

Jewel of Tharn

Richard Blade, #3

by Jeffrey Lord, 1911-1976

Published: 1969

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Chapter 1

The lights were burning late at Number 10 Downing Street Big Ben had just struck three and still the three men sat around the long, green-topped table in the Privy Council room. Blue smoke from J's pipe wreathed upward to form baroque curlicues in the white light of a high chandelier.

The Prime Minister took a sip from the small brandy snifter before him. He said: "It is a sort of death, I suppose. A death in life. Which this man Blade is willing to undergo again and again. You say he accepts these risks gladly?"

Lord Leighton, England's greatest scientist, a shrunken little man with a grotesque hump and glittering yellow eyes, nodded and said: "He does. Gladly."

J, who was Richard Blade's friend, and superior in MI6A, made a grumpy sound in his throat. "I don't think 'gladly' is precisely the word, sir. Blade is no fool. He couldn't have been my top man for twenty years if he were. He is a handsome fellow, right now in the prime of life, and he has a great deal to live for. The world, as the saying goes, is his oyster. Yet he has volunteered. He does accept the risks willingly. That's the better word, sir. Willingly. It is simply a matter of duty, of serving England, and that is something that Blade understands better than most". J's pipe went out and he fumbled for matches.

The Prime Minister looked at Lord Leighton and J, then down at the pile of flimsies before him. He put a pudgy finger on the papers, as though he expected them to fly away, and cleared his throat.

"Very well, gentlemen. Let us see exactly where we are. I will begin by saying that I do not understand, Lord Leighton, do not comprehend in any degree, this miracle that you have brought about. I am a politician, not a scientist, and God knows I have enough problems in this world without seeking for new ones in odd corners of the cosmos...or wherever it is that you send this man Blade. I..."

Lord Leighton, who would have interrupted God if he felt like it, broke in to say, "Not a question of cosmogony, sir. I tried to explain that in my report Not a question of time or space, either. It is a question of the dimensional rift: my computer so alters the molecular structure of Blade's brain and body that he is able to perceive, and live in, dimensions that none of the rest of us are aware of."

The Prime Minister, who did not like being interrupted, gave his Lordship a rather cold stare.

"You tried to explain a great many things in your reports, Leighton. I in turn have just explained that I don't understand them. Not really understand. Now, if you will allow me to get on?"

J busied himself in lighting his pipe again, covering a smirk. Lord Leighton, highest boffin in the land, could be arrogant, and a trifle condescending, with lesser brains than his own. Already, on several occasions, J had felt the rasp of Leighton's impatience.

The Prime Minister continued. "Blade has been out on two of these... these journeys?"

Leighton was silent, his small leonine eyes half closed. He looked sulky, but J knew better. Leighton wasn't sulking, he was merely thinking ahead a couple of centuries.

J said: "Yes, sir. Twice. To Alb and to Cath. The first time it was an accident. Something went wrong with the computer experiment. The second time it was deliberate. The third time... well, sir, that's why we're here."

The PM riffled the file of papers with his fingers. "Yes. You want a white card, an *imprimo*, a 'let this be done.' You also want a million pounds."

Silence. Lord Leighton closed his eyes altogether. J took the hint. He was now carrying the ball. As it should be. His Lordship knew little of officialdom and how things got done in a democracy.

J stuffed his pipe with crude sailor's roughcut, not taking his eyes from those of the PM.

"Yes, sir. That just about sums it up. We want your signature on a piece of paper. *Carte blanche*. And we do want the million pounds. With no questions asked in Parliament I am sure you realize, sir, that this matter is of life or death importance to England. So far, incredible as it may seem, only four people in the world know about it! Lord Leighton, myself, you, sir, and Richard Blade. But if we intend to exploit this thing, sir, and implement the decisions we are obviously going to have to make, based on the discoveries that Blade makes, we cannot maintain this type of cabalistic secrecy. We must expand, call in other people, a lot of them, and that is going to be an awesome task, sir, from the security viewpoint I think I can handle it, but it is going to take money. A great deal of money."

The PM stared down at the sheaf of papers. He drank a little more brandy. Then: "It is just possible that I can get the money. There is a fund—I suppose it is still extant—that was set up during the war." He gave J a tired smile. "It would have to be something like that, of course. Not only in the interests of secrecy, but plain common sense. If I were to go before the House and ask for money for... for a project this... they would have me in a straitjacket in no time."

Lord Leighton opened his eyes. "Then you'll give us the money... and the white card?"

For a moment the PM did not answer. The brandy snifter was empty now, but he did not reach for the decanter nearby. He tapped the glass with a finger and a chiming little note shivered for a moment in the silence and died away.

The PM picked up a flimsy and read from it.

"Possibilities of exploitation of inter-dimensional travel. Hmmm. Possible mass teleportation of surplus population. Colonization of newly discovered dimensions instead of, or in addition to, the moon and planets. Possible mass teleportation of precious minerals, not gold. We all know what that means, don't we? Hmmm. Possible cultural exchanges? I confess that I don't really know what is meant by that."

Lord Leighton blinked his yellow eyes. "Simply means that the more we understand about this universe, and the dimensions of it, the less chance that we'll blow the whole bloody thing to hell. That's what it means."

The PM read silently now. J watched and could feel sympathy with the man who headed the British Government J still didn't quite believe it. Not really. Not absolutely. Not even in this age of commonplace miracles. J was of the wrong generation. He knew it A teenager would accept Leighton's miracle with a bored "so what," and wonder what the fuss was all about J kept thinking that he was going to wake up.

When the PM had finished reading he put the papers down and walked to an escritoire in a corner. He fished a single sheet of paper out of a drawer and scribbled rapidly on it J, watching, saw the flourish of the signature. They had it! And if they had this they would also get the million pounds.

J was quite unprepared for what the PM did next, though he knew the man was rumored to have an odd, elfin sense of humor.

The PM took a candle from the desk, lit it, and walked back to the long table. He put the slip of paper on the table and dropped hot wax on it just below his signature. Into the cooling wax he pressed a massive seal ring which he wore on his left hand.

The PM smiled at J and at Lord Leighton, who was now alert and watching with interest.

"This whole thing has a medieval flavor," said the PM. "Witchcraft, alchemy, spies behind the arras, what you will. We may as well carry it the whole way, eh, gentlemen?"

He handed the sealed and signed bit of paper to J. "There you are. Let it be done! I'm sure it will be honored in most parts of the kingdom, what is left of it. Except, possibly, Wales and parts of Scotland." The smile was a trifle sour. "And I hope you aren't planning to work in Africa."

Lord Leighton stood up. He snatched the bit of paper from J's hand and stared at it, then nodded to the PM. "Thank you, sir. That's all we need... and the million pounds. Good night, sir."

His Lordship walked out of the room without looking back, his hump swaying, his gait crablike as a result of the polio that had struck him long ago.

J made a more gracious exit. Even tried, in some measure, to explain Leighton's rudeness.

"He is very tired, sir. And he is in constant pain. He..."

The PM waved it away. "No matter. No matter at all. If I had his brain I daresay I would be insufferable. Just get on with it. Luck to you. But if this is a hoax, any sort of flummery, then God help us all. I am as committed as you are." He picked up the sheaf of papers from the table. "These go into the fire tonight, as soon as you leave."

As J was leaving the PM called after him. J turned.

"I should like," said the PM, "to meet this Richard Blade one day. When the time is right. He must be quite a man, this dimensional wanderer. Rather makes space walking seem like a Boy Scout Drill, doesn't it?"

J nodded and smiled. "It does, sir. And Richard is indeed quite a man. Good night, sir."

Richard Blade was, at the moment, a man who was losing his girl. They had just made love for the last time. To Blade, forewarned of the termination of the affair, the lovemaking had been especially bittersweet. He did not want to lose Zoe. There

was a distinct possibility that he was in love with Zoe. There was no doubt at all that Zoe was deeply in love with him.

Which was why she was leaving him.

They were in the cottage in Dorset, near the tiny village of Burton-Bradstock. The air was sweet with hawthorne and rose and wild thyme, somewhere a last sleepy cuckoo called, and the moon was a high silver scythe over an amethyst Channel. Blade lay on the wide bed, still rumpled from their lovemaking, and watched Zoe dress. She was determined to drive up to London tonight.

Blade wore only a pair of white shorts. His body, so recently drained, was at ease, if not his mind, and he looked like a huge brawny tanned cat against the white sheet. He was well over six feet and built in proportion, with an awesome symmetry about him, so perfectly in scale, that a stranger did not realize how massive the shoulders, how oaken the thighs, until a stranger had occasion to see, or to feel, Blade in action. Zoe, who was an amateur artist and something of a connoisseur of bodies, had painted him many times in the nude. They had done many things in the nude, he and Zoe, and now she was leaving him.

Blade did not doubt for an instant that she meant it. Zoe was like that. She meant things she said, especially things she said in the tone she had just used with him.

He watched idly as she pulled on long black stockings and gartered them high on her firm white thighs. Zoe had a milky skin that never tanned. She stayed out of the sun and in consequence was always a little like a glistening alabaster goddess. Blade wondered, not for the first time, if women—decent women like Zoe—understood the aphrodisiac effect of black on white. He supposed not. Women, he had read, did not respond to psychological stimuli as readily as men. With them it was more a matter of touch, of tactile stimulation. Blade sighed and dismissed the new urge that was rising in him. Zoe wasn't going to let him touch her. Not any more. Not ever again.

Zoe slipped a gossamer pair of panties up her long legs and over the white garter belt. She leaned forward—Blade was getting a double image in the mirror on the dressing table—to fit her small pointed breasts into the cups of her brassiere. Blade felt an almost physical pain. New desire, bound to be thwarted now, began to gnaw at him.

"Zoe."

She slipped a blue linen frock over her head and straightened it. She picked up a silver backed brush and began doing things to her hair. She was watching him in the mirror.

Blade reached for a pack of cigarettes on the bedside table. He lit one, expelled smoke, and said again: "Zoe."

She was doing her mouth with a brush. She never used a stick. Doing that red moist mouth that he had kissed so many times.

Zoe dabbed at her mouth with a tissue. "Yes, Dick?"

"You've really thought this out? You know what you're doing? You really want to leave me this way?"

Her smile was a phantom in the mirror. "Yes. Yes. And no. I have thought it out, I do know what I'm doing, and I do not want to leave you."

Blade frowned. "That's women's logic, which means no logic at all. You love me and you don't want to leave me. But you are going to leave me. That's more than a mere man like me can understand."

Zoe twisted her leg to contemplate her stocking. Her lovely mobile face, with the generous mouth and wide set eyes, was impassive. She kept her face averted because she did not want Blade to see the sheen of tears in her eyes. Ladies, and Zoe was most distinctly a lady, did not cry at moments like this.

"We've been over this before," she said. "Please, Richard! There's no need to rehash it... let's just say goodbye and have done with it. Would you take my bag out to the car, please?"

Blade, as near as he ever came to sulking, slid into a pair of trousers and, barefooted, his huge torso glinting in the moonlight, carried her bag out to the Minx.

Zoe was very deft about it. It was, Blade was to think later, almost as though she had rehearsed it.

She did not cling, nor did she give him an opportunity for further argument. She kissed him lightly on the cheek, said "Ta, darling," in the south country style, legged it gracefully into the Minx, tugged down her brief skirt, and was gone.

Blade watched the red dot of the Minx's taillight vanishing down the lane. It swerved behind a yew hedge and was gone. He listened as the little car purred on, halted at the blacktop road, turned left and took off in a burst of speed. She would take the blacktop into Bridport and then hit the arterial road for London.

Ta, Zoe.

He went back into the cottage, tossed the trousers off to one side, and stretched out on the bed again. It was somehow too large now, and too empty. Her fragrance lingered in the room like a delicate ghost.

Blade lit a new cigarette and stared at the ceiling. After a moment he began to curse, softly, barely moving his lips, making a liturgy of it. He ran the gamut and felt slightly better.

Couldn't be helped, he told himself. Absolutely nothing to be done about it. A job was a job. Duty was duty. Both came before private indulgence, even in love.

There, of course, was the rub. Blade was an honest man and he had never been able to tell Zoe—what she most wanted to hear—that he loved her. That he wanted to marry her.

Toward the end she had been most brutally candid.

"You disappear for weeks, months on end, Richard, and there is never an explanation. You go without warning... you come back without warning. Suddenly you appear and I'm supposed to welcome you back and take up just where we left off. Just like that! It won't work, Richard. Not with me... not any more."

It was useless to try to explain. Bound by his oath, and by the Official Secrets Act, Blade couldn't even explain that he couldn't explain. He took refuge in silence. And in cajolery—and in sex.

Even sex failed in the end.

"I'm a normal woman, Richard. I want to be married. I want a family and a home and reasonable security. Most of all I want to know where my husband is... at least most of the time. Even more important—I want to know that my husband is coming home. That I'll see him again. I don't know what you do, Richard, and

I've never pried, but I doubt that you can truthfully reassure me about that—that you will be coming home! Whatever you do, I have the feeling that it is dangerous. More than a feeling, a certainty. Can you deny it?"

Blade couldn't.

"I love you with all my heart," Zoe had said, "but love isn't enough. Not for me. So after this weekend, Richard, I'm not going to see you again."

And now the weekend had gone and so had Zoe.

Blade's mood was such that he was glad when the phone rang next morning and J, after the usual affable preliminaries, "requested" his presence in London. Blade locked up the cottage, tossed his bags into the MG and took off with a roar, glad to be on the move.

J was waiting for him in the little office in Copra House, deep in the grimy environs of the City. Blade, much to his amazement, had found a parking place on Bart Lane and, after an hour with J, he and the older man drove to the Tower in the MG.

J did most of the talking during the drive, rattling on in the effete Establishment tones that concealed a shrewd brain. Blade was busy trying to digest all that he had heard just now. Operation X-Dimension had status, official status, and the fullest backing of the PM himself. Blade could not see that it changed matters very much—it was he, alone, who still had to go out there and face whatever must be faced. Alone.

"I'll look after your car, dear boy," said J. "Leighton doesn't know how long you'll be gone this time—or if he does know he won't tell me. In any case I'll take care of everything. You're not to worry."

Blade gave him a sour smile. J was nervous. More so than Blade, by far, and talking nonsense to relieve his tension.

The procedure at the Tower was the same. Burly guards escorted them past the site of the old Water Gate and down many stairs to a large bronze-fronted elevator. There Blade and J said goodbye.

J patted his shoulder. "See you soon, dear boy. I hope it's a ripping adventure this time." The old man's false teeth glinted at Blade. "But keep in mind that it's more than an adventure now—it's for England! Goodbye, Richard."

Blade stepped into the elevator, the bronze door sighed shut behind him, and he fell away into the depths of the Tower. The car fell so fast that he felt a little sick. This labyrinth beneath the Tower was all new work. New and top, top secret. Blade himself had not known of it until a few months before.

Lord Leighton was waiting for him in the brilliantly lighted foyer. The little hunchback in the white smock smiled with tobacco stained teeth as Blade left the car. The elevator shot up again.

His Lordship shook Blade's big hand. He peered into Blade's face with small yellow eyes stained red from lack of sleep. "I suppose J has told you of our new status?"

Blade said that J had told him.

Leighton nodded, then lurched away in his tortured, crablike walk. It seemed to Blade that the little cripple's hump was larger, but that was nonsense. He followed Leighton along the path he had walked twice before, through the computer room where the consoles clicked and hummed about their recondite affairs.

Leighton waved a claw-like hand at the computers. "A million pounds!" He chuckled. "That means all new equipment, Richard. These are already obsolete."

Blade changed his clothes in the same cubicle. He put on the twist of linen that served as a loincloth. Heretofore the linen had disintegrated as he passed through the computer. He smiled. He had landed naked in Alb, and naked he had landed in the dimension of Cath. J, rather sharply, had observed that Blade was nothing less than the Adam myth relived.

As he left the cubicle Blade's smile turned grim. Until now he had found no Eden, no Paradise. Quite the contrary.

Lord Leighton wasted no time. Everything was ready. Blade went into the glass cage that stood on a pad in the guts of the monster computer. Leighton greased his body and attached the scores of electrodes. The tiny wires, with their shiny metal cobra heads, were all tagged and grouped and ran through portholes in the center of the vast machine.

The first trip out Blade had been a little afraid. It had all been strange to him then. On his second journey he had been nervous, normally so. This time he was neither afraid nor nervous. He found that he was looking forward to it. He had been idle too long.

Lord Leighton finished with the electrodes. He smiled at Blade, who sat ready in the chair, so festooned with wires that he looked a bit like Gulliver bound.

Leighton said: "Just remember, Richard, that you don't have to consciously observe and remember. It is better if you don't. Our work with the chronos computer has expanded your memory cells so that all observed data will file itself automatically. Just don't think about remembering and you will remember."

Blade nodded.

Lord Leighton reached for a switch behind him. "I can't be sure just when I'll bring you back. It's very tricky. I'm in the midst of some very complex calculations about that now, and it will take a few days. But you needn't worry, boy. I'll get you back!"

Something akin to affection gleamed in the hunch-back's yellow eyes. He who had never loved anything but a computer. "Ready, Richard?"

"Get on with it."

Lord Leighton closed the switch.

Chapter 2

Richard Blade opened his eyes and stared at the mountains that were cutting painfully into his flesh. Mountains? His vision cleared and his sense of perspective returned. Not mountains. Pebbles. He was lying with his face in pebbles. Gravel. His head was paining him furiously. The pain was routine by now, a customary thing that happened every time Lord Leighton put him into the computer-complex, but Blade still didn't like it.

This time the pain had a special flavor. It reminded him of the worst of his few hangovers: the night he and Reggie Drake had celebrated a particularly brilliant coup in Istanbul and had gotten hold of some bad raki. Reggie was dead now and

he, Richard Blade, was on another journey into that extra-dimensional world that could be opened by Lord Leighton's monster computer.

Where was he this time? That was one of the troubles with the computer from Blade's point of view. You never knew where it would send you!

The pain in his head was receding now. He felt better. Still he did not move. Plenty of time. He kept his eyes closed and let his senses feed his brain. It was, after all, only a matter of technique. This was his third trip through the computer and he had learned that you moved into your new world, the new dimension, very, very slowly. You made fewer mistakes that way and the chances of survival were better.

For a moment then he felt the loneliness, the terrible sense of utter isolation and desolation, that he always felt at this time. Blade alone. Blade against whatever it was out there. It would pass.

Blade opened his eyes again. He stood up slowly and looked around him. He was in a declivity, some sort of small pit fringed by strange-looking bushes. He was lying on pebbles and flint that sloped down to a small pool of reddish colored water.

"Jargo! Over here, Jargo, you fool! Not there. Over here. Bring the sled over here!"

Instinctively Blade ducked down into the pit again. Quickness of mind had been his chief asset during twenty years in a dangerous profession. He knelt on the pebbles and flints, cocked an ear, and listened. His hearing was superb. After a moment the voice came again, this time with an approving note.

"That's right, Jargo. Right there so they can be picked up first thing tomorrow. That's a good beast."

Blade remained kneeling. The voice was coming from some distance. "All right, Jargo. That's all for this strip. These won't be ripe until tomorrow. Take your sled and your crew over to the far side and get the mani there. It's all right. I've got you down for twenty kronos.

Several things happened at once in the brain of Richard Blade. It was a fine brain and it handled the impinging stimuli with dexterity and speed, sorting and labeling them without effort, and leaving Blade in utter confusion and puzzlement.

The voice was like nothing he had ever heard before. It did not use words in the ordinary sense, but rather a series of clicks, whistles, buzzings, and trills. It was a language that Blade had never heard in his life.

Yet he understood it!

And now something else stirred in his brain, the caution of some primate that had sired him a million years ago. He was in danger! He decided to play things very cautiously. Blade was suddenly very thirsty. He crept quietly to the little pool and drank. The water was reddish and tasted strongly of minerals. It was quiet now, and after he had drunk his fill he gazed at the sky. There was no sun, no trace of daylight, moon, no clouds. Blade stared at it uneasily, baffled. It was like no sky he had ever seen. There was no color. The void over him, as far as he could see to the zenith and all the horizons, was milky opaque. There were no birds. No wind. Blade was warm, comfortable, even though he stood naked. Then an involuntary shiver did run through him. He understood, without knowing how he

came by the knowledge, that this sky was always like this. Crepuscular. Eternal twilight.

He bent and picked up a large stone as a weapon, looked at his nakedness and shook his head. His grin reappeared, tense and tight and worried, but still a grin. He clutched his stone tightly and began to climb cautiously up the sides of the pit. He would see.

He reached the ring of bushes around the pit. They were low, stiff and scrubby, with large black berries. They formed a nearly impenetrable hedge around the pit. Blade squirmed through it, tearing his naked flesh on sharp spines. After a dozen feet or so he came to the end of the hedge and peered out.

As far as he could see the land was flat. Well trodden paths divided the flatlands into separate fields. Far off, near the horizon, he saw a loom of domed buildings. In a field between himself and the buildings he saw a number of dark figures at work. At first he thought they were men or women, but then he looked closer and saw they were neither. He did not know what they were. They did not walk like men, some slouching half erect and some going on all fours, and the constant gabble that reached him even at this distance did not sound like human speech. Nor could he understand it, as he had so inexplicably understood the voice he had heard before.

As Blade watched them he saw a figure detach itself from the group and start in his direction. His hand tightened on the stone again. Had he been seen? He decided he had not: his cover was good, and the figure coming toward him was obviously unaware of his presence. Blade studied the approaching figure with great care and interest.

He saw at once that it was unlike the workers. As it drew closer he felt a thrill of relief course through him. This was a human being. Another man. Or woman?

Blade scowled. Something was very wrong. The person—so he thought of it—was naked, as naked as he himself was. Yet he could not have said if it was male or female. As it drew even closer Blade saw, could hear, that it was talking to itself in the same strange language he had heard before, the same series of clicks and trills and whistles that he could so unaccountably understand.

It was even the same voice. The same person, the one who had been talking to Jargo. Whoever, or whatever, Jargo was.

Blade made up his mind. He was going to get a little information, and soon. He watched the figure come near, cluttering to itself, walking between long rows of waist-high plants that, to Blade, resembled cotton in bloom. It must be cotton. He could see the white puffs of the opening bolls.

The approaching figure stopped for a moment beside one of the plants. A hand reached out, plucked one of the white puffs, and popped it into a mouth. Chewing contentedly, the figure came on. Cotton eaters?

Blade noticed now what he had missed before. Near the hedge was a line of platforms similar to those used for stacking in factories. They were loaded with bales of the white puffs, whatever they were. Nearby were several long sleds with attached traces for hauling. These were stacked high with loaded platforms.

The person—Blade could think of no other description—went to one of the platforms and picked up something. A thick book. Blade nodded. Simple enough.

Records. It had forgotten the book and had come back for it. That sort of thing made sense.

The creature was now less than a dozen feet from Blade. It apparently had no sense of danger. It perched itself on one of the bales and began to thumb rapidly through the book, clicking and trilling to itself in the outlandish language that Blade could understand.

"I really must be more careful," the thing said. "Forgetting the book like that, leaving it about for anyone to see. Not that Jargo or any of the beasts can read, but if they ever find out how they are being cheated there will be a terrible uprising. Like the one in Kronos Nine that is written of. Anyway Honcho would kill me if he knew I was so careless, so absent-minded..."

Click-click-whistle-trill...

The creature talked on and on to itself, all the time riffling through the book. Blade listened, understood, and was dumbfounded. What was it?

It looked human. Good, evenly spaced features under close cropped brownish hair. Nose, mouth, eyes—much the same as Blade's own. The body was much slighter, slimmer in build, the bone structure very light. It was covered with a fine growth of pale brown hair except for...

Blade got it then. He was looking at some sort of neuter! A mutant somehow bred without sex.

That explained it. Why Blade had been so puzzled, why he had not been able to figure out just what the thing was. It was nothing. Yet it lived in a fairly presentable human form.

There was no hair on its chest. And no breasts, not even vestigial. Only a smooth expanse of flesh. It was the same in the genital area. No hair. Smooth flesh veeing down into slim thighs with no slightest hint of any kind of sexual apparatus. He hefted the stone in his right hand. He was sure he could hit it from here. He was on the verge of hurling the stone when he checked himself. The skull did not look too thick. He did not want to kill the thing, or even hurt it badly. He wanted information, not blood.

Blade put the stone down noiselessly. He would try stealth. The thing was still engrossed in the record book. If he could sneak up and grab it...

That wasn't going to work either. He was flat on his belly in the thick brush and it was impossible to disengage himself quickly without sound. Blade glanced across the fields to where the group of dark figures still worked. They had moved farther away, busily plucking the white tufts and tossing them into huge bags which were drawn on sleds.

Blade stood up. He would try persuasion, try not to alarm the thing. If only he could make it understand that he meant it no harm, that he only wanted help and information. But how? He could understand the language, if it was a language, but he certainly couldn't speak it. Well, maybe a smile would do it.

Blade stepped out of the brush. He smiled and held out his hands in a gesture of entreaty. The creature looked up from the book and saw him. It smiled. Blade smiled. He took a halting step toward it.

Now the creature was no longer smiling, no longer looking at Blade's face. It slipped off the bale and stood for a moment, staring at Blade's nakedness. Staring

in particular at his revealed genitals. An expression of fear and awe flickered on the thing's face. It fell to its knees and held up its hands in supplication.

"Lordsman! I am sorry, Lordsman. I did not know you were there. You did not speak or I would have made slaveface sooner. Forgive me, Lordsman. I did not mean to offend. I make slaveface now. What is your desire, Lordsman? You have escaped from the Cage? You wish my help? Anything at all, Lordsman. Command me!"

Blade looked across the fields. None of the worker group was paying them any attention. It had gone better than he had expected, even though he did not understand except that the creature thought he was a Lordsman, whatever that was, and that his naked genitals had something to do with it.

Blade stepped back into the cover of the brush. He crooked a finger at the kneeling figure. He smiled.

"Come here," Blade said. "I will not harm you. I want to talk to you."

Blade halted, stunned. It was impossible and yet it was happening, had happened.

The creature understood him. Blade was speaking in English, as he had always spoken, and the thoughts leaped clear and alive into words.

Yet what came from his lips was a jumble of clicks, trills, and clattering whistles.

Chapter 3

Blade saw no danger in the thing kneeling before him. They could understand each other. Blade was a Lordsman, whatever that was, and he was supposed to have escaped from a cage. The Cage. Take it from there.

He touched the thing on the shoulder. It trembled and began kissing his feet. "Forgive me, Lordsman. Forgive me for my fear. I will serve you in any way I can. Only do not destroy me, I beg you. I have not yet 200 kronos of my time. I am yet owed over 300 kronos before my time of destruction."

"Come with me," said Blade. "Obey me exactly and I will not destroy you. Help me, obey me in all things, and perhaps I will extend your kronos."

He had already spotted the word kronos as being extremely important in this new language which he could speak, and understand, yet not entirely understand. He guessed that kronos had something to do with time, rewards, payment... possibly a great many meanings and nuances. He must bluff his way ahead.

They went down the pebble strewn incline to the pool. The neuter, Blade was now thinking of it so, looked at Blade.

"Permission to drink, Lordsman?"

Blade nodded curtly. He was getting well into the part now. "Permission."

The neuter drank thirstily, wiped its mouth on the back of a hand and gazed up at Blade. Its eyes were a pale green, and glinted with what Blade guessed was a secondary, a limited, intelligence. But at the moment he was completely sure of only one thing: this neuter could not harm him, had no wish to harm him, and might be of great help.

The neuter spoke first. "You will really extend my kronos, Lordsman? Beyond the 500 that is given?"

Blade nodded. He was in it now. Might as well keep on lying and groping.

"Yes. But we will speak of that later. Right now I want your help. I...I have been ill. I escaped from the Cage, as you guessed, but I had a bad fall. I struck my head. And now I do not remember much of anything. I do not know where I am, or what I am doing here. So we must begin at the beginning, you see."

A hint of a smile. A flicker of cunning mirth in the light green eyes. "You fell, Lordsman? You did not have too much soka?"

Blade filed that away. Soka. It could only be the native variant of booze. It was a trifle but it made him feel enormously better, like the comfortable echo of some well-known voice.

Then he scowled and made his voice gruff. "Your name?"

The neuter trembled as though the words had been a physical blow. "Moyna, Lordsman. Moyna. Kronos 4013 AG, Tier 9, Decantment 4. Destruct Kronos 500. It is all here, Lordsman, as required on my birthplate."

The neuter raised an arm and pointed to its armpit. Blade stared. The skin there was as smooth, as hairless, as that around the genital and chest area. Beneath the skin, easily decipherable, was a rectangular plaque bearing the information Blade had just been given. Blade read it with ease, as though he had been doing it all his life, and hardly thought it remarkable. He might not understand a damned thing yet, but he was acclimating fast.

He smiled at the neuter. "All right. You are Moyna. I am Blade!"

The neuter nodded and watched him with bright green eyes. "I understand, Lordsman. You are Blade. You are one of the Twenty and you have escaped from the Cage. I understand that much, Lordsman Blade. It is nearly time for the Sacer and you are afraid that you would fail, that you would not be chosen. I do not understand that, Lordsman, because it is beyond my cuna but if you say it then it must be so. But how can I make slaveface for you, Lordsman Blade?"

Blade tapped his temple again. "I told you, Moyna. I struck my head and I have forgotten much. Nearly everything. So you will answer my questions."

"With all slaveface, Lordsman Blade."

"Where am I, then? What is this place?"

"You are in Tharn, Lordsman. But of course you must know that much?"

Blade nodded curtly. Lied. "Yes. That much I remember. In what part of Tharn am I?"

"In Canto 13, Lordsman. The Provo of North Gorge." The neuter pointed to the fields beyond the hedge. "This is maniarea Zygoté. We are harvesting the mani as always."

Blade stared at it, remembering what he had heard on first awakening. Mani must be the cotton-like stuff. But not cotton, since it was edible.

"Who is Jargo?" he asked.

The question seemed to puzzle the neuter. It shrugged and blinked green eyes at Blade. "Jargo, Lordsman? One of the ceboids, of course. A worker beast Of no importance. Why, Lordsman?"

Blade frowned at it. "You will not ask why! You will only answer. Understand that!"

The neuter began to tremble again and tried to kiss Blade's feet. He pushed it away, not ungently. "Enough of that. I want food, shelter, and clothing. And a place where we can talk without being disturbed. Can you find those for me?"

The neuter shook its head. "There is no such place, Lordsman. Surely you know that! But I forget—you struck your head. But let me think. I will try, because it is my duty as slaveface to you, but do not be angry if I fail. I am only thinkspeak to the fourth level."

