rehod had an edge in sheer physical strength, but he had about the same edge in speed. If he could use that speed to drive home a few blows that would start cutting away Rehod's strength

Blade's swords darted and flew like striking snakes, as fast as human muscles could move them. At the same time they moved with deadly accuracy to their targets. Blow by blow, Blade began dealing out punishment.

Another blow to Rehod's shoulder. One to the right side of his chest, another to the left side of his belly. Two in quick succession to his right thigh, which left a spectacular welt and drew a hiss of pain. Blade followed up the blows to the thigh by working down the same leg with three more attacks. The last one went squarely home to the knee. After that Rehod was unmistakably favoring his right leg.

His legs might be taking punishment, but Rehod's arms were still as strong and quick as ever. Blade couldn't risk moving his attacks lower than the knee. He'd be leaving himself too open to an attack that would be just as dangerous as ever.

So he went back to work on Rehod's ribs and shoulders. Twice he broke the skin so that blood began to trickle and mix with the sweat on Rehod's torso. Most of the time he hit hard enough to leave welts. Some of his earlier hits were already turning a spectacular dark blue.

The hitting was not all on one side. From time to time Rehod got through Blade's defenses and left welts and blood trickles of his own. This didn't happen often, though. Blade was hitting four or five times for every time he was hit. At this rate even Rehod would soon have to yield; even his bull frame could take only so much punishment before his bull strength started to fade. Then the fight could be over very quickly.

Blade was vaguely aware that the noise from the circle of watchers got steadily louder as he hammered more and more blows through Rehod's defenses and left more and more blood and bruises on the man. He could hear it only faintly, as his own breath roared louder and louder in his ears, building up a wall of sound that seemed to shut out the rest of the world.

He was also vaguely aware that the noise suddenly died, as completely as if all the watchers had sunk into the ground. No doubt something had happened to cause that silence, but it could not interest Blade. Nothing could interest him except Rehod, the man he had to beat down to the ground.

The silence went on. So did the fight. Now Rehod was definitely beginning to slow down. His legs could no longer hurl him forward or take him backward or sideways. His arms could no longer send either

sword driving through Blade's defenses to split or bruise Blade's skin.

As Rehod lost the power to attack, he seemed to gain more power to defend. His swords whirled and danced, forming a blurred shield of steel and bone and leather between himself and Blade. It became harder and harder for Blade to drive through the mounting fury of Rehod's defense.

Blade saw that Rehod was defending himself with a vigor that would shortly drain his strength. It also seemed to him that Rehod might be setting a trap, trying to get his opponent completely committed to a steady, all-out attack, then launching a final desperate stroke of his own.

Blade began to pace himself, keeping something in reserve each time he attacked, ready to shift from attack to defense faster than Rehod could strike. He also kept an eye on the padding of Rehod's swords. It was hard to be sure, but Blade thought some of the padding was beginning to slowly break up and peel off.

Still the whirling of the swords went on. Blade heard the noise of the watchers begin to rise again. Whatever had silenced them was no longer at work.

Then Rehod began to attack again, not with the wild fury Blade had expected but with cool precision and surprising control. Each attack came in a little higher. Blade was certain his opponent had at last decided on his final moves, but didn't waste time trying to guess what these might be.

A few more attacks, and Rehod began to draw back a step or two after each one. He seemed to be trying to catch his breath. Blade considered pressing attacks of his own, but decided against it. He'd been fighting for nearly an hour and wouldn't turn down any chance to catch his own breath.

Suddenly Rehod attacked again, moving in as fast as he'd ever done. Blade was barely able to react in time. Rehod almost sprang back from the attack, his swords leaping upward to cross above his head.

With a snap of one powerful wrist Rehod drove his shortsword along the edge of his other weapon. The padding vanished as if the touch of the shortsword had dissolved it. Sunlight gleamed along the bare edge of Rehod's longsword, in the moment before it slashed down at Blade's head.

Blade's response came faster than any watcher's eye could follow. His longsword flashed upward to meet Rehod's treacherous downcut, while his body twisted out from under the descending sword. The naked sword and the padded one came together, and with a tremendous clang Rehod's sword drove Blade's down toward the ground. The deadly edge hissed down past Blade's ear, inches from slashing deeply into his shoulder.

Blade drove his own shortsword forward in a powerful thrust at Rehod's groin. Rehod screamed out loud and stiffened, for a moment totally paralyzed by the pain.

In that moment Blade dropped his longsword and drove his clenched right fist hard into Rehod's stomach. The blow doubled Rehod up and drove him backward several steps. His muscles jerked and his fingers writhed frantically as he tried to raise or even hold on to his swords.

Blade slammed the flat of his shortsword down on Rehod's right wrist, then drove the heel of his free hand up under the man's jaw. Rehod dropped both swords, went over backward like a falling tree, landed with a thud, and lay there. After a moment he groaned, clutched his stomach, turned on his side, and began vomiting.

Blade straightened up, dropped his shortsword, turned his back on his fallen opponent, and walked toward the circle of watching Kargoi.

For the first time in many minutes he realized just how close everyone had crowded to watch the fight. Even the mounted sentries had pulled their drends to a stop. A dozen men had climbed up on the backs of the drends to get a better view.

The only group standing slightly apart was half a dozen mounted warriors. Blade stared at them. They weren't sentries, or anybody else who'd been on hand when the fight began.

One of them was an old man, white-haired and his skin a pattern of wrinkles and scars. He held himself as straight as a sword, though, and his gaze was as clear and as penetrating as Paor's.

Another of the riders was a younger man, enough like the older man to clearly be his son. The other four riders were warriors, all of them as large as Rehod and nearly as ferocious looking. Each of them wore a blue leather strip across his chest, in addition to the usual weapons and garments.

Paor himself came running out to meet Blade, with a grin that was nearly as wide as his face.

"Friend Blade, you have your place in the songs of the Kargoi and the memories of those who saw you, even if you fall down upon the ground dead in this moment! You judged Rehod's treachery perfectly, and met it in a way that will be long remembered."

Blade laughed. "I hope Rehod will remember it, along with everyone else."

Paor nodded. "He will." Then he looked toward Rehod's writhing form, his grin faded, and he lowered his voice. "He is not dying, is he?"

Blade shook his head. Paor frowned. "It would have been better to kill him. You had the right to do so. Now you have shamed him but left him alive. He will be an even more dangerous enemy than before, although he will have fewer friends."

Paor was probably right-Rehod would have been much safer dead. But it was too late to do anything about it now, and Blade had never been too fond of killing when there were less bloody ways of dealing with a problem.

Paor went on. "Meanwhile, I am to bring you before Adroon, High Baudz of the Kargoi. He has watched you fight and declared that you shall not be tested further, but shall at once be ranked among the warriors of the Red People." He pointed toward the little group of riders, and the old man in the middle raised his hand to beckon Blade toward him.

Chapter 9

Adroon the High Baudz of the Kargoi appeared to be a man of few words. He simply repeated to Blade what Paor had already said. Then he handed Blade two swords.

"These swords shall be yours, until the last blood flows from your body in battle against the enemies of the Kargoi," the old man said. "Then they shall lie with your bones beneath the earth."

Blade bowed. "I am honored." He would have been quite as happy if Adroon had handed him a well-roasted leg of drend. At the moment he wanted food much more than he wanted weapons.

Fortunately that was the end of the ceremony. Adroon and his escort rode off toward the camp. The other watchers began to mount up. Several of Rehod's friends picked him up and slung him over the back of his drend like a sack of potatoes. Paor led up another drend, Blade mounted it, and they all rode back to camp.

They rode up through a wide fringe of furiously busy people. Some were slaughtering drends, others were butchering them, still others were roasting the meat on ten-foot spits. The male laborers were hauling tents out of the wagons and setting them up all around the great circle. Parties of women were unloading gear from the wagons and carrying it into the tents as fast as they were set up.

Paor noticed Blade looking around him and laughed. "No, Blade, we are not abandoning the wagons to walk the rest of the way. Adroon has decided that all three Peoples shall stay where they are several more days. Here the grass is good and abundant, so the drends will grow strong. Also, beyond this place we come down to the shore. While we wait here, our riders must go forward to see what lies ahead, by the water.

"So for these few days, we move out of the wagons. They are good and strong and we care much for them. But as with a good strong woman one cares for much, there are times when it is good to get away. Also, it gives time for the women to clean the wagons."

Blade noticed that some of the women were carrying loads of bedding and furs to lay them close to the fires. He remembered swarms of vermin in the wagons and mentally applauded.

After that, Blade paid very little attention to anything until he was able to sit down with other warriors around a fire, with a leather mug of kaum in one hand and a large slab of hot roasted meat in the other. The kaum was strong and sour, and the smoke of the dung fire gave the meat a peculiar flavor. To the hungry Blade it tasted better than any meal he'd ever eaten in the finest of West End restaurants.

Blade polished off a second cup of kaum and two more slabs of meat, then wiped his grease-smearred hands on the grass. The other warriors saw that he was finished and started asking him questions.

They went on asking questions until the meat and the kaum were gone, the fire itself was dying in a thin trickle of smoke, and the angry colors of sunset were spreading across the sky. They asked Blade about himself, about his voyage, about England, about his fight with Rehod, and about a hundred and one other things.

Fortunately Blade's head was clear now that his stomach was full, and he'd long since mastered the arts of telling plausible lies with a straight face. He was able to come up with believable answers to nearly all of the questions. Most of those he couldn't answer, no one seemed to think very important.

"After all," said one warrior, "this Blade from England has done to Rehod what many of us would have wished to do long ago. For this he has earned our gratitude. I, for one, would not care if he had horns on his head, wings growing from his back, and claws on his hands and feet."

"No, indeed," said another warrior, and there was a cheerful chorus of agreement from the men around the fire. Several of them reached over to slap Blade clumsily on the shoulder. Many of them were now half drunk on kaum.

Blade felt about as safe and comfortable as he could ever expect to be in Dimension X. His own skill had won him a secure place among the Kargoi. He'd also been lucky to encounter Paor, who was wise, honest, and popular, and to fight Rehod, who was bad-tempered, narrow-minded, and with many enemies. If things had been the other way around, Blade doubted he would be here by the fire, telling the warriors of the Kargoi about his homeland and travels.

Eventually Blade ran out of tales to tell the men sitting around him. By that time most of them were too drunk or too sleepy to be listening, or to notice when Blade quietly rose and slipped off into the night.

He headed for the tent he'd been given for his own use during the next few days. As a rule only the

baudzi and half a dozen of the most distinguished warriors in each clan had any such right to privacy. This tent was a special mark of honor for him.

The tent was one of the smallest kind, used by the scouts who rode on ahead of the wagon columns. It lay a little apart from the rest. The night was so black that Blade nearly stumbled over sprawled sleepers or happily writhing couples every few yards. He did stumble over the dread-hide rope that braced one end of his tent. Blade recovered his balance, but he'd jerked the tent pole loose. It fell with a thud, bringing the tent down with it.

From under the leather a woman's voice sounded, cheerfully and unashamedly cursing whoever had knocked the tent down on her. She wished that he might fall into ripe drend dung up to his chin and have thornflies puncture his exposed skin. Blade listened for a while, smiling in the darkness. He was not particularly surprised to find a woman in his tent, and now looked forward to meeting her.

He bent down, lifted the fallen tent with one hand, and reached inside with the other. The reaching hand closed on a bare shoulder, drawing a yelp of surprise and protest. Blade tightened his grip. To the accompaniment of more curses he drew the woman out, until he could grip her with both hands and pull her to her feet.

Even in the darkness Blade could see that the woman was young and attractive. She wore nothing except for a length of hide twisted around her hips. A narrow face framed in long dark hair, with large, expressive eyes, slightly marred by a sharp nose. Full breasts, firm and ripe in spite of being almost too large for the slim body. Perfect legs and small, long-toed feet that the girl was trying not to shuffle in embarrassment or fear. The warriors of the Kargoi were in the habit of beating women who displeased or disobeyed them. Why should she assume that this newly arrived warrior from England would be any different?

Blade put a hand under her chin and raised her head until her large eyes were looking into his. Then he smiled. "You should lower your voice, if you do not want all the Red People to know that the English warrior has a woman who buzzes like a bee."

"What is a bee?"

"A small flying insect in England. Like the thornfly, it stings painfully and makes much noise. It also makes a sweet liquid, called honey. What is your name?"

"Naula. What is yours?" Her voice was calm, and she'd stopped shuffling her feet. This seemed to be a young woman who did not remain afraid long. Blade wondered if she was being given to him because too many other warriors of the Kargoi had found her impossible to endure or subdue.

"My name is Blade," he said. He let go of her chin, took her by one shoulder, then turned her around. He ran a hand lightly down her back, then put an arm around her waist.

"Well, Naula. Shall we see if you, like the bee of England, can also give sweetness?" she nodded and started putting up the tent again.

Inside the tent there was little room and less light. Blade found that he had to squat as he stripped off his loinguard, boots, and kilt. From the darkness he heard more sounds of leather on skin, as Naula dropped her own garment. Then suddenly there were two slim arms thrown around him from behind and two firm breasts with even firmer nipples pressed against his back.

He tried to turn around, but Naula laughed and held herself against his back while he tried to reach for her. Then Blade began to laugh, and finally Naula let go and fell down onto the tent floor. In the darkness

their hands reached out for each other. They drew together, and then they joined.

It was a quick and fierce joining, but it was one that filled both of them with an immense, almost overpowering pleasure and delight. Naula's small body first quivered, then writhed and twisted from head to toe. She drew up her legs until they were almost bent double. Her knees drove into Blade's ribs while her feet pounded his buttocks. Her hands thrashed and slapped and dug at his back. A continuous stream of moans and little screams sounded in Blade's ear as he bent to caress with his lips her mouth, her eyes, her ears and cheeks and throat, the breasts with their nipples now swollen so hard.

Blade lost himself in Naula's rich warmth that seemed to grow and grow with each passing moment and each movement of their united bodies. He lost himself in the swelling heat in his groin that was pleasure and searing agony at the same time. He lost himself in a struggle for control that eventually came to its inevitable end. Before long Naula drew him into her again, and then he drew her down upon him a third time, and it was only after that they slept.

Naula slept heavily, as if stunned, her hair flowing across Blade's chest and one of his hands cupping one breast. From time to time she gave little snorts and gasps. They were not enough to keep Blade awake, though. He was too pleasantly tired.

As he drifted off to sleep, he could not help wondering if he'd just been through another test as a warrior of the Kargoi. If he had, he'd certainly passed it well enough, judging from the expression on Naula's face.

Chapter 10

Blade awoke to shouts and screams and furiously running feet. For a few seconds he vaguely wondered if the sounds came from Naula, perhaps reliving in her dreams their passion earlier that night. Then he snapped fully awake, remembering just in time not to spring to his feet and knock the tent down again. Gripping his shortsword, he crawled to the entrance of the tent and looked out.

Shadowy figures were passing in all directions at a dead run. Some of them stumbled and fell. He heard cries of anger and fear, screams of pain, the twang of bowstrings, and the mounting bellow of what seemed like all the drends in the camp. It seemed as if madness had suddenly attacked all of the Red People at once.

Then Blade saw a flicker of movement overhead, and looked up. Above him in the darkness glided one of the bat-winged creatures Blade had seen flying high above the shore, silhouetted against the sunset. Half invisible in the night, it was a shadowy nightmare. As it showed clearly in the firelight it looked even worse. It was neither bird nor bat, but something that combined the worst features of both, expanded to ten or twenty times the size of either.

The bat-bird glided past, out of the light and into the darkness. Then came the snap of great wings folding and a raw, tearing scream as the thing swooped down on a victim somewhere out in that darkness.

A long line of bat-birds swept past, too high to be counted accurately. Blade heard arrows whistling upward at the dim fleeting shapes and cursed. Fired wildly like that, the arrows would seldom hit or kill and usually fall back somewhere into the crowded camp.

Then two more bat-birds came flying low through the light of the fire. This time cooler-headed archers waited for them. Blade heard the sharp cracks of arrows driving into the leathery wings. One bounced from a scaled belly. The bat-birds flew on, ignoring the arrows as they would have ignored wads of cotton from a child's slingshot. They flew on into the darkness, and more screams rose where they stooped to the attack.

The bat-birds could seek and strike in total darkness, and what kind of defense could deal with them then? Blade couldn't be sure, but he did know that no one could do much against the bat-birds unless they themselves were out in the darkness where the creatures struck.

Blade snatched up his longsword, then suddenly realized that he would do well to take an even longer weapon. Naula stuck her head out of the tent. "Get back inside and stay down!" Blade shouted, reaching for the tent pole. He jerked it free with both hands and the tent slowly settled down on top of Naula. The bat-birds might be able to see in the dark like cats, but they could hardly see through the heavy leather.

Blade dodged around fear-paralyzed women and children huddled on the ground, and leaped over the body of a warrior sprawled on his back with a Kargoi arrow through his chest. He left behind the last glow of the fire, heard a low-pitched warbling cry above him, and turned to see a bat-bird beginning its stoop on him.

With only his swords Blade could not have met his attacker. They would have gone down into death together, steel and beak and talons all sinking in at the same moment.

Instead Blade held the tent pole, eight feet of limber wood, and he swung it like a champion cricketer. The darkness and the uproar and the nightmare creature hurling itself at him neither slowed nor weakened him. The pole caught the bat-bird across the side of its elongated head, and the thin skull cracked. The creature spun out of the air and thudded to the ground practically on top of Blade. He stepped back to let it fall, then jumped on it. Light bones cracked and crunched, the two ten-foot wings flapped wildly, then twitched into stillness. Blade sprang off the body and turned to meet the next attack.

Now the battle cries of warriors joined the uproar all around him. The Kargoi were beginning to fight back like the seasoned warriors they were. Another bat-bird swooped at Blade, then turned aside at the last moment as a dread thundered past. The beast ran blindly, bawling in panic and trampling down two women who stood in its path. On its back a bat-bird was perched, talons sunk deep in the flesh and hooked beak burrowing even deeper. Blade himself had to step aside, then face the stoop of another enemy.

This time Blade had the time to strike with the precision of a surgeon and the deadliness of an executioner. Crack! and the pole struck the bat-bird in the throat, practically stopping it in midair. It fell. Crack! and the pole smashed down across the back of its neck. Crack! and the pole crushed its skull. It died without a cry or a twitch.

A third bat-bird singled Blade out for attack. This one came at him already slowed by two arrows that had found weak spots in its hide. Blade stood his ground and thrust with the end of his pole at the center of its chest. The beak snapped shut inches from his face and the talons reached out for his groin. The thrust had Blade's full strength behind it, meeting the full weight of the bat-bird. Ribs and internal organs caved in and another kill lay at Blade's feet.

After that Blade stopped keeping count. Every few moments a bat-bird came at him out of the darkness. He didn't know what it was about him or the ground where he stood that drew the attackers to him, but he was sure there was something.

Some of the bat-birds missed and flew off to seek prey elsewhere. All those who pressed home their attacks met Blade's lightning-quick pole, and all those who met the pole died. The bodies thrashed and twitched and poured out blood and death cries in a widening circle around him.

After a while Blade realized that some of the bat-birds were turning aside from him and the circle of dead around him. A little while longer, and he realized that the noise around him was dying away. Finally warriors of the Kargoi came picking their way through the darkness to stand and stare at Blade and his

circle of dead. The attack of the bat-birds was over-for tonight.

As the warriors crowded toward him, Blade examined his pole. It was coated with blood and skin and scales. Under the slimy coating he could feel half a dozen cracks. A few more blows and it would have snapped off in his hands, leaving him no better off than the other warriors of the Kargoi.

As they crowded around him, the warriors pounded Blade's back and shoulders and poured out half-hysterical congratulations. They made so much noise he had no chance to ask what had happened elsewhere in the camp of the Red People, amid the darkness and the screams and the bellows.

It was dawn before anyone really knew what had happened in the camp. It was later than that before Paor was able to tell Blade.

The tale was ugly. At least two hundred of the Kargoi were dead or wounded. Among them was the son of Adroon, the High Baudz, who lay with his stomach slashed opened by talons, a wound that would surely kill him in a day or two. As many drends had been killed or so badly hurt that no one but the butchers could get much use out of them now.

To be sure, more than three hundred of the bat-birds also lay dead, at least forty of them Blade's own victims. But several times that many had attacked and flown away to safety.

Blade didn't like hearing any of this. He disliked almost as much hearing that Rehod had slain nearly twenty of the bat-birds, some of them with his bare hands. Now the loud-mouthed baudz had done something to make people forget his treachery in the duel with Blade.

The more Blade thought about what Paor had told him, the more he began to suspect that there'd been organization or even intelligence behind the attack of the bat-birds. Were the creatures themselves at least slightly intelligent? Blade found that hard to believe. The brains in the narrow skulls were far too small.

But if there was intelligence or direction, and it didn't come from the bat-birds themselves, then where did it come from?

Blade would much rather not have faced this question. But it wouldn't go away, and sooner or later answering it would become important. For now there simply wasn't enough information, and there were other things to do here that could save many lives. Blade made up his mind to watch the next attack much more closely, so that he would no longer have to rely on Kargoi observations of the bat-birds' behavior. It was just possible that everything he'd heard to suggest organization and intelligence was what untrained or frightened observers had imagined.

Blade sincerely hoped so.

Meanwhile, he was at work even as Paor talked to him. With his shortsword he systematically cut out the beaks and cut off the talons of the dead bat-birds. When he'd finished that he started cutting up the great leathery wings and started cutting out the tendons. Finally he took a fresh tent pole and tied one of the hooked, razor-sharp beaks to one end of it with several lashings of tendon. Paor watched all this in polite silence until Blade was finished.

"What do you make, Blade?"

Blade silently picked up his weapon and whirled it around his head. Then he swung it hard. The beak on the business end hissed angrily through the air. Paor carefully stepped out of range.

"I killed many bat-birds last night. I killed most of them with the pole of a tent. I would have killed more if

"I'd had something sharp on the end of that pole."

"I see."

If Paor didn't see now, he would do so before long. The Kargoi were proud of their skill in war. They were not so proud that they would refuse to learn from a hero who worked so quietly that it would be hard for them to realize that he was even teaching.

Blade said nothing for a while, as he practiced with his improvised weapon. Then Paor bent down and picked up one of the talons and one of the beaks.

"May I take these?"

"Certainly." Blade laughed. "I suggest you tie them to something other than a tent pole, though. If the warriors of the Kargoi take all the tent poles to kill the bat-birds, all the tents will fall down on the women and children."

Chapter 11

Blade spent the day alternately practicing with his weapon and cutting up more bat-birds. By noon he saw Paor making the rounds with a pole-weapon of his own. By midafternoon other warriors were coming around to pick up beaks and talons, while others started cutting up bat-birds on their own. By nightfall half the spare tent poles in the camp of the Red People had been carried off to be made into weapons.

There would still have been another bloody slaughter on both sides if the bat-birds had attacked that night. A hundred warriors stood watch all night, just in case. A few bat-birds flew high overhead, but none came swooping down to the attack.

The next morning a wood-cutting party rode off toward the forest, to cut branches and saplings for weapon shafts. That afternoon Paor discovered that tying a piece of sharp metal to the end of a pole made an even more effective weapon—a proper spear, in fact. The blacksmiths suddenly found themselves being asked to beat points and edges on every bit of scrap metal in their wagons.

A second night went by without the bat-birds attacking. By the next evening several hundred warriors had spears or some sort of other pole weapon. Blade even saw Rehod practicing with a ten-foot pole that had a full-sized longsword tied to the end. He didn't stay around to watch Rehod's exercises. The man glared as though he would much rather use his new weapon on Blade than on the bat-birds.

Everyone had a chance to try out their new weapons that night. The bat-birds came again, twice as many as before. This time Blade himself could clearly see some direction and coordination in their attack. Those who attacked attacked fiercely against carefully chosen weak points. At the same time they held back what could only be called a reserve.

The warriors of the Red People didn't care about any of this. They went into action with their new weapons and a grim determination to avenge their fallen comrades and protect their women and herds. Some of them died, but more of them killed and went on killing until there were no more bat-birds to kill. Archers rode among the drend herds, bows ready. They still could not bring the bat-birds down from the air, but they could often shoot them off the back of a drend before the beast suffered any harm. The women and children huddled safe in the tents or wagons.

There were dead Kargoi on the ground when the sun rose, but there were a great many more dead bat-birds. There were so many that half the warriors of the Red People could have made weapons from

their victims' beaks and talons, if Paor hadn't taught them the advantage of metal points.

After that, no one expected the bat-birds to return for some time. The scouts sent on ahead toward the shore came in, reporting that all three Peoples of the Kargoi would have to form a single column to pass along the shore. The hills ahead came almost down to the water, and reached far inland without a pass the wagons could hope to cross safely.

So it was either stay here, or risk the dash along the shore. Before the attack of the bat-birds, there were many who'd thought of settling here, with the plain on one hand and the forest on the other. The bat-birds had changed all that. No one cared to settle in a land where the darkness might hold so much horrible death. They'd got the better of the creatures, to be sure, but was that the only death that stalked by night in this land?

The drends were fat from good grazing. There was food for several weeks in the wagons, and there would be fish and game along the shore. The scouts reported many birds and large herds of the boar-like animals Blade had seen in the forest. Pushing on was clearly the best thing to do.

