
Blade 27: Master of the Hashomi

By Jeffrey Lord

Chapter 1

Richard Blade awoke. He felt hard rock under him and small sharp stones jabbing into his bare skin. His head throbbed like a drum and a searing white light dazzled him. He closed his eyes and tried to relax. It had been a remarkably swift and simple transition into Dimension X.

He could not help laughing at that idea, although the laughter made his head hurt more. He supposed a transition into Dimension X could be "swift." At least it had seemed to him only a few seconds in the nothingness that lay between Home Dimension and Dimension X. How long it really was; he couldn't even guess. Normal concepts of time and space had less than no meaning when a man was passing from an underground room below the Tower of London into some part of infinity.

What made no sense was to call any transition into Dimension X "simple." To be sure, there hadn't been anything unusual about this trip. He wasn't carrying any equipment and Lord Leighton hadn't sprung some new and exotic experiment ripened in his brilliant, eccentric, and endlessly fertile mind.

Blade had simply smeared himself with smelly black grease to prevent electrical burns and sat down in a chair inside a glass booth in the center of the underground room. Lord Leighton bustled about, attaching scores of cobra-headed metal electrodes to Blade's body, wiring him into the huge computer whose gray crackle-finished consoles rose all around the booth. At last Leighton returned to stand by the main control panel. With the gray-haired man known only as J watching, Leighton pulled the red master switch. Current surged into him, the computer and his own train joined, and for the twenty-seventh time Richard Blade was flung away from the room, from Britain, from the world he knew, into-somewhere else.

Very simple, until you started thinking about all that had gone into preparing this series of events that had become almost a routine.

There were only four men in the whole world who knew it all. There was Lord Leighton, the most brilliant and the most eccentric scientific brain in Great Britain. The giant computer was his creation, and in a sense Dimension X was his discovery. It had been his idea to wire Richard Blade into the computer for the first time. He thought the combination of a human and an electronic brain would produce something new and unique.

It certainly had. When Blade returned from his first trip into Dimension X, it was instantly clear that he'd returned with one of the most important scientific discoveries of all time. It had to be kept a closely guarded secret, from Britain's enemies and even from her friends. It also had to be studied further.

There was a whole world-many worlds-out there in Dimension X. There were resources of knowledge, material, skills, people-a whole new British Empire that could dwarf the first one. One scientist, one computer, and one man of action wouldn't be enough for the job.

So the Prime Minister of England was told of the discovery, and several million pounds from secret funds went to establish Project Dimension X. The man called J, head of the secret intelligence agency MI6, was told, and he became the Project's administrator, security chief, and man-of-all-work. He also

kept a watchful eye on Lord Leighton's more bizarre whims and fancies, particularly when they might endanger Richard Blade. J had picked Blade straight out of Oxford, seen him become MI6's crack agent, and loved the younger man as he would have loved a son.

Lord Leighton, the Prime Minister, J. Three of the four who knew the secrets of Dimension X. The fourth was Richard Blade, the man on the spot. Secret agent, natural adventurer, a man whose physical and mental gifts made him the most nearly indestructible human being alive. Veteran of twenty-six trips into Dimension X, and the only living person who could come through one alive and sane. There were doubtless others, and sooner or later they would have to be found and put to work. Meanwhile, Blade was not only indestructible, he was indispensable.

That was by no means all of the story, if one wanted to tell it completely. There was more money, some of it spent to good purpose, much of it spent on Lord Leighton's whims. There were men and women dead all over Dimension X, killed by Blade in the process of surviving to return to Britain alive and sane.

There were men and women dead or in prison in a good many places in Home Dimension, killed or confined to protect the secret of Dimension X.

There were unexpected and totally lunatic moments, such as the time Blade saved a dozen lives in a train wreck outside London. He had to flee in order to escape publicity that might have endangered the security of the Project. Because he fled, Scotland Yard decided that he may have been a wanted criminal. For several months Britain's own police were hard at work, making it impossible for Richard Blade to live a normal life even when he was in Home Dimension. J had finally tidied up that mess, but there would inevitably be others, probably even worse.

Simple? No, the word made no sense at all here. The only way Richard Blade would ever face anything "simple" was when his luck finally ran out.

Death was simple enough, at least when it was all over.

Chapter 2

For now, Blade was alive, safely in Dimension X, unhurt except for the usual headache, and in no danger of anything except sunburn. The sun and the hot wind blowing across his skin made him suspect he'd landed in a desert.

He opened his eyes and sat up. Sunlight flamed and his head started throbbing again. He saw gray mountains to his left, red-brown desert to his right. With the dazzling sunlight and his throbbing head, he had a moment's sensation that both the mountains and the desert were alive and watching him.

Slowly his eyes adjusted to the glare and his head calmed down. He found he could stand, look around him, and see the landscape for what it was.

He stood on a rocky slope that rose from the edge of the desert toward the mountains. A monstrous, incandescent sun poured light and heat out of a sterile blue sky. The mountains lay to the west, the desert to the east.

The desert began about five miles to the east and nearly a mile below Blade. It stretched away toward a distant flat horizon, patches of gravel alternating with patches of sand. Blade saw gulleys that must have been carved by water, but no vegetation, let alone birds or animals. In the clear air the horizon was a good thirty miles away—two days travel, for a man taking it easy and saving moisture. Every one of those

thirty miles looked dead, dry, and sterile. It would be too much of a gamble heading out across the desert, Blade decided. He'd have to reach water within three days. That was as long as he could hope to last in this sun-baked land. Then he would die. In a few more days after that his body would be a withered husk. In a few months the sand would have buried him, or perhaps stripped the flesh from his bones so that only a bleaching skeleton would remain to greet travelers.

There seemed to be nothing out there worth risking such a fate. If the ground at his feet had been sprouting man-eating tigers and poisonous snakes, perhaps Blade would have thought differently. But it was only bare rock, sullen gray streaked with black and brown, cracked and flaked by thousands of years of sun, and at the moment almost too hot to stand on. To the west rose the mountains, and Blade turned to study them more closely.

The nearest peaks leaped up to at least ten thousand feet. Farther away Blade could see more peaks rising to twelve and fifteen thousand feet, with white snowcaps blazing from their summits. Still farther off he could make out the white wall of a magnificent triangular peak soaring up to at least twenty thousand feet. A plume of snow trailing from its summit hinted at strong winds high aloft.

Where there was snow, there would be water. Where there was water, there would be life, and where there was life Blade could find something to eat. If there were no people, Blade knew he might be in for an uncomfortable time. He'd be eating berries and roots and raw fish, drinking from mountain streams, and generally living more like an animal than a human being. But he would be living, which was more than the desert would let him do.

It was time to move out. Blade decided he'd go north at his present altitude, between mountain and desert. There wasn't much to choose between north and south-the view was equally dismal in either direction. But at his present altitude the nights should be endurable, and any streams flowing down from the mountains might not have entirely dried up.

Blade licked lips that already felt dry from the sun and gritty with rock dust, then struck north, moving with steady, unhurried strides.

The mountains to the west seemed unchanging, always turning the same face toward him. The nearer peaks seemed close enough for him to throw a rock over their summits, but in fact had to be at least twenty miles away. He'd be crossing those miles sooner or later, but not today.

He'd arrived in this Dimension about mid-morning. At noon he stopped for a short rest, then moved on. At this pace he could keep moving for two days without food or water, covering a good fifty miles in that time.

Slowly the boulders began to cast lengthening shadows.

The sun's light took a reddish tinge as it sank toward the peaks. In another hour the darkness and chill of the desert night would come swiftly. Blade began looking for something better than bare rocky ground to give him a resting place for the night. As his eyes searched, his legs kept moving.

He'd come perhaps seven hours and twenty miles from his starting point when he saw something breaking the monotony of rocky ground, upended boulders, and scrubby bushes. At first it seemed only an irregular smudge on the ground, pale and uncertain in the fading light. Then Blade's eyes caught a last flash of sunlight on something metallic. He increased his pace, until he was almost running across the last three hundred yards.

Half in the shadow of a high outcropping of gray rock, a litter of bones stretched for fifty yards along the ground. There were human remains, and also skeletons that looked very much like camels. The bones were bleached and scoured white as flour by the sun and wind of-how many years? Blade could only guess.

Certainly a long time. There were cotton robes and leather belts, pouches, and boots among the remains. The robes were pale and worn as fine as cobweb, the leather was cracked and flaking, baked hard as wood. The dead had been lying here a long time since they came out of the desert to die here of thirst before they could reach the mountains.

Or had they died of thirst? Blade found himself noticing other flashes of light on metal, cracks in some of the skulls, peculiar stains on the robes. He began to move among the remains, examining them more carefully.

Most of the robes were faded to a dingy white, but most also showed large patches of spots that had once been stained dark. Bloodstains? Certainly nothing else was as likely.

Blade picked up a skull. It had been split from the crown to the bridge of the nose, and after that hacked free of the neck that once held it up. Wind and sun had not done that.

Something sharper than a stone pricked Blade's foot. He stepped back, knelt, and felt in the gravel and bones around him. He came up with a long, leaf-shaped arrowhead, still attached to a few inches of shaft baked so dry that the wood crumbled to powder between Blade's fingers.

Blade found himself looking around the darkening landscape with new alertness and a growing suspicion. These people might have been moving up from the desert in search of water, but he doubted they'd died from not finding it. They'd died from bows and sharp steel in the hands of human enemies.

Again Blade examined the litter of bones and gear, studying them in the light of this new certainty. The human enemies had been skilled enough to lay an ambush that struck down the whole party in almost the same moment. Perhaps a few had ridden entirely clear, but the rest lay too close together for there to be any other plausible explanation.

Blade backed away from the fallen bones, trying to look in all directions at once, and scrambled up the rock outcropping. The last few feet were nearly vertical. Blade pulled himself over the sharp crest and lay flat behind it, looking back the way he'd come.

Yes, here was where the ambushers had lain in wait. The rocks could conceal archers, holding their fire until the riders were within easy bowshot. Then a sudden rain of arrows, at a range where they could hardly miss the camels, and a mass of stunned and dismounted men to be finished off with swords.

All right, so he'd reconstructed the events of so many years ago. What did this mean for him now?

It didn't have to mean anything. The ambush could have been generations ago, the bones lying in the open because on this rocky slope the sand of the desert would not creep over them. The youngest of the ambush party could have long since died of old age.

Still, this land had once seen men killing each other, and it might do so again. Blade decided to strike out for the mountains as soon as dawn gave him traveling light. Out on the slope he lacked not only water but cover. He was as visible as a flea on a plate.

By now the twilight was turning purple. A chill in the air began to nibble at Blade's bare skin. He scrambled down the rocks again and gathered up several of the fallen robes. Then he climbed back up, wrapped himself in the robes as well as he could, and curled up. He didn't expect to be comfortable, but he did expect that anyone climbing up the outcropping to get at him would make enough noise to penetrate his sleep. In both Home Dimension and Dimension X, survival was a matter of a thousand small precautions that made a man a more difficult victim.

Satisfied that he'd done his best, Blade relaxed. Like any healthy animal at the end of a long day's hunting, he was asleep in moments.

Nothing bothered Blade that night. He woke in a land lit by a dying moon and the first pink traces of dawn, but as lifeless and empty as the night before. He climbed back down the rock to the bones.

In the dawn he was able to make a more thorough search. He found more robes and tore some of them into strips, then tied the strips around his feet. All the boots and shoes were too small for Blade, even if the passage of time hadn't made them unwearable. A few layers of cloth would be better than nothing, to keep the stones from wearing the skin off his feet as he climbed toward the mountains. When he'd finished binding up his feet, he began searching for a weapon.

It was a long search. The ambushers had not only wiped the party out of existence, they'd stripped the bodies of everything except the clothes on their backs and the harnesses on their riding animals. Blade had to search through the whole area, scattering bones and whole skeletons that might have lain here undisturbed for more years than he'd lived. At times he felt slightly like a grave robber.

At last he turned over an almost intact skeleton and found a long knife thrust up between its ribs. Apparently the dead man had been stabbed, then fallen on his face, concealing the death weapon under himself so that it was overlooked in the search after the battle. Blade drew the knife out from between the dry ribs and examined it carefully.

It was nearly two feet long, with a heavy hilt of silver and black lacquer. The blade was slightly curved, heavily weighted toward the point, and razor-sharp on both edges. Blade tried a few experimental slashes. The knife was beautifully balanced, for both forehand and backhand strokes. It looked and felt capable of lopping off hands, arms, and even heads with lethal efficiency.

Blade made a belt from a strip of fabric and a sling for the knife from another, then tied the sling to the belt. It now rode easily on his right thigh, ready for a quick draw. It was a far better weapon than he'd expected to find, and apparently in perfect condition, completely unrusty. Perhaps that shouldn't be so surprising. This seemed to be the kind of land where a child could grow to middle age without ever seeing rain.

As Blade started to sling the knife, he noticed a design worked in silver on the pommel and engraved near the point. It was an elaborate design, showing a five-petaled flower that reminded Blade vaguely of a poppy.

Presumably the original owner of the knife had been one of the ambushers, since his knife had been in the body of one of the victims. Presumably he had also not survived the victory, otherwise he'd have retrieved his weapon. The flower doubtless meant something to him. It meant nothing to Richard Blade, who'd come across an unimaginable distance to stumble on this forgotten battlefield and play scavenger among its bones. All that mattered to him was that the knife still held its edge and temper.

He bent to tighten his foot bindings, then straightened up and drew a patch of cloth over his head and

shoulders for extra protection from the sun. Now he could leave the dead to the sleep he'd interrupted and go on about his search for the living people of this Dimension.

Blade turned his face toward the distant mountains, then started walking.

Chapter 3

The mountain lifted higher and higher with each hour of Blade's steady march toward them. He could look deeper and deeper into the range, to see the patches of gray-green mountain pasture, thin silver lacings of streams flowing down over bare rock, the mist that rose where waterfalls plunged a thousand feet. He could now be certain that all the water a man might need was waiting for him there in the mountains. What else might be waiting for him he would find out when he got there.

With his early start, Blade covered two-thirds of the distance to the mountains by noon. Five miles from the foot of the nearest peak, he stopped to rest. The bushes seemed to grow thicker and greener here, and he no longer felt quite so nakedly visible to anyone who might be watching. He tested the edge of the knife on several branches, and found it cut easily and cleanly. He chewed some of the leaves to fight his thirst.

Barely a mile farther on he came to water. A shallow stream flowed over a gravel bed and plunged down a steep ravine to end in a broad muddy pool. The pool had no outlet that Blade could see—either the water evaporated or seeped away underground. The banks were thickly overgrown with bushes, coarse grass, and even a few pale red flowers. Small mouse-like things darted for cover as Blade approached, and somewhere in the bushes a bird squawked in surprise.

Two rocks stood out on either side of the stream where it flowed out of the ravine into the pool. Each showed the same sign that was on Blade's knife—the poppy-like flower. Each carved image was nearly four feet high, and they were identical except for one point. The carving on the rock to the right of the stream was worn and beginning to lose detail. Many years of wind had scoured it, many years of hot days and chilly nights had flaked away the rock around it.

The other carving was as clean and fresh as if the carver had set down his hammer and chisel only a few hours ago.

The impression of something brand-new was so overpowering that Blade found himself examining the ground around the rock for footprints. The people whose sign was the poppy flower were not dead and gone. Some of them had passed this way, probably within months, certainly within years, leaving their sign for all to see. Was it a warning to their enemies, a welcome to their friends, a prayer to whatever gods they worshipped, or something else entirely different and quite incomprehensible?

Blade wasted no time guessing. Nor did he change his plans. If the poppy people still existed, the mountains were as good a place as any to start looking for them. He had reason to assume they were formidable warriors, but no reason to assume he was in any danger from them—yet. He knelt by the stream, drank as much as he could, then rose and moved on.

Now his eye searched the landscape a little more carefully, and his right hand was never far from the hilt of his knife. Otherwise, no one watching Blade could have told that he was now fully alert, ready to turn from explorer into deadly fighting machine between one breath and the next.

The breeze blowing from the mountains began to carry a damp coolness. Blade turned south, to skirt the flank of the nearest peak in search of an easier path into the mountains. He was an expert climber, who'd

made most of the important climbs in the Alps and Rockies. Dressed and equipped as he was, though, it made more sense to go around rather than over the looming peaks.

Another hour, and a narrow, rugged pass opened before him, snaking off into the shadows among the peaks. It finally seemed to vanish close to the foot of the twenty-thousand-foot giant with its trailing plume of snow. Blade doubted he could find a better route into the mountains, and climbed straight toward the mouth of the pass.

The shadows and the chill mountain air seemed to swallow Blade the moment he stepped into the pass. Before he'd gone a mile it was as if the barren, sun-baked slopes and the desert to the east had been a dream. Vast, rocky monoliths that seemed to brood were all around him. Blade had a sense of entering a world not made to human proportions, where he was an unwanted intruder.

Still, he would push on as long as he could. If the mountain men were the people of the poppy flower, they might have a short way with strangers, but that was a risk he'd have to face. Meanwhile, he would take special care to memorize his route and mark his trail. He might want to get out of the mountains much faster than he came in.

Blade strode on briskly, arms swinging to pump more air into his massive chest. The air around him was getting noticeably thinner. It would be cold tonight, but not dangerously so long as there was no wind.

The air was still all that afternoon as Blade plunged deeper and deeper into the mountains. Where the sun lit up the slopes and blazed from the snowcaps of the peaks, the scenery had a magnificent Alpine beauty. Blade found himself almost regretting that he wasn't going to be able to spend some time climbing a few of the mountains around him. For a while he amused himself with the fantasy of retiring here, when large-scale travel into Dimension X was perfected, and opening a resort. He was quite sure he could make this Dimension a popular tourist destination.

Twilight overtook him on the edge of a mountain meadow of coarse grass dotted with tiny yellow flowers. A stream leaped from the top of a black cliff to his left, to make a waterfall as it plunged and a clear cold pool where it landed. Blade drank, stretched out on the ground, and fell asleep with the splashing of the waterfall in his ears.

For three days Blade moved steadily deeper into the mountains. He would have turned back at the end of the second day if he hadn't found food. His body might seem to have the strength and endurance of a machine, but it was flesh and blood. It would have been foolish to push on until he was too weak to retreat.

But on the afternoon of the second day he found himself looking down on a flock of animals like large one-horned goats. A well-thrown stone stunned one and sent the rest of the flock dashing off in panic. Blade plunged down the slope, drew the knife, and slit the fallen animal's throat. Then he butchered it and stuffed himself with the raw flesh. The meat was bloody, gamey, and still warm, but it was food-enough to keep him going for several more days. If he found more flocks of goats, he could keep going for weeks, even though raw goat meat wasn't exactly a gourmet meal.

After eating, Blade cut patches from the goat's skin, scraped them clean, and tied them around his feet. When the condition of his feet might be a matter of life or death, any extra protection he could give them helped.

Blade was still heading deeper into the mountains on the afternoon of the third day. His goal now was the twenty-thousand-foot peak. On one side the peak shot up in an almost vertical face nearly ten

thousand feet high, flanked by two sharp spurs. On the other side a gentle slope ran almost up to the summit. Today the winds aloft must be light, for the snow plume was barely visible.

Blade decided that he'd go as far as the mountain, then explore in a complete circle around its base. After that he'd climb as far up the easy slope as he could and from that high perch look for traces of human life. If he couldn't find any, it would be time to turn back, to take his chances with the desert or at least look elsewhere for the human inhabitants of this Dimension.

The hours passed; evening settled on the mountains, and darkness and the end of Blade's daily march were not far off. Blade was making his way along a narrow ledge above a fast-flowing stream when he caught sight of a dim orange glow far ahead. It flickered and wavered, and he couldn't tell what or how far away it might be—but it was there. He kept moving, but now he held the knife in his right hand and was thankful that the goatskin bindings made his footsteps almost noiseless.

The darkness grew thicker, and in contrast the orange glow ahead grew slowly larger and brighter. Blade felt a moment's relief as he stepped off the narrow ledge onto a broader shelf of rock. There he would have room to fight and no chance of a fifty-foot plunge into the boiling stream if he put a foot wrong.

The rock shelf broadened and sprouted boulders, then grass, bushes, and even small trees stunted and twisted by altitude and years of wind. Blade used every bit of cover as he crept forward, his eyes never leaving the steadily growing spot of orange.

A few more steps, and Blade was on the edge of a wide belt of cleared land, sloping down to the stream. On the far side of the stream another slope rose to the foot of a cliff. Halfway between the stream and the cliff a fire blazed inside a circle of large stones. Its flames shot up ten feet into the air, and sparks rose higher still. Around the stones about twenty men lay or sat on furs or skins, oiling or sharpening weapons, drinking from skin bags, or sound asleep. Blade's eyes were drawn to the spectacle of what lay beyond them.

The stream ran through a cutting at the bottom of the cleared slopes, between vertical walls of dressed stone twenty feet high. A wooden footbridge crossed it directly below the fire and the men. The stream ran on for another fifty yards, then suddenly it was no longer there. On either side of it the ground also ended, as if it had been cut off by a knife or dissolved into the night air.

Daylight now lingered only on the summit of the great peak. Everything else lay in shadow, sinking deeper by the minute. At first Blade could make out only a vast emptiness where the stream and the ground ended. Then his eyes adjusted to the darkness and told him of an immense valley, stretching away mile after mile; of mountain walls rising solid and nearly vertical on either side of the valley; of wooded hills and small lakes on its floor. It even told him of a dimly visible patch of light far off on the crest of one of the hills.

That was all Blade learned of the valley before he learned something else. The men around the fire might seem to be off their guard; but they were not. Two of them jumped up with wild inhuman screeches, and the fire glowed on the curved swords they drew and pointed at Blade. Then their comrades were also jumping up, and their raw-throated cries tore at Blade's ears and sent echoes leaping from the cliffs.

Then all of them were rushing down the slope toward the bridge. Some ran so fast that they seemed to skim the ground, and none waited any longer than they needed to snatch up their weapons.

None of them had time to cover more than a few steps before Blade leaped out of cover. None of the

could drown out his yell, and none of them could match his speed as he also plunged down toward the bridge.

Chapter 4

Blade's charge down the slope in the face of twenty-to-one odds wasn't quite as suicidal as it seemed.

To turn and flee would bring all the men after him, hunting him like a wild animal through the darkness and over ground they would certainly know better than he did. To stay where he was would invite them to climb up and come at him from all sides. To reach the bridge before they did gave him a chance to hold it against them. They would have to come at him no more than two at a time, since the bridge was narrow and there was no other crossing point on the stream. He would have a chance to hold them off long enough to discourage them. Then he could try a peaceful approach, and if that failed, he would still be holding the bridge. It looked light and rather poorly anchored at either end. A good heave and it would be in the stream, rushing toward the cliff and a plunge into the valley. That would keep the survivors on the other side long enough to give him a good head start on his retreat.

The only danger was archery, which could pick him off from a distance. Blade hadn't seen any bows among the men, and in the darkness he'd be a poor archery target anyway, particularly after the fight came to close quarters.

All these thoughts tumbled furiously through Blade's mind as his legs drove him toward the bridge. His speed, his size, his weird clothing, and his terrible war cry all combined to bring the enemy to a stop for a moment. Blade reached his end of the bridge a moment before the first of the enemy reached his.

It took the enemy another moment to sort themselves out, with a great deal of angry shouting. Blade could make out no recognizable words in that shouting, so presumably there were none. As he had passed into Dimension X, the computer somehow twisted his brain so that he understood the local language as plain English and his own speech came out in the local language. It was a process no one fully understood, but it was a vast help in the exploration of Dimension X. No one, least of all Blade, was inclined to look such a gift horse in the mouth.

Two men stepped onto the bridge, their swords raised in front of them, coming at Blade with the lithe grace of stalking cats. Blade considered for a moment lifting the bridge and dumping them into the stream, then decided against it. The others might regard it as treachery or brute strength, not skill and courage in a fair fight. Showing that skill and courage was his best chance of making peace with these warriors was therefore worth the risk.

Those risks would not be small. Blade had only his knife, and the swords his opponents held were a foot and a half longer, curved like scimitars, and clearly heavy enough to chop a man in half. A gilded band ran along the back of each sword, so at least they weren't doubled-edged.

Blade stepped forward to force the two men to deliver their attack while they were still on the bridge. That way they would have to come straight at him, and they would have only the light planks rather than the solid ground under their feet.

The two swordsmen stayed level with each other, their steps were measured and precise, and the gleaming swords they held in front of them never wavered. As the men closed, Blade saw that each man carried a knife like his in a heavily patterned leather sheath hanging from a sash at the waist. Otherwise they were dressed identically-soft boots, baggy trousers with a faint sheen to them, soft leather vests that left their arms and necks bare. They wore no armor that Blade could see, and every bit of hair except

their eyebrows had been shaved off. Their heads were wrapped tightly in bands of leather, like an Indian's turban but much more tightly fitting.

Their clothing might be almost comic, but the steel they carried and the way they moved were not. They were clearly trained fighting men, sure and quick in their movements. Blade knew he could not safely take any chances against them—at least not until he had a sword to match theirs.

The two swords rose higher still, ready to slash down at Blade's head. He balanced himself on the balls of his feet, both hands out of sight behind his back. Then the swords came down, the one on Blade's left a second ahead of the other. The steel muscles in Blade's legs uncoiled, hurling him high and to one side. As he leaped, he shifted his knife from his right hand to his left.

As Blade had expected, a full overhand slash with such a heavy sword drew both men forward, momentarily off balance. Blade closed with the man to his left before the other could raise his sword again. The knife flashed in a precise arc, slitting the flesh of the man's neck and the windpipe under it. Blood sprayed, the man's breathing became a horrible choking, and his hands quivered on the hilt of his sword. Yet he did not cry out, his eyes did not flicker, his face might have been a stone mask, and his arm muscles were actually twisting and jerking, trying to raise his sword back into striking position. He was dying on his feet, yet his mind was still on the fight rather than on the death that was only seconds away.

Blade had no time to spend wondering what this might mean. As the man's grip on his sword weakened, Blade lunged for it with his free right hand. Blade's other opponent slashed sideways at him, bringing his sword around in a hissing arc with no thought for his dying comrade. The sharp edge whispered over Blade's head as he ducked, then bit into the chest of the dying man. Flesh, ribs, the heart itself parted under the blow. It went in so deep that for a moment the dead man's still-erect body held the sword of his living comrade. Then the second man joined the first in death, as Blade drove his knife up between the ribs, straight to the heart. He died as silently as the first, without a word, a cry, or even a change of expression.

The swift death of the first two men made the next two hesitate briefly. Their eyes met Blade's, though; and their faces were blank. Their hesitation did not come from fear, but from the desire of good fighting men to assess their opponent and the situation they faced. When they came, it was even faster than the first two. One sword was held high, the other wide to one side ready to slash in an arc.

Blade suspected they might be trying to drive him away from the end of the bridge and open a passage for their comrades. He also suspected they would be quite willing to die in the process. He didn't like the way the first two men had died, as silently as robots or zombies who couldn't feel pain.

The man with his sword held high was on the right, the one with the sword held wide on the left. Blade saw that the second man was moving out ahead of the other. He would be within striking range a few vital seconds before the other.

Once more Blade's legs hurled him to the left. This time he jumped wider. The sword was a blur as it slashed at him, the steel missing by inches from Blade's skin. The man pulled the sword to a stop before it struck his partner but not before the other had to stop, well out of range of Blade.

The sword was single-edged, so the man could not take out Blade on the backswing. He had to turn the sword before he could strike again. He did it so quickly that no one slower than Blade could have taken advantage of the delay.

Blade closed, feinting with the knife in his left hand, driving the man sideways to meet Blade's right. The edge of Blade's right hand caught the man across the throat. Blade felt the windpipe shatter, heard the man start choking, but saw no expression on his face. Blade dropped his knife, seized the dying man with both hands, and swung him around. The other man's sword came down. Blade ducked, and it sank deep into the skull of the man held in front of Blade. Blood and brains sprayed and the man's hands opened limply, letting his sword fall. Blade threw the corpse at the other swordsman hard enough to knock him off the bridge. Living and dead together plunged into the stream and were swept away toward the cliff. Blade stooped, gripped the fallen sword, and had it raised before the next two attackers started across the bridge. Now he had striking range equal to his opponents, not greater. Blade was six-foot-one and weighed more than two hundred pounds, all of it muscle and bone. His opponents all looked shorter and lighter. That gave Blade a longer reach and more striking power. It also meant that if necessary he could swing the heavy curved sword with one hand.

The next two attackers charged across the bridge, and he decided it was necessary. Instead of rising to his feet, Blade waited for the enemy in a crouch. Then his sword slashed, ripping one man in the thigh and leaping up to take the other in the groin. The man with the wounded thigh staggered. His leg would no longer support his full weight, but he kept on coming. The man struck in the groin reeled backward from the sheer force of the blow, but did not fall. Neither man cried out.

Blade found the silence in which his opponents took their punishment thoroughly unnatural and slightly unnerving. The man he'd struck in the groin must be in ghastly agony, his genitals mangled beyond healing. Yet he was not even moaning faintly. In fact, he was coming at Blade again, swinging his sword wildly but energetically.

Blade took a two-handed grip on his sword and without rising from his crouch swung at the man's leg. He sheared completely through it about six inches below the knee. The man toppled forward, sword lashing out at Blade and nearly laying open his cheek. Incredibly, the man balanced himself for a moment on his good leg and the blood-gushing stump of the other. Then his efforts to swing his sword again overbalanced him. He went off the bridge and splashed into the stream below.

Now Blade had to leap back to avoid a wild slash from the man he'd wounded in the thigh. The man took two lurching steps forward and swung again. His sword met Blade's with a clang and a shower of sparks. Blade's strength broke the man's grip on his sword and it flew clear across the stream to land among the men waiting on the other side.

Instead of retreating, the man drew his knife and came at Blade. His only chance now was great speed, and his wounded leg ruled that out. Blade had plenty of time to aim and deliver a swift, powerful slash that took the man's head clear off its shoulders. The head dropped into the stream while the body sprawled almost at Blade's feet.

By now Blade could feel the ground around the end of the bridge growing muddy with blood. The more he contemplated the prospect of continuing this fight the way he'd begun it, the less he liked it. Blade never minded fighting when there seemed to be some point in it. He couldn't help wondering what point there was in continuing this battle.

He didn't seem to be making any impression on his opponents by his fighting ability. Each pair came at him as furiously as the pair before them, fought as desperately, and died as silently. He'd hoped his first victories would win him a chance to negotiate. They'd done nothing of the kind. Blade wondered if these people had such concepts as "negotiation" or even "peace."

Besides, the eerie and unnatural silence of the men as they fought, bled, and died was strengthening

doubts in Blade's mind. Were these warriors drugged beyond the ability to do anything but fight, or were they possibly not quite sane?

No, this was a fight not worth continuing. He'd do well to seek his meeting with the people of this Dimension somewhere else. Here the time and the place and the people were all wrong. He would drop the bridge into the stream and retreat under cover of darkness.

By now three pairs of swordsmen were standing on the bridge, filling it halfway to Blade's side. Blade frowned. They would weigh the bridge down until it would be hard to lift, even for him. The lead pair could easily be on him before he'd done the job, and have him at too much of a disadvantage. He'd have to clear all six off the bridge, then run back to his own side and heave it into the stream. Risky, but less so than trying to retreat with these people free to cross the bridge and track him through the darkness.

Blade picked up a second sword and swung both of them over his head until the air hissed and hummed. These people might not have all the technique needed to face two of their own swords in the hands of a man like Blade. That could make it a shod fight, which was just as well. Even Blade's great strength could not keep two of these heavy weapons in action for long.

Blade stopped swinging the swords, dropped into a crouch, and took two steps forward. As his foot came down on the planks of the bridge, a sharp cry sounded from behind the men on the other side. The six men on the bridge all took a step forward, until the swords of the lead pair could almost reach the tips of Blade's weapons. The rest of their comrades separated, to let a slim figure pass through.

This man was shorter and smaller than many of the others, but he was obviously in command. He was dressed the same as the others, except that instead of a sleeveless vest he wore a dark tunic with baggy sleeves and a white glove on his left hand. His sword was slung across his back, and in his gloved hand he held a slim, eight-foot wooden staff. One end was gilded and sharp, the other ended in a silver poppy flower. The wood was lacquered black and polished until reflected firelight seemed to flow up and down it.

Something-or someone-new had been added. This man might listen to reason, at least briefly-or he might coordinate the attacks of his men and sweep Blade away like a chip of wood dropped into the stream. Blade made a calm mental note that perhaps he'd left his retreat until just a trifle too late.

Then there was no time for thought. All six men on the bridge were coming at him like a single projectile fired from a gun. All of them were screaming wildly. The two in the lead were swinging their swords back and forth in wide arcs that covered the whole bridge.

Blade still stood his ground, because the situation was now clearly kill or be killed. Against these odds, he'd probably be killed, but any chance he had depended on holding his end of the bridge. With his two swords and longer reach, the fight wasn't over yet.

Blade waited as the first two men closed. Then he lunged with his right, while his left whirled the sword over and down. The curved swords were not intended for thrusting, but they had sharp points and Blade's lunge had all the weight of the sword and his own strength behind it. He aimed at the throat of the man on the right, missed, gashed his shoulder, and forced the man to stop his own swing.

Blade's other sword flashed down in its precisely calculated arc and crashed into his other opponent's weapon. Sparks rained down and the weapon froze in midair. Blade raised both his swords and swung again, using all his strength. Against these people, delaying tactics and wounds weren't much good. Sooner rather than later he had to go for the kill.

Steel bit deeply into the hip of the man to Blade's right, cutting nearly through to the groin. The man on the left came on too fast, ducking as he came. Blade's slash took him alongside the head, cutting off an ear, biting through the leather bindings to lay open the scalp, but not killing or even crippling. The man's sword took a chunk of flesh out of Blade's side and left a long gouge across his ribs. Then the man folded forward as Blade slashed at him again, cutting off his right arm. He stayed on his feet as he folded, and drove his head forward into Blade's stomach.

The shock drove Blade backward several feet. The man lifted his severed stump so that the blood spraying from it struck Blade in the face, and clutched at Blade's left arm with his remaining hand. Blade had to give more ground to shake him loose. By the time the man finally collapsed at Blade's feet, the remaining four men on the bridge had crossed it and now held the end against Blade. Behind them the leader was beckoning the others forward.

Blade faced the fact that he was about to die, then put it out of his mind. In its place was a grim, chill intention to die as hard as possible, and leave as many more of these people lying dead around his corpse as he could. He particularly hoped to get a chance at the leader.

The leader waited until his eleven surviving men crossed the bridge. Then he raised his staff over his head with both hands and made quick, darting movements. Responding to his signals, the eleven men spread wide around Blade. Blade watched them calmly, his swords lowered until their tips rested on the ground. He wanted to save his strength. The wound was beginning to blaze with pain, but it was not bleeding heavily. Probably it felt worse than it was. He still wouldn't be an easy prey.

Then all eleven men were moving in on Blade. Half held their swords high, the other half came at Blade with their knives. Blade noted this with cool professional detachment. It was a good idea. The knifeman would be able to work at close quarters in a way he could not with the sword. Blade decided he would not let the fight get to close quarters.

He exploded into action, legs pumping and arms making his swords whistle and dance in the darkness. A circle of fast-moving steel whistled about Blade, then bit into the line of advancing men.

No human-senses could have picked out the details of that fight. There were too many men and weapons involved, moving much too fast. A watcher could have seen bodies merging and then drawing apart, the shadowy flickering of swords, and men reeling out of the fight to fall to the ground. He could have heard the hiss of steel cutting air and the meaty sounds of it biting into flesh and bone, the thud of feet and of falling limbs and heads, an occasional gasp for breath. He would have smelled the raw odors of fresh blood and of men soiling themselves in their final agony.

He would not have heard any cries of pain, either from Blade as he took six wounds or from his opponents as five of them died.

At last Blade lay on his back on the ground, looking up at the men standing around him. He could feel the ground under him damp with blood, some of it his from wounds that hadn't started to hurt yet. They probably wouldn't have time to start, either. He'd be dead first. The six remaining men all held their bloody weapons in their hands, and all of them had their eyes on him. He could sense murderous hostility in all of them, even though their faces were as blank as ever.

Then the leader was stepping forward, pushing the men away from Blade. Four of them went readily, two of them taking positions by the end of the bridge. The other two darted away across the bridge. Blade wondered vaguely where they were going in such a hurry, then the last two men drew his attention.

They showed no sign of moving. They stood with their legs wide apart, swords in their hands, eyes shifting from Blade to the leader and back again to Blade. Blade sensed that they now felt not only murderous hostility toward him, but defiance toward their leader. He wished he could get up and help the leader, but had no hope of doing so. He'd already lost too much blood, and if he tried to rise he'd lose more. Then he'd die, whatever happened between the leader and his two mutinous warriors.

So Blade lay still, and he was lying still when the leader's staff flicked out. The sharp end seemed to leap across the space between the leader and one of the men. Blade half expected it to pierce the man like a spear, but the point only brushed across one arm. The other man stiffened and began to turn. Before he could complete the movement the staff flicked out a second time, the tip grazing the second man's cheek.