And now Blade was suddenly uneasy again. He gazed around the barren little pit. They were alone and desolate, and yet suddenly he knew it was not so.

The neuter was crouching, staring at the ground, obviously in deep thought.

Blade said: "Is there danger, Moyna?"

Again surprise in the green eyes. "Danger, Lordsman? That blow on your head was surely a great one. Of course there is danger. There is always danger in Tharn. Much danger for both of us, now. If I am missed and cannot explain to Honcho he will destruct me. If you are taken you will be sent back to the Cage and... but you must know, Lordsman."

Blade was silent. For the moment he was more dependent on the neuter than he liked to admit.

Moyna raised its head and looked around at the pit in which they stood. It looked at Blade and smiled. "I cannot thinkspeak beyond the fourth level, as I said to you, but it is possible that in this place, because it is low lying, we have not yet been seen on the spiscreens. I do not say this is so, Lordsman, but it is possible. One reason I say it is possible is because Honcho has not yet sent soldier-beasts to capture us. If we are on the spiscreens he would have done so by now. So if we are swift we may yet escape. Follow me, Lordsman."

It was, Blade admitted, pretty good reasoning. Thinkspeak at fourth level turned out a pretty intelligent neuter. For which, he thought with no sense of blasphemy, let us thank whatever Tharnian Gods there were.

Moyna was clawing at the side of the pit with his hands, digging like a dog after a buried bone. Soon enough of the gravel was cleared to reveal a round trapdoor made of what appeared to be plastic. It was thick and opaque and emitted a ringing sound when Moyna struck it. Yet it was not metal.

Moyna pulled the trapdoor open on a single hinge. Somewhere inside a light glowed. The neuter motioned to Blade to enter. "Quickly Lordsman! Before we are picked up on the spiscreens."

Blade went down stairs cut into stone. He was in a narrow tunnel floored with stone and so high that he did not have to stoop.

"What is this place, Moyna?"

The neuter was fitting the trapdoor back into place. It turned to Blade and smiled, shrugging. "I said I am only fourth level, Lordsman. So I can not retain much of kronoswrite. I found this place by accident one day, while I was searching for a sled of mani that one of the ceboids had stolen and hidden. They are most cunning at times. Anyway I found this place and explored it, and then I forgot it until this time. I did not memthink or thinkspeak of it, because it is not of my level."

Blade made himself be patient. "But you know something of it. What?" He was peering down the tunnel, trying to find the source of light. There did not appear to

be any source. Yet the light was there, luminous, misty white, floating like a will-o'-the-wisp before them as they made their way along the narrow way.

Moyna led the way. It said: "I only know that this place was made long ago, in the time of the great wars, when the Pethcines broke into Tharn from the Gorge and ravaged the land. That much is instilled at fourth level. And a little more. It is in kronoswrite that the survivors, even the Queen Goddess herself, with the High Priestess and some of the Lordsmen, hid in such a place as this for many kronos until a way could be found to defeat the Pethcines. That is all I know, Lordsmen Blade. When your brain is well from the blow you will know all, of course."

"Of course," Blade agreed. And smiled inwardly. He was a pretty big boy to have to go back to school, to start from scratch, but that was exactly what he must do.

They walked on and on. The elusive light danced on ahead of them. For the first time Blade felt a little cold. Moyna did not seem to be affected.

"Where does this tunnel go, Moyna?"

"I do not know, Lordsmen. When I was here before, the only time, I came only as far as a garrison room. It is just ahead now. Beyond that I did not venture. But I have some small capacity to guessthink, only a little, and it may be that this tunnel leads on to one of the Gorge Towers. It is from the Towers that the Pethcines are observed and kept in check, as the Lordsmen will remember when he is well."

"Of course," agreed Blade.

The tunnel widened abruptly into a large chamber. The light that had been dancing on ahead of them now centered itself in the chamber and hung there, a glowing blob of effulgence. Blade approached the light and thrust his hand into the periphery of radiance. He felt a tingling, a mild shock, and drew back his hand. Electricity of some sort!

The neuter was watching him, its slender hands on almost nonexistent hips. Its features registered surprise as Blade thrust his hand into the light, but it said nothing.

In the exact center of the large chamber was a circular plaque, or pad, set into the floor. It was of the same opaque, plastic-like substance that Blade had seen before. It occurred to him that Tharnians did not know or understand metal, or had no use for it.

Blade pointed to the circular pad. It was about six feet in diameter. "What is that, Moyna?"

The neuter fell to its knees and clasped its hand in an attitude of prayer. "No, Lordsmen Blade! No! It is forbidden. I cannot speak of it." It was cowering, averting its eyes now, refusing to look at Blade or the pad.

Blade shrugged and skirted the spot gingerly. Some sort of danger, but it need not concern him at the moment. He was much more interested in the various weapons and articles of clothing that hung on the walls or lay scattered about. Moyna must be right, Blade thought. At one time or another this must have been a guard room, a garrison of some sort.

Clothing! Blade was feeling the need of it. From a peg he selected what appeared to be a complete uniform. Everything was there, from high-thonged sandals to a plumed high-crested helmet. Again no metal. It was all made of the same dull

opaque plastic material, light as a feather except for the helmet and breastplate. They were heavier and had a bronze tint.

Blade tapped the helmet with his finger. "Of what is this made, Moyna? I have forgotten."

The neuter, now that Blade no longer appeared interested in the frightening pad, came forward with a smile. "Of the mani, Lordsman. What else? Everything is made of mani, though it has many different names."

Blade tapped the helmet again. "This? This heavy stuff?"

"Tekshi, Lordsman."

Blade began to get dressed. Moyna watched with approval, nodding every now and then. As Blade drew on a pair of very short and feather-light breeches, the neuter clapped its hand and bowed several times. For some reason which Blade could not fathom at the moment it appeared proud and deliriously happy. A moment later he got an inkling.

Moyna had been staring at Blade's genitalia. As they disappeared beneath the breeches the neuter said, "I am most happy, Lordsman, that you chose me to make slaveface for you. It was kind of you to let me see the Mystery. Perhaps my memspeak will forget how it was, for such is the nature of things, but even so I am grateful. I, Moyna, alone of all my level, have been shown the Mystery. Thank you. Thank you, Lordsman Blade."

Blade filed it away for future reference. When there was time he would think about it. Obviously Moyna, a neuter, had never seen a man's sexual equipment before and was awed by it. Just as obviously, going by inference, sexual equipment such as Blade's own did exist in Tharn. That meant other men. Or did it? Blade kept dressing. He at least, with clothing and weapons, felt more like a man. He had never been entirely comfortable when naked.

Blade donned a kilt-like garment that fitted snugly about his waist and fell to his knees. Over his broad shoulders and deep chest he drew a light undershirt. Then a heavier shirt, woven of the teksin, which was very like chain mail. It was when he began to buckle on a breastplate, from the back, that he halted and gazed at the armor in puzzlement and slight dismay. The frontal armor had two large bulges. No mistaking their purpose. The armor had been made for a woman. A woman with large breasts!

Blade glanced at the neuter. It displayed no interest in Blade's puzzlement. In a moment Blade understood. Moyna had never seen a man's genital area before and it was quite unlikely that it knew what breasts were.

He threw the breastplate to the floor and stomped out the bulges with his foot. The teksin yielded but did not break. He buckled on the plates, donned a plumed helmet, and began to examine the weapons available. These, like the armor, like everything in Tharn so far, were made of the inevitable opaque plastic, teksin, or whatever the hell it was. Blade determined to think of it as plastic.

One of Blade's hobbies, before J and Lord Leighton, had been weaponry. One of his clubs was the Medieval Club - on fine summer afternoons in Kent they got together and had at each other with broadsword, mace, and lance - and Blade was also an expert on such arcana as wheel locks, miquelets, the snaphaunce, and right through to such weapons as the M-16. So it was that the weapons he

examined now had a familiar look about them, though he had never seen anything exactly like them before.

They were all fashioned of the dull plastic. He was amazed to see that the stuff took a very fine edge. There were sabers, rapiers, cutlasses, and one blade that was very like a trench knife. Blade selected a rapier and hung it from his shoulder in the baldric that came with it. He drew the long thin blade and feinted with it several times, stamping back and forth and whipping the blade in the air. He was an expert swordsman and it felt good to have a weapon in his hands again.

Moyna watched patiently. It did not appear to be frightened of, or even to understand, the rapier. Blade sheathed the rapier and turned his attention to the long row of tubes that stood upright in a case along one wall. Under the case was a chest filled with thin and very sharply pointed plastic darts. Blade took down one of the tubes. It took him only a few seconds to figure it out.

The tubes were air guns. Simple and effective. Blade found a small lever and pumped it, felt the pressure build within the tube. There was nothing resembling a stock or a butt, just a circle with a trigger in it. Blade pulled the trigger and the tube emitted a hollow spang.

Blade found a rammer and pushed one of the darts down into the tube, then pumped it up again. He pointed the tube at a shield on an opposite wall and pulled the trigger again. Spang.

The dart penetrated the plastic shield to a depth of two inches. Blade pulled out the dart and looked at the barb. For the first time he noticed a dark coloration on the point. Poison? Drug? Probably a most effective weapon at short range. Nevertheless he had the impression that all this store of weapons was antique, long disused and obsolete, left here in this underground chamber to molder. But beggars could not be choosers, and they must suffice for the moment.

Moyna had been watching all this with disinterest. Weapons apparently meant nothing to him. Blade guessed that neuters never saw weapons, or came in contact with them, did not understand them and therefore had no fear of them. That meant, of course, that neuters were not killed with weapons. How then?

Blade glanced at the circular pad of plastic in the center of the chamber. Moyna was afraid of that! Blade was about to pursue the matter, for his curiosity was great, when he saw the mirror for the first time.

The mirror was of plastic, but had been polished to a high sheen. Blade stared at his image with a sense of shock. It was the same lean, handsome face, the same muscular and perfectly conditioned body, yet there was something about the eyes, the forehead, that he did not remember having seen before. The difference was vague, ephemeral, but it was there. It was, he thought, almost as though the intelligence behind the eyes had changed.

The plumed helmet and breastplate, the kilt-like skirt, gave him a familiar Roman-Graeco look. Blade smiled at himself in the mirror. He had seen pictures in the history books of ancient warriors that looked much as he did now. Blade nodded at his image and smiled again. He had always had his share of vanity. The outfit became him well.

Blade strode resolutely to the circular pad of plastic in the center of the chamber. He watched the neuter closely as he did so. The pad intrigued Blade; he was determined to seek out its meaning.

Moyna fell to its knees again. It began to shiver and shake and moan, again clasping its hands in a prayerful attitude.

Blade halted at the very edge of the circle. He whipped the rapier out of its scabbard and slashed it back and forth through the area over the pad. Nothing happened. Blade glanced back at Moyna. The neuter was on its knees still, keening and making the little whistling, sobbing sounds. It would not look at Blade nor at the pad, but Blade could catch the words.

"No, Lordsman! Do not. I have been good slaveface. I have obeyed. Do not. Do not!"

Blade began to lose his temper. "What do you fear?" he shouted at the neuter. "Look, Moyna. Look!"

Blade stepped into the center of the pad.

Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. Blade smiled at Moyna and stepped out of the circle. "You see, Moyna. There is nothing to be afraid of in this place. Come. We'll be on our way."

The neuter glanced from Blade to the circular pad. It shook its head. "Even yet you do not understand, Lordsman. You who are of a high level and memspeaked for it. It is your head, of course. You have forgotten much. But it is not danger for you, Lordsman, it is danger for me. Come. Come! Let us leave this place. We will see if the other tunnel leads to the Gorge Tower. If it does not I cannot help us."

Moyna got to its feet and, carefully avoiding the pad, started for the passage that led out of the chamber on the far side. Blade stared at the pad, slowly shook his head, then followed the neuter. He had always hated leaving a mystery unsolved and...

Moyna reached the point where the tunnel began to narrow again. There was a sudden flash of blue flame. Moyna was hurled backward, landing flat at Blade's feet.

Blade stared down at the prostrate Moyna. The neuter made no attempt to rise. It looked at the big man and great tears rolled down the smooth cheeks.

"Honcho!" said the neuter. "Honcho has seen us. We are trapped. The magveil!"

Blade stepped over the prostrate figure. He had already guessed that some sort of electro-magnetic screen had been thrown around the chamber. It had hurled the neuter back. Would it work on him?

He walked boldly into the tunnel. Flash! A blue sheet of flame. Blade was whirled off his feet and slammed backward. There was no pain, no sense of electrical shock or bum, just a great invisible hand smashing him back. He was as helpless as an insect in a typhoon.

Blade lay for a moment on the floor. He cursed softly to himself. What now? What next?

The neuter made a high whining sound, a babble of wordless terror. It was pointing to the circular plastic pad.

Something was materializing on the pad. A whorl of gauzy vapor. Blade watched, too fascinated to feel fear.

As though some unseen hand had painted it, in broad clear strokes on thin air, a figure began to materialize on the pad. Slowly at first, then rapidly. Then it was there.

It was another neuter. It was as naked as Moyna, with the same smooth and hairless genital and chest areas, the same light covering of hair. But there the resemblance ended. This neuter was much larger than Moyna and its head was shaven. Its head was also much larger, the cranium well developed, and the green eyes were alive with an intelligence that was tinged with cunning.

Moyna began to knock its head against the floor in abjection. It wept. "Honcho! Forgive, Honcho! I only made slaveface, as is the law. I could do no other. You know that, Honcho. You know that!"

The neuter called Honcho stepped off the pad. It did not so much as glance at Blade, who watched with fascination and first faint beginnings of alarm. This neuter wore a chain about its neck that was obviously a badge of office. The stones, set into plastic strands, gleamed like diamonds in the pale light. Diamonds the size of ice cubes.

Honcho approached the sniveling Moyna and stood staring down at it. Honcho's face was impassive, the green eyes narrowed now. It reached out and tapped the cringing Moyna on the shoulder.

"How many kronos?"

"Not yet 200, Honcho! Not yet of mid-kronos. I beg, Honcho, I beg..."

Honcho put long tapering fingers to its chin and stood looking down at Moyna. It frowned. The watching Blade could detect no mercy, no sympathy, yet there was no sign of anger, of vindictiveness. Only thought. Deep thought.

At last Honcho said, "I am sorry, Moyna. It is not really your fault. That I admit. You made slaveface to the Lordsman here, as you must do by law. As I, also, must do."

The tall neuter turned to face Blade, as though seeing him for the first time, and said: "I make slaveface, Lordsman. I am Honcho. Kronos 4005 AG. Tier 1, Decantment 1. Destruct Kronos 800. It is here so written. I present it as required by law."

Honcho raised his arm and pointed to a medallion set into the skin below the armpit, just as Moyna had done. And yet not quite as Moyna had done. Blade did not miss the difference. There was an arrogance, a near contempt, about the gesture. Blade recognized it instantly. It was the way a subordinate salutes an officer whom he hates and distrusts.

Honcho spoke again. "I am 14th level, Lordsman. I am He of all neuters. If you will now excuse me I will attend to Moyna. I again make slaveface, Lordsman." The green eyes were narrowed and there was no mistaking the smirk on the mobile lips.

Blade knew, in that instant, that here was an enemy!

Honcho turned again to the cringing Moyna. It pointed to the circular pad. "Enter. I, who am He, command it!"

Moyna wept. It began to crawl on its hands and knees toward the pad. Just as it reached the edge it turned back to face Blade. Blade sensed the enormous effort this took. The creature was going against all its training, its conditioning, its built-in obedience.

Moyna held out its hands in pleading. "Lordsman! You promised... you promised to extend my kronos. Keep your promise. Save me!"

The other neuter had stepped a little away and was watching with an enigmatic look on its bland features.

Blade had promised. He whipped the rapier from its sheath and stepped between Honcho and the begging Moyna.

"It is my responsibility," said Blade. "I commanded Moyna to do what was done. If anyone is to be punished, let it be me. So, Honcho, punish me if you dare!"

For a moment they confronted each other. Blade extended the rapier in threatening fashion, watching Honcho's face for every nuance of response. He had no idea how this would turn out. That was the trouble: he didn't know exactly what he was doing. He could only follow his instincts.

Doubt and puzzlement flickered for a moment across Honcho's face. Then it laughed. "There is something very wrong here, Lordsman." No mistaking the sneer.

Honcho looked at Moyna. "In! I am being merciful. If you do not obey at once you will suffer Number 2 destruct! Do you wish that, Moyna?"

Moyna gave a little whistling sob and crawled onto the plastic pad. Blade leaped at Honcho and thrust with the rapier, a long reaching lunge that was aimed at the heart. In the practice of his profession Blade had dueled in earnest more than once and had lived. He felt a surge of primitive joy, of blood lust, as he rammed the slim rapier directly into Honcho's heart.

Blade tripped and fell, off balance. He sprawled ignominiously on the floor of the chamber. The rapier clattered from his hand. It had passed through air. He had stabbed nothing! The sharp edged teksin had sliced through a wraith.

Honcho was a dozen feet away, on the other side of the chamber. It stared at Blade with narrowed green eyes and laughed, a taunting laugh. "There is indeed something very wrong here, Lordsman. More than I thought at first. You attempt to attack a simlu? You are mad, or you have the soka illness. Or... but we will speak of that later. Moyna!"

Blade cursed and got to his feet, raging and helpless. He could do nothing. He did not understand it all, but he did understand that this Honcho was not the real neuter, the real He. It was a picture, a ghost, a wraith, call it anything, that was somehow projected into the chamber. The real Honcho was watching from some secret place.

Moyna was crouched in the middle of the pad, whimpering and trembling. Honcho—the projection of Honcho—raised a finger. Blade guessed that it was a command to some unseen soldier or servant.

Moyna vanished in mid-scream. There was a slight cloud over the pad, like steamy gauze, and a faint smell of burning in the chamber. That was all.

Honcho did not look at Blade. It spoke, apparently to the vacant walls. "Moyna destruct. See that it is entered so."

Blade picked up the rapier and sheathed it. He had been defeated but not shattered. He could not kill a simlu, as Honcho had named his image, but it was logical that where there was a simlu there had to be a real neuter. A real Honcho. Blade must bide his time.

Honcho turned to Blade. "And now, Lordsman, let us speak of you. You will answer my question. You are one of the Twenty? You have escaped from the Cage in Urcit?"

Blade tried to bluff it out. The tale had worked with Moyna. Poor Moyna.

"Yes," said Blade. "That is so. I escaped, but I suffered a bad fall. I struck my head. I do not remember much."

Honcho regarded him. No doubt of the sneer now. And yet Blade could sense that Honcho was not altogether sure of himself. Not 100 percent convinced about Blade. Something was lacking.

Honcho pointed to Blade's kilt-like nether garment "Pull it up. I would see."

Blade obeyed. He bared his genitals. The neuter gasped and took a step backward. For a moment Blade thought it was going to fall on its knees and make slaveface as Moyna had done. But no.

The green eyes had narrowed still more, until they were mere slits now. Honcho nodded and nodded and stroked its chin with the tapering fingers. Blade covered himself, adjusting the kilt, sensing that he was losing this round.

Honcho walked around Blade. Around and around, studying the big man from every angle. At last the neuter spoke.

"You are no Lordsman! That I know. Yet you are homid, one of THEY. I do not understand it. And I should understand it. My birthplate lies—I am far above 14th level, although THEY do not know that—and I should understand it." Honcho ran a finger over his close-clipped skull. "There is a great mystery here—a mystery that I will understand, I swear it—and perhaps a mystery that I can use in my own plans."

Blade had to keep reminding himself that this was only a simlu, not the real Honcho. It was hard to do. The neuter confronting him now was real in everything but substance.

Blade said: "All right, Honcho. I am no Lordsman. I may be homid, but I don't know exactly what that is. I lied. I did not strike my head. I am a stranger in your land. You appear to be an intelligent being, so let us sit down and reason together. Let us talk. You can find out about me and I can find out about you. We will be friends, not enemies."

Blade smiled at the neuter. It was his best smile and he took great pains with it. "I am sorry that I lost my temper and tried to kill you, Honcho. Shall we be friends?"

Honcho fingered its chin. "It is most strange. You speak our language. We understand each other. Yet you use words I have never heard before. Friends? What are friends?"

Blade kept his smile firm. "It means that we will not try to harm each other. That perhaps we can help each other, work together, so that each of us gets what he wants."

The neuter nodded slowly. "Yes. I understand that. Not that you could harm me with weapons as crude as these." It gestured around the large chamber. "These are arfactis, from the time of a million kronos, kept as curiosities or as playthings for the beast-soldiers."

Blade did not answer. He sensed that the neuter image was only talking to cover deep thought. It was trying to come to a decision.

The decision was made. Honcho put a finger to its lips and shook its head slightly at Blade. When it spoke it was not to Blade, but to the listening walls. Blade knew that this was only simlu, not the real flesh and blood creature, yet his skin crawled and the hairs prickled on his neck.

Honcho said: "All spisccreens in Provo of North Gorge to be shuttered. I am He who commands. There will be no memspeak of those past minikronos. I repeat—no memspeak! All to be erased. Do so on command of He."

Honcho raised his hands and clapped them sharply. Blade sensed that now the unseen listeners and watchers were gone. Honcho wanted privacy for some reasons of his own.

The neuter image stared at him. "Come," said Honcho. "We will go to my real where we can talk. In secret." He stepped toward the circular pad. Blade hesitated.

Honcho smiled at him. "You are afraid, then? Of what happened to Moyna? Do not be. It is only to teleport, not destruct. Come. No harm. As you have said, we are friends. For now. It is really very simple. A simple disestablishment of quarks."

Blade stepped onto the pad. He was very close to Honcho now, and could not resist the temptation to sweep a hand through the image. He felt nothing and the image was not disturbed. It was like passing his hand through a solid vapor. Blade did not even question the contradiction in terms. He was thinking ahead. Thinking furiously.

Honcho was staring at Blade. He laughed softly. "You do not really understand at all, do you? Such a simple thing. So now I know who you are not!"

Blade stared back. "All right. Who am I not?"

"You are not Mazda! Not HE WHO WILL COME TO THEY. That much I know. If you were Mazda you would know all things."

"We are getting a little too involved," said Blade coolly. "It is useless to talk of such things now. Let us wait, as you say, and talk in secret and in leisure, so we can come to understand each other."

Honcho's face was very close to Blade's. The neuter's facial area was smooth skinned, marred by only a faint down, the teeth longish and a glistening white. The slitted eyes were deep green pits.

"I tell you one thing," said Honcho. "I have already decided this. I know you are not Mazda. You know you are not Mazda. But THEY do not know that you are not Mazda. So, if I decree it, and I may, you will be Mazda! You will be HE WHO COMES TO THEY. It is understood?"

Blade knew that to be servile would be a mistake, perhaps a fatal one. In any case he was not a servile man. Had never been. "I promise nothing," he said gruffly. "Let us wait and see."

"Yes. We shall indeed see. Take a chair and make yourself comfortable."

Blade gazed around in new amazement. Only an instant before he had been in the chamber, on the pad; now he was standing in the midst of a tall-ceilinged room. Somewhere music was playing. Beneath his feet was a thick-piled white rug that he knew would be made of the ubiquitous mani. There were cabinets around the walls. In the very center of the room was a large, low desk with two contour chairs facing it. In one of the chairs, reclining, smiling except for the gimlety green eyes, was Honcho.

The neuter waved a hand toward the other chair. "Sit."

Blade approached the chair warily. Was this the real Honcho or more simlu?

Honcho guessed at Blade's thought. It stood up and extended a hand across the desk. "Touch."

They touched hands. The neuter's was cool, nearly as frail as Moyna's had been, but it was flesh and blood. Blade sank into the chair.

Honcho smiled. "You are convinced that I am in my real at the moment, not simlu?"

Blade nodded. "Yes. I am convinced."

"Good," said the neuter. For a moment it toyed with the chain of diamonds around its neck. Then it reached into a drawer and came out with what Blade recognized as a sort of ball point pen and slate.

Honcho poised the pen, it was really more of a stylus, over the slate and looked at Blade. "Your name?"

But before Blade could answer the neuter held up its hand. "One moment. Before we begin I had better explain something to you. Tell me a lie."

Blade stared. "What?"

Impatience flickered over the neuter's face. "Tell me a lie! Say something that is untrue."

Blade grinned. "My name is Queen Elizabeth."

A low buzz sounded from somewhere in his chair. Two lights, set into the arm rests, began to flicker. Blade's smile pained a little. A built-in lie detector was going to make it tougher.

"You get the point," said Honcho. "Now... your name?"

"Richard Blade."

Again the buzzing and the flickering lights. Blade frowned. "But I'm not lying, damn it. I am Richard Blade!"

"Wrong," said the neuter. "You may have been Richard Blade, whoever and whatever he was, but from this seg of kronos you are Mazda. HE WHO COMES TO THEY. Never forget it."

Blade could only stare, feeling foolish and helpless, with his mouth half open.

"You are Mazda," Honcho repeated. "You are a God in homid form. After millions of kronos the promise has been kept. You are here. HE WHO COMES TO THEY."

There was no mistaking the glitter, the cunning, in the green eyes now. "And," said the neuter, "you are also my own very private God. My own to do with exactly as I please."

Chapter 4

As nearly as Blade could reckon it was three days before he saw Honcho again. He had no way of telling time. He did not yet understand the Tharnian kronos, and there were no days and nights, no sun or moon or stars. Only the neutral, curdled milk sky. Blade had to content himself by guessing at the hours, and making marks with a stylus and slate he found in his apartments.

He lived alone, in great luxury, and knew that he was continually watched by spisccreens which he could not locate. He could find no wires, no mikes or cameras as he understood them. He found nothing. Yet he was sure that he was being watched.

Honcho, the neuter who was He, had said as much before they parted.

"There will be some kronos seg before my plans are ready," Honcho said. "I was all but prepared, but your coming has altered matters. For the better, I think. Also there are some things I do' not understand, which I must understand, and I must have a period of deep-think and memspeak. I cannot make any mistakes. Go, Blade. I call you that. Me only. To all others you are Mazda. A God. Remember it. You are HE WHO COMES TO THEY."

Blade lived well. He was allowed to retain the rapier, and so knew it would do him no good. There were closets filled with kilts and toga-like garments. There was a bath, a huge and ornate room, where he was cleansed by jets of perfumed vapor. There was no soap and no razors. Blade did not particularly mind. His beard was heavy, he had always had to shave twice a day, and now it began to thicken and curl, dark and lustrous.

His food was brought to him, and the apartments cleaned, by creatures that he knew must be the ceboids of which Moyna had spoken. The worker-beasts he had seen in the fields on that first day in Tharn.

But these were obviously soldier-beasts, not workers, and Blade observed them closely. They were apparently especially bred for special duties.

The ceboids always came in a squad, five females and one male. The females wore breastplates and kilts and sandals, and did not carry arms. The male ceboid who always accompanied them was armed. He stood guard at the single door when the magveil was inoperative. Blade had tested the door only once, and had instantly been thrown back by the invisible charge.

The ceboids did not speak Tharnian. They chattered among themselves in a fashion that reminded Blade of apes. Yet the ceboids were not apes. There was something baboon-like about the faces, yet the ears were almost human. They walked easily erect, yet could scuttle on all fours when they chose. The females were well developed with large firm breasts, straight legs, and only a vestige of tail. The male, the only one Blade ever saw, was as well built in a masculine way, had a much longer tail, and kept one of the teksin tubes trained on Blade all the time it was in the apartment.

After the first visit of the ceboids Blade reclined, reading one of the many books in the apartment, and tried to ignore them. Or to give that impression. He was, actually, watching them covertly all the while. He did not expect anything to come of it, but he felt that he had nothing to lose. He was searching, with quiet desperation, for any loophole, anything at all, that would permit him to face Honcho on more even terms. At the moment it did not appear promising.

The female ceboids, on their part, took an inordinate interest in Blade and did not try very hard to disguise it. They all had rather large eyes, brown, murky and muddy, in which at times he detected a humid glitter. The females kept staring at him, from odd angles, and making sounds that Blade could only suppose were ceboid giggles. Now and again the male ceboid would speak harshly to them, and for a moment they would desist and be all business, but soon they were at it again. It was not long before he guessed what they were up to - they were trying to get a glimpse beneath his kilts! Blade was amused, and was very careful not to exhibit himself.

Blade read omnivorously, knowing that it was to Honcho's purpose that he do so, the books were hardly there by accident, but he did not concern himself with the neuter's motives. He must learn if he was to survive.

One thing he learned was that Tharn, literally, meant THE ALL OF EVERYTHING. That than which there is no other. It was, Blade conceded, quite a comforting concept. The fact that he, and he alone, knew that it was not true, did nothing to alter matters.

There was a large terrace on which he was permitted to roam. There were no magveils across the open windows of his bedroom, which opened on the terrace, and now he strolled to a waist-high balustrade. The ceboids had come and gone for the time being and he was alone, though conscious of being watched.

Blade put his elbows on the balustrade and peered down. He knew, because he had tested it, that there was a magveil just six inches from the outer edge of the balustrade.

The Gorge rather frightened Blade, who was not afraid of much. The tower in which he was confined stood on the verge. By leaning over the balustrade and peering down, careful to avoid touching the magveil, he could see for miles down into nothingness. It was the same looking across the Gorge. Miles of vacancy. He could very nearly, not quite, believe what his eyes told him: that Tharn existed on a plateau surmounting an abyss of eternal space.

It could not, of course, be true. Not even in Tharn. Moyna had mentioned the Pethcines before it had been destructed. This tower, this whole rambling structure built of great blocks of the dull plastic, Blade had begun to think of it as a castle, was only one of a series of such structures built to watch the Gorge and guard against the Pethcines. Who, what, were the Pethcines? Blade, musing idly, wondered if they might be possible allies? Friends? Or new enemies?

He had been walking along the balustrade. Just ahead it curved in, fencing him, and he knew the magveil was beyond. This was as far as he was allowed to roam.

Blade gazed down. There was another terrace, very like the one on which he now stood, about a hundred feet below him. He had noted it before. It had always been deserted. In any case there was the magveil hemming him in. He had been giving some thought to circumventing the magveil, but as yet had come up with nothing. He did not yet know enough about magnetic fields, and flux, which he was sure the Tharnians were using with a high degree of sophistication. But Blade was reading and learning with each passing hour. And as an old intriguer he knew intrigue when he saw it; Honcho was up to something and Blade, somehow, figured large in the head neuter's plans. So Blade felt fairly secure and was content to wait and see. To bide his time.

Until this very moment. Now he saw the woman on the terrace below him and he caught his breath. Desire came instantly.