Blade agreed, but wondered if the land ahead would be much safer than the land they were leaving. If something was in fact directing the bat-birds down on the marching Kargoi, could it perhaps direct something else against them as they moved along the shore? Blade couldn't be sure, nor could he put his doubts and suspicions into words the Kargoi would understand or believe.

The next attack didn't catch Blade asleep, although it came in the same darkness as the attack of the bat-birds. It came as he lay beside Naula in a tent half a mile from the edge of the water. They'd just made love, but neither was so tired that sleep tempted them. They lay awake, exchanging pats and caresses, waiting until time would bring desire again.

Mounted sentries gave warning of the attack, but did little more. Against what came out of the sea against the Kargoi, there was no way they could have done much more.

Blade stretched, and found desire growing in him again, not fierce this time but warm and comfortable. His hand reached out, hovered in the air, and dropped gently on Naula's breast. In the darkness he could sense she was smiling, feeling her own desire rising to match his.

Her hand was creeping across the hard muscles of his chest when a hissing roar blasted out of the night. Blade threw off the furs and started to rise. Naula lay with her caressing hand suspended in midair, frozen into a rigid claw.

As Blade rose, the first roar was echoed by others, too many to count and blending too rapidly into a monstrous sound that beat on Blade's ears like the solid fists of an attacker. A hundred huge boilers all seemed to be letting off steam in a single moment.

Blade jerked Naula to her feet with one hand and picked up her clothes with the other. "Dress and follow me," he said, bending to pick up his weapons.

As he led Naula out into the darkness, Blade was fully armed with both swords, two spears, a knife, a bow, a quiver. He wore nothing except a padded loinguard and a leather brace on his right forearm. Clothes would only be a burden tonight, not a protection.

In the darkness terror was stalking the Kargoi, terror in the form of sixty-foot hulks of living flesh that hissed and roared, made the ground shake under their weight, and moved steadily forward. A single glance toward the sea showed Blade more than a hundred huge reptilian beasts heading toward the camp, forming a line more than a mile wide, like an incoming tide of armored flesh. Behind the first line he

could dimly make out patches of foam as more beasts churned their way through the shallows.

There was fear in the camp, but the fear was not exploding into panic. From the rows of tents on the seaward side of the camp, women ran toward the circle of wagons, carrying crying babies or dragging shrieking children by the hand. Blade knew the beasts coming out of the sea could smash a wagon to kindling wood, but any shelter doubtless looked better than none.

Meanwhile the warriors ran toward the advancing reptiles, brandishing their swords and spears. The craftsmen ran with them, waving hammers and axes. Even the workers were there, with cooking spits and logs of firewood.

It was magnificent courage, but Blade was certain more would be needed before this night was over. Each of the reptiles looked far too strong to be attacked wildly or blindly, and there were far too many of them. Too many warriors would die under teeth and claws, trampling feet and lashing tails.

Who or what wanted things to happen that way? There was someone or something that did. Blade was now certain of that. He could not believe there was any natural cause for this attack. He could imagine natural causes for the sea reptiles gathering together in such numbers—a sudden abundance of food in one place, for example. He could not imagine them coming forward onto the land to attack humans or their livestock, and above all he could not imagine them coming forward in a line as solid and rigid as guardsmen on parade.

Mounted warriors now rode forward to join their comrades. Arrows whistled toward the oncoming enemy as archers let fly. With the darkness and the archers' excitement, not all the arrows flew high enough. Blade saw a Kargoi warrior fall from his saddle, hand clapped to a thigh neatly skewered by one of his comrade's arrows.

Naula was still clinging tightly to him. Blade slapped her on the rump and pointed toward the wagons. "Run!" She looked at him, wide-eyed with fear that was more for him than for herself, then ran. Blade zig-zagged through the confusion of hurrying men, caught the reins of the riderless drend, and vaulted on to its broad back. Gripping the reins with one hand, he got his feet under him and stood on the saddle pad.

Now he could look out across the exploding battle, as the first of the lumbering reptiles and the onrushing men collided. Three of the beasts came on, and a fringe of men suddenly formed around them, spears thrusting and swords hacking at the scaly hides. A crested head rose, with a writhing stick figure clamped in long tangs that dripped blood. Two more men were scythed down by the sweep of a tail three feet thick and twenty feet long. Then the fringe of men broke up and two of the three beasts lumbered onward. The third beast remained behind, down on its knees with half a dozen warriors stabbing at the eyes and seeking out weak spots in the armored hide. Another half-dozen warriors lay still, writhed feebly, or crawled jerkily toward what safety they could find. One lay on his back, hands clapped to his groin, courage forgotten and all his remaining strength poured into an endless agonized screaming.

The beasts' masters had not only formed them into an unnaturally precise line for their attack, they seemed to be filling them with an equally unnatural ferocity. Half a dozen warriors maimed or dead for every beast killed meant the end of the Kargoi, if not tonight then soon.

A bright moon shone now, and Blade could see all along the attacking line and past it to the shore. He could count more than two hundred of the reptiles, of half a dozen different breeds. All were huge, all were hideous, all were moving steadily toward him, driving the warriors of the Kargoi before them. Here and there one of the beasts was down, kicking out its life under Kargoi steel, but there were far too few of these.

At least no more of the reptiles were surging out of the water to join the attack. They were not endless—at least not tonight. Now Blade knew what to do about tonight's attack.

He filled his chest and roared out in a terrible voice, "Ho, Kargoi! Listen! Listen, and learn how to stand against these monsters as you stood against the batbirds!"

When he wanted to, Richard Blade could make himself heard in the middle of an exploding ammunition dump. His voice carried halfway across the battlefield. Men turned to stare at him, and even some of the advancing reptiles raised their heads in bewilderment at the strange sound.

Blade shouted again. "Form lines, two or three of them, wide lines all across the field! Stand with your spears toward the beasts. Stand, and let nothing but death move you! Stand, and let the archers aim at the eyes. Swordsmen, axemen, when they are blinded, strike!"

That was about as complicated a set of instructions as anybody would be likely to hear or understand, let alone follow, in the middle of a night battle. Blade hoped it would be enough to make clear to the Kargoi what they should do.

It should work. The pikemen of medieval and Renaissance Europe had often stood successfully against the massed charge of armored knights. Admittedly, the Kargoi were not trained infantry, and tonight at least they would be fighting with eight- and ten-foot spears instead of pikes twice as long. Also, the beasts coming at them out of the sea were more ferocious than any knight and weighed ten times as much as any horse.

They were also a great deal slower on their feet and hopefully slower in their wits. Whoever drove them on to the attack could not give them speed that was not in their massive bodies or intelligence that was not in the tiny brains inside the thick skulls.

Blade kept shouting his instructions, until his breath rasped in his raw throat, his chest heaved as if he'd run ten miles, and he could see that he was being heard. Ten, twenty, thirty warriors at a time would gather, then spread out into a line. Single lines at first, then double and triple lines as more warriors ran up from the rear or in from the flanks. The short lines grew longer, grew toward each other, formed longer lines of a hundred or two hundred warriors.

These lines were beginning to do what Blade had hoped they would. Where they found the lines across their paths, the sea reptiles were slowing down. Sometimes they would stop or even draw back when they felt a dozen spear points pricking their snouts, stabbing at their nostrils or eyes or into their open mouths. Others would press on, snapping and clawing as ferociously as ever. With warriors all around them, they did not last long. There was always someone ready and willing to strike when a beast was stopped. They struck with spears at the brain, down through the eyes or up through the open mouths. They struck from beneath with whatever weapon came to hand, ripping through the lighter belly scales. They struck at the necks, the flanks, the legs, even under the tails. They struck everywhere they could find a target. Blade heard a continuous drum roll of metal and wood pounding on scaly skin and slicing deep into the flesh beneath it. He also heard the bellows and roars of monstrous beasts in mortal agony. The warriors of the Kargoi were still going down, but now so were the attackers.

Once or twice a reptile plowed clear through a line, to break into the open beyond it and go rampaging among the tents. Blade heard screams as women who hadn't fled in time died in those tents, and hoped Naula had run fast enough and far enough.

Other beasts had the good luck or the good sense to find open flanks where the sections of line hadn't linked up. They plunged on toward the tents and the wagons, heads down and feet churning up the ground.

One of these beasts got as far as a trio of tethered riding drends. With a bellow, one of the drends broke its tether and charged the oncoming reptile. They met head-on, the drend's long horns hooking wickedly, driving the reptile's head to one side. Before it could recover a second drend came lumbering in and butted it in the flank. A full-grown riding drend weighed nearly a ton, and the impact shoved the reptile bodily to one side. Then someone dashed up and drove a cooking spit into one eye, deep enough to reach the brain. The beast slumped down into death and the drends lumbered off, bellowing in noisy triumph.

Blade realized it was time he got into the fight. He'd done about all he could do by standing on the back of a drend and shouting orders at the top of his lungs. Besides, his voice was completely gone.

So he leaped down from the back of the drend and ran forward. A dead reptile lay in his path. He swerved, ran across a patch of ground turned into mud by the beast's blood, leaped over its outstretched tail, and found himself in the rear of a line of warriors. He ran along it until he came to the right flank and stepped into place.

Several of the warriors recognized him and shouted greetings, bared teeth startlingly white in blood-smearred faces. Shouts from farther along the line told of another reptile making its charge. As spears rose into position, it slowed but did not stop. A warrior ran out of the line with a spear and thrust at the beast's eyes. The fanged head swung sideways, knocking the man down. He was unhurt. Before the jaws could close on him, he rolled clear, leaped up, and returned to the attack. Blade dashed forward to join the man.

Blade had to hear what he did after that from other people, who saw it all and marveled at it. He was never sure how much of what they said was the truth and how much of it just a good tale they enjoyed telling about a hero.

The Kargoi said he killed seven of the reptiles himself, helped other warriors kill five others, and drove half a dozen more back into the sea. He was willing to believe them. Certainly by the time he became aware of the world around him again, all his weapons were blunted and he was exhausted, aching, horribly thirsty, and covered with blood from head to foot.

He was less willing to believe that he'd strangled one of the beasts with his bare hands and lifted another completely off the ground, to drop it on its head and break its neck. Other tales of what he'd done were even less believable. It was, however, believable that the Kargoi had won. In fact it was certain.

Except for a dozen of so that had made their way back into the sea, all of the beasts were dead, more than two hundred of them. So were nearly three hundred warriors and a hundred women and children of the Kargoi. A hundred drends were dead, and a thousand more scattered all over the countryside by stampedes. Twenty wagons were smashed to splinters. Blade's idea of forming lines hadn't prevented a considerable toll of casualties, but it had certainly prevented disaster.

The drends were rounded up and harnessed; one by one the wagons rolled out of their circle and headed south. Blade bathed in the sea and climbed into his wagon, quite content not to be asked for any advice at the moment. The only thing he would have advised, the Kargoi were already doing-getting out of here! He fell asleep with his head in Naula's lap as the wagon creaked into motion.

Chapter 12

Blade rode out with the scouts that afternoon. They spread in a line five miles wide, stretching across the front of all the wagons. Blade rode within sight of the water.

The scouts beside him rode with one eye on the land and the other uneasily turned toward the water,

waiting for whatever might come out of it. Fortunately the sea reptiles, like the bat-birds, seemed to be creatures of the night. Once Blade saw a dark head and back rise from the waves a few hundred yards off shore, then sink down again after a minute or two. Otherwise the water shone in the sun, kicked up into whitecaps by a brisk wind. It rolled in peacefully on the shore, with no sign that it had ever spawned last night's horrors. Yet the reptiles were still out there, and so were their masters. They would come again, Blade was certain.

Once they'd made the new camp, Blade planned to ride back to the dead reptiles. He wanted to study them, learn more about what they could do, what could be done to them while they lived, and perhaps what could be done with them after they were dead. He might also find some clues about who their masters might be. At the moment this was such a total mystery that Blade refused even to guess.

The Kargoi made camp late that day, under the glaring sunset sky with the shadows already stretching far across the beaten-down grass. They made a camp huddled close against the foot of the hills and as far from the water as possible. The wagons of all three Peoples were drawn into an immense triple circle and all the warriors took up positions between them and the water. Except for the warriors no one left the wagons. No tents were pitched, no fires were lit.

No one in the whole camp slept that night except out of sheer exhaustion. All the wakefulness was unnecessary. Nothing came out of the sea or down from the sky.

At dawn Blade rode back to the battlefield. He would have preferred to ride alone, but that wasn't possible. The moment he mentioned he was going to ride back, Paor insisted on coming with him. Then Naula swore she also would come and share his danger. Several other warriors immediately decided that they would be shamed if a woman went where they would not. They insisted on joining the party. In the end Blade rode back at the head of fifty warriors.

That was far too many witnesses for much of what Blade wanted to do. So far no one among the Kargoi had the faintest notion that the attacks of the bat-birds and the sea reptiles were anything but more monstrous freaks of nature, like the volcanoes or the rising sea. Blade desperately wanted them to stay ignorant as long as possible. He suspected that not even the courage of the Kargoi would survive the knowledge that the bat-birds and reptiles were being directed by some unknown intelligence greater than theirs. He also suspected that if warriors like Paor watched all he did on the battlefield, they would begin to wonder what he was looking for and then ask questions to which he could give no safe answers.

He might have done better to ride back by himself in the night, secretly, risking the bat-birds and reptiles and anything else that might be tempted to attack a lone rider. He would far rather risk his own neck ten times over than risk a panic among the Kargoi that could leave them helpless in the face of their enemies.

Blade was able to get some use out of his unwanted escort by making the warriors help him butcher the dead reptiles. At first the warriors drew back at the idea of cutting up two thousand tons of rapidly-decaying corpses in the hot sun. The smell alone already lay across the shore like a fog.

Blade ignored their protests and hesitations. He and Paor and Naula and a few other willing spirits stripped off their clothes, drew their swords, and went to work. After a little further hesitation, the rest of the warriors joined in, except the few on guard duty. They could not refuse to follow the lead of the hero Blade, or refuse to go where even Blade's woman went.

The work was every bit as gruesome as Blade expected. He was glad he hadn't eaten any breakfast. Most of the warriors didn't have stomachs as strong as his. Blade felt sorry for them, but he wasn't too unhappy to see them dropping out one by one. There were plenty of hands left to do the necessary work, and fewer eyes to watch him.

It was soon clear that the reptiles could be put to all sorts of uses. Their scaly hides made excellent body armor, shields, and helmets-heavy, smelly, and hot, but tougher than boiled leather and almost as tough as mail. Their bones came in all shapes and sizes, from tiny ones that could be carved into buttons, through larger ones that would make good axe handles, to the ribs that were as tall as a man and would make good roofbeams for fair-sized huts if the Kargoi ever had a chance to build any.

The claws and teeth would make excellent arrowheads and speartips-not as hard as metal, but more easily replaced and hard enough to deal with most human opponents. The internal organs were too far gone in decay to be much use. Taken from a freshly-killed beast, on the other hand, thoroughly cleaned, and cured in the sun, they would make large, sturdy bags and bottles.

Blade hacked and slashed, pried and pulled, splattering himself from head to foot with blood and filth until he looked like something found on the floor of a hatcher's shop. Even if the other men had been watching him every minute, they wouldn't have seen anything suspicious. He carved his way deeper and deeper into the decaying bodies without finding anything that shouldn't have been there in a normal beast.

At last Blade asked everyone to stand back and leave him alone for a short time. It was the custom among the English, he said, to offer the brain of a slain animal as a sacrifice to the Earth Wisdom. It was improper for anyone but a warrior of England to witness the sacrifice.

The few warriors still on their feet were more than happy to leave him alone, out of respect for his customs and out of a great desire to get away from the acres of reeking carrion. No curious eyes were around when Blade went to work on the skull of the most intact of the reptiles. That was the most likely place left to find some trace of whatever intelligence might lie behind the beasts' attacks.

Blade closely examined the hide stretched over the huge skull. Any scar, any unnatural bulge might give him a clue. He looked until his eyes were watering and his fingers raw from prodding the scaly hide. All he could find was one strip about a foot long and a couple of inches wide, where the hide seemed a little smoother than elsewhere. It could be the scar of an operation to implant something in or near the brain. It could also be a scar left by a battle against another reptile or by running into a submerged boulder!

Blade began cutting, slowly and methodically, keeping well clear of the scar. He cut through the hide and into the skull, then began working his way around the scar. At last a circle of hide about a foot in diameter was loose. Blade gripped it by one side and thrust his sword gently in under it, to pry it free.

As he thrust, the point of his sword struck something solid. Blade poked gently and heard a sound that could only have been made by his sword striking metal or plastic. He drew his sword out, put it down, and began carefully stripping the hide off by hand.

At last a bloody circle of skull lay exposed. A little to one side of the center was a disk of translucent glass or plastic, about six inches in diameter. Several wires crisscrossed the surface. Blade could make out the faint patterns of what was unmistakably advanced microcircuitry.

There it was--complete and undeniable evidence that someone was implanting something, probably a control device, in the brains of the sea reptiles.

Who? The device itself gave no real clues. Microcircuitry obeyed certain basic laws that were the same for any people or race. All that was implied was a certain level of technology-and the existence somewhere in this Dimension of somebody with that level of technology.

That meant the Kargoi and anybody else who managed to survive the rising waters were in more danger than they could know. No matter how much Blade taught them, they could still be doomed.

Blade swore, first mentally, then out loud. He didn't feel helpless-he never did-but for once he did feel that the opposition might be a trifle overpowering!

He put the flap of hide back in place, stood up, and signaled to the others to gather around him. They came slowly, Paor leading them.

Blade laid his sword across the beast's skull and spoke loudly.

"The brains of these creatures are not fit for sacrifice. They have been attacked by an evil growth, that makes them mad."

Paor nodded. "So that is why they were attacking us?"

"Yes "

It was not the best possible lie, but it should last until the Kargoi were ready to learn the truth-if that time ever came.

Chapter 13

With all the other men who'd worked beside him, Blade went down to the sea to scrub off the blood and filth. Then Blade rode up to where the smashed wagons lay. He began picking up boards and tying them on the back of his drend.

Paor followed him. "What are you doing, Blade?"

"I'm going to build a raft. Do you want to help me?"

"I suppose I can. Why do you want to build it?"

"I want to go out on the water farther than I can swim and see how these beasts live there."

Paor's mouth opened and he stood speechless for a moment. "Blade, they will come and smash the raft. Then they will gulp you down in a mouthful!"

"Perhaps. But I do not know that. I do not know many things about these creatures, and I need to know them. The Kargoi need to know them too."

"You cannot do this any other way?"

"Not without sending someone else into danger that I will not face myself. Would you have me do that?"

Paor was silent again. He could recognize a man who'd made up his mind to the point where there was no arguing with him.

With the help of half a dozen warriors, the raft quickly took shape. It was about ten feet by six feet, just able to keep Blade afloat and dry. It would never support a sail, so Blade carved one of the reptile ribs into a combination pole and paddle.

The warriors watched grim-faced from the shore as he set out, and Naula was weeping openly. No doubt his voyage seemed as mad to them as that of Columbus had to his Spanish friends. Blade was not going nearly as far-in fact, he was barely going out of their sight. But he was in just as much danger, if not more.

Blade had to push and pull the raft some distance before it would float with his weight on it. Then he

scrambled aboard and began paddling steadily. Behind him the figures of the watchers on shore grew slowly but surely smaller.

Blade headed straight away from land. Every few minutes he took soundings with an improvised lead line, a rock tied to a length of rope. He was pleased to find the water getting steadily deeper.

Out in deep water he would be no more vulnerable to the reptiles than he would be in the shallows. They could come at him in either place. He would have a better chance of catching a glimpse of the beasts' masters. Those masters would probably keep their distance from shore, even if they swam in the water along with their pets. If they used something like a submarine to control the reptiles' attacks, they would probably have to stay in deep water.

What they would do to somebody who came out seeking them in deep water was another matter, one not at all pleasant to think about. Again Blade had a painful sensation of going up against outrageously long odds. He would have felt a little better with a rocket launcher, or even a single hand grenade!

Blade kept paddling until the lead showed eighty feet of water under the raft and a bottom that might have once been a forest. He untangled the half-decayed, weed-grown branch the line brought up and threw it over the side. Then he put up his paddle and squatted in the middle of the raft, waiting and trying to look in all directions at once across the water.

Slowly the sunset colors blazed in the sky, then faded into darkness. Somewhere beyond the horizon a storm was raging across water and land and the endlessly changing frontier between the two. Blade saw dim, noiseless flashes low down in the dark sky and felt the raft rise and fall on a gentle swell, all that was left of the distant waves. It was a warm night, and so quiet that when Blade dipped a hand over the side of the raft and held it up, the falling drops sounded almost loud.

Clouds came and went across the face of the moon at irregular intervals. When the moon shone clear there was enough light to see clearly. On Blade's left an isolated hill rose clear of the water. An almost intact stone building was perched halfway up the side facing him. To his right lay a wide stretch of swamp where a large flat hilltop lay just below the surface of the water. Between the two was a wide stretch of empty water, suggesting a valley that was now a deep channel. Certainly that would be a logical route for the sea reptiles and their masters, if the masters were logical-if the masters existed at all.

Alone on the water, Blade found it hard to know exactly what to believe. It seemed possible that he was on a wildgoose chase. It seemed just as possible that some malignant intelligence was even now watching him from under the water, getting ready to strike.

On the shore orange glows told Blade that the watchers had lit fires. If those fires helped keep the watchers happy, so much the better. Blade began a slow, regular scan of a complete circle around him.

He didn't know how long it took him to scan that circle twelve times. He did know that on the thirteenth time, he spotted a faint light just above the water's edge on the hill with the stone building. It was so faint that he would never have seen it from the shore, or even from three hundred yards farther away. The light did not flicker, and it was a pale blue-white that Blade had never seen in any campfire in any Dimension. Perhaps a pocket of volcanic gas had ignited and was venting itself into the air?

Then the light began to come and go, not wavering but going on and off in what Blade quickly saw was a regular pattern. Two long-one short-two long. Then five longs in rapid succession, then a repetition of the first five. Over and over again, eight times. The blue-white light was artificial, and someone was signaling with it. Who would answer?

Blade began paddling the raft slowly toward the hill. Whoever built the microcircuitry he'd found in the

reptile's head could undoubtedly build underwater detection devices able to pick up two shrimps mating five miles away, and radar able to pick up a mouse two miles off. They might not have either one on the hill. In that case he might be able to sneak up on the hill where the light shone and go hunting for the answers to a good many of his questions.

The hill was only a mile away, but it seemed to take hours before it started growing visibly larger. Not a breath of air moved to either slow Blade's progress or conceal the small sounds he could not help making as he paddled the raft steadily toward his goal.

He'd covered about half the distance when the light began signaling again. This time it went through the complete sequence four times. Now Blade could see that the light shone from among low, spreading trees that straggled along the water's edge. The remnants of an orchard, perhaps. Blade started bearing to the left. He wanted to come in on the opposite side of the hill from the light and sneak across the slope under cover of the trees.

The hill grew steadily larger in the darkness, and so did the light on it. On the shore the fires burned higher and higher, undisturbed. Whatever the signal light was doing, it hadn't yet called an attack by the sea reptiles on the watchers along the shore.

At last Blade could see that he was no more than a hundred yards from dry land. He was tempted to slip off the raft and swim the rest of the way in, to make a smaller target. But he couldn't be sure of safely anchoring the raft, or of finding it again in the darkness. He paddled in until the raft gently scraped over the top of a submerged tree and bumped solid ground. Blade leaped ashore, agile as a cat and even quieter, and tied the lead line around a stump.

If the signal light was manned, whoever was manning it hadn't detected him, didn't care about him, or was waiting for the right time to strike. There was no point in trying to guess which. Blade made sure that his bowstring was dry and that both swords moved freely in their scabbards. Then he began his slow stalk through the trees toward the blue-white light.

Around him the night was silent and dark except for the signal light ahead, the orange fire glow on the distant land, and the moon when the clouds let it shine. From time to time the trees cut off Blade's view of the signal light, but they never entirely cut off his view of the water.

Suddenly the clouds opened wider than ever, as though a veil had been jerked away. The moon blazed down until it laid a silver trail across the water.

As if the moonlight had called it out of the depths, something black and glistening rose from the water into the silver path. For a moment Blade thought it was one of the great reptiles coming to the surface. Then he recognized the conning tower of a small submarine, and the foamy wake it left behind as it ran in toward the island. Half a dozen cylindrical objects seemed to be tied to the submarine's hull, giving it a hump-backed appearance.

Blade had to watch the submarine for only a minute to know that it was heading straight toward the signal light. He moved on again, more slowly and carefully than before. He didn't know what to expect—armed sentries, detectors, booby traps, land mines, or what. He was sure that whoever had set up the signal station and was now coming to inspect it must have provided it with some defenses.

If there were any, Blade passed through them as if he'd been an insect or a ghost. He came out on a ledge of rock uphill from the signal light, just as the submarine stopped about fifty feet offshore. In the glow from the light he could clearly make out who was operating it and who was swimming ashore from the submarine. He watched them and froze, barely breathing.

The signalers and the swimmers were not human. They stood eight or nine feet tall, and they looked like nothing so much as giant stalks of asparagus with four double-jointed arms ending in lobster-like claws. Instead of feet, they moved on a massive rippling suction disk at the base of the "stalk." The ones swimming in from the submarine were encased from head to foot in flexible, transparent cylinders that left the arms and claws free for swimming. Blade could see air tanks and sacks of gear slung from a belt around each cylinder.