For a long moment no one moved. It was as if the two men had been paralyzed so completely they couldn't even fall over. Blade wondered how this had happened. They certainly hadn't been beaten into submission. The staff had struck no harder than a pinprick. Yet in a single moment all the defiance seemed to have gone out of them.

Then the leader pointed to the bridge, and the two men laid their weapons on the ground and walked slowly off to join their comrades at the bridge. A moment later the two men who'd run to the camp came running back across the bridge. They carried flasks and strips of white cloth in their hands, and they ran toward Blade.

Blade felt pain and tension and the anticipation of death flow out of him in a great wave. For some reason they were going to take him prisoner, instead of killing him, and even try to heal his wounds. They might even succeed. Then he would be alive, and that was a situation with many more possibilities than being dead.

Blade's eyes slid shut and his mind drifted off to somewhere far away. None of his senses registered the two men kneeling beside him, bathing and bandaging his wounds, or the leader standing over them, looking down at Blade with profound curiosity.

Chapter 5

Blade was pleasantly surprised to wake up at all. He knew that people could die from losing the amount of blood he'd lost, even with Home Dimension's medical science to help them. Under the more primitive conditions of Dimension X, it would not have been at all difficult for him to slip away in spite of the best efforts of the men tending him.

He was still more pleasantly surprised to wake up in a bed, with the smell of clean linen and flowers around him, and in the background the crackling of a fire and the splash of flowing water. Mere comfort could not pull him through, if the doctors of the poppy-flower warriors didn't know their business. It would help him regain his strength more quickly once he was out of danger. That was all to the good. Being weak and helpless was never safe in Dimension X. It was even less safe when you were in the hands of people whose intentions toward you had once been murderous; and might easily become so again.

Blade shifted position slightly, to uncramp his legs. He felt pain stabbing him in a dozen places, and the constriction of bandages. He knew he must look as though he'd been run through a mowing machine. It was a miracle that none of those heavy, hard-swung swords had sunk through flesh into bone or vital organs. As it was, he would have a whole new crop of spectacular scars to add to the many he already bore in various places. Plastic surgery had kept his face in good repair, but the appearance of his body

had caused at least one woman to ask if he made his living wrestling tigers and bears.

Someone in the room must have been watching for Blade to show signs of life. Suddenly there were two figures in white robes standing by the bed. The robes were so loose and flowing that it was impossible to tell whether the figures were men or women. One held a steaming bowl and a sponge, the other a large jar of glazed pottery and a bronze cup.

The first attendant pulled the light linen covering away from Blade and began sponging all the exposed areas of his skin. Then the second attendant poured something from the jar into the cup and held the cup to Blade's lips. That was a good sign. It suggested he had no internal injuries worth bothering about.

The cup held cool water, slightly sweetened with honey and holding a faint hint of some unknown drug. In spite of this it was the most delicious drink Blade could ever remember having. His throat seemed to be packed solid with dust and phlegm, and the sweet water washed it all away like the flood from a broken dam. Blade emptied the cup twice, and found he could move tongue and lips enough to say, "Thank you."

He thought he saw the two attendants smile, but couldn't be sure. Sleep was taking him away again, and he didn't resist.

Gradually Blade spent more time awake and less time sleeping. Even more gradually the pain of his wounds faded, and inch by inch the areas covered by the bandages shrank. There was no sign of infection in any of the wounds, another pleasant surprise for Blade. These people seemed to have at least a practical understanding of infections and how to prevent them.

Without infection, none of Blade's flesh wounds were serious enough to be dangerous to someone in his superb physical condition and with his healing powers. He did not know exactly how long it was before he was able to get out of bed and take a few steps. It was certainly soon enough to surprise his attendants. They insisted that he get back into bed and stay there. He insisted just as vigorously that he should be allowed to move around.

Blade had never been a very good patient. He disliked the sensation of being helpless and bedridden even when he was safe in Home Dimension. Here he disliked it even more. He could not regain his strength lying in bed. Nor could he learn most of what he would need to know about these people who were holding him-as guest, or prisoner?

Probably prisoner, but certainly a valuable, even honored one. The attendants seemed genuinely concerned about his health as they urged him to return to bed. The room itself was plainly furnished-only a bed, a low table, and some cushions and mats on the floor-but it was spotlessly clean. The food they began to serve him was plain-more of the honeyed water, bread, cheese, fruits and vegetables, clear soups-but excellent. No damp cells, no moldy straw, no scampering rats, sour porridge, or prison fevers to worry about. He could survive this sort of captivity as long as he might need to.

He no longer needed to sleep more than his normal five hours a night, but found it useful to pretend that he needed more. When they thought he was asleep, the attendants would talk freely in his hearing, as they sponged him down, changed his bandages, and swept the room. They were all women or old men; not deep into the secrets of the poppyflower warriors, but what they said told Blade a good deal of what he needed to know.

He was among the Hashomi. The Hashomi were a band of warrior adepts, like the ninjas of medieval Japan or the hashshashin of the medieval Arab world. There were several thousand of the sworn, trained

adepts. Most had been born among the Hashomi and brought up from infancy in their way of life, a way of life that depended heavily on various drugs.

In addition to the sworn fighters, there were men and women to tend the crops, heal the sick and wounded; repair the houses, bear and raise the children who would become Hashomi, and do everything else needed to maintain a civilized society. All of them lived within the great valley that stretched east and west from the great mountain with its plume of snow. Few outsiders had ever sought to penetrate the mountains that stood between the valley and the desert. Fewer still had succeeded, and none had ever returned alive to outside world.

The Hashomi did not remain entirely hidden within their home valley. Far across the desert lay a great city called Dahaura, apparently the center of an empire that spread across most of the Dimension. There was envy and hatred on people's faces and in their voices when they spoke of Dahaura. They also spoke of Hashomi going forth from the valley and entering Dahaura. What the Hashomi did in the city was never stated, but Blade suspected it was nothing approved of by the rulers of Dahaura.

All of the Hashomi, warriors and workers alike, were ruled by the Master. The man appeared to have no other name. At least Blade never heard him referred to as anything but "The Master." Nor did Blade ever hear "The Master" spoken of except with genuine awe and reverence. Clearly the man had gifts or at least a strength of personality that made him someone to be followed-and someone for Blade to deal with very carefully.

Blade was glad he had all this firmly in mind before the day came for him to meet the Master of the Hashomi.

It was just before sunset, and Blade was sitting on a cushion on the terrace of one of the buildings that served as a hospital. On the valley floor far below the terrace, the fields of wheat and flax were already disappearing behind a rising veil of mist.

A wooden railing ran along the edge of the terrace. It was only waist-high and painted white for visibility in the darkness. Beyond the railing, the valley wall plunged away, four hundred vertical feet to the fields below. The rock of the cliff was as free of handholds as a billiard ball. Anyone going over the railing to escape would not get far.

There was another way out of the hospital, to be sure. It lay through a tunnel carved from the solid rock behind the ledge where the hospital buildings stood. The tunnel began just behind the attendants' huts and ran straight, to come out five hundred feet farther along the valley wall and a hundred feet below the hospital. Several smaller side tunnels or caves opened off it on the inward side. Each one was closed off by a heavy wooden door with a small iron grating in the center. Blade caught faint smells and still fainter sounds through these gratings that hinted of prison cells or even worse behind the doors.

He could move freely up and down the chill, dim tunnel. He could not leave it. A few yards beyond the lower end of the tunnel was a twenty-foot gap in the ledge, spanned by a light wooden footbridge.

Beyond the bridge was a shallow cave. In that cave fifteen or twenty of the fighting Hashomi were always on guard duty. No one could come out of the tunnel mouth and across the bridge without being seen and met by the guards.

Blade knew he would not be getting out of the hospital without the consent of the Hashomi. At least not downward, and as for going upward, that would require more time. Time to regain his full strength, time to study the slopes above him, time to assemble some sort of climbing gear, food, and weapons. He

would not plunge back into the mountains with nothing but a knife and raw goat's meat between him and death, not when the Hashomi might be hard on his trail.

He was considering where to look for climbing gear when he heard someone padding silently across the stones of the terrace behind him. Blade rose, turning until he could face the newcomer without having his own back to the edge of the terrace and the cliff below.

He knew with a single glance that this must be the Master of the Hashomi. No one else in this valley would be carrying himself like this man, with the same air of command, of confidence, of total assurance that no one would show him anything but due and proper obedience.

From the remarks he'd overheard, Blade would not have been surprised to find the Master a man seven-foot-tall and broad in proportion. He was taller than any man Blade had seen among the Hashomi—a hair under six feet. He was slender and supple as a whip, almost gaunt. Instead of trousers and vest, he wore a dark-blue robe embroidered with white poppy flowers, gathered in at the waist with a white sash. His bare feet were leathery brown, as was the face framed by a square-cut gray beard. His skull was bare and hairless. Two knives were slung at his waist and he carried one of the long staves in his left hand. This one was thicker than the one carried by the leader in the battle at the bridge. It seemed to be gilded, and there was a large silver ball at one end, perforated with a number of small holes.

Blade decided against kneeling or bowing, even though it was probably expected. It might help to seem a man who could not be intimidated, cowed, or brought to obedience against his will. That might anger the Master, but it might also arouse his curiosity. Such a man could be something new in the Master's experience, something not to be destroyed until its possibilities had been explored.

It was a gamble, but it was a gamble that offered Blade more hope than jumping off the terrace or hurling himself barehanded at the guards below the tunnel.

Blade stood calm and straight, hands clearly visible and motionless at his side. He never took his eyes off the Master, and particularly the Master's hands. Both hands were long fingered and narrow, with prominent bones, encased in tightfitting white gloves. In those gloves they reminded Blade of the hands of a corpse or a skeleton.

Then the Master spoke.

"So. You have come to the Valley of the Hashomi, in the shadow of the White Mountain. That is a journey that few have made. None have returned from it, except as Hashomi or as corpses carried away by the streams of the mountains that shield us. Which will it be for you, far-traveling stranger?"

Blade shook his head. "Neither."

The Master's wide black eyes narrowed slightly. "That cannot be."

"With all respect, Master of the Hashomi, you are wrong."

Being flatly contradicted was defiantly something the Master seldom experienced. His eyes narrowed practically to slits, and his free hand tightened into a fist. His whole body seemed to be vibrating slightly, like a plucked harp string.

Here was the first crisis. The Master's notion of dealing with opposition might be a simple "off with his head." In that case Blade had only a few minutes to live. The Master had even less. Blade was not

completely well yet, but he knew he was perfectly able to wring the Master's lean neck.

The crisis passed. The Master's fist unclenched, his eyes opened, and he hooked a thumb into his sash. With a look that might have held the hint of a smile, he nodded at Blade.

"Very well. You will not become either a Hashom or a corpse. Tell me how this is to be."

"My name is Blade," said the Englishman. "In my homeland, I was of an order not unlike the Hashomi" He gave a quick description of the British Intelligence Service, translating it into terms the Master would grasp. He described J as a man who'd been a mighty warrior in his youth and now instructed the young adepts of "the British agents." Lord Leighton was a scholar and doctor, so learned and with so many devices and potions at his command that some suspected him of wizardry.

"Do not think that because my Order has two men to do what the Hashomi do with one Master, we are weaker. In Britain, it has been found that the warrior and the scholar each do their own task best when they do not have to do the other's as well. Matters seem to be different among the Hashomi, and I would gladly learn why."

"If you become one of the Hashomi, you will learn that and much else," said the Master.

Blade smiled. "I am sorry, but that is not possible. I cannot become of the Hashomi. At least I cannot become of the Hashomi as you have made them, with the drugs you take from the flower on your robe."

"I think it is for me to say what is and is not possible, herein the Valley of the Hashomi. If you become of the Hashomi, handr potions will be in your body. If you do not become of the Hashomi-"

"Yes, I know, I know," said Blade. "Then my body will be in the mountain streams, food for the fish. You have said this before, and I know well enough what you believe: I say that this is not so. May I tell you why?"

Either the Master was getting used to Blade's contradicting him, or he was curious about how Blade proposed to accomplish the impossible. He nodded.

"You may speak further."

"We use no drugs among the British agents, except for one. That is a drug that makes it impossible for us to receive any other drug into our bodies."

"How-impossible?" The Master at least seemed willing to hear him out.

"Any other drug that is given to us will either kill us or at least make us sleep like men struck on the head."

"Any drug?"

"Yes. The more powerful the drug, the more likely we are to die. The drugs you give the Hashomi must be very powerful. Also, I have not yet gained back all my strength. So if you were to give me the drugs of the Hashomi, I would most certainly die."

The Master took a strand of his beard between two fingers and twirled it. "This is as it may be. Yet it seems to me that you must die, in one way or another. If you do not take the drugs, we must--"

Blade gently shook his head, until the Master broke off and looked at him, both suspicious and curious. Good. The Master of the Hashomi was a man willing to argue and capable of weighing the merits of a case put before him. Blade was not completely surprised to find that the Master was such a man. He'd always heard the Master spoken of as a wise leader as well as a mighty warrior. Such leaders could usually use their heads as well as their sword arms. He would still move cautiously, though. Strange orders of warrior adepts like the Hashomi sometimes had equally strange leaders, as deadly and ultimately as deaf to argument as the sands of the desert.

"There is another possibility, if you are willing," said Blade. "I am an exile from my homeland, with small chance of returning. The fanatical rulers of our land have suppressed the British agents. Some have remained, in the vain hope of rebuilding the Order in secret. They will not succeed, not in Britain and not in their lifetimes.

"I would not spend the rest of my years living like a rat in a cellar. If the British agents are to rise again, it will be with the aid of other warriors, their kin in spirit. Warriors such as the Hashomi. So I came to your valley in peace, and I would stay here in peace."

"Your arrival at the bridge was not the most peaceful sort," said the Master.

"No, it was not. That was not my choice. I do not know what level of skill the Hashomi who guarded the bridge that night have reached. I would say that it was not high. They may be brave and good with their swords, but I cannot say much for their ability to think."

The Master refused to be baited into giving a definite answer to Blade's question. His lips wrinkled in a sour smile that showed Blade's thrust had gone home. Then he spoke soberly, picking his words with care.

"You, Richard Blade of the British agents, think that you are worthy to join the Hashomi, as you stand before me here and now?"

Blade wanted to say "Yes," but something told him that would be pushing matters too far too fast. So he shrugged.

"I have been wounded, and that takes strength from a man. I must regain all the strength I had the day I came upon your Hashomi at the bridge. When I have done that, I will perhaps be worthy to join the Hashomi."

"You will submit to a proper testing of your worth?" The note of hope in the Master's voice rang encouragingly in Blade's ears. He felt like grinning. The Master wasn't going to let a willing and gifted fighting man slip out of his grasp, even if he had to bend a few rules of the Hashomi to do it.

"That depends on what you mean by a proper testing," said Blade. He wasn't going to let himself be trapped into promising to attempt the impossible.

"You must face Hashomi fighters again," said the Master. "You must show everything you have learned as a British agent. If you are superior to the Hashomi, certain things may become possible that would not be possible otherwise."

"What if I am not superior to the Hashomi? What if I am only-different?" Blade was equally unwilling to be caught in a "win or die" situation if he could avoid it.

The Master's fist clenched again. His voice did not change, but Blade sensed the impatience beginning to build up in the man. He decided to end this argument over the testing as quickly as he could without too much danger to himself.

"Very well. I will go against the Hashomi ."

"Barehanded," interrupted the Master. "Barehanded, and your opponent will have a sword."

Blade shook his head. Talk about attempting the Impossible! "No. Think of the wounds a sword can inflict. I could win, slay my opponent, and still die myself. Even if I did not die, what could I teach the Hashomi if I had to spend the rest of my life with one leg or one arm? If I must fight unarmed a man with a sword, you risk losing my knowledge regardless of how the fight comes out. That does not seem the wisest course of action. I would be ready to go against two of the Hashomi together, if they have only their knives and the drug-staves."

"Two Hashomi, chosen by me?"

"Yes."

"They will be chosen for their skill and speed, I warn you."

"I would not ask that it be otherwise," said Blade. "You must give me a proper testing, and I must pass it. Otherwise you are setting aside the ways of the Hashomi to no good purpose."

"That is true," said the Master. "Yet the ways of the Hashomi have only one aim, and that is to make the Hashomi fit for war. If this is not done, how can we pass the tests the future holds for us? If we fail, what good will it be to us that we have failed according to the ways of our fathers?" He raised a hand in a farewell salute to Blade. "In three weeks time, will you be strong again?"

"I expect to be."

"Very well. In three weeks, then." The Master turned and strode across the terrace, quickly vanishing among the buildings of the hospital.

Blade found it easier to breathe after the Master was out of sight. He'd won himself at least three weeks more of life for certain. If he passed his testing, he'd win more life, perhaps freedom of movement, perhaps even the favor of the Master.

That was not altogether a good thing. The Master's favor could protect him, but it would also mean the Master's eye on him and the Master's keen mind analyzing all his actions.

It was not necessarily safe to have someone like that watching you, even if for the moment he might be on your side.

Chapter 6

Blade was ready to fight any reasonable number of Hashomi within two weeks. As far as he was concerned the third week was a waste of time. He had nothing to do but pace up and down the terrace or around and around his hospital room like a caged tiger. The guards at the far end of the tunnel were unfailingly polite, but flatly refused to let him pass. The only way he could hope for the freedom of

movement he needed was to pass the testing, and that was that.

At least there seemed to be no possible danger as long as he was in the hospital. Except for the Master himself, no armed Hashomi ever seemed to enter it. The most lethal weapons on hand were the surgeons' instruments.

Of the forty-odd people in the hospital, ten were old men, wrinkled and gray, and twenty were equally elderly women. They were brisk, efficient, and clearly knew their business. Once Blade was on the way to recovery, they seemed ready to treat him as if he was no more than a prize animal.

The rest of the hospital staff were younger women, few of them over twenty and most of them quite attractive as far as Blade could see. Blade sensed one or more of them watching him almost every moment he was out of his room. He was never able to ask one of them what they were looking for, though. Every time he tried, the girl would smile shyly and then dart away.

Blade wondered if orders had come from the Master to keep him in a sort of isolation booth until the time came for him to be tested. The idea made sense. Blade was where no man with his mind intact and free of drugs had been since the Hashomi were founded, centuries before. The Master wasn't prepared to risk destroying him out of hand-or risk letting him find out too much about the Hashomi.

The duel of wits with the Master would be going on long after the testing was over and done with. Blade knew he could not relax for a moment as long as he was within the valley, and perhaps not even in this Dimension. If the Hashomi had reached out across the desert to establish their agents in Dahaura, he might be in some danger even if he escaped to the city.

But that was a thought for a future that might never come unless he passed his testing against the two picked Hashomi. Blade put the matter out of his mind and settled down to eight hours a day of conditioning and unarmed combat exercises. He was careful to do them in the privacy of his room, for he wanted his skill and strength to be as much of a surprise as possible.

The two Hashomi chosen by the Master would be among the most formidable opponents Blade had ever faced. He would give them no unnecessary advantage.

Six Hashomi came to the hospital before dawn one morning to escort Blade down to the testing. They found him already out on the terrace, watching the sun turn the summit of the White Mountain to flame and start sucking up the mist in the valley, below. He wore sandals and a white hospital robe, but he planned to fight barefoot and naked, except for a loincloth and a sash. Clothes would be more likely to slow his movements than protect him from the razor-sharp knives and the drug-laden tips of the black staves.

The six formed a rough circle around Blade, and kept pace with him down the tunnel. Was it just his imagination, or did the rank smells and the cries from whatever lay beyond the side doors seem stronger today? Blade decided one thing. He'd force the Hashomi to kill him before he'd let himself be locked behind one of those doors. If the Hashomi were planning treachery, he could not stop them. But he could make them pay for it with the lives of as many men as he could reach before he went down-perhaps even the life of the Master himself.

They came out of the tunnel, crossed the bridge, and continued their descent of the path toward the valley floor. The path zigzagged back and forth down the steep slope, taking nearly half a mile to descend the last three hundred feet to level ground.

By that time the sun was fully up, and the mist was lifting from the valley. The ground rolled away toward the opposite side of the valley, a good ten miles away. Blade saw plowed fields, huts, little stands of wood, all connected by paths of hard-beaten earth and split up by small streams and fences of logs and piled stones. The soil on either side of the path was dark and moist, and the grass was green and lush. The Hashomi had certainly found themselves a good home in this valley, and done much work to make it even better. Blade could understand why they had little to do with the outside world, preferring that it remain ignorant of where they were. The Valley of the Hashomi was a rich prize. It might be rich enough to tempt someone who knew where it was into leading an army against it.

Blade and the six Hashomi walked for nearly two hours before they came to the testing place. By that time the sun was well up in the sky, and the day had turned pleasantly warm. At last the party came around the end of a low hill and faced a large square of beaten earth, at least two hundred feet on a side. On three sides of the square rose a low wall of stones and dressed logs, just high enough to keep out stray livestock. On the fourth side rose several pyramidal stone buildings. On the ground along this side were spread a number of mats and cushions, and a large tent had been erected in front of the buildings. Above the tent flew a long blue banner with a white poppy in the center.

Several Hashomi came out of the tent as Blade appeared. He went forward to meet them as his escorts dropped back and spread out along the edge of the square.

Blade counted eight Hashomi coming toward him. The Master was in the lead, followed by five fighters carrying swords and knives. Their lines and weather-beaten faces showed they were all middle-aged or older. Two younger men dressed like the leader at the bridge brought up the rear. They carried knives and staves. As the party drew closer, Blade saw that one of the younger men was actually the leader of the Hashomi at the bridge.

Blade stopped twenty feet from the Master, stretched out both arms, then raised both hands in greeting, fingers spread wide.

The Master nodded, his face expressionless. "Welcome to your testing, British agent Blade. Do you find yourself fit?"

"As fit as I can ever hope to be, worthy Master," said Blade. This seemed to be a solemn, even sacred occasion for the Hashomi, and it would do him no harm to enter into the spirit of the affair.

"That is good." The Master whistled sharply. Several unarmed men emerged from the tent. Blade recognized two doctors and one of the bearded, brown-robed men who were the Hashomi's equivalent of priests. The priest carried a small drum and a flute.

The Master stepped aside and let the doctors and the priest approach Blade. The doctors ran their hands over Blade's arms and legs, probed the scar tissue on his torso, tapped him on the knees, chest, and groin, looked in his ears, eyes, and mouth. Blade found it hard not to burst out laughing. These men were so much like Home Dimension doctors—not necessarily sure of what they were looking for, but determined to at least give the impression that they knew.

At last the doctors stepped back and turned to the Master. "The man is altogether fit."

"Good." Now the priest stepped forward. He walked three times counterclockwise around Blade, tapping steadily on the drum and making a humming sound like a distant hive of bees. Then he drew a small bag from a pouch on his belt, opened it, and shook yellow powder from it all over Blade. Finally he walked three more times around Blade, playing softly on the flute.

Blade could only guess what the priest was up to. Was he driving evil spirits out of Blade, or letting them in? The priest's work was obviously part of the ritual of the testing, so there was no point in raising any objections. Still, Blade was very careful not to swallow or inhale any of the yellow powder, or let it get in his eyes.

At last the priest joined the doctors. The three civilians and the five armed Hashomi arranged themselves on the mats and cushions around the door of the tent. Only the Master and Blade's two opponents remained standing facing him. The Master stepped to one side, raised his staff, then held it out until it formed a barrier between Blade and his two opponents. The two men backed off several yards, and Blade took this as a signal to do the same.

"All are fit," intoned the Master. "All are blessed. All are ready." The staff whipped up into the vertical position so fast that Blade's eyes could not follow it. By pure reflex he dropped into fighting stance. His opponents stiffened, and their knives rasped out of their sheathes. The Master's voice swelled and deepened, until it seemed like a lion's roar.

"Let the testing begin!"

Three sets of eyes met and locked. Blade's two opponents began a slow circling to the right, and he shifted just as slowly to the left. For the moment Blade was content to maneuver and draw his opponents into doing the same. The more he saw of the way they moved, the better. Of course, if he could find a good angle of attack right away, without giving them one, he'd take it. But he wasn't going to bet on that. They were two to one against him, the staves gave them a longer reach, and he had to assume they were just as fast and just as skilled as he was. The odds could very well be no more than even.

On the other hand, two men will always have problems coordinating their actions against a single opponent unless they've trained together as a team for months or years. The staves were long—in fact, too long to be easily wielded one-handed. Blade had plenty of room—he could go anywhere within the walled-off square. Doubtless he would make a better impression on the Master and the five judges if he stayed close, but he didn't have to. Finally, Blade knew he had the edge in weight and strength over either opponent. In a close grapple, he could probably break either one of them into little pieces.

Blade and his two opponents literally went around in circles for several minutes, each minute seeming like half an hour. The impassive faces of the two Hashomi leaders, were totally unreadable, and Blade hoped his own face was as good a mask. So far he hadn't learned a thing about the two, except that they were as easy and quick in their movements as he'd expected.

So he could safely rule out any tactics that depended on his being faster than they were, unless he could hand out a little punishment first. No real chances for that, yet. Maybe he'd better let them make the first attack, and see what he could develop in countering it.

The circling went on, and the watchers by the tent seemed to be getting farther and farther away. The circles were getting larger. That should trigger an attack soon, Blade realized. The two Hashomi would also want the Master and the judges to have a good view of what happened. Their lives might not be at stake, but they'd certainly be interested in earning the Master's favor by a good performance.

Blade was determined that they'd have to work a great deal harder than they expected, to earn anything except broken bones!

One more circle. Then a flicker of metal as one of the Hashomi handed his knife to his partner. The first

man now had both hands free for his staff, while the second man dropped his staff and raised a knife in each hand. Ingenious, thought Blade, and quite possibly dangerous. It had the disadvantage of leaving one staff where he could pick it up, though, and that might prove to be a very large disadvantage indeed. Blade was a master of quarterstaff fighting, and the Hashomi staves were weighted and balanced well enough for it.

First, though, he had to survive the attack that could now be only seconds away. The three men made another half-circle, then suddenly the two Hashomi were running in opposite directions, to get on opposite sides of Blade.

They were every bit as fast as Blade-but no faster. He picked the man with the staff as the less dangerous. Once past the drug-laden needle at the tip, he would be safe. The knives were a different matter.

He ran straight at the man with the staff and the tip darted toward him with the speed of an arrow. Blade swerved, saw it pass within inches of his skin, leaped clear over the staff as the man drew it back for another thrust, landed, whirled, and struck at the man's shoulder. The man's speed was already taking him back out of range as Blade's hand descended. It struck hard enough to shake him, but nothing was broken or disabled. Before Blade could strike again, the man was out of range and his partner with the knives was almost within range.

Blade couldn't get completely clear of the knife man's rush. The point of one knife left a thin red line across his right arm-no deeper or more dangerous than a paper cut, fortunately, although it stung painfully. One of Blade's long legs whipped out, and a size 12 foot with a leather-tough sole drove into the knife man's thigh. If it had struck the knee the man would have been out of the fight, but he was moving fast enough to spoil Blade's aim. The kick jolted him violently, and he sprang out of range without trying to get another slash home with his knives.

For a moment Blade thought he had the time and the clear space to make a dash for the fallen staff. But his opponents recovered faster than he expected, flowing almost without a break from their retreat into their next attack. The knife man swung wide, until he was between Blade and the fallen staff. Then he and his partner came at Blade again, so fast and so close together that Blade wasn't sure he'd have time to meet them separately.

Once more Blade closed with the staff man, avoiding a thrust even more narrowly than the first time. He closed inside the man's striking range, but did not attack. Instead Blade gripped the staff with both hands, and used his superior strength to jerk both it and the man holding it forward. The knife man came in, suddenly finding himself within seconds of being impaled by the tip of his partner's staff. He slowed down to avoid this. Blade had enough time to wheel on one foot and drive the other into the knife man's stomach. The breath went out of him with a whufff and he reeled back without slashing at Blade.

Blade now shifted his grip on the staff. He kicked at the staff man's groin and at the same moment he heaved with all his strength on the staff. The man sprang clear in time to avoid the kick, letting go of his staff so suddenly that Blade was nearly thrown off-balance. Before he could grip the staff for either attack or defense, the knife man was coming in again.

Blade held the staff crossways and met the attack. Both knives chopped into the staff. The sharp edges with the heavy steel and the man's wiry strength behind them chopped through the wood. The staff fell into three pieces. Blade quickly opened the distance to keep the knife man from doing the same job on him.

The knife man handed one of his weapons to his partner, and both drew back. Both seemed to be a trifle less sure in their movements, and the man who'd held the staff was now rubbing his shoulder. They'd taken a certain amount of punishment-Blade could split two-by-fours with his hands, and without using his full strength. They hadn't taken enough to make them much less dangerous. In fact, now that both had knives, both would be deadly at close range.

The brief pause gave Blade plenty of time to snatch up the fallen staff. He raised it and whirled it over his head. It was light, supple, almost graceful. If he'd been choosing something for cracking skulls or ribs, he'd have chosen something a good deal heavier. Here he wasn't doing the choosing, and if the staff lasted long enough to take out one opponent, that would be enough.

Now Blade had the advantage in reach. He decided it was time to go over to the attack himself. He shifted swiftly to the right, then closed as the two men turned to face him. He whirled the staff end for end, thrusting out savagely with the weighted butt.

The staff struck when the two men were sure they were still out of range. The butt smacked into one man's knife arm. Blade saw his mouth clamp shut, and he sprang back. Blade whipped the staff up and shortened his second thrust. The second man grabbed the staff and shoved it to one side as he slashed at Blade with his knife.

Blade let go of the staff, sidestepped the slash, and clamped both hands down on the man's knife arm. He jerked hard, and the man screamed uncontrollably and horribly as both elbow and shoulder joints gave under the impossible strain. Blade whirled, turning his back on the man and crouching as he heaved with all his strength. The man flew over Blade's head and crashed to the ground. It didn't matter how much punishment he could take or how much pain he could endure--for him this fight was over.

Blade spun around, to see the second man charging him, one hand dangling uselessly but the knife raised in the other. The second staff was also cracked and useless. Blade decided it was time to use his surprise weapon.

By nimble footwork he avoided three furious rushes in the few seconds it took him to untie his sash. It was five feet long, and one end dangled as if weighted. It was. Into a pocket at one end Blade had sewn a number of pebbles and bits of scrap metal. Only a few ounces, but it should be enough. Blade began whirling the sash around his head.

His opponent hesitated for a moment, then decided he still had a chance. He ran at Blade, and this time his knife was raised even higher, to cut the sash apart and deprive Blade of his last weapon.

Blade whipped the sash forward, and with a hiss the weighted end wound itself three times around the man's upraised arm. Blade heaved with all his strength, and the man flew forward to meet Blade's foot slamming up into his groin. He folded in midair and struck the ground already doubled up and writhing. He did not cry out, but after a moment he choked and started vomiting.

Blade turned the man's head to one side so he would not choke on his own vomit. Then he examined the other man. He also was alive, although probably with a concussion and certainly with an arm he'd never be able to use again. Blade rather hoped there was a place among the Hashomi for the one-armed or the castrated, and that he hadn't condemned these men to death by defeating and crippling them. To be sure, they had put his life in considerable danger, but they'd hardly done this of their own free will.

Blade rewound his sash and retrieved both knives. Then he turned toward the watchers outside the tent. From the first moment of the fight they had ceased to exist as far as he was concerned. Yet it still lay with

the Master to decide what Blade had won by defeating two picked Hashomi in a matter of minutes. The sun was no higher in the sky than it had been when the fight began, so it had to have been a matter of minutes, even though it felt like several hours.

The Master had risen and was walking slowly toward Blade, carrying his staff in one hand, his other thrust inside his robe. His face was blank, but the subtle quivering of his body told Blade that the Master was not as calm as he was pretending to be.

"So it is done," the Master said quietly. "You have been tested and found-more than adequate." His face twisted for a moment with some emotion Blade could not read-fear, rage, surprise, uncertainty? "In fact, you have made the testing as we conceived it a thing for children to laugh at!"

"I am sorry if I have done the Hashomi an injury by this," said Blade, with an elaborate politeness he was far from feeling.

"Do not fear that," said the Master. "It is not the way of the Hashomi to believe that we know everything merely because we are the Hashomi. There are those who know what we do not, and from whom we may learn if they are willing to teach us.

"As for your two opponents--" The Master broke off, and raised his staff. Blade's hands dropped to within inches of his knife hilts, fingers curling ready to grip. Then he forced himself to relax. The internal discipline of the Hashomi was not his affair, particularly when the price of trying to make it so could easily be death.

The Master's hands moved in a delicate pattern along his staff. A glossy red needle thrust itself out of the silver ball on the striking end. The Master walked over to the vomiting man, raised the staff, and brought it down. The needle drove deep into the man's neck. He straightened out, throwing his arms wide, his eyes rolling up in his head until only the whites were visible. Then he arched his back so violently and so far that Blade heard the spine crack, and went limp, blood trickling from his mouth, ears, and nose. The man with the disabled arm was still mercifully unconscious, and he died more peacefully.

Blade was waiting, arms crossed on his chest, when the Master came back to him. "Certainly you seem to have told the truth about what you learned as a British agent. It seems to be a strong and wise Order. Will you teach us as much of the agents' skills as we may need?"

"I do not know how much you may need. I can certainly teach you as much as I know. I trust that will be enough."

"Of course," said the Master, smiling with everything except his eyes.

"And in return," said Blade, "I trust you will agree that I learn the ways of the Hashomi, without submitting to the drugs or being caged like an animal." He made the words a flat statement, not a question. He would be polite to the Master if necessary, but never humble.

"You may trust me in that," said the Master. "My word is law in the Valley of the Hashomi, and my word will be that the British agent Blade is to call the Valley of the Hashomi his home from this time onward." The Master turned away, indicating that Blade should follow him.

Blade did so, his smile masking thoughts the Master might not have found agreeable. The Master could be trusted-to do anything that his own power or the power of the Hashomi might demand. For the moment, both demanded that he leave Blade alive and free. That moment would not last forever, and by

the time it ended, Blade knew he would do well to be somewhere far from the valley, where the Master's word was not law and the hands of the Hashomi could not reach him easily.

Chapter 7

The Master of the Hashomi kept his promise. Blade still lived in his room in the hospital, but now he could come and go when he pleased, and go very nearly anywhere in the whole Valley of the Hashomi.

That covered a good deal of territory. The valley was ten miles wide and stretched over fifty miles from end to end. It was well-watered, the soil was fertile, and the crops were luxuriant. There were easily accessible deposits of iron, gold, silver, and copper in the nearby mountains. There were several large stretches of forest, and a number of places where good building stone could be quarried.

In fact, there was room and resources in the valley for two or three times its actual population. Blade estimated that it held no more than thirty thousand people, no more than five thousand of them fully trained and sworn fighting Hashomi. Perhaps that was why the Master laid such stress on bringing up every suitable male child as a Hashom. The five thousand he had now were barely enough to defend the valley against a determined attack.

Some of these suitable male children were found among the families of the craftsmen and farmers, but not many. Most came from the Houses of the Red Water, which were literally breeding pens for future Hashomi. Three hundred carefully chosen women lived in the Houses. Each was expected to bear three male children in six years before being released to go about her business. The fathers were chosen from among the best of the sworn Hashomi.

There were also the Houses of the Forge, where skilled craftsmen produced weapons and metalware. There were the Houses of Healing, five of them, including the hospital where Blade was living.

There was the House of the Ephraimini—a term for which there was no really adequate translation. Blade mentally labeled them "the Wise Men." They were the scholars, the priests, and above all, the men in charge of producing the various drugs that lay at the heart of the Hashomi way of life. Most of the drugs were produced from various parts of the poppy-like flower, the handr. The House of the Ephraimini was one of the places Blade was not allowed to enter, but he saw it from a distance. It was a squat building of massive stone blocks, looking as grim and aged as the mountains themselves. It was completely surrounded by broad fields of handr and the other plants from which the drugs and medicines of the Hashomi were extracted.

Finally, there were the Houses of the Iron Flower, the barracks of the fighting Hashomi. Blade was allowed to enter one of these and look around—with an escort of twelve grim-faced Hashomi, led by the Master himself.

The daily life of a sworn Hashom was thoroughly Spartan. Each had a room to himself, but it was no more than a stone cell ten feet on a side, with whitewashed walls, a tiled floor, and a ceiling of rough-hewn beams black with age. The only furnishings allowed were a thin sleeping pallet with two blankets, a water jug, and a plain chest of polished wood to hold clothes and weapons. A Hashom could use his cell for sleeping or meditating. Everything else—eating, bathing, answering the calls of nature, and above all training and exercising—was done communally.

They took Blade to one of the communal dining halls and let him sample the food being prepared for the evening meal. The food was . . . well, it existed, and presumably there was enough of it to keep the Hashomi from dying of starvation. It had no other virtues that Blade could discover. A Home Dimension

mess sergeant who served up food like this would be court-martialed-if he wasn't lynched on the spot by the men who had to eat what he prepared.