She was near a balustrade, gazing out across the Gorge, combing lustrous red hair that fell to her knees. Even in the colorless eternal twilight of Tharn the red hair glinted like a banner and, in the brooding silence that hung over the Gorge, he could hear the sibilant sound of the comb as she drew it slowly through the lustrous mass.

Blade's throat was constricted and his heart thudded. Only with difficulty could he draw the dense Tharnian air into his lungs. He had always been a well sexed

man, and sexually overprivileged—J's words—but there was no accounting for the lust that raged in him now.

He leaned far over the railing and studied the woman, seeking for a flaw, for some indication of mutantcy. He found none. This was a woman. A real woman! As he had always known women.

Blade craned to see. Too far. He drew back, fearful of the magveil, it was not a pleasant experience, and suddenly he realized that there was no magveil. Not here! Here was a blank, a blind spot, in the invisible electric cage that imprisoned him.

Purposely done, of course. Honcho wanted him to see the woman. Blade thanked the neuter and did not question the miracle. He leaned far over the balustrade and feasted his eyes. He was having a massive physical reaction.

The woman glanced up. Their eyes met. His eyes were superb and even at that distance he saw that her beauty was classic. The face was oval, the brow high and the eyes wide set, the nose straight and short, finely chiseled, set over a scarlet mouth that was at once firm and sensuous.

She was wearing breastplates and a brief, tight-fitting garment over her genital area that reminded Blade of a bikini. Her legs were long and sum and, though his angle of view was foreshortened, Blade knew she must be tall.

They continued to gaze at each other. Blade felt himself drawn, wanting to leap the railing and fall to her, to immolate and drown himself in the pool of her. His flesh was heavy. It took a great effort to raise his hand and wave to her.

The movement released both of them. The woman fell to her knees, the long red hair cascading about her tawny bare shoulders. She spread her hands beside her on the terrace and began to tap her forehead gently on the blocks of teksin. She was kowtowing to him. In that instant it came to Blade, who was fighting to regain control of his senses and mind, that she thought he was Mazda. HE WHO COMES TO THEY.

That meant Honcho, the neuter. Honcho intended this thing!

Blade watched her. She was still kneeling, still making obeisance. He waited. She glanced up. Blade made a sign, pointing to himself and then to the terrace below. He smiled. Mazda was in a benevolent, even a loving mood. Blade smiled again.

He moved swiftly back into the apartment, went to the closet and began to rip the clothing into long strips. Teksin, made from the mani, had great tensile strength. Blade was not afraid of falling. Neither was he afraid of Honcho for the moment. He was curious. Honcho had willed this to happen, had allowed the magveil to fail at just that spot, and had very likely given the woman instructions. Why? Blade did not really give a damn at the moment. He was consumed with lust. Let Honcho watch and listen on the spisccreens.

Rapidly he knotted together his rope of teksin. He went back to the balustrade and tossed the rope over, secured it, and swung himself out over the void. The magveil was still inoperative.

Blade went down the fragile line like a sailor. He had to drop the last ten feet to the terrace. It was empty now. The woman had vanished. Blade strode to an open window. If the spying Honcho invoked magveil now Blade would be raging and frustrated.

Her apartment was a duplicate of Blade's. She was in the large central chamber, standing, watching the window. Her flaming hair was drawn down over each shoulder, covering her breasts. When Blade entered she again fell to her knees and began to tap her forehead against the floor.

He went to her and stood for a moment looking down at her nearly nude body. She was exquisitely formed. Her flesh glinted a tawny gold in the pale light. Blade touched her bowed head and she trembled.

Blade struggled to keep the desire and lust from his voice and very nearly succeeded. He said: "Do you know who I am?"

Without looking at him she answered. "I know. You are Mazda. You are the God. You are HE WHO COMES TO THEY."

Blade repressed a smile. He was prepared to play the role to the hilt. Perhaps this was what Honcho wanted: to see how Blade would play the role of Mazda.

He touched her shoulder again. The flesh was warm, live velvet, smooth and pneumatic and springing to his touch. He had never touched flesh like this before. He had never seen such golden tones of flesh before. And now he was aware of the odor of her. A delicate effluvium only barely sensed, like no woman smell he had ever known. A compound of flowers and flesh that beckoned and lured, a Lorelei scent that was stronger than chains.

"Stand up," said Blade. "I, Mazda, want to look at you."

She obeyed. She was as tall as Blade himself, well over six feet. She still would not look directly at him.

"Look at me," Blade commanded.

Her eyes were large, luminous, and a pure gentian violet. They stared into Blade's own with a mixture of awe, fear, and curiosity. And just a shade of invitation?

Blade kept his hand on her shoulder. "You acknowledge that I am Mazda? HE WHO COMES TO THEY?"

"I acknowledge it."

"You will do my bidding?"

"In all things, Lord Mazda."

Blade could wait no longer. He was perishing in his own flame. He pulled her against him and kissed her.

She obeyed. She was a column of gold-velvet marble. She did not move, nor close her eyes. She stared fixedly into his face as he kissed her again. Her lips were warm, and as unyielding, as unresponsive, as the teksin beneath their feet.

Blade pulled away and tilted her chin with his fingers. "You do not like kissing?"

"Kissing? I do not understand, Lord Mazda. I do not know the word."

"I will explain," said Blade. "Come. It is my wish." He swept her into his arms again and kissed her hard. Again she did not resist, or aid him, but after a moment her lips quivered under his. Blade forced her lips open with his tongue. She began to tremble quietly in his arms. At last he released her.

"That," said Blade, "is kissing. You will know how the next time. Did you like it?"

"I liked it, Lord Mazda. This is what the Gods do?"

"When they can," he said lightly. "When they can. What is your name, girl?"

"I am Zulekia. Of the Maidukes of THEY." By now Blade had read enough to know that the Maidukes were privileged upperclass servants, handmaidens, of

THEY. But his reading must have led him astray; his understanding had been that the Maidukes never left Urcit, the great Capital of Tharn.

He took her by the hand and led her toward a great low bed that filled one corner of the room. She went docilely at first, then she pulled away, staring at him. She fell to her knees again.

"No! No, Lord Mazda. I cannot. I am not fit. I am not one intended for HE WHO COMES TO THEY. I am karno! I am karno!"

Blade gazed at her, puzzled and impatient. Karno? He had not come across the word in his reading.

Zulekia saw that he did not understand. Plainly she was puzzled by this, but she squirmed around to show him the back of the bikini-like panties she wore. "I am karno," she insisted again. "Karno. My seal has been broken."

Blade was impatient...and intrigued. He bent to examine the back of the panties. There was a slim belt of teksin holding them up, with both ends set cunningly into a seal-like medallion. Zulekia made a deft movement with her hand and the seal fell apart. She looked at Blade.

"You understand, Lord Mazda? My seal has been broken. It was broken and could not be put back as the Priestess does. So I am karno. Impure. I have been with the Lordsmen and was caught. It is why I was banished from Urcit and sent here to be punished.

I am evil. Not clean. Impure. That is why the Lord Mazda cannot make coi with me."

Blade looked around the room. The dull walls of teksin stared back at him. He hoped that Honcho was enjoying his eavesdropping. Blade was beginning to understand something else about Honcho: the neuter was more than a watcher and a listener. Honcho was a voyeur, a pervert! Honcho had no sex, and yet... and yet...

Blade took her hand again and led her firmly to the bed. "I do understand," he said. "It does not matter. I do not care. Now, obey me!"

And he did understand. Zulekia was a homid, a human for all intents and purposes, and she had been caught doing what came naturally to homids. Caught, Blade knew, was the operative word. Caught! Now she was to be punished. Blade's smile was grim, but he was not at all unhappy. This was something he recognized and understood.

And now he could wait no longer. He turned her so that she stood with her back to him. He fumbled with the catch holding on her breastplates and they fell to the floor with a little click of teksin on teksin. Zulekia stared straight before her, unmoving.

"Raise your arms a bit," said Blade. He was whispering.

She raised her arms.

Her breasts were cool golden orbs in his hands, the nipples infinitesimal buttons only a moment before and now rising to his finger stroke. Blade's knees began to shake, he had to fight to restrain himself, and yet he was determined that this play would serve a double purpose. His mouth was close to her ear.

"You know that Honcho is watching?"

She surprised him by answering aloud. "Yes. I know."

"Nod," said Blade fiercely. "Nod! Don't speak."

She half turned to face him, the great violet eyes filled with puzzlement, and again she saw that he did not understand. She reached to pluck out a long red-bronze strand of her hair. She let it float to the floor. Blade watched. When the hair wafted against the teksin she said: "Honcho heard that."

Blade suppressed anger. What was the use of raging? And it was good to know that the spisccreens were so sensitive. It was nearly beyond belief, yet he did believe. Whispering was no good. And there was no place to hide. Then he had an inspiration. Just maybe...but it could wait. Everything could wait.

He turned her about and caressed her breasts again for a moment. He led her to the bed and commanded her to lie down. She did so without demur. Now that she had warned him, told him she was karno, and he did not appear to care, she was prepared to do as the God pleased. So Blade read her thoughts.

Zulekia gazed up at him, the violet eyes watching without expression. Blade stripped away her brief pants. Her pubic hair was a swatch of color against her tawnniness. Blade hurled away his own clothes.

As he prepared to enter her Blade wondered, for one sickening moment, if this was another of Honcho's devilish tricks. Was this woman real? Or was this simlu? A wraith and not woman?

A moment later he knew. It was not simlu. She was real. She was more than real. Zulekia was the essence of all the women Blade had ever had, and he knew that he had never had a woman before. This was the mystery, the unattainable, and Blade was solving it and attaining it.

Zulekia made no sound. Not the whole time. She did not put her arms about Blade. Yet she moved beneath him as he had never suspected a woman could move. The odor of her arose and engulfed him. Taunting and satisfying him at the same time. He had the feeling that what she was doing was as natural as breathing to her. She did not pretend. She did not try. She simply was. Her body perfectly fitted to his, flesh exactly measured to flesh, thrust to thrust, moistness to moistness, pestle to mortar.

It was Blade who groaned and cried aloud. Blade who threshed in frenzy. Blade who poured out in one great spill of ecstasy.

They lay quietly. Blade, from the corner of his eye, saw something move in a corner of the room. He turned to see Honcho's simlu slowly fading, vanishing. The mocking sneer was the last to go.

Chapter 5

Blade had hoped to work out some secret means of communication with Zulekia, perhaps body pressures or blinking their eyes, but he was given no chance. A troop of ceboid soldiers came immediately and he was escorted back to his own chambers. Blade, glancing back at the woman, thought he detected a hint of entreaty in her violet eyes. Did she expect him to save her from her fate? Could he?

Honcho was waiting for Blade. He was wearing a breastplate and a heavy cloak of transparent teksin. In his hand he carried two odd-looking belts. They reminded Blade of cartridge belts with bandoliers attached.

The neuter handed Blade one of the belts. "Put it on." He touched Blade lightly to show that he was real, not simlu, then said: "Come with me. We have a long journey to make. Perhaps it would be well if you took a cloak. We are going into the Gorge and there will be weather there."

From his reading Blade knew that Tharnians understood weather, could in fact control it, but it had never been mentioned before. He could not help wondering how such a state of affairs would work out in England. Most people would be struck dumb!

Honcho touched a wall and a panel slid back. Blade followed the neuter into darkness. Immediately a misty blob of light appeared and began to dance along before them.

They made their way along a smooth floored passage so narrow they had to walk in single file. Honcho led the way. For a moment Blade was greatly tempted. This was real Honcho, not simlu, and he could surely kill the neuter with his bare hands.

He fought back the urge. It was not yet the time. He was still very much a stranger in a strange land and the truth was that he needed the neuter as much as Honcho appeared to need him.

The neuter walked on rapidly, following the light. He said: "For the first time I put myself in jeopardy. You will do well to remember it and act accordingly, because if I am in jeopardy so are you. We go to see King Org, of the Pethcines, and his daughter Totha. They do not like me, nor trust me, but they must know about you. The Pethcines do not believe in the Gods of THEY, and I do not think they will believe you are Mazda—they are too cunning and brutish for such beliefs—but I can make them believe that you can help us. As you can, of course. Help me!"

Blade let that pass. He was still feeling his way, but he was already sure that Honcho was up to nothing more than an old-fashioned palace revolution. He was planning to overthrow THEY and take power in Tharn. In some way he intended to use both Blade and the Pethcines in this. Let it wait. Bide his time. For all Blade knew THEY were better overthrown, and Blade had his own future to worry about.

Casually Blade said, "Did you enjoy it, Honcho? Watching the woman and me? Or, rather, did your simlu enjoy it?"

"I did not watch to enjoy!" Honcho threw the words back as he strode along. "I watched to understand. I have never seen coi performed before. Nor has any other neuter. Normally curiosity about coi is not instilled in us during our decanter period. I, of course, am different. I find coi interesting and puzzling. What did you call it in this place from which you claim to come?" During his stay in the Gorge Tower Blade and the neuter had had several long discussions. Blade had been candid about himself and his background. He had seen little point in being otherwise.

Now he found that he was enjoying baiting Honcho. "We call it sex," he said. "It is an emotional thing, one that a neuter cannot be expected to understand. It is

also a very powerful physical drive, a hunger. Perhaps the most powerful in all the world."

He saw Honcho nod in the soft light. The creature's voice was calm and it appeared pleased.

"I saw that. I was watching very closely. I noted your reflexive convulsions, and your face. I saw something more than physical. Something that I do not really understand yet, though I will. It appeared to me that, in this act of coi with the Maiduke woman, you were in her power for a little time. This is so?"

Blade was instantly wary. He warned himself again not to underestimate this... this thing? In that moment he began to think of Honcho as He, not as it. In a way it was a victory for Honcho, though Blade had no intention of letting him know it.

So he was curt. "I enjoyed it. It was pleasure while it lasted. I was not in her power."

"I think otherwise," said Honcho. "I cannot express it, because we do not have the words in Tharnian. But it is there."

He was cunning. Blade admitted the loss of another round and was not surprised when Honcho said: "You will now care what becomes of Zulekia? You would wish, perhaps to save her from the punishment that has been decreed?"

Blade raged inwardly. There might not be words in Tharnian for love, or tenderness, or even for casual human affection, but Honcho had seen the point readily enough.

"I would not like to see her harmed," he admitted. "If it is possible to save her I would do so. What is her punishment to be?"

Honcho laughed and the sound was cruel. "To be given to the ceboids, of course. To all of them, even to the lowest. They are very fond of homid women. Then she will be given to the ceboid females, who will tear her to bits and toss the pieces into the Gorge."

Blade, who was not an easy or a soft man, did not like to think of that. "I would not have this happen," he said.

Honcho said: "I did not think so. It is in my power to prevent it. I will prevent it, as long as you obey my orders and try no treachery against me. Understand that well, Blade. I have placed the woman in a new place, a very secret place, under guard of my most trusted ceboids. She remains safe so long as you are my man, my Mazda, my HE WHO COMES TO THEY." And Honcho laughed again.

Blade did not answer. The man was a ferret. A cunning and damnable ferret who, without even understanding it, had sought out a weakness in Blade.

The tunnel widened now. The dancing light stopped and hovered over a dark circular hole in the floor. Blade noted again that the Tharnians knew and used the circle concept, though they had long ago discontinued use of the wheel as inefficient.

Four ceboid soldiers were guarding the shaft. They bowed obsequiously as Honcho approached. They wore armor, carried swords, and were equipped with the teksin air guns. Honcho spoke briefly to them in their own language and they stepped aside, watching Blade with bloodshot animal eyes.

Honcho adjusted the belt he wore by turning a dial on it. He told Blade to do the same. The big man did so, understanding now that the belts were some sort of

antigravity mechanism. It was perfectly reasonable that the Tharnians, who could harness magnetism and magnetic flux, could also control gravity.

The neuter stepped into the hole and began to float downward. Blade did the same. It was a pleasant sensation, like descending in a very slow elevator. Very slowly, side by side, they floated down and down into the darkness.

Honcho was silent for a long time. Then: "We have many magkronos to go. So listen carefully, Blade. And obey absolutely."

The neuter talked for a long time, while Blade listened and absorbed.

At last they reached the bottom of the shaft and drifted gently to a landing. They were in a great arching cave. Honcho took off his belt and also took Blade's. He bid the belts beneath a rock and beckoned to Blade. They went toward the front of the cave, bending and finally crawling into a narrow passage.

Just before they reached the end of the passage Honcho said: "From what you have told me, Blade, I think you will find the land of the Pethcines much like the place from which you come. Or claim to come. You will perhaps feel at home here. They are brutes and barbarians."

Blade did not answer. He stepped out of the cave, feeling a strange exhilaration. It was dark. Pitch dark. Wind slammed around him and rain dashed into his face and splashed from his armor. It was cold, much colder than it had been above. This was weather, real weather, that he could understand.

He filled his great lungs with the cold, damp air. Then Honcho tapped his arm. "Come. There is not much time."

The neuter led the way along a narrow, rock strewn ravine. He went easily into the dark, obviously knowing the route. They rounded a bend and Blade saw the flicker of a campfire.

They approached the fire. It was the entrance of another cave and a little knot of men crouched about it. Honcho halted for a moment in the shadows, barring the way with his arm. The men around the fire did not see or hear them, perhaps because of the storm. Blade studied them closely. They were men, real men, and he recognized the type as what he would have once called Mongoloid.

They were squat, shaggy men dressed in skins and crude armor. They all carried knives, or short swords, or both. Lances were stacked nearby, and some of the men had short bows and quivers slung over their shoulders. They were all talking animatedly, gnawing on joints of meat and every now and then tossing a bone to one of the huge dogs that lolled about.

One of the dogs suddenly pricked its ears and growled into the darkness. Honcho squeezed Blade's arm. "Remain here until I call." He strode into the circle of firelight.

Blade watched, half admiring Honcho's poise. The neuter had said there was danger, and Blade believed him, yet Honcho did not appear afraid. He raised his right hand high over his head and walked nearer the fire. Some of the men sprang to their feet, some remained seated. One picked up a lance. Another swiftly notched an arrow to his bow.

Honcho began to speak in Tharnian. The men eased a little and listened attentively.

"I am He, of Tharn," said the neuter. "As you well know. You will take me to King Org at once. I have urgent business. I also bring another, a stranger, who will

also be a guest of the King, and whom you will treat with the same courtesy and consideration you show to me. This is understood?"

One of the men, a beetle-browed man with huge shoulders and powerful bowed legs, pushed back a pointed fur cap from his low forehead and growled, "Where is he, then? This stranger?"

Honcho turned and cocked a finger at Blade. "Come."

Blade strode into the firelight, towering over the squat men, conscious that in his armor and with his magnificent build, he made a striking picture. Blade halted and struck a deliberate pose. Honcho was not the only one who was cunning, who could play games, and already Blade was wondering if he could use these Pethcines, and how?

The men stared at Blade and muttered among themselves in a language he could not understand. Blade looked at Honcho. The neuter appeared cool enough, though Blade sensed that he was tense and waiting for something.

The man who had spoken to Honcho, the leader, fell to his knees and touched his short sword to his forehead. "Lord," he said in Tharnian. "We obey."

Blade was watching Honcho's green eyes. He saw amusement, and something of relief.

Blade touched the kneeling man's shoulder. "Rise," he said. "You are my friends. So it shall be, now and always." One of the great dogs whined softly and came to lick Blade's hand. Blade felt a strange sense of pleasure, or power, that he had never known before. He was playing a role, but at the same time he was living it!

Honcho clapped his hands. "Take us to King Org now."

The leader of the band plucked a torch from the fire and led the way. The others did not follow.

They followed the wavering torch back into a narrow ravine. The wind gusted and guttered the torch, which tossed smoky red shadows on the rain streaked rocks. Honcho, walking beside Blade, said in a low voice: "You did that well. I admit that you have fine presence. I begin to think that you have not told me all about this place of yours. Were you a king there?"

"I am no king," said Blade curtly.

They left the ravine and approached a wide opening to a vast cavern. Before they reached it Blade heard the murmur of hundreds of voices. The place was ablaze with the light of a thousand torches.

The Pethdne who was leading them flung down his torch and stood aside. He looked at Honcho in a strange manner and there was defiance in his voice. "We are having the feast of our own Sacer, as you see. Not as THEY of Tharn have it, but as we Pethcines have it, and will have it again in Urcit."

The neuter nodded and touched the man on the shoulder. "So it will be. Go now. My thanks. When you come to Urcit I will not forget you."

The man vanished into the dark. Blade gazed at the blazing entrance of the cave, from which came the roar and mumble and shouting of a great crowd. And, as Blade recognized at once, not a sober crowd. He looked at Honcho and gestured toward the cave mouth. "Soka?"

The neuter's smile was faint. "They call it dema. It is the same, with the same effects. I told you they are a swinish, brutish lot, and there is danger. Do exactly as I told you. Come, Mazda!" Again the sneering little smile.

They walked into the vast cave and paused. For a moment they were not noticed, then someone saw them and shouted. A hush fell over the crowd as all peered to see. Blade gazed around, feeling his heart step up its beating. It was a garish and barbarous spectacle.

The cavern was gigantic, in the form of an amphitheater, with myriad torches ringing it. The crude stone seats were packed with Pethcines in every stage of disarray and disorder and drunkenness. Most were staring at Blade and Honcho, but some were not. The couples who were copulating nearby, in plain view of the mob, and without anyone seeming to care or notice, did not so much as glance at the two interlopers.

Honcho nudged Blade. "The stone! Go to it at once and bow. Do not touch the sword!"

Blade nodded. He remembered his instructions well. He glanced down the huge oval to the great block of stone that stood exactly in the middle of it. The stone was at least ten feet long and stood shoulderhigh to Blade. He began to walk toward the stone. His stride was firm, his shoulders squared, his head high. He glanced about him as he walked, deliberately making his gaze arrogant. The Pethcines would understand arrogance.

He was walking on sand now. His foot struck something and he saw that it was a severed head. Another one lay near by. Gouts of blood stained the sand. He passed a naked and headless body and approached the stone. Honcho had been most explicit about this.

Blade paused at the end of the stone. The silence was nearly absolute now. Beyond the stone, fifty feet or so, was a high double throne on which sat a man and a young woman. King Org and his daughter Totha. Blade's glance flicked over them without hesitating. He stared down at the huge sword on the stone.

He had seen swords like it before. In museums. It was not unlike a medieval broadsword, double edged and with a sharp point. The long hilt was a mass of twisted gold, tarnished now, and heavily studded with jewels. Blade knew it would be tremendously heavy. No Pethcine, Honcho had said, had ever been able to wield it with one hand.

Blade fell to his knees before the stone. He placed his forehead against the cold edge and raised his hands, careful not to touch the sword. Then he stood up. A great roar filled the cavern. Blade could not tell if it was approbation or bloodlust. He stepped around the stone and stood waiting, as the neuter had said to do.

Honcho now approached the stone and made his obeisance. He joined Blade and together they approached the throne. The throng was still howling like a mad thing. Yet Honcho spoke clearly enough for Blade to hear above the roar.

"I will bow to Org and his daughter. You will not bow! Mazda does not bow. Do not speak until you are spoken to. Be proud, be haughty, but do not overdo it. Follow my lead in all things, but if something arises that I have not foreseen you must handle it yourself."

They halted before the throne. The crowd was still riotous. Honcho fell to one knee. "Org. Totha. I bring the one of whom I spoke. Mazda. HE WHO COMES TO THEY!"

King Org had eyes that were bloodshot and piggish in a fat, ringlet bearded face. They were also very shrewd. They stared at Blade for a very long time. Blade,

unflinching, stared back. The roaring of the crowd died now to a gusty whispering and when Org spoke his words came clear and sharp.

"You say it, Honcho. I do not have to believe it. I will admit that he looks the part. But you have proof? He has proof?"

Honcho inclined his head. His smile was slight. "In time, Org, in time. But not before this mob. You know they will accept him if you do. One thing at a time. The important thing is that if he is Mazda, HE WHO COMES TO THEY, he has not gone to they. He has come to us! So what is written in the Tharnian Book is not true. It is false. He is our God, the Pethcine God, and not theirs. He will lead you back to Urcit, where you should be ruling now. It is so easy, Org. All you have to do is allow me to guide you."

Org was squat and powerful, with an enormous paunch. His slitted eyes were nearly concealed in fat, yet they surveyed Honcho and Blade with a cold inquisitional stare.

"So you still say, Honcho. You may be right. I do not say you are not. I do not even say that, for our purposes, he is not Mazda."

Org turned suddenly to his daughter. "What say you, Totha?"

All this time Blade and Totha had been dueling with their eyes. She had never taken her eyes off him, since his approach to the throne, and there was no mistaking the message. Her eyes were oval, almond, true Mongoloid, and at that distance appeared a deep brown. Her mouth was wide and red, her teeth sparkling white, her nose small and straight, her ears tiny. Her glistening black hair was set high on her head and garnished with small golden combs. Her skin was dusky ivory, her pear-shaped breasts sharp and firm with long brown nipples. She wore only a very short skirt of some animal skin and her legs were slim and well formed with exquisite ankles.

Blade stared back at her, his face impassive. The impact of her eyes was a physical thing, crawling over his flesh like insects that excited instead of repulsing him. They rested for a long time on his groin and her lips moved in what could only have been anticipation. He had never seen a girl so lovely and at the same time so lewd. He could detect the stark honesty, along with cruelty and desire.

Totha's eyes played over his long legs, his torso, his tremendous chest and shoulders, the majestic tallness of him. Her smile grew. At last her glance met his again and again there was no mistaking the offering. Take me if you want me. And if you can!

Totha leaned toward her father and said something.

Honcho, without moving his head, spoke through thin lips. "She wants you. I had not counted on this. Not so soon. Be very careful now. I cannot help you. But perhaps it will not be so bad after all... if you win."

Win? For a moment he did not understand. Then Blade saw the byplay enacted before him and did understand. There was no mystery. It was as primitive, as elemental, as sex. Or death. Or Totha.

The young Pethcine had been lounging nearby. He appeared taller than most of them and his body bulged with muscle. All this while he had been glowering at Blade. Now he rose from his stool and went to the throne and said something to the girl. She stared at him coldly. Org slapped his fat leg and shouted with laughter.

Totha gave the young man a push. He scowled and clutched at her arm, shouting angrily.

Totha balled her fist and struck him hard in the face. She picked up a cup and dashed the contents into his face. The Pethcine stepped back and glared from Totha to Blade. Org shouted with laughter again and pounded on his paunch with a balled fist.

Totha stood up and came toward Blade. Her hips were sinuous and she reminded him of a very beautiful snake. Her bared breasts jounced with each step.

"Be careful," whispered Honcho. "Do not offend her. She rules Org. She has only to ask and she gets. Our heads if she desires them. Be very careful!"

Blade understood then what Honcho had really meant by putting himself in jeopardy. Here in the Gorge he was shorn of many of his technical powers. Honcho, at the moment, was as vulnerable as Blade himself.

The next moment he forgot Honcho.

Totha stood before Blade. She raised herself on tiptoe and peered into his eyes. She put dainty hands on his big shoulders and caressed them. She ran her fingers down his arms and around his chest and brushed them over his smooth-fleshed middle. She smiled at him.

"I believe you are a God," said the girl. "Perhaps not Mazda, but a God just the same. I want you. Totha wants you."

She pressed herself against Blade. She crushed her firm bare breasts against him. She reached and pulled his head down to meet her lips. Her tongue struck at his mouth and again he thought of a lovely snake.

"Totha wants you," she said again. "You will kill Gutar for me. I have grown tired of him anyway."

Blade held her closely. Her skin was petal smooth and smelled of sex and death. Over her shoulder he saw King Org giving orders and men were bringing weapons. Blade also saw Honcho. The neuter's lips moved.

"Be sure you kill him!"

Chapter 6

The mob of Pethcines, sensing blood, left off drinking and copulating in public and rose to their feet in one great shouting horde.

"Gutar! Gutar! Gutar!"

Honcho stood off to one side, his arms folded. He did not speak to Blade again. This was the unforeseen event and the neuter could not help. This in no way dismayed Blade. He was confident.

Totha kissed him once more and pressed herself against him, then went back to her throne where she sat and smiled at him in encouragement. King Org motioned for Blade to approach the throne. Gutar was already there. He cursed and spat at Blade's feet as the big man came up.

King Org was happy at the prospect of a fight. He scratched his ringlet of beard and leered at Blade.

"This is well. It will settle much. If you are indeed Mazda you will kill Gutar. If not he will surely kill you. He is the champion of all the Pethcines and has already killed three men today."

Org waved a hand toward the heads and bodies still littering the sands of the arena. "They challenged Gutar, as it was their right to do on this time of Sacer. Had any of them won they would have had the right to Totha. You have won her without a fight, for she wants you. But you must fight to keep her. I, Org of the Pethcines, say it. What weapons will you have, O Mazda?"

The last was said with a cunning little wink of the fat enshrouded eyes.

Blade had been studying the proffered weapons. He wanted none of them.

Blade drew the rapier from its scabbard with a rasping flourish. "I will have a shield," he said. "None else."

As he spoke he glanced at Honcho. The neuter did not look happy. Blade smiled. Honcho's carefully laid plans would go up in smoke if Blade were killed.

Gutar thought Blade's smile was disdain for him. He leaped at Blade with a roar of rage, still unarmed. Blade moved swiftly, tripping the sturdy Pethcine as he rushed past. Gutar went sprawling heavily on his face. The crowd stopped shouting. King Org looked thoughtful. Totha clapped her hands. Honcho nearly smiled.

Org pointed a fat round finger at Gutar, who was getting up and looking a bit crestfallen. "You will wait, Gutar, until I give the word. Or I will kill you!"

Gutar retired to confer with his Pethcine friends. He was stripped down now. Naked. It was the way the Pethcines fought.

Org said: "Shields are not permitted in private combat. You must fight naked, with only your weapons. You really wish to use only that stick, that thing?" Org gazed doubtfully at the slender rapier.

Before Blade could answer Gutar was shouting. "Let him have his shield! And I, Gutar, will use a bow." One of his men handed him a short bow and a quiver with three arrows in it. Blade guessed that there was tradition for this.

Org looked at Blade. "You agree?"

It changed the odds, especially as Gutar was also armed with a short heavy sword and a long throwing net, but Blade's reply was curt. "I agree. Let us be on with it. before Gutar has time to think and loses his courage."

The big Pethcine howled in new rage at the insult, as Blade had intended. He was confident, but not overconfident. He had not counted on arrows, and would have to match them with psychological arrows of his own. So he stared in contempt at Gutar and said, "Are you ready, Gutar? Or do you wish to weep a little first? Or perhaps to pray?"