These beings were not human, but Blade had seen them before. Many trips to Dimension X in the past, he'd met them in a Dimension where they helped send out Ice Dragons to prey on the human inhabitants of a glacier-stricken world. The Ice Dragons had a human Ice Master, but ultimately they were the creation and the weapon of the advanced science of the Menel.

Yet the Menel were not creatures of any Earth or any Dimension. They came from deep space, across the great gulfs between the stars. From their distant, unknown home they had come to this world, in this Dimension. They had come and now they were settling down to do what?

Blade didn't know. All he had was a magnificent opportunity to find out and perhaps prevent it, if it was dangerous and he lived long enough. If he hadn't been so close to the Menel and still half stunned with surprise, Blade would have laughed out loud.

Now he probably had the answer to his first question—who was controlling the sea creatures? In finding the answer to that question, though, he'd raised at least fifty more!

Chapter 14

For the moment there was nothing to do but hide and watch the Menel at work for as long as he could. Somehow they hadn't detected his presence, which was distinctly odd. The great stronghold of the Menel under the polar ice of the Dimension of the Ice Dragons had been an incredible display of advanced technology in a dozen fields.

If the Menel had wanted to guard their signal station and rendezvous, they could easily have done so. They could have made it impossible for anyone as poorly equipped as Blade to approach it. That he was here within fifty feet of the Menel, alive and undetected, suggested that the Menel hadn't thought to guard the area at all.

Why? They might despise the inhabitants of this Dimension as hopelessly primitive. So primitive, in fact, that there could be no danger of an attack from them. In that case the Menel might be in for a rude surprise before this night was over.

Or perhaps they didn't have the necessary equipment. Certainly the eight Menel now in sight seemed to have plenty of gear of one sort or another. Blade saw tools adapted to their claws, stacks of gleaming plastic disks, two unmistakable lasers, an array of boxes and tubes that might hold anything. The two signalers had the light and a large metal box with a control panel on one side and wires leading from the other side down into the water. There was nothing that looked like a weapon or a detection device in sight, except possibly the lasers. Even they looked like drills or more signaling devices rather than weapons.

In spite of their lack of alertness, Blade knew that he was really too close to the Menel for safety. They might not be expecting visitors, but he knew they had better night vision than human beings. He didn't know what their hearing was like. Under those circumstances, it might be as dangerous to move back as to stay put.

His present position also had one advantage. He was close enough to the Menel so that he could charge

in among them in a matter of seconds. They were slow moving on their disks, although the four claw-equipped arms could strike fast and far. If he could get in among them quickly enough, Blade was fairly sure he could do as much damage as might be needed. Possibly he wouldn't get out alive, but almost certainly he would take most of the Menel with him.

If he got in among them. Blade wasn't going to lift a finger against the Menel until he knew what they were doing. From his experience with them in the Dimension of the Ice Dragons, he doubted they were harmless or friendly here. But harmless or not, they were intelligent beings from another world. The first time he fought them, he'd refused to kill a helpless Menel and actually given first aid to a wounded one. He'd follow the same policy here.

Blade didn't know if anything more would come of this second meeting with the Menel than had come of the first one. He didn't know how often the Menel's travels among the stars (and perhaps among the Dimensions?) might bring them into contact with human beings. He did know that he would do everything he could to make the Menel realize that human beings did not kill them on sight. If that idea could sink into the brains that lay somewhere in those mammoth asparagus stalks, it might open a new direction for the history of both races.

It seemed like an hour but it must have been only a few minutes more before the Menel started their night's work. One of the two signalers at the control panel started twisting switches and pulling levers. The box began to hum quietly to itself, like a distant hive of sleepy bees. Triangular patches that might be dials or indicators began to glow faintly, purple, gold, and green.

Three of the other six Menel opened one of the boxes and pulled out dark plastic tubes. They looked like hypodermic syringes or sprays, but they were four feet long and as thick as a man's arm. All six of the Menel not busy at the control panel began putting on their diving gear again.

This time it was nearly an hour before anything else happened. Then suddenly the night's stillness was ripped apart. The hissing roars of a number of the great reptiles sounded close at hand. Blade looked out to sea, in time to watch the fanged heads and dark humped backs rise into view.

Then Blade saw them begin to swim toward him and the Menel. He could count nine of them, and he had the distinct impression that six of them were herding the other three toward the shore, like dogs herding sheep.

As the reptiles approached land five of the six Menel divers slipped into the water. They were carrying one of the lasers, the syringes, and several other pieces of equipment whose use Blade couldn't guess.

The Menel swam out toward the approaching reptiles. They were not particularly graceful in the water, but with three of their four arms beating steadily they moved surprisingly fast. Blade found himself forced to respect the courage of the five swimmers. It seemed likely that some of the approaching beasts were under control by the two signalers. That didn't mean it was safe to swim up to those jaws that could bite a Menel in half as easily as a man.

The last of the Menel reached into one of the opened boxes and drew out what Blade recognized as a weapon. He'd seen the Menel carrying them in the land of the Ice Dragons, when they came up from their underground base to put down a rebellion among their human guards and servants. The weapon was a six-foot black tube with a red lens set in one end. The Menel held it crosswise with two arms, rather like a man holding a submachine gun.

Now the nine reptiles were nearly in shallow water. Four of the six herders surrounded two of the others, hissing and butting them in the side to drive them away from the Menel swimmers and from the submarine. The other two herders pushed the last reptile in toward the Menel, who went splashing out to

meet it.

The arms of the two signalers now moved furiously as they sent out increasingly complex signals to the beasts they were controlling. In the darkness they looked like grotesque idols in some Oriental temple, come to life and performing some impossible and inhuman dance. Their attention seemed completely fixed on the sea and their five comrades. The same was true of the armed Menel, who seemed to be in charge of whatever was going on here.

The five swimmers surrounded the "wild" reptile. A shot of anaesthetic left it semiconscious. One of them clamped a disk to the top of its skull. Another pressed the laser against the scaly hide and activated it. A brief red glow, and hide and skull parted.

A third Menel raised one of the electronic brain implants. Another few seconds' work with the laser, and the implant settled into place. From another of the tubes shot a fine mist of what was probably an antiseptic. Then the skull and hide were closed and the whole incision sealed with another brief burst of the laser. The last step in the operation was an injection to counteract the anaesthetic. The reptile shook its head, hissed faintly, then permitted the two herders to drive it into deeper water.

Blade crouched in the darkness, realizing that he'd just seen a breathtaking display of advanced technology and skilled surgery. He also realized that the Menel would have to be treated as enemies. They were using their knowledge to implant in the sea reptiles-and no doubt the bat-birds-the control devices that made it possible to drive them against the Kargo. Exactly why they were doing this Blade didn't know, but he did know one thing-tonight's operations should be stopped. He would be as careful as he could be to avoid killing any of the Menel. He would be just as careful to leave not one bit of their equipment intact or one of their implanted monsters alive.

There was only one weapon in sight, the tube held by the Menel commander. If he could disable or capture it, that should be a good enough start. After that he couldn't plan in too much detail. He didn't know his enemy that well.

Blade waited as two more of the herders drove one of the wild reptiles toward the waiting surgical team. He waited long enough after that for the operation to begin, and draw the attention of all the Menel.

Then he sprang to his feet and charged down the slope to the attack.

Chapter 15

The Menel were so intent on what was happening in the water that Blade probably could have charged down on a horse without alerting them. He had seldom been able to take an opponent so completely by surprise.

He threw one spear with all his strength at the control box. He aimed between the two Menel, and the spear sank a foot deep into the box. The humming died instantly and most of the lights went out. The two signalers turned to face Blade, but since neither of them was armed he ignored them.

He charged the Menel commander, letting out his breath in a roaring battle cry as he went, hoping to startle or distract the being. The Menel was just beginning to turn on its base, the arms that held the weapon swinging upward, when Blade came in with a leaping side kick. Both feet drove into the Menel with all of Blade's speed and all of his two hundred and ten pounds behind them. The Menel weighed half again as much, but it was caught too far off balance. It tottered, the two free arms flailing the air wildly, claws snapping within inches of Blade. Then it went over on its side with a thud and a peculiar warbling cry.

Blade recovered while the Menel was going over. As it landed he was on top of it, striking with the flat of his longsword at the two arms holding the weapon. He not only didn't want to hurt the Menel, he didn't want to damage the weapon if he could avoid it.

The Menel shivered all over at the impact of Blade's sword. One of the claws gripping the weapon opened feebly, the other clicked convulsively, trying to tighten its grip. Blade grabbed the free end of the weapon and jerked it loose. He sprang away from the fallen Menel, just as the two signalers made up their minds to charge him.

They lurched across the ground at him faster than he'd thought they could move, so fast that he had no time to find out how to activate the weapon. He sprang aside from their charge, dropping his longsword and gripping the Menel weapon in both hands like a quarterstaff. He held it crosswise in front of him as the claws reached out.

One of the lunging claws struck the firing control. A beam of eye-searing crimson light darted from the lens at the muzzle. Air crackled and boomed as the crimson beam tore through it.

In the path of the beam lay three full grown trees. Without smoke or flame, sparks or even very much noise, the beam sliced through all three of them as if they'd been straws. Broken branches and solid pieces of wood fell to the ground with cracklings and thuds.

Blade hastily backed away, slapping the square plate that seemed to be the trigger for the beamer. The beam cut off. The two Menel signalers backed away almost as fast as they'd charged, separating as they went. Blade swung the beamer down and aimed it at the control box. The weapon was awkward to handle, being designed for beings nine feet tall, but it weighed no more than twenty pounds.

As they saw Blade taking aim, the two Menel seemed to panic. They slammed all four claws down on the ground and heaved themselves wildly along. In their fear they were so grotesque and ludicrous that Blade burst out laughing.

He fired again. The crimson beam sliced into the control box, and it fell into two pieces as neatly as any piece of meat divided by a hatcher's cleaver. Blade fired again, running the beam along the wires leading into the water, watching them jump and twist and dissolve like sugar lumps dropped into hot coffee.

By this time the Menel commander was heaving itself erect again. One claw clumsily gripped Blade's longsword. Two other claws reached out for the remaining laser. Blade ducked under a wild swing of the sword and fired the beamer with the lens held almost against the laser. The laser fell into half a dozen pieces and something inside it blazed up fiercely with an angry hiss and a cloud of stinking green smoke. The Menel dropped the last piece as if it had suddenly turned red hot and backed away, swaying from side to side like a tree in a high wind. It stood there for a moment. Blade had the sense of being stared at intently and judged by nonhuman senses and a still more nonhuman but keen intelligence. Then the last Menel turned and followed the two signalers toward the water. Blade went to work with the beamer, systematically wrecking every container and piece of equipment in sight.

Meanwhile, the five swimmers had broken off the implant operation. Blade saw the circle around the drugged reptile break up and saw the half-opened skull sink out of sight. That reptile at least wouldn't be troubling anyone again.

The other eight reptiles were just beginning to react, as their sluggish wits struggled to grasp the new situation. The last wild one suddenly found that its herders were no longer paying any attention to it. Foam churned around it as it dove away for open water.

The seven implanted reptiles were slowly realizing that no one was sending commands through their

brains any more. They seemed totally unaware of the eight Menel in the water, all swimming furiously toward the submarine.

Blade didn't much care for what he had to do next. The submarine was the last chance the Menel had for rejoining their comrades elsewhere, or even fighting off the reptiles now. It still had to be destroyed, for it was also their last chance for catching and killing Blade on his way back to the safety of the land.

Blade raised the beamer and sighted on the submarine's conning tower. As he did, one of the Menel raised a laser and let fly wildly. A beam of green light flashed close enough for Blade to feel searing-hot air blow painfully across one leg. Then he slapped the trigger plate of the beamer.

The submarine's conning tower exploded upward on top of a pillar of foam and steam. It shot ten feet into the air, then splashed back among the Menel. They stopped swimming as the wave from the explosion swept over them. Now they were too close to the submarine for Blade to have another clear shot at its bow. He shifted his aim, and with another pulse of the beam blew off the stern. Then Blade picked up his fallen sword, tucked the beamer under one arm, and started back the way he'd come. Seven uncontrolled and angry reptiles would certainly be enough to keep eight Menel too busy to think any more about Richard Blade.

Blade was tempted to leave the beamer and swim back to shore. He could probably go faster that way than aboard the raft. But he wasn't sure how long the beasts would be occupied with the Menel, or how well the beamer would work after it got wet. Besides, he wanted to get it back to shore if he could. He might need something to convince the Kargoi of what they faced, if a time suddenly came when they had to be told. He could hardly think of anything more convincing than the beamer.

So he sprinted through the darkness along the shore to where he'd left the raft. He slashed the line with his sword and leaped aboard. The raft dove several inches deep under the impact, then bobbed to the surface. Blade put down the beamer, snatched up the paddle, and began paddling as if a dozen of the sea reptiles were already hard on his trail.

It seemed forever before the little island began receding in the darkness. At last Blade felt free to turn and look toward the shore. The fires there were blazing higher, and smaller dots of light moving back and forth along the shore told Blade of lit torches. He wondered what wild guesses the watchers were making about what they saw and heard, and paddled on. Slowly the island faded behind him, and so did the noise of the battle the Menel were fighting against the sea beasts.

A little while longer, and Blade could begin to make out individual figures moving along the shore, in and out of the pools of light thrown by the fires. In another few minutes he'd be in water shallow enough to slow the attack of the great reptiles, and

The sea behind him rose into two glistening mounds, and a too familiar roaring hiss rolled across the water.

As the fanged heads broke the surface and rose dripping and terrible, Blade was already lifting the beamer. The two beasts surged forward, Blade's hand came down on the trigger plate, and the crimson beam vanished into the mouth of the one on the left. The whole top of the skull came off, with bits of bone and teeth, hide, flesh, and brain tissue raining down. Blade shifted his aim as the second beast came at him, ignoring the fate of the first one. Again his hand came down on the trigger plate, and this time nothing happened.

Blade struck the trigger plate a second time, a third. Broken or exhausted, the beamer was certainly useless for the moment. Blade shifted it to his left hand and drew his longsword with his right. He still had a chance, if the beast would stay on the surface and not have the sense to dive and come up under the

raft.

It came on. Its head reared high above Blade, the scraping and clashing of long teeth added to the hisses and roars. Then the head dipped toward him.

Blade saw the yard-wide mouth descending on him and thrust upward with the useless beamer, ramming it between the filth-caked teeth. At the same time he struck with his sword, putting every bit of his strength into the slash. Even the beast's rugged hide could not stand up under such a blow. Hide and flesh gaped open to the bone all across the beast's nose. It jerked its head back with a convulsive whipping of the long neck, roaring deafeningly. Blade thrust his sword into its scabbard and plunged over the side of the raft.

He dove deep, striking out toward the shore. Hopefully the wounded beast would be distracted by the beamer, then by the raft. By that time he would be safely on land. It was a faint hope, but all he had. He thrust himself furiously through the black depths until a burning in his lungs warned him that his breath was about to run out. He lunged toward the surface and thrust his head up for a gulp of air.

The beast floated now with its head high in the air, twisting about wildly. Between the teeth Blade saw the beamer shining. Good. He'd gained a few seconds head start, at least. He took a deep breath, then got ready to dive again.

As Blade's head was about to dip under, the beast's jaws clamped down hard on the beamer. Somehow that triggered the release of all the weapon's stored energy in a single explosive second. Gold and crimson flame flared where the reptile's head had been, and its last hissing roar was lost in the thunderous crash of the explosion. Bits of charred flesh and bone sprayed down into the water like the blast of a shotgun, kicking up the water all around Blade.

For another moment the mangled stump of the beast's neck waved high in the air, as its body obeyed the last few signals from the now shattered brain. Then it dropped limply into the water, throwing up a wave that washed over Blade's head. By the time he could see again the beast had sunk out of sight, and nothing was left from the battle except a few stray planks of the raft.

So much for using the beamer to convince anybody of anything! At least he was alive, instead of making a meal for one of the reptiles, and now he wouldn't have to worry about how to conceal the beamer until the right time came to reveal it.

On shore the people seemed to be dashing about like ants from a broken hill. It was time to get ashore and try to give them some sort of plausible explanation of what had been going on.

Blade turned and began to swim.

Chapter 16

The moment Blade stepped out of the water, all the warriors crowded around him. They pounded him on the back, wrung his hand, shouted questions and cries of joy at his return. Paor finally broke up the mob, shouting orders and prodding a few laggards with the butt of his spear, and Blade was able to sit down and drink some water.

That gave him enough time to think up an explanation of what he'd been doing and what had happened. The island had a volcanic vent on it, he said, and some of the escaping gas had ignited. The noise attracted some of the sea beasts, but they'd become interested in fighting each other. So he'd been able to escape, although only by the skin of his teeth!

Everyone on shore had seen the lights and heard the sounds of Blade's battle and seen the two beasts that chased his raft. With the darkness and their own fear and ignorance, the Kargoi hadn't seen enough to make them doubt Blade's tale. All they wanted to do now was pack up and get back to the main camp.

That was fine with Blade. He'd learned what he came to learn-and much more. It would take many more than fifty men to butcher all the dead reptiles for their useful parts before they rotted hopelessly. He also wanted to get away before any wreckage drifted ashore from the island. The Kargoi might wonder about his tale if a dead Menel or a piece of the submarine was washed up on the shore practically at their feet.

In half an hour everyone was mounted up, and in an hour they were well on their march through the darkness toward the main camp.

They reached it just before dawn. Blade learned at once that the camp and its warriors had been nearly as busy last night as he had.

During the night the camp had to stand off a united attack by bat-birds from the sky and reptiles from the sea. Without the spears, the battle would have been grim and bloody, and the camp might have been overrun. As it was, another two hundred warriors, as many women and children, and twice as many drends were dead or dying. The attackers had been wiped out nearly to the last bird and beast, but how many more such victories could the Kargoi afford?

Obviously the Menel Blade had fought weren't the only ones in the area last night. It must have taken a good many of them to organize, launch, and control such a large attack. At least they'd lost many of their animals, and thanks to Blade's work they might have some trouble implanting more-for a while, at least.

Time. That was what Blade knew he had to fight to gain-as much of it as he could. He couldn't be sure what the Kargoi would do with the time he gave them. They might do nothing at all; even if they did anything it still might not be enough to save them. With their advanced technology the Menel would not be limited to indirect attacks with controlled animals. Any day they could take the field themselves, launching a direct and completely unstoppable attack.

The prospects were grim, but there was no point in spending any time worrying about them. Blade could have easily used a twenty-nine hour day coping with the problems at hand.

The problems added up rapidly. Adroon, the High Baudz, lay in his wagon, immobilized by a badly-broken leg. In spite of the severe pain, he was as clear-headed as ever, but his presence would be missed on future battlefields.

Rehod, on the other hand, had made a mighty name for himself in the night's attack, killing at least a dozen of the reptiles and twice as many bat-birds with his own weapons, leading attacks, rallying shaken lines, seemingly in three or four places at once. Many people were now inclined to forget and forgive his breach of faith in the fight with Blade. He has learned better, they said, so now we can trust and honor him.

In short, Rehod had become a hero second only to Blade in the eyes of many people. Too many, for Blade's peace of mind.

His own night's work had been every bit as heroic and dangerous and valuable to the Kargoi as Rehod's. But he himself was the only one who knew that, the only one who could even be trusted with the knowledge! As far as everyone else knew, he'd been watching volcanoes while Rehod dashed about among the teeth and talons of the attackers. Paor hadn't even been doing as much as Blade.

Blade wished now that he'd come up with some more heroic version of his hours on the island, one that could compete with Rehod's deeds. It was too late to change the story, though. The only thing Blade could do about Rehod now was to keep a close eye on him and an even closer guard over his own tent at night. Rehod now had enough friends to give him all sorts of perfect alibis if Blade was found dead in his tent some morning. There would certainly be suspicions, but probably nothing more.

Many among the Kargoi said it was absolutely necessary to move on at once. They still faced several days of traveling dangerously close to the water before their trail could turn inland. The sooner the Kargoi started off, the better.

Those who'd been with Blade loudly urged staying where they were, to butcher the reptiles and bat-birds as thoroughly as possible. Blade and Paor won out. They showed what excellent armor could be made from the hides of the reptiles-armor that gave some protection even against swords and arrows. That convinced Adroon.

"Indeed the beasts are terrible," said the High Baudz. "Yet we also know that before we are safe in our new home, there will be human enemies to fight. In such a battle, the hides of the dead beasts may save as many warriors of the Kargoi as the claws and teeth of the living beasts slew. Blade has spoken wisely."

The camp was moved a few miles farther on, to escape the suffocating stench of thousands of tons of carrion. The women and workers dug a large ditch along the seaward side of the camp, deep enough to catch the beasts and too wide for them to jump. The warriors descended on the dead reptiles and bat-birds, holding their swords with one hand and their noses with the other.

Everyone except the babies and the sick or wounded worked eighteen hours out of the twenty-four every day for the next week. By the end of that time every warrior of the Kargoi stank as though he himself were half-rotten. He also walked about with his vitals swathed in reptile-hide armor, a spear tipped with reptile teeth or claws, his swords hanging from a belt of bat-bird skin, water bags and even tents of sun-cured reptile gut stowed in his wagon-in short, fully equipped from the remains of his enemies. The Kargoi had long been accustomed to turning every part of a drend to some use. Now Blade had taught them to do the same with the bat-birds and the sea reptiles.

Eventually the work came to an end, with every man and woman of the Kargoi as weary as if they'd fought a battle each day of the past week. There was a mass bath, with the water turning red as the Kargoi washed off a week's accumulated filth. There was a great feast, with everyone gorging themselves on roast meat and kaum. Then the Kargoi marched off on the next stage of their journey, while behind them the carrion birds and insects swooped and buzzed above the acres of rotting flesh.

Blade and Paor were among the last to leave. As they looked back at the shambles, Paor frowned.

"There was something unnatural in the way those creatures came at us," he said. He shook his head. "I hope we have seen the last of them."

Blade said nothing. He didn't care for Paor's suspicions, and as for Paor's hopes, they were almost certain to be disappointed. The Menel would be heard from again.

Chapter 17

The last days of the Kargoi's march along the shore passed without incident. Bat-birds sometimes flew over in the twilight, but did not attack. Twice warriors riding close to the water saw the heads of sea reptiles rise from the surface. Once Blade saw a low gleaming shape far out on the water, that vanished before anyone else could notice it. A Menel submarine? That was all.

Every night they made camp with the stench of badly-cured reptile hide and the moans and cries of the wounded hanging over the camp. Every morning when they moved on they left a few hides that were too rotten to carry farther and the graves of a few wounded who'd died in the night.

At last they turned away from the shore, up a broad valley that offered good grazing. Scouts rode on ahead to the pass visible at the upper end of the valley, to explore the country beyond.

The valley might have been a proper new homeland, but there were two things wrong with it. First, it was too low. The water had only to rise a few more feet and the river that flowed down the valley would back up and spread across most of the land where drends might graze and crops grow. The rest of the land would become exposed to the attacks of the sea reptiles.

Second, the valley was already the home of people who had no intention of giving it up to the Kargoi. The sides of the valley were covered with thick forests and the valley people hid in those forests by day. By night they slipped out and shot arrows into the Kargoi and their beasts from impossibly long ranges. The Kargoi could not hope to meet this sort of guerrilla warfare for a decade or a generation. So even those most weary of traveling had to admit that the journey wasn't over yet.

Adroon's journey was another matter. By the time the Kargoi reached the valley, it was obvious that the High Baudz was seriously ill. Inch by inch his broken leg was turning black with gangrene. There was no choice left but amputation.

The operation went well, but his sixty years and many battles had left Adroon without enough strength to survive it. He died that night, and for the first time in three generations the Kargoi had no High Baudz and no hereditary candidate for the office.

"I knew the gods were not through with us," said Paor wearily. He sounded like a brave man with much of his courage at last beaten out of him by a series of punishing blows that had simply gone on too long. "I knew it. They thought it would be a good jest to take Adroon from us. It is a good jest, so good that the Kargoi may die of it."

"How is this so?" asked Blade. "Surely the Kargoi see clearly that they must all follow one leader while they are on the march?"

"Yes. But every baudz sees just as clearly that he is that one leader. Each has or will have friends or kin or a whole clan who will hope to gain much when he takes up the wand of the High Baudz. Even if all the baudzi themselves were wise men, each has among his followers men who are not. There are always swords drawn in anger, blood shed, and feuds begun. Behind those feuds come factions and hatred, as inevitably as finding drend dung where the drend have passed."

Blade shook his head. "The Kargoi should not let themselves be driven into a war among themselves by thinking too much of what has happened in the past. They should think of what may be done now so that they can march on united."

Paor laughed sourly. "It is easy to say that, Blade. Have you done any such thinking yourself?"

"Yes. I have a suggestion. Suppose a man with no friends, no kin, no clan were to become High Baudz for the space of one year, or until the Kargoi have found a new home. Then he could step aside, and a High Baudz be chosen to guide the Kargoi for many years. The feuds and the factions would not do so much harm then."

"I suppose that is one idea. But is there such a man as you-?" Paor broke off as his mouth dropped open and his hand rose to point a finger at Blade. "You?"