The Hashomi trained, exercised, and meditated at least fourteen hours a day, every day of the year except on certain religious festivals. They drank nothing stronger than water, and they were allowed sexual intercourse no more than once a month-if they had conducted themselves well during that month.

"What is bad conduct, according to the laws and customs of the Hashomi?" asked Blade.

There were a thousand different things for which a Hashom might be punished-talking during the hours of meditation, taking more than his share of the food, crying out or giving other signs of pain during weapons training. A long and dreary list that in Blade's mind added up to a thoroughly grim way of life. The Hashomi were dedicated, but Blade wondered how many of them, after years of such dedication, were entirely sane.

After ten years without any serious misconduct a Hashom might become a Treas-one of the leaders who wore the blue tunics and were entrusted with the drug-laden staves. For a Treas some of the rigorous discipline was slightly relaxed. He could drink weak beer four times a year, have a woman as often as once a week (if he hadn't given up sex entirely, as the average Treas did), and spend one day a month outside the Houses of the Iron Flower, with no one to give him orders or judge his conduct.

Blade suspected that last privilege was the one most valued. He knew that if he'd spent ten years under the iron discipline of the Hashomi, he would have gladly given his right arm to have one day a month entirely to himself.

A Hashom normally entered the Houses of the Iron Flower at the age of fourteen. He seldom left alive before he was sixty, and then only if he'd rendered exceptional service to the order or become disabled in honorable battle.

This did not mean that the ranks of the Hashomi were top-heavy with worn-out graybeards. Far from it. Blade knew certain Oriental martial-arts teachers who, in their sixties, had been able to mop up the floor with opponents young enough to be their grandsons. Old age was always as much in the mind as in the body.

Those Hashomi who had reached the rank of Treas were often admitted to the Ephraimini, and spent their last years cultivating and processing the handr and performing the burial rites over their former comrades. There was a good deal of burying, for as the Master said, "Like fish drawn from the stream onto the bank, the Hashom who leaves the Houses of the Iron Flower often leaves the only place where he can exist."

Blade could hardly think of a sadder end to forty-odd years of dedicated self-denying service and constant danger. He couldn't help feeling that those Hashomi who died in training accidents or in battle were lucky. He was also sure of one thing: he would choose almost any form of death rather than life as one of the sworn, drugged, and disciplined Hashomi.

Blade understood much more about the Hashomi after his visit to the Houses of the Iron Flower, but there were still several mysteries. What did the Hashomi do with their hard-earned, lethal skills, for their friends and against their enemies? Who were their friends (if they had any), and who were their enemies? Blade was certain that Dahaura was considered an enemy, but why and what were the Hashomi fighting against?

Finally, where were many of the Hashomi? The Houses of the Iron Flower were square, squat buildings of stone blocks, with iron doors cast in the shape of a handr flower-thus their name. There were only enough of them to hold the five thousand Hashomi of which the Master spoke so often. Yet nearly half the Houses seemed to be empty. Doubtless some of the Hashomi were guarding the valley, like the men Blade had fought. Still, more than a thousand of them must be completely gone from the valley. Where had they gone; and why? Dahaura? Perhaps, but that was only a guess.

Blade was certain of one thing. The Hashomi were approaching a great moment, perhaps a crisis, in their history. The Master dropped too many hints of that for Blade to have any doubts on the matter. The Master was willing for Blade to know how valuable his assistance could be to the Hashomi, even if not precisely why.

Blade didn't blame the Master. In the man's position he would have done the same thing. It did mean one more mystery about the Hashomi that he would have to explore on his own, with the danger of discovery nipping at his heels.

It was not just curiosity that now drove Blade. Now he considered himself an enemy of the Hashomi. To be sure, he would not seek to destroy them entirely, even if by some chance he acquired the power to do so. That was not his affair. He would do almost anything to keep them from extending their power and their grim way of life beyond their home valley.

Unfortunately he had no idea of how to do this. He couldn't safely do much until he was out of the valley, yet he had to stay there until he'd learned a good deal more. It was a familiar dilemma, one that every secret agent faced a dozen times in his career. To learn what you needed to know, you had to expose yourself to so much danger that you might not live to pass on or use what you'd learned!

Blade was undressing for bed one night a few weeks after the testing when he heard a faint tapping on his door. The door could not be locked, so he shifted position until he had the bed between him and the door. He pulled out the knife he kept under his pillow, crouched beside the bed, and called softly.

"Come in."

The heavy wooden door slid back on its greased rails, and a robed figure was silhouetted against the dim light in the hallway outside. Blade saw that it was small, slim, with a long, bound tail of hair trailing halfway down its back. One of the women of the hospital staff, apparently. Was she old or young, and, in any case, why was she paying him a visit in his room at this hour? There was nothing written down to prohibit it, but there was nothing written down to prohibit a great many of the things for which he'd seen men and women severely punished. The woman was risking dismissal for certain, perhaps a flogging and branding.

The woman stood motionless in the doorway. Blade realized that she was waiting for him to let her come in. He was putting her in danger every minute he made her stand in the open doorway, visible to anyone who might pass along the hallway.

"Come on in, I said," repeated Blade, gesturing urgently. The woman nodded, heaved the door shut, and approached Blade. He picked up the oil lamp on the floor beside the bed and held it out in front of him as the woman approached the bed.

Blade now recognized her. She was one of the younger women whose eyes had followed his comings and goings with interest. In fact, she was the only one he knew by name. Her name was Mirna, and she seemed to be a leader among the younger women. It was hard to judge her age, but she was certainly no

fresh-faced girl.

"Welcome, Mirna," said Blade. "I have only water to offer you, but-"

She laughed softly, and her face twisted into a wry smile. "You need not tell me how little there can be of hospitality, here in this valley. But you can make me welcome, with only water or indeed with no drink at all. I am not thirsty."

She sat down on the bed, pulled her bound hair around over her shoulder, and began undoing the bindings. Slowly she worked at her hair, until it flowed down freely. Like most of the women of the valley, Mirna was dark-haired, but her hair was so black that it held distinct tints of blue. She shook her head, and the hair tossed in a cloud that framed her narrow olive-skinned face with the prominent arched nose. Blade found that he wanted to stroke that hair, feeling its silkiness on his skin, and then move on to stroke Mirna's face. He also suspected that Mirna would not object. Blade was an experienced man who seldom failed to detect a willing woman, and a lusty man who seldom turned one down unless there was a very good reason to do so.

There might be a reason now. Was Mirna coming to him out of desire for him, or on the Master's orders, to surround Blade with scandal? That could give the Master a perfect excuse for breaking his agreement with Blade and having him drugged or slain.

On the other hand, the scandal the Master could spread would be nothing compared to the scandal Mirna could cause, if she felt herself rejected and humiliated for no good reason. Blade had no desire whatever to find himself considered an enemy by any of the women of the valley.

Mirna now ran her fingers through her hair, tugging and combing, wincing as the knots and snags came out. Her eyes seldom left Blade's face, except to run up and down his body. He was barefoot and wore only a pair of the baggy Hashom trousers, leaving his massive torso with its display of muscles and scars entirely bare.

At last Mirna seemed to finish with both her hair and her examination of Blade. She wore a plain gray robe, belted in at the waist with a knitted sash of black wool. The garment barely hinted at any female curves underneath. Women's garments in this valley seemed to be about as stylish as flour sacks.

Mirna's hands closed over the knot in the sash, and Blade felt a sudden tightening in his loins and a dryness in his throat as her fingers went to work on the knot. He'd been living without women far longer than he ever did by choice.

He still did not let desire rise to swallow his judgment. He continued to stand by the bed, the knife in his hand, as Mirna finished unknitting the sash. He watched as she rose to her feet, the robe drifting open to give tantalizing hints of beauty underneath. Now she shrugged the robe from her shoulders. It whispered to the floor and she faced him across the bed, gloriously naked.

There was a faint hint of perfume in the air of the room now that it could play freely over all of Mirna's body. Blade saw that the nipples of her delicately rounded breasts were darkened with some cosmetic. The dark triangle of hair between her thighs had also been rubbed with something that gave it a silvery sheen in the dimly lit room.

Slowly she raised her arms above her head, which gave her breasts new and fascinating movements, then slowly turned her back to Blade. He found his eyes drawn to the line of her spine where it emerged from under her hair, downward to the cleft between her firm buttocks.

Blade's eyes were not the only part of his body moving now. He pushed his trousers and loinguard under them down his legs, and stepped around the bed as naked as Mirna. She stepped away from the bed without turning around. He came up to her from behind, burying his face in her hair, smelling its perfume, while his hands went around her and cupped her breasts. The solid warmth of her buttocks nestled against his groin, and it was like a caress. Suddenly warmth was flaring up in Blade, and his hands tightened on Mirna's breasts as her nipples thrust out hard against his palms.

They stood there for a long moment, in a flare of desire so intense that neither wanted to move apart for fear of losing it. Somehow their minds told their bodies that they had to move, if they wanted to reach the goal they both now desperately sought. Mirna turned toward Blade, standing on tip-toe to raise her lips to his as his arms locked around her and lifted her.

There was a moment when it seemed that Mirna would insist on Blade taking her then and there, as they stood by the bed. But her desire lifted her high, and Blade's arms lifted her higher. He picked her up and held her in his arms as easily as a child while his lips caressed her breasts. Then he turned and lowered her gently to the bed. The leather straps that supported the thin mattress groaned under Blade's weight as he lay down beside her. He ignored the sounds. Like all the buildings of the Hashomi, the hospital had thick walls. He could play trumpets, set off firecrackers, or make love to Mirna as passionately as they both wished without anyone in the next room being much the wiser.

Mirna clutched at him furiously, arms and legs thrashing. Then she maneuvered him over on his back, straddled his thighs, and dropped upon his massively swollen and upthrust manhood. She bent forward, and her hands clutched Blade's dark hair as her inward warmth and wetness gripped his swollen flesh. Her hands gripped so hard that pain stabbed Blade for a moment. Then the pain was gone, and only pleasure remained, swelling slowly and then not so slowly as Mirna began to move upon him.

She moved in more different ways than Blade would have thought possible for any one woman. Sometimes she bent far backward until her hair brushed his ankles, sometimes she stopped moving altogether and sat bolt upright, motionless except for the rise and fall of her breasts. Did she do that to prolong her own desire or Blade's? It was impossible to tell, and in the end it was a question with no meaning.

Suddenly she bent far backward, and Blade could both see and feel the twisting and tightening of her pelvic muscles. Then she bent as far forward, with a small scream that turned into a long tearing gasp, and her teeth clamped down on her lower lip until Blade could see drops of blood.

Then he could see nothing, for the room became even darker and seemed to vanish in a swirling blue haze. He was conscious only of a blaze of sheer ecstasy in the middle of that blueness, as he found his own release. He thrust his own hips upward, until Mirna was tossed about on top of him like a chip of wood on top of a wave. His own breath came out in a long groan that turned into a hiss as his lungs emptied. Then his hands groped for Mirna, ran up and down the smooth, sweat-slick back, and drew her against him as both of them relaxed.

The relaxation lasted only moments. Somehow Mirna found enough strength to lift herself off Blade. She half-rolled, half-fell off the bed and for a moment held onto the edge to keep from slumping to the floor. Then she rose on shaky legs, and stood looking down at Blade.

She sighed. "Blade, if we had time, and this place was safer-" She seemed to run out of breath.

"Yes," he prompted her. "If the time and place were better-"

She took a deep breath, and ran her hands through hair that spread damp and tangled all over her shoulders. "No. The time and place have been good enough, for now. You have been given another test, Blade-and you have passed it as you did the test against the fighting Hashomi."

"Who has been giving me this test besides yourself?" said Blade.

"The women of the Valley of the Hashomi," she replied. "The women who cannot live as they wish because of the ways of the Hashomi."

Blade started to laugh at the idea of the women of the valley testing his virility, then sobered. Behind Mirna's cryptic words was a very real meaning-and perhaps a very real opportunity.

"The ways of the Hashomi?" he repeated slowly. "You think particularly of their ways with women?"

"Yes. Or of their not-ways," she said, her face twisting bitterly. "They are taught, and exercised, and drugged until they are less than men, as far as the women are concerned."

"How many women?" said Blade. The opportunity was taking firmer shape in his mind.

"More women than there are men who can help them live as women ought to," said Mirna. The way she hammered out the words told Blade clearly that he wasn't going to learn any more-at least not yet.

Mirna bent with swift grace to retrieve her robe and tie it about herself. Then she bent again, and her lips ran warmly and lightly down Blade's stomach into his groin. He could feel desire stirring again, but before it had time to do more than that, Mirna's lips were no longer there. Blade sighed. As she said, the time and place were not the best, but still-

She laid a hand lightly on his cheek. "Blade, I must go. The women of the valley will hear of this-"

"Not the men?"

Her voice hardened. "They keep their secrets from us. We keep ours from them." Again Blade understood that she would tell him no more tonight. "The women will hear, and then in time I shall come to you again."

"Not alone?" Blade hinted.

She hesitated for a moment, then-

"No. Not alone"

A moment later she was gone, and the door slid into place. Blade lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. He suspected he'd found not only willing women, but perhaps willing allies as well. With the eyes and ears of even a few of the valley's women at his command, his ability to penetrate the secrets of the Hashomi could be multiplied many times over.

Could be. How long would it be before he knew for certain?

As long as the women want it to be, said a firm voice in his mind.

After a moment, Blade was forced to agree with that voice. Trying to hurry one woman was seldom wise. Trying to hurry several dozen was almost always stupid.

Blade turned on his side, pulled the blankets over himself, and drifted off to the easiest sleep he'd had in this Dimension.

Chapter 8

The women of the valley were eager to get Blade's services, but didn't forget caution or common sense. It was several days before Blade heard from Mirna again, and more than a week before she led him to his first rendezvous.

Even then Blade was not quite as well-off as he'd hoped to be. It was entertaining to dream of satisfying hundreds of sex-starved women while learning all the secrets of the Hashomi from what the women babbled or moaned. Things didn't work out that way.

Mirna had said there were more eager and lusty women than there were eager and lusty men. Blade met less than a hundred. Doubtless there might be more, but Mirna seemed to be a cautious soul. Blade suspected she was bringing to him only those women she could trust to be totally discreet and possibly only those who were her personal friends-and allies. Mirna quite obviously had some plans beyond giving a few dozen of her friends a few happy hours in bed with Richard Blade.

Blade was careful not to inquire about those plans. If Mirna was deep in some dangerous game, she would be quite ready to denounce him to the Master if he did anything but keep his mouth shut and his loins busy. She couldn't afford to be less than ruthless where her own survival was concerned.

Blade did learn a good deal from the women in spite of all this. Unfortunately, most of it was kitchen gossip, domestic scandals, or which Hashomi were usually impotent, drunk, or more than normally sadistic. A vast amount of petty detail, which would no doubt be useful if he ever decided it was worth trying to blackmail some of the Hashomi.

Somehow, Blade could not see much sense in that.

He realized after a few days that he should have expected this. The place of women among the Hashomi was so low that even in his most unguarded moments a sworn adept would hardly reveal very many secrets to one. Most of the leaders high enough to be in the confidence of the Master were celibate or so old they'd lost interest in women.

Not that Blade's passing among the women was a complete waste of his time and energy. From what he saw and from what they told him, he was able to work up a map of the whole valley, with all the important towns and camps and many of the guard posts clearly marked. He was also able to find out where much of the gear he badly needed could be obtained, without the Master's consent or knowledge.

So night after night Blade made his rounds to the places where the women waited. Night after night he slipped into unguarded storehouses, arsenals, and shops, to come out with what he wanted. Night after night, a hidden cache grew in a forest near the northern wall of the valley. Before long he had everything he needed to make his way safely out of the valley and through the mountains that hid it from the world.

Apart from all this, there was a great deal of lusty pleasure to give the women, and to take from them. That was quite all right with Blade-there was nothing of the ascetic in him!

The Master and the senior Treases were more informative. They told Blade very little, but they showed him a lot. From what he saw, Blade was able to draw a good many conclusions on his own.

There were at least nine separate drugs involved in the cult of the Hashomi, ranging from the healing to the lethal. The basic drug was a mildly addictive one that was given to the Hashomi from the moment they entered the ranks of the order. Its main effect was to make them more sensitive to the other eight drugs.

Three of these were more important than the others. There was the huma, the poison the Master had injected into the two men defeated by Blade. A full dose of it could kill a strong man in a few seconds. Even a grain or two finding its way through a cut or scratch could kill a man within a few agonizing hours.

There was the ken, the drug the leader had injected into the two disobedient Hashomi after the fight by the bridge. It made a man passive, almost without a will of his own, incapable of acting without orders and equally incapable of disobeying any order given him. While a man had the ken in him, he was little more than a puppet.

The final member of the deadly trio was the nad. This was not made from the handr flower, but compounded according to a highly secret formula from certain mineral salts and vegetable juices. Its effects reminded Blade of what he'd seen among victims of massive doses of LSD. The nad reacted in any warm-blooded creature to produce madness paranoia, uncontrollable rage, catatonic withdrawal, furious convulsions that ended in death from the rupturing of muscles and internal organs.

Any warm-blooded creature-animals as well as men. Seared into Blade's memory was a demonstration, of the nad he watched one day. He stood beside the Master on the edge of a steep-walled pit dug in the earth almost at the foot of the White Mountain. Together they watched three armed Hashomi lead a man and a woman into the pit. Their hands were bound behind their backs, and both were naked. The man was gray-haired and pot-bellied, while the woman was hardly more than a girl.

They were led to the center of the pit, then chained by the ankle to a thick wooden stake sunk in the earth. The Hashomi scuttled toward the entrance to the pit and slammed the gate behind them. As they did, another gate on the opposite side of the pit opened. The two chained victims turned fear-widened eyes toward the second gate.

"They are a farmer and his daughter caught stealing ripe handr from the fields of the Hashomi," the Master said. "This is contrary to our ways, which were given to the First Master by Junah himself."

In other words, stealing handr was blasphemy. Junah was the god of the religion that seemed to dominate this Dimension. It ruled in Dahaura as well as in the valley, although Blade had heard that in Dahaura it was divided into several sects.

Blade nodded politely. "I understand. Certainly the handr must be protected."

The Master smiled. "Indeed it must be, and today you shall see how we protect it." His last words were nearly drowned out by a high-pitched neigh that turned into a shrill scream and ended in a long rasping intake of breath. Blade recognized a horse, in terrible pain, fear, or anger.

Hooves thudded, and the horse burst out into the pit. It was a small gray stallion, thick-necked, short-legged, obviously a breed formed for strength and endurance rather than speed or show. It plunged out into the pit, alternately rearing and kicking out, long teeth snapping at the air. Its eyes were wide and bloodshot and rolled furiously.

"The nad is working in it," said the Master. "Soon it will be blind as well as mad. But before its eyes grow dark, it will see the man and the woman."

As the horse dashed around and around the pit, one of its lashing hooves struck the girl on the hip. The girl bit back a scream and clutched at the post to hold herself up. Blood now trickled down her bare thigh, and her father let out a sharp cry that mingled horror, fear, and rage.

The horse heard him and turned. Its drug-hazed eyes focused on him, and it reared up, its iron-shod hooves striking out. Its aim was good enough. One hoof flailed the air by the man's ear, the other crashed into his forehead. Skin parted, bone cracked and shattered, blood oozed. The man jerked convulsively, then collapsed to the ground without a cry. He was not dead-Blade could see him twitching feebly. But the damage would have defeated Home Dimension's best brain surgeon.

Then the horse turned on the girl, using both hooves and teeth. The girl was not as lucky as her father, for it took her a long time to die. At first she tried to be silent, then she screamed, and finally she was silent again because her torn lungs could no longer take in enough air for a scream.

Blade also had to exercise a good deal of self-control before the girl died. He wasn't going to cry out and he wasn't going to be sick. He'd seen far too many ugly sights. He did have to grip the railing in front of him, to keep his hands from closing on the lean throat of the Master of the Hashomi and squeezing until life was gone. He was quite certain that he could do that before the other Hashomi could kill him.

At last the only movement around the girl was the flies settling on her wounds. The Master signaled to one of the Hashomi and the man stepped forward, holding a bow with an arrow already nocked to it. The arrow whistled down into the pit, driving through the horse's skull. It reared with a gasp and dropped beside its two victims. The bodies were still lying there as the Master led Blade away.

"Thus the nad is an instrument of the justice of the Hashomi," said the Master. Blade nodded. He did not trust himself to speak, not when it took a real effort to keep his hands at his sides.

Finally he was able to ask, "You say that any warm-blooded animal will do this under the influence of the nad?"

"Yes. We have tried it with horses, dogs, oxen, goats, and sheep-even the hunting falcons that the nobles of Dahaura love so greatly. All will run mad, smashing and killing as best they can, until they fall dead or are slain."

"I see," said Blade. Perhaps he saw even more clearly than the Master intended. What would happen to a city-say, Dahaura-if a few dozen animals maddened with the nad were let loose in its streets? Or a few hundred, or a few thousand? With the nad, not only men but animals could be turned into mindless, maddened weapons of the Hashomi.

Then a question occurred to him. Perhaps the Master would answer it, having already shown him so much. "What about animals whose blood runs cold-snakes and fish, for example?"

The Master's smile was unpleasantly smug. "We have little use for fish. But as for snakes-well, we do something with the fathers of snakes."

The next day the Master led Blade to another pit, at the mouth of a large cave on the other side of the valley. This pit was more than a hundred yards across and twenty yards deep. Iron spikes six feet long and six inches thick were planted firmly in the rock all around the edge. They sloped inward, to impale

anything trying to climb out of the pit.

This time four of the Hashomi with Blade and the Master carried crossbows, and two carried large brass trumpets that coiled around the men's shoulders. The trumpeters walked to the edge of the pit and started blowing. They blew until echoes were bouncing around the pit and from the pit to the slopes above. They blew until half the mountainside above the pit could have crumbled and crashed down in a landslide without being heard. The trumpeters began to gasp and their faces turned the color of ripe tomatoes, but they went on blowing.

Finally the blare of the trumpets died, because the trumpeters had no more breath to blow. They reeled back from the edge of the pit, and only sheer will power and the Master's watchful eyes kept them from collapsing. As the echoes died away, the crossbowmen stepped forward, raising their weapons.

Then the earth seemed to respond to the call of the trumpets. Out of the dark mouth of the cave floated a distant rumbling and hissing, followed by the sound of heavy squelching footsteps, and an unbelievably foul odor. It was like every imaginable form of decay and corruption mixed together and multiplied. Blade found himself wanting to hold his nose, and saw that even the Master was wrinkling up his face in uncontrollable distaste.

Then the darkness in the mouth of the cave seemed to come alive, take form, and crawl out of the pit. It was thirty feet long, coal black, and moved on four clawed legs as thick as a man's body. The head was as large as a horse's body, equipped with glaring yellow eyes and a mouth full of crusted teeth a foot long. From the head a double line of sharp spines ran down the creature's back to the tip of its stubby tail. From nose to tail it was covered with scales the size of dinner plates, glossy where they weren't dulled by mud or filth.

Just as Blade was getting used to the presence of the first creature, a second pushed its black snout out of the cave. Then a third, a fourth, a fifth until the pit seemed to be packed solid with black-scaled flesh. The smell was past description, past belief, and nearly past endurance. Even the Master was now holding his nose with one hand as he motioned the archers forward with the other.

They cocked their bows, raised them, and let fly. Four heavy bolts drove through the scales of the nearest monster, deep into its flesh. It quivered so violently that Blade expected it to fall over and be trampled flat by its mates. Instead it went on quivering like a jelly for nearly a minute. Then suddenly it whirled around, more quickly than Blade would have believed possible, and its jaws clamped down on the flank of its nearest neighbor.

The second monster let out a hissing roar like a boiler venting steam and twisted free of the first one's jaws. A ragged tear showed in its hide, and white flesh laced with pale red blood showed at the bottom of the tear. The wound didn't seem to slow the creature at all. With another roar it turned on its attacker, bowling it over and trying to get a grip on its throat. The long teeth scraped across the scales without penetrating, and the two creatures drew apart for a moment. Then they hurled themselves at each other again.

The fight was long, bloody, and noisy. At last the creature with the arrows in its hide lost the sight of one eye. Its opponent lunged in from the blind side, got its teeth into the throat, and chewed and twisted until at last the flesh tore and blood vessels split to pour a red pool on to the ground. The dying creature toppled on to its side, the tail still thrashing back and forth. Its opponent drew back slowly, bleeding from half a dozen wounds, its muzzle coated up to the eyes with dried blood.

By this time several of the other monsters had paired off to fight, and many more seemed ready to leap

at each other's throats. The Master signaled to the trumpeters again, and the blare of their instruments rose until it drowned out even the roar of the monsters below. Somehow it reached their slow wits as a message, and one by one they turned and crept back into the cave. Within a few minutes they were gone, leaving behind nothing but their odor. A trail of blood and fallen scales showed where they'd dragged the dead body into the cave with them.

Blade stepped away from the pit until he felt it was safe to take a deep breath. By the time he could speak again, the Master had joined him. The man's face was paler than usual, and the hands gripping the great staff were white-knuckled and quivering slightly. It seemed there were powers in this valley strong enough to make even the Master of the Hashomi uncomfortable.

Blade decided to take advantage of that discomfort.

"What are they?" he said softly. He could see why the Master had referred to them as "the fathers of snakes." They were obviously reptiles of some sort, left over from a distant age of this Dimension. But what business did the Hashomi have with them?

The Master's eyes seemed to be fixed on something far off and barely visible. His voice was dreamy, as though he himself had taken an overdose of one of the Hashomi's drugs.

"When the First Master came to this valley, it was theirs." He went on to describe a sort of lost world, where monsters out of distant ages of the world had swarmed over the cliffs and among the forests.

"We had no use for most of them, but these have done well. In the time that is coming, they will do even better for us. They are ours, like the drugs, like the swords and knives of our sworn fighters. They are the assarani."

In other words, weapons. Who would be the assarani's victims, in "the time that is coming"? Blade did not dare ask that aloud. Instead he asked, in a carefully business-like voice, "What was in those bolts the archers fired into the first assaran? I am surprised that any of your drugs could take effect so quickly in such a large, slow-moving creature."

Blade's tone brought the Master back to reality. He smiled. "We owe much to the wisdom of the First Master. What works upon the assarani is not in the arrows. It is in them."

Blade looked a question at the Master. He continued. "The water they drink is from a stream that flows down into their cave. We drop into the stream what will make them more sensitive to any other drug. The water carries it to them, they drink, and thus all the other drugs work upon them in a moment."

Blade nodded. The account left out a good many details he would have been glad to know, but it gave him one vital piece of information. He'd guessed at it before-now he could be sure. The drugs of the Hashomi were enormously powerful. Like LSD, a few pounds dropped into a city's water supply would probably be enough to affect a whole population. He'd never liked the idea of something that powerful available to dangerous or irresponsible men or groups.

He liked even less the idea of such drugs in the hands of the Hashomi.

The Master went on, too proud of his people's skills to be silent or to notice the chill remoteness on Blade's face.

"We also dispose of the bodies of our dead by feeding them to the assarani. In each body we place the

proper drugs, so that in eating the flesh of the dead the beasts also eat the drugs."

Blade wondered what the farmers and craftsmen of the Valley of the Hashomi thought of having their dead carted off as dinosaur fodder. He would have to ask someone beside the Master, though. In silence he followed the Master away from the pit.

Chapter 9

Not everything the Master showed Blade was as exotic or sinister as the mad-crazed horse or the pit of the assarani. Much of it was simply the training sessions of the Hashomi, with sword and knife, spear, longbow and crossbow, dagger, strangling cords, and other weapons for both open battle and silent murder.

There was very little Blade could teach them about the use of the weapons they already had. Hour after hour of training, week after week, had done about all that could be done.

The Hashomi needed even less advice and instruction on physical conditioning. From the newly entered teenage boys up to the graying men in their late fifties, they were all quick, tough, hard as nails, trimmed down to nothing but skin and muscle stretched tautly over their light bones. In a straight barehanded brawl, somebody the size and strength of Blade could pull any of them apart, but only if he could catch them and hold on.

Still, a time was coming when the Hashomi might need every technique of unarmed combat that Blade could or would teach them. The Master made that clear. The Master also made it clear that Blade had better teach, and teach well-or he might find his freedom and even his life ending abruptly.

The Master also wanted Blade to pass on his skills with the quarterstaff. Like bare hands, a simple staff of wood was not a weapon that would arouse the suspicions of the Hashomi's enemies.

Blade went to work, eight and ten hours a day, doing his best and concealing his distaste for teaching the Hashomi anything that might make them more dangerous. The men learned fast, as he expected. Within a few days he was able to appoint some of the more promising students as instructors.

While Blade taught, he also learned. At times he saw Hashomi training with throwing spears and lighter scimitars. These, he was told, were weapons of the soldiers of Dahaura.

At other times he saw Hashomi using their assassination weapon, but wearing green robes with golden sashes and green shoes of heavy canvas. This was the ceremonial costume of the Hemo-Junah-the Fighters of Junah. They were the strongest of the dissenting sects among the worshippers of Junah, bitterly opposed to the orthodox Tezo-Junahthe Children of Junah.

The rulers of Dahaura, the Barans, had belonged to the Children of Junah for nearly four hundred years. During that time they had persecuted the other sects, until only the Fighters of Junah were left with any strength. As their name implied, they were a militant sect, whose members swore blood oaths and sought to perfect themselves in arms. Often they paid for their oaths and their training with their lives, strangled or beheaded or impaled by order of the Barans. The persecution reduced their numbers, but increased the fanaticism of the survivors.

It was an old and familiar story to Blade, one he'd seen or heard of in a dozen Dimensions. Obviously the Hashomi were planning to take advantage of the religious conflict. They'd be fools not to. But what did they hope to gain by this? The Hashomi were skilled and fanatical, but they had only five thousand

fighting men. Dahaura was an empire spreading several weeks ride from border to border, with millions of people: It would be a tough nut for even the Hashomi to crack.

Unfortunately, Blade once more found his quest for information about as rewarding as trying to get answers from the rocks of the White Mountain. The Master did once ask Blade if he believed in Junah and appeared pleased when the Englishman said no. That was the only revealing thing Blade heard. He began to suspect that he could spend a year here in the Valley of the Hashomi, teaching karate and quarterstaff fighting, without learning much more.

Then suddenly he learned he could not safely stay in the valley at all.

The last of the night's women had just slipped out the door of the hut, and Blade was catching his breath before returning to the hospital. He was not fresh out of Oxford any more, and his day's work training left him with only so much strength for his night's work among the women. Fortunately he had strength for both, and there were many happy women in the valley because of that. It was an exhausting routine, but far better than having either the Master or the women as enemies.

He was about to rise when he heard a faint tapping on the door. A moment of silence, and it came again, in a pattern he recognized. Mirna. He opened the door, and she slipped into the hut and into his arms.

After a moment she drew her lips and body away from his. He stroked her cheek, and felt her trembling slightly.

"Mirna. Are they after you?"

"No." A short, harsh laugh. "They do not yet care what the women do. It will take more than this to make them do so. They do care about what you are doing to the women, though. They care, so that there is danger for you."

"Who are 'they' and what is the danger to me?"

"The fighting Hashomi, even a Treas or two. It is known among them what you do."

"Is it known to the Master?" That might seem a foolish question. By law and custom the Hashomi were supposed to have no secrets from the Master, but Blade doubted all those laws and customs were obeyed. No man can ever bring himself to tell even the most trusted and revered leader every last thing about his personal affairs.

Mirna knew this as well as Blade did. In the darkness he could see her frowning, weighing what she knew. "None of the men have spoken of telling the Master. At least not in the hearing of any of the women of the Houses of the Iced Water. What they may have said and done elsewhere-"

"Yes, I understand. What is it that the men say?"

"They say 'this British agent Blade does not live like a Hashom. He does not meditate, he eats as he chooses and when he chooses, he lives every day alone. And every night he goes forth and takes women. By all that we have learned since we became of the Hashomi, he should be swiftly weakening in both mind and body.

"Yet he is as strong and swift and cunning as ever. He survived wounds that would have killed many Hashomi, and slew two of the best Treases as though they were freshly sworn boys. He is the master of

fighting arts that the Hashomi know not, and teaches them to us.

"What does this say of the way of the Hashomi? Is it needed for strength and speed in the battles we fight? Can only British agents live as Blade does and still fight well? Or could we also perhaps live with good food and beer- and women and freedom when we want them, and still do all that we need to do?"

"That is what they are saying and asking, Blade. Many of them. You are a stranger who has been raised above them, and they do not love you for this. They will kill you if they get the chance. As for the Master-"

Blade put a hand on her lips to silence her so he could think in peace. He knew quite well what the Master would say and do when he heard these mutterings among the Hashomi.

Quite by accident Blade had sown doubt, discontent, and rebellion among the Hashomi. For centuries they'd followed obediently in the footsteps of the First Master and his successors. Now they were beginning to think for themselves.

Sooner or later the Master would hear of this. He would also know that the discipline of the Hashomi was in danger. For Richard Blade, who had brought this danger into the valley, there could be only one penalty.

Death.

It was time to leave the Valley of the Hashomi behind. The Master might learn of this any day. Blade said as much to Mirna, and found her clinging to him, her eyes wet. The farewell took much longer than Blade liked, although Mirna was as delightful and passionate as ever. Then finally she was gone and Blade was able to pull on his clothes.

Fortunately he did not have to return to the hospital. He had his weapons ready to hand. Everything else he needed was in the hidden cache on the far side of the valley. Three hours brisk walking from the hut would bring him there. Then a scramble up the cliffs into the mountains to the north of the valley, and away toward the east and the desert.

Whatever he might find there, it could not be as dangerous now as the Master of the Hashomi.

Chapter 10

Blade was halfway across the valley when he realized that he was being followed. The Hashomi were competent woodsmen, good enough to track a man across country at night. They were not quite good enough to track Blade without being detected. Very few people in any Dimension were.

Blade kept moving without changing his pace, while he considered how to deal with the men on his trail. How many of them were there? Did they want to kill him outright, or capture him and bring him before the Master?

There was a half-moon above, but clouds kept drifting across it. A mile farther on, the moon came out briefly, and Blade was finally able to get a good look at his pursuers. There were four of them, one carrying the staff of a Treas. Blade made up his mind to turn on them as soon as he found a good ambush site. He knew he could handle four Hashomi, probably without any of them getting away to give the alarm.

Blade and the Hashomi who thought they were hunting him kept moving steadily north for another two miles. By now the last village was behind them, the farms were fewer, and the land was becoming more thickly forested. When the moon shone, it showed the cliffs of the northern wall of the valley looming steadily higher. Blade knew the route he'd be using to climb it, if he survived the coming fight. He'd studied the route carefully by daylight, and was confident that he could climb it even by night, as long as no one was shooting at him.

It was about time to make sure nobody would be.

Blade kept moving until he came to a large tree with thick, spreading branches that would support a man and heavy foliage that would hide one. The open ground around it was narrow enough so that anyone leaping down from the tree would be within easy striking distance of anyone there.

Blade scrambled up into the tree, found a well-hidden place where he could brace himself securely, and waited. Insects whined in his ears and the rough bark of the tree gouged his skin, while the sap left sticky messes in his hair and down his neck. He took his mind off the discomforts by checking his sword, knife, dagger, and other weapons. The Hashomi normally went about fully armed, so no one had ever considered it suspicious that Blade was a walking arsenal.

Blade waited in his perch so long that he began to wonder if perhaps the Hashomi had given up the chase. Or perhaps they'd realized he was laying an ambush for them, and had sent back for help? That was an unpleasant thought, but not likely. No Treas and few ordinary Hashomi cared to admit that they needed help in any battle.

Then suddenly the four Hashomi were moving out into the open ground around Blade's tree. They moved as cautiously as if they expected to tread on poisonous snakes any minute. The Treas carried his staff and a knife, two had their swords drawn and ready, and the fourth held a crossbow. In their desire not to lose Blade's trail they'd spread out into a wide line. Too wide. They were beyond mutual supporting distance of each other.

Blade continued to wait as the men moved toward the tree. The moon was shining so brightly now that Blade recognized the Treas. He was one of the five who'd acted as judges at Blade's testing. In another minute he'd have a second chance to judge Blade's skill, although he might not live long enough to benefit from this opportunity.

The archer was drifting to the left, on a course that would bring him almost directly under Blade. Blade waited until the last possible second, then three breaths longer. His hand darted inside his tunic, and jerked out a twenty-foot length of tough cord. On the end was tied a small metal tube. Blade pressed the free end of the tube against the branch, and four spring-loaded hooks popped into sight. He let the cord run out a few feet, then whipped it toward the archer.

The hooks caught the crossbow. Blade jerked hard, and the bow flew out of the man's hands and thudded to the ground. It went off, driving its bolt into the tree. As it did, Blade landed beside it. The archer's eyes widened and he reached for the knife in his belt.

He wasn't fast enough. Blade closed in, the side of his right hand chopping the man across the throat. At the same time his left drove the dagger up under the man's ribs. Blade didn't even wait for the dying archer to fall before he whirled, drawing his sword with his right hand and raising the dagger.