This time Gutar did not answer. He leaped out into the center of the arena and waited, crouching, near the great stone. He swung the net slowly back and forth in his left hand, the short, broad-bladed sword in his right, the bow and quiver slung across his broad shoulders.

A shield was flung at Blade. It was small, hardly larger than a dinner plate, made of hide with a central boss of gleaming metal. At once he began to have misgivings; this was not his idea of a shield and it was little cover for his huge body. In exposed flesh area Gutar was going to have a distinct advantage.

Now Blade stood naked except for the rapier and the shield. He glanced at Totha. She was leaning forward on her throne, her eyes glued on his body, and she was not looking at his face. He saw a sharp little red tongue lick around her wide mouth and again he thought of a snake.

Blade faced Gutar. He had the reach with the rapier, his arms were longer, but there was the net that could entrap either Blade or his weapon. He began to circle Gutar, moving slowly to the right, hoping that the other would rush him. If he did Blade could end it quickly.

Gutar was too wise to rush. Now that the fight had actually begun he seemed to have lost his rage. This, Blade knew, was an old hand. A cool hand. Already he sensed the reasons why Gutar was champion of all the Pethcines.

Gutar turned with Blade's movement, moving his sword in short glittering circles but making no effort to rush.

"Kill, Gutar! *Kill-kill-kill-kill!*"

It was, Blade thought wryly, something of a partisan crowd.

Gutar flung the net. He was skillful. Blade had been expecting it, yet he could not move fast enough to avoid it. The net settled over his head and shoulder, not heavy, but binding him and cramping his sword arm. Gutar rushed at him, his broad flat face contorted in a grin of malice. He did not swing the short sword, as Blade had expected, but thrust with it in an upward disemboweling stroke.

Blade's sword arm was netted. He acted without thought, and dropped the shield and tossed the rapier from his useless right hand to his free left hand. It was a dangerous move. If he dropped the rapier while still netted he was finished.

Blade did not miss. He caught the rapier in time to parry Gutar's thrust down and away from his naked belly. The point ripped his inner thigh, a slight wound. At the same time Blade butted Gutar in the face with his head and swung a chopping hand blow to the Pethcines temple. The net impeded him, but still he got enormous force into the blow. Gutar fell away, mouthing curses, failing on all fours.

Blade leaped backward as Gutar, still on his knees, swung in a backhand slash at his exposed genitals. Blade ripped off the net and twirled it at the crouching man and in the same fluid motion retrieved his shield and changed his rapier back to his right hand.

He went in a long feral lunge trying to take Gutar from behind and beneath the left shoulder blade.

Gutar rolled away from the fluttering net. He had never dropped his sword. He kept rolling. Blade's lunge missed. Gutar was on his feet and again on the defensive, backing away slowly, his left hand up and fumbling for the quiver now.

Blade leaped with the net and went into the attack again. He feinted in tierce, to force Gutar to parry high. Gutar did as he must to save his eyes. Blade stepped, leaned, and went into a long quarter thrust that would ram the teksin through the Pethcine's heart and out the back.

By some miracle Gutar's clumsy blade was back in position, parrying the lunge. Blade frowned. Miracle? No. This savage, this barbarian, was as skillful with his crude sword as Blade was with the rapier. In that instant Blade knew he was in for a real fight. One he could possibly lose. His foot touched one of the heads and he kicked it away without looking. His head might be on the sand if he made any

more mistakes. Blade had never really been afraid of anything in his life, and he did not know fear now, but he did become cautious. He must begin to plan a strategy, a campaign. This was going to take skill and brains. Blade knew that he was not going to wear Gutar down physically. Blade was in superb shape, as he always was, but he guessed that Gutar was, too.

Neither of them was sweating yet. Gutar was still backing nimbly away, trying to get his bow down off his shoulder. He now had an arrow clutched in his teeth. Blade went swirling into the attack again. Gutar managed to parry the thrusts but the bow was still on his shoulder. Every time he reached for it Blade slashed at him furiously. The shield he clutched in his left hand was growing smaller every moment.

Blade kept up his furious attack. The slim rapier darted and spun and glimmered and kept probing for Gutar's heart. Gutar parried frantically, sometimes barely, but he parried. He gave up the attempt to get the bow off his shoulder and trudged slowly backward, at times using his sword with two hands, turning Blade's thrusts again and again.

A small worry nudged at Blade. He was beginning to breathe a little hard. Not so the Pethcine. His deep chest moved in an easy rhythm; his eyes were slits of hate, staring at Blade out of the flat Mongoloid face.

Blade began to work Gutar around toward the great stone where lay the Sacred Sword. Gutar realized instantly what was happening and tried to swerve away, but Blade would have none of it. The rapier licked in and out, a dainty sliver with a deadly sting, and at last Blade drew blood. He ran Gutar through the right shoulder, but high and ripping only a few muscles. Blood streamed. Gutar sneered and spat at Blade and paid no attention to the blood. Nor did he try again to get to the bow. Blade gave him no time.

Steadily now Blade worked him back toward the stone. When he got him backed against it he could finish him off. Soon. A feather of panic stirred in Blade. He was sweating now and the breath was whistling in his nostrils. Who would have thought that this creature could be so skillful, or keep it up so long?

Gutar backed against the stone. He tried to sidle away to his right and Blade blooded him. Gutar tried it to his left and Blade nicked his chest. He began a series of feints designed to draw Gutar's defense higher and higher. Blade, now that the end was near, found new energy and a cruelty he had not known he possessed. He began to toy with Gutar, continually feinting his guard high and higher, then nicking him before the sword could come down again. Half a dozen times Blade could have run the Pethcine through and did not.

But now Gutar was gushing blood in half a dozen places. The roaring of the mob was one vast incessant dinning wall of noise that Blade had long ago shut out of his mind.

Now! Blade felt an instant's shame. He had been playing with Gutar and that was cruel, and he had not been cruel before. Nor had he ever relished killing before. Now he was cruel and he did relish killing. He was going to enjoy killing Gutar.

The rapier went driving in for the kill. Gutar was faster. He bent, stooped, so low that the rapier got him in the left shoulder, scraping the bone, instead of the heart. Gutar scooped a handful of sand and flung it in Blade's face. His aim was

perfect. Blade, both eyes full of sand, stinging and tearing, staggered backward. He caught his balance and lowered the rapier for defense, at the same time clawing and scraping at his eyes. They began to clear, just in time to see Gutar stoop again and throw something at him. More sand. Blade took a backward step and shielded his eyes with his hand. That trick would not work again.

Gutar had not thrown sand. The head, whirled by the hair and hurled with all the Pethcine's vast strength, struck Blade like a cannonball full in the face.

Blade was stunned. He went lurching backward and his feet caught in the forgotten net. He fell heavily on his back and the rapier skittered from his hand. Gutar, blood streaming from him in fountains, raised his sword and rushed at Blade with a harsh cry. He was on Blade, and slashing downward, before the big man could roll out of danger.

Blade could see well enough now to raise his shield and parry the first blow. Or partially parry it. The descending sword slashed away half the shield. Gutar slashed again and his blade struck the shield's boss and exploded in a shower of sparks. Gutar jammed one foot into Blade's chest with enormous force, pinning him, and raised his sword for the death stroke. The mob was going blood mad.

Blade watched the cruel short sword glint downward. He fended with the half shield and at the same time reached up and grabbed at the bow still slung over Gutar's shoulder. Blade tugged down with all his strength. The bowstring caught about the Pethcine's thick neck. He strained back, trying to recover balance for a last blow. Blade pulled. Gutar lost his footing and came smashing down atop Blade.

They were both covered with blood. Blade wriggled partially from under Gutar, managed to get half astride the man, meaning to ride him, using his weight, and throttle him with the bowstring.

The bowstring broke. Gutar, his body lubricated with blood, squirmed free of Blade, rolled onto his back and thrust up with his sword. Blade fell away. His vision was clearing now, but he could not find his rapier. He hurled the broken shield at Gutar and backed away. Gutar brushed the shield away with a massive forearm and began to stalk Blade, forcing him back against the huge stone just as Blade had done a few minutes before.

Blade dared not take his eyes off Gutar. His bare feet touched nothing but sand as he retreated. He was not going to find the rapier! His back touched the stone. Gutar made a fierce guttural sound in his throat and rushed.

Blade's outflung hand brushed back over the top of the stone altar. His fingers touched the hilt of the great sword. They closed around it. The muscles in Blade's right shoulder and arm knotted and corded as he lifted the sword in his right hand and swung it, level and flashing like a scythe, at the grinning, blood-drenched Gutar.

The big sword hummed a threnody, whispering, as it came around. Blade felt the tremor along the shaft as it bit into Gutar's neck.

Gutar's head leaped into the air, hovered for a moment, then fell and bounced away to the right.

For a long moment the Pethcine's headless body stood confronting Blade. The short sword was still raised to strike. A jet of blood leaped two feet into the air as

the body still stood like a grotesque statue. At last the sword fell, the knees buckled, and the squat and dying body crashed down in a writhing heap.

Blade put the point of the huge sword in the sand and leaned on it. Only gradually did he become aware of the dead silence in the arena; the air was as devoid of life as the still quivering trunk of Gutar. It was an instant before Blade really understood it. He had not been thinking. He had been fighting for his life. Then he understood: he had touched the Sacred Sword! Worse. He had used it, defiled it, to kill the champion of all the Pethcines. Now, surely, they would tear him limb from limb.

And there was nothing he could do. He wiped blood and sweat from his face, still leaning on the sword, and waited. He was bone weary.

Totha leaned and spoke to her father, Org. Org glanced quickly at Honcho and raised a finger. Honcho approached the throne and there was much whispering. Blade waited, breathing easier now, his heart still thudding.

King Org, Totha, and Honcho were approaching him. The silence in the arena persisted, as if no one even dared to breathe.

They were close now. Then Honcho and Totha halted and King Org came on alone. He fell to his knees before Blade. He reached to touch the bloody sword, ran his finger along the steel, and marked his forehead with the blood.

Org's voice filled the arena: "Mazda! HE WHO COMES TO THEY! Mazda! Who has come to us, to the Pethcines instead, to lead us back into Tharn and to our heritage. Mazda! Lord Mazda! We welcome you. We accept you. We obey you. Give me, Lord Mazda, a sign of your love."

So that only Blade could hear, Org said: "Touch me on the shoulder with the sword. Then Totha will come. Do the same with her. Then go with her, follow her, quickly! Take the sword with you."

Blade nodded. He was, then, going to get out of this alive. He raised the great sword and touched Org on the shoulder with the bloody point.

Then Totha came forward. Honcho remained where he was. The neuter's face was impassive, his eyes nearly closed, and he did not look happy.

Totha knelt before Blade. She touched the sword and smeared blood on her forehead as her father had done. Her voice was light, clear and melodious, carrying far as she spoke.

"Accept my love also, Lord Mazda. And give me yours."

Blade touched her bare shoulder with the sword. Gutar's blood had not yet thickened and some of it ran down her collar bone and trickled like a red worm between her bare breasts.

Totha stood up and extended her hand. "Come with me," she said softly. "Do not speak. Bring the sword with you."

She led Blade across the arena, over the crimsoned sand, her hand firm and strong in his. He could feel her trembling and knew that she was terribly excited.

Blade could feel the thousands of Pethcine eyes on him as they walked behind the throne and approached a narrow passage. Two guards stepped aside and fell to their knees at a sharp command from the girl. They bowed their heads and did not look at Blade.

The passage was narrow, twisting and turning, and lit by flaring torches in sconces. As they rounded the first turning Blade could hear Org speaking to the

crowd again, then the sudden crashing roar of what sounded like acceptance and approval.

Totha led him into a small chamber cut in the stone. A single torch glowed smokily against the wall. In one corner was a pallet of skins. A water jar, its sides glistening with moisture, hung from a peg. Blade took his hand from Totha's and stepped toward the water jar. She tugged at him fiercely.

"I am thirsty," said Blade. "And I would wash and bathe my wound. Have you something to bind it with?"

Totha held him fast. She fell on her knees before him and pressed her mouth to the wound on his thigh.

"I will bind it with my lips."

Blade leaned on the sword and stared down at her. Some of her excitement transferred itself to him. A faint tremor began in his legs as her mouth caressed him. He put a big hand on her glistening head and she made a soft moaning sound.

Her scarlet stained mouth gaped up at him, the perfect little bones of her teeth glinting through the blood. When she spoke her voice was trembling, yet oddly firm and commanding. "We are alone. When we are alone you are not Mazda, but you are still my Lord. Only do not misunderstand. I rule. You do not. I command. You obey. I desire. You give."

"I thank you for slaying my brother, Gutar. I had grown very weary of him. When I have become weary of you I will have you slain also, but that time is far to come. Obey me, Lord, and submit with all your great body to my desires. None will come. None dares intrude on Totha in this place."

As she began her phallic worship Blade's hands closed around the jeweled hilt of the great sword. He closed his eyes and let his body surrender, but his brain was clear and active.

He had come far into the labyrinth, still had far to go, and he could see no glimmer of light ahead. Yet it must be there.

Chapter 7

Blade remained in the Gorge for two days. He could reckon time here - there were days and nights and even a glimpse of red sun occasionally, though mostly the weather was wild and wet. He and Totha, when she would let him off the couch of love, rode great shaggy horses and Blade explored as far as he was permitted. It was a feral, craggy country, full of cruel ravines and slashing black mountains and rock formations like demons. It reminded Blade of plates he had seen of Dora's Hell.

And always there was the great sheer wall of the Gorge rising up and up and out of sight into the clouds.

Blade, when he was not making love to Totha, who was insatiable and knew techniques that even he had not encountered before, found an occasional moment to think of his other, civilized life, and to wonder how soon Lord Leighton would snatch him back through the computer. He did not worry about it. He knew that

J, like a faithful watchdog over Blade's safety, would not let Lord Leighton keep him out too long. Here, too, a fact must be faced: Lord Leighton, as a scientist, was sometimes overzealous and tended to forget his humanity. Especially with so much at stake, perhaps England's very existence.

And there were times when Blade was quite prepared to be snatched back to London and the Tower before he had completed his mission of exploration. Totha was literally loving him to death!

Totha was straddling him now back in the cave chamber and grunting like the little animal she was. Blade was still able to replenish her physically, he was amazingly strong and enduring in that department, but the excitement was long since gone. Even the greatest of pleasures can pall. He was careful not to show it. He knew that Totha, in her way, was far more dangerous than Org and Honcho combined.

Totha rested for a moment, leaning far over him and crushing her breasts against his big chest. Her sharp little teeth gnawed at his beard which was sprouting magnificently. She liked to talk in this position, with his flesh in her, talk to the accompaniment of her moist slithery little movements. She could go on and on for hours.

Usually Totha spoke her mind loudly and imperiously. Now she whispered. "When we have taken Tharn and killed Honcho, there is another thing I want you to do for me."

Blade did not open his eyes. "Yes, Totha?"

Totha bounced for a moment. Then: "You must kill Org for me. For us. There will not be room for three on the throne of Tharn."

Blade opened one eye. He was bored with his sexual thralldom and he did not choose his words as carefully as usual.

"Three, Totha? Two? You mean one, don't you? You! Only you, Totha. But there is one little thing that puzzles me: who are you going to get to kill me?"

At that moment she began to have one of her innumerable convulsions. She sat erect, grimacing down at him, teeth bared and eyes rolling wildly. "I do not know, but I will find a way!"

Later, when even Totha deigned to rest, she lay beside him on the skins and toyed with his beard. They had long since dropped the Mazda pretence among themselves. Blade, Org and Totha, and the neuter had had many long conferences and had come to perfect agreement, each with the silent reservation that he would kill the other three when the proper time came. Blade knew that Org was now jealous of Totha and him in a sexual sense. The Pethcines had no understanding of incest; at first Org had offered his daughter as a gift, as hospitality, and perhaps as a political gesture but now he was jealous and resentful and beginning to sulk.

Blade could not decide which one of the three was the more dangerous. He inclined toward Totha, yet Org was capable of gigantic rages. Honcho was cunning, crafty, with a highly developed homid brain that had somehow been misplaced in a neuter's body. His brain was as good as Blade's own and the techniques at his disposal far superior to anything Blade had at the moment. Yet Blade lived, kept a half step ahead, because they needed him desperately. Without him Tharn could not be taken.

Now Totha said: "I may not kill you after all. I have never had this feeling for a man before. Not Org, nor Gutar, nor any of the great warriors of the tribe has made me feel as you do. And I will not find a man in Tharn that can gratify me, the Lordsmen are all runt things, shriveled and sickly. I shall put all of them to death immediately. No, Blade, perhaps I will let you live." She laughed and poked his chest. "After all, who will be left?"

"Who indeed?" Then, slyly, he added: "There is always Honcho?"

Totha went into a gale of giggles. "Honcho? That thing? Ha-ho, he is indeed a thing that has no thing!" And she grabbed for Blade as if to reassure herself.

"He is cunning and has great powers, this I know, but he is useless to a woman."

Blade studied her. She had let a careless remark drop earlier, and now he came back to it. It was a possible way of handling the neuter in the future. In the imminent future, because very soon now Blade must return to Tharn and then to Urcit.

"Yet you told me that Honcho sometimes takes a girl, a Pethdne maiden, when he comes into the Gorge. Why?"

Totha, when she was not engaged in or thinking about sex, could be very sharp. She narrowed her eyes and tweaked his beard. "Why? I ask you the same. Why do you care? I will take care of Honcho when the time comes. Org will. What matter?"

"It matters," he said. "Because it may be a weakness and Honcho does not have many weaknesses. Down here in the Gorge, perhaps, but not in Tharn. He will not be as easy to kill as you think. But if he, a thing as you say, is interested in girls, then it is a weakness and I must know all about it So tell me. What does he do with a girl? Or don't you know?"

Totha was not laughing now. She stared at him. "Maybe you are right. I do not know. But I do know what Honcho does with a girl. He does nothing! He talks. He asks questions. He makes them show him things. But he himself does nothing. How can he?"

"How do you know all this?"

She laughed again. "I know. I have asked the girls after Honcho has been with them. I am Queen here and it is my right to know, anyway I was curious."

Honcho, Blade though wryly, was lucky in a sense. He didn't have to satisfy this little Pethcinian wildcat.

He persevered. "Tell me about it. It may be very important." Important enough, he thought, to save my life and let me win. Sex, and there was irony for you, might be the neuter's Achilles' heel. A weakness that could be used to destroy him.

Finally, seeing that he was serious, Totha told him all about it. In the most descriptive and earthy terms.

Honcho had an unquenchable curiosity about sex. What the Tharnians called coi. He would take a Pethcine girl into seclusion, strip her naked, and finger and prod her and ask her endless questions. What did it feel like to have coi? How often did they like coi? What did they do when they had coi?

Once, and Totha fought hard to restrain her giggles, once the neuter had brought along an artificial phallus, made of the omnipresent teksin, and thrust it into a girl and watched her reactions. And made those strange marks of his with a

stick on a piece of flat bark. This was as near as Totha could describe a stylus and slate.

Blade listened with an odd sense of pity, and with a growing certainty that he had found Honcho's vulnerable spot. The man was in torment. Blade was now thinking of the neuter as a man. First it had been it, like the unlucky Moyna, then he. Now it was man. Because that was his misfortune and that was going to be his downfall if Blade could arrange it. Somehow a mistake had been made: Honcho had been made with a homid, human, brain in a neuter's body.

Blade felt brief pity, once more, then banished it forever. He knew what must be done. He whispered now. Pulled Totha down atop him and whispered in her ear.

Her eyes widened and she pushed up away from him. "Me? With that thing? I will not! He can do nothing!"

Blade was patient. He did not try to explain that that was precisely the point He said, "It will work. I know it will. Honcho will not be able to resist you. He has not tried before with you, because you are a Princess and..."

"I am a Queen!"

"A Queen, and you are Org's daughter and anyway he does not trust either of you. He is using you because he must, as you are using him, and as you are both using me..."

Totha was aroused again. She began to climb over him. Blade was ready, but he said, "Wait! Listen to me."

"You speak like Honcho," she said sullenly. "Too many words. Words that are like winds in the caves, that twist and go nowhere. This is what I want. This is what I will have!"

She had her way. When it was over Blade said, "Now will you listen?"

"I will listen. I do not promise to do it. I am Totha and I do nothing that I do not wish."

Blade put his mouth against her ear and whispered for a long time. At last she agreed. Reluctantly, or so she tried to pretend, but he could see that the idea was beginning to attract her. In her way she was as curious as Honcho.

Blade was content. He had planted a seed. It might flourish, it might not. Timing was important, but that he could not exactly control. Blade smiled. It was, then, in the hands of the Gods. Tharnian Gods. Which meant, when you got right down to it, that it was in his hands. He would just have to do the best he could with what he had. And pray. To himself?

When Blade and Honcho returned to the Gorge Tower he took the great Sacred Sword with him. Org did not want to let it go at first but the neuter persuaded him.

"When we have taken Tharn," he said, "and THEY have been destroyed, then the sword can be returned to its rightful place in the Palace. Think, Org! The Sacred Sword does not really belong here in the Gorge. It belongs in Tharn. Is this not so?"

Org agreed that it was so.

As Honcho and Blade floated slowly up the shaft to the Tower the neuter said: "You are curious about the sword?"

Blade had the heavy weapon slung over his shoulder. He had cleaned and burnished it as best he could.

"I am curious."

Honcho spoke now in a purer, more upperclass Tharnian than he had used in the Gorge.

"The sword is nearly as old as Tharn itself. Many, many megakronos. It was the one great treasure the Tharnian men were able to take when they were defeated and hurled into the Gorge."

Blade had read of that great struggle. The Tharnian women had revolted, vanquished the men and banished them forever from Tharn, keeping only a few prisoners for breeding purposes. The men, living like savages in the Gorge, had gradually evolved into a new race, the savage Pethcines. But racial memories did not die, and always the hope glimmered that one day the Sword, and the Pethcines, would return to rule in Tharn.

"That is why Org let you take it," said Honcho as they neared the top of the shaft "When you go to Urcit the sword will go with you, to the Palace, and the sword is the symbol!"

Honcho turned Blade over to a squad of ceboid soldiers and was about to leave when Blade said: "I would like a favor, Honcho."

The neuter stared at him, impassive.

"I would see Zulekia again," Blade continued. "The Maiduke girl. In my chambers. This is possible?"

The green eyes narrowed, but a hint of a smile touched the thin lips. "You have not had enough coi for a time? I would have thought so, Blade. Or perhaps Totha did not suit you? I find that hard to believe."

Blade said nothing.

Honcho nodded. "All right. But it must be brief. There is very little time now. We stayed too long in the Gorge. See herm, and as soon as you have finished I will send you to Urcit. Go. I will send the ceboids for you when I want you."

In his chambers Blade bathed under the perfumed jets and donned fresh clothing. He combed his beard and admired it for a moment. Who would have guessed that he looked so well with a beard?

Org had given him a scabbard and baldric for the sword. The baldric was ancient and very rotten, and would have to be replaced, but for now it would serve. Blade admired the jewels that studded the hilt. There were twenty of them, set flush in the metal, and they glinted now in the pale Tharnian light. Diamonds, rubies, pearls and sapphires, and an oddly cut roseate stone that he did not recognize. In his other life they would have been worth a fortune, to the Pethcines they were only part of a symbol, and he had guessed that in Tharn jewels did not have much value.

He was still admiring them when the ceboids ushered Zulekia into the chamber.

Blade sensed at once that there was something different about the Maiduke girl. He could not be sure exactly what it was—she was dressed the same, her long red-bronze hair was still a glory, her gentian eyes as large—but the difference was there.

The ceboids bowed themselves out and Blade knew that the magveil was once again in place. Honcho no doubt would be watching on the spiscreeens. He did not give it a thought. His heart lifted strangely as Zulekia walked toward him, unsmiling as ever, her lovely face impassive. Then, just before she reached him,

something happened in her eyes. She blinked rapidly as though signaling alertness, and something moved in the violet depths. Warning? Entreaty?

Her eyes held his in a long stare as she stepped into his arms. "Make kiss," she said. "I like it. I remember. Make kiss."

Blade made kiss. She moved against him, pressing closer and closer. Her mouth, sweet and softly warm, slid from his and grazed his ear as she strained against him. She breathed the words, rather than whispered, as faint as a dying echo.

"When you make coi to me you must touch me deeply there! Very deeply."

Blade waited, chills prickling up his spine. Zulekia had taken a deliberate chance. She knew as well as Blade, better, how sensitive the spisccreens were. Yet she had gambled. Why? More important at the moment—would they get away with it?

Nothing. Blade breathed again. And now her eyes warned him again. No more risks. He had understood. Or had he? He must touch her deeply there! He thought he understood...and yet?

Zulekia took his hand and led him toward the bed. Blade, who had thought himself drained and exhausted by Totha's constant importunities, now found that he raged like a stallion.

At the bed she turned and faced him. "Make more kiss, my Lord."

They kissed for a long time, until she trembled against him as his hands explored her body.

She said at last. "I think I really understand kiss now."

"That is good," said Blade who was beginning to have a new understanding of it himself. Then he heard himself saying: "Do you understand love, Zulekia?"

The great eyes widened. "Love? It is not a Tharnian word. No, I do not understand it."

"Perhaps," he said gently, "one day you will." He tried to draw her down to the bed beside him, but for a moment she resisted.

"Honcho, the neuter who is He, has told me that you spoke for me. That you would have me saved. That my punishment shall not be as decreed. I am grateful to you, My lord. I make all slaveface."

"This is not the time to speak of that," he said fiercely. "Come to me. I command!"

Blade began to caress and explore her body, remembering her words, probing deep into that moist sanctum. His fingers touched something tiny, hard, cylindrical, and then he really understood. But how to mask it from the spisccreens?

Zulekia had taken a great risk. So must he. Blade threw his huge bulk on her, blanketing her slim cool body with his own. He clutched the tiny cylinder in a fist now. Secure for the moment.

He could wait no longer. He entered her with a great thrust. Then...

Then nothing. He felt her flesh melt away in his arms. He was embracing a wraith, mist, a gauze image of Zulekia that was a perfect and lovely emptiness. SIMLU!

Blade lay prone on the bed, raging. The O of Zulekia still embraced him.

Honcho laughed in the chamber. "I have kept my promise, Blade. I agreed to let you see the girl. Nothing else."

Blade fought to control his temper. Tremors ravaged him and sweat stood out on his face and chest. He knew himself and his temper too well. Once he let it slip the leash he was like a madman.

Honcho's laugh came again. "For a Lord, Blade, for Mazda, you look most undignified. Does coi mean so much, then?"

Blade won his battle with himself. He had the little cylinder clutched in his fist. Honcho had not seen, the spisccreens for once had failed. Blade felt better. He had won, not the neuter.

"I am sending the ceboids for you," said Honcho. "At once. You go to Urcit immediately."

Chapter 8

So Richard Blade came to Urcit. Not as a body, at first, but as pure intelligence. So great were Honcho's powers. He had perfected a refinement of teleportation that even THEY did not understand and could not use.

Blade's big body, handsome and massive, lay fully clothed on a circular pad in the neuter's main laboratory. The corpus looked peaceful in sleep, the great sword at his side. A feathery veil of teksin covered him.

After he had sent Blade's mind away Honcho stayed alone with the body. He sent the ceboids and the minor neuters away. Again and again he walked to the edge of the pad and stood looking down at Blade. There was no one to see now, and the green eyes mirrored thoughts that Blade would have understood. Envy, fear, hate, jealousy—even admiration. They were all present. Envy loomed the greatest.

Once Honcho stepped on the pad, about to search the clothing, then he turned back with a shrug. The little cylinder snuggled unseen in a makeshift pocket in a fold of toga where Blade had hidden it.

Blade's mind wandered Urcit, seeing and understanding, assimilating and planning, yet unseen.

The towers of Urcit spired into points against the curdled milky sky, the eternal twilight. Blade understood that sky now. It was controlled so that mani, Tharn's single crop out of which everything was made, could best prosper.

Urcit stood on a vast and reaching plain. There were wide streets and graceful squares in which fountains played. Fountains that spewed colors and music instead of water. Blade had never heard such music before; it was everywhere and yet nowhere; it did not intrude and yet it was always there. Sensuous and gay, lifting the spirits like a powerful drug.

Urcit was clean. No speck of filth was seen anywhere. And yet nobody seemed to work. There were ceboids in the streets, and neuters, all hustling and bustling along, but he could discern no real intent.

And so it was that he saw THEY at last, and never thought of them so again. Richard Blade had never stood in awe of beautiful women!

Honcho had said that there were less than a thousand of them.

Blade watched them walk the streets, lounge in the squares and places, all regal, all tall, all lovely female creatures. There were brunettes and blondes and redheads, and every mingled shade, and their fine skins glowed in golden and copper tones. They dressed alike, and yet not alike, each wearing colors in breastplates and mini-togas that flattered and complemented them best.

There was a pleasant odor in the immaculate and windless streets. The smell of women.

Blade was fascinated and missed nothing, though mindful of the time. Kronos were ticking away and soon the Sacer would begin. A vastly different Sacer, so Honcho said, than the one of the Pethcines.

Sometimes the women were alone, sometimes accompanied by a ceboid or a neuter. Sometimes they were in twos, or groups, and some went hand in hand. The air was filled with bright badinage, in the high Tharnian that Blade understood, and he closed his mind to it less it distract him from his task. There was very little time now. Honcho had waited until the very last microkronos and Blade knew why. To cut down on the chances of matters going wrong.

Blade saw that all the women were now streaming toward a great slim pencil of a building that loomed in the exact center of the city. The Palace. It was here that Sacer was held and the twenty Lordsmen were sacrificed.

Blade had noticed, in his tour of Urcit, that phallic symbols were everywhere. In every square, place and crescent, were replicas of the male organ mounted on plinths. It was in shop windows. The women wore the same symbol on charm bracelets and necklaces. The gargoyles on the buildings were in the form of sharp thrusting phalli.

Engraved on the base of every image was the letter: *M. Mazda*. The symbol, the personification, of the male power.

The Palace stood in a great square. Before the main entrance was a huge phallus, sculpted from transparent teksin, that towered a hundred feet into the air. Flanking it on either side was the statue of a woman, each dressed in flowing white robes and each exactly resembling the other. Twins. Astar and Isma. Twin rulers of Tharn. Astar, the Queen-Goddess. Isma, the High Priestess. Astar clutched a phallic shaped scepter. Isma held aloft a half-rolled scroll. The Word.

The irony did not escape Blade. Honcho had pointed it out. Tharn was a dying civilization. Beautiful women, magnificent specimens that they were, were not enough. They worshiped the male organ as a symbol of fertility, of resurrection and immortality, of continuity. It was not enough.