"I have no kin or clan here among the Kargoi. I have only two friends. Naula is one, and she is only a young girl. You are the other, and you are a wise man whom I trust."

Paor shut his mouth and nodded slowly. "Yes, I can see that you are such a man as you have described. I see also that you could indeed lead as High Baudz, wisely and well.

"Yet-you have no faction, now. What will you have after a year as High Baudz? During that year you will be able to reward many. Those whom a man rewards have been known to follow him."

"That is true," said Blade. "I can only swear to you that out of my love for the Kargoi and my regard for my own honor, I will do no such thing." He drew his shortsword and handed it to Paor, hilt first. "Take this sword. I swear by all that any among the Kargoi believe in that with this sword you may slay me, without a fight, if after a year as High Baudz I do not step aside. I will swear it again, before all the baudzi of the Kargoi and anyone else you may think fit to witness the oath. I can offer no more than this oath."

"For me, the oath is enough," said Paor, smiling and handing the sword back. "I doubt if many of the wiser baudzi will think otherwise."

For a short time it looked as if Paor had been too optimistic. Several of the baudzi and a good many warriors cried loudly that no stranger should have the supreme honor the Kargoi could give, no matter what oaths he was willing to swear or how great the need for a High Baudz. If there was need to make someone High Baudz for a year, then surely there were any number of worthy men among the Kargoi!

These people might have won or at least dangerously delayed matters, except that their secret leaked out. Their choice for High Baudz was Rehod.

Suddenly Blade found himself with all the support he needed. Many people respected Rehod's courage, but had doubts about his wisdom and judgement. A hard-fighting hero he certainly was, but was he also a leader who could be trusted to lead the Kargoi safely into their new home without making fatal mistakes or abusing his power?

So the baudzi gathered together around Adroon's grave and chose Richard Blade to be High Baudz of the Kargoi. They listened to him swear his promised oath, swore their own oaths to follow his guidance in all matters of war, then started pouring out the kaum. The party went on all night.

Blade found himself hard at work almost from the moment of his elevation to office. The scouts who'd gone across the pass at the head of the valley started returning the next morning. Blade sat with them, heard their tales, and slowly learned what lay beyond the pass.

A day's march beyond the pass lay a wide stretch of water. It was shallow, almost a swamp in many places, but obviously connected somehow with the sea. The tides fell and rose, revealing and then swallowing up areas of ground turned to ooze, dead trees, even weed-grown buildings. Even at the lowest point of the tide, there was no way to the far side except by boat.

That far side was far indeed-a good ten miles. On the far side a range of lush green hills suggested a considerable expanse of fertile, hospitable land. But smoke columns by day and fires by night suggested a land already inhabited. To make their home among the hills or even to pass through them, the Kargoi would have to be ready to fight.

No one among the Kargoi would consider for a moment retracing their steps. The valley where they lay now had already been ruled out. The slope on the far side of the pass was too rugged and heavily forested. The new homeland, or at least the next stage of the journey, lay beyond the water. A grim and exhausting few weeks lay ahead of the Kargoi.

One of the grimmest and most exhausting times would be had simply getting across the water. The Kargoi knew how to cross rivers, and perhaps this water had once been a river, but now it was a good deal more.

The problem was not quite hopeless. The great wagons of the Kargoi were so well built that they could float like boats. Or at least they could easily be made to do so, with a little bit of patching and caulking of seams opened by the jolting and jarring of many miles of overland travel.

So much for the wagons. What about the drends? They could swim across a river, with a good deal of whipping and prodding. They could not swim ten miles.

"Perhaps we should try taming some of the sea reptiles to tow our wagons across," said Paor with a laugh. "They do not seem much more stupid than a drend, so perhaps they can learn almost as much."

Again Blade had to wonder how much Paor suspected about the attacks of the sea reptiles. He shook his head. "I do not think we have that much time. Besides, I have a better plan for getting the drends across the water."

It was basically a simple plan, although Blade knew too well how many things would still have to go exactly right. Cut down trees along the shore and build rafts-big ones, large enough to support a dozen drends. Launch the rafts and lead the drends on board, tethering them securely so they would not fall overboard.

Then set the wagons afloat. Tie two or three wagons to each raft. The men and women aboard the wagons go to work with poles or paddles. Slowly the wagons make their way across the miles of water. When dry land is reached on the far side, ground the rafts, unload the drends, and hitch them up to pull the wagons ashore.

Obviously it would be impossible to bring all the drends across in one trip this way. Many wagons would have to make several trips towing drend rafts. It would also be necessary to make all the crossings by day, to keep the wagons or the rafts from running aground.

Blade counted up wagons and drends and did some calculations. It would take nearly a week to get everybody across the water by this method. During the crossing an attack by any creatures under Menel control could mean a bloody shambles.

Any other method, though, would leave the Kargoi just as vulnerable and take much more time. They could not afford to give that much time to either the Menel or whoever might be waiting on the far side of the water. An alert and waiting enemy could do a great deal of damage to the slow convoys of wagons and drend rafts as they crept toward the far shore of the water.

Fortunately there was something that could be done about human enemies, unlike the Menel. If the hides of drends and sea reptiles were stretched over light wooden frameworks and made waterproof, then what? The Kargoi would have dozens of shallow-draft boats, easily handled and carrying twenty or thirty warriors apiece.

With enough of these boats, the Kargoi could send a thousand or more warriors across the water in a single night. If they landed by surprise, they could certainly sweep aside any force likely to be waiting for them. They could seize and hold a stretch of the far shore; if necessary they could build a log fort large enough to hold all of the Kargoi in an emergency.

Then the wagons and the drends could cross the water to a safe landing, the Kargoi would be united, and they could plan their next move. At this point even Blade wasn't sure what that next move might be. Too

much depended on what the enemy did—the unknown human enemy across the water, and the known nonhuman one lurking out to sea.

Chapter 18

Darkness was all around the boat as it crept across water like black marble. The darkness hid all but one of the thirty-five boats that followed in the wake of Blade's.

Eight hundred warriors of the Kargoi were approaching the far shore of the water. In another few minutes they should be landing safely, if their luck held. So far it had held for more than three hours. No sign of the Menel, no sign of an alert and waiting enemy, no sign of anything alive in the darkness and the water except themselves. Surely that luck could hold for at least a few more minutes.

Blade carefully shifted in the cramped bow of the boat and looked aft. The paddles rose and fell steadily, with only a gentle pluck as they dipped and the faint plank of falling drops as they rose. He could see the boat immediately astern, and if he looked hard enough, the faintest hint of the one behind that.

When the warriors landed, they would make camp until dawn. Then four columns of a hundred men each would go out to explore the countryside, capture or kill any small bands of enemies, and report any large ones. The rest of the landing party would start chopping down trees and digging ditches to make a large fortified enclosure. One boat would return across the water, bringing word to the waiting Kargoi. As soon as the enclosure was finished, the wagons and the rafts would start their crossing. Another week would see the Kargoi united once again.

In the silence and the darkness the sudden splash of a paddle off to the left sounded like an explosion. Blade twisted again, peering in the direction of the sound. The splash came again, closer, and a third time, still closer.

Before Blade could even draw his sword a long low canoe with four men in it seemed to leap at him out of the darkness.

Blade crouched, bracing himself with one hand while he snatched up a spear with the other. One of the men in the canoe whirled, dropping his paddle and raising a long fishing trident. Both Blade and the fisherman made their throws at the same moment. Blade ducked and the trident passed over his head, without spoiling his own aim. His spear took the man in the shoulder. He fell back on the man behind him, his face twisted in pain but not crying out.

In the next moment Blade's boat rode up over the low-lying canoe, driving it down into the water. The tough wood of the canoe pressed upward against the hide of the boat. Blade heard seams parting and felt water rushing in around his feet. He drew his sword and vaulted over the bow into the half-submerged canoe. One of the fishermen lunged at him with a short knife, missed, then grappled with him and tried to bear him over the side. The man fought in total silence and with astonishing strength. At last Blade was able to bring his knee up into the man's groin. With a gasp the fisherman jerked back, giving Blade just enough room to bring his sword into play. The fisherman made no sound even when he died.

Meanwhile the other two men in the canoe were battling against two Kargoi warriors. One of them threw a net over one of his attackers while the other fell on the entangled man, stabbing at his throat with a knife. The steel bit home, and suddenly the battle wasn't silent any more. The stabbed warrior let out a bubbling scream of agony. His attacker fell on top of him with a faint thud, cut down by the second warrior. The last fisherman had no weapon but his net, yet he tried to pull it back for another throw as the Kargoi came at him. The net leaped out, the sword slashed down, and both men went over the side.

Splashes sounded behind Blade as the warriors in his boat jumped overboard. Blade was relieved to see

that the water was no more than waist-deep. The men began pushing toward shore, holding their greased and blackened weapons over their heads.

On either side of the wading men other boats pushed forward, the men at the paddles no longer trying to be silent. Blade sprang overboard from the sinking canoe and splashed toward one of the passing boats. As he did, he heard the long, deep blasts of a horn sounding from the darkness ahead. A second horn answered it, then two more almost together.

Before Blade could climb into the boat, he saw lights appearing ahead. The alarm was up, and now the Kargoi were going to have to fight their way ashore. Blade scrambled into the boat and shouted, "Light up your torches and put your backs into it! Archers, hold your fire until I give the order!"

Torches flared as the boats shot ahead. Blade's boat joined the rush toward shore. They passed the wading men, splashing furiously toward a shore now less than a spear's throw away. Blade saw one man vanish as he stepped into a deep hole. Two of his comrades hauled him to the surface, spluttering and gasping for breath.

On the land several of the lights now formed a cluster. Blade could make out a number of dark-skinned figures standing in the light, holding bows and spears. A flurry of movement, and several more ran out from the trees. One held a long red staff. A closer look, and Blade realized that the staff bearer was a woman.

Then the boats were sliding up onto the mud and crunching over submerged roots. Blade dropped into knee-deep water, drew his longsword, and splashed toward dry land. As fast as the other boats grounded, their warriors followed him.

An arrow whistled past Blade and splashed into the water. Another struck him in the stomach but glanced off his reptile-hide armor. As the water grew shallower and the footing more solid, he broke into a run.

Not all the arrows coming at the Kargoi were badly aimed or futile. Blade saw one man suddenly stagger and clutch a bloody thigh--then keep on going, stumbling, his face twisted in pain, but still on his feet. As the Kargoi started reaching the land, several of the fishermen began to form a circle around the woman. She didn't seem willing to be protected. Blade saw her whirl her long staff, jabbing at the stomach of one man, the knee of another. They fell back. Before they could recover, Blade charged them at a dead run.

As he ran he shouted "Prisoners! Prisoners!" He doubted that many of his warriors would hear or obey, but hopefully enough would leave at least a few of the enemy alive. He particularly wanted the woman--she looked like the highest-ranking person among the enemy here tonight. She would be a valuable hostage, perhaps a valuable source of information.

Two of the fishermen stepped toward Blade as he approached the woman. One of them shot an arrow that whistled past his ear, then gripped his bow like a club and swung wildly at the oncoming Blade. Blade threw up one arm, taking the blow on his wrist brace, then chopped downward with his shortsword to hack the bow in two. The man dropped the broken halves, but instead of stepping back, he dropped on all fours and hurled himself at Blade.

Blade sprang clear of the man's lunge, but had to check his slash at the other man, who was coming at him with a spear. The spear point drove into the armor of Blade's thigh and almost into his flesh. Before the man could pull back Blade swung his longsword a second time. This time the edge cut cleanly through the spear shaft and one of the arms holding it. The man bared his teeth with a hiss of pain and drew back.

Now the woman came in, gripping her staff with obvious skill, feinting at Blade with one end, then

swinging with all her strength at his head. As she swung, the archer grabbed Blade around the waist, clawing at his armor, heaving with all his strength. Blade went over backward, and the woman's staff whistled down where his head had been to thud into the ground.

The woman raised the staff again, but hesitated for a moment, obviously afraid of hitting the archer as he struggled with Blade. Two Kargoi rushed in against the woman and she had to back away, her staff flickering like lightning, thudding against the Kargoi armor, doing no damage but keeping the warriors out of striking range.

Meanwhile Blade found that he had a first-class fight on his hands. The archer who'd grappled him was barely two-thirds his size, but the man was all muscle and also a tough, skilled wrestler in a murderous rage. At last Blade let go of his swords and threw all his own speed and strength against the archer. Twice he got the man in an unbreakable hold, then let him go, to show a willingness to accept the man's surrender. The archer seemed incapable of accepting the idea of surrendering. Each time Blade let him go, he attacked more furiously than before.

At last Blade got the archer in a firm grip, twisted hard, and let go only when he heard the man's neck snap. He rose, covered with sweat and dirt, his face grim. These people might not have much in the way of weapons, but they'd showed considerable skill in using what they had, and also breathtaking courage. These people would not be easy to fight, and Blade found that he didn't particularly like the idea of fighting them in any case.

The woman was still defending herself, her back against a tree, and there were now four Kargoi warriors around her. They seemed to be letting her hold them at a distance, and Blade realized they must think he'd picked out the woman as his prize of the night's battle. So they were merely keeping her busy until the High Baudz could come up and claim his rightful booty.

Blade looked up and down the shore. A large number of Kargoi torches were now throwing light on the scene. Out of twenty or so defenders, all but half a dozen were either dead or had vanished into the forest. Each of these survivors was defending himself desperately against three or four Kargoi. The Kargoi were attacking so eagerly they sometimes got in each other's way, giving the fishermen a chance to strike back. Blade counted at least fifteen Kargoi down, six of them obviously dead.

The warriors around the woman had her hemmed in so that she could not flee, but as Blade approached they stepped aside. The woman cracked one warrior's wrist with a final flick of her staff, then turned for a dash into the forest.

Blade was up with her before she'd gone three steps. She whirled and the staff sang through the air toward Blade. He raised his longsword to block the staff and unhooked his shortsword from his belt, scabbard and all. Then he closed in, holding the shortsword out hilt first.

The woman didn't realize until it was too late that Blade meant to capture her, not kill her. His longsword met her staff in midair and chopped halfway through it. The two weapons were locked together, and that held her in place just long enough. Blade thrust the hilt of his shortsword into the woman's stomach, pulling the blow at the last moment to avoid doing real damage. The woman gasped and doubled up, her hands gripping the staff so tightly that the knuckles of her dark-brown hands turned pale. Blade dropped both swords, jerked the staff out of the woman's hands, caught her by the arms, and got her face down on the ground. He placed one foot in the small of her back and held her down while he drew cord from the pouch at his belt and systematically bound her wrists and ankles. Then he turned her over.

Now that he could look at her carefully, he realized that she was extremely striking. Not beautiful, not even pretty, but exciting and certainly memorable. She was tall and long-limbed, with broad shoulders for

a woman and a broad, high-cheeked face. Large gray eyes stared up at him, filled with pain and confusion, but also with continued defiance.

She wore the same clothing as the other fishermen, a pair of knee-length trousers with a silky sheen to them. Hers were now rather soiled and torn from the fighting. She was bare above the waist, her small but beautifully formed breasts exposed. The cuffs of her trousers were embroidered in a geometric design of red and blue. She wore a wide bronze ring on each arm, one set with blue stones and the other with a design of fish and seaweed.

Blade ordered two warriors to mount guard over the woman and give her food and water if she asked. Then he strode off to rally his men and start getting things sorted out.

None of the eight hundred Kargoi warriors of the landing party got much sleep for several days, and Blade got least of all. By the end of that time, however, they'd done everything they were supposed to do and a good deal more besides.

The woman said nothing, not even to ask for food or water, but there were seven other prisoners, most of whom talked freely enough. Some talked out of fear, believing that their people were doomed if they didn't cooperate with the Kargoi. Others talked in a spirit of angry defiance, to tell the Kargoi of what a fate awaited them as soon as they moved on. Blade listened carefully to all of them.

The Kargoi had landed on what was now a peninsula, in the land of a people who called themselves the Hauri. The Hauri were neither numerous nor well armed, although their courage and skill needed no further proving. They lived by fishing and diving for shellfish and pearls, and were very much at home both on and under the water.

The Hauri lived in a loose federation of twenty-one villages. Their only "government" was a council of the headmen of each village that met once a month. The headman of the largest village was usually allowed to act as the chairman of the council, if he was judged fit.

The current chairman was young, but he had a large reputation among the Hauri as a fearless sailor and diver, who deliberately sought out the most dangerous fish in the seas. His name was Fudan, and the woman Blade had captured was his sister Loya. She had several titles, all of them long, virtually impossible to pronounce, and totally impossible to translate into anything sensible. For want of a better title, Blade called her "Princess" Loya.

So much for the Hauri. They would be no particular problem, in spite of their stubborn courage. The Kargoi could overcome them and probably wipe them out to the last man, woman, and child, any time they chose. Fortunately, such a slaughter probably wouldn't be necessary. The land where the Hauri lived seemed large enough to hold both them and the Kargoi, if necessary.

Unfortunately there was more to settling in this new land than dealing with the Hauri. To the west of the forests and hills where the Hauri lived lay broad plains, plains the Kargoi would need for grazing their drends. Those plains were also the eastern border of the kingdom of Tor. Two hundred miles farther west lay the great city of Tordas, which held more people than all of the Hauri and the Kargoi put together.

The Torians, it was said, were a people mighty in war. If the Kargoi dared march against them, they would be marching into disaster, and the Hauri would rejoice. The Hauri and the Torians had fought in the remote past, but for several centuries they had lived more or less in peace. The Hauri had neither the wish nor the ability to wage war against the Torians. The Torians' trained lancers mounted on three-toed blue horses could do little against the Hauri if they retreated into their forests and caves. The Hauri preferred to trade the pearls and shellfish their divers brought up for fine weapons and other goods they

could not produce themselves.

Blade was loudly assured that the Torians would not feel so peacefully inclined toward the Kargoi. They would attack as soon as the Kargoi moved out onto the plains. They would attack, and they would very probably put an end to the Kargoi. That thought naturally made the Hauri prisoners extremely happy.

Blade was not quite sure what to do with the prisoners. He eventually decided to release them all, including Loya. He also gave them a message for Fudan and the council of headmen. If the Hauri would make no attacks on the Kargoi for three months, the Kargoi would also keep the peace for that length of time. They would also keep away from the villages of the Hauri as much as possible when they marched west toward their meeting with the Torians.

The Hauri would do well to accept this agreement, he said. They had seen that the Kargoi were strong and brave, quite able to conquer this land if they wished. They would rather march west, to find pasture for their drends and measure their strength against the riders of Tor. They were making the Hauri a free gift of peace, and the Hauri would be wise to accept that gift.

None of the Hauri showed much reaction to Blade's proposal. Silently they gathered up their clothing and weapons, and just as silently they slipped off into the forest. The last one to go was Loya. She said nothing, but her eyes met Blade's for a moment, and he thought he saw her smile faintly. Then she was gone into the forest after the others.

The fort built on the shore was no more than a ditch and a rough wall of logs dragged into place and piled up. The place to build a fort that could stand up against a strong attack was farther to the west, on the Torian frontier. The warriors Blade sent west had orders to pick a site for that fort, while avoiding encounters with the Torians as much as possible.

Meanwhile, the wagons and the rafts were starting to cross the water. At Blade's request Paor sent across two hundred riding drends and their riders before letting any of the family wagons and wagon drends make the crossing. Blade was determined to get a line of mounted scouts thrown out to the west as soon as possible. The Hauri might already have sent word to the Torians that the Kargoi were in the land. Then the Torians would come riding east, perhaps in force, and Blade wanted to make sure they did not come by surprise.

The days passed and the shore came alive with the sounds of drends bellowing, axes chopping, trees crashing down, war songs and camp songs, the clatter and banging of craftsmen at work repairing wagons and rafts—all the sounds of the Kargoi hard at work. On the fifth day Naula came over, and Blade was able to spend a few hours with her in his tent.

On the sixth day Rehod came over. He was rather less welcome than Naula, and Blade almost wished Paor had come over instead. Yet it was probably better to have the trustworthy Paor on the far side of the water and the treacherous Rehod over here where he could be watched.

In any case, the Kargoi needed to cooperate more than ever now. Beyond the land the Torians and the Hauri shared uneasily lay the sea—nothing but the sea, on all sides and in all directions for as far as anyone knew.

The Kargoi had reached the end of their journey. They would either live in this land or die in it.

Chapter 19

Blade stood on the wall of the West Fort and looked out across the plains of Tor. To the west they stretched away to a green horizon as featureless and nearly as level as the sea itself. Mounted scouts of

the Kargoi were out there beyond that horizon now, and no doubt so were the riders of Tor.

The West Fort had been finished for ten days now. A double log wall twelve feet high enclosed a square two hundred feet on a side. The two walls stood eight feet apart. The space between them was filled with earth, and the top of the outer wall set with a waist-high railing of sharpened stakes. Inside were huts, stables, and storehouses holding drend meat and kaum. Two wells of sweet water were dug at the opposite corner of the square from the stables.

The West Fort stood ready, a base for the scouts and the permanent home of a garrison of four hundred Kargoi warriors. That was too many for the Torians to leave in their rear if they chose to ride east. They would have to eliminate the West Fort before they could feel safe, and Blade knew the fort's garrison could hold it against any army five or six times their strength if they had to.

So far the Kargoi and the Torians had both been sending out their scouts and nothing else. Little skirmishes flared across fifty miles of plains, with blue horses and drends both dashing off riderless afterward. So far honors were about even.

Sooner or later the collision would come. The Kargoi and the Torians could not ignore each other this way much longer. The Kargoi needed to move well out onto the plains to graze their drends freely; the Torians needed to protect their eastern borders.

Even if the Kargoi were willing to give up their drends, Blade wondered if there would be peace between them and Tor. The Hauri certainly would have something to say on the matter. So far the fishermen were keeping the truce Blade had offered them. So far they were also expecting to see the Kargoi move on to the west and fight the Torians. It didn't matter greatly to the Hauri who won that fight, as long as the Kargoi went west. If the Kargoi showed signs of actually settling in the land that had been theirs for so long, the Hauri might start having second thoughts about the truce.

How far west the Kargoi would be able to get was still very much an open question. Tordas was nearly impregnable behind its walls, and so were most of the other towns. The farmlands of Tor were largely intact in spite of the rising waters. So was their army of horsemen that could maneuver as freely across the plains as a ship on the sea. If the Torians wanted to fight for every mile of plain, they were more than strong enough to do so. From their Queen Kayarna on down, they were a proud and determined people, who would almost certainly choose to make that fight.

So the Kargoi and the Torians would meet in all-out battle, and then what? The Kargoi were confident of the outcome-more so than Blade was. He knew the Kargoi would be badly outnumbered, and their drends could never match the nimble-footed horses of the Torians. The line of spearmen might stand against Torian charges, but they could hardly attack. There would be a whole new set of military skills for the Kargoi to learn, and perhaps not enough time for learning them.

Perhaps the Kargoi would not learn fast enough. Then they would find only a grave instead of a home in this land. Blade knew the Kargoi did not fear that. They had come far, and now they would not give up their drends and their way of life merely because the Torians could ride circles around them.

From inside the fort Blade heard the sound of the gong beating out the call to dinner. From their huts the women ran to the cook shed, carrying pots and bowls. Blade saw Naula among them. He waved to her, to make certain she knew where to find him, and saw her wave back. Then he turned his eyes back to the western horizon-and stiffened.

Since the last time he'd looked that way, the horizon had sprouted two thin columns of dark smoke. As he watched, a third column curled up to join the first two. The sentries along the wall saw the smoke too. One of them leaned over the inside railing and shouted. He was answered by the sound of the gong and

the signal drums. For a moment everyone Blade could see stood in frozen silence. Then chaos seemed to descend on the West Fort, as everyone dashed to his post, grabbed up his weapons, or simply got out of the way.

The smoke to the west meant the Torians were at last coming in force. Blade knew the drend-mounted scouts might not be able to escape from such a force after they detected it. So he'd worked out a code of smoke signals. The distant scouts could alert the fort, whether they lived or died.

As the sunset flamed in the sky, two of the scouts rode up to the waiting fort. One of them was wounded in the arm, the other on the thigh, and both their drends were staggering with exhaustion. Blade had them fed and their wounds cared for before he asked for their reports.

Three thousand Torians at least were coming, all Mounted, with a number of wagons that seemed to be carrying siege equipment. That was no surprise. The Torians would not be sending three thousand men to merely ride around the walls of the fort and hurl arrows and curses at its garrison.

It was more than two days before the men on the walls of the fort saw Torian banners lifting over the western horizon. The garrison had plenty of time to finish preparing a proper reception for them.

There was also time for Kargoi reinforcements to arrive-three hundred mounted warriors. The men were welcome, although there was no room for their drends and these had to be turned loose, to take their chances with the Torians, A great deal less welcome was the leader of the reinforcements-Rehod.

Some of the scouts had obviously ridden straight off to the man, to warn him that the Torians were coming and the West Fort needed help. If he could get there in time, he would be able to share with Blade the glory and honor to be won in the coming battle.

Blade wasn't too happy about this. It suggested that Rehod was finding at least some warriors of the Kargoi who would neglect their duty and disobey the orders of the High Baudz himself, to help him win glory.