Blade took care to learn what he could do with every weapon that came into his hands. He knew that he could throw the dagger and hit a vital spot on an unarmored man up to about twenty feet away. The next

Hashom was about that far. The man had time for only one step before Blade's dagger was in the air, and one more before it was in his stomach.

That wouldn't kill a man outright, but it would slow and distract even one of the Hashomi. The man hesitated before taking his next step, and his sword froze in midair. Blade's sword hummed in a wide slash with all the strength of both massive arms behind it. The Hashom's body toppled as his head flew high in the air, clipped off as neatly as the head of a dandelion.

By this time the Treas had clearly realized what was happening. He decided to throw pride to the winds and send his last man for help while he himself delayed Blade as long as possible. It was a courageous decision, but made too late. Blade closed with the Treas before the man could abandon staff and knife and draw his sword. He beat the knife out of the other's hand with a swordcut that sent it flying high into the branches of the tree. Then he whirled on one foot and drove the other in over the staff against the Treas' jaw. The man went over backward, landed full length, and lay there without moving or making a sound.

Blade didn't have time to see if the Treas was dead. The last Hashom was obeying his leader's orders and running for dear life. Blade knew he had to catch up with the man and kill him before he reached the cover of the trees. Otherwise the man would get away, to bring the whole valley and all the Hashomi in it after Blade.

Blade's legs were longer, but duty and perhaps fear drove the Hashomi onward like an Olympic sprinter. Blade finally caught the man at the very edge of the trees that would have swallowed him for good, and forced him to turn.

This Hashom was the best swordsman Blade had met in the valley. For a few minutes he had to use all his own strength and skill simply to avoid being struck down. He couldn't afford even a light wound that would slow him down or make it impossible for him to climb the cliffs.

The hiss and clang of swords and the deadly dance of two skilled swordsmen seemed to go on for an hour. In fact, within a few more minutes Blade was able to get through his opponent's guard and wound him in the arm. It wasn't enough to disable the arm, but it was enough to slow the man's sword work. A Hashom's willpower, training, and drugs could make him ignore pain, but not stop flowing blood or knit together severed muscles and tendons.

The next time the two swords crashed together, Blade drove down the Hashom's guard and opened his scalp. Now there was blood flowing down into the man's eyes as well as along his arm. He shook his head, glaring at Blade out of his one clear eye. Before he'd finished shaking his head, Blade's sword came down again, cutting off his right hand. He tried to draw his knife with the remaining hand, but hadn't completed the movement when Blade's sword split his skull from the crown down to the upper jaw.

Blade pulled his sword free of the dead man and used it to cut a branch. Then he laid the branch over the man's bloody face. This was the first opponent he'd met in the Valley of the Hashomi he could really respect—a man who'd turned and fought, and showed real skill as well as the half-demented courage of the Hashomi. He slung his sword and hurried back to where he'd left the fallen Treas.

The man was still unconscious, and a mouth from which most of the teeth were missing was still bleeding. But he was very much alive. His breathing was regular, and his pulse was steady.

Blade felt like cheering. This could mean a better ending to the night's work than simply slipping out of the valley like a thief. The man at his feet was a senior Treas, high among the Hashomi, quite possibly in

the confidence of the Master. A good dose of the ken drug from his own staff would still make him a passive, obedient creature, without a will of his own. Then he would be ready to answer any question Blade might ask him. Blade intended to ask a good many.

Blade bound his prisoner's hands and feet with cord from the man's belt pouch. He carried the Treas and his staff deep into the trees, where no one could come at them quickly or unexpectedly. Then he settled down to the strangest interrogation that his long and varied career had ever brought him.

It was not only the strangest interrogation, it was one of the longest. The Treas seemed to sense what Blade was doing, and there was a savage battle between the strength of the ken and the strength of his will. At last the ken won. But by that time Blade had injected so much that the man was rambling and barely coherent. Blade had to ask the same question four or five times before he got an answer that made sense. He began to wonder if dawn or even daylight would come before he'd finished. His best chance of escaping lay in vanishing from the valley in the darkness, so that no man could say when he'd gone, how, or which way. That might throw off pursuit long enough for him to get clear of the mountains.

Blade's luck held. It was still dark when he rose from behind the sleeping Treas and began pulling on his gear. He knew the heart of the plans of the Master of the Hashomi, and as many details as the Treas himself knew.

It was the Master's dream to provoke a rebellion among the Fighters of Junah against the ruling Baran of Dahaura. He had already helped them with gold, weapons, and Hashomi acting as spies and assassins. They thought he would help them even more, when they rose in open warfare against the Baran. Indeed, they were planning that open warfare largely because they thought they could rely on the aid of the Master and his Hashomi.

They were wrong. The Master had no love for the Baran and the Children of Junah, but he had no love for the Fighters of Junah either. What he did love was his dream—a dream of setting the two sides against each other. There was enough hatred built up between the two to keep them fighting until the Baranate of Dahaura fell into chaos. The cities would be plague-stricken, the farms turned back to desert, the rivers choked with the corpses of the dead. Political power would no longer be in the firm and just hands of the Baran, but in the hands of a score of local warlords, ambitious warlords, who might be willing to do anything or ally themselves with anyone in order to grasp more power.

What would happen if the Hashomi came out of their mountains and offered their support to such a warlord?

What the Master hoped to see happen was the steady rise of the Hashomi to more and more power, until in the end they—and he—were the real rulers of this Dimension . . . or its ruins. It was an ambitious plan, particularly against the present Baran, who seemed to be a gifted, just, and popular ruler. He would be a formidable opponent even for the Master of the Hashomi. Still, the Master's plan offered the best hope that five thousand men could have for seizing an empire.

There was also no doubt that the Master's plan doomed many hundred thousands of people to death or misery, and for no reason except the satisfaction of his ambitions to rule. There was even less doubt in Blade's mind now than there had been—the Hashomi were his enemies, even if the Baran of Dahaura might not be his friend.

Blade looked at the man lying at his feet. This man was one of the Master's trusted counselors and advisers. For that he deserved death several times over. Yet Blade had never found it possible to cut the throat of a sleeping man in cold blood, unless his own life or mission was at stake. That wasn't the case

here. The amount of ken injected into the Treas would keep him asleep for several hours, and give him total amnesia for several days. By the time anybody could get anything sensible from him, Blade would be long gone. Blade arranged the man as comfortably as possible, tied him up again, and started north.

There were hints of dawn in the sky when Blade reached the foot of the cliffs. He'd deliberately chosen a route up them as difficult as he could manage. The Hashomi were at home among their mountains, but not on them. They preferred to revere their sacred White Mountain from a distance, without scaling its twenty thousand feet of ice, snow, and rock. They had only limited skill in rock-climbing, and no idea what Blade could do.

That was a weakness, and Blade was going to take full advantage of it. The Hashomi could doubtless trail him as far as the base of the cliff. There his trail would end, and nothing would face them except the rock towering five hundred feet before it became a reasonable slope. They would look at it, and for some time they would be wondering if Blade had developed wings and flown off into the sky.

The Hashomi were not so stupid that they would go on wondering forever. Someone-probably the Master-would realize that since Blade could not have done anything else, he had climbed the cliff. Search parties would climb the easier routes along the north side of the valley and plunge into the mountains on Blade's trail. But it would be a cold trail. Blade would have gained many hours on the Hashomi, perhaps a whole day.

With that kind of a lead, he knew he could stay ahead of nearly anyone, in any Dimension.

He tied the climbing rope and the axe to his belt, and pulled on the boots with the heavy nailed soles. He carefully stowed the rest of his gear, and adjusted the pack so that it rode snug and comfortable, pulling him neither forward nor backward. He didn't want to find himself being pulled off balance while he was hanging by his fingers and toes over hundreds of feet of empty air.

He took a final swig from his water bottle, then stepped forward, raising both hands and one foot. He felt the rock solid under his curving fingers, felt his spikes gripping the foothold. Peace flowed through him. This was no longer the weird battle against the Hashomi. This was the familiar battle against the strength of the rock and the weaknesses of his own body. Blade relaxed, and began to climb.

Chapter 11

Blade marched north for two days before turning east toward the desert. This would still further confuse his trail. It would also bring him out of the mountains as close as possible to the oasis of Habin D'er. The Hashomi maps he'd seen showed it no more than an easy day's march from the foot of the mountains. At the oasis he could wait until one of the trade caravans came by, then join it for the journey across the desert.

Three more days marching eastward brought Blade out of the mountains. If the Hashomi were on his trail, he saw and heard no sign of it. The mountains were vast and the Hashomi hardly numerous enough to comb them boulder by boulder for a single man skilled in both evading and fighting. As long as they didn't guess how many of their most vital secrets Blade was carrying off, they might not even think it worthwhile pursuing him.

Of course, the word would sooner or later be out, and the Hashomi in Dahaura would be on the lookout for him. He'd have to disguise himself and perhaps lie low, until he'd gained power and influence or the protection of someone who had them. That should not be impossible. Even if there were as many as a thousand Hashomi in Dahaura, there were also a million other people in the city, and Blade was an expert

at being invisible to his enemies.

On the morning of the fourth day he came through the last narrow canyon on the fringes of the mountains and looked out across the desert. Here the peaks came down almost to the sand, with only a mile or so of boulder-strewn ground separating them. The sun blazed down so that even the reflected light from the sand half-dazzled Blade. He still could not miss a patch of lush greenness far out on the eastern horizon. He took careful bearings on the patch, filled his water bottles from a last feeble stream, and settled down to wait until dark.

At last the chill darkness of a desert night came down on the land. Blade crossed the boulders and struck out into the desert. His sense of direction kept him on course as his legs carried him steadily up and down one dune after another. Every hour or so he stopped briefly to rest and look back at the mountains. Slowly they were fading away in the darkness. Blade made up his mind that if he ever entered those mountains again, it would be as an armed enemy of the Hashomi.

If that time ever came, it would help to have Mirna and her women on his side. He hoped she could keep her plans secret and her women alive until then.

Shortly after dawn Blade climbed a dune and from its crest saw a spot of green on the horizon. Two more dunes, and the spot was still there. Two more dunes after that, and he could make out individual trees. Now the ground leveled out, and Blade's pace increased almost to a trot as he covered the last mile to the fringes of the oasis.

As he passed the first trees, he heard from the opposite side of the oasis the bubbling cries of camels, the thud of many feet, and the rattle and jangle of harness. Blade stopped in mid-stride and swerved to the left, where a stand of squat trees with palm-like leaves and purple berries offered some cover. Before he could get out of sight, a dozen bearded men in white robes burst through the trees. Most of them had single-handed curved swords and those who didn't carried thick double-curved bows and filled quivers.

Again Blade stopped. He spread his arms and raised his empty hands. "I come in peace, my friends," he said. "Are you of Dahaura?"

The answer was an arrow that missed Blade's ear by less than a foot and thumped into a tree well behind him. Blade darted to the left, trying for the cover of the trees. A second arrow whistled past his nose and plunged into the middle of the trees, while a third sank into the hard sand at his feet.

The precision with which those arrows were landing showed Blade that the men were missing him deliberately. If he tried to run or fight, they could easily make him look like a pincushion before he could give one of them a single scratch.

What wretched luck! If he'd waited until nightfall to approach the oasis, these people might have already come and gone. If they'd made camp, there would have been sentries and perhaps campfires to warn him. Even in the daylight, if they'd approached the oasis from any other direction but the exact opposite side-

Blade swore mentally, as several of the men rushed forward to surround him and strip him of his weapons and gear. They also took his boots, leaving him standing barefoot on the uncomfortably hot sand.

The men examined the weapons they took from Blade, and a rapid babble of conversation rose as they recognized the hand flower of the Hashomi on the sword and the knife. One of the men jerked a thumb

at Blade.

"Think he's one of them? This is damned close to their mountains. Maybe we should-" as he made the universal throat-slitting gesture.

The man who seemed to be in command pulled at his beard, then slowly shook his head. "No. A Hashom wouldn't have surrendered. His mistake, and our gain. He's got the look of a fighting man, and I'm not going to give up a hundred mahari because he might be a Hashom."

"A hundred?" The first man sounded skeptical.

"At least. I've seen smaller men bring a hundred and twenty. Of course they might have to trim him, to keep him in hand, but that's not our problem."

"All right, Shman. But if he tries to escape-" Again the throat-slitting gesture.

"Of course."

The conversation died, as the men bound Blade's hands behind his back and led him after them. They came out on the other side of the trees, on the bank of a large pond of blue-green water. More than thirty camels were lined up on the other bank, their muzzles dipping into the water as they drank with furious gulping noises. A few of them carried heavy packs, but most of them bore riding saddles and harness.

More white-robed men were moving about among the camels, carrying waterskins and coarse woolen sacks. All of them were armed like the ones who'd taken Blade. There was also a ten-foot lance slung in a leather bucket on the flank of each camel.

Blade's feet were bound, and he was left in the shade of a tree by the pond. He spent the afternoon there, while the men watered their camels, filled their waterskins, ate, and trimmed their beards. Blade noted that four or five mounted men were always patrolling the fringes of the oasis, and the dismounted men always kept their weapons to hand. These were good soldiers. Blade would have thought twice about trying to escape from them, even if he hadn't known they would kill him if he tried.

Blade listened carefully to the conversation of the men, and was able to sort out most of what had happened to him. His captors were indeed soldiers of Dahaura, a patrol of the Baranate's elite Desert Riders. Under other circumstances Blade would probably not have encountered them until he reached the other side of the main desert.

Unfortunately, once more his luck had been bad. The Baran himself had issued a new edict that the Desert Riders were to send their patrols to the very foot of the mountains of the Hashomi. They were also to arrest any man found wandering alone, or any party without proper identification. Such people were to be enslaved if they surrendered peacefully, killed on the spot if they resisted or attempted to escape after capture.

Apparently the Baran was not yet ready to make open war on the Hashomi. He was quite happy to set his soldiers to making it more difficult for the Hashomi to wage war against him.

The edict must have been very recent indeed, thought Blade, or the Hashomi would have heard of it and I would have been expecting something like this. Either that, or the network of spies the Hashomi claimed to have in Dahaura had let them down.

It was almost pleasant to think of the arrogant, fanatical Hashomi making such a mistake. Unfortunately it was Blade who was going to have to pay for that mistake. He would reach Dahaura as a bound slave, destined for sale in the market and perhaps worse. He didn't like the word "trimming" which he had heard mentioned by several of his captors. He suspected it referred to making a male slave into a eunuch. Slavery itself he could survive, but losing his manhood was another matter. They'd have to kill him first, and they wouldn't do it without a few casualties of their own!

Once Blade was sure he'd been captured by men of Dahaura, he tried to speak to them. He tried three times. The first two times he was slapped, hard enough to split his lip. The third time one of the men drew a knife and flourished it in a way that hinted Blade would lose an eye if he opened his mouth again.

"The Law of Silence for slaves is made of iron, and you would do well to remember that!"

Toward sunset they brought Blade water and food-raisins, flat bread, a small piece of dried meat. Then they lifted him onto the back of one of the pack camels, tying his hands to the reins and his feet to the stirrups. The others mounted up, and the whole patrol moved off into the desert night.

The patrol quartered the desert for three more days, from oasis to oasis. Apart from feeding him, the Baran's men ignored Blade completely. He had nothing to do but listen to the conversations around him and watch the desert scenery. The conversations told him little that was new and the scenery quickly lost its appeal.

At last the patrol reached an oasis that seemed to be a base for the Desert Riders. There was a whitewashed stone fort that would have looked at home in any of a dozen movies about the French Foreign Legion.

There was also a caravan heading eastward, out of the desert. The patrol captain turned Blade over to the caravan, with depressingly strict instructions to kill him if he tried escaping. That same evening the caravan rode out of the fort and turned east.

Five days later they were out of the desert, and six days after that they came to Dahaura.

The name Dahaura! meant "Jewel of the Da," the mile-wide river on whose banks the city was built. The city covered all the land inside a wide bend of the Da. At the river end the ground rose into a gigantic rocky hill. Successive Barans had leveled and terraced the hill bit by bit, surrounding it with walls and building their palaces on top of it. With those walls defended by a loyal garrison, the Barans had a formidable citadel that could hold out even against an enemy who'd entered the city itself.

That would not be easy. The landward side of Dahaura was protected by a wall eight miles long and fifty feet high, with nine towered gates. On the river sides the city was defended by a strong fleet of galleys and the mile-wide river itself. A single floating bridge crossed the Da, entering the city directly below the walls of the Baran's citadel.

Dahaura could stand against almost any attack from the outside. That was the problem. The attack the Master of the Hashomi was readying would be one from within. How well could the city and the Baranate cope with that?

The caravan turned onto a brick road that approached the walls of Dahaura through several miles of cultivated land. Blade saw fruit orchards, vegetable patches, and vineyards with fat bunches of purple and green grapes. Small humped bridges carried the road over a network of irrigation canals.

Closer to the city the road grew wider and the traffic on it grew heavier. More caravans, with camels, horses, and mules all lurching or trotting along with a great clatter and clinking. Ox-carts piled high with barrels and sacks rumbled along, their drivers cracking long whips. Several times parties of soldiers passed, usually riding at a canter on graceful horses.

Still closer to the city, the side of the road began to be lined with white stone walls surmounted with gilded iron spikes. Beyond the walls Blade could make out treetops and the tiled roofs of sprawling houses. Once they passed a square white block of a building set in the middle of a neatly manicured lawn. Beside the building rose a five-sided tower, on each side a mosaic showing the red spiral that was the symbol of Junah, the One and Universal. A platform on top of the tower supported a circular brass gong as tall as a man.

Then at last they came up to the outer gate. Four guards came out, bare to the waist except for blue necklaces and their bows and quivers. They examined the caravan leader's pass, ran quickly along the line of men and animals, then signaled to their comrades on top of the wall. Ahead, double gates of iron-bound timber twenty feet on a side creaked open. The caravan trotted forward. A moment of darkness and coolness, then the sun was blazing down on the caravan again. Richard Blade had come to Dahaura.

Chapter 12

A million people lived in Dahaura and it seemed to Blade that all of them were out in the streets at once. The caravan advanced one step, almost one inch at a time, down a wide street that was packed from curb to curb with other animals, men, women, and children, carts, wagons, and ornate carriages.

The air was thick enough to slice with the smells of animals, unwashed human beings, overripe fruit, herbs and spices, perfumes, and charcoal smoke from the braziers of the craftsmen in the little alleys opening off either side of the street.

Now traffic came to a complete halt as two wagons ahead locked wheels. One driver tried to jerk his vehicle free. The sacks piled high on the other wagon toppled into the first one. Several burst and showered the driver with yellow grain. The drivers cursed each other, everyone they were holding up cursed them, their oxen lowed angrily and tried to butt at each other. Eventually both drivers had the sense to back up, and the traffic untangled itself.

Blade saw similar scenes three more times before a massive gray-brown building loomed up at the end of the street. It had "prison" written all over it even without the armed guards at each gate and on the roof.

The caravan stopped briefly at the main gate of the prison and Blade was ordered to dismount. More of the barechested, blue-necklaced infantry of the Baran ran out to surround him.

"Dangerous?" one of them asked, pointing at Blade.

The caravan leader shrugged. "The Desert Riders took him alive, and he didn't give us much trouble either. Tries to talk out of turn, but that's about all."

"Right," said the soldier. He raised a spiked truncheon and prodded Blade in the buttocks with it hard enough to draw blood. "Come on, you. And remember the Law of Silence."

By now Blade knew better than to do anything but obey. The guards hustled him off, and an iron-barred

gate clanged shut behind them. A ramp paved with worn flagstones sloped down into the foundations of the prison. Blade's guards half-led, half-pushed him down it, and after another few steps the sunlight was gone.

How many prisoners had been hustled down this ramp, to wear the flagstones down? Blade wondered. He also wondered how many of the prisoners had ever seen the sunlight again.

The prison chamber for the male slaves was a stone-walled and stone-floored pit a hundred feet on a side. A narrow ledge ran around all four sides, where the guards walked. At one end was a solid iron door.

It was impossible to keep track of time there. Blade could find no routine in the meals, in the filling of the water buckets, or in anything else. The prisoners came and went quickly, and most of them were numb and apathetic.

The guards were efficient, alert, hard-working, and often brutal. The rule of silence for slaves was strictly enforced, with long iron-tipped whips. Blade saw one of those whips take out a man's eyes when he tried to complain about some totally spoiled food. Blade kept very much to himself, and endured in grim silence the crowding, the smells, the wretched food and scummy water, the lice and rats, and the screams and whimperings of his fellow prisoners.

A few of those prisoners resented Blade's aloofness, and perhaps also the obvious good health that gave him a chance of being sold into some service where he might hope to survive. The first man who let his resentment of Blade go too far got a broken wrist, the second got a sprained ankle and a knock on the head. After that the other prisoners let Blade alone. None of them wanted to risk serious injury at the hands of this silent, scarred giant. Slaves with crippling injuries were often slain outright, or sent to the salt flats at the mouth of the Da, a slower but equally certain death.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly onward, one hour hardly distinguishable from another. Blade began to wonder how long he'd be in this prison. He could endure filth and lice, but not the loss of all sense of time. Disorientation and perhaps apathy would follow, sooner or later. They would not kill him, not even in the prison, but they might leave him slowed down when he left the prison. That could be fatal.

Blade used every technique he'd ever learned to keep his mind and body in condition. He succeeded. He also succeeded in convincing his fellow prisoners that he was quite mad, and making them avoid him even more carefully than before.

At last a day came, when a guard cracked a whip at Blade and shouted, "You! The big desert man! Up and out of here!" The iron-weighted tip of the whip snapped just over Blade's head as he scrambled up the wall of the pit. For the moment he didn't care where he was going or what awaited him there. He only cared that he was getting out of the damned prison!

The guards scrubbed Blade with soap whose smell alone would have killed any germs or vermin. They shaved off every bit of his hair except his eyebrows, and oiled him from head to foot until he looked and felt more like a greased pig than a human being. Finally they gave him a meal-bread, porridge, boiled salt meat, beer-all he could eat and drink. One meal couldn't put back on Blade's bones the twenty pounds he'd lost in prison, but it gave him strength and peace of mind.

He slept well that night, alone in an almost-clean cell, and in the morning they led him out onto the auction block.

Blade had been a slave in a good many different Dimensions, but this was the first time he'd actually been put up on the open market. He couldn't help wondering what his market price would be. Doubtless that would depend on what he was being sold for. That was more than interesting-it could make the difference between life and death.

One of the guards prodded him in the back with a truncheon. Blade noticed that the young woman who'd been sitting on the bench beside him was gone. "On your feet, big boy!" grunted the man. "You're next."

Blade rose awkwardly to his feet and shuffled to the foot of brick stairs that led up on to the block. His wrists and ankles were chained. At the top of the stairs was a square doorway that showed a patch of eye-searing blue sky. From beyond the doorway Blade could hear the brisk patter of the auctioneer, voices raised to bid, an occasional clink of chain as the girl moved, and a background murmur from the crowd. It seemed to take a lot of talking for the auctioneer to get each bid-apparently it was a slow day. Blade heard the bidding on the girl creep up to fifty mahari, make a single jump to sixty, then stay there. Finally the auctioneer's voice barked:

"Sold to [a barely pronounceable name whose spelling Blade couldn't imagine] for sixty mahari."

The guard prodded Blade with the spike of his truncheon. One of these days, Blade decided, he was going to take one of those truncheons away from a guard and give it back as painfully as possible. Then he rose to his feet and climbed the stairs to the block.

The first blaze of sunlight dazzled him for a moment. When his eyes adjusted, he found himself standing on a wooden platform, at one end of a large square paved with filthy brown flagstones. Brick walls rose on either side of the square, trapping the heat of the day, seeming to bounce all of it toward the auction block. Blade felt sweat breaking out at once, and the auctioneer looked as if he'd been fished out of a river. His long robe was almost black with filth and sweat.

Scattered across the square were at least two hundred people, some standing, some sitting on cushions or rugs, a few lucky ones sitting on donkeys or under canopies held over them by household slaves. Blade smelled beer, fruit, and smoke from carved ivory pipes, and read weariness, heat, and boredom on all the faces.

The auctioneer waved his ivory baton at Blade. "Honored sirs, I offer this man-strong, fit, in the prime of life, suitable for any task." He prodded Blade's shoulder muscles and biceps. "Taken by the Riders under the Forbidden Desert Edict of our noble Baran, he is unwounded, well-fed, ready to train. Imagine this matchless physical specimen bearing your chairs, shifting the burdens of your household, standing guard over your valuables. Consider-"

"Consider how long we've been sitting out here!" shouted someone. "Get to the point! How much?"

"Honored sirs, I beg you to consider the many uses to which, a man of such size and strength may be put. I beg you to-"

"How much, you pissing jackass?" roared another voice, louder and angrier than the first one.

The auctioneer's face turned noticeably paler. "A hundred and ten mahari," he gasped.

Several people growled angrily, and others turned away and began to drift toward the gate. "In the name of Junah, have mercy, honored sirs," cried the auctioneer. "It is not my judgment of this man's worth that

has set the price where it is. Nor is it my place to question the judgment of the Baran's officers." The growls died away into silence, but the drift toward the gate continued.

The auctioneer's face turned still paler, and he looked as if he was about to get down on his knees and beg the crowd to put in a bid. "Honored sirs, I am at a loss-"

"Oh, send him back down and bring on another girl," someone snapped. "A hundred and ten mahari for that wild bull? And him not even trimmed? You think anyone'd want something like that in his house, or within a mile of his women?" There was a growl of agreement.

Blade realized that the size and physical condition he'd expected to be an asset were turning out to be almost a liability. His best chance now was being sold for manual labor, but anyone who had a hundred and ten mahari to spend on workers could buy three of them for that price. It looked as if he might be going back to prison, or else facing the trimming knives of the surgeons.

"Ho, auctioneer!" One of the mounted men slipped down from the back of his donkey and pushed forward, a servant striding behind him. "I bid a hundred mahari, for the desert man."

"Kubin, you-!" the auctioneer began, then bit off his words. He even managed to stop his hands from shaking before the approaching man reached the block.

Blade stared down at the man, and their eyes met. The man called Kubin was nearly as broad as Blade, though a head shorter. He wasn't fat, either. His bare arms and the chest revealed by his silk tunic were layered and ridged with muscle. In his sash Kubin carried a scimitar nearly large enough for one of the Hashomi, and his servant carried another. Blade noticed that the men nearest to Kubin were inching away or trying to look elsewhere.

The auctioneer tore his eyes away from Kubin and shouted, "Is there another bid? Another, honored sirs? Another bid than that of Kubin Ben Sarif? Another? What, no other? I call once.

"I call twice.

"I call three times-and the desert man is sold to Kubin Ben Sarif, for one hundred mahari!"

There was a collective sigh of relief from the crowd, almost loud enough to drown out the sigh of relief from the auctioneer. He bowed deeply to Kubin. "Is it your wish that the man be trimmed? For thirty mahari extra, the surgeons of the house will do it for you, and keep him until he recovers."

"Or dies," said Kubin. He looked Blade up and down, seeming to examine each muscle and tendon, each limb, each scar. Blade did his best to remain impassive under the man's inspection. Kubin Ben Sarif was not precisely the master he would have chosen. There was something about the man to make others fear him. Still, he was better than a return to prison, perhaps as an unsaleable slave destined for trimming or the living death of the salt flats.

Kubin's examination of Blade went on so long that the auctioneer began to fidget again. "Honored Kubin, it becomes difficult to spend any more time upon this man. There are other slaves to sell this day. Will you have him trimmed or not?"

Without moving a muscle, Blade got ready for action. If Kubin said yes, there was going to be blood all over this auction block in the next minute, and not all of it would be Blade's. There were enough soldiers in sight to make sure he wouldn't be getting out of here alive, but that wouldn't save the auctioneer, or

Kubin.

Kubin's eyes rose again, and this time they met and held Blade's. Slave and free man stared hard at each other, then both looked away in the same moment. Slowly Kubin shook his head.

"No, I'll take him as he is."

Chapter 13

The auctioneer's desire to get both Blade and his new master on their way helped speed the paperwork. In less than half an hour Blade was chained securely in the back of a hired cart driven by Kubin's servant. They rattled out of the slave market with Kubin riding behind on his donkey.

The cart picked up speed as they reached the main street. Blade noticed that many people seemed to recognize Kubin, and some of those who found themselves in his path made a visible effort to get clear. Few greeted the man, and practically no one smiled at him.

Blade wondered what kind of a man he had to deal with—a secret police officer, or Dahaura's equivalent of a Mafia chief, or what? It was hard to believe that someone engaged in criminal business would ride around as Kubin did, in broad daylight, undisguised, and with only a single servant, unless he was brave to the point of madness.

The cart kept to the main streets until it rumbled out one of the gates and on another mile beyond the wall. Then it turned down a lane between two high stone walls and finally stopped at a gate. Unlike the gates, of the other villas along the road, this one was not ornamental ironwork. It was massive timber, with a heavy iron bolt rammed home. The tower on one side of the gate was plain, without plasterwork or mosaics. All four sides were loopholed, and Blade saw the glint of spears and helmets on top.

The gate opened smoothly, on well-oiled hinges. The cart rolled in, onto a path of hard gravel between rose trees twenty feet high. Among the trees stood marble benches decorated with geometrical figures and statues in bronze and marble. The rose petals, red and yellow and gold, lay scattered on the gravel, and the scent was almost overpowering.

All the rest of Kubin Ben Sarif's villa that Blade saw was like this—an endless alternation of grim military efficiency and opulent beauty that hinted at the wealth the efficiency was defending. However Kubin Ben Sarif had gained his fortune, he certainly had one.

There was nothing luxurious about the basement room where Blade and Kubin first faced each other in private. Walls and ceiling were whitewashed stone, while the floor was plain blue tile. The only furniture was a long table of polished wood, and a stool padded with a green cushion on which Kubin sat. An iron ring nearly a yard in diameter was set into one wall, and Blade's chains were fastened to the ring. He could turn freely, but not move more than a couple of feet in any direction.

Kubin straddled the stool and placed both hands on his knees. "So, desert man. You are now in the service of Kubin Ben Sarif. What do you say to that?"

Blade smiled. "That depends on whether I have permission to speak."

"You do. In fact, you are ordered to speak when I ask you a question."

Blade nodded. "I understand. As for what I say to being in your service—I do not know who you are,

what you are, or the duties of a slave in your service."

"You know nothing about me?" Kubin's face was unreadable, but his voice could not entirely conceal his surprise. "How long have you been in Dahaura?" This time his tone held not only surprise, but a slight note of wounded vanity.

Blade did not risk smiling. Instead he shrugged and said evenly, "I crossed the border of Dahaura three days before I was taken by the Desert Riders. Since that time I have had little chance to observe the men of Dahaura and who is important among them. I know that you are a wealthy man-this villa says so. I also know that you are respected and even feared by many in Dahaura-the eyes of the men in the slave market said that. More than this I do not know. That is ignorance, I admit, but it is not my fault."

Kubin laughed. "You are right about my being respected, feared, and wealthy, and I like it that you have seen all these things. Now I shall end your ignorance.

"I am Kubin Ben Sarif, and I am first among the dealers in women in all Dahaura. In my houses are more than three hundred women, with beauty and skill such that no man who walks the earth cannot find one among them to please him. My business is these women, and all else that is necessary for the prosperity and good order of the houses where they may be found. Much else is necessary beside the flesh of the women. Perhaps you did not realize this."

"I have heard that this is so," said Blade. "When one has as many women in one's service as there are soldiers in a company of the Baran's army, one must take much the same care of them."

Kubin laughed. "Well spoken. Indeed, that is a comparison I have used myself, for I was once a soldier of the Baran. Not he who rules Dahaura now, but his father. I have often asked myself-had I remained in the Baran's service, might I not be a noble and a general now?"

Kubin launched into a long tale, of a promising young soldier who'd hidden certain jewels he'd found on the body of a bandit. With some of the jewels he bought his discharge from the army, with the rest he bought a small house and four lovely women. The house prospered from the work of the women, and so did Kubin Ben Sarif.

He had continued to prosper, with minor interruptions, for twenty-five years.

It took Kubin more than an hour to tell the tale of those years. At first Blade wondered why he was being told so much. Then he realized that Kubin was skipping lightly and discreetly over a good many episodes-such as how so many of his rivals had come to die at times so convenient for him. What Blade was getting was merely the "official" biography.

Still, what Blade was learning was valuable. He'd been close in his guess that Kubin was the local equivalent of a Mafia chief. Certainly it would be wise to treat him as that sort of man-one who would show solid loyalty to faithful servants, and total ruthlessness toward unfaithful ones.

Eventually Kubin ran out of tales to tell and called for beer. The servant brought two cups and two jugs, and on Kubin's signal put one of them within easy reach of Blade.

"Go on," said Kubin. "No one is watching us to demand that you not drink in the presence of a free man of Dahaura." He raised his own cup and intoned solemnly, "In the hope of Junah's blessing of a long life without sin and a quick death without pain, I drink."

Blade filled his own cup, repeated the prayer, and also drank. It was not very good beer, weak and flat, but it was cool and wet. At the moment it seemed one of the most refreshing drinks he'd ever tasted.

Kubin emptied a second cup, then crossed his arms on his chest and looked at Blade. "Doubtless you wonder-what will you be in my service, that you need to know all that I have told you?"

"I can't deny that."

Kubin laughed. "Very good. It is simple. It was clear to me that you were a man who'd spent most of his life as a free warrior. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Good. Many of the others thought the same. They were fools. They saw only how dangerous you might be, and not how useful. I have places for such men as you in my service. There is much that must be done in my houses and elsewhere in my affairs that is best done by a man with a sword in his hands. A strong man, who knows what to do with that sword."

"Such men are indeed useful, in a business such as yours," said Blade. "I am pleased that you consider me fit to be one." That was partly true. Admittedly, Blade would not have freely chosen a job as a combined Mafia bodyguard, hitman, and whorehouse bouncer. But since the job had chosen him, he could live with it better than some. He would have a sword in his hand and a certain amount of freedom of movement. He would not be trapped and defenseless.

"You will not be so pleased if I find that I've made a mistake about you," said Kubin.

"That is one reason I did not have you trimmed. The trimming knife is something to hold over your head-or over your balls." He laughed harshly. "Also, most men trimmed at your age do not survive it. I was not going to pay another thirty mahari to have you butchered and lose everything."

"Then-in my work I will have nothing to do with the women?" said Blade.

Again Kubin laughed. "In your work, no. As for what you do when you are not working-that is your affair. You do not strike me as a lover of boys, and few of my women are lovers of other women. So I do not imagine that you will stay apart from all of them all of the time.

"Just remember, though. If you do anything to make one of the women unfit for her work, you will have me to reckon with. And if you do anything to one that her sisters call an injury, you will have them to deal with.

"If you have a choice, you'd do better to deal with me. The women of my houses are Women Beyond the Law, and they've lived as long as they have by taking no nonsense from any man. Frankly, I'd rather face a trimming knife or even the Baran's executioners than half a dozen of my own women when they're feeling a grievance."

"I thank you for the warning," said Blade.

"Thank me by doing everything I think you can do," said Kubin, rising from the stool. "If you do, I can promise you freedom within three years. If not-" He shrugged. "Junah sends to some men wisdom and to some folly. Who is to know what he shall receive?"

He rang the bell to summon the guards, turned, and strode with massive dignity out of the room.

Chapter 14

Blade's first post in the service of Kubin Ben Sarif was as a guard in the House of the Night's Tale in the Street of the Ox-Droivers. He was on duty all night, twelve solid hours, with a club in his hand and a sword at his belt. He kept the customers moving in and out, quietly if possible, forcibly if necessary. He kept track of the comings and goings of the other servants, with their trays of food, their jugs of beer and wine, their flasks of perfume and their hot towels. The House of the Night's Tale offered every luxury that its customers might ask for, along with the women. It charged accordingly. For a full night with one of the four leading ladies of the house, the charge was thirty mahari-more than the purchase price of some of the serving girls.

The job was not boring, but it was tiring, hard on the temper, and sometimes dangerous. There was usually at least one difficult customer each night, and as a slave Blade had to tread a very fine line in his dealings with them. If he was too gentle, the man could wreck the house and cost Blade his job. Too rough, and the man might draw his sword at Blade. Then there would also be a mess, perhaps bloodshed, certainly the loss of Blade's job, and perhaps a sentence to the salt flats. A slave had certain rights against a free man in defense of his master's property, but the courts could not always be persuaded to support them.

Blade's size and strength were an asset in this work. He outweighed the average Dahauran by at least twenty pounds, and could pick up many of the house's customers with one hand and disarm them with the other. In his first five weeks at the House of the Night's Tale, Blade never had to draw his sword on a customer.

More dangerous to Blade than the customers was Hadish, the senior guard at the house. Hadish was only a little smaller than Blade, and was all muscle. He had only one ear and one eye, and no liking whatever for Blade. He felt that Blade had been promoted to a position of trust he didn't deserve. What's more, this had been done without Hadish's consent.

"What's Kubin coming to?" Hadish growled once. "Did you ram him so good he wanted to keep you around?"