Blade entered the Palace. The women were streaming along ramps towards a central arena. It was circular and covered with a pinkish-white sand, and illuminated by the nebulous drifting lights. There were no wires, no cables, no fixtures. Blade understood now that power was transmitted from some central source by means of invisible laser beams, that in some way the Tharnians could tap into magnetic fields and drain and harness the energy. There was a master Power Pool, and part of his mission for Honcho was to find it and render it useless. Then the great magveils would not work, the Red Storms could not be sent, and the Pethcines would sweep in like a scourge and devour the land.

If Blade willed it so.

The arena was full of women now. Quiet, waiting, only a low hum of conversation as obbligate to a waiting, haunting silence. The odor of the assembled females was overwhelmingly sensuous. Blade studied the two empty thrones that stood in the very center of the arena. The music that was everywhere, and nowhere, suddenly altered. There was a muted strain of trumpets. Astar and Isma, walking hand in hand, entered the arena. They were clad in golden breastplates and purple mini-tunics and were followed by a group of chanting Maiduke maidens. Many of the Maidukes strongly resembled Zulekia. Blade, hovering, observed that the sealed chastity belts were unbroken. Good Maidukes, these. No karno committed. Or they had been cleverer than Zulekia?

Astar and Isma halted in the middle of the arena. They kissed each other lightly, then each ascended her separate throne.

Blade was watching Astar, the Queen-Goddess, and he saw something that puzzled him. She stared straight ahead, her eyes half closed, and she might have been alone in Tharn. She was withdrawn, silent, distant.

It was Isma, the High Priestess, who raised her hands high and clapped them. The music altered, the trumpets more brazen now.

Isma's voice was sweet and high and commanding. "Let the Sacer of Tharn begin," she said. "Bring in the Lordsmen."

There was a hush over the vast arena. The trumpets died to whispers. Somewhere a vast door slid open and the Lordsmen marched into the arena in a column of twos. And Blade understood why Tharn was dying, and why Honcho had picked this time for its overthrow. The Lordsmen were only travesties of men. They were runts, spindly and scrawny, some ugly and misshapen, all standing under five feet. The male strain in Tharn had weakened and run out, and this was all that was left.

Marching music now. The Lordsmen circled the arena, still in twos, raising their swords to the thrones as they passed. They were dressed bravely enough in tinted armor and helmets and greaves, and each carried a square shield and a short sharp sword. Recognition clicked in Blade's mind. The Roman gladiator games. This scene was much akin.

The music died again. The Lordsmen stopped marching and formed a double rank near the thrones. The crowd of women buzzed and hummed. There was a moment of waiting. Then Isma clapped her hands again.

An old man began to materialize between the thrones. Blade knew that he was seeing simlu and for a moment his mind chilled, then he cast it off. Honcho had admitted that he could not, in person and without permission, penetrate the magveils around Urcit. He could send simlu, yes, but a simlu was harmless, lacking real power. And Honcho's spiscreeves did not work in Urcit. For a time Blade had nothing to fear.

He saw now that the old man was also a neuter. The slimness, the neutral cast of features, the long green eyes were unmistakable. Yet this neuter must be very old. Its hair was gray and the face a mass of wrinkles. It was richly dressed.

The neuter was fully materialized now. It made obeisance to both Astar and Isma. Blade noted again that the Queen-Goddess did not respond, only sat unmoving and staring straight ahead. It was the High Priestess who nodded and spoke: "Hail to you, Sutha. King of Neuters. You know your duty well. Perform it."

Sutha bowed again, then faced the column of Lordsmen. The voice was like an ancient document, raveled and cracked and weak with age. He began to walk up and down the line of Lordsmen. Blade, watching closely, sensed that some sort of a decision was to be made. Yet it did not seem to be a serious one, for the old neuter had a half-mocking smile on his face. Blade glanced at the throne. Astar was paying no attention, but Isma was leaning forward, amusement on her face, like one who anticipates entertainment of a lighter sort.

Sutha selected the largest and strongest of the Lordsmen and placed him squarely in the center of the arena. The man stripped off his armor and weapons and piled them at his feet. He was naked now. Blade felt amusement and a trace of pity—the Lordsmen was a puny thing but, such as it was, he was certainly in an erectile state. And now Sutha was positioning the other Lordsmen, one here, one there, somewhat in the manner of chessmen on a board. All stripped down as soon as they took their positions.

Blade saw and heard it then. The women! They had stopped talking and laughing among themselves, and yet there was no silence. It took him a moment to puzzle it out, then he understood: it was the sound of breathing. Just that. Hushed, expectant, excited breathing. The women kept their seats, not one arose and he supposed there was a rule about that, but each one of them was tensed and ready, an arrow on a bow string, a coiled spring. And then Blade could also smell them. Not the perfume, not the clean bodies, but women exuding the musky odor of lust.

Blade could anticipate. This was a once a year thing, and while it had comic overtones it would be deadly serious to the women involved. And, he thought with amusement, it might be dangerous to the Lordsmen. He did not think they had long to live in any case, but even that little time might be cut short.

The old neuter had finished now. He raised a hand to Isma. Astar was still taking no interest in the proceedings.

Isma in turn gestured to a neuter trumpeter who stood nearby. One blast of the trumpet.

All the women stood up.

Another blast of the trumpet.

The arena was filled with the slither and flutter of feminine clothing as it was discarded. The effect, the sound and the odor, was overpowering. The arena was one vast mass of woman flesh, naked and unshielded, muscles tensed, faces contorted. They waited. Breathing.

A final blast on the trumpet.

Blade could only compare it, a pale comparison at best, to a rush of women he had once seen in a great London store. There had been a sale going on and Blade and a friend had unwittingly gotten caught in the stampede. They had nearly been torn apart.

So it was now. At the third blast of the trumpet the women stormed into the arena like a tidal wave. Teeth glinted white and feral in contorted lovely faces; breasts of every size and type bobbed and jounced and jammed as female struggled against female.

The horde swept down and over the Lordsmen, inundating them, clawing and scratching and pushing at each other to get a man and claim him. Blood was

already flowing from minor wounds. The Lordsman in the center of the arena, he first chosen by Sutha, went down under a wave of kicking legs and waving arms and tawny posteriors.

It was useless to try to watch everything at once, so Blade concentrated on the scene in the middle. Here the fight was brief enough, if rough. A tall redhead, well muscled and superbly breasted, was straddling the fallen Lordsman and beating off all comers. As soon as she had established her rights the other women fell back. By that time it was too late for them, for all the other Lordsmen had been similarly conquered and claimed.

Trumpet.

The fight was over. The losers retired to their seats and began to dress, sullen, muttering, but obeying the rules.

Each of the Lordsmen had been taken now. The woman stood over him, naked, sweaty, disheveled and a little bloody perhaps, but triumphant. Blade saw that Isma was laughing now as she made another sign to the old neuter.

Trumpet.

Blade had never seen mass rape before, and he had never dreamed that it could be comic, yet somehow it was now. To him.

Certainly it was not comic to the women. At the last blast of the trumpet each one fell on her victim like a female wolf on a helpless lamb. Blade noted that the Lordsmen were, for the most part, passive. There seemed to be no real lust in them. They were simply machines, not very good ones, to be used by the women to achieve this long denied, and illegal, gratification.

Some of the women cried, some howled like lost demons, some laughed wildly, some worked away in a deadly writhing silence. All of them, he saw, placed the man in the lower, the subordinate position and mounted him in one fashion or another. Some of the women were brutal, cuffing and kicking their partners into a submission that was never in doubt.

There was a great silence in the seats as the women watched their luckier sisters. Isma, her chin cupped in a palm, leaned forward to watch with an occasional delighted laugh. Astar still paid no attention. Sutha, the old neuter, appeared bored by it all. He had, Blade imagined, been through it all many times.

It was all over quite suddenly. Nearly all the women seemed to finish at the same time. One laggard, a sinuous blonde, was at last admonished by Sutha and raced to a finish with a great series of ecstatic wriggles. The women vanished from the arena and the Lordsmen again donned their clothes, armor, and weapons.

The fun and games, Blade sensed, were over. Serious business was on the agenda now. The Lordsmen formed two lines facing each other, swords and shields at the ready.

Isma stood up and clapped her hands once more. "Let the sacred flame be made ready."

Ceboids brought forth a large platform of teksin on which a small fire burned. Sutha cast some powder into the flames and there was a puff of red and yellow smoke.

Sutha raised his skinny arms and proclaimed: "Let the sacred slaying begin!" The music leaped up, furious and martial, bearing in itself the clangor and clash of arms.

The women watched in silence again as the Lordsmen began to fight. Blade admitted that, for their size and condition, some of them were very proficient at arms. And they were evenly matched physically, so that it was some time before the struggle had been narrowed down to the last two. Yet gradually the twenty were whittled down. Heads rolled and blood gushed from great ugly wounds. As soon as a man fell and was dispatched the ceboids came out to drag the corpse away and scatter fresh sand over the blood.

As the last two exhausted Lordsmen panted and slashed at each other, both on the verge of utter collapse, Blade knew that his time was growing very near. He knew what he must do. At the outset, at least, he meant to carry out Honcho's orders. Later he might decide on another course. He was not yet a free man. He walked in danger every moment. He was not sure, even now, that Honcho would keep his word, adhere to the plan. Honcho was cunning and malicious beyond measure. He might have evolved a new plan by now, one that did not include Blade or included only his death.

There was a stifled, choked, dying scream as the next to last Lordsmen died. His opponent's sword ripped out his throat and he sank to his knees, the red blood spurting. The survivor hacked off the head, and then turned the body over and cut off the genitals. He picked them up, carried them to the fire and cast them in, at the same time bowing to Astar and Isma.

Isma raised a hand. She stared down at the bloodstained victor.

"You live," she said. "You are Keeper of the Cage for the next kronoseg. You have won the right to consort with any of the Maidukes you choose. I, Isma, High Priestess of Tharn, pronounce it so. As it is so written in The Word. I command..."

It was time. And Honcho was carrying on with the plan. Blade felt his body flow into sensate being, was aware of his great muscles and his flesh, of his clothing and his armor and the great sword in his right hand. Honcho had kept his word thus far, and sent Blade's body from the Gorge Tower. It meant, or Blade hoped it meant, that Honcho still did not distrust him too much. It was life again. Real flesh and blood life! And for a time he was beyond Honcho's reach; for now the neuter could not harm him.

There was stricken silence in the huge arena. Blade had materialized near the thrones. Isma was staring at him, her mouth still open. The Lordsmen gaped. Sutha folded his arms over his bony chest and stared at Blade with slitted green eyes. The old neuter, alone of all, did not appear very surprised.

Blade raised the big sword and brandished it. The sword would, Honcho had promised, be recognized at once for what it was. His coaching of Blade had been long and meticulous.

Blade brandished the sword once more. He flung back his head and roared out the words.

"You do not command, Isma! I command! I am Mazda and I have come at last as was promised. I am Mazda! Whom all will obey."

There was a flutter of fear through the assembled women. Some fell to their knees, others stared and hugged their breasts, the bolder ones leaned to get a closer view of this magnificent apparition.

Astar, the Queen-Goddess, did not so much as look at Blade. She stared ahead of her, her face impassive. Something was very wrong there.

Isma stood up and stretched out both hands. "If you are indeed Mazda you will carry out the prophecy."

This was the part that Blade did not like. Yet it must be done. The play must be carried through. There was no help for it.

Blade spun the huge sword in his hand. He turned toward the lone surviving Lordsman. "Defend yourself," he warned.

The man cowered, overcome with terror at this strange and new sight, at this towering bearded giant with the massive sword. He slunk backward, casting looks of appeal to Isma.

Blade moved in. "Put up your sword," he said again. He did not want to kill this poor excuse for a man. Yet he must. His own life was very much at stake, though not endangered by the Lordsman himself.

For a moment the dwarf man nearly found his courage. He raised his sword. Then he flung it away and fell to his knees, babbling and begging. "I... I cannot fight Mazda. I make slaveface! I beg my life. I surrender all claims and beg only my life. I..."

Blade did it quickly, lest he be unable to do it at all. The big sword snarled in the air. The man's head, lopped like a cabbage from a stalk, rolled over the sand. The arena was filled with a susurrant wail as a thousand women sighed as one.

The worst was yet to come, but there was no turning back now. Blade bestrode the headless trunk and hacked off the genitals. He carried them to the fire and flung them in. There was a crackle of flame, smoke rose, the charring of flesh in the air.

Blade raised the bloody sword aloft. "I am Mazda," he said once more. "I come, as was foretold, to save Tharn." He pointed the sword at Isma, ignoring her sister, Astar.

"I lack comforts," said Blade. "They will be given at once. And I will have private audience with you, Isma, High Priestess of Tharn. At once. I have much to say that is important for your ears. Now let this be done!"

He was close to Isma. She was standing on the throne, but so tall was Blade that their eyes were nearly level.

Her beauty was breathtaking. She betrayed no excitement other than the rapid rise and fall of her breasts beneath the plates. Her eyes were sloe, dark as night, and narrowed on him now. He saw the quick intelligence glow and flicker in her eyes and knew at once that she did not believe and that she was the one he must win over. Astar, somehow, did not count. He was already sure of that.

Isma inclined her head. She beckoned the old neuter, Sutha, forward.

"You are Lord Mazda," said Isma, and a flicker of mockery moved in the deep eyes. "Your command shall be obeyed in everything. Go with Sutha, Lord. He will attend you. I shall come presently."

Blade, still swinging the big sword, stalked as majestically as he knew how from the arena. As he left it he heard the beginning of great clamor. The rising hysteria of a thousand women who have seen the promised land.

Chapter 9

As Blade followed the old neuter down a long corridor that slanted into the bowels of the Palace he felt in the folds of his tunic. He had had time only to contrive a makeshift pocket for the tiny cylinder he had gotten from Zulekia. There was raised, minute lettering on the cylinder that he had not yet read.

Sutha turned into a transverse corridor and then through an arching door that led into a huge well-lighted room where scores of neuters, all dressed exactly alike, worked at desks. Some were using machines made of teksin, others worked with styli and slates.

They passed into a smaller room where another neuter, old but not as old as Sutha, looked up from a desk to nod to Sutha and stare at Blade. Then into a circular room with an arching dome, a large desk in the center, and low couches spaced around three sides of the perimeter. The fourth side of the room was squared off. There was a large blank space, possibly a screen of some sort, and scores of small push and pull switches. Set into the screen area was a narrow door, a postern, and from behind this came a low, monotonous hum that struck a familiar chord in Blade's memory. He had last heard it in London Tower: the sound of computers at work. Hundreds of them.

Sutha bowed and indicated a couch. "If you will rest, Lord. I think it well that we should talk before you have an audience with Isma. She also wishes this."

Blade had ripped a strip from his tunic and was wiping the sword free of blood. Sutha watched him closely, his eyes narrowed and intent on the great sword.

"You have been into the Gorge, my Lord? That is the Secret Sword of the Pethcines?"

Blade tossed the bloody scrap of cloth away. "It is, Sutha. I killed a man for it. Gutar, champion of all the Pethcines. He nearly killed me. But perhaps you know of this already?"

Sutha shook his head. "Not know, Lord. Suspect, perhaps. Our knowledge, our intelligence of the Gorge, is not of the best. I admit it. There have been difficulties."

Blade sensed that it was a moment of crux. The old neuter was taking him apart, dissecting him, with those glittering green eyes. Blade attacked.

"Why must I talk to you? Who are you, anyway? I am Mazda and I will speak only with Isma or Astar. At once! Where are they?" He watched Sutha's eyes.

Sutha built a temple of his long fingers and stared at them for a long moment. The fingers moved in an incessant tremor which Blade attributed to age, not fear.

Sutha said, "You must agree, Lord, that this is a most unusual situation. You appear from nowhere, that in itself is no miracle because we have used teleportation for years, but you appear and announce that you are Mazda. This is a miracle, of sorts, because I know there is no Mazda. As does Isma. And, I daresay, quite a few others of the people who think for themselves. That, thinking, is a thing we try to discourage. But leave that, let us speak with absolute candor, you and I. I do not threaten, Lord. I do not promise. But I am Sutha and I represent Isma. She is listening now. Who are you, Lord? From where did you come? How did you arrive in Tharn? And how do you have the sword of the Pethcines?"

Blade had been thinking furiously. There was much that he understood, much more that he did not. But it was crux and he must decide. He held the die. He must cast it. But first...

He leaned toward Sutha. "This place, this room. It is secret? Absolutely secret? There are no spisccreens that lead out of Urcit?"

Sutha's smile was enigmatic. He shook his head. "To Canto 13, in the Provo of North Gorge? No. We are private here. Except for Isma. You will speak now? Truth, nothing but truth?"

"I will," said Blade. "Nothing but truth."

He told Sutha everything that had happened to him since the day in London when Lord Leighton had pressed the computer button. Sutha listened without once interrupting. Nor did the High Priestess, who was listening somewhere in the Palace, send her voice into the room.

Blade finished. Sutha stroked his chin and stared, but with nothing of amazement. There was even a hint of boredom in his voice.

"Our scientists, our astronomers and physicists, and all the other disciplines, suspected for many kronos that there was intelligent life in the universe. Other than here in Tharn. But all efforts of communication failed and after a time it hardly seemed worth while. We had domestic problems, also. We became a one crop economy. Mani. To produce enough mani for all our needs we had to control the weather, and the sky, and so shut ourselves off from the universe. But we know it is there, Lord. We know it is there!" And Sutha smiled.

"I," said Blade, "am living proof of that." Sutha was speaking again. "In a sense, you are Mazda! HE WHO COMES TO THEY. We shall accept you as such, Richard Blade. I will call you that in private. And though we know, you and I and Isma, that you are not a God, yet it may well be that you are sent to save Tharn. Now to business. You will find that we in Urcit, as apart from certain other parts of Tharn, are an eminently practical people."

Blade asked the question that had been bothering him.

"You speak always and only of Isma. What of Astar? In the books I have read..."

Sutha held up a hand. "Yes. You have a right to know. Our religion is based on duality and as Mazda you will have to consort with both of them. Astar represents power, Isma death. So it is written and so it has to be, for all power structures need a religion. But in Tharn, Isma must carry the whole burden. Astar is a child. Has been a child since birth. Her brain did not develop as it should have. She is capable of going through the outward motions of being Astar, no more. Now, about this neuter in the North Provo. Honcho?"

"That is the name I know him by."

"It is enough. I will show you a picture. You will tell me if it is a likeness of the neuter Honcho."

Sutha pressed one of the many switches set into the flat wall. An image leaped into being on the screen. It was Honcho, his arms folded, his green eyes staring out into the room. Below the picture was a medallion bearing an inscription.

Honcho. Kronos 4006, Tier 1, Decantment 1. Destruct Kronos 800.

Below the medallion, in cursive Tharnian, someone had scrawled with a stylus: 14th Level...? ...investigate.

Sutha looked at Blade. "That is the neuter?"

"Yes."

Sutha pressed another switch and the picture faded.

"We have suspected Honcho for some time," Sutha said. "We could never be quite sure. He is very clever and has always been able to conceal his true intelligence, which is far above the 14th level. We knew there was an abort in the 4006 group, but we have never been able to find it. Now we know for sure."

Blade said: "He has one great weakness. Sex. What you people call coi. I have told you about Totha. It is possible that she will destroy Honcho for us. I tried to arrange it so."

Sutha shook his head. "That would not be good. We prefer that Honcho remain alive, and that he lead the Pethcines into Tharn. We plan to destroy them once and for all, forever. This we cannot do unless we can entice them out of the Gorge. Our powers are of no avail in the Gorge. I hope that this woman, this Totha, will fail. I consider it likely that she will. Honcho is far too intelligent to be destroyed by a woman."

Blade' kept silent. He was not sure, knowing Totha. And this old Sutha had not seen the torment in Honcho's eyes when he spoke of sex. Coi. This was one department, Blade thought, in which he knew more than the Tharnians. And Sutha, as a neuter, could not begin to understand.

Sutha's next words shattered that illusion.

"I was also an abort," said the old neuter. "Something went wrong in my conditioning and decanting process and I was given intelligence far above my station. I am very nearly homid, as Honcho must be. I understand the torture of coi when one is not equipped for coi. I feel sympathy for this Honcho. Still, he must be destroyed, after he has served his purpose and led the Pethcines into the trap that we shall lay for them."

Blade was slightly awe-stricken. The old neuter might have been looking into his mind.

Now Isma interrupted for the first time. Her voice came into the room. "You have talked enough for now, Sutha. I would speak with Mazda, with Blade, in person. See that his comforts are attended to, that he has everything he wishes, then send him to me. Alone in the Sacred Chamber. No one must know, of course. If he is to be Mazda the exact letter of the prophecy must be followed."

Sutha shook his head and held up a hand. Isma could see them, then? Blade had been on the verge of producing the little cylinder he had taken from Zulekia's body. Now he did not.

Sutha was still shaking his head. "In all respect and obedience, Isma, I wish that you would not. It would be a violation of the Book. Neither you nor Astar should see him until the Ceremony of Ravishment. It is so written and I think it should so be. Tharn is in peril, Isma. Even though you may not believe it. Tharn is and will be, in great peril. I make all humble slaveface, as any neuter must, but I ask you, High Priestess, to trust me in this matter. Wait!"

Silence. Then Isma said a word that Blade did not understand. But he understood the tone, the disappointment. More silence and an emptiness in the room that had been missing before.

Sutha shrugged. "She does not listen now. She is angry with me and you. No matter. She will get over it. She is only impatient for a real man at last, and who

can blame her? But there are more important things at the moment, at least for neuters and would-be Mazdas."

Sutha's smile was open and lacking in deceit. He seemed to be saying that he and Blade were partners now and must somehow muddle through together, but it was not going to be easy.

Blade took the little cylinder from his tunic. He rolled it between his fingers, feeling the raised inscription on it. It was much too fine for him to read with the naked eye. He held it up for the old neuter to see.

That it meant something to Sutha was immediately apparent. The green eyes snapped and he extended a withered hand. "Where did you come by this, Blade? There is something you have not told me, then?"

Blade handed over the cylinder. It was true. He had left Zulekia out of his account. It occurred to him that doing so was a holdover from his other life, had to do with privacy and chivalry, and might very well prove fatal in Tharn. He now told Sutha everything about his relations with the Maiduke girl.

Sutha listened while he scrutinized the little cylinder with a magnifying glass. He kept nodding and chuckling as Blade spoke. Finally he put the cylinder away and smiled at Blade.

"I sent Zulekia to the Provo of North Gorge. To Honcho's territory. As a spy. I did not, of course, know about you then. And that you would confirm my suspicions of Honcho. I had not heard from her. I am relieved to know that she is still alive. Much more so to see that she, in turn, confirms all that you have told me about yourself and your relations with Honcho. It clears the air, so to speak."

He seemed prepared to let the matter drop, but Blade would not have it. That last near embrace with Zulekia, the look in those large violet eyes still haunted him.

"Zulekia told me that she had been sent to the Gorge Tower to be punished. That she had committed a crime. Karno! She had been caught in coi with one of the Lordsmen. This is not true, then?"

The old neuter appeared puzzled. He narrowed his eyes at Blade. "But of course it is true. She did commit karno. Her chastity seal was broken! She was sent to the Gorge Tower to be punished: to be given to the ceboids and then flung into the Gorge. Nothing of that has changed. It will still be done. Why are you so concerned, Blade?"

The big man realized, once more, how much he had to learn about the manner of Tharnian thought.

"But she is spying for you, Sutha! Working for you. Surely you promised to commute her sentence, to save her, if she did the job you wanted done?"

Sutha shook his head. "I promised her nothing. Why should I? She has sinned and must pay for it anyway. I needed a spy near Honcho. It was a perfect, a valid, excuse to do what I had to do. Simple. What is it that you do not understand?"

"Why she obeyed, why she worked so well for you if you did not promise her anything. If she has nothing to gain. But then perhaps she is depending on your mercy?"

"Mercy?" Sutha repeated the word, frowning. "I do not think I understand. It is not Tharnian. What does it mean?"

Blade hesitated, then tried another tack. He was in Tharn! Think and do and speak as the Tharnians did. But how to make Sutha understand? Sex without love. Autocracy and obedience without mercy!

He tried bluntness. "I would have this girl, Zulekia, saved. I had coi with her, as I told you, and I liked it very much. I want it again. With Zulekia. I wish her saved and brought back to Urcit."

Sutha raised a hand in warning. There was a glint of terror in his eyes. Blade waited. The neuter stared around the room, listening, waiting for something. He put a trembling finger to his lips and with the other hand kept waving Blade to silence.

Nothing. Blade guessed that Isma had kept her word. Angry with both of them, pouting, she had shut off communication.

Sutha stood up and beckoned to Blade, still with his finger at his lips. Blade followed him. They left the chamber through the narrow postern in the screen.

They were in a long room that stretched away as far as Blade could see. It was empty but for row upon row of computers clacking and humming away. They were all made of teksin, large and small, and their sound was as ominous as a flight of giant bees. Acre upon acre of them spinning and clicking and flashing.

Sutha blinked his narrow eyes at Blade. He waved a hand at the vast and serried rows of computers and in a loud voice, and barking another warning, he said: "This is the central control room of all of Tharn. All orders, directives, codes physical and moral, regulations and decisions, everything to do with running Tharn, it all emanates from here. I do not say that power originates here. Come, I will show you where it does originate."

His eyes were still enjoining silence. Blade said nothing, but his impatience was growing and his temper fraying. He knew himself and he knew his trouble. He was afraid, but not afraid enough. K his temper got off the leash he could wreck everything. He fought it.

They left the maze of computers and went down stairs that were broad and shallow. They seemed endless, but at last they came to a short hall leading to tall double doors. Over the doors was the symbol of the phallus.

Sutha, still speaking loudly, said, "As Mazda it is fitting, Lord, that you be shown the Power Pool at once. It was given by you, and to you we now return it. It is the source of all things and I know that you and Isma will use it wisely." The green eyes went blink-blink-blink.

They halted. Sutha put out a hand. The huge doors swung slowly open. Blade shifted the great sword at his side. The baldric was too narrow and at times galled his shoulder.

They advanced into a gloomy cavernous chamber. The phallic symbols were everywhere. In the exact center of the chamber was a circular pool of water. Near it was a long altar, built so low that they could look down into the open sarcophagus.

She might have been sleeping. She was naked except for a single strip of golden teksin covering the pubic area. Her long hair fell over her shoulders and partially hid her firm upthrust breasts with a fine veil of tawny gold. Her eyes were closed and there was a faint smile on the scarlet lips. It was the dual face of Astar and Isma. Her flesh was copper-gold tinted, the legs so long and sensually curving, so

rounded and pneumatic and firm with life that it did not seem possible that she was dead.

"The first Queen-Goddess," said Sutha. "Astar I. She has been dead for many millions of kronos. Yet she lives. She will live as long as Tharn lives. And Tharn will live as long as she lives."

Blade stepped back to watch as the old neuter made obeisance before the sarcophagus. He sensed that in this the neuter was sincere. His face, his voice and gestures, were solemn and deeply felt. Cynic, skeptic, Tharnian sophisticate to the core, yet this sexless thing was worshiping this long dead corpse. It was eerie and Blade did not try to deny the prickle of near fear, and awe, that plucked at his nerves.

The long dead Queen-Goddess lay in eternal silence. In her right hand was clutched the phallus staff. Sutha was still on his knees. The silence in the chamber was absolute.

Sutha arose, his manner suddenly brisk. He beckoned to Blade. "Come here. I will show you the Power Pool. In this place it is safe to speak our true minds.

The only place in all Tharn. Here, in the Sacred of Sacred, there are no eyes or ears except our own."

"And who has admission to this place?" asked Blade as he followed Sutha around the sarcophagus to the circular pool.

"Only three. Until you came. Astar, Isma, and myself. And now you." Sutha flicked a quick smile at Blade. "You see? I give the fate of Tharn into your hands. As Honcho would have it."

They halted at the edge of the little pool. It was. Blade judged, some twelve feet in diameter and the surface was unruffled, smooth as glass, dead and stagnant-looking as if nothing had disturbed it in centuries. Blade peered down into the crystalline depths. It was deep. How deep he could not guess.

By his side Sutha spoke quietly. "What do you see, Blade?"

He saw a squarish, small, casket-like box. It lay glimmering on the bottom of the pool. There was no motion, no refulgence in the water, nothing to indicate the awesome power that Blade knew was contained in the box.

"This is the Pool," said Sutha. As though he were intoning a litany. "This is the Pool and that is the Source of all things. In that small casket is the Power!"

Some form of nuclear power, thought Blade, who was no scientist. The Tharnian version of atomic exploitation. Far more sophisticated than anything he knew about. And yet there must be more to it, infinite and complex refinements.

Sutha was reading his thoughts. "It is the Power, but in itself it does not do the work of Tharn. We use the Power to dislocate and harness the magnetic fields. Do you understand these matters, Blade?"

Blade shrugged his huge shoulders. "Not much of it," he said gruffly. "I am a warrior. A man of arms! What should I know of such things?"

Sutha was watching Blade closely. Blade smiled. "What happens?", he pointed down into the pool, "what happens if it is disturbed? Touched. Moved?"

The neuter spread his hand in a gesture of effacement. "I cannot say. In millions of kronos it has never been disturbed. I can only tell you what is written. What is in the Book. If the Power is in any way defiled it will first destroy he who defiles it,

then it will die. The Power will no longer exist! If that ever happens then Tharn will no longer exist."

Blade was silent for a long time, staring down at the bottom of the pool.

"Clever Honcho," he said at last. "Cunning Honcho. If I had obeyed him I would have destroyed myself and Tharn at the same time. You would have been powerless, Sutha, in a very real sense."

"It is so," agreed Sutha. "And Honcho could have led his Pethcines up from the Gorge to destroy us all."

Silence. Blade shifted the heavy sword again. He pulled it half out of the scabbard, then slammed it back. He looked at the frail old neuter.

"I could still do it."

Sutha smiled. "You could, Blade. I am frail and weak and very old. Neuters cannot fight I could not prevent you. Here we are entirely private and no help will come. But are you so bent on self-destruction, Blade? And you would serve Honcho that far?"

Blade swore. "I am going to take great pleasure in killing Honcho when the time comes. I hope it will be soon."

There was a ledge of teksin brick rimming the pool. Now Sutha seated himself on it and crossed his thin legs. Blade fancied he detected a quirk of merriment in the old green eyes. And acknowledged that he was beginning to like, really like, this old man. In that instant Blade perceived something he had never really known before, had not even thought much about. It did not take only sex to make a man!