Blade didn't mind it that Rehod would have another chance to make a hero of himself, one he didn't really deserve. He did mind not knowing how far Rehod might carry his rivalry, or how many of the three hundred warriors he brought with him were his personal followers. In the middle of a desperate battle, Blade didn't want to have to worry about getting men under him to obey his orders, or about guarding his back from anybody except the Torians.

Rehod's men settled in, the sun went down, and the night passed, hour after hour of uneasy watching the darkness. No one slept very well. It was like some of the watchful nights by the shore, with one great difference. Whatever else might be said against them and however formidable they might be, the Torians were human.

Dawn came, with the usual display of colors spreading across the eastern sky. They were just starting to fade when suddenly the horizon was dark with the banners and the horses of the Torians.

There were almost four thousand of them, with a hundred wagonloads of gear and several hundred head of cattle. They settled down around the fort and the garrison settled down inside it. Torian archers rode in to within bowshot of the walls and sent their arrows whistling past the sentries. The sentries returned the favor. Few men on either side were hurt.

Night fell again. Blade considered launching a quick raid, to take the Torians by surprise. He decided against it. He had too few men to spare a strong force, and the Torians hadn't shown what tricks they might have up their sleeve.

Instead, Blade simply doubled the guards on the walls and set lighted torches on the railing every twenty feet. The torches were made of drend-hair rope, soaked in naphtha from a pool the Kargoi had found in the forest and wound around a wooden shaft. There were hundreds of the torches ready and many more gallons of the naphtha in bags made from the intestines of the sea reptiles. The Hauri used the naphtha in their lamps, but had never thought of using it as a weapon. Blade expected it would be a disagreeable surprise for the Torians.

The next morning a convoy of empty wagons rumbled off from the Torian camp under heavy escort. The day passed with more exchanges of arrows, and the night passed with more watching by torchlight from the walls.

In the morning the wagons returned. They were piled high with brushwood and several of them carried heavy logs. Blade could see the Torians fitting the logs with crude handles, tying the brushwood into bundles, and unloading dozens of scaling ladders.

The coming battle would be a straight, head-on collision, in which fighting ability, courage, and sheer stubbornness would mean more than any tricks or surprises. It would also be a bloody shambles, but Blade was confident the Kargoi would hold on no matter how bloody the fighting became. The only thing he had to fear was sheer weight of numbers--and perhaps Rehod's treachery.

It was not pleasant, to realize that he could be more sure of the enemy's tactics in the battle than of a comrade's loyalty.

Chapter 20

Another dawn, the fourth since the Torians arrived. A breeze blew across the grass from the Torian camp, bringing with it the smell of wood smoke and roasting meat. The Torians were getting plenty of firewood from the forests to the east, but they must be getting short of food. The fort, on the other hand, held several weeks' supplies.

The Torians' morning patrol was mounting up. It seemed to be stronger than usual this morning--several hundred men at least. Blade scanned the line of blue horses and barrel-chested, bowlegged riders. The average Torian seemed to be about five and a half feet tall, and wore a combination of pigtail and mustache that gave him a distinctly Mongolian appearance.

Each of the riders had a piece of equipment Blade had never seen before---a large square wooden shield, slung on one side of his mount. Blade stared at the shields for another long moment. Then he whirled, cupped his hands, and bellowed, "Sound the alarm! The Torians are attacking!"

His voice carried to every corner of the fort. Men were dashing out of their huts and tents and scrambling up the ladders on the inside of the wall before Blade could repeat his call a third time.

By the time the gongs and drums sounded, the Torians were on the move. They seemed to explode out of their camp toward the fort like members of a well-rehearsed dance group. Doubtless they had been doing more than a little rehearsing, well out of sight of the fort's defenders. As he watched the Torian attack unfold, Blade could not help admiring their skill, even though he realized that skill might mean his death within the next few hours.

The horsemen with the shields headed straight for the fort at an easy trot. Behind them moved more than a thousand men on foot, each two or three men carrying either a scaling ladder or a bundle of brushwood. The mass of men and horses moving forward raised a veil of dust from the dry ground. It was impossible to see through that veil and make out what was happening with the Torian battering rams. Doubtless they would appear in their own good time.

Meanwhile the Kargoi were manning the walls with a rush, each warrior with every weapon he had. As they reached the top of the wall and saw the Torian attack, they began dropping swords and spears and unslinging their bows. One by one they knelt, nocked arrows, and let fly.

In their eagerness the Kargoi opened fire before any of the Torians were within range. The Torians' speed quickly brought them under Kargoi fire, though. The wooden shields were too clumsy to protect a man on horseback, and in any case the Kargoi aimed at the horses. The blue-skinned animals began to go down, screaming, kicking, rolling about and sometimes rolling onto their fallen riders. Parts of the incoming line became ghastly tangles of riderless or fallen or stumbling horses and staggering or crawling or fallen men. Neither the Torians nor their horses died quietly.

The Torians came on, and soon they could dismount and return the arrow fire. With the speed and precision of circus riders, they sprang down from their horses, bows in one hand and the great shields in the other. With shouts and slaps they turned their horses back. The animals dashed away through the oncoming infantry, who opened their ranks to let them pass.

Meanwhile the archers set up their shields on the ground and knelt behind them. The Kargoi shifted their fire, but it was hard to hit a shielded man and nearly impossible to kill him. The Torians would duck behind their shields, nock an arrow, pop up, let fly, then duck down before the Kargoi could fire. They were not shooting very well, but they were shooting fast and furiously. A steady stream of arrows poured over the wall, and Kargoi began to go down as the arrows pierced their reptile-hide armor or found exposed areas of their bodies.

Blade bellowed orders for the Kargoi to kneel behind the railing. That gave them some extra protection, but the arrows continued to whistle over them and into the fort.

Arrows began to run short on the wall. Someone inside the fort organized a line of the women to pass filled quivers up to the archers, while others collected Torian arrows. Blade saw Naula running toward the wall and scrambling up it without using a ladder, agile as a monkey. He shouted for her to get back down, but she seemed to be deaf to everything except the mounting roar of the battle. Her eyes were wide, more with excitement than with fear, and Blade saw that she had a carving knife stuck in her belt.

Well, if she wanted to get into a full-scale battle, she'd chosen the right time and place. Reluctantly Blade put the girl out of his mind and turned back to the battle.

The archers of both sides were shooting as furiously as ever, but no longer very effectively. Both sides were now so well protected that they were neither taking nor doing much damage. If there'd been only archers on hand, the archery duel could have gone on all day, the archers using and reusing each others arrows until all the arrows and all the bowstrings were broken and not an archer on either side could lift a finger.

Now the Torian infantry were crowding up behind their archers, standing ready to advance when somebody gave them the word. They stood there for several minutes, long enough for the Kargoi to pick off some of them, long enough for some Torian commander to realize that the Kargoi archers weren't going to give up. Then a horn blew at one end of the Torian line, and all the Torians surged forward, a solid mass of more than a thousand men hurling themselves at the wall of the West Fort.

Along the wall Blade saw the Kargoi dropping their bows and picking up spears and swords. The men with the bags of naphtha did not pick them up, but stood close by them, ready to go to work.

The oncoming mass of Torians reached the ditch around the fort and the men with the brushwood bundles ran forward. They hurled the bundles down into the ditch while their own archers kept up a steady fire. Blade saw Kargoi rise to hurl spears and be picked off by arrows.

He shouted to them to get down and save their spears for the close combat that was only minutes away. Some of them heard him, others were too full of battle fury to listen to anyone or anything. Blade ran along the wall, ignoring the arrows flying past, jerking men down onto their knees.

Now the ditch was filled nearly to the top with brushwood in three places, and the Torians with the scaling ladders were coming to the front. The Torians wore no armor and their weapons for fighting on foot were not as good as those of the Kargoi-only a short curved sword and a small circular wooden shield. There might not have been much to fear, if the Torians hadn't so badly outnumbered the defenders and if they hadn't been coming on as if nothing but death could stop them. Probably nothing could.

Now the ladders were banging up against the wall and the first Torians were scrambling up them. Some Kargoi eagerly thrust their spears against the ladders the moment they were in position. Other waited until Torians were on the ladders, then pushed. Ladders and Torians fell with clatters, thuds, and screams.

Blade ran to where three ladders were rising above the wall almost side by side. The shower of incoming arrows had stopped; the Torian archers were too afraid of hitting their own men. The Kargoi had no such fear, and wherever the Torians were not coming up the wall Kargoi bows were at work. The ground outside the ditch was becoming littered with still or writhing bodies and stained with blood.

Blade reached the first of the ladders just as a Torian head popped up over the railing. His sword fell with a swish, the Torian head leaped from its shoulders, and the blood-spouting corpse fell back on the men climbing up behind it. The ladder swung away from the wall and crashed down on top of half a dozen more Torians. Kargoi arrows hissed down onto the men before they could get themselves sorted out, and several of them never got up again.

From the second ladder a Torian actually scrambled over the railing, onto the wall. Blade and a Kargoi warrior struck him in the same moment. The Kargoi's spear went through the man from the back, while Blade's sword laid open his belly. Each grabbed the Torian by one arm and heaved his body off the wall.

More Torians were running forward now, with more brushwood to make new crossing places. Blade gave his orders to the naphtha carriers. They waited until each crossing place was filled in and the Torians moving up to the wall. Then they threw down bags of naphtha and torches on top of that. Flames boomed up, brushwood crackled, and Torians died screaming horribly, rolling on the ground or running wildly, trailing flame and smoke.

Now Blade had a few moments free to look over the fort. He saw at once that too many men were trying to get in on the defense of the wall, and not enough were ready elsewhere. He began shouting, waving men away and pushing others toward the ladders. Gradually he got warriors and women drifting across the fort toward the gate. He would have liked to see Naula join that drift, but she seemed determined to stay with him on the wall until the last Torian attacker was beaten down or beaten back.

Blade's orders reinforcing the gate came just in time. Only minutes after the warriors started moving that way, the Torians attacked with their battering-ram. A tremendous booming crash rolled across the fort as the ram struck its first blow, drowning out all other sounds for a moment. The echoes died away, harsh Torian voices rose in a heaving chant, and the ram crashed home again. Blade saw the heavy logs of the gate shiver.

Torian heads appeared over the outer railing of the gate house and Kargoi scrambled up to meet them. A new and furious battle exploded up there, as the ram pounded away at the gate below. Blade saw Rehod leading warriors and a band of women and workers carrying logs, to brace the sagging gate. From the gate house Torian archers fired at Rehod's band, each one getting off an arrow or two before he was killed. Blade saw Rehod bend and pick up something from the ground, then run on toward the gate.

The Torians kept trying to scale the wall where Blade stood until all their brushwood and most of their ladders had been used up-smashed or burned or buried under mounds of corpses. In several places the ditch was nearly filled with Torian bodies. They'd lost nearly five hundred men, enough to make the bravest draw back and think again. Blade saw warriors beginning to drift around the walls of the fort, to join the attack on the gate.

The gate seemed to be only minutes from collapse. Blade saw several men shot down trying to toss naphtha down on the crew of the ram. Flames and screams rose in one place, but not the right one. The pounding of the ram went on.

Blade was heading for a ladder, to go down and join the defense of the gate, when a woman's cry struck a sudden new note in his ear. He turned, to see Naula standing close behind him. She was swaying like a drunkard, her teeth clamped down hard on her lower lip. Blade reached out a hand to steady her, then saw the Torian arrow driven into her breast.

Her lips moved, twisting painfully to get the words out. "Rehod-at you-saw him-he wanted us to think Torians-kill-" Then she sagged forward, and would have fallen off the wall if Blade hadn't caught her. He held her for a moment, long enough to feel the life go out of her. Then he laid her down, wiped the blood from her lips, and sprang down from the wall into the fort like a tiger on the hunt.

He had to kill Rehod, and quickly, before the baudz could attack again or get any of his personal followers to defend him against Blade. It would have to be a stealthy killing, too, or the garrison would see their two commanders locked in deadly combat as the Torians broke through the gate. That spectacle could sow panic and give the Torians victory.

As Blade ran across the fort the logs of the gate gave inward with an uproar of thuds and crackings. The women and workers trying to brace fresh logs in place scattered, leaping over the brush-filled ditch dug in a semicircle around the gate. The Torians followed them, scrambling over the fallen logs, coming on with shouts and screams, scenting victory.

Then Rehod threw a lighted torch down into the brushwood that filled the ditch. The naphtha-soaked wood exploded into a wall of flame that ran completely across the gate. At the very ends of the semicircle there were gaps, where the ditch was cut short to keep the wall from catching fire. Solid clusters of Kargoi with spears and swords ran into position behind those gaps. Meanwhile, every Kargoi within range who had a bow and arrows let fly.

The first few Torians could not draw back in time as the flames roared up. They tumbled straight into the ditch. The screams were indescribable, and Blade saw hardened Kargoi warriors turn white and vomit at the sound. Arrows rained down on the Torians who escaped the flames, and the head of the attacking column went down as if a machine gun had gone to work on it.

The spectacle of the dying Torians drew all of Rehod's attention. He stood at the edge of the smoke cloud around the fire-filled ditch, waving his sword, with no eyes for anything to his flanks or rear. Blade sprinted up to Rehod, pivoted on one foot, and wheel-kicked the baudz in the small of the back. Rehod was in the flaming ditch before he realized that he was falling. He did not scream long, but he screamed louder and more horribly than anyone else who'd died in the ditch. Blade could ignore those screams. Naula was now thoroughly avenged, and the danger of civil war or intrigue among the Kargoi greatly reduced.

Only a few minutes after Rehod's death, the attack through the gate collapsed. Again the Torians left several hundred dead and dying on the ground before they gave up the struggle. Between the two attacks, they'd lost more men than the whole strength of the garrison of the West Fort, without inflicting

more than a hundred casualties on the Kargoi.

Blade kept his doubts about the future to himself. Apart from the lurking threat of the Menel, the Torians would certainly come again. They were intelligent as well as brave, and they would certainly learn valuable lessons from this repulse. When they came again, they might not be so comparatively easy to stop.

He wasn't even sure that the Torians had finished with this attack. The fort was dangerously short of both arrows and naphtha. If the Torians pushed home another assault, they might lose another thousand men, but they would probably have the West Fort when the battle was over.

Blade didn't relax until dawn the next morning showed empty plain where the Torian camp had been. Even then he was cautious about letting parties out of the fort to scavenge up the fallen weapons and collect the bodies for burial in a mass grave. The parties worked armed, with mounted scouts out in all directions.

That evening Paor appeared with five hundred mounted warriors and a long wagon convoy of supplies. Now the fort could hold out against any attack the Torians could launch for quite some time.

"Where's Rehod?" was Paor's question, after inspecting the fort.

"I killed him," said Blade quietly. "He shot at me with a Torian arrow, to make it look like the work of the enemy. Naula died taking that arrow. I came down, caught Rehod by surprise, and pushed him into the fire ditch. No one could even recognize which body was his after the fire died down.

"Did anyone see you do it?"

Blade shook his head. "Let us say that if anyone saw it, they have said nothing to me about it. They know they will not raise Rehod from the dead, and they may perhaps join him if they offend me."

"My sword would be with you in that," said Paor.

"Good. It seems to me that we have now found as much of a new homeland as we are likely to have until we make peace with the Torians. That may be a long time. With Rehod dead there is less danger of plots and intrigues. Perhaps it is time that we consider making you High Baudz."

Paor stared, then shook his head. "I-the gods only know whether I am worthy of this."

"I know that you are worthy," said Blade. "So do many of the other warriors, and neither I nor they are gods."

Paor laughed weakly. "No, I suppose not. But I-Blade, I need time to think upon this. Can you give me that?"

"Certainly," said Blade. "But do not ask for too much time. The Torians will not give it to you."

Chapter 21

Days turned into weeks and weeks into months, and the Torians did not come. Blade suspected that when they did come east again, they would come with fourteen or even forty thousand men, and they would be a great deal harder to defeat or discourage.

Meanwhile the Kargoi did what they could to prepare. The West Fort was repaired and a second fort was built and garrisoned. Five hundred mounted warriors camped on the edge of the forest, ready to

move out to the aid of either fort. The rest of the warriors camped wherever they could get food and avoid the Hauri. They spent much of their time making fifteen-foot pikes and practicing using them, in lines, squares, and columns. Blade watched them with growing confidence. If the Torians were too slow in launching their next attack, they might face a pike wall that no cavalry charge could break. That might be enough to give the Kargoi the victory they needed. Hopefully they would not need to march two hundred miles to Tordas, storm its walls, and put Queen Kayarna to the sword in her own palace before the Torians would agree to let the Kargoi use the plains!

The truce with the Hauri held firm. The Kargoi still did not entirely trust the fishermen of the villages, while the Hauri did not wish to seem too friendly to the Kargoi, in case the Torians won the next battle.

Yet slowly the wariness and suspicion faded. The women of each people began to find the men of the other interesting, and the men did the same with the women. The Kargoi developed a taste for eating dried fish and wearing necklaces of polished shells. The Hauri found it agreeable to feast on roasted drend meat and wear garments of drend leather or armor of reptile hide.

The Hauri and the Kargoi were still not one people. That would take generations, if it ever happened at all. They were two peoples who had begun to trust each other. That meant a good deal. The Kargoi could face the Torians knowing that their rear was safe, and the Hauri could go about their lives as they had done for centuries.

After a month or two the Hauri began to invite Blade and other high-ranking warriors of the Kargoi to their villages. The visitors ate fish and oysters roasted on driftwood fires and strong-tasting stews of clams and seaweed. They slept in the grass-roofed huts with the chocolate-colored Hauri women. They even sailed in the Hauri's outrigger canoes, far out on what had been open sea even before the ice melted and the water rose.

Blade was happy to go on those fishing trips. He could do nothing against the Torians for the moment, while far out to sea he might again encounter the Menel.

There were whitecaps on the sea, and the sail of the big canoe was filled out round and firm.

"Like the breast of a fine woman," said Fudan, as he put the helm over. The canoe heeled sharply; it would have capsized without the outrigger. The sail swung around with the mast and rigging creaking under the strain, and the canoe settled on its new course. Now they were heading straight toward a low rocky island that reared up out of the depths and sheltered a stretch of water three miles long. They could anchor in the lee of the island, safe from most storms but within easy diving range of a particularly rich pearl bed.

"Like Loya's breasts," Blade thought, looking at the sail. He did not say this out loud, although he knew Fudan made no effort to act as his sister's guardian. He'd seen Loya often during the past few weeks. She never wore more than the trousers in which he'd first seen her, and sometimes less. Other women of the Hauri might cover themselves from throat to ankles, but not Loya, in the pride of her rank or perhaps in the even greater pride of her beauty.

The pearl bed they sought lay no more than sixty feet down, shallow water for the pearl oysters. Closer to the mainland, such a shallow bed would long since have been stripped of its choicest pearls. Here they were a good thirty miles farther out than the canoes of the Hauri usually came. Only a bold sailor such as Fudan would come this far.

A flash of light low on the horizon caught Blade's attention. It was far too bright to be sunlight reflected on the sea. It came and went irregularly. Blade realized that it was indeed reflected sunlight, but sunlight flashing from something made of polished metal, moving slowly just above the water. It appeared to be

moving toward the lee side of the island, where Blade and Fudan were planning to anchor.

A moment came when the sunlight was not blazing from the moving object. Blade got a clear view of a streamlined metal cylinder with a high fin aft and a bubble canopy forward.

It was a flying machine of the Menel. He'd seen them before in the Dimension of the Ice Dragons. In fact he'd flown a force of raiders aboard one into the polar regions, to destroy the Ice Dragons and the Ice Master and liberate his slaves and prisoners. The one he'd flown against the Ice Dragons was several times larger than the one he saw now, but they were of the same basic design.

As Blade watched, he realized that the machine was not under full control. It was weaving erratically from side to side and bobbing up and down, sometimes barely skimming the crests of the waves, at other times soaring high into the air. Gradually it took a nose-down attitude. Blade held his breath, watching and waiting for the inevitable.

The machine swooped low, and this time its nose dug into the crest of a wave. Spray exploded around it as it cartwheeled for a hundred feet, the canopy shattering and the tail fin ripping loose. Blade thought he saw an elongated dark shape with four waving arms hurtling out of the spray. Then the machine struck again and arrowed straight down into the water. A spreading patch of foam marked the spot.

It was a moment before Blade realized that Fudan had watched the final gyrations and fall of the Menel flying machine. Blade stared at the man, trying to read the expression on the weather-beaten brown face.

"It will not come again, after this," said Fudan quietly.

Blade was startled and his voice showed it. "You mean-this is nothing new to you? You've seen-that-before?"

"Oh yes. Our fishermen see it come up from the south, oh, once a month, for two years now. Always the same one, we think."

"For two years, you say?" Blade went on. He was finding Fudan's calmness harder to deal with than panic or superstitious awe.

"Oh yes. It began after the great star fell from the sky onto the island to the south. So we think it comes from that island, where the Sky People must live."

Blade realized that if the conversation went on this way much longer, he was going to either lose his temper or sound like an idiot. Neither would do any good. "You know that people from the sky have come to this world, and are living on an island to the south. Their machine has come once a month for the past two years. Didn't you do anything about this?"

Fudan looked innocent. "Why should we? They have done nothing to us by flying over our canoes and looking at them. The fish and the oysters and the seaweed are as abundant as ever, the sharks and eels no more dangerous, our women bear as many healthy children as before." He frowned. "Of course, if the sea reptiles are becoming dangerous, as you say, perhaps it is these Sky People who are behind it. In that case perhaps we shall have to think about what we may do against them, if they go on doing evil with-"

Blade's temper nearly snapped. "Why didn't you tell me?" he said, an edge in his voice.

"You never asked me," said Fudan.

Blade let out his breath in a long whoooosssh and began to laugh. Fudan was quite right. It had never

occurred to him that the Hauri might have seen the Menel without thinking them worth mentioning. It had seemed wise to keep the Menel as much a secret from the Hauri as he'd kept them from the Kargoi.

So much for what had seemed wise.

"I understand," said Blade. "But I must tell you that Sky People, the Menel, are indeed using the creatures of the sea and the birds of the air against us. They are enemies to the Kargoi. They may become enemies to the Hauri as well. Now that their machine has fallen, we have a good chance to learn more about them. We must dive down to that machine and look at it and everything in it. This will be more dangerous than letting the Menel fly over your canoes and look at you, but-"

"Do you think the Hauri become afraid so easily?" said Fudan. He did not sound angry, merely implying that Blade was being rather silly to even raise the point.

"No. I have fought the Hauri and know they are a brave people. But the Menel have weapons against which the courage of the Hauri and the Kargoi together may be nothing. There may be such weapons in this machine, and some of the Menel may still be alive to use them. So let us not treat them like stranded sea turtles, to be knocked on the head with a stick."

"Certainly, that would not be wise," said Fudan. He put the helm over, and the canoe turned toward the position of the crash. "Blade, look to our weapons. The weapons of the Hauri have slain green sharks and death eels, so perhaps they will make even the Menel know that the Hauri are not easy prey."

If the Menel beamers didn't work under water, Fudan might very well be right. The Hauri's underwater weapons would not have been turned down by a Home Dimension skin diver. They had tridents and thrusting spears, hooked bars for prying shellfish loose from rocks, crossbows with elastic bands of fish skin that propelled heavy barbed darts, and curved knives that could slit the throat of a man or the gills of an eight-foot green shark with equal ease. The Hauri never killed or took more than they needed from the sea, but they made sure they could always take that much.

Fudan started the canoe zig-zagging as they approached the crash position, to make a difficult target for anyone who might be waiting. Blade hoped the wreck would be no more than eighty feet down. He was a good enough skin diver to reach that depth easily, but he was no more than an amateur by the standards of the Hauri. Their best divers could bring up shells and coral from a hundred and seventy feet down.

As they drew closer to the position Blade scanned the water, looking for floating wreckage. Fudan lowered the sail and broke out the paddles. The water was now so transparent that they could see down to the bottom a hundred feet below, every fish and every coral boulder clearly visible. Both men loaded crossbows and put them in the bottom of the canoe within easy reach.

They were entering the area of the crash when Blade saw a gray-white cloud of shrieking sea birds whirling over something floating in the water. Without a word Fudan steered for it. A few more strokes, and Blade could make out the floating object as one of the Menel. A few more, and they were alongside the body.

There was no doubt the Menel was dead. No living creature could survive with its head crushed into featureless pulp, two arms torn out of their sockets, and half its body split open so that strange internal organs trailed out into the water. Small fish were already nibbling at those organs while the sea birds swooped on them from above.

Blade looked at the Menel, and couldn't help feeling slightly sorry for it. It reminded him of the body of an RAF pilot he'd seen, washed ashore after a high-speed plane crash into the sea. It had suffered a

wretched death he wouldn't wish on any intelligent creature, human or not, friendly or not.

Blade saw no other bodies floating. If there'd been any other Menel aboard the machine, they were probably trapped in the wreckage. Fudan said nothing, although this must have been his first sight of one of the Sky People. Perhaps to a man used to the strange creatures of the sea, even a being from outer space would not look strange.

Another hundred yards, and Blade saw a dark shape on the bottom below. Its outlines were distorted by the water and by crash damage, but it was unmistakably what they were looking for. Fudan threw the anchor overboard and counted the knots on the line as it ran out. Finally the stone touched bottom and the canoe swung gently to and fro.