Blade knew that Hadish often insisted on younger guards in Kubin's service submitting to his attentions before he'd recommend them for promotion. He smiled blandly and shrugged. "I don't know about Kubin, but something's certainly nipping at you. Does it bother you, that you can't get it off with me? I suppose it might, since now you'll have to try the women, and I doubt if any of them will put up with your scars and your stinks."

Blade had to draw his sword then, at least briefly, to keep Hadish from trying to push him down the basement stairs. After that they weren't quite open enemies-Kubin's discipline was too tight for that. But Blade was aware that he'd better keep his back covered when Hadish was around.

Fortunately, Blade had an ally in the House of the Night's Tale after his first few weeks there. It began just before dawn one morning, when the sky was paling and the breeze through the windows already held the first hints of a scorching hot day. Dahaura wasn't in the desert, but you could never have told it from the daytime temperatures. Everyone who could afford it had a villa or house outside the city, away from the heat, dust, and smells, with trees, grass, and flowing water close at hand.

Blade climbed the stairs to the third-floor loft where he and the other male servants slept. He stepped

onto the floor, hearing a board creak under his foot, and turned toward the loft door.

Then suddenly he felt two hands grip him from behind.

Blade realized just in time that the hands were small and soft. He was already turning, one hand on his sword hilt and the other arm doubling up to drive his elbow backward into his attacker's stomach. Then the "attacker" giggled. Slowly Blade turned around, hand still on the sword hilt, and looked down.

The woman giggled again, and looked up. She had to crane her neck to meet Blade's eyes, for she was no more than five feet tall. Blade recognized Esseta, one of the four High Women of the House of the Night's Tale.

The women of Kubin's brothels were seldom entirely what they seemed, but in Esseta's case appearances were more than usually deceiving. She was close to thirty, but showed not a line or a wrinkle. In the dim light of the house where she did her business, she could and often did pass for a girl of seventeen.

It was not only her face and body that could seem to be a girl's. She could adopt all the mannerisms of one, convincing any customer that he was dealing with a green, inexperienced girl, new to her trade, almost innocent. This notion inspired many of her customers to extraordinary performances and extraordinary generosity.

Other men preferred a mature woman, experienced, skilled, and perhaps even comforting. Esseta was able to please them also. In fact, there was hardly a male desire she could not satisfy. She had great skill, no inhibitions, and a cool head.

After twelve years in Kubin's houses, Esseta also had enough money to buy a house of her own and say good-bye forever to his service, or even retired completely. She preferred not to. Women Beyond the Law had a good deal of independence. In that way they were better off than the more respectable wives, daughters, and mothers held "Within the Law," always under the protection of some man.

On the other hand, a Woman Beyond the Law was still on her own, in a land where men ruled, sometimes with a heavy hand. She didn't have to have a protector, but she often found it helpful to hire one. Esseta was now in effect hiring Kubin Ben Sarif as her protector, and for the price she paid he gave very good protection indeed. If you kept your agreements with Kubin, he would do the same in return, and at much risk and even expense to himself. On the other hand, if you cheated him, then Junah help you!

Esseta giggled again as her eyes met Blade's. He frowned, not quite able to match her lighthearted mood. "I hope you realize how nearly you came to getting knocked flat," he said quietly. "Grabbing a fighting man from behind that way, in the dark, is not wise."

"I'm sorry. I thought I could get your attention quietly." She giggled again.

That giggle was infectious. Blade found it impossible to stay in a bad mood. He smiled at Esseta. "Does that giggle mean that I'm dealing with the girl instead of the woman?"

Suddenly the giggle changed to the full-throated laughter of an adult woman. "Why don't you try finding out for yourself, Blade?" She slipped a hand into his and led him in the opposite direction from the door to the sleeping loft.

With a finger to her lips, she led Blade along a dark passage he'd seen but never explored. It ended in a plain wooden door. Esseta pointed to a carved knob. Blade gripped the knob and heaved. The door slid aside with a faint grating of wood on wood. Beyond lay a square windowless chamber, dimly lit by an oil lamp in an iron bracket on one wall. The light showed dust on the floor, and Blade felt it prickling in his nostrils as his feet kicked it up.

The light also showed a wooden bed, piled with clean but worn quilts and rugs. Blade turned to pull the door shut behind them. He heard a whimper of cloth and another faint giggle as the door thudded home. He turned and saw Esseta standing in the middle of the room: Her robe had fallen into a neat pile at her feet, and she was totally nude.

For a moment Blade felt that his breath was about to stop. In Esseta's five feet there was more beauty than he'd imagined possible in any three women. Every curve flowed into every other curve as if there was only one possible way to do it. Scented oil gave her pale brown skin the sheen of fine bronze. Her hair was a tight cap of dark curls. Both her snub nose and the nipples of her delicate breasts had an impudent upward tilt.

Then her mouth curled up into a smile that was both a girl's and a woman's. She fingered her chin with one hand, resting the other hand on a well-turned hip. Slowly she walked in a circle around Blade. Without the smile on Esseta's face, Blade would have felt unpleasantly like a horse being examined by a particularly skeptical buyer. As it was, he could anticipate what would happen as soon as Esseta had finished her inspection.

At last Esseta came up to Blade from behind, and again her arms went around him and small soft hands pressed against him. He wore nothing but trousers and boots, and her fingers danced up and down his bare chest swiftly, delicately, and precisely. At the same time she brought her face close to his back, until her curls tickled his skin and her lips could caress the line of his backbone.

She did all of this with such skill that Blade was soon as aroused as if they'd already joined. He bit back a gasp, sensing that she wanted him to remain passive as long as he could. It was more of her playfulness.

At last Esseta stepped away from Blade and came around in front of him. She raised herself on tiptoe until her lips could curl themselves warmly and wetly against his. The kiss faded away with tantalizing slowness, and Blade felt her lips drifting down with the same luxurious warmth over his skin. She kissed his ribs and his stomach while her fingers twined themselves in the hair on his chest. Then her lips swooped down like a bird of prey, and suddenly his erection was swallowed up.

Blade's gasp turned into a groan of the most exquisite agony he'd ever felt or could have imagined feeling. Then for a moment he could not speak, because he could not breathe. Esseta's lips swept along his swollen flesh, kissed the tip, sought the inside of both thighs, then returned to their original place.

Esseta repeated the pattern some unguessable number of times, then began varying it. As her lips worked, her hands were pulling Blade's trousers farther and farther down his legs. Blade was hardly aware of this, or of anything else except the almost terrifying delight her lips on his flesh were bringing him.

Then he was aware of pain that was also pleasure, bubbling up within him and ready to boil over. In silence he fought against the agony, in silence Esseta's lips went on working to make that fight hopeless, and in silence Blade lost it. The ecstasy of total release seared through him, as he bowed backward, away from those lips, pumping heat up between them. He bowed so far backward that he fell over, and Esseta fell on top of him. For a moment her lips were no longer on him, but not for long. There was too

much more she wanted from him.

She took it; and went on taking it, until Blade could not have given her any more if his life had depended on it. Perhaps Esseta herself had reached the point where she could take no more. In any case, she finally collapsed to lie beside him, one leg raised over his, her breasts against his side and the fingers of one hand spread on his chest.

Then she sat up and smiled. She raised her arms above her head and stretched like a cat. The movements of her breasts would have awakened desire in a corpse, but not in Richard Blade at this moment. Then she laughed, and this time the woman's laugh turned into the girl's giggle.

Blade shook his head. "You have the skills of an actress, as well as all your other gifts. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Not many. I have shown how I play my game to only a few, and only two of those who paid for me have ever guessed."

"What happened then?"

"Both stayed all night, and poured gold into my lap when morning came. They wanted to see what else I could do."

Blade laughed. "Is there anything you can't deal with?"

For a moment her face was a pale mask. "Yes. The years. Against them I have no power."

"You've done well so far."

"So far, yes." Suddenly she was smiling again. "And shall I tell you why I've done so well? It is my secret."

"I'm listening."

"This life is not easy, and much of it gives no pleasure. So when I have a chance, I play, to amuse myself and give myself pleasure. I do not have as many chances as I wish, but I have enough. As long as I can play, I can fight off the years." She bent down and kissed Blade. "Will you help me play, Blade from the desert?"

Silently Blade nodded, and by the time he finished kissing her he found that somehow desire was again rising in him.

Blade's being Esseta's recognized lover didn't make things any easier between him and Hadish. It wasn't that the senior guard was jealous of Blade's delightful hours in bed with her—he didn't care for women. He did see very clearly that with Esseta's support Blade could go almost anywhere and do almost anything. Furthermore, if it came to a clash between him and Blade, Kubin would be far more likely to support a man on good terms with one of his favorite ladies. Not being a fool, Hadish was afraid of Kubin Ben Sarif.

That same fear kept him quiet for some time. Meanwhile, Blade began escorting the ladies of the House of the Night's Tale when they went out to shop or take the air in the parks by the Da. For this Esseta bought him several new sets of clothes, as well as a jeweled dagger that would have looked at home on a

nobleman's belt.

"We of the House of the Night's Tale have our reputation to uphold," she said. "Can we be escorted by a man who does not look his best?"

"Hardly," said Blade. He noted that in spite of all its jewels, the knife was well-balanced and sharp. Esseta was a good judge of weapons.

The knife might be able to gut a human attacker like a fish, but it couldn't do anything against flies and foul smells. For some time that was all Blade faced as he escorted Esseta and her companions about Dahaura.

Dahaura was even busier and more prosperous than he'd imagined. It was hard to believe that any sane man could conceive of overthrowing this bustling city and the empire it ruled with no more than five thousand fighting men.

But then, the Master of the Hashomi was not entirely sane. Immensely gifted, to be sure, but also somewhat mad-and all the more dangerous because he was both. He would certainly try to carry out his plans, and even if he failed and the Hashomi perished, so would thousands of innocent people.

Even worse, it was possible that he might not fail. Blade kept his ears and eyes open, and what he heard and saw told him much about the religious conflict within Dahaura. The Fighters of Junah were despised and openly persecuted, in a way that turned Blade's stomach. He saw them stoned and beaten in the marketplaces, thrown into the rivers, driven out of shops and taverns. He saw two or three of them cut to bloody ribbons when they openly raised a hand in their own defense. He saw them treated in a way that would not have been wise even if they'd been incapable of resistance.

Since they were steadily organizing for battle, the persecution was worse than unwise. It was criminally stupid. It was sowing the seeds of religious warfare in Dahaura, just as the Master of the Hashomi expected. That warfare would come sooner or later-Blade was certain of that. And then? Religious warfare had brought down empires before, even without the aid of the Hashomi to make things worse.

The Master of the Hashomi might be mad, but his plan to overthrow the Baranate of Dahaura was not a madman's fantasy. It was a real danger, and that meant Blade's information about the Hashomi had to reach the Baran.

How? He might be able to speak to Kubin Ben Sarif and get some results. Kubin had no great love for the Fighters of Junah, even if he'd operated on the fringes of the Baran's law most of his life. He could be trusted. Unfortunately, he would also be hard to find-Blade hadn't seen him since their first strange interview.

Send a message? Not on this matter, and not with Hadish around. Esseta? Blade saw her every day. She was cool-headed, discreet, and loyal to the Baranate. Unfortunately, she'd also made it clear that she never mixed in high politics. That was one reason she was still alive and unbranded, so she intended to go on that way for the rest of her life.

The word had to get to the Baran somehow. But if he spoke to the wrong person, it might also get to the ears of someone ready to pay for having Blade's gutted corpse floating in the Da. It was a delicate situation, and likely to get worse rather than better.

Sooner or later, though, he'd have to gamble. The only alternative was to remain completely silent, and

that he would not do. He had a debt to pay to the Master of the Hashomi.

Chapter 15

It promised to be a hot day even for Dahaura. The only air moving was a faint breeze from the river that seemed to be passing over the tanneries on its way. The foul reek of curing leather surrounded the little party as they left the House of the Night's Tale.

Blade was the escort for a party that included Esseta, two of the other women of the house, and three servant girls to carry the purchases. They were going to walk, as their destination was the Street of the Perfumers on the bank of a canal less than half a mile away.

They walked swiftly, Blade in the lead and Esseta bringing up the rear. Blade's size and appearance cleared a path, and few of the beggars and street boys even bothered to shout at them. They were a slave and six Women Beyond the Law, but the sashes they wore showed that they were also under the protection of Kubin Ben Sarif.

They passed donkey carts and sedan chairs, fruit juice vendors, porters and puppet shows, a squad of the Baran's soldiers, and three mounted noblemen. At last they made their way into the Street of the Perfumers. It was oven-hot in the narrow street, but the delicate scents drifting out of the shops and booths drove out the stink of the tanneries.

Esseta was bargaining vigorously over a jar of mint-scented green lotion when Blade noticed an odd trio moving toward him from the far end of the street. Down the middle of the street a small pudgy man was walking with slow precise steps. He wore the turban of a tribal chief from the mountains in the north of the Baranate, but he wore the robes and ankle boots of a high-class merchant of Dahaura. He also wore a purse and an ornamental dagger on his belt. Blade had seen men in the same mixture of clothing before. They were usually men of mixed blood, acting as traders and agents for their fathers' tribes.

Moving parallel to the merchant and almost level with him were two other men. One wore nothing but a breechcloth stiff with filth, and his matted hair and beard did not conceal his thinness or his scars. One of Dahaura's beggars, with nothing unusual about him—except the purposeful way he was keeping pace with the robed man.

On the other side of the street was a man in a workman's breeches and full-sleeved tunic. He had a full beard and a surprisingly bushy head of red-brown hair. The color of his hair was not unusual, but the sheer mass of it drew Blade's eye.

Blade was shifting his glance back to the beggar, when suddenly the man ran out into the middle of the street and threw himself on his knees in front of the merchant. "Alms, alms, for the love of Junah," the man cried. "Alms, that my children may eat. Alms, alms, and my prayers will be with you in all your wakings and sleepings. Alms, alms. alms!"

The skinny arms reached out, pressing long-fingered hands with black nails against the front of the merchant's robes. "Peace, my friend," he replied. "Alms shall be yours, and bread in the mouths of your children." He reached for his purse.

As he did, the beggar's hands clamped hard on the man's belt. With surprising strength, the beggar jerked the merchant forward, off balance. At the same time the bushy-haired man broke out of the crowd and came running up to the merchant from behind. As he ran one hand darted up inside the other sleeve and came out holding a short knife. With both speed and grace, he stabbed at the merchant's

exposed back.

The stab that should have gone deep into the victim's flesh barely cut through the robe. The point grated on metal and stopped abruptly, caught in what could only be the links of a shirt of chain mail. Before the would-be murderer could react to this unexpected development, Richard Blade was charging down on him.

If it had been simply an ordinary purse-snatching, Blade wouldn't have interfered. There were a hundred of those a day in Dahaura, in spite of the best efforts of the Baran's soldiers. Furthermore, this man looked as if he wouldn't miss a single meal even if his purse did vanish.

An open attempt at murder in the public streets was something else. That was rare enough to be a surprise. The Baran kept most of his subjects unmurdered by savage punishments for convicted murderers, and for those who refused to help catch them. Blade was the only armed man within striking distance. If he didn't interfere, he'd be doing well to get off with five years in the salt flats.

As the knifeman drew back from Blade's charge, the merchant went into action on his own. With surprising agility, he flung himself to one side, throwing the beggar down with him. The merchant rolled, broke the beggar's hold on his belt, and came up with his own dagger drawn. The beggar sprang backward, practically into Blade's path. A moment later he was sprawling on his back, struck down by the flat of Blade's sword.

Blade leaped over the body and faced the knifeman. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the merchant getting to his feet. The man sheathed his dagger, then scurried off down the street. Blade wasn't sure whether to laugh or swear. The man was so obviously willing to leave the rest of the affair to Blade, now that he could be sure of getting out of it with a whole skin.

That was more than Blade could be sure of. His sword was longer than the bushy-haired man's knife, but the man moved like an expert fighter. The two men froze for a moment, then began a slow, cautious circling around each other, each looking for an opening.

They made two complete circles that way, while Esseta shouted for one of the servant girls to run and bring some soldiers. Blade couldn't help wondering why the man was staying to fight instead of making every effort to break away and get clear. Perhaps he was expecting some help, and in that case-

Blade's anticipation saved his life. He saw a sudden flurry of movement in the back of a booth a few yards down the street, and a silhouette suddenly appearing in a doorway a few yards in the opposite direction. Blade dove, rolling to get out of reach of the knifeman. A crossbow went spung and the bolt flashed across the street, cutting through the air where Blade had been a heartbeat ago. The bolt flew on to smash the brazier of a man capping bottles and scatter hot oil and live coals over several booths.

Out of the shadowed doorway burst a tall man, swinging a two-handed sword. Blade sprang to his feet, just in time to see Esseta snatch a bronze censer on a gilded chain from a table. Gripping the chain, she swung the censer like an Olympic hammer thrower winding up. The heavy censer whipped through a half-circle and smashed into the swordsman's chest, knocking him backward into a booth. Before he could rise, several people were all around him and all over him, snatching his sword from him and punching and kicking him until he stopped moving.

The archer tried to leap out into the street from the booth where he'd been hiding. His foot caught on the table and it fell over, spilling more bottles and vials. The man crashed face down into the street, nearly impaling himself on his own crossbow. He let out a scream as if he was being flayed with dull knives. He

still tried to get up, until Blade ran up to him and kicked him in the side of the head.

Now there was complete confusion in the Street of the Perfumers, with people running in all directions. Some ran for water to put out the spreading fire, others ran to help Esseta and the women, some simply ran around in circles. Blade grabbed the first man to come within reach and shouted in his ear.

"Where did the big one go, the one with the bushy hair?"

The man jerked himself free of Blade's grip and waved down the street toward the canal. Blade broke into a run. He reached the end of the street just in time to see a tall man leap onto the stern of a gaily decorated barge moored alongside the quay. The man was not totally bald, but a knife gleamed in one hand and a thick red-brown wig flapped in the other. As Blade dashed toward him, the man dropped the wig into the canal and ran toward the bow of the barge.

Blade leaped onto the stern of the barge as the other man reached the bow. The man looked around desperately, as he realized that he was trapped. Then he turned, his lips creeping back from his teeth in a wolf-like snarl.

Blade picked up one of the barge's oars. Holding it like a quarterstaff, he advanced toward his opponent. The man sprang toward Blade with a howl, but he was just a trifle too slow. Blade swung the oar, catching the man in mid-leap. Both the oar and the man's ribs cracked. He smashed down across the railing of the barge, legs inside, head and chest outside. His legs flailed wildly for a moment, then he slipped over the side and into the canal. Blade stepped to the side and looked down. The man was gone, leaving behind nothing but a spreading circle of ripples and a spreading stain of blood on the dark water of the canal.

Blade sheathed his knife and walked back up the street. By now a squad of soldiers and two officers had arrived. The fire was almost out, although three booths had been reduced to ashes. Esseta was being questioned by one of the officers; while the other women and the servants huddled behind her like a flock of chickens.

As Blade strode up, the men and women in the booths and shop windows began cheering, stamping their feet, and waving their hands. Of course, this enthusiasm wouldn't keep the perfumers from submitting a large bill for all the damage done in the fight. Blade knew the merchants of Dahaura far too well to expect anything else. At least the bill would wind up on Kubin Ben Sarif's desk, and he could certainly afford it!

The officers made a good impression on Blade. They were brisk, professional, knew what questions to ask, and kept the perfumers from interfering until Blade had finished his story. Then they interviewed the rest of the witnesses in turn, taking careful notes. By this time another squad of soldiers had arrived, with a donkey cart for the three prisoners. The archer and the beggar were unconscious. The swordsman was wide awake, and the Baran's interrogators would be at work on him before sunset. He did not look very happy at the prospect.

Bit by bit, all the loose ends were tied up except one. What had happened to the intended victim, the merchant with the mail shirt under his robes? Nobody seemed to know.

Blade cleared his throat, in the deferential manner it was always wise for slaves to use with officers of the Baran's army. "Honored sirs, I ask if we should perhaps consider--was the merchant also in disguise, like the man with the knife?"

"Why do you say that?" said one of the officers.

"Would a genuine merchant have worn a coat of mail under his robes-particularly in this quarter of the city, on a day like this?"

One of the officers shrugged. "We shall certainly consider it. But I can't see anything coming of it. I doubt we'll ever see the merchant or the knifeman again. Dahaura can swallow a man who doesn't want to be found as thoroughly as the canals can swallow a body."

He smiled. "However, there's better news for you-Blade, you said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Odd name. Anyway, I'd be surprised if the judge doesn't send around a writ of freedom for you after this. You're in Kubin's service? Well, that old tight-purse won't have any complaint. The treasury will handle any claims these merchants may put in, and also your purchase price."

Esseta laughed. "That will reconcile Kubin Ben Sarif to almost anything."

"So I thought," the officer said. "Farewell and good custom, night sisters." He climbed up beside the driver of the donkey cart and shouted orders. In a minute the last of the soldiers were out of sight, and Blade and Esseta were free to return to the House of the Night's Tale.

Chapter 16

Blade didn't get back to the House of the Night's Tale until nearly sunset. It had been a hot, windless day, and now they were facing the same kind of night.

Kubin Ben Sarif seldom came into the city itself to deal with this kind of affair. He left that to a handful of trusted personal agents, and one of them was on hand when Blade returned. He was a gray-haired man and looked like someone with many years of experience as a soldier or as one of Kubin's fighting men.

Without even giving his name, the man began giving orders. It was Kubin's wish that both Blade and Esseta be properly rewarded-how and in what amount would be decided later. For tonight the House of the Night's Tale would do no business, but both Hashid and Blade would stand guard at the main door nonetheless. All other doors would be locked, and no one permitted through them. He himself would arrange to relieve Blade and Hashid at intervals, so that one of them could get some sleep and still leave two men on guard.

"Does the lord Kubin suspect someone of wishing this house ill?" asked Hashid. He tried to make the question sound completely casual, but didn't succeed. Blade detected something that shouldn't have been there in Hashid's voice. Eagerness, fear, suspicion? He couldn't be sure. He could only be sure that Hashid would bear watching until this affair had blown over.

"Kubin is not worried about people's wishes," said the older man. "He is worried about the Thieves' families who might feel called on to pay us a visit. He will seek them out, in time, and make arrangements with them."

Blade couldn't help wondering what those "arrangements" would be. Bribery or murder? Kubin could afford the first, but had no scruples about applying the second if the first failed. Scruples were one thing he could not afford.

It was really Kubin's decision, in any case, and none of Blade's business. His own suspicions of Hashid were another matter-he had to mention them. He did so in the first moment he was alone with Kubin's agent.,

The man looked at him skeptically. "You feel that Hashid is not to be trusted?"

"Not in matters that can mean life or death to lord Kubin's servants, I think."

"Yet you feel this only because of what you hear in his voice?"

"That, and also because he is an ambitious man. He hopes to rise high, but fears that Kubin has turned against him. He thinks that I have caused this, and so he is my enemy."

"How do you know so well what is in Hashid's mind, Blade?"

Blade kept face and voice expressionless. "One may learn much from the women."

The agent laughed harshly. "So one may. Perhaps I also would do well to speak to the women. But not tonight. I cannot imagine that our friend Hashid has any way of doing us harm tonight."

The first hours of the night passed quietly. It was not common for such a prosperous brothel as the House of the Night's Tale to be unexpectedly closed, but it was not unknown either. Most of the customers who were turned away took it quietly, and Blade had to raise his voice only once. The customers of the House of the Night's Tale knew who owned it, and none wanted to give offense to Kubin Ben Sarif. If he wanted to close down one of his most profitable businesses on any night for any reason, it was not for them to ask why.

An hour after midnight, Kubin's agent came down to relieve Blade on guard duty. Blade did not return to the sleeping loft, but went to a mattress he'd spread on the floor at the foot of the stairs. That way he could sleep within earshot of anything that might happen at the door, weapons at hand. Blade ate some bread and cheese, drank a mug of beer, and lay down fully clothed. No one had come to the door in nearly an hour, so he found it easy to drift off to sleep.

He was sleeping lightly, though, so he awoke at the first banging of the door knocker. He rolled over and looked toward the door. In the dim light of the hall he saw Kubin's agent standing with one hand on the bar of the door and the other holding open the speaking hole just above the latch.

"I am sorry, but it is Kubin's wish that the house be closed tonight. We value your custom, and certainly we will welcome you on another night. But not this one."

"Will there be free beer if we come back on another night?" came faintly through the speaking hole. The voice was high-pitched, like a boy's. Probably some youngster who's scraped together the money and the nerve to try his first woman and come to us for her, thought Blade. Too bad he's going to have to be disappointed.

"Free beer?" said the agent, confused. Then behind him Hashid rose from the bench where he'd been sitting.

"Of course, there will be free beer," he said. "Give us your name, and we shall-"

"What do you think-?" snapped the agent, turning to face Hadish. He never completed the turn. Halfway through it, Hadish's right hand swept up to meet him, driving a knife into his throat. With his left hand Hadish gripped the bar and heaved it out of its brackets. The bar and the body of Kubin's agent hit the floor at the same moment. Then Hadish gripped the handle of the door and heaved it open. That took both hands and all his attention, so he did not see Blade leap to his feet.

Blade ran down the hall and gripped one end of the heavy wooden bench. He put all his strength and weight into a tremendous shove. The bench seemed to fly down the hall ahead of him. Hadish let go of the handle as the door swung open and started to turn. The bench caught him and smashed him against the edge of the door, two hundred pounds of iron-hard wood with Blade behind it. The sword he'd started to draw fell from lifeless fingers. He toppled to one side as Blade heaved the bench back, then drove it forward again.

It shot into the open doorway as three masked men started to come through. The bench caught two of them with the force of a battering ram. Blade heard the sickening crunch of a man's kneecap disintegrating, and an agonized scream that he hoped would wake the entire house.

The two men struck by the bench went backward down the front stairs, taking several of their comrades with them. The third man was more agile. He leaped up on the bench and struck at Blade with his sword. Blade had to back clear before he could get his own sword into action. Then there was a brief flurry of sword cuts, ending when Blade got under his opponent's guard and laid open his stomach and thigh.

The man was dying, but he'd driven Blade back far enough to open a path for his comrades into the House of the Night's Tale. Several more now charged through the doorway, pushing the bench back so violently that Blade had to jump out of its path.

As he did, one of the girls appeared at the foot of the stairs. She took one look at the scene in the hallway, then screamed loudly enough to nearly deafen Blade. If that didn't wake up the rest of the house, they must all be dead! He had time to shout to her, "Get back upstairs and warn them! Tell them to close all the-!" and then his opponents seemed to be swarming all over him like hungry wolves.

Blade's sword whirled and danced, slicing flesh and chopping bone. He was stronger and faster and could reach farther than any of the men facing him. He was also facing them in the cramped hallway, where none of these things gave him the edge he needed against such odds. Once more he had to give ground to avoid being surrounded and cut down. Some of his opponents had long knives, better for work at close quarters than Blade's sword.

None of the masked men seemed to be Hashomi. They screamed when his sword tore their flesh, and when they took crippling wounds they fell or drew back. The hallway rapidly became a shambles, with screams ringing in Blade's ears and the well-scrubbed wooden floor under him slippery with blood and half-buried under writhing bodies.

It seemed that for every man who fell two more took his place. Blade gave up the hallway a foot at a time, backing slowly toward the stairs. He would have to hold the stairway until the end, otherwise these people would have an easy route up to the women's rooms.

Blade swore. It was ludicrous, to realize that he was quite possibly going to die here in the bloody, body-strewn hallway, defending a warehouse from enemies in masks. He didn't know who they were or why they were attacking. He didn't even have time to make a good guess!

Anger at this ridiculous fate flowed through Blade, twisting his face into a mask so terrible that several of

his opponents drew back. It filled him with a terrible speed and strength, so that he went over to the offensive and killed three men with four sword strokes. Then the hallway was clear around him, and he was facing a bandy-legged man with a long knife in each hand.

The man came at Blade with a rush, his movements sure and fluid. Blade had plenty of room to swing his sword, and aimed a cut at the man's head. The man brought up one knife fast enough to deflect the sword to one side, thrusting with the other knife at Blade's groin. Blade twisted to one side and slashed down again. His sword bit into the man's right shoulder. The man blinked, but didn't make a sound. Blade knew he was facing one of the Hashomi.

The Hashom took a step backward. Then he raised his right arm, which should have been impossible. With more strength than Blade could believe, he hurled the knife from his right hand at Blade. Blade had to leap aside to avoid taking the knife in his chest. The Hashom charged, whipping his other knife around in a wide arc and stabbing upward. Blade's sword came down, but he'd misjudged the Hashom's speed. Instead of splitting the man's skull, Blade only mangled his right shoulder again. This left the Hashom on his feet, charging past Blade toward the foot of the stairs.

Blade had to move quickly, to catch the Hashom without turning his back on the other men. As his sword came up for the killing blow, a chair came flying down the stairs from above. It caught the Hashom squarely in the chest, hurling him across the hallway. He held onto his knife, but couldn't do anything with it before Blade's sword came down. This time the stroke split the Hashom's head neatly in two. Before the body struck the floor Blade was turning back to face his other opponents.

He did so just in time. Seeing Blade distracted by the Hashom, the other attackers had regained their courage. Eight of them were in the hallway now, moving forward one step at a time, stepping over the bodies, leaving the bloody footprints, but coming on as steadily as a glacier and in overwhelming strength. Blade picked up the chair and set it in front of him to block part of the hallway, without taking his eyes off the men coming at him.

Then bare feet thudded on the stairs. Esseta and two other women were standing beside Blade, as suddenly as if they'd sprouted from the floor. Esseta held a dagger, the second woman held a kitchen cleaver, and the third held the broken-off leg of a chair. Esseta raised her dagger in a mocking salute to the attackers.

"Hail, doomed fools! Consider the price Kubin Ben Sarif will ask for this night's work, before you come on! You will pay that price, whatever happens to us. There is nothing you can do for yourselves by doing anything to us." There was a hissing note in Esseta's voice, exactly like a snake's angry warning.

The eight men stopped as if an invisible rope had been stretched across the hallway in front of them. Some kept their eyes on Blade, but others looked furtively toward the now-distant doorway. From upstairs came the sound of furniture being pushed around. Blade hoped the women and servants were building some sort of barricade across the head of the stairs.

Then the door flew open, and three more men sprang into the hallway. One carried a long shepherd's staff with a knife tied to the end of it, making a crude but wicked-looking spear. The other two carried crossbows. The spearman gave a wordless cry and slammed the butt of his weapon on the floor. A quiver ran through the men facing Blade, and they began to draw to either side.

In another second the archers would have a clear field of fire. With the flat of his sword Blade slapped Esseta across the back. "Get down!" he shouted, pointing to the chair. It was poor cover for her and the other women, but better than nothing. He himself dropped into a crouch, ready to spring forward,

seeking cover among his enemies. If he could get into the middle of them, and even better, if he could knock down the lamp that was the only light in the hallway. Not much chance of that, though, and no chance of his surviving it. The women might be able to make their retreat, though, and-

A sudden explosion of sound from outside made the spearman and the archers stiffen. Hooves clattered on the cobblestones of the street, men shouted, horses neighed. Then crossbows began to go off, and men began to scream.

The spearman whirled around and thrust his head out the door. A second later he reeled back into the hallway, a spear rammed through him from chest to back. He threw up his hands and fell. As he did, he crashed against one of the archers and the man's crossbow fired. The bolt went into the back of one of the eight men facing Blade, flinging him so violently forward that he knocked down several of his comrades.

Whatever the cause, the enemy was falling into confusion. Blade snatched up the chair with his free hand, hurled it into the middle of the enemy, then followed up with his sword.

The confusion among the attackers promptly became total. Some tried to run forward to meet Blade others tried to retreat toward the door. Some just stood where they were, unable or unwilling to do anything. Blade's sword flashed and hissed in a deadly arc, and two men reeled toward the wall, trying to stop the blood from gaping wounds. He heard a gurgling cry, and saw Esseta cutting the throat of one of the men who'd been knocked down. The remaining archer fired, and the bolt thunked harmlessly into the wall.

Now the men in the hallway might have broken and run, but Blade and the women were pressing them too closely. They didn't have time to even turn around, let alone run. A man on the floor kicked out wildly, and Esseta tripped over him and went down. Another man tried to stamp on her, but as his foot came down so did Blade's sword. The man's leg came off just below the knee, and Esseta gasped and spluttered, drenched in a torrent of blood spraying from the stump. The man screamed and fell almost on top of her.

Then a sword was slicing the air toward Blade's head. He whirled to avoid it and his foot slipped on the blood now inches deep on the floor. He threw out his other leg for balance, and got it tangled up in the chair. He threw out both hands in a last desperate effort to keep himself upright. His free hand slammed into the wall, and then his head slammed into the heavy iron bracket holding the lamp. A roaring explosion of pain and fire threw him down into blackness.

Blade's last thought was that it was a bloody stupid way to die, tripping over a chair just when help had arrived.

Chapter 17

For the second time in this Dimension, Richard Blade found himself waking when he'd expected to be dead. At least this time it was no surprise to wake up in a bed. That he was alive at all could only mean the attackers had been driven off before they could kill him. No doubt Esseta or the horsemen who'd come to the rescue had then taken care of putting him to bed. At the moment his head hurt so much that it was an effort to think farther than that. Blade decided he could spare himself the effort for now and drifted off to sleep again.

He woke up with the feeling that the whole room around him was the color of blood. Then he saw the sky outside the one high arched window, and realized that it was simply the glow of sunset on the tiles of

the walls and floor. His headache had subsided, and he felt ready to sit up in bed and look around him.

Wherever he was, it was not in the House of the Night's Tale. Nor was he in the hands of people who believed in any sort of asceticism. The room would not have been out of place in a royal palace. The walls and floor were covered with mosaics, floral patterns in green and silver and blue, with gilded highlights. A tapestry with a hunting scene hung over the bed. The bed itself was a massive affair, elaborately carved out of a dark red wood. The knobs at the head and foot of the bed were crystal serpents' heads, set in silver. The sheets under Blade were silk, and the quilt over him seemed to be silk filled with down.

Blade climbed out of the bed. There was a bandage around his head, and another on his left wrist. Other than that he hadn't picked up a single scratch in the fight in the hallway of the House of the Night's Tale. Not bad, even if he had ended the evening by tripping over a chair and knocking himself silly on a lamp!

He walked toward the window, and was just about to reach it when the door opened. Two elderly eunuchs came bustling in. When they saw Blade standing near the window, they frantically urged him back to bed. They even grabbed his arms and tried to drag him. Blade's temper flared at this. If the two eunuchs hadn't been so old and so obviously afraid of being punished if something happened to him, he would have been tempted to knock both of them down.

The two eunuchs led Blade back to the bed and then summoned a doctor to examine him, two more eunuchs to bathe him, and four maidservants with a meal. The food was excellent—lamb stew, bread, several kinds of fruit, and some really good beer—and served from silver vessels with enameled or gilded lids. Blade was more certain than ever that he was in the care of some high-ranking notable of the Baranate. He wished he could get to the window and look out, to orient himself, but every time he tried to get out of bed the two senior eunuchs seemed ready to throw a fit.

It was dark outside by the time Blade finished eating. The servants were clearing away the dishes when the door suddenly swung open and four huge dark-skinned men strode in. They wore the trousers and necklaces of the Baran's infantry, and also blue turbans and thigh-length tunics of chain mail. They positioned themselves two on either side of the door. As they did, all the servants prostrated themselves on the floor, hands outstretched toward the door.

Blade was suddenly tense. There was only one man in Dahaura who received this honor. Before he could even wonder what he ought to do, brisk footsteps sounded in the hall outside and the Baran of Dahaura strode through the door.

The Baran was not really tall enough to stride properly. He stood only about five-and-a-half feet tall and was slightly plump. Hair thinning on top and a long drooping mustache didn't improve his looks. But he carried himself so well and moved with such assurance and dignity that it was hard to be aware of his physical shortcomings. The way the Baran carried himself reminded Blade of the Master of the Hashomi. Both had the same air of knowing that no one would disobey them, stand in their path, or attack their dignity.

The Baran also reminded Blade of someone else he'd seen, but for a moment Blade couldn't think who. Then the certainty seemed to explode in his mind. The merchant who'd been attacked in the Street of the Perfumers! The surprisingly agile merchant, who'd worn mail under his robes and vanished like a puff of smoke while everyone else was busy with the fight! The merchant had been the Baran, disguised with a beard and perhaps padding under his robes.

Blade kept his face blank, in spite of the sudden shock. He didn't know why the Baran had been in the

Street of the Perfumers in disguise yesterday. He was quite certain the man wouldn't care to have the matter discussed where so many ears could listen.

The Baran made a sweeping, graceful gesture with both hands, drawing the servants to their feet as if he'd pulled on invisible wires. Another gesture sent them scampering out the door. A third gesture sent two of the guards after them, to stand outside. Their comrades closed the door and stationed themselves on either side of it. They said nothing, but kept their eyes fixed on the Baran. From the Baran's use of nothing but gestures to give his orders, Blade suspected the guards were deaf-mutes.

The Baran came over to the bed and walked briskly in a circle around it. His eyes were on Blade all the time. They were large eyes, dark, intense, but for the moment showing nothing.