"It will be soon," said Sutha. "The sooner the better. But we must plan it carefully. You must follow, to the letter and all but the sabotage of the Power, the plan that Honcho laid out for you. But we will discuss that later, when Isma is with us. She will have to know. Now, in private and in safety - and we cannot come here too often or Isma will suspect—what is this nonsense about the Maiduke girl, Zulekia? Are all the men mad in this place from whence you came?"

Blade nearly laughed. "Not mad, Sutha. Stubborn, perhaps. But I liked Zulekia. It is as simple as that. I liked and enjoyed her. I would not have, her harmed. Surely, with all your powers, it is not so difficult to save her?"

Sutha looked pained. "I pray Astar you are not a simpleton, Blade. All my hopes and plans are useless if you are. But I will assume that you are not and that you can understand matters if I explain it properly. So pay careful attention."

Sutha held up one finger. "I cannot understand, possibly because I am a neuter, what is so important about one Maiduke girl who was born and conditioned only to obey and be destroyed when her time comes. Especially one who has committed the crime of karno and deserves to be destroyed. I cannot understand it, but I will accept it as your true wish."

Blade nodded. "It is."

Sutha held up a second finger. "Agreed. Now, Zulekia is in the Gorge Tower, Honcho's prisoner, and so beyond my power to save or harm at the moment."

"I find that hard to believe," said Blade. He frowned and pointed down into the pool. "You have the Power!"

Sutha scowled. It was obvious that he was being very patient with Blade.

"I have the Power. Yes. Am I to use it then, to destroy Honcho and rescue a criminal girl at the cost of forsaking my major and important plan? The total destruction of the Pethcines?"

Blade grudgingly admitted that this would not be wise.

"Besides," said Sutha in a musing tone, "I am not so sure that I can destroy Honcho as long as he remains in his own Provo. He is cunning and also something of a genius. Look at the way he sent your mind, your intelligence only, to scout Urcit! We here know of this, in theory, but we have not yet perfected it Above all Honcho must not be underestimated."

It was ridiculous and Blade knew it, but nevertheless he found himself glancing around the Sacred Chamber. "Is there any chance...?"

Sutha shook his head. "Not now. As soon as you told me it was recorded on magamp steps were taken. No. Honcho cannot send his mind into Urcit now."

"But that is a giveaway in itself, Sutha. Honcho will know, or suspect, that I have told you everything."

The old neuter held up a soothing hand. "Perhaps not. We are always experimenting with various types of powers of magveils. Maybe he will attribute it to that And, when we are ready, we will let his mind through. Or, better yet, his simlu. When we are ready, not before.

"In the meantime, Blade, you must see that nothing can be done about Zulekia. If I save the girl and destroy Honcho too soon, I will lose the Pethcines. I cannot destroy them in the Gorge. If I shut off all power, here at the source, and I can do that, then I deprive Honcho of power but I also leave Urcit defenseless. The Pethcines can invade us and Honcho wins his end in any case. Must you have this one girl, Blade?"

Blade thought for a moment. Then: "I must have her. Or, at least, I must save her. I will not have her destroyed, used by the ceboids and thrown into the Gorge. If she must die I would have it done in a more humane manner. She is not a ceboid or a... a..."

Sutha stared at Blade. The green eyes were cool, but without anger.

"Or a neuter?"

Blade cursed his blundering tongue, but he plunged ahead. "All right. She is homid. Human. And I like her. And I pity her. That is another word you do not use in Tharn. I beg you, Sutha, do what you can!"

Sutha rubbed his nose with a long forefinger. "There is still another word that we do not use. Very few know it. Only old ones like me, that read the mysteries that no one else ever reads or even knows exist. It is also a forbidden word and it is mentioned only once in all the mysteries. It is an odd word. Love. Does it mean anything to you, Blade?"

Something bade Blade shake his head and deny. "No. I do not know the word."

"As well, perhaps. The mysteries define it as something unwholesome. Weakening. Treacherous. A sin that causes much rot and trouble. It has always puzzled me."

Blade put his hand on the jeweled hilt of the sword. Not in threat, but to emphasize the way he felt. "So you will not help Zulekia? Very well. I must find a way to do it myself."

"Before you even think of that," said Sutha, "listen to my real reason for refusing to try. The reason I brought you here so soon, to the Sacred of Sacred, where we could not be overheard. The reason is Isma. The High Priestess!"

Blade nodded, getting the point at once. "She would be displeased that I thought of another woman?"

Sutha leaned to pat the big man's shoulder. The expression on his face was a mingle of approval, exasperation, impatience and something else that Blade thought might just be a genuine liking for himself, dolt though Sutha obviously thought him.

Sutha cast a glance upward, as though to call on a minor Tharnian God or two, and clasped his hands in resignation.

"You begin to see it, Blade. Isma! She is High Priestess and her authority is absolute. Even I cannot go against her. Astar is nothing. She, and her child's brain, do not count. I have, as a matter of fact, had great difficulty in restraining Isma from slaying Astar and ruling alone. She will do it yet. And I tell you something else about Isma: she has known coi, has committed karno many times with the Lordsmen. Only I know this, and Isma does not care that I know. But of all the times she has gone to the Cage, or had the Lordsmen sent to her, never once has she known coi as it is written it should be. Coi between a God and a Goddess!"

Blade was stubborn. He clung to a thought once it had lodged securely.

"You say that only you and Isma know of her actions, that she has coi? How can this be? The Lordsmen must know. The ones involved. Or are they in a trance?" And Blade laughed.

Sutha did not laugh, nor even smile.

"The Lordsmen involved are immediately put to death following the event, Blade. They are killed and a substitute brought in from the Breeding Grounds.

story is put out, for the People, or THEY if you choose, that there has been an accident."

Blade's smile faded. "I see."

"Then see this: if Isma has one suspicion, any faintest inkling, that you are so much as thinking of this girl, this Maiduke Zulekia, then the girl is dead. You are dead. And very likely I am dead. About the girl I care nothing. About myself I care little. I am a very old neuter, I am entitled to a painless destruct, and my kronos have already been extended many times because I please Isma and serve her well. But you, Blade? I would have you live. I have hopes and plans that, but none of that now. Come. We must get you to your quarters. Isma will be impatient and there is much to do. You must make ready for the Ceremony of Ravishment."

As they left the Sacred Chamber Blade glanced once again at the corpse of Astar I. He knew it was impossible, yet her smile seemed to have altered, to have become a little more mocking than it had been.

Then he forgot Astar I as he listened to Sutha explaining the Ceremony of Ravishment and what he must do. Blade was appalled.

Chapter 10

The women were assembled. The People, as Sutha called them, and as Blade had come to think of them. They rustled and craned and chattered and filled the great amphitheater with their effluvia, with their laughter, and most of all, it was a palpable thing, with their expectations. The word had gone out. Mazda had come. Tharn could be saved. Snatched back from a slow, withering, agonizing death. The God had come, and from his loins would spring a new Tharn.

The Maiduke maidens had a special section to themselves, under the watchful eyes of monitor neuters. There were special ceboid patrols everywhere. Such of the Bearer maidens as were not fertilized, and thus incarcerated in the baby plants, were also on hand. The long conveyor belts, bearing the neuter decanters, had ground to a stop. All of them, every level of Tharnian society, were there unless duty prevented. From the lowliest to the highest, from the most humble ceboid street cleaner to Isma herself, they were all avid to see the God perform. And along with the flower smell of women was another, nearly as tangible, miasma that lingered in the air. Lubricity. Tharn was not an inhibited state.

Richard Blade had been bathed and perfumed by a company of Maiduke girls watched over by a neuter. They chattered incessantly as they worked, in a Tharnian patois that he could not entirely understand, but what he did understand was hard on his composure. They stared. How they stared! One, bolder than the rest, actually reached and tweaked until harshly reprimanded by the neuter. Blade was glad when it was over.

Blade was not to take his great sword into the arena. With reluctance Blade entrusted the weapon to the care of a neuter called Xeno. Xeno was young, only 16 kronos out of decantment, and husky for a neuter. He was Blade's personal servant and filled with awe at the assignment, and at Blade.

Blade wore only a purple loincloth. He was unarmed. Now he paced the floor of his sumptuous chamber impatiently, anxious for Sutha to arrive and conduct him to the amphitheater, to have it over with. The image of Honcho, with his clever, aborted and not so neuter brain, haunted him. Surely Honcho had more arrows to his quiver than Blade knew of. And what of Totha? Of Org? Nothing could be done until this ceremony was over and Blade officially received as Mazda. Blade chafed and fretted for action.

Sutha came and conducted Blade through a tunnel beneath the arena. Xeno, staggering under the weight of the sword, followed along behind.

Blade asked a question that had been bothering him.

"How much of this ceremony is mock, Sutha, and how much real? Astar and Isma are to be armed and I am not? Will they really try to kill me?"

Sutha nodded. "They will really try to kill you, Blade. They must. If they can, if they do, then it is a false prophecy and you are not Mazda. You, in turn, will try to slay them. But only symbolically! You do have a weapon."

The old neuter pointed to Blade's groin. "Your phallus! That is your weapon. I warned you. You must disarm them and ravish each separately. So do you consummate with the dual Goddess and you all become as ONE. Tharn."

Sutha touched Blade's arm. "You will not fail. You must not fail. Do you understand my meaning? Even if you disarm them, Astar and Isma, and subdue

them, which you will, and then are not capable of entering them, then you will still have failed. It will be symbolic death. And actual death will not be far behind."

Blade did not think he would fail. He had always been enormously potent. And yet there was no guarantee that in the excitement, the frenzy, in the stress of performing publicly, he pushed the thought away. That would be all right.

They reached a gate leading into the great arena. Sutha flicked a hand at Xeno and the young neuter dropped back and fell to his knees, making slaveface. Sutha drew Blade into a corner. Through the gate they could hear the sound of the waiting crowd.

Sutha squeezed Blade's great bicep. "I do not think you will fail, Blade. But if you do I cannot help you. Isma will order the soldier-ceboids to kill you. This they will do, though you slay many of them first. But it is not that I worry about, much. It is Isma. She has a secret. I can always tell. And being Isma it is a dangerous secret. I do not know if it concerns you, or Astar, or even myself. But be warned. Watch her. Isma is High Priestess and a woman of all women, and not to be trusted for a minikronos. Go, Blade. I invoke fortune on thee."

Blade strode into the arena.

There was no welcoming roar. There was gathering silence as the whispering died away and the assembled People, all of THEY who really counted, feasted their eyes on Blade.

Blade stood tall, his heavily muscled legs planted like columns in the earth. His heavy black beard had been washed and combed. It was thick and wiry and glistened in the evanescent soft light bathing the huge space.

Blade's shoulders were wide, his chest massive, his waist lean and hard muscled. Playing to the audience, as Sutha had instructed, he raised his arms above his head and turned slowly around, inspecting them and letting them see the confidence and arrogance he exuded. Even if Sutha had not given him meticulous instructions, Blade was far too good a natural showman to play it humbly.

So he stood for a moment. The whispers came back now, and a long collective exhalation from the women of Tharn. The neuters were apathetic. The ceboids, with slow animal curiosity, watched his every movement.

Blade smiled at them. He put his hands on his hips and laughed, loudly and triumphantly, his white teeth flashing through the black beard. Some of the women began to laugh, a nervous growing titter.

Blade began to walk toward the transparent teksin cage in the center of the arena. It was cube shaped and the walls were solid. Inside, each lying on a separate couch, were Astar and Isma. They were naked. Beside each couch was a shield and a sword with a keen, phallus-shaped blade. As Blade approached Isma raised herself on her elbow and watched him. Astar did not move. Only the rise and fall of her sharp breasts showed that she lived.

A door, reached by a short flight of steps, opened into the cage. By the steps a fire burned on a teksin grate. It was attended by a high ranking neuter. As Blade drew near the neuter cast a handful of powder on the flame and it swirled upward in a cloud of red and yellow.

Blade watched the moiling fire from a corner of his eye. He knew why the fire was there, what it was waiting for. If he failed, if he was not man enough, Isma—or would it be Astar?—would hack off his manhood and toss it to the greedy flames.

The music began. It crept into the arena from nowhere, low and sinuous, gaining in sensuality with every note. Blade halted at the foot of the steps.

Through the teksin his eyes met those of Isma. Their stares locked and held. Something glittered in those obsidian depths and the red mouth moved a bit over pearly teeth. Isma moved on the couch, twisting, thrusting her breasts at Blade like daggers. She crooked a finger and her lips moved. Come. Come to coi... or death.

Blade glanced at Astar. She was still unmoving, silent and distant on her couch, staring straight before her. Would she fight him? Could she, as retarded as she was? Her body, revealed in every detail, was as lovely as that of Isma. Their breasts, their faces, were alike. Only the body hair was different: Isma's a darkest curling jet, Astar's fine and straight and golden bronze.

A great phallus, bearing the initial M, curved over the door of the cage. Blade made obeisance to it, then bounded up the stairs, and flung open the door and stepped inside. The crowd was silent, intent, waiting.

Isma leaped to her feet and picked up her sword and shield. Her breasts, the smooth velvet woman muscles of her shimmered and writhed beneath the tawny hide. Blade, incongruously at that moment, remembered that the People had once been great warriors under Astar I.

Isma snapped a command at Astar. "Fight, Astar! On your feet and fight. Kill this one who claims he is Mazda." Isma's mouth was thin and angry, imperious. She leaped at Blade and thrust with the sword. Blade moved skillfully away.

Isma did not follow. She retreated still talking to Astar. "Fight, Astar! Fight!"

Blade knew then that Sutha had been right. Something was amiss. Isma was up to some mischief. He watched, ready and tense, as Astar got slowly off the couch. She picked up her shield and weapon and began to move toward Blade. Her eyes were vacant and staring and she looked not at Blade, but through him. In a flash it came to him. Astar was drugged!

So much the easier. He waited as Astar approached, concentrating on her body, feeling himself begin to react to the sexual excitement that clogged the air like smoke. He kept an eye on Isma, who was slowly circling around to get behind him. Obviously she intended that he subdue Astar first. Why? And why drug Astar? It must be Isma's doing. Was Sutha wrong and Astar not retarded, brain damaged, at all? Had Isma been drugging her for a long time?

Astar seemed to come alive for a moment. She saw Blade, as if for the first time, and her eyes narrowed and flamed. She leaped at him with a scream. "*Kill—kill!* I am Astar. I am virgin. I will not be taken. I will kill..."

She swung wildly with the sword. Blade ducked under it and moved in to grab her around the waist. He backhanded her wrist and the sword fell. He pulled the shield off her arm and flung it away. She struggled in vain as he picked her up and carried her to the couch. Isma moved in closer behind him. He was suddenly aware that there was no sound in the cage other than the breathing of the three of them. The cage was soundproof. He glanced through the teksin, saw the open red throats of the howling mob of women, crazed by anticipation and empathic coi.

Astar's struggles were feeble now, her breathing harsh and tortured. She slumped against Blade, her breasts mashed against his great chest. Blade was conscious of an intense and growing excitement. He was ready! With Isma at his back, waiting.

Isma spoke for the first time. "Hurry," she said. "Hurry and take her and have done with it. She is nothing. I have seen to that. A token will be enough, just enter her and then leave her. Come to me! Save all of yourself for me, to take me. If you can! If you dare!"

Blade tossed Astar sprawling on the couch. He was breathing hard and his voice was harsh. "And you, Isma? And you... when my back is to you?"

She laughed. "Is Mazda afraid, then?"

Astar was sprawling on the couch, her eyes closed, her breasts heaving, her long golden legs flung wide. Yet Blade hesitated. "They cannot hear us?"

"Of course not. Would I speak so else! Hurry with her and come to me."

Blade fell atop Astar and thrust hard into her. Astar screamed. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she died. Blade had seen much of death and he knew she was dead. For a second he did not understand. It was not possible that he... Then he knew. Astar had been murdered, drugged, poisoned, by Isma. It had been a masterpiece of timing.

So was Isma's attack on Blade. While he was still in the trance of shock, of trying to understand, she leaped at him with a cry of defiance. She thrust hard at his naked back. Her teeth were bared and she was panting.

"If I can kill you, Mazda-Blade, I do not want you! I am sick to death of creatures that are not men. I'll kill you, Blade. Kill you!"

Her red mouth was dripping saliva as she attacked him. She was good with the sword. Blade rolled away, off the couch, and she slashed him in the side. Blood welled down his leg. He leaped away from her with a wolfish grin.

"You do mean to kill me, Isma!"

She feinted at his throat, then lowered her blade to slash at his still rigid manhood. "I'll kill it, Blade. Kill it! I'll burn it and the ceboids can have your carcass to toss on the dung heap. Mazda? A God? Prove it!"

He wondered if there was a word for insanity in Tharnian. He had not yet come across it. But whether or not, Isma was insane at this moment. She was devoured with double lust. For killing and for coi, and one fed the other.

Blade retreated slowly around the cage. Isma followed, feinting and thrusting, silent now, her dark eyes blazing at him. Blade too was being overcome with lust. He was also losing his temper. He made no effort to restrain it. He felt it sliding and let it go. If this bitch-Goddess, this High Priestess of coi wanted coi, he could damned well give her coi. He would kill her, all right. He would slay her with the only weapon he had.

He slithered back past the couch where the dead Astar lay still sprawled in an attitude of love. Isma followed, trying to work him into a corner. At any moment Blade could have picked up Astar's sword and shield and killed Isma. He did not want to. Not that way. And he was not thinking of the consequences of such an act, whatever they might be. No. He was going to kill Isma symbolically, as Sutha had said he must, and it was going to be a slaying she would remember for the

rest of her life. She would, thought Blade as his rage towered and grew, beg him to slay her over and over and over.

Isma slashed at him and missed. Blade smiled in mockery. It was time. He stepped in swiftly and caught her sword wrist and twisted. She screamed and he smiled and twisted again. He hurt her and enjoyed doing it. She dropped the sword.

Isma tried to brain him with the shield. Blade struck her hard across the face with his open hand. She reeled back, stifling another scream, staring at him in disbelief. Then she leaped, screaming, spitting out the words in fury.

"You dare strike Isma!"

"I dare." He struck her again, backhanding her the opposite way across those lovely features.

She clawed at his face and tried to bite him. Blade got his big hand into her thick hair and twisted. She screamed. He kicked her legs out from under her and she fell heavily. He had forgotten the crowd now. They were not there. He was intent on his fury and his lust.

He pulled the shield off her arm and flung it violently away. She tried to fight her way up and he kicked her feet away again. She was sobbing and screaming and cursing, her eyes wild with rage and her scarlet mouth drooling spittle.

Blade dragged her across the cage by her hair. As they passed Astar's fallen sword she reached for it and he slashed hard at her wrist. She screamed in pain.

Blade pulled her on the couch by the hair. She lunged up at him and he yanked her head back.

Blade laughed down into her face, bitterly and furiously. "Now, Isma! Now you shall find out who is Mazda! Are you ready?"

She spat in his face. "Never... never... never. I forbid it. I am Isma, High Priestess of Tharn! I rule now. Only I—I will have you torn apart by ceboids."

Blade's rage had begun to cool. He was still angry, but the red mist was clearing. He mocked her. "I know you are the High Priestess, Isma. I also know that you murdered Astar so you could rule alone. You must have planned it for a long time. But you are wrong. I am Mazda and you are going to rule with me. Make up your mind to it, Isma! And now..."

She locked her thighs together, denying him entrance. She laughed wildly and he sensed the beginning of hysteria. "No. You see, I will not permit it."

Blade seized her firm left breast and twisted it cruelly. "You will not?"

She screamed shrilly but refused to open her legs. He twisted the breast again, repeating: "You will not, Isma? You will not?"

The long thighs parted. Blade plunged at her, stabbing, wanting to hurt her, to kill her.

She had, of course, never known a real man before. He did not lie close atop her, but raised himself so he could watch her face, see the mingled rage and fear slowly transformed to surprise and disbelief. She gasped and sighed. Her mouth widened into a scarlet vacant and stayed that way. Her nails began to rake at his back, bringing blood, but there was no anger in her now.

Within a minute she convulsed for the first time. Blade had not even started. He plunged on, feeling that he was going to pierce her entrails, slay her once and for all, and he did not care what happened to him.

Minute followed minute. On and on. Isma began to cry and sob and ask for surcease.

"I am weary, My Lord. I would stop now. Please."

Blade kept on.

She was frantic again. "You are Mazda. You are my Lord. I am nothing—you are everything, my Lord... make slaveface—I make slaveface... I..."

Still Blade did not show mercy. It was not a Tharnian quality. It was not a Blade quality, either, at the moment On and on and on.

"Please, my Lord. Please! I cannot go on. I cannot. I am dying."

"Die, then."

"I cannot endure it, my Lord."

"You must endure it. I am master now. Is that not so, Isma?"

"Yes. It is so, Lord. Yes-yes-yes-yes-yes."

Blade convulsed and poured his seed into Isma, the High Priestess.

"Never call me Mazda again. Between us two. I am Blade. Blade of Tharn!"

"Yes, Lord. You are Blade of Tharn."

She was whimpering and crying now. The firm breasts had gone to mush beneath him and in her long dark eyes was a look of satiety and content.

As Blade arose up he wondered how long it would last. He had come to the throne of Tharn. Now to hold it.

Chapter 11

For a month by Blade's way of reckoning time, he was feted and feasted and revered by the People of Tharn. Astar's body was vaporized—the story being circulated that she died of joyful shock on recognizing the true Mazda—and Blade now shared the throne with Isma. One by one, each woman individually, was presented to him. He counted them. 927. The People. THEY. The upper and ruling class of Tharn, in turn ruled by Isma and, now, himself.

Isma watched coldly as each woman was presented to Blade. So far Isma had been subdued, docile and loving, and Blade was careful that his glance never rested too long on any woman, and his manner remained curt and aloof. Sutha advised this and Blade knew he was right.

Each of the women was a beauty in her own right. Defective females were destroyed at birth. There was every combination of coloring and feature, but all were tall and seemingly ageless. None old. None young. Blade learned that each woman, each homid, as well as the neuters, was allotted a certain number of kronos. When the time came the individual was destructed, routinely and without ceremony, and a substitute moved in from the birth plants.

He visited the Cage, where the young Lordsmen were kept and bred in captivity until each generation reached the age of sacrifice. They lived well, the young men of Tharn, waited on hand and foot by neuters and ceboids from the time they were born until they died in the arena. They were poor specimens, all of them, but it was on their semen, milked and injected into the Bearer Maidens, that Tharn depended for life and continuity. Blade would change all that. His seed was strong.

Blade came to understand the rigid social structure of Tharn. He intended to change this, too, when he was in actual fact ruler of Tharn, but now he observed and listened, gulping knowledge down in huge bites, trying to digest it against the day when he would need it.

Until his arrival Tharn had been an absolute autocracy ruled by a Queen-Goddess and a High Priestess descending in an unbroken line for millions of kronos. The real administration was carried on by a Council of Neuters, headed by a King of Neuters, in this case Sutha. The neuters ran Tharn, but had no real authority over the elite, the People. They had life and death authority over all minor neuters and the ceboids.

There were four main Provos in Tharn, and in each the head neuter had absolute authority, responsible in theory to Sutha, but in fact each Provo was a small Kingdom in its own right. As long as the mani kept coming in, and there was no open revolt, the Provos were left alone. This made it easy for ambitious neuters like Honcho to plot against Urcit. Blade would change all this, too, when the time came.

The Maidukes and the Bearer Maidens, though also homids, were little better than high-class servants. Blade visited the baby plants, where long lines of Bearer Maidens were in various stages of gestation. Only one male child in a hundred was kept for possible graduation to the Cage; the others were quickly suffocated in a small transparent bag of teksin.

Nor were all the girl children kept alive, though the percentage was higher than the male. There was a feral judgment scale: only the absolutely perfect females were kept for eventual membership in the People. Those only slightly less perfect were destined to become Maidukes, and the next gradation down were made Bearer Maidens. All the rest were destroyed.

Blade saw the error immediately and wondered at the Tharnians. The third rate of female homids were bearing the children. Children fathered at a distance by a poor strain of male Lordsmen in which the blood had deteriorated to physical malformation and near imbecility. The paradox intrigued Blade. The Tharnians manipulated magnetic force with ease; yet they had never heard of eugenic law.

Neuters were not born of women. Part of the semen bank was set apart and given special chemical treatment, then neuters were created in bottles, or decanters, and set into motion on a conveyor belt. It was a long process - the neuter plant was a Tharnian mile long - and what went in as a fertilized speck of protoplasm in a bottle came out as a neuter infant. Along the way it was subject to dozens of shots with a high pressure hypodermic. When it was decanted it was segregated and graded in classes from A to E and in levels from 1 to 14. The neuters grew rapidly, much faster than homid children, and each was electronically taught and conditioned for the task it was allotted. Each was given a certain number of kronos to exist, according to a carefully rated efficiency chart and at the end of that time was destroyed.

Ceboids bore their young naturally. From the ceboids came the lower grades of soldiers and all the menial workers, the hewers and the carriers and the sweepers of dung. They lived mainly in slums on the outskirts of Urcit, spoke their own brutish language, and were as faithful as dogs to the master of the moment.

Blade could not wholly satisfy himself about the ceboids. They were hybrids, representing various strains of animals, but with no one predominant animal strain. Their intelligence was universally low. Even Sutha could not satisfy Blade's curiosity about them. There had always been ceboids, for millions of kronos, and Tharn could not exist without them. Who would do the work?

Sutha and Blade held frequent conferences to plan their strategy. Honcho must make his move soon. Sutha, by the subtle control of power, made it easy for Honcho. They waited. Still nothing. Sutha weakened the magveils still more. If Honcho was probing he must find the weakness.

Blade and Isma were in the Regal Chamber when it happened. They had had a long and arduous bout and Isma slept in contentment, a half smile on her lovely face. Blade, stretched on the great bed beside her, the sword close at hand, was not surprised, nor particularly alarmed, when the simlu of Honcho began to materialize. He did not move a hand toward the sword. A simlu could not harm him, and at this stage Honcho would not dare teleport his real into Urcit.

Honcho was wearing light armor and a tunic. The long green eyes glinted at Blade and he showed his fanged white teeth in half a smile. Blade nodded a welcome and said nothing.

Honcho stared past Blade at the sleeping Isma. His eyes roved over her body, naked save for a light robe of frilled teksin.

"She is as lovely as I thought, Blade. It is the first time I have seen her. How is she in coi? Satisfactory?"

Blade nodded. "Most."

"Then you are happy? Content? You must be—you did not adhere to our plan."

Blade smiled. "Did you really think I would?"

Honcho rubbed his shaven head with a finger. "No. Of course not. I knew you would not destroy the Power. And be destroyed yourself. You are not a fool, Blade. I could not use you if you were."

Blade raised himself on an elbow, careful not to disturb Isma. "Then why did you suggest such a plan in the first place?"

The neuter blinked. "I had to test you. You, a stranger from a strange place I did not know. You might have been a fool!"

"So now you know," said Blade. "I am not a fool. I am Mazda, or most of Urcit thinks I am, and I rule with Isma."

Honcho nodded, as if to himself. "So I planned it. I had two plans, really. First, if you were a fool, you would destroy the Power, and yourself, and my Pethcines would easily overrun Tharn and Urcit. It was, and I now admit it, really not such a good plan. I would have Tharn, but I would not have the Power. It would have taken a long time to restore the Power, if I could have done it at all, and I need the Power to control Org and the Pethcines. They are savages, as perhaps you remember?"

"I remember. How is Totha?"

Honcho's smile thinned. The green eyes narrowed. "As ever, Blade. But she has changed. She used to hate me, hold me in contempt, now she seems to like me. I think I know why, but I still find it pleasant. She has, or very nearly, taught me to understand coi."

Blade's taunt was deliberate. "How can that be? You are not a man. You are a neuter. A nothing!"

Honcho shrugged and spread his long fingered, nearly prehensile hands in a knowing gesture. "Perhaps.

Perhaps not. Even that may be changed. Totha thinks it may be, and she is very interested. All the miracles, Blade, are not performed here in Urcit."

Blade became very alert. "What does that mean?"

Honcho could not repress his gloating. "Many, many kronos ago, Blade, before the system was perfected, and all things became static, there was a thing called sickness in Tharn. And there were men, homids, called surgeons. I have read of them. Some were very wise and skilled. Then they vanished, were ruled extinct, because they were not needed. But a few survived. I have been searching all Tharn for a long time, and I have found one. In a remote corner of West Provo. I sent ceboids and had him secretly brought to my Tower. He tells me that there is a thing, something called an operation, that will make me a man. In body as I already am in brain. What do you say to that, Blade?"

Blade was amused but he did not let Honcho see it. It was a minor development that had no bearing on the matter at hand yet it buttressed his judgment of Honcho. The neuter was a tortured creature and sex was going to be the death of him. He was reaching for the unattainable and that was nearly always fatal.

Gravely he said: "Your ambition is impressive, Honcho. It is overwhelming. Not only do you wish to rule Tharn, you also wish to be a man. I can only advise you to be careful. Do not overreach."

Honcho stroked his sharp chin. "I thought you would say that You have changed, Blade. You have changed greatly since I destroyed Moyna and took you prisoner. Is it possible that I made a mistake sending you here as I did? I begin to think there is treachery in your heart, Blade. That you do not intend to carry out our plan, to keep our bargain."

Coldness grew in Blade. The neuter's tone was soft, lacking in anger, and laden with a mocking confidence that rattled the big man. He kept his face impassive.

"That may be, Honcho. Why do I need you now? I am accepted as Mazda. I rule. I have Isma. With every hour I learn more of Tharn and Urcit and the uses of the Power. What can you offer me, Honcho, that I do not already have? I command now, Honcho, not you! You are fortunate that I decided to forget your scheming and let you live in peace in the North Provo. You will, of course, have nothing more to do with the Pethcines. When I am ready I will destroy them." This last was said on impulse, on the spur of the moment. Blade felt a strange compulsion to keep talking, because as long as he talked Honcho would not, and he did not want Honcho to speak because he knew what Honcho was going to say. Blade did not want him to say it. Blade was trying to forget it. And her.

Honcho had folded his frail arms across his chest. He stood listening with bowed head, half smiling, his eyes half closed, the epitome of patience. Blade's hand itched for the great sword. If only Honcho was here in real and not simlu! Blade choked back a curse, feeling the sweat start on his forehead. It was useless to wish. You could not decapitate a simlu.

Honcho looked up. "You are quite finished?"

Blade nodded curtly. "I am. Go. I am weary and wish to rest Go back to your Provo, Honcho, and forget your plotting. I will forget that you ever plotted. That I promise."