"Nine dzor," said Fudan, as he laid his paddle in the bottom of the canoe. The dzor was a measure of depth equal to about seven feet. So the wreck lay about sixty feet down, easy diving depth.

Blade pulled off his sandals and began strapping on the fish-skin fins. Then he tied the weight belt with its pouches of gravel around his waist and picked up a sack and his crossbow.

"With your permission, Fudan?" he said. The first dive on a fishing expedition had a certain ritual quality. Normally Blade would have let Fudan go first, but he didn't know how much time they would have. If the crashed machine had been able to get off any sort of a distress signal

Fudan nodded. He was silently pulling on his own diving gear, watching both sky and water as he did so. There was no need to tell him to keep alert. The Hauri knew the basic safety rule for diving: one man in the water, the other in the boat, alert and ready to help if needed.

Blade clung to the side of the canoe, breathing deeply to fill his system with oxygen. At last he let go of the canoe, flipped upside down, and plunged toward the wreck below.

He seemed to drift down through the greenness, although he was kicking as hard as he could. The wreck of the Menel machine seemed to hang suspended before his eyes in a distant limbo for a long time, without getting any closer. A school of foot-long silver fish with dark stripes swam up past him. Then suddenly the coral branches on the bottom seemed to be reaching up toward him like clutching hands. He leveled out and swam toward the machine.

It lay with its nose crushed against a cluster of boulders and its tail standing up like a tombstone. The canopy was gone, both hatches blown off, and the metal skin amidships torn open like a paper bag. Blade swam up to the gaping opening left by the missing canopy and looked down into the cockpit.

Two of the Menel lay there in the wreckage, their bodies mangled almost beyond recognition. Among the smashed controls and what must have been seats, Blade could see the twisted shape of one of the beamers. Farther back in the fuselage he could make out a third Menel, crushed under several items of heavy equipment torn loose from the walls and floor by the impact of the crash.

That was all he could make out before his chest began to tighten up from lack of air. He backed out of the machine and thrust himself steadily back to the surface, the sunlight, and the air.

For the next two hours, Blade and Fudan alternated diving and keeping watch. Dive after dive, Blade explored the machine. Dive after dive, Fudan brought up pearl oysters and piled them in the bow. He paid no attention to the machine.

"It interests me, yes," he said. "But also I must bring home the pearls. We have come too far to do otherwise. Besides, if we bring home no pearls, many will wonder what we did here. They will ask

questions that I do not want to have to answer."

Since the machine was designed for a crew of beings nine feet tall, there was plenty of room inside it in spite of the damage. Blade swam about freely, examining the equipment as well as he could in the dim light and the short time he had on each dive.

He was able to recognize many familiar objects. There was a small computer with a print-out device. There were the remains of a radar set. There were various items of scientific gear, including a spectroscope, a centrifuge, sampling devices, chemical-analysis equipment, and much that was less easily identifiable. There was a cargo compartment aft, holding boxes and tubes of many different sizes with as many different markings. On the floor lay a number of the electronic implants for the brains of the sea reptiles, spilled from a broken box.

From each dive Blade brought up some small piece of Menel equipment. The pile of bits and pieces in his end of the canoe grew, like Fudan's pile of shells in his end.

Blade kept on diving until the first warning twinges of pain in his joints and muscles told him that he was approaching his limit for the day. It was maddening to have to leave the machine with so much of it still a mystery, but there was no helping it. He'd already collected as much as he could hope to analyze himself, perhaps more. He'd also collected ten times more than he could ever hope to bring back to Home Dimension.

On his last dive he went down determined to examine the ceiling of the machine. So far he'd been too busy searching and stripping the floor. He swam in through the crack in the fuselage, turned on his back, and looked up.

A large squarish shape seemed to be hanging from the ceiling at an impossible angle. At first Blade thought it was another piece of broken equipment, then he realized that it was floating freely. He reached up and drew it down to him.

It was a large black-covered book of some sort, scaled in a waterproof sack with a small cylinder at one end for buoyancy. Obviously it was designed to survive and float free in the event of a crash. Did the Menel keep diaries or logs? If so, then this might be one. Blade clutched the book under his arm and dove out of the machine. Excitement drove him up to the surface. He threw the book into the canoe, hauled himself out of the water, and caught his breath.

Fudan looked at Blade, experienced eyes noting his fatigue. "Blade, I hope that was your last dive for the day?"

Blade nodded. "I'll stay in the canoe, until you've finished your diving."

"That will not be much longer," said Fudan. "I see in the sky that a great storm will come in from the sea in another day. If I dive much more, we shall have to spend the night here. With a storm coming, that would not be wise."

As Fudan slipped over the side again, Blade relaxed into the healthy fatigue that came after a long day's work well done. He looked up at the sky. The faintest hints of sunset colors were beginning to glow in the west. Above the colors rode the mackerel-scale clouds that indeed promised foul weather not far off. Except for those clouds and the wheeling sea birds, the sky was empty.

A sudden splash alongside the canoe made Blade turn. He expected to see Fudan's head emerge dripping from the water. Instead he looked straight into a pair of glittering golden eyes, set in a totally hideous face. It was a death-eel, the most sinister-looking and voracious creature in the seas of this

Dimension, one that sometimes attacked even the great sea reptiles.

The mouth opened, exposing two rows of needle-sharp teeth. Blade's eyes ran from the bulging head back along the coal-black body and he swallowed. This death-eel could not be an inch under thirty feet long.

What had brought it here, Blade didn't know. What he did know was that in no more than a minute Fudan would be rising from the bottom, straight into the creature's striking range, straight into those gaping, teeth-studded jaws. Fudan would not see it until it was too late. There would be no escaping the eel's enormous speed and agility.

Somehow, though, the eel didn't seem to be paying any attention to Blade. Somehow he'd failed to register in its tiny, hunger-filled mind as either a possible prey or a possible enemy. He had a few seconds at least to act.

Blade started to pick up one of the crossbows. As he did, the eel's head sank down and vanished under the raft. Blade swore. Now he couldn't get a killing shot in before the eel noticed Fudan. There was only one thing to do. Catching up a knife in one hand and a spear in the other, Blade rolled over the side of the canoe and into the water. Before the eel could react, he was gripping the slimy body with both legs. As the body began to twist, Blade reached forward with his knife and his spear and drove the points of both deep into the eel's head.

He'd hoped to reach the brain with one weapon or the other. Instead he drove the eel into a sudden fury. Its body arched from nose to tail; and its head plunged down into the depths. Blade barely had a chance to gulp a breath of air before he was dragged under. At least he'd drawn its attention away from Fudan.

If Blade hadn't had his knife gripped firmly and driven in deeply, he would have been torn loose from the eel. As it was, the force of the water tore the spear point out of the eel's head and the spear shaft out of Blade's hand. The spear vanished, and Blade drew his belt dagger.

The eel chose that moment to shake its head from side to side in a desperate effort to get rid of its tormentor. Blade felt his left arm nearly dragged out of its socket, but he held on. As long as he held on where he was, the eel could not twist around and reach him. The moment he let go, it would be looping around and those tooth-studded jaws would be reaching out for him, perhaps closing on him.

Blade thrust his dagger into the black flesh. Blood flowed, pale green in the underwater light. The eel twisted convulsively, but showed no sign of weakening. It continued its plunge toward the bottom.

Blade realized that it must be planning to try scraping him off against the rocks on the bottom. He also realized that even if it didn't do that and even if his knives held, the breath in his lungs was almost gone. He might already be so far down that he could never hope to reach the surface alive. But he could not and would not let go, as long as there was any chance that Fudan hadn't made it to safety.

Blade knew that he was only moments away from death, either by drowning or in the jaws of the eel. None of his life passed before his eyes-his mind was still working too furiously, trying to think how to strike a lethal blow against the eel. It would go on working like that until the last brain cell winked out from lack of oxygen.

Then the eel was twisting more furiously than ever. Blade held on to both knives, but the eel's twisting tore them free. Blade found himself floating upward as the eel curved around underneath him, the head rising toward him, the jaws opening, the teeth ready to tear his flesh and a crossbow bolt suddenly standing out from the black head, squarely between the golden eyes.

That was the last thing Blade knew until he awoke, facedown in the bottom of the canoe, with Fudan pounding his back and heaving his arms up and down. It was a crude form of artificial respiration, but it worked. Blade gulped in air until his head stopped swimming, then slowly sat up. Once more he looked into the eyes of the death-eel alongside the canoe, but now the eyes were closed and the thirty feet of sinister black body floated limply in death.

Blade went on catching his breath, until he felt like speaking again. Even then he looked at Fudan for quite a while before he said a word. The Hauri chief matched him stare for stare.

"You saved my life," said Blade at last.

Fudan shook his head. "Perhaps. Certainly you saved mine first. I would not have been alive to shoot the eel if you had not fought it as you did. You would probably have killed it even without my help."

Blade had his doubts on that point, but there was no use in arguing. Fudan went on.

"Certainly we have this day fought a death-eel and slain it, and one of us has just as certainly saved the other." He smiled. "By the customs of the Hauri this makes us brothers in the spirit. Each may ask of the other the same that a brother in the flesh could. Each must grant what is asked if there is no dishonor in it."

"Well," said Blade. "In that case I will promise you my voice in the councils of the Kargoi, to speak for making the peace with the Hauri last forever."

"I also will give my voice for peace between our peoples, among the headmen of the Hauri. I will also consent that you take as wife my sister Loya."

Blade frowned. "I am honored. But I would not take her against--"

Fudan threw back his head and laughed. "Blade, Blade, Loya has already given her consent ten times over. It is her dearest wish to be your wife, to bear you sons and daughters who will be living proof that there is peace between the Hauri and the Kargoi. Do you find her displeasing?"

It was Blade's turn to laugh. "Hardly. It is merely that I have given no thought to taking a wife." He did not add that this was partly out of a reluctance to involve Loya in all the battles he knew he still had to fight in this Dimension. Women who became involved in his battles had a way of getting killed, and he wanted to avoid that fate for Loya. "If it is now proper that I take a wife, certainly I could find none better than Loya. She is beautiful, strong, and wise."

"She is. I am glad you think of her as she thinks of you." Fudan turned and began heaving on the anchor rope. "If you feel able to put away our weapons and the bags of shells, I think it is time to see about beginning our voyage home."

Chapter 22

They headed for home under full sail in order to beat the approaching storm and succeeded with a few hours to spare. From a hilltop beside a sheltered cove, Blade watched the sea and sky both turn dark and twenty-foot waves churn against the shore.

That night Blade and Fudan sat in a hut lit by a flickering candle. Fudan squatted, opening the shellfish with his knife and carefully probing the dark flesh inside for the precious black pearls. Just as carefully Blade examined the salvaged Menel equipment.

Some of it was impossible to even identify. Much of it was impossible to study without a fully equipped

laboratory. Frustrating, but inevitable. Blade saved the black book in its waterproof bag until the last.

It was indeed some sort of diary or log, with a map, photographs, and handwritten entries. At least Blade assumed they were handwritten. The "handwriting" of the Menel looked more like the marks made by a cockroach dipped in ink and sent crawling across the pages of the diary. After a moment Blade turned to the map and photographs.

It would have been hard to find the Menel's island base purely from the map-their cartographers did not work to human standards, and Blade was totally unable to guess the scale of the map. Fortunately the Hauri had seen the ship of the Menel fall out of the sky and knew where the island lay. With the map from the diary, it would be possible to land on the island and march straight to where the spaceship of the Menel lay hidden.

The crashed spaceship. The photographs made that clear. Judging from the size of the Menel standing beside it, the ship was at least five hundred feet long. It was also broken completely in two, with one end crushed into the ground as well. Blade counted forty-eight Menel in the group photograph. At least twenty of them were wearing what could have been bandages, and only twelve of them were carrying the long cylindrical beamers.

Perhaps the Menel had come to this world with a plan of conquest. Perhaps in the crushed part of the ship lay hundreds of dead Menel, a dozen more submarines and a dozen more flying machines, and an array of weapons that would have given them control of this Dimension in a few weeks. Certainly what they had now was this battered, poorly armed band of survivors of a devastating crash-a band which had in the past few weeks lost still more people and equipment to Blade's efforts and bad luck.

In spite of this disaster, they were trying to carry out their mission of extending the Menel empire. If they couldn't conquer this Dimension outright, perhaps they could do so by controlling some of the more formidable local wildlife? Some determined individual among the Menel must have asked that question. The result was the implanted bat-birds and sea reptiles.

Blade could not help wondering about the diary he held. Was it official and authorized, as a supplementary record of the Menel activities in this Dimension? Or had some Menel succumbed to the temptation to record privately what he and his comrades had done? Why had he succumbed, in that case? Out of loneliness, fear, despair, distrust of superiors who might not give him or someone close to him proper credit? Those were plausible motives for human beings in a situation like this, and ascribing those motives to the Menel made them seem much more human for a moment. It was also complete guesswork, and perhaps totally unjustified.

One thing was certain. The diary laid out for Blade to see all the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the Menel. Whoever had kept that diary and for whatever reasons had, quite by accident, done his comrades a great deal of harm. Fortunately for him, he was probably one of the crash victims and would therefore never know. Meanwhile, Richard Blade sat with the diary in his hands.

It was almost ludicrous, the way the Great Menel Menace had evaporated or at least shrunk down to its proper size. Instead of a horde of Menel ready to sweep human beings from the face of this world, there was a battered handful of survivors desperately trying to improvise some sort of campaign with what little equipment they still had. Blade found himself reluctantly admiring their courage and determination, although he didn't think much of their common sense. And a campaign of conquest was still a campaign of conquest, no matter how sloppy or ineffective it might be.

There was also no guarantee that the Menel wouldn't sooner find some more effective method of attack. They might even find human allies, the way they'd found the Ice Master in the land of the Ice Dragons.

So there was still no time to waste. The peoples of this Dimension would have to be united, as fast as possible and as thoroughly as possible without telling them exactly why they had to unite. A few of the wisest leaders could be trusted with that truth, but for the time being no one else.

He would also have to give this Dimension gunpowder as quickly as possible. Gunpowder weapons were still not equal to the beamers of the Menel, but they would be better than spears and arrows. With a hundred cannon or a thousand muskets to every beamer, the Menel would certainly have their claws full in any battle.

Blade realized that he was letting his thoughts run on ridiculously far ahead of his knowledge, and turned back to the photographs in the diary. One of the last ones showed an aerial view of a two-masted sailing ship, all sails set and close-hauled. The human figures on the deck showed that the ship was about a hundred feet long. Most of the figures wore seaman's trousers, boots, and caps. Several wore long coats of chain mail, with horned helmets on their heads and broadswords or axes slung from belts at their waists.

What drew Blade's eye particularly were the long cylinders of various sizes pointing outward on either side of the main deck and also at the bow and stern. On the main deck someone was about to shove a large sponge on the end of a long pole into the outboard end of one of the cylinders. They could hardly be anything but cannon-perhaps crude, but judging from their size, quite powerful.

So somebody in this Dimension already had gunpowder. Who and where were they? There was no clue to where this picture had been taken. The sailing ship might have been just beyond the range of the Hauri canoes, or it might have been half a world away.

In any case, it was absolutely necessary to search out these people. If they became allies and friends, it would give the other peoples of this Dimension gunpowder weapons many years sooner. If they became enemies-or even worse allies of the Menel-well, that had to be prevented somehow.

Blade suddenly realized that the candle had gone out and the hut was so dark he could barely make out the photographs in the book across his knees. Fudan was slumped over his pile of shellfish, sound asleep, his knife still in his hand.

Blade yawned, and realized that he also was ready for sleep. Certainly he could do nothing more against the Menel now, even if he stayed up all night.

The storm died by morning and Fudan put out to sea in his canoe, a small bag of black pearls slung at his waist. He wanted Blade to come with him, but Blade refused. He did not want to bring any of the Menel equipment to a Hauri village or a Kargoi camp at the moment.

"It is possible that the Menel have put in some of these little machines devices that give off signals-like smoke signals, but invisible. Such signals can be heard many days' sailing away. The Menel might follow the signals in another flying machine and destroy whatever and whoever they found. If they do that while I am here, I alone will die, not a whole village."

Fudan sighed. "I could say that your wisdom is worth a whole village, and it would be true. But it would not change your mind, would it?"

Blade shook his head. "If I am killed, look for a boulder marked with a blue triangle on top of that hill to the east." He pointed. "Under it I will put a written plan of how to fight the Menel. In that plan will be everything you will need to know to go on without me."

"Should I tell anyone else of what we have seen and learned on this voyage?"

Blade was about to shake his head, but some note in Fudan's voice made him stop. "Are you thinking of anyone in particular?"

"Yes. The man you would have as High Baudz of the Kargoi, Paor. He has been asking many questions about what we have seen of the sea reptiles. I began to wonder if he suspects something about them."

"But you didn't tell me, because I didn't ask?" said Blade, laughing.

"That is true. Then you wish me to tell him?"

"Yes. It is time that he learned. I trust him to keep silent until it is time to speak of this to other people."

"Very good. Farewell, Blade, and do not stay here alone too long. Both the Hauri and the Kargoi have too great a need of you."

Blade shook hands with Fudan and watched the chief go down to the shore and climb into his canoe. When Fudan's sail was out of sight, Blade returned to the hut and the study of his Menel souvenirs.

For all that he learned from them during the next four days, Blade might just as well have gone with Fudan. Even the photographs lost interest for him after looking at them twenty times. He was able to spend a day writing up his report and concealing it on the hill, but that was only one day, and he was determined to give the Menel at least a week. If they hadn't done anything to trace their missing gear by then, it would probably be safe for him to go home.

Blade was just lighting the candle on the fifth evening when someone knocked on the door of the hut. He blew out the candle, picked up his sword, and went to the door.

He needed no weapons for the visitor. It was Loya, dressed in her usual trousers, her staff in one hand and a bag of food slung over the other shoulder. She was barefoot and there were salt stains on her trousers and in her hair.

"Am I welcome, in spite of that?" she said, pointing at the sword. Her broad mouth curved into a mocking smile.

"Certainly." Blade put down the sword and closed the door behind her. "Perhaps in return for my welcome you will tell me why you have come here?"

"Why does any woman come to a man she has chosen and who has accepted her-or so she has been told?" There was no mockery in the smile now. "It is not good for you to be alone so long."

"It may not be good for you to be here," said Blade. He hesitated. "The Sky People may come, and if they do"

"Yes, yes," Loya said briskly, waving one hand to dismiss the matter. "Fudan has told me everything. I came anyway. Blade, there is nothing that can frighten me away from he who is to be my husband."

"You seem to have tracked me down at last. Well then, huntress, come and claim your prey." He stood up and held out both arms to her. Loya seemed to float into them without her feet touching the ground.

For some time Blade had wondered how Loya's long-limbed, finely muscled body would feel in his arms. Now he knew. She filled him with soaring excitement and at the same time tenderness. He was more to Loya than she could ever be to him, and nothing could be done about that in the long run. In the time they would have together, though, he would do anything possible to avoid hurting her or disappointing her.

Loya was tall enough so that he did not have to bend far to kiss her. He started on her forehead, brushed his lips down over both eyes and across the high-bridged nose, then brought his mouth against hers. He started gently but quickly sensed her demanding more and began to give it. Her tongue crept out between the even white teeth and he met it with his own. He felt a warm, deeply sensual welcome in that meeting of their tongues.

He would happily have let the kissing go on forever, but as his lips and Loya's met his hands were moving up and down her back and her hands were stroking the insides of his thighs. His hands slipped inside her trousers and drew her up against him, so that the swollen manhood under his loinguard was pressing upward between her thighs. Her hands crept upward across the broad chest, fingering the layers of muscle and the ridged scars. Then they darted down to yank aside the loinguard and suddenly close on the exposed flesh. Blade jerked as if he'd received an electric shock and stifled a gasp.

He could feel Loya's breath coming quickly now, her chest rising and falling, driving the solid curves of her breasts and the still more solid points of her nipples against him. He could feel her beginning to shiver, as if she were standing in a cold wind. He could feel that it was time for both of them.

It was agony to step apart even for a moment, but it was a short-lived agony and it made coming together again all the sweeter. Blade tore off his loinguard as Loya unlaced her trousers and pushed them down her long legs. She stepped forward, a perfect triangle of blue-black hair cradled between her thighs, rising on her toes as she came. Blade bent at the knees, so that they were perfectly positioned. Loya sank down, he rose up, and as he did he slid upward into the eagerly waiting warmth inside her.

Neither Loya nor Blade could have stayed apart a second longer. It would have made no difference to him if she'd weighed four hundred pounds—he still could have lifted her like a feather pillow, with the strength given by the overpowering desire in him.

He had no need to move, only to support Loya while she rose and fell and twisted as though all her limbs were suddenly made of elastic. She followed no pattern or rhythm, followed nothing except her own desire. Yet somehow what her desire demanded was exactly what would also perfectly satisfy Blade. It seemed to him that in the joining of their bodies they had also joined their minds, so they had only one consciousness between them.

Suddenly Loya seemed to spring upward, her arms locking hard around Blade's neck and her legs around his waist. All the breath went out of him under the pressure of those muscular limbs. A moment later all the breath went out of Loya as well, in a series of convulsive gasps. Her body arched forward and back, her head twisted from side to side and battered itself against Blade's shoulder. Then before she could be still it was Blade's back that arched like a tightly-drawn bow, and his arms and legs that gripped Loya as though his life would cease the moment he let her go. He did not gasp, for there was no breath left in his body. He stood until his body had found all its release and the room began to swim around him from the lack of oxygen. Slowly he sank to the floor, without releasing Loya, and her head sank forward onto his chest with a last moment of grace. Then they had no strength left to keep them from sprawling on the floor in a tangle of arms and legs and damp hair.

The strength to look at each other swiftly returned. The strength to sit up, laugh, talk, eat dried fish and seaweed from Loya's pack came a little later. It was hours before they found the strength or the desire to join again. The first loving had drained both of them so that for a time they were unable to even conceive of desire, let alone feel it.

That was something rare for Blade, and it meant that Loya was something equally rare among women. That was no surprise. He'd suspected it since they first met. Now that he could be certain, he could also hope that uniting the Hauri and the Kargoi might not be so difficult—if he had the time.

Chapter 23

Kayarna Kameda, Queen of Tor, sat on a blanket spread on the landward face of a sand dune a day's ride north of Tordas. She was naked, her long legs stretched out in front of her and her arms crossed over her full breasts. The breasts and the flesh of her arms and legs were all tanned and admirably firm for a woman of forty-two, although the waist showed the thickening inevitable after bearing three children.

Without the three children, though, she would not have felt free to spend the remaining years of her life pleasing herself as she chose. Kayarna Deda had always been known as one who understood her duties and gave them the attention they deserved.

A man stood on the crest of the sand dune above her, looking out over the fog-shrouded sea. He also was naked, and Kayarna had to admit she preferred him that way. Duskas Mon had just enough brains to command a troop of the Royal Guards. His real talents lay in other directions, and Kayarna would keep him busy in those directions as long as he could do his duty. She would not give him anything else, no matter how often he lost his temper. She could always coax him back to her bed, and if some day she could not-well, there were other strong young guardsmen in plenty who could fill his place. She would not risk giving Duskas more than he deserved. Jealousy among the captains and nobles over the advancement of royal favorites had cost more than one ruler of Tor throne and life.

She heard splashes and the squealing voices of young women on the far side of the dune. Kayarna sighed. The four serving maids who'd accompanied her and Duskas out here were bathing in the sea. No doubt one of the little fools had stepped on a stingray and would have to be carried back to the palace. The next time she came out here

Then the squeals turned into unmistakable screams of terror. Kayarna snatched up her sword from the corner of the blanket, sprang to her feet, and rushed up to the crest of the sand dune without bothering to dress. As she reached the crest Duskas shouted, "Get down, Glorious One!" and shoved her so hard that she fell to her knees. She started to flare angrily at this disrespect, then got a good look at what was coming out of the sea and fell silent.

A ship's boat lay in the shallows, while fifteen men climbed out of it and waded toward the beach. Each one wore a long robelike garment of chain mail and a metal helmet with long sharp horns jutting out on either side. Each carried a sword or an axe at his belt, and three of them carried long metal tubes with some sort of sculptured decorations at the end they held. Farther offshore, half visible in the fog, Kayarna saw two large ships, with more boats coming ashore from them.

The four maids stood as if turned to stone while the steel-clad men tramped toward them. One of the girls shrieked and ran. Her panic made her clumsy. She went down, and shrieked again as two of the men fell on her before she could rise.

Whatever Duskas Mon might lack in brains, there was nothing wrong with his courage. The maid's shrieks drove him into action. Naked and unarmed as he was, he roared a war cry and charged down at the oncoming men. Perhaps he hoped to distract them long enough for Queen Kayarna and even the maids to escape.

Duskas covered only a few steps before one of the men pointed a tube at him and jerked on the "sculpture." There was a terrible noise, a cloud of white smoke, and a hideous 'plat as something tore through Duskas's body and out his back. He fell on his face, kicked twice, and lay still. In his back Kayarna saw a gaping red hole large enough to hold a man's fist.

Kayarna knew suddenly that she could do nothing for herself or for Tor except run like the wind. Duskas was dead and the maids were doomed. The other three were now trying to run, but the men were hard on their heels. Four of the invaders started up the dune toward Kayarna. They came a few steps through the soft sand, then Kayarna was sprinting toward the trees where the horses were tethered.