Finally the Baran sat down cross-legged on the floor and folded his hands in his lap. "Well, Demad Blade. Are you surprised to see me here?"

Blade wasn't sure he'd heard right. Demad was a rank-a fairly high rank, too-among the gentlemen in the Baran's personal service. Once again he carefully kept his face straight, as he replied, "Not entirely, Lord. Not after my dealings with-a certain merchant, who found himself beset by thieves in the Street of the Perfumers yesterday morning." If the Baran was going to spring surprises, Blade intended to do the same.

The Baran's round face split in a smile that made him look positively cherubic. "Ah, you know the merchant, then?"

"I do, lord. My eyes have been trained, so they have a certain skill in such matters."

"More than I have in disguising, eh?"

"I would not dispute the Lord Baran of Dahaura, not in such a matter."

The Baran laughed out loud. "Your eyes are skilled, and so is your tongue. It is fortunate that not many in Dahaura have such skills. Otherwise my comings and goings in the city would become as dangerous as some of my councilors always said they were."

He shrugged. "Doubtless the ill-luck they predict will overtake me some day; and then my sons can arrange the succession as they see fit. Meanwhile, I do not see that I have any choice. I cannot see and hear the real life of Dahaura with the eyes and ears of others, no matter how much I may trust them or respect their wisdom."

"That is a wise course that does you great honor," said Blade. The compliment was sincere, in spite of the formal wording he felt was necessary.

The Baran smiled again. "If you are going to spread flowery praises upon me like compost on a garden, I may sell you back to Kubin Ben Sarif. I have a thousand men around me who think they render a great service by pouring honey into my ears. I have only a few who use their wits and their strength for better purposes. I have taken you from Kubin's service and made you a Demad in mine in the hope that you will prove another of these useful men. If I am to be disappointed, however-" Another shrug.

"I will do my best to see that you are not disappointed, Lord Baran," said Blade. "I will do better, I think, if someone explains to me what has been happening while I have been asleep here." It might be presumptuous to ask the Baran of Dahaura for an explanation of anything, but Blade would have been willing to question God to get information he needed.

The Baran did not appear to be offended. "I will be happy to do so. To begin with, the man you chased into the canal was a master in the Thieves Guild. The Thieves take offense easily. When it is a question of avenging a master, they are willing to face even the wrath of Kubin Ben Sarif."

"Some of them seemed to have doubts about that," said Blade, remembering how Esseta's threat had stopped the advance in the hallway.

"I know," said the Baran. "I have personally spoken to Esseta as well as to Kubin. Like you, Esseta will be joining my service. I do not imagine that you will complain about having her here in the palace?"

"Not at all," said Blade, smiling. He suspected that the Baran would complain even less. The ruler of Dahaura was said to have a robust appetite for women, and also high standards. Esseta would certainly satisfy both the appetites and the standards, and would hardly object to sharing the Baran's bed for however long he found her pleasing.

"But we wander far afield," said the Baran. "The Thieves Guild met that same afternoon, and it was decided to move against the House of the Night's Tale. They wanted you and Esseta above all, and were prepared to kill anyone else in their path. They had also found a willing traitor in Hadish. Kubin Ben Sarif was not happy about that, I might add. I suspect that a good many of his people will be answering some very sharp questions in the next few weeks."

"Poor Kubin," said Blade, with a wry smile.

"Indeed," said the Baran. "He wanted to keep you around to help with the questioning, and was most reluctant to dispense with your services. However, it was not impossible to persuade him in the end. I am the Baran, after all, and I also paid him five hundred mahari. I have also promised him the services of the Busud-Barani, the Eyes of the Baran. Not you, though-I have other things for you to do when you become one of my Eyes."

"Your Eyes," said Blade carefully. "They are-those who watch your enemies?"

"Yes. And from time to time strike them down. They need to be men who can think as well as strike, like you."

"I see," said Blade, still cautious.

"I trust you do," said the Baran. "Many of the people who might be fit for this sort of work think it beneath them. One of my Eyes might come from the oldest nobility of Dahaura, but he may have to spend ten months as a porter in the storerooms of a brewer. But again, we wander from the events of last night."

The rest of the story was told quickly. More than thirty members of the Thieves Guild descended on the House of the Night's Tale, and through Hadish's treachery they got in. They would have done their work and been gone in a few minutes except for Blade's fight. From first to last he'd killed or crippled ten men. He'd delayed the rest until the City Riders could come up and kill or capture most of the rest. The Baran himself had been with the City Riders, and he'd been firmly in charge of the situation by the time Kubin Ben Sarif arrived.

It had been an embarrassing night for Kubin, all things considered.

"I trust Kubin will not suffer for this," said Blade. "He did me no injury, and I would not play a part in any move against him."

"On the contrary," said the Baran. "He has promised to organize the Assembly of the Brothel Keepers against the Thieves Guild. Many in the assembly will listen to him because they owe him money or favors. Others will listen because they know he commands some of the best and most reliable fighting men in Dahaura." The Baran smiled complacently. "I do not think the Thieves will find the Brothel Keepers an easier prey than they found the House of the Night's Tale."

The Baran rose to his feet and was halfway to the door before Blade remembered the Hashomi. He raised a hand to call the Baran back, but the ruler of Dahaura only stopped and shook his head. "No, Blade, no more tonight. You have wounds to let heal, and strength to regain. Also, a friend is coming to you, who will be better company than I. Whatever you have to say can wait a few days."

The guards threw the door open and swiftly followed the Baran out. The door remained open, though. Blade lay back on the pillows and tried to relax, in spite of all the thoughts bubbling in his mind. A soft voice made him sit up again.

"Greetings, friend." Esseta was standing in the doorway, dressed in a green robe, her hair falling down her back. She looked very much like a seventeen-year-old girl.

Blade laughed. "I'd say I was surprised to see you, but at this point nothing much would surprise me."

"I can imagine," said Esseta, smiling. She pulled the door closed behind her and walked across the room toward the bed, undoing her robe as she did. It fell to the floor. Underneath she wore another robe, this one of light silk that covered everything but concealed nothing. She did not take that one off until she climbed into the bed beside Blade.

As his arms went around her, Blade could not help thinking of the Hashomi one last time. The Baran had to know. On the other hand, he'd said he would hear Blade again in a few days. Certainly the Hashomi were not going to bring Dahaura down in a few days-not when they faced a man such as the Baran seemed to be.

Then Blade was no longer interested in anything except Esseta.

Chapter 18

Blade's room was in a tower of the White Palace, one of the five palaces in the Baran's private citadel. He was there for a week, until the doctors pronounced him entirely fit and recovered.

The week was tedious. Blade was confined to the room by the doctor's orders, and even if he hadn't been he couldn't have wandered freely in the palace. There were guards at every stairway and in every corridor. Even the Baran's most trusted men could go only where they were supposed to, when they were supposed to.

Esseta spent two nights with Blade, and he did not lack female company on the other nights. The Baran saw to that. He also visited Blade twice, once bringing the scroll that proclaimed Blade a free citizen of Dahaura with the rank of Demad, once just to talk. The second time, Blade was finally able to tell of his adventures among the Hashomi.

The Baran listened to Blade's entire story without comment. When Blade had finished, the Baran stood

up, went to the window, lit his pipe, and stood there smoking it in silence for nearly ten minutes. Blade was not comfortable during those ten minutes. He could not be entirely sure that the Baran would believe him, or what might happen if the Baran thought he was lying.

Finally the Baran turned to Blade and frowned. "I am not sure I want to believe you. No, do not be afraid. I do not say this because I think you are an enemy to the Baranate, a teller of lies to sow fear and confusion. You would not have spat in the face of the Thieves Guild if you were. That was the act of a brave man, an honorable one, a man worthy to be a Demad and one of the Eyes of the Baran.

"I do not want to believe you, because if what you say is true, then there is no hope of peace with the Fighters of Junah."

"How much hope did you think there was before?" Blade asked bluntly.

"More than there can be now," replied the Baran, after a moment's hesitation. "I cannot say exactly. I was thinking of a plan, to offer them freedom from persecution in return for oaths of loyalty and the disarming of their trained warriors. I had not reached the point of asking my councilors to study the plan, so I do not know how practical it might have been. Yet it would have been worth trying, even if it held only a small hope that I would not be obliged to shed the blood of my own subjects."

Blade was tempted to point out that rulers unwilling to shed the blood of their subjects often wound up with the subjects shedding the rulers' blood. However, saying that would certainly give offense.

The Baran seemed to read Blade's thoughts, and smiled sadly. "Yes, I know. I should not be so tender toward the Fighters of Junah. They have made themselves enemies not only to me but to many of my loyal and peaceful subjects. Still, I prefer that war and slaughter be the last weapon I take up, rather than the first. You would not quarrel with that wish, I trust?"

"Not at all."

"Good. I may as well tell you that your knowledge of the Hashomi will make you an important man in any plans we make against them and their allies. It is good to know that you will not be thinking entirely of killing."

"You believe I'm telling the truth?"

"Yes. No matter how many problems your tales of the Hashomi may cause, I must believe them. We have learned something about the Hashomi ourselves, over the years. All that we have learned matches what you saw in the Valley of the Hashomi. So I believe you, and I will make new plans from what you have said."

Blade could no longer keep from grinning. This was not just success, but triumph. His news had not only reached the Baran, but it would turn the whole power of the Baranate in a new direction for the fight against the Hashomi. That didn't guarantee victory, but it would certainly make the Master's task a great deal more difficult.

The Baran noticed Blade's pleased expression. "You'll stop grinning soon enough, Blade, when we put you to work. The first thing you're going to do is write down everything you've learned about the Hashomi."

"Is that safe?"

"You'll do it yourself, and what you write will never be out of my own hands. But it must be written down. We can't risk losing all your knowledge if you don't come back from some journey as one of the Eyes.

"Then we'll be taking you out to the place where the Eyes of the Baran learn their work. Perhaps it won't impress you, considering that you've seen the Hashomi at work in their own country. But we have a few tricks of our own that you'd do well to learn.

"Then-" The Baran spread his hands and shrugged. "Then you'll go out, and it will be as Junah wills it." He rose and slapped Blade on the shoulder. "It may be some time before we meet again, so I will say-may Junah bless you."

"With a long life?" said Blade, laughing. "In this work, I doubt it."

The complete story of Blade's adventures among the Hashomi was nearly as long as a novel. He had to write out every word of it with a quill pen and ink, on sheet after sheet of parchment. Then they sent him off to learn how to be one of the Eyes of the Baran.

The training camp was in an ancient castle, centuries older than the Baranate, perched on top of a mountain several days travel to the north of Dahaura. From the top of the castle a man could see nearly a hundred miles in every direction on a clear day.

Unfortunately there were few clear days up in the mountains. Even so, Blade was kept much too busy to admire the scenery.

The training was rigorous and intelligent but taught Blade practically nothing he didn't already know. The only novelty was the skilled work done in giving him a disguise.

As the eunuch in charge of the training put it, "We know that you have done certain things to make you a marked man for the Thieves Guild. You will not live long enough to do any work for the Baran without a disguise.

"We cannot take away your height or your scars. Yet there are things we can add to you, until your own mother would hardly know you."

Blade's head was shaved again, and his scalp rubbed with something that made it turn blue. He was ordered to grow his beard, and when it had grown long enough it was tinted gray and divided into two plaits braided with gold thread. A patch went over one eye, and several impressive scars were tattooed on his face, neck, and arms.

The final touch was a heavy leather boot with complicated bindings and fastenings. When the boot was on and everything was tightened, it looked as though Blade had one foot so deformed he didn't dare show it. Yet he could move just as fast with the boot in place as he could barefoot.

Blade's mother certainly wouldn't have recognized him. In fact, he barely recognized himself the first time he looked in the mirror in his room.

The eunuch smiled at Blade's surprise. "We respect the Hashomi here, but we do not believe they are the only people in all the world with secret arts and skills in death. Perhaps they believe they are, but if so, then that is their problem-not ours."

That was quite true. The arrogant confidence of the Hashomi in their own skill might lead them to a foolish contempt for their enemies. Or at least it might have done so, without the Master. As unbalanced as he was, the Master of the Hashomi was too shrewd to make such a blunder.

Besides, the Hashomi were only part of the menace facing Dahaura, and not even the most dangerous part. Without the Fighters of Junah, the Hashomi could hardly be more than a large nuisance.

Suppose the alliance of the Hashomi and the Fighters of Junah broke apart? What then. Either would be much less dangerous separately.

That was an idea worth pursuing, Blade realized. But not now—he didn't know enough about the plans of the Fighters of Junah, and neither did anyone else. In time—yes, he'd file away the notion in his mind. There might be something in it, for the future.

Chapter 19

At last they let Blade out of the castle and sent him back to Dahaura. His "cover identity" was that of an officer of the Baran's army; wounded in battle against some of the wild tribes beyond the frontier, now on a pension that gave him just enough to live. His wounds and his poverty were expected to arouse a good deal of sympathy and get men and women alike to talk freely.

"There are risks, of course," said the chief of the Eyes of the Baran. "If you meet a soldier who actually fought in the battle where you say you were wounded, you must of course get away from him as quickly as possible. To let him catch you in a lie would not be wise."

"No, it would not," said Blade, more politely than he felt. The chief of the Eyes of the Baran was another of those grayhaired eunuchs who seemed to be everywhere and do nearly everything in the Baran's service. This one's name was Giraz, and he kept himself as lean as a shoelace by vigorous exercise and light eating. He also had an annoying habit of treating his subordinates as if they were children who needed to be told the facts of life. Still, he listened to them when they spoke, and he was willing to work eighteen hours a day for the Baranate. For those two virtues Blade was willing to forgive Giraz quite a few vices.

Blade moved about Dahaura as freely as a fish in the ocean, saying little and listening a great deal. Being a pensioned-off veteran was good for a drink, a meal, or even a night's lodging in many places. Most people seemed to be loyal to the Baran, or at least concerned about looking that way.

In those few places frequented largely by the Fighters of Junah, Blade was not so lucky. Several times he was asked to leave, twice he had things thrown at him, and once three men came at him with knives. They wore the clothes of common laborers, but they moved and held their weapons like professional fighting men. Blade had a good deal of trouble fighting them off without revealing too much of his own skill, and the tavern's furniture got badly smashed in the process.

After that Blade started carrying a walking stick. It was the sort of thing a man with a partly crippled leg would carry, and looked perfectly harmless. In fact it was weighted and balanced so that Blade could wield it with deadly effectiveness on a second's notice. With a little more warning, he could unscrew one end and expose five inches of razor-sharp steel. Sword-canes were not everyday wear in Dahaura, but enough people carried them so that no one would suspect anything sinister about Blade if he used one to defend himself.

Blade quickly learned that something was happening in the ranks of the Thieves Guild that was making even the prostitutes and dealers in stolen goods have second thoughts about dealing with them. No one would talk freely about this "something," of course. The Thieves had always been ruthless with those who said the wrong thing at the wrong time, and that certainly hadn't changed. But the rumors were everywhere in Dahaura, like fleas in the bedding of a cheap inn, and Blade started collecting those rumors.

He wasn't the only one. Giraz was too good an intelligence chief to let his agents know too much about each other, but Blade had eyes and ears and a mind to draw conclusions. Esseta was certainly involved in the spying on the Thieves. She now had a house of her own outside the walls, with a dozen women in it--all paid for by the Baran, Blade was quite certain. Blade could not see how anything less could have overcome Esseta's life-long refusal to get mixed up in politics.

Meanwhile, Kubin Ben Sarif was busily organizing the Brothel Keepers to fight the Thieves--or at least join in the watch kept upon them. Kubin knew exactly what he was doing and why, but he kept it a secret from most of his fellow keepers. They didn't need to know why they were doing what he told them to do, as long as they did it.

There seemed to be a small army of spies, plotters, and assassins running around in Dahaura. It reminded Blade of West Berlin, notoriously filled with agents from every intelligence service on both sides of the Iron Curtain. He'd done only one mission there, and was glad that was all. He'd never felt quite so much in danger every minute--until he came to Dahaura.

With all the spies the Baran had on the job, a picture of what the Thieves Guild had in mind slowly appeared. It was a picture that frightened everyone who had full knowledge of it.

The Thieves Guild was allying itself with the Fighters of Junah. They were determined to have not merely justice but vengeance, thorough and bloody. The things they wanted avenged went back many years, and Blade's killing of the master who'd tried to rob the Baran was only the final straw. They'd given up hope of getting what they wanted from the Baranate, so that anyone who sought its overthrow had possibilities as an ally. There were only two such groups that the Thieves knew of the tribes across the eastern frontier and the Fighters of Junah. The tribes were a long way off and hostile to strangers of every sort, whether they were friends or foes of the Baran. Most of the Fighters of Junah were close at hand, in Dahaura and the other five large cities of the Baranate; they needed help, and they knew it.

At first Blade was surprised to find anyone in Dahaura forming an alliance with the Fighters of Junah. He'd thought that most people would give up anything, including vengeance, rather than join the Fighters.

That was true of most people, but not of the Thieves Guild. They had short tempers and long memories. More important, few of them had any religion to speak of. Some of them were said to worship at the shrines of cults even older and more persecuted than the Fighters of Junah. Most believed only in gold, a good knife, and a painful death for traitors and tale-bearers. It did not bother them that the Fighters of Junah were heretics, as long as they were allies.

The Fighters of Junah couldn't afford to pick and choose their allies, any more than the Thieves. So they were welcoming the alliance with an open mind, if not yet open arms.

How far the alliance had gone was hard to learn. What frightened Blade was how far it might go. An alliance of the Thieves with the Fighters of Junah meant an alliance of the Thieves with the Hashomi. The Hashomi were deadly and efficient, but there could not be that many of them in Dahaura. With the Thieves to guide them, spy for them, and hide them, the Hashomi could become far more dangerous.

Dahaura held few secrets from the Thieves Guild.

Nor was that the worst of it. There were the drugs of the Hashomi, the drugs that could spread madness and destruction through a whole city. What would happen if the Hashomi and the Thieves together started dropping drugs into the feed at every stable in Dahaura? Or putting them into the brewing vats of all the city's largest breweries? There were a dozen other possibilities, all gruesome. Working together, the Thieves, the Hashomi, and the Fighters of Junah could attack more different points than the Baranate could possibly hope to defend. Dahaura could be thrown into chaos within a single day, if the work was done properly.

The Baran didn't ask Blade for advice, and Blade was glad. He wouldn't have been quite sure what to say. His instincts told him to advise rounding up every Thief in Dahaura and torturing them until they'd revealed everything, then executing them all in public. His better judgment told him this was impossible. Even trying it would simply grab only a part of the Thieves and drive the rest into hiding, angrier and more dangerous than ever.

The key was the leaders of the Thieves Guild, the Council of Twelve. If they could be swept up all at once, the Thieves would be leaderless and at least temporarily paralyzed. Then they could either be rounded up at leisure, or possibly even ignored while the Baran's fighting men went after the Hashomi. Standing orders were to avoid any sort of trouble with the Fighters of Junah-unless, of course, they started it.

Esseta was apparently putting her sister courtesans on to the job of tracing the movements of the Council of Twelve. She had to be discreet about this, of course, and very careful in her choice of women to help her. Some of the women of Dahaura's brothels hated the Thieves so much that they'd never be able to keep their mouths shut. Other women were the friends of Thieves, or secret dealers in stolen goods. They might turn double agent.

More and more, Dahaura reminded Blade of West Berlin. He remembered how glad he used to be when a mission to Dimension X ended up involving him in the same sort of espionage work he knew and did so well.

Now he'd be far happier in a Dimension where nobody had ever heard of spies!

Chapter 20

The night was clear, and the moon so full and bright that the narrow road ahead gleamed like silver. A light breeze carried the scent of roses and flowering trees. On this kind of night Blade would have preferred to be riding for his own pleasure, rather than on the Baran's business.

However, the Baran's business had to be carried out. So Blade searched the tops of the villa walls on either side of the road, looking for a crouching figure waving a red scarf. That would be one of Kubin Ben Sarif's men, waiting to meet Blade and lead him to a rendezvous with the leader of the Brothel Keepers. By order of the Baran, Blade was to place himself under Kubin's orders for the next month.

What this might mean, Blade could only guess. Giraz, the chief of the Eyes of the Baran, had hinted that he was to spy on Kubin.

"Not that we believe the man to be disloyal, you understand," said the eunuch. "We do believe from what he has done in the past that Kubin might be-ah, impulsive-in his use of what he has learned."

That put Blade in an awkward position. When Kubin became aware that he was being spied on, he would take offense. He would not protest directly, or abandon the Baran's service. He was too loyal and hard-headed for that. But Blade's past services to Kubin might not protect him from an "accident."

Blade didn't like getting involved in this kind of sideshow. The atmosphere of everyone spying on everyone else was becoming thicker and thicker, and that he liked even less. From his experience he knew that such a situation was bound to fall apart violently and unpredictably, and sooner rather than later.

Blade stiffened in the saddle. One hand went to the hilt of his sword, the other tightened on the reins. His knees locked, ready to drive his spurs into the horse and make a dash for safety.

There was a dark shape perched on a wall, waving the promised red scarf. Two faces also peered through the iron spikes on the wall, one on each side of the man. That wasn't according to plan.

Ambush!

The word shouted itself in Blade's mind. He was just about to spur his horse to a gallop, when a familiar voice called softly, "Blade! Ride down to the second gate on the left. We'll meet you there. Show no sign you're expecting anyone."

It was Kubin Ben Sarif. Something was wrong. It could be anything, so the only sensible thing to do for now was to obey Kubin's instructions.

The second gate on the left was open, and two men in dark clothes and hoods were waiting just inside it. Blade turned his horse in through the gate and Kubin appeared out of the darkness, two more men with him. The first two closed the gate and Blade dismounted.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered, sharply to Kubin. "You could be compromising everything!" Several of the villas around here belonged to people whose loyalty was doubtful, and there were always servants who might be bribed or persuaded to talk. In addition, Kubin Ben Sarif was hard to mistake for anybody else. If he was seen here, in a rendezvous with Blade, it could blow Blade's cover so thoroughly that he'd be no further use to the Baran, even if he didn't end up dead in some back alley in Dahaura.

Kubin made an impatient gesture with one hand. Blade saw that the hand was encased in a heavy glove of fine chain mail reinforced on the back with strips of lead. Wearing those gloves, Kubin could grip swords or crack skulls with a backhanded slap. He was obviously expecting trouble tonight, or perhaps planning to make it for someone else.

"That's a story there's no time to tell. The Thieves are out tonight, and Esseta is in danger."

Blade knew at once there was no point in arguing with Kubin. He'd taken command, and the only thing to do was follow him and hope for the best. That best might be very good indeed, though. Kubin could have given lessons in strategy and tactics to half the Baran's generals.

"How many?" said Blade.

"We counted fifty crossing the Bridge of the Three Brothers, but it's too soon to know if that's all."

Blade nodded. The Bridge of the Three Brothers was less than a mile from the isolated villa where Esseta had set up her house. If the Thieves Guild had sent out fifty men, some of them probably

Hashomi, there was going to be blood and death before morning.

Kubin seemed to be reading Blade's mind. "They've thrown a challenge in our face, and perhaps they hope we won't rise to it without the Baran's express consent. They will be wrong. I've put half my men across the roads they will need to use to retreat from either my villa or Esseta's. More are riding straight for the palace. I do not think the Baran will want the City Riders brought into this. They could learn too much."

That meant Kubin's men would be on their own for at least a couple of hours. "Is it worth the risk?" Blade asked.

"To me, there is no risk," said Kubin, with a grim smile. "No fifty men can get into my villa in a single night, even if those in it do no more than close and lock the doors and windows. Even Hashomi cannot pull apart stone walls or bend iron bars with their bare hands. Esseta is a different matter. You and I and the men with me are riding to her house. We leave now, and pray to Junah that we are in time."

"Only these four?" said Blade.

"We may meet others. But we still ride now. No number of men will do Esseta any good if they arrive after the Thieves have cut her throat or carried her off to be tortured and questioned."

While Kubin was speaking, his men had led five more horses out from under the trees by the path. They all mounted, and with Blade bringing up the rear trotted out the gate. Once on the open road, they spurred their horses to a canter. The dust rose under the horses' hooves, seeming to glow in the moonlight.

If they'd dashed straight up the road they could have reached Esseta's villa in a few minutes. Kubin had no intention of riding into any ambushes the Thieves might have set out. He turned aside at the Bridge of the Three Brothers, fording the canal under the cover of a fruit orchard several hundred yards away.

On the far side of the stream he led the way through a maze of vineyards, vegetable patches, abandoned villas with tumbled walls, and patches of woodland. At times the ground was so rough that the men had to dismount and lead their horses to keep them from stumbling and breaking legs.

"We lose a little time coming this way," whispered Kubin. "But we have cover almost up to Esseta's gate. Then the surprise will be theirs, not ours."

Blade hoped so. Surprise was the only way six men had of overcoming the fifteen or twenty the Thieves could have sent to Esseta's.

After a few more endless minutes, Kubin whispered an order to dismount. The horses were tethered to some bushes and the six men drew swords. Crouching low, they made their way down between the rows of a vineyard, to come out on the bank of a ditch filled with scummy water. On the far side of the ditch was a rutted gravel road, and on the far side of the road the gate of Esseta's villa.

The gate stood open, which it should not have done. There were three armed men crouching in the bushes on one side of the gate, who shouldn't have been there. Just inside the gate Blade could make out horses with sacks wrapped around their hooves to muffle the sound of their movements. No respectable customer of Esseta's house would ride up on horses equipped like that.

They were too late to keep the Thieves away from Esseta's house. Were they too late altogether?

Only one way to find out. Kubin drifted to the left, Blade to the right, while the other four men took positions between them. Then Kubin raised his sword and all six men hurled themselves across the ditch.

They'd gained the surprise they needed. The first thing the Thieves' sentries knew of the attack was when six men seemed to rise out of the road. One of them had time to scream before he died, then all three were twitching and spurting blood. The six charged through the gate so fast they trampled a fourth Thief underfoot without raising a weapon. Then they were in the courtyard of Esseta's villa.

"Cut loose the horses," snapped Kubin, pointing at two of his men. They darted off toward the animals, while the others ran toward the house. A Thief leaped out from behind a tree and Blade whirled to meet him. Clanging swords threw off sparks, Blade gave ground briefly to improve his footing, then the Thief's head flew from his shoulders. The headless body sprawled on the cracked tiles of the courtyard.

As it did, light blazed in the doorway of the villa, silhouetting four men. Two of them were carrying something wrapped in a blanket-something the size and shape of a small woman. Beyond the men Blade could see two bodies sprawled on the floor. One was a masked man, the other a young woman bare to the waist. Her stiffened hand held a knife that was driven up to the hilt in the man's chest.

The four men stepped out into the courtyard, and behind them came a fifth man, holding a lantern. Across his back was slung a two-handed sword. Like their dead comrade, the five men wore masks.

As the fifth man appeared, Kubin let out a screech like a mountain lion and charged. The Thieves reacted instantly, dropping their burden and spreading out to meet their opponents. The blanket unwrapped itself as it fell, revealing Esseta's pale face. The man with the lantern whirled it over his head, then hurled it straight at Blade. Blade ducked aside, raising his sword as he did, and found the man coming at him with his own sword carving the air in front of him.

Blade swung toward the man's right as the sword hissed toward him. The two swords met with a clang like a badly tuned gong, jarring Blade's arm all the way up to the elbow. He slashed hard to keep his opponent in play while he drew his knife. With the longer sword, his opponent would be at a disadvantage if Blade could get in close.

The man knew this, and kept his sword moving continuously, keeping a barrier of sharp-edged steel between himself and Blade. Perhaps he was playing for time, and certainly he was gaining it. Blade couldn't afford that-this battle had to be won quickly. How many Thieves might be close enough to join in, he didn't know. Nor did he want to find out the hard way.

Blade leaped forward, inside the arc of the other's sword. His own sword rose, to block the other's next swing. Again the swords crashed together and sparks blazed. The enemy's sword smashed Blade's out of his hand and swept it high into the air. The collision deflected the longer sword over Blade's head. With precise timing and all his speed, Blade gripped his opponent by one arm, immobilizing the sword and simultaneously jerking him forward. The man flew at Blade, to meet a knife in his throat.

Blade turned away without waiting for the man to fall, ready to take a hand in the rest of the battle. He saw two of the Thieves down. He saw one of Kubin's men leaning against the wall, hands clamped over his stomach. He saw Kubin fighting single-handed, against two Thieves, and moved to join him.

Before Blade could join the fight, Kubin ended it himself. His sword bit into the thigh of one Thief, sending the man staggering back. Before Kubin could guard, the other Thief slashed down with a heavy knife. Kubin raised his left hand to take the slash on his glove, but miscalculated. The knife bit into his

unprotected wrist, shearing through flesh and bone, taking his left hand off as neatly as a surgeon could have done.

Kubin finished turning, dropped his sword, and closed with the Thief. The man seemed paralyzed to see Kubin shrug off the loss of his hand as though it was nothing more than a mosquito bite. Kubin approached the motionless Thief and clamped his right hand around the man's throat, lifting and squeezing in a single motion. The man's windpipe collapsed with a crackling sound as his head smashed against the wall. Kubin hammered the man several times more against the wall, until the back of his head was visibly flattened. Only then did he let the body drop, pull off his sash, and start tying it around the stump of his left wrist.

With Blade's help, Kubin finished the job while he was still able to stand. As Blade tied the final knot in the tourniquet, the Thieves' horses behind him exploded into wild panic, then bolted for the gate. The two men Kubin had sent to deal with them came running up, both waving bloody swords.

Kubin's face was pale and sweat was breaking out on his forehead, but he was still in complete control of himself. "We'd better be on our way," he said. He pointed to Esseta. "You two-pick her up and carry her. Gently." He shook off Blade's efforts to help him and led the way toward the gate. Again Blade brought up the rear, his face grim. He didn't know whether Esseta was going to live or die, or how many of her people the Thieves had killed besides the one girl. At least they'd made sure that Esseta wouldn't die as a prisoner of the Thieves and their allies, in agony, all her secrets torn from her by unbearable pain.

Now they were crossing the road. Blade heard hooves approaching down the road. Two horsemen appeared, one with a crossbow, the other with a sword. Both weapons came up, both horses jumped forward in a spray of gravel, and both riders shouted wild cries as they charged.

Blade had the two-handed sword of his last victim slung across his back. In a single motion he drew it, then stepped forward to meet the horsemen's charge.

The bolt wssshed from the crossbow and Blade heard it sink into flesh without seeing who'd been hit. The swordsman came down on him, filling his vision, weapon raised to slash. Blade's sword whirled, biting deep into the man's body, sinking so deeply that it was jerked out of Blade's hands as the horse rushed past. The dying man's sword swept harmlessly over Blade's head, and the rider fell to the road. The archer tried to rein in his horse, but came too close. Before he could wheel and ride off, one of Kubin's men leaped up behind him. One hand gripped the Thief's hair, pulling his head back, the other gripped a knife and drew it across the Thief's exposed throat. Kubin's man leaped off the horse's back as the animal bolted, driven into panic by the sudden outpouring of its rider's blood.

Kubin was bending over Esseta, his remaining hand clamped on her neck. Blade looked closer, and his face set even harder. The bolt from the crossbow had torn through Esseta's neck, gouging the flesh deeply. Not deeply enough to get the jugular vein, fortunately-the blood was only trickling around Kubin's fingers, not pouring out. Blade pulled off his own sash, tore off a piece, wadded it into a compress, and tied it over the wound with the rest of the sash. Then he straightened up, wiping his hands on his trousers to clean Esseta's blood off them.

"We're going to have to hole up somewhere," said Blade. "Neither you nor Esseta will survive if we have to travel. So we're going to the nearest house and settle in there, while one of the men goes to your villa for help."

Kubin nodded. "What if the people in the house object?"

Blade hefted his sword. "I don't think they will."

Kubin motioned to one of his men, holding up his right hand. "Ride to the villa and bring back the doctor and ten men. Take this glove so they'll know the message is from me."

"Yes, Lord Kubin." The man pulled the heavy glove off Kubin's hand and dashed away. Blade bent down, lifted Esseta gently in his arms, and led the way across the ditch and into the vineyard.

A few minutes later they came out on the other side, near a small white farmhouse. Blade led them across the farmyard and hammered on the door with his sword.

"Open, in the name of the Baran!"

There was the scrape of a bolt being- drawn, and then the door crept open a few inches and a woman peered out. She took one look at Blade, appearing twice human size and splattered with blood from head to foot, then screamed and fainted. Blade thrust his sword into the opening before anyone could slam the door, then pushed the door the rest of the way open. The woman's children scurried out of the way and huddled in a corner. Blade strode in, picked up the woman, carried her out of the way, and turned back to the door just in time to see Kubin faint. Shock and loss of blood had finally caught up with him.

Blade made both Kubin and Esseta as comfortable as possible, and assigned one of the men to keep an eye on them. He and the remaining man went around the house, closing and nailing all the shutters, locking the door, and putting buckets of water handy in case the Thieves tried to burn them out.

Blade hoped the Thieves couldn't call up reinforcements before Kubin's men arrived from his villa. He also hoped his rough first aid would keep both Esseta and Kubin alive until the doctor came.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do for a while, except hope.

Wherever the Thieves went after their defeat, it was not to Kubin's villa or the house where Blade mounted guard over his two helpless charges. An hour passed in silence, except for the heavy breathing of Kubin and Esseta.

Then suddenly armed men seemed to drop from the sky, until there were enough around the farmhouse to fight a pitched battle against the Hashomi. First came the men from Kubin's villa, thirty of them, with the doctor and two priests of Junah. Then fifty of the City Riders came clattering up. Hard on their heels was a column of soldiers from the city garrison. After that came another strong force of horsemen-more than Blade could count. These were the elite cavalry of the Baran's Guard, armored from head to foot, mounted on mail-draped horses, armed to the teeth, and each of them a match for half a dozen Thieves or a couple of Hashomi.

Finally Giraz, chief of the Eyes of the Baran, rode up on a mule and took charge. He discouraged unnecessary questions and sent the two-thirds of the men who weren't needed about their business. He also made arrangements to have Kubin and Esseta taken directly to the palace. After that he found time to get a brief account of the night's events from Blade.

"The hand of Junah was over all of you tonight," he said soberly, when Blade had finished. "You must give proper thanks for his favor." Giraz's piety had disturbed Blade at first, but now he realized that it was entirely sincere, although a trifle odd in a man of Giraz's profession.

"I will," said Blade politely. "I'd also like to hear what the Baran has to say about this night's work. We did him good service, I think, but he may not realize it."

Chapter 21

Blade and Giraz sat down with the Baran for a private conference the next morning. The Baran was blunt. His orders had been to watch the Thieves, not fight them—at least not now.

"However, I must admit that order always depended on the Thieves cooperating," he said. "Since they did not cooperate—" he shrugged. "We've had to start lopping off heads, so we may as well go on doing it. I will be a good deal happier when there is not a single Thief alive in Dahaura." Both Giraz and Blade nodded in agreement.

"Now," the Baran continued, "we still would do well to try striking down the Council of Twelve as our first move. Giraz, do you think there is still any chance of that?"

The eunuch nodded. "We have ways of knowing where and when they meet. I do not think last night's events have made any difference. As far as I have learned, the thieves took no prisoners who could tell them how much we know about them. It is obvious they thought Esseta was such a person, but they had no time to ask her anything before Blade came upon them."

"Good," said the Baran. "How is Esseta, by the way?"

"The doctor believes she will live;" replied Blade. "He also fears she will be scarred for life."

"She need not worry about that," said the Baran. "She will have no need to continue in her profession. I could reward Kubin Ben Sarif as generously, but I doubt if the treasury could afford it. He's not exactly a poor man."

Blade laughed. "No, my lord, he certainly is not. Besides, I don't think he'd take the money. I spoke to him this morning. He says he can keep a brothel just as well with the one hand he has left—after he gets through using it to strangle as many Thieves as he can reach. The doctor threatens to tie him to the bed if he keeps talking like that."

The Baran smiled. "The doctor will have my orders to do so, if Kubin doesn't calm himself. He has done his duty several times over, and a good man like that should rest and be healed. He won't be happy about missing our blow against the Thieves, but I am not going to risk the lives of my subjects merely to keep Kubin Ben Sarif happy. Will his men fight without him leading them, do you think?" Blade nodded. "Good. I will put you in command of them, on the night. Now, Giraz, bring out the map of Dahaura, and we shall see what is to be done."

The moon was now past full, and tonight clouds covered two thirds of the sky. In the back alleys of Dahaura it was dark enough to hide black cats, Thieves, or men of the Baran and Kubin Ben Sarif setting out to catch Thieves.

Richard Blade slipped into the shelter of a recessed doorway and held his bronze lantern out at arm's length. Five small holes were punched in each side, making four different patterns. Blade held out the lantern until he saw a faint orange glow at the far end of the alley.

He stared at it, until he could recognize the pattern he'd been expecting. The leader of the other group of Kubin's men was at the far end of the alley. Blade raised and lowered his lantern three times, saw the

other man do the same, then whispered sharply, "Come on."