Honcho's mouth thinned. "And leave you to gather all the fruits of my planning? I think not, Blade. Perhaps you are a fool after all. At the moment you are showing the intelligence of first level ceboid, a sweeper of dung. But you have a weakness, Blade, a great weakness that you try to pretend you do not have. No! Speak no more. Watch. I am going to show you something. I can only do this because old Sutha has weakened the magveils, trying to entice me into Urcit. Did you really think that I would teleport myself here, put my real in your power? Think again. When I come in my real it will be with Org and the Pethcines and as a conqueror. But watch, Blade. Watch!"

Honcho pointed a finger at the center of the chamber. Blade started, fascinated, knowing that it was taking every ounce of Honcho's power to summon a second simlu into the room. The neuter was using secondary power, regenerated and buffered in the Gorge Tower, though fed from the primary source, and from that distance the power was stretched to the ultimate.

Yet a picture was forming in the room. Blade watched with a coldness growing in him. It was Zulekia. And Totha.

Zulekia was somewhere in the Tower, in a barren room. She was spread-eagled on the floor, her arms and legs pulled wide apart and fastened to ringbolts of teksin. She was naked. She was screaming, her red mouth gaping wide, though Honcho was not bringing the sound into the chamber. Somehow that made it worse for Blade—the yawning contorted mouth that he had kissed—and the silent screaming that went on and on.

One of the ceboid-soldiers was atop Zulekia. It finished and another took its place. There was a long line of ceboids waiting outside the door, snarling and jostling and peering to see what was going on. The line stretched down a corridor and out of sight.

Totha watched from a corner of the room. She was smiling and laughing and applauding as each ceboid took a turn with the shrieking Zulekia. Blade hated her. His big fingers itched for her throat.

Totha went to kneel beside the Maiduke girl. Totha was wearing only a brief girdle of animal skin and her breasts hung firm and shapely as she bent over Zulekia.

Her lips writhed over sharp little teeth as she thrust a little flaying knife into tender flesh. Zulekia screamed with the new pain and began to thresh about in her agony. She arched her back, screaming and screaming.

Sweat was pouring from Blade. Isma stirred sleepily beside him but he paid her no heed. "Enough," he grated at Honcho. "Enough! I swear, by all the Gods of Tharn, that I will do the same to you..."

Honcho mocked him. "But watch—there is more."

The scene faded, then came back. This time Blade saw the Tower, the terrace on which he had first seen Zulekia, overhanging the Gorge. Four ceboids were holding the girl by the wrists and ankles, swinging her back and forth, on the point of hurling her into the Gorge. Totha stood a little way back, watching with her same cruel smile.

"I have been able to invent a little refinement," said Honcho. "The hooks. Watch carefully."

It was only simlu, yet Blade winced, sweated and cursed under his breath. Great jagged hooks of teksin had been set into the cliff wall. The falling body of Zulekia hurtled down and struck a pair of the hooks. They pierced her thighs and torso and she hung there like meat in the butcher shop, her once lovely face dissolved in agony, a contorted screaming mask.

"It will be," said Honcho, "many minikronos before she dies. Would you have this happen, Blade?"

Blade wiped sweat from his face and stared at the creature. He was tense with rage and desperate, sick, with impotence. There was, at the moment, nothing he could do.

The picture faded away.

"That was only simlu," said Honcho. "Fore-simlu. An extrapolation of what will be, Blade, if you do not obey my orders. I have shown you. So it will be. I cannot, at the moment, force you to obey. The girl is my only weapon. Perhaps you do not care what happens to her and in that case I will have to find another way. Only you know that. But I must also know. What of it, Blade?"

Blade closed his eyes for a moment. He did not, actually, trust himself not to leap and grapple with the simlu. And make a fool of himself as he had before.

Sweat beaded his brow and formed saltily in the crevices of his body. He found himself praying to a Deity that was not Tharnian. To someone he had nearly forgotten. He prayed not for courage. He had that in plenty. He prayed for wisdom, patience, for cunning to match that of Honcho.

Blade looked at the neuter. He nodded. "It must not happen to Zulekia. What do you want me to do?"

Honcho told him. Told him briefly and faded away. Blade lay brooding and staring at the now empty chamber. Beside him Isma stirred and began to awaken. Presently she looked over at Blade and reached to stroke his bearded cheek.

"What is it, Lord? You look troubled."

"It is nothing," he told her. "I had a bad dream. Something you would not understand, since Tharnians do not dream."

She moved over to nuzzle and kiss him. "You are happy in Tharn, my Lord. With me?"

"I am happy," Blade said miserably.

Isma began to stroke her breasts, a habit she had preparatory to coi. She leaned to kiss Blade again. "I would have you, Lord, before we attend the feast later. Then we confer with old Sutha?"

For a moment she left off her warming-up exercises. "We confer and confer, Lord, and nothing happens. What do you and Sutha plan to do about the Pethcines?"

Blade rolled away from her and off the bed. At the moment the thought of coi revolted him. He stalked out of the room, taking the big sword with him.

Over his shoulder he said, "I go to see Sutha now. You are right. The Pethcine question must be settled at once. At once!"

But how? What? The dilemma lay within himself. Honcho was a monster. A cunning monster that struck directly at Blade's weakness, that had unerringly

found the flaw in Blade. Had somehow known it from the first. Blade was human, not just homid, and Honcho knew that. He should not have known it, but he did.

And yet, as Blade made his way through a maze of tunnels and corridors to the computer room, where he would meet Sutha, he told himself that the problem was easily enough resolved. All he had to do was forget Zulekia. What was the girl to him, after all? A few minutes of pleasure... What else?

All he had to do was leave her to the torture and he was again ahead of Honcho in the deadly game they played.

Could he?

Chapter 12

By the time Blade met Sutha in the computer area he had made his decision. His motives were complex, even murky, but he understood enough about himself to know what he must do. And to acknowledge that he was not doing it for the girl's sake alone. Just how to achieve his ends he did not yet know, except that it was going to require a combination of guile and guts and there would be no margin for error.

He met Sutha and they went into the Sacred of Sacreds where they could have privacy. Blade sat on the brink of the Pool and stared down at the casket far below the unruffled surface.

"You must abort the Power at once," he told Sutha. "Honcho is ready to invade Tharn. I want him to do so. Immediately. I will prepare everything."

The old neuter studied Blade for a moment. Sutha seemed preoccupied, full of his own thoughts.

He nodded. "Yes. I think the time has come. You have seen Honcho? He sent his simlu?"

"He did. He threatened me, showed me what will happen to Zulekia if I do not obey." Blade told Sutha what he had seen.

When he had finished Sutha said: "And you? You agreed to his plan?"

Blade made a ball of his mighty right fist and slammed it down on the teksin ledge. The structure quivered. "I did! I pretended to agree. I am to persuade you, as I am now doing, that the time has come to abort the Power and let Honcho in. Then, before we can return the Power and drop the magveils behind him and the Pethcines, trapping them, and send the Red Storms, I am to kill you, Sutha, and make Isma prisoner and turn the Power over to Honcho. He will then stand where you now stand, Sutha. He will be King of Neuters! It is a very good plan, from Honcho's viewpoint."

Sutha stroked his pointed chin and nodded. "It is. It is indeed. And Honcho promises that you will still rule as Mazda?"

"He does. I believe him in that. He will need a figurehead."

"Just so." The green eyes blinked. "You will be exactly that. A puppet. Honcho will rule Tharn, and Honcho alone."

"A disaster not to be thought of," growled Blade.

The old neuter smiled. He cast a glance at the great sword hanging at Blade's side. "I am glad to hear you say that, Blade. But let us suppose a bit, suppose that you did carry out Honcho's scheme. Who then would rule with you, or pretend to rule? You and Isma still? Or you and Zulekia? Is she the real temptation he offers, Blade?"

Blade scowled. The truth was that he did not know the truth. He slammed his fist on the ledge again. And again. "I cannot answer that. But this I know: Zulekia shall not die as Honcho plans! She shall not! I, Blade, say it I do not know if I love her—a thing you would not understand, Sutha—but I will not see her tortured and killed in such a fashion."

Sutha built a temple with his fingers, as was his way. He nodded. "All right, Blade. I see that you are not going to listen to reason about Zulekia. Perhaps it does not matter much now. Just see that Isma does not hear of it before you make a final choice. Isma knows as much about the manipulation of the Power as I do, though she leaves it mostly to me. Her hatred, and her jealousy, is a terrible thing, Blade. She would destroy all of Tharn to take her revenge."

"Leave Isma to me," Blade said curtly. "It is you who are the all important one, Sutha. You I must depend on. Listen carefully now."

"You will abort the Power as we have planned. Honcho and Org and the Pethcines will come into the trap. Again as planned. But I do not want the Power reactivated until I give the word! I alone! You will not understand, you will be puzzled, but you must wait, Sutha. Wait! I and I alone will decide when the Power is turned on again. You must promise me this."

"And if I do not promise?"

Blade's hand had been resting on the jeweled hilt of the Pethdne sword. He half-drew it from the scabbard. "Then I will kill you, Sutha. I will kill you now and take my chances. I swear it!"

Sutha did not show fear. He never did. Blade thought that his smile was a little sad.

"I promise this," said Sutha. "I think I see what you have in mind. But let me point out a few things. You are new here, Blade, and there is much you do not know."

"I know what I must do."

"Yet you must listen and be sure you understand. When the Power is aborted, completely aborted, everything in Tharn, and here in Urcit, comes to a halt. Everything, Blade! Without the Power Tharn is nothing. We are no better, much weaker in fact, than the Pethcines. They are only savages and barbarians, but without the Power we will be helpless before them."

Blade touched the sword. "Not quite helpless."

Sutha nodded. "I know. I said I understood. You want to fight the Pethcines, and Honcho, on their own terms?"

Blade grinned like a wolf. "Wrong. On my terms."

It was the kernel, the nut, of his planning. To hell with the Power, with magveils and simlu and teleportation and all the other Tharnian miracles. He, as mere man, was helpless against those things. And helpless against Honcho, how the knowledge rankled, as long as Honcho had those things at his command. But take them away...

Sutha was speaking again, in a low tone, as if to himself. "Take away the Power and Tharn comes to a halt. There will be no light. The weather will slip beyond our control. The mani will die in the fields. The baby plants will not function and the neuter embryos will die in their decanters. All food processing will halt. There will be no waste disposal, no spisccreens, no way to police the ceboids. There is always the possibility that, under such conditions, they will revolt."

"So be it," said Blade. He slammed the sword back into the scabbard with a clang. "So I wish it. In depriving Tharn, ourselves, of all these things we also deprive Honcho of them. That is my whole point, Sutha. Without the Power Honcho is nothing. I will kill him. I will kill Org and Totha also, if I must. I do not think the Pethcines will fight well without a leader."

Sutha appeared to give in, but only half convinced. "Just so you do not wait too long to give the word. I have told you my dream—to destroy the Pethcines forever, for all time, so they can never again threaten Tharn. I know that is impossible without the Power."

Blade had other thoughts, but he kept them to himself. He needed Sutha for his plan. Needed him badly. And he had no desire to harm the old neuter.

"I will not wait too long. I promise it. I will send a runner when the time is right. On the other hand you promise that all Power, all of it, will stay aborted until I ask for it?"

Sutha laid a scrawny hand over his left chest. "I promise it."

"Then do it now," commanded Blade. "I would see it done with my own eyes."

"Come, then."

Blade followed him past the sarophagus of Astar I. The naked mummy still wore its smile of faint mockery.

They went back through the computer area and beyond it to a tiny cubicle of a room. It contained nothing but walls filled with buttons and switches. Sutha reached for a master switch, hesitated, then without looking at Blade he tugged the switch down.

There was silence. A new, strange silence the like of which Blade had not heard since his arrival in Tharn. The computers had stopped.

Blade touched Sutha's arm. "I will speak with Isma. Tell her nothing of our plans if she asks. Say that I will not tell even you! That way she cannot hold you responsible. Goodbye, Sutha. I go now to make my preparations. What will you do?"

"I will remain here, in this place, until I hear from you. Do not be too long, Blade. In this microkrono Tharn has begun to die."

Blade touched the sword hilt. "Don't worry, Sutha. I—and this—will save Tharn. Perhaps a better Tharn than you know."

Blade climbed endless stairs to the very top of the Palace. Here, from a large terrace, was a broad view of the surrounding country. Some of the women were lounging about, naked, being given teksin oil treatments by Maiduke girls, and Blade cleared them out brusquely. For the time being this would be his Command Post.

He sent a neuter to summon Isma and watched in cold amusement as the creature stepped on the gravity drop and found it would not work.

"Use the stairs," Blade commanded brusquely. "You will be using them from now on. After you have found the High Priestess and delivered my message send the Second Neuter to me. At once!"

The neuter made a frightened slaveface and ran.

Blade sent for tables and chairs. There were no maps and he could not expect to find a pair of field glasses in Tharn. It did not really matter. He intended that Honcho and Org should come to him. Blade would choose the battle site and dictate the conditions. Only so did he stand a chance of winning. And win he must. There was no turning back now. Honcho and Org, Totha, the barbarian horde, would already be on the march. It would not take Honcho long to discover that the Power had been aborted and that he could advance through the magveils.

He went to the railing protecting the terrace and examined the sky. He thought he detected a tiny rift of blue, but could not be positive. It would take a little time. There was still the eternal twilight, the milky opaqueness. He sought for the scribble of blue again and found it. Wider now. Weather control was not functioning in Tharn.

Blade stared at the streamer of blue for a moment. He smiled and walked to a table where there was a pile of slates and a stylus. Still smiling he picked up a slate and wrote: Blade, days of...

A monstrous conceit. The Bladian calendar.

Isma arrived, magnificent in a flowing black robe and accompanied by the usual gaggle of Maiduke girls. Blade sent the girls away. Isma watched with a mingle of curiosity and resentment in her oval sloe eyes. She was as strikingly patrician, as breathtakingly lovely as ever. Her hair was piled high on her head and her skin was golden milk, her mouth a vivid slash of scarlet desire. When the Maidukes had gone she came close to Blade and kissed him and thrust her breasts against him. She pushed out her lips at him.

"I am angry with you, Lord. The way you left our bed so hurriedly. I was in the mood for coi."

Blade put his big hands on her shoulders and held her away from him. Surprise glinted in the dark eyes. Blade chuckled her beneath the chin and laughed. She was nothing but a beautiful pouting woman. The Power was gone and, somehow, so was the High Priestess. This lovely amoral murderous woman was just that, just another woman.

Isma stepped back from him, her puzzlement beginning to give way to anger. "You are acting very strangely, Lord. You forget that I am Isma! I do not tolerate arrogance."

Blade scowled at her. "I forget nothing, Isma. You see - I call you so. But as for me, from this moment you will call me Blade. Or Lord Blade, if it pleases you. One or the other. Nothing else. You will forget Mazda."

Her mouth was scornful. "Mazda never was. We know that."

He nodded. "Yes. And when the time is right all shall know it. But now we speak of more important things." He pointed to a chair. "Sit down, Isma, and listen!"

Isma obeyed docilely enough, surprise again replacing anger on her lovely face. Not in all the kronos of Tharn had anyone ever spoken to a High Priestess like this.

Blade spoke for a long time. Isma listened and understood, as he, had known she would. After Sutha she had the best conditioned brain in Tharn. That was the weakness, the blindness. A conditioned brain.

Nonetheless, when Blade had explained what he meant to do, Isma went directly to his weakness.

"I agree that the Pethcines must be lured into a trap," she said. "And to that the Power must be aborted. But why, once they are in the trap, do you want to wait? When we can drop the magveils behind them and send the Red Storms and the magrays, when we can destroy them utterly. Why wait?"

And destroy Zulekia with them! Blade was sure that Honcho would bring the girl along as hostage.

Isma watched him intently.

Blade, having his story ready, went glibly into it. "It has occurred to me," he explained, "that it is not a good idea to destroy the Pethcines completely. I..."

Isma interrupted, her face scornful and disbelieving. "Not destroy them? The Pethcines? They are nothing but brutes, savages—filthy barbarians. You have not only aborted our Power, Blade. You have aborted your brain!"

Ignoring the gibe, Blade said, "Hear me out, Isma. You will admit that the Lordsmen are poor things? Weaklings? That none could ever satisfy you?"

The dark eyes hardened. Her features stiffened into lines of hauteur. "The Lordsmen? What have they to do with me? They are poor things, I admit, but what have they to do with me?" The last words were a near scream and she started to rise from the chair.

Blade stepped quickly and pushed her into the chair again. He was a trifle rough and again Isma could not believe that she had been so treated. Yet she remained in the chair.

Blade, arms akimbo, towered over her. "Do not lie to me, Isma. I know that you have been with the Lordsmen. It means nothing to me. I do not care. My point is that we do not kill all the Pethcines! That we take as many prisoners as possible and use them to replace the Lordsmen. They are barbarians, yes, but they are strong and virile. I would select the best, Isma, and then mate them with the People. With the women. And each would bear her own child."

Isma leaped to her feet. "I will not listen to this blasphemy! And I shall give orders to destruct Sutha immediately. Only he could have told you this."

From the corner of his eye Blade saw that the Second Neuter had arrived and was lingering in the background, along with a Lieutenant and a squad of ceboid soldiers. Even the beasts were staring in amazement.

It was the moment of truth for Blade. Now or never. He needed Isma, for as High Priestess she could still exact absolute obedience, for a time, even without the Power.

He looked steadily at Isma. Their eyes met in combat and neither looked away. Blade said, very softly: "You can destruct Sutha. Yes. You can always get another neuter. But how about me, Isma? Can you get another Blade? Have I not pleased you as never before? Do I not rule with you? Do I not value Tharn, and yearn to protect it, as much as you do? Would I do anything that is not for the ultimate good of Tharn? Ask yourself all those questions, Isma, and then see if you can still quarrel with me."

Her stare was dark and unblinking. It gave nothing away, yet Blade knew she was thinking of the Pethcine men, of barbarian virility and novelty. He knew his Isma. He kept a careful eye on the squad of ceboids. They were armed only with teksin swords and he could kill them easily, but he did not want to do that. He needed, must have, unity in Urcit. Else he was already defeated.

Isma looked away. She went back to the chair and sat down again. Blade kept his face impassive and restrained a sigh of relief. It had been a narrow thing, but he had brought it off. At least for the time being. Zulekia's name had not been mentioned.

"I will listen," said Isma haughtily. "Explain exactly what it is that you intend to do, Lord Blade."

Blade flicked a finger at the Second Neuter, who came forward. Then he took Isma's arm and led her to the railing of the terrace. Overhead more blue was showing now as the curdled melancholy twilight gave way to a solitary shaft of crimson silver. Blade took a deep breath. The air was different. There was a sun in Tharn!

The neuter was staring fearfully at the changing sky. It looked at Isma, then at Blade, and said: "I have never seen this before. Not in all my kronos."

"Get used to it," said Blade.

He pointed to the flat, only slightly undulating land that lay in the direction of North Provo. Here, on the outskirts of Urcit, was a maze of ceboid hovels. Hundreds of them.

"We will level those shacks," said Blade, "and make barricades of them. Honcho and Org will come in from this direction, I am sure. Urcit has no walls and so it does not matter where they attack. They will take the most direct route into the city. You, Second Neuter, will give orders at once for those hovels to be torn down and made into a long barricade. We will mass our main force behind it." He looked at Isma "Your women were warriors once, I understand. They must be again. You will see to it, Isma, that they are all mustered out immediately. Fully armed."

Blade pointed. "Assembly point will be there, in the Square of the Great Phallus. You will do this now, Isma."

Her smile was faint, and lacking the mockery he had expected. She seemed perfectly serious. "Yes, Lord Blade. But how shall I summon them? There is no power."

Blade laughed and pointed down to his sandaled feet. "There is power. Foot power. Have the Third Neuter form a group of runners. You will have to set up a message center in liaison with my command post here. I make you Commander of the People, Isma. Of all the homid women. You are second only to me, and will obey only my orders. That is understood?"

Her dark eyes narrowed at him, but she said only: "That is understood, Lord Blade. I go to obey." The obedience was only in the words, not in her tone or her look.

Blade turned to the Second Neuter. "Sutha, your King, has bidden that you obey me absolutely. He, Sutha, will not be in this battle. He has a special and very difficult task and must do it alone. So you are in command of all neuters...under me, of course. You understand this?"

The Second Neuter was of middle kronos. He wore a chain of small teksin diamonds over his tunic. He made a slight slaveface and said, "Yes, Lord Blade. What do you require of me?"

"It is simple enough. I require a roster of all your neuters, of all ranks and grades. You will form them into an army. They are going to have to fight."

"Fight, Lord Blade?" The Second Neuter looked startled. "Neuters cannot fight! We, none of us, have ever been trained for fighting. I am afraid that we will be of no use to you, my Lord Blade."

Blade stared at the neuter grimly. "Then I will use you for cannon fodder. If you cannot fight at least you will make good targets for Pethcine arrows."

"Cannon fodder, my Lord Blade? I do not understand the term."

"You will," said Blade. "You will. Go and gather all neuters together. Assemble them in the square before the neuter dormitories."

The Second Neuter was leaving as Blade called him back. "One moment. Who commands the ceboids?" He gestured to where the squad of ceboid soldiers waited near the stairs.

"We command them, my Lord Blade. The neuters. The lowest order of neuters, of course. I have never had anything to do with the ceboids myself, naturally."

Blade pointed to a chair. "Sit, Second Neuter." The neuter obeyed. Blade stoked his beard.

"You say neuters cannot fight. What of the ceboids—will they fight?"

"They will obey, Lord Blade. That is the only function of a ceboid, to obey."

Blade remembered something Sutha had told him. "Yet I have heard that there is always danger of revolt among them. Is this true?"

The smooth impassive face of the Second Neuter twitched. The long green eyes narrowed. "That is only the opinion of an old..." The words ceased abruptly. The neuter made slaveface. "I am sorry, Lord Blade. It is not my place..."

Blade held up a hand. "Enough. I am not interested in your opinion of Sutha. Just answer my questions." He sighed inwardly. He had enough trouble without a power struggle among the neuters.

The Second Neuter thought a moment, then said: "The ceboids will fight. As well as their intelligence permits, and if they are whipped enough. That is the secret with ceboids, my Lord, whipping. And a public execution every now and then. It is all they understand."

Blade studied the creatures waiting near the stair. These were soldier-ceboids and they all had tails. Their origin still baffled Blade. He watched now as they chattered among themselves in their coarse, guttural language. Every now and then one of the long dog-baboon heads swiveled in his direction. Blade knew they were watching and listening. How much did they understand?

Blade knew that the Second Neuter, no matter his level of conditioning, was a fool. It could not be helped. He must use the neuter as best he could, depend on him as far as he dared.

"Who actually oversees the ceboids?"

"The ceboid-masters, Lord Blade. Neuters of the lowest level. They live among the ceboids and speak their language. This is necessary because the beasts cannot learn Tharnian, therefore the ceboid-masters must speak their language. It has always been thus, for all the kronos on record."

Blade regarded him grimly. "I see. Well, a great many things are going to be changed in Tharn. That is all for now, Second Neuter. Go and start organizing your neuters as I bade you. And find Xeno, he is my servant, and send him to me. At once."

"At once, Lord Blade." The Second Neuter made slaveface and glided away. Blade watched him disappear down the stairs followed by the ceboid squad.

Blade strode back to the railing once more. There was a great blue patch directly overhead now, widening as he watched it, and toward the northern horizon, from whence Honcho and Org and the Pethcines would come, there was a scatter of small clouds like sheep in a pen. As Blade watched the clouds a single lance of sunlight struck through from somewhere and gilded them, transforming each separate cloudlet into a golden fleece. Blade tugged at his beard and smiled, a slow smile. In his other life he had never believed in omens. Now he was not so sure.

Xeno arrived breathless and fearful. He had in fact been off attending to some business of his own, neuter business, and neglecting his duties. He did not know what to expect. Perhaps he would even be destructed, and he of only 16 kronos! He made deep and humble slaveface, his slitted eyes on the great sword at Blade's side.

"You sent for me, Lord Blade?" He was still breathless from running. And very nervous and upset. Nothing worked in Tharn any more. There were horrible rumors that the Power was gone forever.

Blade was stern. "I did. Sit down."

"Sit down, my Lord?" It was unthinkable. Sit down! In the Lord Blade's presence!

Blade roared suddenly. "I said to sit down, Xeno. That is a command!"

Xeno sat. Blade regarded him. He needed an aide, an ADC, that was intelligent and trustworthy. Intuition told him that Xeno was his man or, rather, his neuter.

"You have 16 kronos?"

"Yes, my Lord."

Blade nodded in satisfaction. Still a very young neuter.

"What is your level, Xeno?"

"Of the 12th level, my Lord. I was apprenticed as a Maiduke monitor until Sutha appointed me to serve you."

Blade could have wished the level higher, but it would have to do. He remembered that Moyna, the first neuter he had ever seen, had only been 4th level and Moyna managed pretty well until Honcho had destructed him.

"I would have you serve me," said Blade.

Xeno made another slaveface. He was puzzled. "But of course, my Lord Blade. What else am I for?"

Blade started to scowl, then his white teeth glinted through the black beard. Of course Xeno did not understand. It would have to be explained.

Blade was wearing an authority chain. It was of golden tinted teksin with a small pendant phallus. He took it from his own person and placed it around Xeno's neck. The young neuter stared down at it in fascinated puzzlement. What did it mean? Everything in Tharn was changing so fast!

Blade pointed a big finger at the neuter. "I did not mean exactly that. Listen well. When I have finished you will tell me what you understand and what you do not." Blade half smiled. "If you do not understand enough I will take the chain back and send you to live with the ceboids. Now.

"I have appointed you my ADC. Adjutant. Lieutenant. Translate it into Tharnian as you wish. You will remain with me constantly, unless I send you on a task. You will take orders from me alone. Only me! That is most important, and that includes the High Priestess Isma and King Sutha of the neuters. Remember that—only I give you orders!

"I place you in command of all the ceboid-masters. And the ceboids, of course. About them I will give you more specific orders later.

"You will collect all the food in Urcit, and all the water, and you will have them stored where I tell you. You will do the same with all the unprocessed mani. You will also gather, in a place I will designate, all the stocks of raw teksin. That is important. I will need every bit of it. As soon as you leave me you will begin to do these things. But this is only the beginning, Xeno. We are going to have to work hard. And then fight hard. Now, is there anything you do not understand?"

Xeno was regarding Blade with eyes that reflected mingled perplexity and adulation. He fingered the chain Blade had bestowed on him.

Before the neuter could answer Blade added what he hoped would be the clincher. "Serve me well, Xeno, well and faithfully, and intelligently, and when Sutha is finished I shall see that you have his place. Now I ask again—what do you not understand? Do not be afraid to ask. It is important that everything be perfectly clear to you."

"I understand all that you have said, Lord Blade. But there is something..."

"What is it?"

"That." Xeno pointed to the sky. "It makes me afraid, Lord. What is happening?"

The curdled skim of Tharnian sky had cleared in the west. A single star glinted silver, pinned on a background of rose-blue. The sun was going down.

Blade smiled at Xeno. "Do not be afraid." he told the neuter. "The sky is not falling down."

Chapter 13

Blade had calculated, by converting Tharnian kronos into hours, the time it would take Honcho and Org about four days to bring the Pethcine host to Urcit. Blade did not sleep in those four days.

He managed to check incipient chaos before it could set in, but for a time events were in precarious balance. For the first time in millions of kronos Urcit, and all Tharn, was without the Power. Blade, almost literally, had a mob of bewildered children on his hands. For one thing he was grateful—they were not frightened. There was no panic. Tharn, Urcit especially, had lived so long in indolence and luxury, had been so long guarded by the magveils and other technical marvels, that they had forgotten the meaning of fear. They had also forgotten how to fight. There was a dim folk memory, among the People and the older neuters, of a long

ago Pethcinian invasion; there was memory also of a revolt or two by the ceboids, but these had been quickly suppressed and memory scabbed over, and for a great many kronos now none of the People had actually witnessed murder and rapine. Ceremonial killing did not count, nor did the rare executions of ceboids. The latter had, in any case, been kept down to a minimum by order of Sutha.

The upshot of it all was that while Blade did not have an army—it was more of a semi-disciplined mob—he did have a corps eager to fight, if only someone would show them how. Many of the People had been bored without knowing it, and the emergency was an outlet. It did not take much, Blade noted, to arouse blood lust among a group of beautiful woman who, by law, were permitted everything but sex. Coi.

Isma surprised and pleased him by the manner in which she took over the command of the 927. At the first assembly in the Square of the Phallus, Isma appeared in a complete suit of golden-teksin armor. She carried sword and spear, a shield barely larger than the one Blade had used at the Sacer of the Pethcines, and a helmet with a magnificent panache of feathered jewels. She was impressive, and Blade was especially impressed when he found that she could use the sword.

Isma's manner toward Blade was now cool and remote, and he knew that there would be a later reckoning. He did not concern himself with it and, after telling Isma what she must do, he stood aside as much as possible. And approved of the manner in which she appointed her officers and began to put the women through drills that were arduous enough.

Blade was curt, as stern as he had to be, and he did not have to repeat many orders. Discipline was no problem among the ceboids and the neuters, and not much of a problem with the Bearer Maidens and the Maidukes. They had all been educated and conditioned to obey. It was only from the People that he expected trouble. When the trouble did come he was thankful, and pleasantly surprised, that it was minor and that Isma handled it with alacrity and firmness.

One of the women had missed muster several times. At last she was found concealed in the Lordsmen's Cage, reeling with soka, and intent on working her way through the entire roster of the young Lordsmen in a sort of communal coi.

Isma did not ask Blade for advice. She had the erring woman dragged to the square, where she personally cut off the blonde head and showed it to the remaining 926. The women all seemed to get the message. The head was impaled on one of the many phalli gracing the square, where they could all see it as they drilled.

There were nights now in Tharn, with a moon and stars, but Blade hardly knew the difference. He kept driving. He was everywhere, inspecting and suggesting changes and snapping out orders. He ran Xeno nearly to death. Now and then Blade would receive a slate from Sutha, or send one, but there was not really much to say. Sutha remained at his post in the Power Cubicle, awaiting the word to restore the Power to Tharn, and only Blade knew that the word was never going to come.

At the end of three days and nights Blade knew that he had wrought a miracle. Whether it would bear up under duress was another matter.

On the northern side of the city the ceboid hovels had been torn down and made into barricades. Blade, personally supervising this, had built his crude forts as

near a long teksin plant as possible, thus providing some protection for his rear. On the roof of the teksin plant he mounted the dozen catapults he had been able to make. These were manned by the Bearer Maidens, even those who were in advanced stages of insemination, under the command of a neuter chosen by Xeno. The catapults hurled great jagged chunks of teksin, flaming oil of teksin in bags, and two of the machines could fire a dozen long arrows at a time.