She did not throw her sword away, for that would be neither honorable for the ruler of a warrior people nor sensible for a woman who might yet have to kill herself. She took nothing else-not a single stitch of clothing, not a single one of her jewels. She was as naked as the day of her birth as she dashed across the sand, expecting every moment to feel one of the smoke tubes hurling something into her back.

Instead the men coming after her tried to run her down on foot. Their armor and weapons dragged them back as Kayarna's fear drove her forward. She easily outdistanced them, leaped into the saddle of the first horse she reached, slashed the tether with her sword, and dug her bare heels into the horse's flanks. Sand flew up and branches lashed her across the face and shoulders hard enough to draw blood. She ignored the pain and everything else except driving the horse onward as fast as it would go.

Another of the tubes banged far behind her, as one of the men made a last desperate effort to bring her down. Whatever the tube threw came nowhere near her or her horse. Then she was far out of the invaders' reach, galloping along the shore, looking for a place to turn inland. Tordas had to be warned, and more than warned. It had to be prepared to fight these people who had come from the sea, in spite of their steel clothing and hats and their strange smoke tubes that reached out like the arrows from a bow but were something altogether new and terrible.

The Torians soon learned that the people from the sea called themselves the Vodi. They also found many other names to call them, all rude and some unprintable.

Ten thousand Vodi in two hundred ships came out of the sea and landed before Tordas. They fought on foot, so they could not run away from a Torian charge, but they didn't need to. They stood, threw balls of stone and lead from their smoke tubes, shrugged off arrows and lances with their steel coats, and slew Torians by the hundreds with their axes and swords. The Torians fought five battles in fifteen days, lost all of them, and lost ten men for every one of the Vodi they killed or hurt.

Within three weeks of the coming of the Vodi Tordas was surrounded. Food could no longer get in, and the poor who'd never eaten well anyway began to starve. Messengers could still get in and out, but they did no good. None of the captains of the garrisons of the other cities of Tor had any wish to hurl their horsemen against the smoke tubes and steel coats of the Vodi. Kayarna was also sure that some of those captains were holding back in hopes of making a separate peace with the Vodi after Tordas fell and the throne of Tor stood vacant.

Those captains would not have to wait long. The Vodi had other weapons besides starvation to use against Tordas. They had enormous smoke tubes, as long as a ship's boat and many times heavier, hurling stone balls as large as a horse's head and as heavy as a man. The stones crashed into the walls, rolled down the streets, fell through the roofs of palaces, hovels, temples, and shops with a gruesome impartiality. The walls of Tordas would certainly let the Torians beat off any assault as long as they stood. How long would those walls stand, under the battering of the smoke tubes?

Kayarna wondered. She did not show her doubts when she rode about the battered streets. She urged on the captains and the soldiers, consoled the bereaved, saw that widows were fed and orphans were housed in the palace itself. She spent eighteen hours a day awake and most of those hours in the saddle. This not only inspired the Torians, it gave Kayarna herself peaceful sleep at night, untroubled by nightmares of what would happen when the walls finally came down and the Vodi stormed the city.

If the gods had willed it that she should be the last ruler of Tor, then she would at least try to die in a manner worthy of those who'd gone before her.

It was several more weeks before Richard Blade learned precisely what was happening to Tordas and why the Torians would not be attacking the Kargoi any time soon. He had to get the story bit by bit from Torian prisoners.

Naturally these men were reluctant to admit how helpless their land was against the Kargoi. The Kargoi found convincing methods of persuading them to tell all they knew.

When Blade had a clear picture of what was happening to the west, he sat down with Fudan, Loya, and Paor to decide the best course of action.

"The Torians will not be able to hold out much longer. That seems certain. In England we have some experience with smoke tubes such as the Vodi are using. We call them guns. Against large guns no wall can stand, unless it is built specially to resist them.

"So the Vodi are on the road to victory, and in the end they will win without our help. We cannot earn their gratitude by helping them defeat Tor. We can only hurry the day when they will rule all the land to the west and feel ready to move against us.

"If we hold back from aiding either side, the Vodi will still win. It will take them a little longer, but sooner or later they will rule in Tor. Then they will also think of coming east-

"Why should they do that?" said Paor. "If they have settled in a new homeland that is large enough for them, will they want more land?"

"They have not come across the sea because the waters have risen to swallow their own homeland," said Blade. "They have come because they think the rising waters have made other peoples weak, and this is a good time to make those peoples into slaves."

Fudan struggled for words to express his horror. "They-they are monsters!"

"I do not know about that," said Blade. "I do know that such people will not stop with conquering Tor. Sooner or later they will march and sail against us. Also, a people like the Vodi, who love war, might some day be tempted to ally themselves with the Menel, to gain their help in conquering far and wide."

That idea made the other three totally speechless for a moment. Then Loya burst out, "No! The gods forbid!"

Blade smiled. "The gods may forbid it, but I think we ourselves can do a better and more certain job."

"How?" said Paor. Then he answered his own question. "We should go west and help the Torians drive the Vodi into the sea?"

"Yes. If we do that, the Vodi may not come again for many years. The Torians will be grateful, and it will be easy to get them to join with us against the Menel. With the Torians, the Hauri, and the Kargoi all united and given guns, the Menel will not have an easy time of it."

"That is true enough," said Fudan. "We will be a thousand to their one, and none of us will be cowards. But what of the-the guns of the Vodi? The Torians have suffered terribly from them. Do you think we can win against them, when the Torians have failed?"

"Yes," said Blade. "The guns throw their stones by setting fire to a strong powder. The Vodi can only

have brought a certain amount of the powder across the sea with them, and they have been burning it rapidly. If they have burned it all, or if we can destroy what is left, their guns will be useless. Then we can fight them in the old ways, which we know so well."

Blade was making an educated guess when he said that, and he hoped he'd guessed right. If not, he could be leading the two peoples who trusted his wisdom to their deaths.

"If all this is true," said Paor, "then Blade has spoken wisely. We shall go west to aid the Torians."

"We shall," said Fudan and Loya together. All four of them rose from the table, stepped into a circle, and joined their hands together.

Chapter 24

A hundred-pound ball of stone plunged out of the sky, to crash into the corner of a house in the Street of the Tailors. Half of the house shivered, sagged, and crumbled in a swelling roar of falling masonry and a billowing cloud of dust. The rescue workers moved toward the ruins, their dust-coated faces drawn, their steps slow and shuffling. Not even the eyes of their queen upon them could make them move swiftly. The siege of Tordas had gone on too long.

Kayarna gentled her horse with one hand and brushed the dust from her face with the other. At least horses no longer bolted at the crash and thunder of the stone-belching Vodi smoke tubes. Many of them were so gaunt they could hardly have had the strength; fodder was running short. A few more days and none of the horses in the city would have the strength to charge. A few days after that, and it would be time to slaughter and eat them. By eating the horses that had once carried its fighting men proudly across the plains, Tordas might last another week or two—if the smoke tubes didn't batter it into ruins first.

Kayarna urged her horse forward. As she did, two riders came trotting out of the dust cloud filling the street ahead and reined in on either side of her. She recognized two of the captains who'd been among the boldest in getting messages in and out of the city.

"Your Majesty," one of them gasped. "We are lost! The wagon people are advancing upon the city. Their army is in sight from the walls. In another hour they will be joining the Vodi, and then . . ."

Kayarna cut off the man's babblings with a sharp gesture, although a sickening feeling was rising in her too. If the wagon people had indeed come west to join the Vodi, Tordas had only a few more days to live. For a moment she thought she would be physically ill with despair.

Then she straightened in her saddle. Whatever this meant for Tor, she wanted to see it with her own eyes. "Let us go to the wall," she said. She spurred her horse forward, and the two pale-faced messengers fell in with her escort to follow her.

Richard Blade climbed to the platform set on top of his command wagon and looked at the scene spread out before him. Visibility was nearly perfect, except where the siege guns belched smoke and their shot threw up clouds of dust. He could see every last detail of the situation in front of him.

On his right rose the battered walls of Tordas, the tops bristling with defenders. A thin line of Vodi mounted on captured Torian horses was thrown completely around the city. These men could watch the gates, intercept messengers, and warn of the Torians trying to come out. They were not strong enough to do much more.

In the center, the Vodi had a strong siege camp, where their heavy guns blazed away at Tordas from behind earthworks. The commanders and the supplies might be in that camp, but the earthworks could

make it too tough a nut to crack-unless something was happening elsewhere at the same time, to distract the Vodi.

On the left more tents stretched away in an arc toward the beach, unprotected except by a light palisade of stakes. That was the main camp, where the soldiers lived.

Beyond the camps and camp defenses was the beach and the ships. Many boats and a number of the smaller ships were drawn right up on the shore. The rest were anchored in a ragged line stretching for several miles. The Vodi did not seem to be worrying much about an attack from the sea.

All of this was just as Blade had heard from the reports of his scouts. That was good. He'd made his plans on the basis of those reports, and now he wouldn't have to change anything. With an army like this one, enthusiastic but not well disciplined, the fewer changes of plan the better. Changes of plan also took time, and Tordas could not hold out much longer.

The Vodi didn't seem to be moving out to meet him, although his advanced guard was in plain sight. That was as he'd expected. The Vodi were infantry, and infantry fought cavalry by letting the cavalry come to them. That meant he had the initiative for the time being.

So a quick thrust with his own mounted men, to scatter the Vodi watching the gates. That would link up with the Torians, and perhaps draw the Vodi into a hasty move. Once the Torians and their new and unexpected allies had fought a battle side by side, it would be easier to arrange things for the next stage of the campaign. The Torian leaders would be much more willing to trust the Kargoi and listen to their High Baudz.

Blade scrambled down from the platform and leaped into the saddle of his captured Torian horse. He rode at a canter out in front of the mounted troops. There were about four hundred of them-half mounted like him, on captured horses, the other half mounted on drends. Blade waved an arm and heard the sound of horse hooves and drend hooves swell behind him as he galloped forward.

Queen Kayarna reached the top of the stairs and burst out into the daylight. She ran along the wall, ignoring the sentries, leaving her own guards behind, paying no attention to occasional enemy shots whistling past. She ran until she came to the corner of the wall that offered the best view toward the army of the new enemy.

A solid column of mounted men was moving out from that army. Some rode like the Vodi, on captured Torian horses, while others rode the great battle oxen of the wagon people. The horses were slowly drawing away from the oxen, although their captain was obviously trying to slow them down. He was easy to pick out-a huge dark man, riding a horse with almost arrogant skill and handling a Torian lance as if he'd been born with one in his hand. He could not be very wise, though, considering what he was doing. What sense was there in leading a wild charge against nothing but the walls of Tordas?

Kayarna laughed. Were the oxen going to butt down the walls with their heads and... ?

Then she stopped, and her eyes and mouth both opened wide, as all around her the soldiers began shouting in wild amazement. The charge was sweeping over the mounted Vodi, and they were going down before it!

This was happening, or her eyes were betraying her beyond all reason. She saw the big captain ride at one of the Vodi and lift him from the saddle with a lance thrust. The man crashed to the ground and was trampled out of sight under fifty sets of hooves. The charge swept on.

Now the captain was thrusting through another of the Vodi, but this time his lance broke off. He dropped

the butt, drew one of the wagon people's long swords, and began slashing in deadly arcs around him as he rode on. Behind him hundreds more of his men were coming on, and before them the Vodi were disappearing like morning dew sucked up by the sun.

Kayarna screamed out her triumph and joy, then turned and ran back for the stairs. She had to get into the saddle and ride out to meet this captain and his men. She had to ride out, to see these men sent by the gods themselves to save Tor!

Blade rode at one of the Vodi who was foolishly trying to swing a two-handed axe from the back of a skittish horse. His own sword slashed down, cutting off both the man's arms at once. The arms and the axe fell to the ground on one side of the horse, the man himself fell with a scream on the other side. Blade's horse shouldered the dead man's mount aside and he rode on.

Now Blade found himself free of enemies for long enough to look about him. The mounted Vodi were either down, scattering wildly, or being driven into small clusters. Around each cluster swarmed Kargoi, both mounted and on foot, slashing with their swords and thrusting with their pikes. The Vodi were obviously not horsemen by inclination; their cavalry was entirely improvised. It was fighting no worse than usual for such an improvised force, but no better either.

So on Blade's left the way was open to the gates of Tordas. In the center the Vodi were assembling the rest of their cavalry. Some of these carried muskets, but there were no more than a few hundred of them altogether. They didn't worry Blade.

What did worry him was the mass of men he saw assembling behind the Vodi cavalry. The Vodi were gathering their infantry, two or three thousand at least. It would not be long before they advanced, and most of the Kargoi pikemen weren't up yet. Even when they came, would they stand up against the muskets of the Vodi? Dust and distance made it impossible to tell if the Vodi infantry were carrying muskets, and if so, how many. A primitive army's first encounter with gunpowder was always a chancy business, no matter how much they'd been told about it beforehand. The Kargoi....

Blade suddenly realized that a new cloud of dust was spreading around one of the gates of Tordas. For a moment he thought one of the gate towers or a section of wall had collapsed. Then he saw horsemen streaming out of the gate under the umbrella of dust. They were all riding in a hell-for-leather style rare even among the Torians. A white standard streamed out from a lance held by one of the leading riders.

Blade pulled his mount's head around and cantered toward the approaching Torians. He'd just started when someone among the Vodi also noticed the Torian riders. The enemy cavalry lurched into motion. A few fell off, many grabbed saddles to keep themselves on, but the whole mass went staggering toward the Torians. Blade saw the leading Vodi raising muskets.

Suddenly Blade recognized the white standard floating above the Torian horsemen. It was the royal standard of Tor. One of those charging riders must be Queen Kayarna herself! Blade couldn't understand why she'd ridden out like this, but she had. By doing so she'd given the Vodi a chance at complete victory in one easy stroke, before Tor's new allies could make a bit of difference!

Blade shouted to all the Kargoi within earshot to follow him and spurred on his own horse. It leaped forward, with Blade waving his sword and cursing Kayarna's badly timed courage. Some of the Kargoi followed Blade because they heard him, others because they saw him moving out and wanted to be part of whatever the High Baudz was about to do. Now there were three ragged masses of mounted men all moving across the plain as fast as their mounts would go, heading straight for the common collision point.

As they saw that collision looming, the leading Vodi tried to rein in. Some couldn't and kept right on going. Most slowed enough to raise their muskets and fire at the Torians. A Vodi musket wasn't accurate

under the best conditions. Fired from the back of a nervous horse by an unskilled rider, it was about as accurate as spitting into the wind. The Torian horsemen, though, were a target no one could miss. The ragged volley of musketry emptied saddles and brought down horses at a full gallop. The Torians piled up into a horrible screaming shambles. The royal standard wavered but somehow remained aloft. The Vodi cavalry slung their muskets and rode forward to finish off the Torians in hand-to-hand combat at close range.

They were so busy closing that they forgot about the approaching Kargoi. In particular, they forgot about Blade. He reminded some of them of his existence by smashing into them at a gallop. The Vodi riders had left off their armor to reduce the strain on their horses. Blade's sword whirled in a deadly circle around him, lopping off unprotected arms and heads like a mowing machine harvesting ripe wheat. A dozen Vodi were down before the rest realized that they were under attack. They tried to reform and surround this lone madman who was carving a path through their ranks. As they did, the Kargoi who'd been galloping on Blade's heels struck, and behind them came more Kargoi lumbering along on drends. Some of the drend riders shot arrows, others carried fifteen-foot pikes that they used like Torian lances.

Blade saw only snatches of all this. He himself was riding straight for the Torians. Beside the body of a horse so dark blue it was almost black stood a tall woman. She held up a long knife in one hand and was using her sword as a crutch to support an injured leg.

Two Vodi rode at her, crossing in front of Blade. She slashed at one man's horse; the knife left a red line across its chest and it reared with a scream. Its rider slid backward out of the saddle as his horse bolted. The other attacker was about to bring his axe down when Blade caught up with him from behind. Blood-dripping steel bit into the man's neck; his headless body sagged forward and thudded to the ground. Blade prodded the man's horse clear with the point of his sword and rode up to Queen Kayarna. He let his sword dangle and reached down with both hands to swing her up. A mighty heave and she was perched in front of him. Blade dug in his spurs and turned his horse away, out of the heart of the battle.

The light Torian horse couldn't carry double as well as a drend, but its strength lasted long enough for Blade and Kayarna to get well out of harm's way. He left the Queen among the Kargoi for the time being, in charge of Paor and two other trusted baudzi. He himself got a fresh horse and rode back into the battle.

The Kargoi infantry were coming up now, two or three on the back of each drend. They rode in, then dismounted to form the solid lines Blade had taught them, their drends behind them. They would not need many orders, but they might need a little encouragement if they had to stand up under the musketry of the Vodi. Blade was not worried about the enemy's heavy guns—they were far out of range and about as easily moveable as the pyramids of Egypt. All he feared was the muskets.

Three thousand infantry of each side glared at each other across half a mile of plain, bare except for the bodies of a few men and horses. They glared, and they went on glaring as the minutes lengthened into one hour, then two. Blade noticed a number of the Vodi collapsing where they stood, or stumbling like drunken men out of the ranks toward their camp. They could not stand the broiling sun of the plains as well as the Kargoi or the Torians.

Now Blade could see that only the Vodi in the front ranks had muskets, and no more than one-third of the men there. He could also see that the walls of Tordas were dark with spectators, waiting for the collision between their enemies and their new allies. Blade hoped the waiting would not go on much longer. He pulled off his helmet and tried to fan himself with it. He was slowly steaming inside his reptile-hide armor, like a potato in its jacket. Besides, there was no way of curing the reptile hide that could keep it from smelling to high heaven in weather this hot.

The waiting went on for another bout-then suddenly it ended, in a totally unexpected fashion. Drums and trumpets sounded, and the Vodi began to back away. They kept their faces turned toward their enemies and their few remaining horsemen darting about like wasps, but they were unmistakably refusing battle.

Blade stared, unable to believe his own eyes until the Vodi had covered half a mile. Then he took off his helmet again and drank deeply from his water bottle. As he rode off, the cheering started, both from the Kargoi and from the Torians on the wall.

Blade hoped the cheers wouldn't die when both Kargoi and Torians learned the fighting wasn't over yet.

He found Queen Kayarna in a tent set up for her next to Paor's. The guards around her tent were all Torians, but that didn't worry Blade. The two new allies were obviously getting along well-drinking from each other's water bottles, comparing weapons, exchanging stories or boasts of their deeds in battle.

Paor greeted Blade as he rode up, his face one huge grin and his body poised as if he was ready to dance for joy.

"Blade, Blade, they have turned away from us. We have their measure now. Ah, such a victory, their riders dead and their footmen proved cowards."

Blade shook his head. "I wish I could think that, but I can't and I won't. Remember our first meeting, when you turned away from a fight that did not seem necessary or wise. You were no coward then, and I do not think the Vodi are cowards now. Their captains merely do not think it wise to fight us here and now, when we are ready and they do not know the best way of meeting us. If they are given time, they will fight, and they will fight wisely and well."

Paor's grin did not fade. "But we shall not give them time, shall we, Blade? No, the time they need is something they shall not have!"

"Probably," said Blade. "I will know more after I have spoken to Queen Kayarna."

The Queen of Tor was in her tent, lying back on a pile of cushions. She wore a skirt slit up the left side to make room for the bandage on her leg, and was bare to the waist. Blade's eyes wandered to the fine, ripe breasts, with a little rivulet of sweat trickling down between them on to her stomach.

The queen's eyes just as openly ran up and down Blade's body. Blade had never felt quite so strongly that he was being mentally stripped naked and inspected. He did his best to ignore it. Gradually he succeeded, and gradually the bedroom look left Kayarna's eyes. Instead of the lusting woman, Blade faced the formidable warrior queen.

He began briskly. "Our peoples have fought and shed each other's blood. But they have not shed so much that they cannot unite to shed the blood of the Vodi. After that---"

"Let us first talk of the 'before that,'" said Kayarna. "I make no promises until the victory is ours, and I will not ask you to make any either."

"Very well." Blade drew from his belt pouch a long piece of parchment, on which he'd sketched in charcoal a rough map and a list of the forces involved in his battle plan. Kayarna examined it, frowning.

"I see you have two plans here, one with only the Kargoi and the Hauri, the other with all three peoples together."

"That is true," said Blade. "I trust the Torian to fight beside us against the Vodi. But I could not be sure that you and I would be able to sit down and speak of this battle before the time came to fight it. So I

was not sure that the Torians would be fighting beside us from the very first moment."

"Against the Vodi, we will fight from the first moment to the last," said Kayarna earnestly. "This I swear, and may the ghosts of my fathers haunt me and the Vodi use me for a camp whore if I am forsworn."

Blade took both of her hands in his and squeezed them in a comradely fashion. She squeezed back, and although her eyes did not change, her gesture held an unmistakable sensuousness.

Why not? thought Blade. When the right time comes, it will be a fine symbol of the bond that unites our peoples. But Loya must not be hurt by it. I must see to that, if I have to push Kayarna off the wall of her own palace some dark night!

He returned to his map and plans, explaining each detail, each attack and maneuver. Kayarna asked few questions, but the few she asked showed that she understood clearly what he was saying.

"I see that you do not show the Hauri on this paper, although you say they will fight beside us," Kayarna said. "Where are they?"

"The Hauri are in a place unknown to all except themselves and me. Above all, it is unknown to the Vodi. I would rather that place remain so unknown until the moment comes when the Vodi will learn for themselves where the Hauri are."

Kayarna's face hardened momentarily. "You do not trust my silence or the loyalty of those around me?"

"I do. But you and they will be leading your warriors in this battle. If the Vodi should take you or one of your captains alive, are you sure the secret would not get out? Speak from your wisdom now, not from your pride."

Reluctantly, Kayarna nodded. "I know what the Vodi have done to some of my people. Indeed, I might not remain silent, nor the captains either. Very well, the Hauri will do what they choose, when they choose. What about the smoke tubes, the-the goons-the Vodi carry?"

"They are dangerous," said Blade. "Less so at night, however, when the Vodi cannot see well to aim them. Also, I doubt if they have too much more of the powder that makes the smoke in the guns. If they had more, I think they would have fought us today instead of running away. They are trying to save their powder, to defend their camp and to use in the big guns that fire at the walls of Tordas.

"In any case, it does not really matter. However much powder they have now, by tomorrow morning they will have a great deal less. Then it will be a battle of courage against courage, and that battle the Torians and their allies cannot lose."

"It will be tonight?"

"Yes. The Vodi should not be given time to prepare any new tricks."

"Tonight, then," said Kayarna, with a smile. She might have been speaking of a rendezvous as lovers, rather than of a deadly battle as comrades in arms.

Chapter 25

Blade was staring ahead into the silent darkness when both the silence and the darkness were suddenly broken. The faint thud of Vodi alarm drums and the slightly louder thud of muskets drifted faintly up the breeze. The earthworks around the siege camp were suddenly crowned with a ring of flickering torches. From where Blade sat on his horse, they looked no brighter than fireflies.

The Torians were going in now, abandoning their horses to hurl themselves against the earthworks on foot. They might not break through and many of them would die whether they did or not. Blade was sure they would push the attack in spite of this. They had too many dead to avenge, and Queen Kayarna would be leading them. She might have to lead from a litter to spare her twisted leg, but lead she would!

Blade lifted a wet finger to test the breeze. Good. It seemed to be holding. It would carry sound from the enemy camp toward where his own attack was assembling in the darkness. It would also carry the canoes of the Hauri straight down onto the enemy fleet. They would still have to run the gauntlet of cannon fire, but they would be low, fast-moving targets coming at the gunners out of pitch darkness. The weather had contrived an overcast, totally moonless night for this battle, and Blade was grateful. There would be just enough light for his people to see each other's white armbands, not enough to give the Vodi a dangerous amount of warning.

More sparkles of torchlight and musket fire, closer now. That meant the Kargoi were launching their attack, with all the pikemen marching straight up to the Vodi. If the Vodi somehow managed to come out to meet them, there would be a pitched battle in the open. If not, the Kargoi would drop their pikes, draw their swords, and go into the camp after the enemy.

A distant murmur of voices joined the drums and guns. This must be the faintest hint of an appalling din of screams, yells, war cries, shouts of fear and agony as the battle exploded far away along the shore.

It was time to move in. The Vodi would be awake and alert now, looking in all directions, and there was no point in giving them the slightest chance to brace themselves for his attack. Blade picked up the horn slung from his saddle, put it to his lips, and blew as long as he had breath in his lungs.

Before he'd stopped blowing, a weird and hideous uproar answered him from behind. War cries of Kargoi and Torians, the neighing of horses, the bellowing of angry drends, and then a swelling thunder of hooves. Blade spurred his horse inland; away from the beach, as the thunder became deafening. He was barely out of the way when the vanguard of a thousand furious stampeding wagon drends pounded past, toward the camp of the Vodi.

Behind the drends, around them, even among them rode Torians and Kargoi on horses and riding drends. They shouted at the stampeding animals, they blew horns and beat drums in their ears, they even prodded them in the rumps with swords and lances. The wagon drends moved faster and faster, angry and frightened at the same time.