Behind him fifteen men slipped one by one around the corner of the building. Each man wore a red glove on his left hand, tonight's recognition signal for the attackers. Blade had chosen it as a symbol of Kubin's lost hand that his men were seeking to avenge.

Something dropped with a click on the slippery stones of the alley. Blade looked up to see a dim silhouette on the roof of the building across the alley, and beside it another pattern of orange pinpricks.

The ring around the meeting place of the Thieves' Council of Twelve was complete. The Eyes of the Baran were in position on the roof and on the other side of the building. All routes of escape for the Council and its guards were closed. If they were still in the oil warehouse, they would not be getting out.

They should be there. Carefully planted rumors had brought them, rumors of the complete reliability of the warehouse's owner-who was actually in the Baran's pay. The Eyes of the Baran had struck swiftly against the Thieves' sentries in the nearby streets. Some of them had been Hashomi but all were now dead or prisoners. None had escaped to give warning.

Blade found himself listening tensely for the sound of axes from the roof. The Eyes up there would be going in first, because the roof offered the fastest way in. The faster the attack, the more prisoners. Then the Eyes and Kubin's men from the streets and alleys would join in. That should be enough, but if more men were needed, the Baran himself was waiting half a mile away. A signal from the top of the warehouse would bring him and a hundred picked men within a few minutes.

Blade hoped they wouldn't be needed. He didn't mind the hundred more men, but he did mind the idea of the Baran himself joining the battle. The ruler of Dahaura could not be refused if he insisted-but neither could he be replaced if some fanatic, Thief, Hashom, or Fighter of Junah got to him with a poisoned dagger or a bolt from a crossbow. Dahaura might survive the Baran's death and the struggle for succession among his three eldest sons. It also might not. It certainly would be put at a desperate disadvantage, against an enemy too shrewd and skilled not to exploit that disadvantage.

But that was speculation about a future that might never come. Tonight all that mattered was the looming bulk of the warehouse. Blade stared at the roof as if the sheer intensity of his stare could prod the men up there into action.

Suddenly Blade heard a muffled cry, and the lantern on top of the warehouse seemed to float out into space, then plummet toward the street. The clang as it struck the stones raised echoes up and down the alley. Instead of the axes smashing a hole in the roof, Blade heard the clatter of weapons, running feet, and a cry of agony.

The men on the roof had been detected, and the Thieves were counterattacking. No time now to wait and let the attack develop neatly according to plan. The only thing for the men on the ground to do was to pile in and hope for the best.

Blade turned to one of his men. "Run to the Baran, and have him bring up the reserves." That risked bringing the Baran into the fight, but not calling up the mounted men risked letting some of the Thieves escape. If the Baran learned some of the Thieves had escaped because Blade was trying to protect him, he'd trim Blade with a dull knife.

From the other end of the alley, a solid mass of men was rushing forward. They'd heard the uproar and reached the same decision as Blade. Most of them were in a long double line, carrying something

between them.

The door of the warehouse was iron-bound wood six inches thick, strong enough to stand against anything but a battering ram. So Kubin's men had brought one—a length of tree trunk weighing five hundred pounds, with an iron-weighted head and handles for a dozen men.

The approaching men shuffled up, turned, and hanged forward with sudden fury. The head of the ram crashed into the door, and Blade half-expected the echoes to knock tiles and cornices off nearby buildings onto his head. Crash, crash, crash, then a splintering of wood and the screech of twisted metal as the door gave.

It gave so suddenly that the men on the ram tumbled forward in wild confusion, arms and legs flailing. Most of them went down, which turned out to be just as well. There were crossbowmen waiting inside, and several bolts whistled over the heads of the fallen men. One of the men standing in the street went down. Blade drew his sword and leaped forward, running along the fallen ram, passing the men slowly getting to their feet.

"At them!" he shouted. "At them before they can reload!" Crossbows were slow-firing weapons, good for no more than a single volley against men willing to close in fast.

Blade's feet hit the stones at the bottom of the steps. The hall was dark, except for the dim glow of a lantern at the far end. That glow silhouetted four hooded figures, heads bobbing as they tried to recock their weapons. Blade was among them before they realized that he was within striking distance.

His sword whistled in an arc, the point spitting sparks as it struck the wall. Hardly slowed, it swung on through the arc, cutting off a suddenly raised arm, smashing against a crossbow. Blade pulled his sword back without pulling it free of the crossbow. He dragged the archer with the bow, then stabbed him in the chest.

Now Blade was no longer fighting alone, as the other two archers went down before a wave of red-gloved men thrusting and slashing. Kubin's men were so wild in their swordwork that Blade was glad when they rushed on down the hallway and he was no longer in danger of being cut to pieces by his own men.

He caught up with his men in time to see them burst into the open. The main chamber of the warehouse stretched before them, three stories high and a hundred feet across. Against the walls and on two massive timber platforms in the center, barrels of oil were stacked twice as high as a man. All the rest was open, a floor of rough stones that offered good footing. Across those stones a furious battle swirled back and forth.

It was hard to tell how many defenders there were, and impossible to tell who belonged to which faction of the Baran's enemies. Blade's rough guess was more than forty still alive, all of them fighting like demons.

Behind the enemy's ragged battle line Blade saw a circle of cushions on the floor, more than twenty of them. Around the cushions were scattered parchment scrolls and sheets. Two men were frantically running around the circle, scooping up the parchment and piling it in the center.

In another minute those sheets and all the secrets they carried would be ashes. Blade knew he had to get through the enemy's line and stop those two men. He began looking for a frank or a weak spot, trying to make some sense of the battle.

Two of the defenders had climbed up on top of the piled barrels. They had crossbows, and were shooting upward at a hole chopped in the roof. Every bolt they fired was answered by another one whistling down, but neither side seemed to be hitting anything. A flight of wooden stairs spiraled up to the roof in one corner of the building, and four Thieves with swords were holding the top of it against the Eyes on the roof.

The attack from the roof seemed to be getting nowhere, but on the ground the door on the other side of the warehouse was open and Giraz's Eyes were joining the battle. The defenders were outnumbered now, and slowly they began to fall back.

As the enemy line shrank, Blade's hopes rose of finding a way around it and saving the records. The pile of parchment in the middle of the circle of cushions was nearly a foot high now. With all that material in the Baran's hands, the blow to the Thieves from tonight's work would be even more deadly.

Suddenly a lucky bolt from the roof struck down one of the defending archers. A man facing Blade saw this, turned, and ran toward the pile of barrels to snatch up the fallen crossbow. For a moment there was a gap in the enemy ranks. Blade hurled himself through that gap.

He did not try to strike at the men on either side of him, only get past them. They struck at him, but their swords grated harmlessly across the mail he wore under his tunic. Then he was leaping over the parchment, scattering some sheets like snowflakes, to attack the two men who'd been piling it up.

One had been wearing a mask, but now it dangled around his neck. Blade recognized a face known from another time and another desperate battle-another of the five Treases who'd been the judges of his testing before the Master. The other man he didn't recognize, but saw him holding the short thrusting sword and small circular shield favored by the Fighters of Junah.

Blade stopped worrying about the parchment and concentrated on staying alive against two men he knew would be formidable opponents. That saved his life-that, and the fact that once more he faced two good men who had never fought together before.

Blade's longer sword gave him an edge over the Fighter of Junah. Before the Hashom could prevent it, Blade disabled the Fighter's sword arm. Blade turned to meet the Treas, and shouted in fierce delight as he saw the look in the man's eyes. This man had seen Blade in action before, and knew how deadly he was. That knowledge made him afraid, and although he was a Hashom he couldn't keep the fear off his face.

Blade shouted again and pressed his attack. The Hashom's sword gave him an equal reach, but he was not as fast as Blade. Slowly Blade closed, twice getting through his opponent's guard to inflict minor wounds. Even more slowly the Hashom retreated, face growing pale and desperate in the knowledge that he was being backed against the piled barrels. Blade knew that sort of desperation would sooner or later lead a Hashom into a suicidal charge.

Before the Hashom could reach that point, Blade saw the Fighter of Junah moving in again. Blade shifted to a position where he could meet both men, then saw that the Fighter wasn't carrying a weapon. In his good hand he held a lighted taper. Blade leaped to place himself between the Fighter and the pile of parchment, but the other was quicker. The taper flew forward into the parchment as Blade's sword bit into the Fighter's neck. The papers must have been soaked with oil, because they blazed up in a column of flame as high as a man.

Blade's slash knocked the Fighter to one side, straight into the path of the Hashom. In that moment the Hashom launched his charge. He tripped over his falling comrade, twisted frantically in midair in an effort to save himself, and fell headfirst into the fire. He screamed and went on screaming until the flames sealed his throat.

By that time Blade's attention was elsewhere. Over the clash of weapons and the cries of dying men he heard a growing uproar on the roof. It sounded as if a whole regiment of the Baran's army was gathering up there. In another moment the hole in the roof was ringed with faces, and a dozen crossbows fired together. .

The hail of bolts knocked one of the enemy's archers dead from his perch on the piled barrels. Miraculously the other man escaped with no more than a bolt in the leg. He was raising his crossbow to return the fire when three men came swinging down through the hole in the roof on long ropes. Blade stared, not really wanting to believe what he saw. One of the three men on the ropes was the Baran himself, swinging down into the battle like the star of an old-fashioned swashbuckling movie!

The Baran's swing was precisely timed and aimed. He plunged down at the remaining archer, legs outstretched, and kicked the man in the stomach. The unfired crossbow flew high in the air, while the man flew off the piled barrels so violently that he smashed into the wall.

With equally perfect timing; the Baran let go of the rope and dropped lightly on top of the barrels. For the moment he was out of reach of any armed enemy, but he was well behind the enemy's line. As he rose to his feet, several of them turned and recognized him. A throwing knife flashed through the air and bounced off his mail. Blade ran to the pile of barrels. His sword in one hand, he gripped the heavy timber bracing of the pile with the other and started hauling himself up to join the Baran.

A Thief ran at Blade, so blindly that Blade only needed to hold his sword out and let the man spit himself on it. Then Blade was hauling himself up on top of the barrels. As the Baran reached out to help him up, Blade heard an ominous crack from below. The bracing was giving way.

Slowly one of the heavy beams pulled free of its fastenings, while a second below it split completely across. A loud creak, and one of the immense oil barrels began to shift. With the deadly inevitability of an avalanche, it rolled out of place and dropped six feet to the floor, splitting open as it did.

Golden-brown oil poured across the floor like an incoming tide. It reached the glowing ashes of the pile of parchment. Suddenly there was hissing blue flame sweeping across the surface of the oil, toward the pile of barrels and toward the fighting men.

The flaming oil reached two Thieves and their robes blazed. As they screamed and twisted, Blade raised his voice until it could be heard even over the flames and the screams. "Get off the roof!" he roared. "Get off the roof, fast! The building's going up! Get off the roof, you idiots!" The Baran was staring around him, eyes fixed on the flames that were beginning to dance around the pile of barrels. Blade grabbed the Baran by his belt and by one arm and lifted the man as easily as he could have done with a child. "Catch him!" he shouted to the men on the floor, and saw four of them turn and brace themselves. Then he heaved the Baran off the pile. The ruler of Dahaura flew through the air like a football and landed in the arms of the waiting men. All four of them went down, but the Baran was unharmed.

Blade waited long enough to see the Baran on his feet, then jumped, hurling himself twenty feet through the air and dropping twelve feet to the floor. He landed with a jar that seemed to loosen every joint in his body and every tooth in his head. His fall was cushioned by the sprawled body of a Thief, so he was on his feet again in a moment. As Blade rose, the barrels of the pile behind him began to give at the seams,

leaking their oil into the fire. The blue flames blazed higher.

The Baran and the four men who'd caught him were already on their way toward the door. Blade looked around him. The warehouse was filling with smoke, but the light of the flames let him see that the fighting was nearly over. The floor was littered with bodies of both sides. Some of Kubin's men and the Dyes were dragging off struggling prisoners, while others tried to gather up the bodies of their comrades.

Blade stopped them. "No time for that," he shouted. "We've got to get out of-" His words were lost as the whole pile of barrels erupted in flame. A roaring blue wall swept to within feet of Blade, swallowing most of the bodies and nearly catching several of the living men. They jumped back, beating out smoldering patches on trousers and tunics. One tore a flaming hood from his head just in time to keep his hair from catching fire. Then all of them were scurrying for the doors, with Blade bringing up the rear.

Blade had just reached the bottom of the steps up to the street when the flames reached the barrels along the wall. A score of them burst in a single moment, and it was as if someone had set off a bomb. Blade was thrown flat on the stairs, and got to his feet just in time to leap clear of a wave of blazing oil. He ran up the stairs and out into the cool fresh night air, sucking it into his lungs in great gulps. Behind him the cellar steadily filled with blazing oil, until the sea of fire was lapping halfway up the stairs.

They'd never learn anything useful from what was left in the warehouse, Blade knew. How much had they snatched clear of the battle and the flames?

At least the Baran was alive, although no thanks to the man himself! Blade sheathed his sword and turned to begin counting his men.

Chapter 22

The warehouse burned all night, clearly visible from the walls of the Baran's palace. There was nothing to be done about it except keep the flames from spreading.

By dawn the fire was out and men black with soot were pouring buckets of water on the last smoldering ashes and blackened timbers. By dawn the Baran's men had also added up the score of their night's work, and Giraz was reading it off to the Baran and to Richard Blade.

"Of the Council of Twelve, eight are dead, four are our prisoners. Five other Thieves were also taken. We do not know precisely how many were present, since--"

The Baran nodded impatiently. "Yes, yes, Giraz. We know what happened to the bodies. Please--consider that none of us has had any sleep, and we have had a rather busy night in addition. Save the fine detail for your formal report, and for now be brief."

"Very good, my lord. As I said, we took five lesser Thieves. Six Hashomi were known to be present, and I believe they all perished. As for the Fighters of Junah-" Giraz swallowed and seemed to be hesitating.

The Baran sighed. "Bad news will grow no better with waiting, Giraz."

"Yes, my lord. We took two of the leaders among the Fighters. We have interrogated them, and one has begun to answer questions." Blade couldn't help wondering what had been done, to break one of the dedicated Fighters of Junah so quickly. He decided he didn't really want to know.

"The man who spoke said five other leaders of the Fighters died in the fighting. One was the First Lord of the Warriors, their military commander. Another was their leading priest. The others--"

"I see," said the Baran. "That is not good."

Blade felt that remark needed explaining. "Why is that so, my lord? It seems to me that we have done extremely well. We have not only destroyed the leadership of the Thieves Guild, we have badly hurt the Fighters of Junah."

"Yes," said the Baran. "And by doing so, we may have made open war against them inevitable. Even now they may be planning to take to the streets, swords in their hands. How many people will die from this night's work, who might otherwise have lived?"

Blade took a deep breath. The Baran had given him the perfect opening, and now he intended to do everything he could with it. The job of saving Dahaura wasn't over yet!

"That depends on how we deal with the Fighters of Junah," he said. "If we give them a chance, they may indeed decide to launch the war the Baran fears. But if we take the offensive, then--"

"How can we take the offensive?" interrupted the Baran. "We do not really have enough men to pry the Fighters of Junah out of every hole and corner in Dahaura and the other cities."

"I was not thinking of calling out the army against the Fighters of Junah," replied Blade. "At least not immediately. Against the Thieves, yes-they must be rooted out, at once. But not against the Fighters. I think the first move in our offensive against the Fighters of Junah should be a proclamation."

"A proclamation?" said the Baran. He seemed to be interested but confused.

"Yes," said Blade. "A proclamation that they are outlaws. Any found within-oh, let us say, all the large cities or towns and the lands around them-after five days will be killed on sight "

The Baran sighed. "Blade, you obviously have some plan for dealing with the Fighters. I will say to you what I said to Giraz-it has been a long night and we are all tired. Speak briefly."

"I will do so, my lord. If Giraz will get me a map--"

Blade unrolled the map the eunuch gave him on the floor and the other two stood over him while he crouched and explained his plan.

The Fighters of Junah should be driven out of the large cities of the Baran's proclamation. Nobody should attempt to stop them-in fact, they should be encouraged to leave. After that they should be driven west, toward the edge of the desert.

"We can use rumors, small shows of force, anything necessary to do this," said Blade. "But we may not have to do anything at all. They move west of their own free will, in the hope that the Hashomi will cross the desert in force and aid them against you."

"And this hope will be in vain?" said Giraz. In spite of his fatigue, his red-rimmed eyes were fixed on Blade and the nostrils of his thin nose were quivering like those of a hound on the scent. Giraz loved a subtle-plot the way some men loved fine wine.

"Exactly," said Blade. "We are strike at the allies of the Hashomi before the Master expected to have to move. There is a very good chance that the Master will not move at all."

"Why should the Fighters not know this too?" said the Baran.

"I think the Fighters of Junah would not have gone as far as they have if they didn't expect the Hashomi to come to their aid any time they needed help.

"So we will have the Fighters of Junah assembled in the west, waiting for the Hashomi who will not come. Meanwhile, you assemble your army, and when the Fighters of Junah have waited long enough to grow weary, you strike. You can fight them in the open fields, not in the streets of all your cities. The only people in danger will be your soldiers."

"Too much danger, perhaps," said the Baran. "Will they be able to defeat the Fighters of Junah, massed for battle?"

"Yes," said Giraz. "My lord, do not be misled by the name 'Fighters of Junah.' They have indeed trained some of their people to be strong in battle, but not all. If a hundred thousand Fighters of Junah were to gather in the west, ten or fifteen thousand of them might be good soldiers. The rest-" He shrugged. "Your army will scatter them like cats sweeping aside an army of mice."

"If this is so-" said the Baran, stroking his mustache as he often did when he was wrestling with a difficult decision. "If this is so-"

"It is," said Giraz. "And, my lord, with all due respect, Blade will tell us of his plan much more swiftly if you do not constantly interrupt him."

The Baran stared at the eunuch for a moment, took a deep breath as if he wanted to explode with rage, then smiled and let the breath out in a long sigh. "Blade, you are setting an example for my councilors. You are making them all as sharp-tongued and plain-spoken as yourself. This may turn out to be your greatest service to Dahaura, whether I like it or not. Giraz is right. Continue."

Blade sketched out the rest of his plan quickly. The Baran's army should march against the assembled Fighters of Junah and defeat them in a pitched battle in the open field. Then the Baran should issue another proclamation. All those Fighters of Junah who lay down their arms and surrender by a certain date will have a free pardon. All those who volunteer to march with the Baran against the Valley of the Hashomi will receive land and the right to practice their faith.

"I think you will get many volunteers," said Blade. "The Fighters will suspect that the Hashomi betrayed them, and they should be wild for vengeance.

"Then you take your army across the desert and through the mountains to the Valley of the Hashomi. I have no real plans for what to do then. There may be nothing to do except fight, and go on fighting until all the Hashomi are dead. That will be a long and bloody battle, but when it is over the Hashomi will never again be a danger to Dahaura, not in the time of your children's children's children."

"A very pretty speech, Blade," said the Baran, yawning. "And a plan almost as pretty. I can see points where I must ask you more, but not now. We shall go ahead with the destruction of the Thieves, and when that is done we shall talk of your plan again. If we use it, and if it works-Blade, would you like to be the Hand of the Baran for the Valley of the Hashomi, when we have conquered it?"

Blade was pleasantly surprised. He'd known he was high in the Baran's favor, but not this high. A Hand of the Baran was the viceroy for a large province or a wealthy city, answerable only to the Baran himself. The position carried with it the highest rank among the nobility of Dahaura, if the man didn't have that rank already. He usually did. Hands of the Baran were normally chosen from those families who'd been high-ranking nobles for two centuries. For Blade to be given such an appointment would create a sensation.

He said as much, and the Baran smiled. "That is as may be. Those of the old nobles who have served me as well as you have-I will listen to what they may say. The rest can be silent."

The Baran yawned, stretched, rose shakily to his feet, and yawned again. "Now-no more talk until we have all slept. Right now I think I might fall asleep in my bath and drown before the women could pull me out!" He waved to Blade and Giraz, dismissing them, and wobbled out of the room.

While the Baran and his chief servants slept, the fighting men of Dahaura moved against the Thieves Guild. They had the aid of every armed man the Brothel Keepers could assemble, led by Kubin Ben Sarif himself. The doctor who'd insisted on keeping Kubin in bed was seized by four strong men and bound to the bed himself. He wasn't hurt, just made uncomfortable enough to make him watch his words in the future. Then Kubin went out to join the fighting.

The fighting was short but savage. The Council of Twelve was gone and many of the Thieves' planned hiding places turned out to be traps filled with the Baran's men. The Thieves died with the stubborn fury of cornered rats, but they still died. In two days the six major cities of the Baranate were clear of Thieves. In two more days there wasn't a Thief alive and free anywhere the Baran's authority could reach. A few had probably disguised themselves and fled to isolated villages or an animal-like existence in the swamps and forests. They would be no danger to anyone.

The Thieves would have swiftly become a danger, though, if the Baran hadn't struck when he did. Several of the secret storehouses of the Thieves turned out to contain quantities of Hashomi drugs-more than a ton altogether. That by itself was enough to spread chaos in Dahaura.

Two weeks after the raid on the warehouse, the Baran's proclamation was read in all the cities and towns of Dahaura. Within ten days, all men belonging to the so-called Fighters of Junah were to leave every place where this proclamation was being read and go elsewhere. Those who did not would be publicly executed without trial. A list of the crimes of the Fighters of Junah followed, not mentioning the Hashomi but hinting at the drugs.

"That will make sure people are ready to help drive the Fighters out, or turn in those who stay," said Blade. "It won't get people ready to tear the Fighters apart, or burn the women and children alive in their houses-I hope."

Then the Baran ordered the Desert Riders withdrawn from the desert into the more settled lands of Dahaura, and waited.

Pulling back the Riders was another idea of Blade's. "If we leave them in position, the Hashomi will have an excuse for not coming to aid the Fighters of Junah. They will say that the Desert Riders were too strong for them. Many of the Fighters might believe this.

"But if we leave the Hashomi a clear desert, there will be nothing to keep them from coming except their own refusal to do so. All the Fighters of Junah will then know that the Hashomi have not kept their promises, and can no longer be trusted."

The Baran shook his head, "Blade, did you ever consider joining the Hashomi in their struggle against Dahaura?"

"No. By the time I knew that I would have to take sides at all, I knew that I would be with you. The Hashomi plan nothing that any sane man can wish to see done."

"I am very grateful to Junah that your eyes were opened so soon and so well. You would have been a more dangerous enemy to Dahaura than I care to think about. As it is, you have already earned my gratitude and more rewards than it is in my power to give you. You will have an honored name in Dahaura's history even if your horse stumbles tomorrow and you break your neck."

Blade couldn't help wondering if the Baran might be considering arranging such an accident, to save himself the trouble of giving Blade all his promised rewards. That was always possible, in a land, so filled with intrigue as Dahaura. It did not seem very likely, given the Baran's character, and in any case it would hardly be tactful to raise the point.

So Blade only said, "Thank you," and reached for more beer.

The Fighters of Junah poured out of the cities like rats leaving a sinking ship, and scattered in a dozen different directions. Shortly they found themselves being herded west by carefully planted rumors, by the Baran's cavalry patrols; and by the outraged farmers of the lands to the east. Those who didn't move in the right direction were often lynched by the farmers, or driven into forests and swamps to starve along with the Thieves.

Day after day the reports came in of the Fighters gathering in the west, and day after day the Baran assembled his army. He was going to lead west every man not needed to defend the walls of the city and maintain law and order within them nearly eighty thousand altogether. It was the greatest army in the history of Dahaura, and the battle when it met the Fighters of Junah would be the greatest battle.

In the end, though, there was no battle. The Fighters of Junah gathered in the west, nearly a hundred thousand of them. At first they were able to live precariously by stealing cattle and crops, catching fish, and picking nuts and berries. A hundred thousand men could not live long that way, and hunger came swiftly. After hunger came fear and despair. The Hashomi did not come at all.

Now the reports that reached Blade day after day told of men drifting away from the Army of the Fighters. They were turning themselves in to the Baran's garrison or the local population, willing to do almost anything to be fed.

Then the Baran issued his second proclamation, with its pardon for those Fighters who surrendered, and led his army west. Blade rode with him, hoping that nothing would happen to give the Baran a chance to rush into danger once more.

Nothing did. Most of the "campaign" against the Fighters of Junah was about as dangerous as rounding up cattle. The trained warriors among the Fighters seldom surrendered, but they were too scattered to be really dangerous. The largest number found in one place was only two thousand, and the Desert Riders broke them in a single bloody charge. On that day the Baran was thirty miles away, talking with some of the leaders among the Fighters who'd surrendered.

He mentioned the offer of land and free worship for those Fighters who marched with him against the Hashomi. Even Blade was surprised at the response. The prisoners were almost incoherent with rage

against the Hashomi and, above all, against the Master. They hadn't seen a single Hashom lifting a finger to help them since the night of the warehouse raid. What would that mean, but that the Master had only been playing with them? They'd played along with him, and now the blood of thousands of their followers was on the Master's hands.

They did not love the Baran or the Children of Junah even now. But they hated the Master of the Hashomi savagely and completely. Certainly they would march against him with the Baran, who treated them like men and not like puppets.

So much for the Fighters of Junah. After centuries of opposition to the Baranate, Blade's strategy had swept away their menace in a few weeks.

The Hashomi were going to be a more difficult proposition. As Blade said, "As far as I know there is only one route into the Valley that an army can use. The Hashomi can defend it until they are all dead, and perhaps ten thousand of your men as well. There is no certain way to avoid that, but I have a plan that gives us some hope. I am assuming that the valley people are not too happy with the rule of the Hashomi, and that the Hashomi themselves may be somewhat shaken by the collapse of the Master's strategy. If this is correct, then we may look to find allies in the valley."

Blade explained briefly, with the help of a map he'd sketched of the Valley of the Hashomi. The Baran followed him appreciatively.

"I will need only three or four hundred men, but they'll have to be picked fighters, the best soldiers and the best of the Eyes. In fact, I think that the whole army going to the valley ought to be picked men. Many of your soldiers are brave, but the Hashomi could still slaughter them like wolves killing sheep."

"I'd thought as much," said the Baran. "I've already given the orders to limit our invading army to twenty thousand men, plus five thousand of the Fighters of Junah. I'll also put Giraz under your orders as second-in-command. From your plan, it sounds as if you might not live through it even if everything goes well."

"I may not," said Blade. "In fact, I'm not sure that any of my people will be coming back from this one. But it's going to be worth it. It will save your soldiers' lives, and it may help the people of the valley. Once the Hashomi are dead, we have no quarrel with those they have ruled so harshly for so long."

"Want to leave as many of your future subjects alive as you can, eh, Blade?" said the Baran.

"Why not?" said Blade. "I don't want to rule a desert, either for myself or for you."

Blade was busy during the next few days, picking the men of his force and conferring with Giraz. He also found time to marry Esseta.

It seemed a good idea. Even if he got back alive from the invasion of the Valley of the Hashomi, he would sooner or later be returning to Home Dimension. Then what would happen to Esseta? She had the Baran's favor and her own money, but the favor might be withdrawn at any time and her money would not last forever. She could rely on Kubin Ben Sarif for as much help as he could give, but Kubin was well past fifty. He would not always be around to help her.

On the other hand, as the widow of one of the Baran's most distinguished officers, she would be in a much better situation. She would have legal and social rights that no one could question. She would also inherit Blade's property, and that was a real fortune. The Baran had been giving him estates and villas

with a lavish hand. As Blade's widow, Esseta would be one of the richest women in Dahaura.

In spite of all these obvious arguments in favor of the idea, Blade had quite a job persuading Esseta. Her first reaction was, "Blade, you've lost your mind! Did you get hit on the head in that warehouse fight?" She went on from there, less outspoken, but no less stubborn, for several days.

"Blade," she said at last. "Do you realize who-or what-you're marrying? Do you realize that I cannot be the kind of wife you deserve, the kind of wife to stand beside you in the high circles of the Baran's court? You will be moving in those circles, although you don't seem to realize it."

"If I return from the Valley of the Hashomi," put in Blade.

She shook her head angrily, but at the same time there were tears in her eyes. "Blade, I am what I am, and I cannot be otherwise. What I am is--"

"The woman I am going to marry," he said calmly.

Esseta looked as if she wanted to tear out either Blade's hair or her own in sheer frustration. While she struggled with her feelings, Blade went on. "Apart from everything else, I am not so sure that you cannot change. I have seen far stranger and less likely things happen to both men and women during my travels. I will not accept that argument as a reason for not marrying me. I will listen to only one reason-that you do not care for me, Richard Blade; the man, and want me out of your sight."

At that point Esseta burst into tears and collapsed on Blade's shoulder. He held her gently, while she murmured over and over again, "I cannot tell that lie. I cannot tell that lie."

"Very good," said Blade at last. "Then don't. We should go to the Baran and ask his permission. As a Demad of his household, I'll need it."

The Baran not only gave his permission, he offered to sponsor the bride in place of the father she'd never known. The other sponsor was Kubin Ben Sarif, and the principal witness was Giraz. Esseta looked her age on the day of the wedding, no one would have mistaken her for a young girl. But she was as nervous and blushing as any seventeen year-old virgin bride.

It was almost a pity, Blade thought, that there would be no long marriage for them. A man could do worse than marry an honest whore like Esseta, in this Dimension or any other. She did not have "a heart of gold," but she had a cool head and a clear eye, which were far more important.

Kubin Ben Sarif was shaking his head sadly as Blade led Esseta away from the altar of Junah. "Now I've seen everything," he said. "My golden girl, a bride to this mighty man from nowhere." He slapped Blade on the shoulder. "I'm glad for you both. She'll need someone to take care of her, now that I'm getting old."

Esseta's eyebrows rose in her old impish manner. "Old? Kubin, there are a dozen women I could name who would swear that you lied. There is--"

Kubin laughed and held up a hand to stop her. "Enough, enough. Junah be with you, Blade, and bring you back from the valley. You've been the best of my servants. Now I'd like to have you as a good friend."

I also wish that could be, thought Blade. But it cannot. Silently he shook Kubin's hand, and led Esseta

out of the temple.

The next day the Baran's army marched west, toward the desert, the mountains, and the Valley of the Hashomi.

Chapter 23

Once again the horizon Blade saw was dominated by the White Mountain with the plume of snow trailing from its summit. Behind him lay a journey across the desert and the mountains, almost retracing the journey he'd made to Dahaura.

This time he hadn't covered the route as a bound slave. He'd crossed the desert as part of the Baran's army of twenty-five thousand men. He'd made his way through the mountains at the head of four hundred of the best fighters in Dahaura. Now he looked down on the Valley of the Hashomi from a new position, half a mile above the hospital where he'd first awakened.

The hospital on its ledge and the valley spreading out below looked the same as the last time he'd seen them. More important, they showed no signs the Hashomi were alert and on their guard against the enemies approaching through the mountains.

It would make no difference in the end whether they were alert or not. They would die, and their valley would be swept from end to end. It would make a great difference to the Baran's soldiers and the women and farmers of the valley. If Blade had surprise on his side, not nearly so many of them would die in the next few days.

Blade looked behind him and waved one arm cautiously. Two men suddenly appeared where there'd seemed to be only bare rock, crawling forward to lie beside Blade and look where he pointed. One of them was Giraz.

"From the ledge where the hospital sits, it's a four-hundred-foot drop to the valley," Blade said. "Only a bird could get up or down it. The only way in or out for men is through the tunnel to the bridge, past the guards at the bridge, and then down the path to the valley floor. Men in the hospital and holding the bridge can hardly be attacked from below. They cannot easily be attacked from above, either, as long as they are alert."

"But we can attack from above, eh, Blade?" said Giraz, with a thin smile.

"Yes. The Hashomi don't seem to have garrisoned the hospital. I'll take thirty of the best climbers down with me tonight. The last five hundred feet are all that really need mountain climbing. Thirty should be enough to take the bridge or at least block the tunnel. Then we can fix ropes and bring the rest of the men and gear down by daylight."

"And then?" That was a question Giraz had asked several times, and Blade gave him the same answer as before.

"Then we wait and see. The Hashomi can't heavily attack us without splitting their forces and weakening their hold on the valley entrance."

"What if they decide to ignore us, Blade?"

Blade grinned. "We'll make sure they can't afford to do that."

Blade scrambled down the last few feet of the cliff, dropping to his hands and knees the moment he felt level ground under his feet. He peered into the darkness that held the ledge and the hospital buildings on it. The buildings were no more than formless lumps in the night. In one window Blade saw a faint yellow spark of light. That building, he remembered, held the doctors' quarters. He'd given it a wide berth, since the doctors would certainly raise the alarm.

Crawling on his belly like a snake, Blade crept across the twenty yards of open ground to the nearest building. Its shadow covered him, and he knew he was now almost invisible to any human eye. The silence and the darkness remained unbroken.

He turned and watched the rest of the men with him drop down the cliff. They moved as fast as they dared, with only the faintest scraping of booted feet and gloved hands on the rock. One by one they reached level ground, crept under cover, and without a word melted into the darkness.

Now Blade heard faint rustlings from the darkness. The men were pulling off their boots and putting on soft-soled, noiseless sandals and checking their weapons. So far so good. If the Hashomi had put a garrison in the hospital, it didn't seem to be at all alert.

Blade was rising to his feet, ready to signal to his men, when three robed figures slipped out from between two of the buildings. Instantly Blade's men sprang up and surrounded them. Blade drew his sword and dashed across to where the three were now flat on the ground. All three were women, and all three were still writhing and trying to kick and scream.

Blade was relieved to see that the men had obeyed his orders: "Kill no one in the hospital unless I say so." Blade didn't want any casualties among the women.

Blade drew back the hoods from all three women. He recognized two of them, and one of them he'd bedded. He spoke to that one in an urgent whisper.

"I am Richard Blade, the man from Britain who came to the Valley of the Hashomi and then escaped from it. I have come with many armed men, to end the rule of the Hashomi. What do you say of that?"

The woman Blade spoke to seemed too stunned to understand his words, but one of the others gave a sigh of relief. "You-you are not an enemy to the women?"

"Not unless they make themselves enemies to me. Mirna should have told you that."

"Mirna no longer serves at the hospital, Blade"

Blade felt a chill of suspicion. "Has she been harmed?"

"I do not know. She was sent to serve at a hospital in the valley, that I know."

That was as much as the woman could be expected to know, Blade realized. It was too bad that Mirna was not up here, ready to take charge of the women and out of reach of the Hashomi, but it could not be helped.

"We will let you go, if you promise to return to your quarters and tell your sisters that Richard Blade has come again, to help the women of the valley." He didn't mention that he came in the service of the Baran of Dahaura, since that might confuse or frighten them.

All three women now had recovered enough to nod, and two of them kissed Blade's hands. He signaled to his men to let the women up. The women darted away, and Blade led his men off through the darkness.

The invaders advanced in spurts, half of the men keeping watch from under cover while the other half moved. It was slow but safe progress. They took half an hour to cover the three hundred yards to the mouth of the tunnel, but they reached it without raising the alarm.

Blade crawled to the mouth of the tunnel and lay on his belly, looking down it. The torches flickered in their brackets. The damp air with the faint reek from behind the doors was the same. At the far end of the tunnel Blade saw vague hints of movement as the Hashomi on guard walked their posts.

Blade motioned his men forward. The first eight came up holding nine-foot pikes, brought down the cliff in sections and now screwed back together. The pikemen stepped around Blade and formed a double line, holding their pikes level. Eight bristling steel points now confronted any Hashom in the tunnel, ready to impale him before he could get within reach of his opponents.

Now it was time for speed. Blade pointed down the tunnel with his drawn sword, and the eight pikemen broke into a run. Blade ran behind them, and behind him ran all the rest of his men, except five left to guard the hospital end of the tunnel.

They were half way down the tunnel before Blade noticed any reaction from the far end. "Faster!" he snarled. They had to get out of the tunnel before the Hashomi realized what was going on and pulled the bridge back.

One Hashom plunged forward, filled with panic or desperate courage. The pikes spitted him like a chicken and carried him along for twenty feet before he fell off and was trampled underfoot. Blade's men charged on. An arrow whistled overhead, string sparks from the ceiling. Another arched down and struck a man behind Blade in the chest. Without a cry he staggered out of the path of the men behind him. Then he slumped to the floor, blood spraying from his mouth as he coughed.

The charging men burst out of the tunnel. Their sheer momentum swept two Hashomi on the near end of the bridge into the gap. A Hashom ran around the flank of the pikemen and struck at one of them. His sword clanged on the man's steel cap. Before he could strike again, Blade closed with him and cut off both his arms, then pushed him over the edge.

The bridge was narrow enough to force the pikemen to stop and regroup. That gave the Hashomi on the other side of the gap time to rush out of their cave and form a ragged battle line. Some of them wore only loincloths, others nothing at all. They had no time to move the bridge before Blade's men were advancing again.

Afterward Blade could never forget the battle there on the ledge three hundred feet above the valley floor, but he could never remember any of the details. It was all vague and undefined, like a battle fought in a nightmare.