The noise of the stampede became deafening; the Vodi in their camp would certainly be hearing it by now. That wouldn't make much difference when the drends reached the camp. They were an unstoppable battering ram of living flesh, like the sea reptiles controlled by the Menel.

A moment's thought about the Menel passed through Blade's mind. What would happen if tonight's defeat drove the desperate and reeling Vodi to ally themselves with the Menel? That was a risk, but one that had to be accepted. The Vodi were a menace already at hand, while the Menel were one lurking in the background. The Vodi had to go first.

There was another risk to run tonight. All four of the people who knew the secret of the Menel were in the forefront of the attack—Blade here, Paor with the Kargoi pikemen, Fudan and Loya with the Hauri coming in from the sea. Their people demanded leadership from in front, and any or all of them might die because of this. If they all died, who would be left to plan against the Menel?

Sometimes there were advantages to a general's being able to sit out a battle safe in a bunker far behind the lines!

Behind the drends rode more Torians and more Kargoi, a thousand of them, all armed with every weapon they could carry. On the flanks of the drends bounced bulging sacks of naphtha. When those sacks started going into the Vodi campfires... !

Blade rode back and forth along the landward flank of the stampeding drends. Sometimes he had to ride in and hold back the mounted attackers. In their eagerness some of them would gladly have ridden into the stampede or even ahead of it, willing to risk being trampled for the sake of more quickly getting at the enemy. Blade drove them back with shouts and curses and a waving sword. Tonight's battle would be confused enough, without hotheads making it worse!

Dust boiled up from under the hooves of drends and horses, making the dark night darker. It was beginning to be like riding through an old-fashioned London fog. Blade was edging his own horse out of the dust cloud when the palisade around the Vodi camp appeared ahead. The Vodi had built it well enough to stand against men or horses. They hadn't built it well enough to stand against a stampede of maddened drends. The sentries at the palisade held lighted torches, and by the light of those torches Blade saw everything that happened.

The drends went over the shallow ditch made to stop charging horsemen, went over it as if it wasn't there. Some of them went down and others piled up on top of them and around them, but the wild bawling and bellowing simply made the ones left on their feet move faster. They came up to the palisade at a speed Blade wouldn't have believed drends could reach. Somehow they sensed what lay in their path; they lowered their heads and charged on. Two hundred sets of horns struck the palisade almost in the same moment.

Blade heard an explosion of cracking and splintering wood and all the torches along a wide stretch of palisade went out. As the torches died, a hideous chorus of screams rose, lasting for the few seconds it took the drends to trample the palisade flat. Caught first under the logs and then under the hooves of the drends, most of the Vodi sentries were simply crushed into jelly after those few seconds of screaming. The drends were slowed but not stopped. They plunged on, straight among the tents.

Now the riders were following the drends as fast as their mounts would move. Blade could have yelled his lungs out or killed half of them without slowing them down at all. The riders scented the blood of their enemies, and like a pack of wolves they wanted to make their kill while their chances were best. The horses and the riding drends poured forward, catching up with the stampede, finding gaps in it, dashing out ahead of it into the camp of the Vodi.

Now it was by the light of enemy campfires that Blade saw what happened. Most of the Vodi were awake and armed by now, so few of them died in tents trampled flat by the drends. A good many died on their feet. Blade saw one of the Vodi swing his axe at a drend, smashing in its skull, then die pinned, writhing and screaming in agony as the beast fell squarely on him. Others tried to flee, tripped and were trampled, fell into campfires and were burned alive.

Those who survived the stampede had to face the mounted Kargoi and Torians moments later. At that point most of the Vodi lost whatever courage they had left, turned, and tried to run. Many of them didn't get very far before Torians rode them down, thrusting lances neatly into the backs of their necks or other vulnerable points. Blade saw one musketeer turn to fire, bringing down a Torian and his horse. Another Torian charged him, striking him a glancing blow with the lance. The Vodi stumbled to one side, fell into a fire-and the powder flask on his belt exploded. Even the battle-trained Torian horses shied away from what was left after the explosion died.

Other explosions now sounded farther down in the camp. Blade saw long tongues of flame spurting up and out. Either the Vodi had somehow managed to turn their siege guns on some of the attackers or

some of the attackers were getting through to the powder magazines. Paor had a dozen men of his personal guard specially assigned to burn or blow up anything that looked like gunpowder. Blade hoped some of the men would survive their assignment, but doubted it. They'd been too enthusiastic about the damage the explosions might do to the enemy to worry much about being caught themselves.

Flames were also booming up behind Blade, with the distinctive color of naphtha fires. He hoped his men weren't wasting the naphtha on minor targets, and also hoped they wouldn't destroy too much. If the camp could be captured with some of its gear intact

Blade spurred his horse into a gallop toward the shore. It was there the battle would become completely decisive, there and out among the ships. Danger to their boats and ships-their line of retreat-would break or destroy the Vodi more certainly than anything else.

The horse responded to Blade so eagerly that he reached the shore well ahead of his own men. . Suddenly he found himself trotting along the beach, the lathered and sweating horse kicking up sand instead of dust. He was far enough from the rest of the battle to find darkness and silence around him again.

The darkness and silence lasted only a few seconds. Muskets began banging as the sentries on the drawn-up boats let fly at the first target they'd been offered all night. Blade was a target impossible to miss, even for the most inaccurate weapons in the hands of the worst shots. A bullet ripped Blade's shortsword from his belt and another ripped his helmet from his head. A third ploughed along his temple, cleaning off the hair and opening the skin so that he felt blood flowing. Then two more bullets slammed into the horse; it went down and the half-stunned Blade went down with it.

He managed to roll clear of his dying mount and struggled for footing in the sand. The Vodi dropped their empty muskets and ran toward him from all directions. Blade was just ready to defend himself when the first two came at him.

One raised an axe, then reeled back with a hand missing and the axe falling from the other hand. As the second man slashed down at Blade with a sword, several tons of gunpowder went off farther inland. The long rumbling explosion and the searing flash of light paralyzed the man, breaking his attack. Blade kicked him in the knee, slashed his thigh as he fell, and cut off his head as he landed. Then he snatched up the fallen man's sword and met the next attacker with two weapons dancing in his hands.

With the two swords Blade wove a steel curtain around himself for several minutes, killing one attacker after another. He was never sure exactly how long he fought or how many he killed. He knew that in the end there was a litter of dead and dying Vodi on the beach around him, and others stumbling or crawling off in the darkness to die there alone.

He also knew that he saw two boatloads of Vodi rowing in toward him. There were at least twenty men in each boat. They would be too few to help with the battle in the camp, but they would be more than enough to kill him if he didn't run. Since he couldn't see there was anywhere to run to, he decided to stay where he was and take his chances. He waited for the two boats, clearheaded and cool enough to even pick out his first opponent from each one.

Then dark shapes rose from the water alongside each boat, and dark objects soared into the air to land with faint thuds in the boats. Before any of the Vodi could react, spluttering blue lights dropped among them. Then the standing and sitting men were silhouetted against sheets of flame as the naphtha blazed up.

Most of the men died screaming in those flames or dragged down by the weight of their armor and weapons as they leaped overboard. A few were strong swimmers or sailors who wore no armor. Some of them were dragged down as they swam by Hauri with sharp knives, that would slit open human

throats as well as green sharks. Two or three made it to shore.

Blade ran to meet them. A sailor swung an oar at him, knocking one sword out of his hand. Blade ran the man through with the other. A soldier got to the fallen weapon before Blade. He advanced on Blade with the sword in one hand and an axe in the other, water dripping from his beard, mail coat, and the horns of his helmet. A lithe dark figure rose from the water behind him, ran lightly through the shallows, and struck at the base of his skull with a long staff. The soldier went forward on his face without a twitch. Blade retrieved his sword from the dead hand and went forward to embrace Loya.

Now a battle was beginning out on the water, spreading along the line of anchored ships. The muzzle flashes of the ships' guns lit up Hauri canoes, darting in and out among their high-sided enemies. Most of the shots went over the low-lying targets, doing no harm. Some hit, the heavy stones breaking canoes apart like bathtub toys in the hands of an angry child. Few of the Hauri died even then, for they took to the water as readily as fish.

Meanwhile, more bags of naphtha flew up onto the decks of ships and into boats, and more blue torches followed them. Flames roared up from a dozen ships, then from twenty more. Blade saw the flames race up tarred rigging, leap into sails, and strip them from the masts in a minute. Explosions began to boom as the flames reached ready-to-use powder on deck, and masts began to topple in showers of sparks and clouds of steam. The ports of ships glowed as the fires spread below decks. Other ships, still intact, began to drift as Hauri swimmers cut their anchor ropes.

Blade shouted and danced in delirious triumph at the spectacle of the Vodi fleet dying before his eyes. Meanwhile explosions thundered and roared behind him as well, as the attackers swarmed into the camp and went to work on the powder magazine. Some of the explosions were violent enough to throw burning timbers and pieces of human bodies all the way to the beach, where they landed around Blade.

Beside him, Loya danced and capered just as wildly.

Gradually their attention settled on one large ship in the center of the enemy fleet. A continuous roll of gunfire there told of a particularly vigorous defense. It was gallant, but in the end it was useless. The Hauri drifted a canoe filled from stern to stern with bags of naphtha against the ship, then set their fires. The ship's stern vanished in a sheet of flame that towered up and seconds later engulfed the mainmast. Sailors with their clothes on fire hurled themselves from the yardarms, falling like meteors into the water. The flames spread forward, the foremast became a torch, powder on deck went off violently enough to toss several guns overboard-then the magazine deep down inside the ship exploded.

The ship's deck rose; its sides blew outward; both masts simply vanished. A sphere of flame sat on the water where the ship had been, its surface dotted with planks and guns and human figures. Then the flames shrank into themselves and vanished while the wreckage and the bodies hissed down into the water or fell with thuds on the beach. In the silence that followed the explosion, Blade put his arm around Loya. They stood there for a moment, deaf and blind to everything except each other, then turned back to the battle.

There wasn't much left of that battle. Perhaps the exploding ship had been the flagship of the whole expedition. In any case, the explosion seemed to take all the fight out of the Vodi. They fled or tried to flee or tried to surrender if they had no hope of fleeing. Blade was able to save a few prisoners, but only a few. The Torians were giving no quarter, and neither the Kargoi nor the Hauri felt much like arguing with them on the point.

Dawn came, and Blade was able to write the epitaph for the Vodi expedition. In the commanders' tents he found papers that made it clear the Vodi had put nearly the whole military and naval strength of their

people into the expedition. They had lost nine out of ten of the men, two-thirds of the ships, all their siege guns, equipment, and supplies-in short, they'd met complete disaster.

Blade decided to stop worrying about the Vodi being driven to ally themselves with the Menel. It would be a generation, possibly two, before the Vodi had enough fighting men to be worth anything as allies. If the Menel did accept Vodi support, they'd be saddling themselves with an ally even weaker and more helpless than they were.

Blade met Queen Kayarna as she rode about the battlefield on a horse, her fourth of the night. Unable to walk, she'd ridden the other three right into the battle until they'd been killed under her.

She rode up to Blade, a triumphant grin on her face. The grin faded as she saw Blade's arm around Loya's waist. Whatever she'd been about to say died on lips that tightened into a straight line. She turned her horse and cantered off, her back rigid.

Loya was equally sober-faced as she watched the queen's receding figure. "She did not like seeing us together, I think."

"No, she didn't," said Blade wearily. "I hope she may think otherwise, someday-or at least be silent about it. If she is jealous, though"

He could not quite find the energy to finish the sentence. He'd thoroughly disposed of all the problems involved in winning the war. Now began the problems involved in keeping the peace.

Chapter 26

For the next few days, it didn't matter whether Queen Kayarna was jealous of Loya or not. Everyone was too busy burying the dead, caring for the wounded, collecting the loot from the Vodi camp, and getting the life of Tordas started up again. Kayarna worked as hard as anyone else. On horseback or in a litter, she made the rounds of her city and her allies' camps day and night, asking about a thousand and one things but never about Loya.

Blade knew, however, that the days of hard work would end sooner or later. Then Kayarna might have time, for jealousy. Before that time came, he wanted Loya safely out of Kayarna's reach.

As he put the situation to Loya and Fudan:

"I do not ask this freely, or with any pleasure. I would far rather have Loya with me for-for all the rest of my time in the world. But Queen Kayarna has a keen eye, and I am afraid a jealous heart. I do not think she will risk insulting the Kargoi by taking any steps against me because of my love for you." He stroked Loya's cheek. "But you might be in great danger. We simply cannot trust Kayarna, at least not now."

"So you would like it better if I went away, to the east perhaps?" said Loya.

Blade nodded. "There is a saying in England-'Out of sight, out of mind!' If you go off to the homeland of the Hauri for a few months or perhaps a year, Kayarna may forget about you during that time."

"That might be wise in any case," said Loya. She hesitated, then said quickly, "Blade, I think I will bear your child."

Blade stepped around the table and embraced her. "Then you will go?"

"Yes, and not be angry with you for making me go, either," she said with a shaky smile. "But I-I hope this will not be a parting forever. Will it be, Blade?"

"I-no, let's just say that I will do everything I can to make sure that it is not forever."

"Yes," said Fudan. "But will your best be good enough? If it is not, the Hauri will stand shamed by Queen Kayarna and by her lust for you, and much evil may come of this."

"Fudan, I will not promise to do what may be impossible. Let me put it this way. At the moment Kayarna is jealous. It would not be wise to trust her.

"But she is also a queen who has ruled wisely and well and fought bravely for her city and for her people against the Vodi. She will not want to throw away any portion of her victory or of the new alliance. When her desire for me has passed, I will tell her that Loya is highly honored among the Hauri. I will tell her that the Hauri will consider Loya shamed if the Torians do not do her honor. Therefore, if Kayarna wishes the Hauri to be friendly to Tor, she will see that Loya is honored in her city."

"Yes, but will Kayarna's desire for you ever pass?" said Loya. More quietly she added, "I doubt if mine ever will."

Blade laughed. "Oh, I think Kayarna will tire of me before long. She is a woman who has had many lovers because she needs them. One man will not rule her bed for long."

"I hope not," said Loya.

It was still some time before the Queen of Tor came for Richard Blade. Conscientious to the last, she refused to permit the palace to be repaired until the walls of the city were patched up and the grain warehouses restocked. Only then did she permit workmen to patch the holes in the palace's roof and walls, repair the furnaces under the baths, and sweep up the litter of smashed statuary, plaster dust, and broken tiles from all the floors. After that came Blade's summons to the palace and to the queen's bed. By that time Blade knew Loya was safely in the lands of the Hauri, where Kayarna could never find her even if she wanted to.

As far as Blade could tell, the queen couldn't have cared less. Her great desire was to have as much of Blade's company as the work they still both had to do allowed. He was with her in bed, in the baths, at meals in her private chambers, on long rides into the countryside beyond the devastated area around Tordas.

Blade began to wonder if her desire for him would fade. He began to hear her speak of Tor needing a king, and the more he heard of the idea the more uncertain he felt about it. Becoming king of Tor could make it much harder for him to assure Loya the honor she deserved or even the safety she needed. Kayarna would be more jealous of the other women of her crowned royal consort than of the other women of a mere lover.

On the other hand, if the king of Tor was the former High Baudz of the Kargoi, the alliance between the two peoples could hardly be firmer. Once again Blade was painfully aware of clashing responsibilities. At least Loya was still alive and sane, and he knew he would risk throne, sanity, and life to keep her that way. She might never have the honor that her qualities and her love for him had earned her, but she would not die.

Blight was falling over Tordas. From the window of the chamber in the north tower of the palace, Blade could look out over the city and the water beyond. The fires of the sunset colors were almost faded. Closer at hand, smaller lights burned on both the sea and the land. Torches burned where Hauri fishermen dragged their nets; more torches burned where masons worked late to repair some damaged building.

The rebuilding of Tordas would be an effort by all three of the peoples who'd fought the Vodi. The Torians were doing most of the work, but the Hauri were catching tons of fish to feed the city, while many Kargoi worked as tanners, carpenters, and butchers. The rebuilt city would be something that all three peoples could claim as their own.

In the last few days Blade had taught warriors of all three how to use the captured Vodi muskets and cannon. He'd also written down the formula for making gunpowder. Tomorrow he was supposed to go out into the countryside, to watch the testing of the first batch of Torian-made gunpowder. It would probably be a while before the Torians produced anything that would go bang rather than fzzzzzz, but they were well on the way. Long before anyone else human or nonhuman came against them, all three peoples would have gunpowder weapons and tactics for using them.

He would not wait until then to tell Kayarna about the Menel, though. He would send a message tomorrow to Paor, who was keeping the Menel diary in a locked box in his wagon in the Kargoi camp outside the city. Fudan and Loya were keeping the other Menel souvenirs in the little seaside but by the cove.

Blade wondered how Loya was. In the two months since he'd seen her, her pregnancy would have advanced considerably. Would it be a son or a daughter? It didn't matter much to Blade, and it probably didn't matter much to the Hauri. They were too sensible to treat the child as much more than a symbol, and a girl would do as well for that as a boy. But Loya would probably want a son, to raise as a warrior, a fisherman, a sailor, and an explorer. For her sake he could hope the child would be a boy.

He also hoped he would be able to bring Loya out of the forest again before the child was born. Kayarna hadn't said a word about her rival since Blade moved into the palace-but then, Blade hadn't said a word about Loya either. Perhaps it was time to find some way of subtly raising the question?

Before Blade could think further on this point, he heard a familiar set of swift, light footsteps behind him. He was about to turn around when Kayarna's voice spoke.

"No, Blade. Stand where you are. Do not turn around. I have something for you."

Her tone was light, almost joking, but a wise man obeyed Kayarna Deda of Tor even when she spoke jokingly. Blade did as he was told, conscious of her warm soft breathing behind him and also of the open window in front of him. It was a long way to the ground, and Kayarna had a rough taste in practical jokes.

He heard the sound of rippling cloth, then something heavy settled down on his head, with cool metal pressing against his forehead and temples. A hand fell lightly on his shoulder.

"Turn around, Blade, and look in the mirror."

Blade turned around. He saw Kayarna standing beside him in a long red skirt and jeweled sandals, her hair piled high and caught up with a gold circlet, the nipples of her bare breasts lightly rouged. Then he saw himself in the bronze mirror that hung on the wall.

On his head rose a conical crown a foot high, the frame white gold but with the gold almost completely invisible under layer after layer of black pearls. There were hundreds of them, perhaps more than a thousand, all perfect, all carefully graded and carefully placed. The large ones at the base of the crown were the size of grapes, the ones at the very top were hardly larger than grains of sand. Blade moved his head slightly, and the light played across the black surface of pearls.

It was like wearing a crown of luminous darkness.

"You are already the king of my lovers," said Kayarna with a smile, running her hand down Blade's arm. "By the Pearl Crown you are King-By-Marriage in all of Tor, not just in my bed. You will have the place beside me as long as you live. That place needs filling, and there is no one else so worthy. Nor will there be."

"You flatter me," said Blade. "I can hardly refuse. Yet what becomes of the Kargoi now?"

"You yourself have said that the man Paor is worthy to be High Baudz. Indeed he seems wise and brave. So let him be chosen to rule the Kargoi, and they will have no further need of you."

It struck Blade that he might have just been given the perfect opportunity to raise the question of the Hauri and of Loyas safety and position. Before he could say a word, Kayarna smiled again.

"To the King-By-Marriage, all but the queen must kneel. Even she may kneel if she chooses."

In a single flowing motion Kayarna knelt on the floor before Blade. With one hand she raised his kilt, with the other she drew aside the loinguard under it. Her mouth with its warm, superbly skilled, mobile lips closed on Blade's manhood.

He stood like a rock as she stroked and licked and sucked, trying to keep his back straight and his breathing even. It was a game they played sometimes, seeing how long and how silently each could endure the other's best and most skilled efforts to arouse. It was a delightful game, one in which there was never a loser-only winners.

Blade's silence drove Kayarna to put her hands to work along with her lips. Blade clenched both his teeth and his fists and kept quiet. But his back was beginning to arch involuntarily, almost as if he were being gripped by two powerful hands and bent backward. His body was fighting its own fight with Kayarna's lips.

Blade groaned out loud. As if the groan was a signal, pain roared in his head like the winds of a hurricane sweeping in off the sea. His ears were filled with thunder and before his eyes the world vanished in a red fog of pain. Lord Leighton's computer was gripping his brain, and he was on his way back to Home Dimension.

Wild thoughts of Loya, of the Menel diary, of a dozen other things left undone or unfinished flashed through his mind. He groaned again, as much in frustration as in pain or pleasure. Kayarna heard that groan and was certain that Blade's resistance was about to crumble. Her lips closed on him again.

Then there was nothing for Blade but the pain in his head and the other pain in his groin that was also flaming ecstasy. The world faded around him, but before it did, Kayarna's lips had done their work. As the sensation of those lips on him faded, Blade's body jerked and twisted in a shuddering climax. It jerked and twisted again as the pain spread from his head downward into every nerve fiber. Then it seemed to lie still and quiet, as darkness swallowed him up and he fell down into it, away from Kayarna, away from Tor, away into infinity.

Chapter 27

"So, Richard," said J. "How do you feel about this last trip?"

Soon after he'd started sending out agents instead of going out himself, J had discovered the need for something more than the formal debriefing. Of course that was still necessary and always would be. But if after that debriefing you sat down with the man over some good whiskey and talked things over less formally-well, it was sometimes surprising what came out.

Blade sighed. "Frankly, it was somewhat like the first time I ran into the Menel. I have the feeling I was snatched back just about the time the real work was about to begin. Not only in dealing with the Menel, but in so much else. There's Loya and our child, there's Paor, there's" He broke off and shrugged. "I could go on for half an hour, but I think you get the idea."

"I do," said J. "But if we always gave you time to finish everything you've started, you'd be spending ten years in each Dimension."

Blade laughed. "That's perfectly true. I never was one for leaving business unfinished, even as a boy." He sipped his whiskey in silence for a moment. "I suppose I did get through everything that absolutely had to be done. I also left practically everybody alive and healthy when I came home. That's a pleasant change."

"Everybody, except the Vodi," put in J.

"True. But I don't think the Vodi are going to be on my conscience. Nor the Menel, either."

"Lord Leighton is having fits over the Menel, you realize. If he had a soul, I think he'd sell it to have the Menel diary in his hands. He's been saying that we might learn the true relationship of Dimension and space if we could only translate that diary."

"I know," said Blade. "I was wondering myself what the Menel being in that Dimension meant. Did they have interdimensional travel? Or were the Torians and the Kargoï somehow in-something-that was physically the same as the Dimension of the Ice Dragons. I stopped wondering about it, after a while. I had too many other things on my mind, and I knew Lord Leighton could do a better job of puzzling it all out anyway."

"One point where I have done more thinking is on what the Menel were really after. I wondered if they could seriously hope to conquer the Dimension with their implanted animals. I couldn't see how that was possible, so I wondered if the Menel were a pack of fools."

"I don't think they are. I now think that what they probably hoped to do was flood a particular area with implanted animals. That could make the area uninhabitable, by killing or frightening away all the 'primitive' inhabitants. The humans might even come to call the area accursed. Then the Menel could move from their island to the mainland and settle in. They would be nearly as safe from premature human interference as they'd been on the island. But they would have more room and more resources of metal and everything else. In a generation or two, they would have the strength and the weapons for a full scale war of conquest."

"They didn't reckon on running into a people as tough as the Kargoï. The Kargoï might have died to the last warrior, but I think they would have destroyed most of the Menel animals in the process."

"Perhaps," said J. "But I don't think having you to lead them-ah, hindered them in any way."

Blade flushed. "I suppose not. In any case, the Menel were beaten off, and now their secret is out. Also, they will face a united human race in at least part of the world. That's something I'm sure they won't be expecting from a 'primitive' race. Who knows? In a generation or two they may be ready to give up the struggle. I'd give a good deal to be on hand when that happens." There was a distant look in Blade's eyes, one that J would have called dreamy in any man less practical and tough-minded. "If some human could approach the Menel as an equal, who knows . . . ? I wondered about that, too."

"You'd have Lord Leighton's support in going back, that's for certain," said J. "But we still haven't got a controlled-return process reliable enough to risk you. Even if we did, you might land back in the same Dimension, but twenty-five years in its past or three hundred years in its future."

"Complicated, isn't it?" said Blade drily.

"Rather," said J, in the same tone. Then, more cheerfully, "I have some genuinely good news for once. My sources tell me that Scotland Yard has closed the file on the 'Mystery Hero' affair. So there's no one from the Yard going to be on the lookout for you any more."

Blade looked as if he wanted to jump up and down and cheer. Instead he merely rose, a broad smile on his face, and shook J's hand. "That is good news, sir. I think it calls for another drink."

"Indeed it does," said J, and turned to the sideboard. It was good to see Richard so happy, and the news was a great relief to him as well. Richard had saved more than a dozen lives in a train wreck a few months ago, and his reward had been to find Scotland Yard on his trail. He'd had to vanish from the scene of the wreck to avoid compromising the Project with the publicity, and the police promptly concluded that the "Mystery Hero" had vanished for some sinister reason. It had been most damnably inconvenient all around, and for a considerable time it had denied Richard some of the peace and quiet he so badly needed between trips into Dimension X.

Now it was over. A small victory, but sometimes it seemed there was no other kind.

The two men raised freshly filled glasses, and drank.