Blade remembered that men fought with their bare hands when they'd lost their weapons, and with their teeth and feet when their arms were hacked off. He remembered a Treas striking down one of his men with a staff, and the man in his final agony gripping the staff and jerking furiously, so that he and the Treas plunged into the gap together. He remembered that both sides fought in total silence, the Hashomi because it was part of their training, his own men because they didn't want to raise the alarm.

Finally, he knew that his twenty-five men killed twenty Hashomi and lost only ten themselves. The fighting came to an end, and the bodies of the enemy were stripped and thrown off the cliff. Blade pulled his own dead and wounded back into the tunnel, and the bridge after them. Leaving the tunnel guarded, he ran back to the hospital in time to meet Giraz coming down the cliff with the first reinforcements.

By dawn the hospital was firmly in Blade's hands. Some of the women and servants were half-mad with joy, most were too stunned to react at all. The doctors and priests were allowed to work under close guard. One of them loudly refused to treat the enemies of the Hashomi, and was promptly heaved off the cliff. After that the others saw the wisdom of obeying Blade's orders.

By noon the last of Blade's men was down, except for a small guard left on top of the cliff to give warning of any Hashomi effort to get around Blade's rear. Shortly after noon the first of the valley people arrived at the foot of the cliff. They were farmers and a few women, for the moment apparently more curious than anything else. None of them tried climbing the trail to join Blade.

These people scattered hastily when the first Hashomi arrived, fifty of them. The Hashomi spread out around the end of the trail and along the foot of the cliff. They shot off a few arrows to test the range, then settled down to wait. Blade stared down at them, and could imagine them staring up.

He did not intend to do much more staring, or leave the Hashomi with time for it.

Chapter 24

Blade's men couldn't afford to sit on the ledge above the Valley of the Hashomi forever. There was a spring of fresh water that would supply them until the end of time, but the food in the hospital would only last about ten days. Before that, the Baran's main army was supposed to push its way into the valley, or at least send reinforcements and supplies through the mountains to Blade.

The night after Blade arrived, he sent a strong force down the trail to the valley floor. Half of them fought their way through the guarding Hashomi and marched out into the valley, stealing all the livestock they found.

The other half went to work with axes, chopping down trees and building a fortified stockade around the bottom of the trail. They'd finished by the time the cattle raiders returned. The livestock was driven into the stockade, and a ditch dug around the outside of it. Now Blade had a fortified strongpoint on the valley floor and several tons of fresh meat on the hoof to add to his supplies. The Hashomi had lost forty more men as against Blade's twenty. They'd also been given a pointed notice that they'd better take him seriously, or it would be worse for them. Blade intended to march everywhere in the valley and carry off everything and everybody that wasn't nailed down, if the Hashomi were fool enough to let him.

That day he had a barricade of logs and stones built halfway down the tunnel. Now he had a line of defense to hold even if he lost control of the bridge. Then he had the doors in the tunnel unlocked: Some of the caves were empty, while others held nothing but skeletons and stench. A few held living prisoners.

Most of the prisoners were farmers, craftsmen, and women who hadn't been willing to play their assigned roles in the Hashomi's scheme of things. A few were Hashomi who'd been too openly skeptical of the Master's wisdom.

All of them were more than ready to greet Blade as a liberator, and fight the Hashomi and the Master

with all their strength. Unfortunately, few of them had the strength to get out of bed, let alone raise a sword. So they were carried into the hospital and put in charge of the doctors. At least they would keep the doctors too busy with medical duties to have time for plotting.

Blade wanted able-bodied supporters from the valley people, though. Or at least he wanted to give the Hashomi the impression that he expected to get them. That was the next job.

The last fifty men to come down the mountain each brought one piece of a small catapult. The catapult was now set up and put into action. From the roof of the main hospital building it could reach out nearly a mile into the valley.

Blade kept it firing all day and all night. It shot spears, bundles of arrows, stones, bags of nails and broken glass, filled chamberpots, and anything else that would hurt if it hit somebody. It also fired sacks made of old sheets and filled with appeals to the people of the valley.

"The end of the Hashomi is at hand. Their doom approaches. Freedom for all those who have been their slaves is coming. Kill them. Take their weapons. Gather up food and come to the House of the Free Men by the hospital on K'baq Cliff."

That was one message. There were many others, most of them written by freed prisoners who had the strength to sit up and use a pen. Dozens of the messages were fired off each day, and sometimes the winds in the valley caught them and carried them far beyond the range of the catapult.

It became a point of pride among the defenders of the hospital to keep the catapult going. When a beam broke, one of the hospital carpenters and one of Blade's men carved a new one from a timber of one of the huts. When the rope broke, the women cut off their hair and braided a new one that made the catapult more powerful than before.

It also became a point to count how many people fled to the House of the Free Men-and how many Hashomi were killed in the process. Both figures mounted steadily. Every night shouts, screams, the clash of weapons floated up from the valley, as refugees tried to make their way through the line of watching Hashomi. Several hundred succeeded. As many more died, but so did a good many Hashomi.

Eventually the guards grew so strong that the valley people stopped trying to get through. By that time there were more than two hundred Hashomi tied down, watching Blade's force. Nearly that many had been killed or wounded since Blade arrived at the hospital.

"That makes four hundred Hashomi the Baran will not have to face when he and his men reach the head of the valley," said Blade. "We haven't finished with them, either."

"True," said Giraz. "But I don't imagine they've finished with us, either. If the Master is as you say he is, it's going to take all the running we can do to keep ahead of him."

"Also true," said Blade, and began giving orders to prepare the hospital for defense. The ditch around the stockade was deepened and timbers placed in the bottom, jutting upward. Blade's archers kept the Hashomi at a safe distance until the work was done.

Other archers were placed along the trail from the stockade up to the hospital, at every place where the slope might let a Hashom climb up. During daylight they carried improvised drums to give the alarm, by night they had torches.

Still more archers were stationed along the rim of the hospital's ledge, with a clear field of fire down into the valley. At first the Hashomi tried to keep a line of bonfires alight all along the base of the cliff. They quickly discovered this made them excellent targets for archers they could not even see, let alone reach from four hundred feet below. The Hashomi then tried maintaining their watch without fires, and the valley people at once started slipping through again to join Blade. At last the Hashomi had to draw back and form their line of guards out of range of both the archers and the catapult. That tripled the length of the line and the number of men needed to maintain it. Blade had now tied up a force of Hashomi greater than his own strength, apart from the two hundred casualties he'd inflicted. He'd lost no more than eighty killed and wounded.

It was tempting to think that the job was done, but that was a temptation Blade resisted. Sooner or later the Hashomi would react more violently and effectively than they'd done so far. Then Blade's easy campaign would suddenly turn into a bloody last-ditch struggle.

He did everything he could to get ready for that struggle.

Every container that would hold water was filled and distributed among the buildings of the hospital. The Hashomi might poison the spring or climb up above the hospital and shoot arrows down. If they did, Blade wanted to be sure that no one would be poisoned or have to expose himself to get water.

Wooden shields were made for the fighting men, so they could move about even under a hail of arrows and stones from above. Large rocks were piled all along the path, ready to be rolled down the slopes at Hashomi trying to climb up.

The refugees from the valley did much of the work, slaving away sixteen and eighteen hours a day. Whatever had brought them to Blade in the first place, they now knew that their only hope of survival was his victory. If Blade's position was overrun, they were doomed to a quick death in the fighting, or a slower and far more painful death afterward. They knew that the Master of the Hashomi would take the time for a proper vengeance even if the Baran's army was storming the mouth of the valley at that exact moment.

Day after day went by, and the supply of food in the hospital shrank. The fighting men went on half rations, the civilians on quarter rations. The only people still getting a full ration were the sick and wounded. Faces began to look drawn and flesh melted off bones, but now they had another week before the food would be entirely gone. Before that happened, the Baran's army or at least fresh supplies should be on hand.

The very next night the Master launched his offensive. He used his wits and the skill of his men, but more than either he used the sheer brute strength and ferocity of the assarani, the great black reptiles. He brought them up under cover of a misty day, and that night he sent them in against the stockade. How many he sent no one ever knew, but they seemed endless to those who had to face them coming out of the night.

They came hissing and roaring, hurling themselves into the ditch, screaming as they impaled themselves on the stakes. They piled up in the ditch until it was filled with writhing scaled flesh. Then the survivors climbed over the dead and dying and hurled themselves like battering rams against the stockade itself.

The stockade held just long enough for some of the refugees to run up the trail toward the hospital. Then it collapsed in four places at once, the assarani swarmed in, and the Hashomi swarmed in after them. Fifty of Blade's fighting men and more than half the refugees died in a few minutes, under the teeth and claws of the monsters and the swords and knives of the Hashomi. More than four hundred refugees

survived to be taken prisoner.

Blade didn't have time to worry about them, because he was too busy with other Hashomi. At every place the cliffs offered any hope, they swarmed up toward the trail, some of them holding their knives in their teeth to leave both hands free. These Hashomi climbed with eerie howls that made the toughest of Blade's men shudder.

Some of the climbing Hashomi missed hand or footholds and fell. Some were picked off by arrows or knocked loose by hurled stones. Some reached the trail and ran wild among the guards and the fleeing refugees. They were all killed in the end, but so were a good many of the guards and refugees. The Hashomi seemed to take a special delight in slaughtering the valley people. If they had time, they castrated the men and mutilated the women just as obscenely. Blade and most of his men would have vomited at the sight of what the Hashomi left behind them, if they'd had anything in their stomachs.

Eventually dawn came and with it the end of the Hashomi attack. Blade was able to add up the night's score. It was a bloody one, on both sides.

He'd lost a hundred killed or wounded, about a third of what he had left. The refugees had been slaughtered or captured wholesale. The House of Free Men was gone, and so was the whole trail down into the valley. Blade could no longer hold anything below the tunnel and the gap.

On the other hand, the Hashomi had lost more than a hundred more fighting men, besides the assarani. The huge reptiles would no longer be nearly so great a menace to the Baran's army.

The Hashomi had paid heavily for their victory, but Blade had lost more than he could afford. He could still hurt the enemy if he was prepared to fight to the last man, and he himself was. He also knew that it was easy for a general to decide to fight to the last man and even plan for it, but not so easy to get even the best soldiers to obey him.

In any case, the initiative now lay with the Master of the Hashomi. Much depended on whether he could think up any more new schemes in the next few days.

Sooner or later, the Baran's army had to arrive!

The morning of the second day after the attack, Giraz woke Blade from a restless, hunger-ridden sleep.

"The Hashomi have gathered in the valley, Blade."

"Within catapult range?"

"Yes. But they've got more than a hundred prisoners with them. The refugees won't let the catapult crew open fire."

Blade sprang out of bed and pulled on his clothes. Giraz led him to the edge of the cliff and pointed. Barely two hundred yards from the base of the cliff the Hashomi were gathered around several piles of wood. They were guarding a mass of prisoners. Blade could see that all the prisoners were naked, with their hands bound behind their backs.

Then the Hashomi began setting the piles of wood on fire. When the wood was blazing high, they picked up six of the prisoners. They swung them back and forth, then heaved them onto the blazing wood.

The screams reached the top of the cliff, and after a while so did the smell of burning human flesh.

The Hashomi went on burning their prisoners alive all day, until more than three-quarters of them were gone. Blade's men went about their business with faces even paler and more drawn than usual. Blade was also aware of sullen, fearful looks from many of the surviving refugees. A few of them, maddened by recognizing relatives among the day's victims, had hurled themselves off the ledge.

The next morning the Master pushed his psychological siege a step further. Blade was called to the mouth of the tunnel, to look across the gap and see the Master standing there. Around him was a force of Hashomi, both archers and swordsmen, escorting two prisoners completely concealed in blankets.

"Blade!" shouted the Master. "Yesterday the prisoners died by fire. A clean death, and almost a quick one. Today they will die like this one-!" pointing at one of the two blanket-covered prisoners.

The Hashomi stripped off the blanket, exposing the prisoner to Blade's stare. He was a man of about forty, as far as Blade could tell. It was hard to tell, since the man hardly looked human any more. He'd been beaten, cut, flogged, and burned until hardly an inch of his skin was still intact. One eye had been gouged out, both ears cut off, several fingers and toes had been cut off, and he'd been castrated.

Blade had just time to get a good look at the man. Then two of the Hashomi seized him and heaved him off the cliff. Blade's eyes followed the falling man all the way down, until he hit the ground in a puff of dust. By the time he turned back to the Master, the blanket was off the second prisoner.

Blade stared again. The second prisoner was Mirna, stark naked, showing a few bruises but otherwise unharmed. Her eyes were wide but clear. She hadn't been drugged, and when they started on her she would feel everything.

The Master threw back his head and laughed shrilly. "She will be next, Blade. After her, all the others. Only can you stop us---only you. Bring your men down from where they are, give up your fight, and the prisoners will live. Otherwise-" he jerked a thumb downward.

Blade heard a confused growling and muttering from both the Hashomi and the soldiers and refugees behind him. After a moment he shut it out of his awareness. His mind never worked better or faster than when he faced a total crisis that called for a split-second decision. This was one of those crises.

With dramatic suddenness Blade straightened up, and made an obscene gesture at the Master of the Hashomi. "Coward!" he shouted. He repeated the gesture. "Lover of small boys! Eater of dung!"

The Master stiffened, and the Hashomi around him gripped their weapons and stared at Blade. Blade waited just long enough to be sure that the Hashomi's archers weren't going to let fly, and repeated his gesture a third time.

"Coward, I say," he went on, more softly. "You are only able to fight old men, women, and children. You cannot fight men, such as myself or those who follow me. Your followers at least have tried-and failed. They have died-but it is you who have sent them to their deaths. The death you cannot face yourself. Master of the Hashomi? I call you unworthy to be the master of dogs who feed on carrion!"

The Master of the Hashomi was now as erect as his own staff, and pale as milk except for his eyes, which blazed red. He seemed to be struggling for words. Blade did not give him a chance to speak, but threw out his challenge.

"Master of the Hashomi, do you dare to meet a man? Then tomorrow at this time I will face you, here on the bridge. I will come to you, naked as I was born, with only my hands. You shall bear your staff, equipped as you see fit. We shall meet thus, on the bridge, and fight to the death. If the death is mine, then no man may call you coward again. What say you, Master of the Hashomi? Have you the courage to earn your name and rank?"

There was more muttering among the Hashomi. Blade could see them looking at each other, then at the master. He noticed that some of the sharpest looks were from those who wore bandages on their heads or arms. The Master's control over his people stood on thin ice after so many defeats and so many losses. It might not survive a refusal of Blade's challenge--or so the Master would think.

Blade would have prayed, if he'd thought that would affect the Master's decision.

Then the Master swallowed, and raised one hand in salute. "Blade, it shall be as you say. Here on the bridge, at this time tomorrow, you naked, me as I am now, with my staff. Let all present hear us!"

"We hear!" shouted the Hashomi, and Blade thought he detected a note of relief in some of the shouts. He raised his arms in a signal to his own people, and they repeated the shout.

"We hear!"

Then Blade lowered his arms and whispered sharply,

"Now let's get out of here!"

He could not remember taking a single breath until they were all safely behind the barricade in the tunnel.

Chapter 25

Giraz glowered at Blade the moment the two were alone.

"Blade, have you gone mad?"

"Everybody seems very ready to call me a madman," said Blade sharply. "First Esseta, now you. This makes more sense than anything else I could have done. I'll even explain it if you give me a chance."

Giraz sighed: "You would go ahead and do it anyway, wouldn't you?"

Blade nodded. "The Master couldn't refuse a challenge like the one I made. His people have been taking too much punishment to be willing any more to follow him blindly. They hope he'll kill me easily, and then you and the others at the hospital will surrender."

"I take it we're not supposed to?"

"Great Junah, no!" exploded Blade. "Why do you think I made him so angry before challenging him? I made him angry, so he'd forget to insist that my people promise to surrender if I was killed. He did forget, and now I don't think he'll risk changing the conditions of the fight. By all means-if I die tomorrow, you're in charge. Go on fighting as long as you can."

"That may not be very long, Blade. There is the food shortage, and the refugees won't be happy about seeing their friends and families tortured to death."

Blade shrugged. "You'll just have to do the best you can. The Baran's army will come, sooner or later. This challenge gains us a good twenty-four hours without lifting a finger. Also, the Hashomi may not be so interested in going to work on the prisoners after the Master is dead."

"You're sure of winning, then?" said Giraz.

Blade shook his head. "I'm sure the Master of the Hashomi will die tomorrow, whether I live or not. That's all I can promise."

Blade found it easy to sleep that night, in spite of the knowledge that he might be going to sleep for the last time in his life. He'd meant what he said to Giraz. Unless the Master were both fantastically skilled and fantastically lucky, he would not be able to kill Blade without getting killed himself. The determination of the Hashomi had been shaken by the collapse of the Master's plans, and might very well collapse with his death. Blade's men would go on fighting whether he was there or not. Once again, Richard Blade found himself expendable in a good cause.

The morning dawned clear, with the promise of staying that way. With no rain, the planks of the bridge would be dry once the night's dew was gone. That would reduce the risk of slipping. Blade was glad of that he didn't want to have to worry about accidents. This fight would be enough of a challenge as it was.

The Master had seen Blade fight, but Blade hadn't seen him. The Master would know many of Blade's strengths and weaknesses, while Blade could only guess at most of the Master's. Blade did know that he was stronger than the Master, and suspected that he was at least as fast. He also knew some tactics for dealing with quarterstaves that the Master wouldn't be expecting. They depended on Blade's longer reach and outright brute strength, so he hadn't bothered teaching them to the smaller and lighter Hashomi.

Blade was at his end of the bridge before the Master arrived. With Blade were Giraz and a guard of archers and swordsmen. He'd also strengthened the guards at the barricade in the tunnel, and placed all his fighting men on alert. Blade wanted to make sure the Hashomi wouldn't be tempted to try anything if the battle took any unexpected turns.

When the Master appeared, he was carrying his great staff, with the silver ball that contained the various drug-laden needles. He wore only trousers and sandals. The hair on his chest was as gray as the hair of his beard, but nothing else about him showed his age. He was all whipcord muscle, sinew, and bone. It would be possible for Blade to pull the Master limb from limb if he got a good hold on the man, but it wouldn't be easy for him to get that hold in the first place.

With the Master were three Treases and twelve regular Hashomi. He'd also brought Mirna with him, naked, chained, and showing fresh bruises and welts. Blade was glad to see her, and whispered to Giraz, "If I go down alone with the Master, see that one of our archers puts an arrow into her. She deserves a clean death."

"And if you do not go down, Blade?"

"Then Mirna may outlive us all." Their eyes met in clear understanding of Blade's meaning.

Now Blade stepped forward, arms crossed on his bare chest, eyes fixed on the Master. The Master raised his staff and held it crossways, looking back at Blade. The escorts of each duelist moved forward to close off the ends of the bridge.

"Ha, Blade!" cried the Master. His hands moved along his staff. A green needle slid out of the silver ball. "Blade, look upon your death. The Ephraimini have made this so that your death will be worse than that of any man before. You will be screaming for death three days before it will come, and you will not even have the strength to kill yourself."

Blade turned slightly, and again his eyes met Girazs in mutual understanding. The Master's desire for an elaborate vengeance on Blade had led him into a mistake. He'd now given Blade a possible reason to be careless of his own life, if he could be sure the Master died with him. The moment he was scratched by the needle, Blade would become ten times as dangerous as before. Did the Master realize this?

Blade turned back to the Master, dropped into fighting stance, and stepped forward onto the bridge.

The bridge was only five feet wide, so there was no room for circling or complicated footwork. The two men advanced straight toward each other. As the Master came within striking range, his staff darted out, the green needle aimed at Blade's chest.

Blade twisted sharply aside and his arms swung down in a savage one-two sequence of karate blows. The staff was beaten down so hard that the silver ball struck the planking of the bridge with a bell-like chinnngggg. The Master jerked the staff clear before Blade could follow through to pin it down with his feet.

Three more times in rapid succession, the Master thrust at Blade. Each time Blade's hands or feet smashed it down or aside before the needle came dangerously close. Each time the Master snatched the staff out of Blade's reach before the Englishman could do anything more.

A brief pause, then another flurry of thrusts, coming in so fast and from so many different directions that Blade no longer tried to count or keep track of them. The staff was a dancing blur, moving almost faster than his eyes could follow it, and his own arms and legs darted at the same furious pace to meet it. He always succeeded in blocking the staff, although he picked up a new bruise almost every time. He never succeeded in getting a grip on it, and after a while he gave up trying. He'd expected this to be a long fight, so this did not worry him or even particularly surprise him. The Master's speed alone would make him a difficult opponent.

Eventually the Master gave up trying to drive the needle past Blade's guard and drew back. The two men stood facing each other. Blade's breath was coming a trifle quicker than usual and a fine film of sweat covered his tanned skin in spite of the coolness of the morning. His forearms and ankles were red, and a trickle of blood showed where the skin had been split on one shin. Otherwise he looked as if he could go on fighting all day, and indeed felt quite ready to do so.

The Master had taken no punishment at all, but his narrow chest was heaving. The years had not taken away his speed, but they had inevitably taken away some of his endurance. He could not fight this way indefinitely. The moment he started losing speed, Blade would have a chance to immobilize, break, or even take away the staff. He would have to shift his tactics to something slower, steadier, and with a more solid grip on the staff. Otherwise he might be the one to spend three days screaming for the mercy of death.

The Master was no longer able to keep his face expressionless. Too much was at stake. Blade was able to guess at the Master's plans and decisions from the play of emotions on the thin features, and with an effort kept from smiling. He'd won his first victory. If the Master wound up shortening his thrusts, Blade would be in less danger from the needle. That meant he could take a few more chances to get in close and dish out a little punishment. A dozen good blows would do much to slow down the Master and

prepare him for the final stroke.

The two men approached each other again. The Master once more held the staff crossways, and now he struck out with either end. His hands shifted up and down the staff so quickly that Blade had no time to take advantage of the shifts to close in. Nor could Blade predict which end of the staff would come at him, the wooden upper end or the deadly needle. He had to avoid both, and it took all his speed and attention to do so. Again the Master's staff became a blur, and again Blade found himself avoiding it more by instinct and reflex than by plan.

The Master of the Hashomi had certainly learned his quarterstaff well, and was using everything he'd learned. Blade realized that as long as the Master's speed held, he was going to have to keep his distance. One split second error in timing, one missed step, and he'd be purchasing his victory over the Master at the price of his own life.

The duel went on. Gradually Blade stopped taking punishment. Now he could avoid the Master by pure footwork, without having to use his hands and arms to block the staff. Perhaps he was beginning to have an edge in speed-but even if he did, it wasn't a big enough edge. He didn't expect to get such an edge, either, without giving the Master a good hammering. If he let this duel go on until it was decided by pure endurance, it could last for hours. He didn't want that. If gave too much of a chance for accidents, or treachery by the other Hashomi.

At last Blade could no longer doubt it. The Master was beginning to slow down. Blade also slowed down, matching his speed to the Master's. He wanted to save his own strength, and he also didn't want to warn the Master. If the man saw Blade defending himself with almost contemptuous ease and realized what this meant, he might become desperate. This duel could still be lost or at least end fatally for both men.

At last the Master stopped his attacks and drew back. He was breathing heavily, his beard and hair were dark and matted with sweat, and he seemed to be forcing himself to hold up the staff. He probably was. The Master's staff must weigh at least half again as much as a standard quarterstaff. Blade was also breathing heavily and his arms and hands showed more bruises and a few minor cuts. In spite of that he didn't take the brief rest the Master was offering him, but went straight over to the attack.

Suddenly the Master found Blade's foot coming out of nowhere, smashing into the staff just below where his right hand gripped it. The staff slammed back against his chest so hard that the breath went out of him in a whuff. If Blade's foot had landed squarely on the Master's hand, it would have smashed four fingers.

The Master seemed to be aware of this. He started backing away, to make sure Blade wouldn't be able to deliver another kick like that at a standing target within easy range. So Blade wheeled on one foot and kicked out with the other, aiming low. The Master twisted so that the kick struck his outer thigh instead of his kneecap, but it still jarred him from head to foot.

Now the continuous deadly swirling exchange of attack and counterattack began again. This time it was Blade who was the aggressor, and the Master who had to follow at the pace he set. Four more times Blade drove his feet in, four times the kicks just failed to be lethal or crippling, and all four times the Master was badly jolted. He stayed on his feet and kept those feet moving, he struck back and sometimes forced Blade to give ground-but he was definitely no longer what he'd been at the beginning of the fight. He was no longer a match for Blade, and Blade could read knowledge of this in the Master's eyes and also in those of the watching Hashomi.

Blade realized that he now had to push the fight to a swift conclusion if he wanted to come out of it alive.

The Master was doomed. He could no longer win-but his desperation, or the treachery of his followers, might still mean Blade's death as well. Certainly they could mean Mirna's death, and Blade was beginning to think of doing more in this fight than just killing the Master and coming out on his own feet.

Blade got in one more blow, carefully aimed at the Master's shoulder. He saw the Master wince as the blow went home, and knew that the man would be even slower than before with the staff, at least for a minute or two. Blade dropped into a crouch and came in again. This time he faced the Master squarely, exposing his whole chest and belly as a target.

The Master couldn't resist the temptation. The staff darted at Blade. Blade threw himself on his back, kicking out with both legs and shooting up both arms. The staff sailed over his head and his fingers clamped down on it. At the same moment his feet smashed into the Master's groin.

Blade felt as if he'd broken all the toes on both feet. The Master was wearing some sort of armored groin protector. That didn't save his balance, though, as Blade jerked on the staff. The Master flew forward, to meet another kick from Blade smashing up into his belly. He doubled up, mouth open and gasping for air, while one hand darted inside his trousers. A knife flashed out, but before it could strike, Blade was on his feet, the staff in his hands. Before the Master could react to this sudden turnabout, Blade reversed the staff and drove the wooden end straight into the Master's chest. He put all his strength and weight behind the thrust, and the wood drove through skin and muscle and ribs to stop the Master's heart.

Blade gripped the Master by one arm as he tottered, the life going out of his eyes while he was still on his feet. He gripped the staff with the other hand. Then he whirled around, and with every muscle in his body strained to the limit threw both the Master and the staff toward the tunnel end of the bridge. Giraz jumped as the staff and the Master's body landed almost at his feet. Then he started shouting orders to the men around him.

Before any of them could obey, Blade was on the move again. He covered the ten feet of the bridge to the Hashomi side in three long strides. The Hashomi stared at him approaching, then stepped aside. Their eyes were wide and fixed, their mouths working uncontrollably. For the moment they were no more than animal, incapable of rational thought or action.

In that moment Blade took three more steps, snatched up Mirna, and turned back to the bridge. A Hashom made the mistake of putting one hand to the hilt of his knife. Blade shifted Mirna to one arm and with the other drove a fist straight into the Hashom's jaw. The man went over backward and did not get up. Blade dashed back onto the bridge, and by the time any of the Hashomi raised a weapon, he was back safely on his own side.

Six of Blade's men were already well into the tunnel, carrying the Master's staff and the body of its late owner. The archers all had arrows nocked to their bows, and Giraz had his sword drawn, ready to give them the signal to shoot. His eyes swept across the Hashomi on the far side of the bridge, and his voice was fiat and chill.

"Some of you will join your Master if one of you so much as blinks an eye."

Apparently none of the Hashomi were eager to join their Master. They stood in numb silence until Blade and Giraz were almost up to the barricade. Then arrows came whistling into the tunnel. One archer fell. His comrades dropped to one knee and shot. The arrows drew screams from the bridge, and before the Hashomi could shoot again everyone was safe behind the barricade.

Blade sat down and called for water. His throat seemed to be packed full of red-hot stones and his legs would barely support him. When he'd drunk, he staggered to his feet and turned to Giraz. The eunuch was smiling in grim triumph.

"So much for the Master," he said. "I wonder how long the Hashomi will survive him."

Chapter 26

In spite of Blade's victory, nobody in the hospital got much sleep that day or the following night. Nobody said it out loud, but the same question was in everybody's mind. Were the Hashomi going to launch a last desperate attack to avenge their fallen Master?

They didn't. At dawn the next day the sentries called Blade to the railing to show him the spectacle of an empty valley. The Hashomi were gone, leaving behind nothing but piles of ash and charcoal where their campfires had been. Nothing moved on the valley floor, except the scavenger birds digging bits of flesh out of the bodies of the assarani.

An hour later a messenger from the Baran scrambled down the cliff to the hospital ledge. The Baran's army had reached the mouth of the Valley of the Hashomi and hammered its way in. Now it was advancing down the valley, and the Hashomi were gathering to meet it. The Baran was sending food and reinforcements to Blade in a flying column that should reach the hospital tonight. Until that time Blade and his people had nothing to do.

Blade passed on the message, and when the cheering died down he ordered the last of the beer broken out to celebrate. By the time the flying column appeared, nearly everyone in the hospital was slightly drunk. The beer had worked rather powerfully on stomachs that were so nearly empty.

The next morning Blade led his own people and the flying column down the path to the floor of the valley, to join in the last battle against the Hashomi. It was bloody as long as it lasted, but it did not last long and most of the blood shed was Hashomi. They'd had their chance at close-quarters fighting when the Baran's army came into the valley. In that fighting they'd killed more than three thousand of the Baran's men. He wasn't about to give them a chance to do so a second time.

So the Hashomi were beaten down with archery and hurled spears. They faced bristling walls of pikes. Where they took cover in buildings or forests they were smoked and burned out. Those Hashomi who did get to close quarters usually killed two or three enemies before going down themselves, but not many got the chance. The Baran had promised that any commander who wasted men would be impaled on the walls of the palace in Dahaura, and the Baran was known to keep that sort of promise.

In a single day the Hashomi were broken. Most died, some fled, a few tried to surrender and a very few were allowed to do so. It took another tedious and bloody week to rout the fugitives out of the caves and isolated huts where they'd hidden, but that was a minor affair.

There were still a thousand or so fighting Hashomi unaccounted for. Most of them were probably in Dahaura's cities, lying low.

"They are no more dangerous than the branches of a tree when one has killed the roots," said Blade. "Or at least they need not be. I suggest that you offer a pardon for all who surrender before a set date, then settle them someplace on the frontier where you need good fighters."

"Not among the Fighters of Junah, I hope," said the Baran, with a laugh.

"No. That would be sentencing the Hashomi to death, and I'm not sure they deserve it, not now. I have the feeling that many of the survivors wouldn't mind settling down to a more normal life, with wives, children, and land. Give them that chance, and see what happens."

"I'll do that," said the Baran. "I take it that you don't want any of them in the valley?"

Blade shook his head. "I'll have enough trouble getting things settled as it is. All I've got by way of people I can trust is the refugees and Mirna's women."

"How is Mirna?"

"A few bruises are still healing, but otherwise she's doing well. She's already asked for a horse so she can ride out and get her women properly organized."

"Maybe you ought to marry her, Blade, so that you'll have some influence over those women of hers."

Blade considered the Baran's suggestion. Under the laws of the Baranate, a man could have up to three legal wives and seven recognized concubines. Few men in their right minds would take on that many, of course, even if they could afford them. But he could marry Mirna, if he wanted to.

"I don't think so," he said at last. "She doesn't need any man's protection, not with the Hashomi gone and her women behind her. She might not even be willing. Also, I don't know what the rest of the valley people think of her. If I married her, I could find myself making all her enemies mine before I'd been ruling a week."

"As usual, you think ahead," said the Baran.

I wish I could think farther ahead than I can, thought Blade. I almost wish you hadn't decided to make me your Hand for this valley. My time here must be nearly at an end. I'll be on my way back to Home Dimension long before I can give these people what they need. Who will be my successor?

Of course! I'll recommend Giraz as my successor. He's old enough so that he'll be retiring from the Eyes before long. He's a eunuch, so he won't be producing a family to watch out for. And he's completely trustworthy.

Blade heaved a mental sigh of relief. That was the last loose end tied up.

It was early morning, and the Baran was waiting on the terrace of the hospital as Blade came out. Behind the Baran stood a dozen picked soldiers and Giraz. Beside him stood two scribes, one holding a scroll and the other a long pole with a flag wrapped around one end.

The sunlight flashed on the jewels and precious metals Blade wore. He was in the full court costume of a general of the Baran's army, with tunic and trousers of silk, boots of white calfskin set with pearls, sword with a ruby-studded hilt, and gold helmet with a crest of emeralds. The costume weighed as much as a coat of mail, it was nearly as uncomfortable, and it was far less battle-worthy. Junah help any man who had to fight in this outfit!

Then the Baran and the two scribes were stepping forward. One scribe was unrolling the scroll and reading from it in a high-pitched nasal voice. It was the Baran's proclamation that henceforth Richard Blade was the Hand of the Baran in the Valley formerly of the Hashomi, and that he was in all matters

supreme authority second only to the Baran.

Then the other scribe came forward and handed Blade the furled banner. He undid the silk cords, shook the pole, and the banner lifted and streamed out on the morning breeze. It was green, and on it in white was a knife, slashing through a Hashomi sword and a Hashomi staff.

"This is not only your banner as my Hand in this valley," said the Baran. "This is the banner of your house, the House of Blade, as long as there are men of that name in Dahaura. May that be a long time!"

The Baran motioned to one of the soldiers, and he stepped forward carrying what Blade recognized as the Master's staff, wrapped in silk except for the silver ball at the end. "I thought of making this my own trophy, but by all that is just, it is really yours. Take good care of it, Blade. That was a victory you won for yourself, and let no one say otherwise."

"Lord Baran, I-" began Blade formally, then stopped. It was as if a white light had flared briefly behind his eyeballs, momentarily blotting out the world around him. "My lord-" he began again, and the light came again. This time there was also pain with it, pain that stabbed at Blade's eyes until he felt tears starting from them, pain that thundered in his head.

Blade turned, dropping the banner and barely keeping his grip on the Master's staff. He took two blind, staggering steps forward. He was vaguely aware of shouts and cries from the Baran, Giraz, and the soldiers. He was also aware that the railing was pressing against his stomach. If he stayed here he might go over the edge. The computer was reaching out to him, ready to snatch him back to Home Dimension, but it might not finish the job before he struck the ground four hundred feet below.

The pain grew more savage. Blade bit back a groan and threw himself away from the railing and the cliff beyond it. His head struck the terrace, and the blow seemed to clear his vision. He saw the blue sky and the White Mountain rearing against it. The peak reared higher and higher, as though he were moving toward it, then higher still, until it seemed ready to topple over on him.

Before it could do that, the pain swelled further and the White Mountain danced away into the sky. Blackness fell like rain, and as it fell the world around Blade faded out and did not return.

Chapter 27

The supersonic Concorde was leveling off at its cruising altitude of sixty thousand feet. Richard Blade loosened his seat belt, slid his chair back into a more comfortable position, and relaxed while waiting for the stewardess to take his drink order.

Behind him lay Britain, a safe return from Dimension X, and all the debriefing and interrogation that always followed such a trip. Ahead lay a month's working vacation in the United States-soaking up the sun and sea air in Florida, but also training in underwater sabotage work and looking over a few possible candidates for Project Dimension X.

Blade had ceased to be optimistic about finding another person who could make the trip, but he hadn't given up hope yet. He also hoped that the new man's first trip would be as successful as the one he himself had just finished.

He'd defeated a vicious, gifted madman and helped a good and wise ruler keep his throne and save the lives of his subjects. He'd killed a good many people, but all of them had been trying to kill him. The people he cared about-Esseta, Mirna, Kubin Ben Sarif, Giraz, the Baran himself-had all survived. He did

not have the lives or sanity of a single one of them on his conscience. Blade's conscience was a tough one-it had to be. But he was always happier when people who'd trusted him, who'd been his friends, who'd become involved in his adventures without wishing to, did not end up gruesomely dead.

Finally, there was the grand joke that Dimension X itself had played on all of them. The Master's staff had made the return trip with Blade, in fine condition-except for the vials of drugs in the silver bell.

The drugs were gone-not physically removed, but chemically changed. Blade didn't understand precisely what was involved, since the description for each drug involved several pages of totally incomprehensible chemical formulas. What he did understand was this: Somewhere, somehow, during the transition from Dimension X to Home Dimension, the drugs had ceased to be drugs. Not one of them now had, or ever could have, any effects whatever on the human system.

Transmutation of the chemical elements? Lord Leighton was asking that question, and when Lord Leighton started asking a question like that, he would spend a lot of time looking for an answer. Certainly it added one more mystery to the long list of mysteries surrounding Dimension X.

That was the bad side of what had happened to the drugs. There was also a good side, as far as Blade was concerned. The Master did not care about healing. His staff carried nothing but the killing or mind-warping drugs of the Hashomi. They had not been added to Home Dimension's arsenal of lethal chemicals, and Blade was perfectly happy about that.

Again, this wasn't a tender conscience, it was practical common sense. The Hashomi drugs would be too dangerous in the wrong hands; and there would have been too great a chance of them getting into those wrong hands. As it was, the secret of the Hashomi's drugs would die with the Hashomi, and not live on in Home Dimension.

That was just as well. Home Dimension was even more vulnerable to terrorism than Dahaura-and few of its rulers enjoyed the Baran's combination of good sense and absolute power.