Blade, with a cunning eye, had chosen the one spot where the ground sloped sharply away to the north. A natural glacis. Into this he set long stakes of teksin, sharpened and barbed. Between the stakes he spun a web of very fine filaments of teksin, invisible until the sun caught them. He also bastioned the forts as best he could, and left adequate sally ports. He had one intent, one clear battle plan, and inherent in it was a large element of chance, of gamble.

He intended to bleed the Pethcines to death. He meant to goad and tempt them into a frontal attack. He was sure of Org. Org was a barbarian and knew only one way to fight. Direct attack. Totha might be more intelligent, but Org would be running this battle. Blade was counting on that because, while he did not see how Honcho could know much about actual fighting, he was still a most intelligent neuter. Honcho would see the trap and guess at Blade's strategy. Let him. So long as he could not override Org. King Org was going to come roaring against the forts in a frenzy of blood lust.

Blade was prepared to offer Org a number of tempting targets. His scouts had not yet returned, they were on foot and Blade greatly damned the technical prowess that had long ago deprived Tharn of horseflesh, the wheel, and even metal. But for his great sword there was no trace of metal in Urcit. It did not appease him that teksin was superior to metal in many ways, and had a million uses, that it was flammable and malleable and under certain conditions could even be eaten. Blade would gladly have settled for the crude iron weapons of the Pethcines if he could also have had horses. He had sent a score of scouting parties out soon after the Power had died, and not one had returned.

But he had targets and he planned to be generous with them. Even in the absence of reports he did not reckon that the Pethcines would have much in the way of transport. They would have just so many arrows and spears. He planned to mulct the enemy of these weapons as soon as possible.

To that end, when on the third day he moved his forces into position, he stationed a heavy contingent of ceboids on either flank. This, he thought, would offer some slight protection to his flanks, and might draw some of Org's men off in diversionary attacks. Blade did not trust the ceboids to stand without neuters to whip them forward, and so he placed a line of ceboid-masters just behind the ceboids.

Behind the masters, the neuters, he then placed a line of specially selected ceboid officers, the more intelligent beasts, with orders to kill any neuter that ran. Blade had in person watched this order being translated to the ceboids, and he saw with what puzzlement and joy, it was received. The moist animal eyes examined Blade with awe and fear, but there could be no doubt of their obedience. Blade expected to lose them, all of them, but they would draw a lot of fire and it would take a lot of arrows and spears to kill them all. And they might even kill a few Pethcines.

Blade also planned to sacrifice the Lordsmen. Every one of them big enough to carry a sword into battle. They would be no great loss. He made them a Guard of Honor to Isma and placed them under her command. And his—when the time came.

The Second Neuter, in fact all the neuters of high rank, he kept around him as staff. They were not good for anything else, and they did exercise an awesome authority over the minor neuters and the ceboids. More than that—they were a nucleus. Blade was thinking far ahead.

On the fourth day, still without sleep, Blade constantly inspected his line of forts while keeping an anxious eye on the northern horizon. The twilight sky had all sloughed away now and the new Tharnian sun was mild, the visibility clear for miles, and still nothing moved out on the flat plain. And still no scouts returned.

Blade had instructed Isma in the techniques of the square and the phalanx. He had stationed the women, the 926 now, in his center. Everything, in the last analysis, depended on them. Everything. When the time came, when he had bled the Pethcines as much as possible, he meant to lead the women straight through the opposing center in a frontal attack of his own. Straight to the standards of Org and Totha. At the same time the ceboids would attack on the flanks.

He watched the tall beauties practice the intricacies of the square and the phalanx with mingled emotions. They were willing and anxious, these prima donnas, now full of song and bloodthirst, but they were still bacchantes and voluptuaries, still coi-hungry women to whom coi was forbidden. It might, Blade thought grimly, make them better killers.

The women shouted and sang as they drilled. Each had a Maiduke girl in attendance, as an arms bearer. On one of the flanks Blade was keeping a small contingent of the Maidukes in reserve. They were equipped with the antique air guns, of the type that Moyna had first shown him; he had been able to find about fifty of them. His troops were fighting with arfactis, obsolete weapons, because it was all he had.

Blade checked on the last-minute emplacement of bales of raw mani, they would absorb a lot of arrows and lances, and then returned to the Palace command post. He was weary to the bone, and for the moment his mood was dour. If he failed, and Tharn fell, it would be irony spelt large - a civilization that had advanced too far, too fast. Too much trust placed in advanced techniques. Old virtues forgotten before new ones were acquired. In his other life he had known a truism: the barbarians always won!

The terrace atop the Palace was now a busy place, aswarm with neuters and ceboids scurrying about on various errands. Blade settled himself at a large table and studied the slates on which he had sketched his battle plan. He could see no way to improve it. Let it stand. He did not expect the battle to go exactly to plan, they never did, but he had done all he could and he must, above all, retain a certain degree of flexibility.

Xeno came running up to the desk. "A scout has returned, Lord."

Blade forced his eyes open. He had been nearly asleep over the slates. "Fetch him, then. Quickly."

The returned scout was a neuter of the seventh level. He was disheveled and haggard and there was blood on the shoulder of his tunic. He made slaveface.

Blade scowled impatiently. "Get on with it. What have you found out there?"

"Many Pethcines, my Lord Blade. They approach from the north. They will be here before the morning."

Blade studied him. "How many Pethcines?"

"I did not see them all, Lord, but I saw many. I and my ceboids were driven off before I could see more."

"How did your ceboids fight?"

The wounded neuter shrugged. "Some fought, Lord. Some ran. We all ran when the Pethcines attacked us in the wheeled platforms. They have great knives on the wheels, my Lord, and nothing can stand against them."

Blade pulled at his beard. "Wheeled platforms?" He motioned to Xeno. "Speak with him in low neuter, just what does he mean?"

Xeno spoke rapidly to the scout in a patois that neuters used among themselves. Xeno turned to Blade.

"I think I understand him, Lord. Many kronos ago, in the old times, Tharnians used these platforms. And wheels as well. They are drawn by two horses, which we also once had in Tharn, and they have swords on the wheels." Xeno made a face. "A childish weapon, my Lord Blade. Fit only for barbarians."

Battle chariots. He had not counted on that! Blade scowled at Xeno. "Childish, eh? You will change your mind before this is over."

But he was not particularly worried about the chariots. He knew of a tactic that could handle them, if the women were up to it. But if Org and Honcho had chariots and horses, they were bound to have adequate transport as well. Supplies in plenty. That was bad. Urcit could not, was in no position, to withstand a siege. It had to be decided quickly.

It only confirmed what Blade already knew. Honcho had been preparing for this day a long time. Long before Blade had come to Tharn. Honcho had told him as much. It had been a slow and laborious process, the transferring of so many men, and so much material, from the depths of the Gorge to the plains of Tharn.

Blade questioned the neuter for an hour, then sent him away to be attended to. He was one of the lucky ones. There were no medical facilities and Blade did not intend to be burdened with wounded. He had already designated mercy squads to cut the throats of the badly wounded, regardless of rank.

When the scout had been taken away Xeno said, "The news is bad, my Lord?"

Blade shook his head. "No. Nor good. I will sleep now, Xeno. Wake me if I am needed. In the morning we fight."

He stretched out on two tables pushed together, covered himself with a robe, and was asleep in seconds.

Xeno stood guard over him. At times the young neuter would finger the necklace Blade had given him, then smile at his sleeping Lord. Toward dawn he saw Isma and the Second Neuter come to the top of the stairs and halt, whispering and looking in the direction of the sleeping man. Xeno who had been sitting, stood up.

Isma and the Second Neuter started toward him. Xeno drew his short sword. It was greatly daring of him, and he knew he was as good as dead, but he drew the sword anyway.

Isma stopped, tie Second Neuter also. Nothing was said. The Second Neuter trembled behind the High Priestess. Xeno was silent, holding the sword ready, trying not to let the terror overcome him.

Isma gave him a long look from her dark eyes, then turned away. She and the Second Neuter vanished down the stairs.

The cloak had fallen away from the sleeping Blade. Xeno replaced it and made slaveface. Something had stirred in him for a moment, had nearly come through. He wondered what it was like to be a man. A God?

Chapter 14

Xeno, obeying his instructions, awakened Blade with the first gray chill of dawn. He told the big man of Isma's visit. Blade nodded curtly and strode to the terrace railing, fastening his cloak around his shoulders against a rising wind. Tharn's new weather seemed to be turning bad. As he reached the rail a spatter of cold rain slashed the open terrace.

The campfires of the Pethcines made a great crescent on the plain before Urcit, a concave shimmer of yellow and ruby light extending on both flanks of Blade's forts. He counted upward of a hundred fires and wondered if they actually represented Pethcinian troops or if Org, at Honcho's prodding, was trying to fake it. Org would not think of such a device himself. Blade shrugged his massive shoulders. What matter? Today would tell the story. The die was cast and all his fortunes were at stake.

Xeno set about awakening and organizing staff neuters. Blade ate and had a great draught of warm soka. Then he gave concise orders and he and Xeno left the Palace for the lines. It was growing lighter by the moment, a bleak dank morning with an increasing wind and cold drizzle and no hint of sun. The wind, Blade thought, might help him. Otherwise he did not care about the weather.

Squarely in the midst of the main fort, a little behind the spot where the women would form ranks, Blade had ordered the erection of a high platform of mani bales. This was built in the shape of a pyramid and crowned by a single large bale. There was room enough for Blade alone. Xeno and his lesser aides were clustered on the next level down.

When it was light enough Blade ascended the pyramid and stood peering over at the Pethcine camp. The campfires were dying now, some of them smoking badly, and the easterly wind was blowing a gray film of smoke across the dark lines of Pethcine warriors already assembled. Blade counted files, rapidly multiplied, and whistled softly under his breath. He kept his face impassive. They were all watching him. But eight thousand! Not counting the charioteers that were drawn up far to the rear of Org's first rank.

Blade loosened the huge sword in the scabbard. It was going to be a bloody day.

Behind the center of Org's line, not too far back, were the skin tents of Org and his ranking officers. Totha's tent, perhaps. And certainly Honcho's. And in Honcho's tent, Blade was sure, would be Zulekia. The neuter had certainly brought the Maiduke girl, to increase the pressure on Blade and make sure that

he lived up to his bargain. Blade's little smile was grim. He was counting on Zulekia being there. And he had no intention of living up to his bargain.

He could make out King Org's tent now. It stood a little apart from the others and before it a standard fluttered and snapped in the wind. It was a spear jabbed deep into the earth and from the butt was hung a shield and three horse tails.

Org, Honcho, and Totha came out of the tent as Blade watched. They were all in armor. Totha, wearing breastplates and a short leathern girdle, carried a helmet under one arm. She stopped and stared, looking straight at Blade. He raised a hand. Totha stared for a moment longer, then turned to where Honcho and Org were talking animatedly. Blade grinned. He wondered just how Honcho had managed it, how the neuter had gotten around Totha. Blade had left her primed to kill the neuter, had been more than half convinced the ploy would work. But no. Why? Not that it mattered now.

From the Pethcine lines came a harsh bray of trumpets. Blade smiled again. This was the beginning of the trickery, as Honcho had planned it. There was to be a parley and he, Blade, was to surrender after only a token resistance. The terms would be very generous. Blade and Isma would continue to share the throne of Tharn. Sutha had to go, and Honcho would allow a merciful destruct. Honcho then to be appointed King of Neuters. The Pethcines to be allowed emigration from the Gorge, to settle the plains of Tharn, and be accorded status equal to the People.

Later, as Honcho planned it, the Pethcines would be divided and destroyed in their turn, bit by bit. And, as Blade now extrapolated it, soon it would be Isma's turn. And his own. Then Honcho would rule Tharn alone. And his surgeon would make a man of him. Victory. Heart's desire. Total achievement of aims.

Blade's smile was as cold as the rain. Dream on, Honcho!

The Pethcine trumpets blared again. Org, with Totha and Honcho on either side of him, left his lines and walked toward the main fort. He had no bodyguard. Such was the plan. They would come halfway and wait for Blade.

Blade leaped nimbly down the pyramid of bales. He gave an order to Xeno, who went running off toward the teksin factory behind them. Blade adjusted his helmet at an angle, the black plume brave in the wind, and went out through the sally port to meet the enemy.

He passed Isma and her women, drawn up in a great square, and raised his sword in salute.

The women thrust their swords high in answer. They roared: "Blade! Blade!"

Blade smiled at them. Isma, in the center of the square, flanked about by her Lordsmen, raised her sword but she did not shout nor smile. Her dark eyes followed Blade as he left the fort.

He went alone to meet the three of them. When he was within six paces he halted and saluted with the Pethcine sword. King Org, his greasy ringlets crammed beneath a helmet of metal and leather, glared at the sword and then at Blade. His piggy eyes, ever bloodshot, glared above his curling beard. His voice was thick and cruel, rasping.

"Well, Blade? Do you betray us again? Or do you keep the terms you made with Honcho?" His warrior's eyes roved over the forts and the ceboid troops drawn up on the flanks. "This does not look like surrender to me!"

Blade's smile was glacial. "I agree, Org. It does not."

Org's hand went to his sword. Honcho, with a long-toothed smile, put a hand out to stay it. His green eyes glinted at Blade.

"Surely you will not be fool enough to betray us a second time, Blade. I have shown you what will happen. She is with us, you know. In Org's tent."

Blade stared at him. "I had guessed that. And I do not betray you, Honcho. I never meant to keep any bargain with you, as I am sure you knew. Nor will I betray Urcit, or myself. If you want Urcit, and Tharn, and me—you must take us."

He was conscious of Totha's eyes on him. She was standing easy, relaxed, but her deep brown eyes never left him. Fires burnt in those eyes that sent a chill down Blade's spine. Her mouth was as scarlet, her teeth as white, as they had been in the Gorge when she had done things to his body, and had demanded so much of him. That body, even in armor, was nubile and lithe and the dusky ivory skin as sensuous as ever.

Totha spoke now, for the first time. "You also betray me, Blade! You have made a lie of everything between us."

Blade glanced from Totha to Honcho. "I could name a promise that you have not kept, Totha." He might yet sow a little dissension.

Honcho laughed. "To kill me, Blade? I had not thought you such a fool. Certainly Totha is not, I had no difficulty in pointing out to her where her best interests lay."

Totha spat at the ground. "You desire a Maiduke above me, Blade. That girl Zulekia. Honcho told me of this and at first I did not believe him. Then I spoke to the girl herself and I found that it was true: she wants you, Blade! And for that you are both going to die horribly."

Honcho made an impatient gesture. "Enough of this! But she speaks truth, Blade. Think. If you do not surrender as planned we will attack and defeat you. The girl will die first, with you watching. Both of you will take a long time to die, Blade. If you surrender now things will be as I have promised. I swear it."

Totha spat again. She glared at Honcho. "You will not save the girl! That I vow. Blade's life, perhaps, but not the girl."

Blade grinned at Honcho. "You see. You make promises you cannot keep." He was stalling now, talking to gain time until it was a little lighter and the wind stronger. By now Xeno would have transmitted his orders to the catapult troops on the roof of the teksin plant.

Honcho's green eyes were narrowed on Blade and they were full of speculation. As Blade intended. Honcho was wondering about the Power! Why, with the Pethcines safely in the trap, had the Power not been invoked? Where were the Red Storms and the magveils and the magrays? And where was Honcho's Power? Blade gave him a mocking grin. Honcho did well to wonder. And the advantage was to Blade. He knew what he was going to do. Honcho did not.

Org's sword rasped from the scabbard. He waved it at Blade. His little eyes were glittering with fury. "Fight me, Blade! Fight me now. To the death. We will decide this in single combat."

Blade's sword was swift in reply. "Gladly, Org. Gladly!" It was more than he had expected.

Both Honcho and Totha leaped at Org, catching at his sword arm and forcing it down. Honcho pleaded. Totha cursed and derided.

"Fool!" she blazed at her father. "Old fat fool! That is what he wants. You will be killed and our people will not fight. Fool! Fat stupid fool! Put your sword away and listen to me before you ruin everything."

Blade saw his chance fading. He sheathed his sword and nodded to Org. "Later, Org. Later. Come for me whenever you are ready."

He turned his back on them and strode toward the fort. Once he glanced back. Totha and Honcho were arguing fiercely with Org and half-dragging him back to the Pethcine lines.

Now it would begin.

Blade went straight to the pyramid of bales. He mounted it and made a signal to Xeno. Xeno made a signal in turn. The catapults atop the teksin plant went into action. They began to hurl fire arrows at the Pethcine tents.

Swooooooooosss-swooooooooosss-swooooooooosss... swooooooooosss...

They had followed orders. The arrows, tipped with blazing teksin oil, arched in a high parabola over the forts, firing to windward so the tents on Org's left wing would catch first. The east wind would do the rest.

The first salvo fell short. Blade signaled and the catapults were clogged back for more elevation. Blade could hear the Bearer Maidens singing and shouting at their work. He shook his head and smiled. This whole damned affair was only a festival to them.

The second salvo of fire arrows fell squarely amidst the rude skin tents. Each arrow, as it struck, spread blazing teksin oil. Tents began to go up in flame and roiling black smoke, each one a separate furnace. Blade did not expect too much from the tactic but it would spread a little chaos, plant a little fear, and divert some of Org's troops to saving their baggage.

He kept his eyes glued on Org's tent. And then he saw her. Zulekia. She was naked to the waist, her glorious hair glinting like the tent fires, her lovely face as impassive as ever as two warriors dragged her from the tent. She was wearing only a loincloth of some animal skin.

Totha walked up and struck her in the face. She took the blow proudly and it seemed to Blade that she looked in his direction. Then drifting smoke obscured the scene for a moment. When he looked again Zulekia had been flung to the ground and spreadeagled. The warriors were holding her down. Honcho was giving commands. Four of the chariot horses were being driven up.

From the corner of his eye Blade saw Isma leaping up the pyramid toward him. He steeled himself.

At first Isma did not speak. She stood beside him as they watched Zulekia being bound to the four horses. Each wrist, each ankle, attached to harness by a long rope of twisted leather. Honcho was careful in his directions. A Pethcine warrior stood by each horse, ready for the command. Blade did not think it would come immediately. Honcho was gambling, even as he himself was gambling. Zulekia was the neuter's only ace in the hole. He would not kill her yet. If things went badly Honcho was going to need the Maiduke girl to bargain with. So Blade thought. So he hoped Honcho was thinking. Yet he felt a moment of despair. The horses must have been Totha's idea. That one was a devil in female form.

Isma breathed hard beside him. The female odor of her, mixed with sweat beneath the body armor, was pungent. She said: "Who is the Maiduke, Blade?"

He shrugged and did not look at her. "I think Zulekia is her name. All I know is what Sutha has told me. She was sent to Honcho to be punished for karno, and Sutha used her as a spy. Honcho must have found her out and now he is going to punish her. Perhaps he thinks it will frighten us, seeing her torn apart by the horses."

"Then why doesn't he do it," said Isma. "What is he waiting for?" There was an odd, choked timbre to her voice and Blade looked at her. She was staring through the smoke at Zulekia and the horses, her dark eyes alight with expectation and her red mouth open. As he watched a dribble of saliva ran from the corner of her mouth. Blade turned away.

Isma said: "Why don't they tear her apart?"

"Honcho has his reasons," said Blade. "Get back to your women, Isma. The attack will come any moment now. And be sure you obey my orders exactly as they are sent to you!"

Isma licked her lips with her tongue. She looked at him sulkily. "Yes, Lord Blade! But I do not understand any of this—why do we not retreat into Urcit and simply destroy the Pethcines with the Power? I cannot understand why you wait."

Blade scowled. "I do not explain my orders. Even to you. Go, Isma, and do as you are told."

She scowled back and she muttered, but she went. He watched her rejoin her women and the spindling, scrawny array of Lordsmen. Blade chuckled without glee. Now he was going to have to watch his back. And he must trust Sutha. There was no help for that.

Most of the tents had been burnt out by now. The Pethcines were ignoring them. They were forming into a long double line of skin clad warriors with pointed hats and each carrying a shield and sword and a long spear. Squads of bowmen were deploying in front of the line, on either flank. Trumpets called and echoed and there was much frenzied running to and fro. Blade nodded in satisfaction. It looked like a frontal attack.

He searched anxiously for the chariots and saw them forming up far to the rear, in leisurely fashion. For the moment Org was keeping them in reserve and Blade breathed a bit easier. He knew that his ceboid flanks could not stand up to a chariot charge.

The catapults had stopped shooting fire arrows now. Blade gave another signal, relayed by the vigilant Xeno, and the sound of the catapults changed to a deeper note as they hurled huge jagged blocks of teksin into the enemy ranks.

Whunaaaaggg... whunaaaagggg... whunagggggggg...

One of the teksin missiles struck, bounced and skipped through a file of Pethcines, leaving behind a dozen shredded hunks of flesh. Screams of anger and pain and terror burst from the Pethcine ranks, but they were filled in at once. Org was striding up and down before his men, waving his sword and haranguing them. A teksin ball struck within a foot of him and he did not appear to notice. Blade nodded reluctantly. Org was a barbarian, a savage, but he was a brave one.

The rain had let up. The wind had stiffened and was whipping the Pethcines' banners straight out from their poles. A final trumpet rasped and then, as if both

armies had taken a last deep breath, there was a tiny island of silence among the tumult.

Blade unsheathed the sword. High on the pyramid of bales, above them all, he brandished the sword at the Pethcine lines. His deep baritone roared above the wind.

"Here is your sword, Pethcines. Come and take it!"

Chapter 15

Org made a cunning feint with his frontal attack. The Pethcines, their battle cries swelling into a sullen roar, charged forward fifty paces and then halted. They turned and ran back. Blade's catapults, depressed now, poured a hail of battle arrows and bags of teksin shrapnel into the area just vacated. Blade cursed. Wasted ammunition, and it was short. He shouted to the bowmen to hold their fire. He wanted the Pethcines to waste their arrows, not his own.

Org now sent his, or Honcho's, ceboids in a double flanking attack. Blade recognized the maneuver. Org was willing to sacrifice ceboids just as Blade was.

Blade sent half the Lordsmen to back up the ceboid officers who in turn were backing the whipping neuters. He saw Isma protesting the order, but the Lordsmen formed, wheeled and marched off. Blade was grim.

The ceboid skirmish was short and fierce. Honcho's beasts came on with animal grunts and howls, waving their swords. Blade held the fire of the catapults, though a flanking fire could have been deadly, because he did not have arrows and teksin bombs to waste on ceboids.

He kept an eye on the war chariots. They were still in ranks far to the rear. Zulekia was still spreadeagled between the nervous horses. Honcho stood nearby, his arms folded, staring at the developing fray. For a moment Org and Totha were out of sight. Then, just before he turned his attention back to the ceboids, Blade saw Totha running back toward the chariots.

Blade's ceboids held because of his foresight in planting the ceboid officers behind the neuters. Several of the neuters panicked and tried to run, but the officers cut them down with snarls of joy. Blade knew that a lot of old scores were being settled.

Honcho's neuters, on the other hand, had no stiffening behind them. They whipped their ceboids forward, but when Blade's line held, and the melee broke down into dozens of individual fights - when their weapons did not serve the ceboids went for each other with teeth and claws - Honcho's neuters despaired and began to retreat. Blade gave a signal then and the catapults went into action once more. They hurled shrapnel and six-foot war arrows that skewered four or five neuters at a time. The rest threw down their whips in terror and ran. Without the whippers behind them the ceboids of Honcho broke and fled also. It was soon over and Blade's ceboids had the field. They began tearing the throats out of the wounded ceboids and neuters.

There was a new flare of trumpets as the flank attack subsided and washed back. This time the Pethcine ranks came on in earnest, stepping smartly to the thumping of a crude skin drum.

Blade sent his bowmen to the ramparts of the forts. They began to drop a deadly hail into the advancing Pethcines. Still they came on. Org was leading them and Blade gave instructions for one of the catapults, and a squad of bowmen, to concentrate solely on the King of the Pethcines. Org waded on through the cloud of arrows, untouched.

The bowmen, Blade was using a mixture of high-level neuters and Maiduke maidens, did better than he had expected. They were accurate enough and the barbarian ranks were already thinned by the time they reached the glaxis and began to toil up it. The first rank became tangled on the stakes and the teksin wire and wavered to a halt, trying frantically to disentangle themselves. The rear ranks came on, foolishly and bravely, piling up like the surf on an unfriendly shore.

Blade shouted at Xeno and made a prearranged signal. The Maiduke girls with the few air guns trotted into position and began to hurl darts into the milling savages. The arrow fire kept on. The catapults, depressed now to the limit, worked with a steady chonk-chonk-chonk-chonk as they flung arrows and hundred-pound chunks of teksin and bags of jagged shrapnel into the mass of struggling and dying Pethcines. Still they came on, wave after wave of them, to die.

Blade rubbed his big hands together in glee. His battle plan was working. He cast a glance toward the lines of chariots far to the rear. Still no action there.

Org, in the midst of the chaos, was hacking a way through the stakes and wire with his sword. The fat King was bleeding and sweating and baying defiance like a wounded wolf, shouting and beating at his men with the flat of his sword and trying to urge them up the glaxis.

Blade was tempted. If he could get to Org and kill him it would be all but over. He glanced at the chariots and changed his mind. They were moving now. Not yet attacking, but moving and forming back on the flat plain. Blade put temptation behind him. Stick to the battle plan.

A runner arrived from Isma. Could she sally out and down the glaxis? Cut down the trapped and moiling Pethcines?

Blade looked beyond the gray below him. There were still four ranks of Pethcine warriors not committed. He sent back his answer. No.

As an afterthought he said: "Tell Isma to send the Lordsmen if she likes." It was a chance to get rid of some of her bodyguard. The Pethcines would eat them alive.

Isma obeyed only in part. Blade watched as she formed her Lordsmen and sent them screaming down the glaxis with herself at their head. Her 926 remained as ordered, sullen and impatient in their square.

By now Org and fifty or so of his men had cut their way through the stakes and wire and were starting up the glaxis toward the walls. They met the charging Isma and her Lordsmen head on, with fierce cries of exaltation. Here at last was real red meat for their swords.

It was pitiful. A massacre. Org's sword was a gleaming wheel of light as he ravaged the Lordsmen, hacking through their thin ornamental armor, sending heads spraying like bowling balls. His men did as well, leaping in with howls of bloodthirsty delight.

The Lordsmen were dying fast. Isma, defending herself with more skill than Blade had known she possessed, began to retreat back up the glacis. Org, hewing off a head, then skewering a belly with a thrust, waved his reeking sword and plunged up after her. Blade was off the pyramid in two great leaps and running, sword in hand. He did not want Isma to die this way. Not by his calculated treachery. The Lordsmen, yes, for they were worthless. Isma, no. He did not know how well the women would fight without her.

Isma and two Lordsmen made it as far as the sally port. There they had to turn and defend themselves again. Org and half a dozen of his men closed in for the death. There was uneasy movement among the women, but they held their square and waited.

Org chose Isma for his special prey. He leaped at her, screaming death, his helmet askew and his face shining with sweat and blood. Isma shouted back and lunged at him. Org countered, their sword hilts locked, and Org disarmed her with a twist of his powerful wrist. He showed his black stumps of teeth in an evil grimace and drew his sword back, meaning to transfix Isma squarely between the breasts. Blade was still twenty feet away, running hard.

A dying Pethcine, studded with arrows like a pincushion, stumbled between them with blood pouring from his mouth. He fell, clutching wildly at Org, and Org's sword drove into his vitals instead of Isma's. Org cursed, pushed the man aside, and leaped at Isma again just as Blade arrived.

The huge Pethcinian sword was an extension of Blade now, as much a part of him as his own arm. He parried Org's blow, shoved Isma back out of danger, and backhanded a blow at Org that slashed his helmet in half. Org grunted and retreated two paces, bringing up his shield to ward Blade's next stroke. The shield split down the middle. Org let out a bellow of rage and leaped at Blade, in bad position and wide open for Blade's thrust. Blade would have killed him then but another Pethcine, seeing his King's peril, leaped between them. Blade could not hold back his stroke and put his sword all the way through the man. It stuck there, the dying man screaming and clutching at the steel in him, falling and nearly dragging the sword from Blade's hand. The jeweled hilt was slippery with blood. Blade put a foot against the dead man's chest and pulled, cursing, trying to extricate the sword. Org, seeing the chance, let out a bellow of command and he and four warriors rushed in for the kill.

The sword came unstuck just in time. It glinted and whirled like a live thing as Blade slowly gave ground. One of the Pethcines tried to get behind him. Blade leaped back, feinted for the belly, and laid the man's throat open. He sank to his knees, spewing blood.

Blade kicked him in front of two of the charging barbarians. They fell over him, slashing wildly at Blade as they went down. He beheaded one with a stroke, then rammed a killing thrust through the breast armor of the other. Again the sword was stuck, entangled in flesh and metal and leather. Org was swinging a cruel mace now, a spiked ball at the end of a chain. He whirled it at Blade and the heavy ball mashed the big man's helmet. Sparks flew. Blade reeled in shock and near blindness for a breath, but managed to duck the follow-up blow. He caught the iron ball on his shield and hacked Org in the shoulder, a deep cut. Org shouted defiance and came on.

A Pethcine leaped in on Blade's flank. He backed another two steps and turned from Org long enough to put his sword into the man's groin. He recovered the steel quickly this time, leaving the Pethcine staring down at his ruined manhood, and faced Org once more. Org was not attacking. Org had turned, screaming commands at his men, and was running with them down the glaxis. For a moment Blade could not fathom it. Then he was hit and engulfed from behind, by the massed phalanx of the women. Isma's 926, pouring past him in hot pursuit of the enemy. Isma had disobeyed orders and committed her women. There was very little Blade could do about it.

He was knocked aside by the charge of singing, shouting, screaming women. Had he gone down he might have been trampled to death. Blade shouted a hoarse command, trying to stop them and knowing it was useless. The women were caught up in a blood frenzy.

Blade was nearly winded. He was bleeding from minor wounds, sweating, his body armor slashed and torn. There was a great dent in his helmet where Org had so nearly brained him. He would gladly have rested for a few minutes but there was no time. Isma's disobedience had placed his whole battle plan in the direst jeopardy.

Org and the survivors of the charge had fought clear of the glaxis now and were reforming on the plain. The women, the phalanx tattering and coming to pieces now, were pursuing. Blade cupped his hands and shouted, cursing like a madman. Isma was playing directly into Org's merciless hands, leaving the sheltering advantage of the forts to fight on the open plain. Blade groaned aloud and started forward. If he could get to Isma in time, take command from her, he might yet avert the disaster that was building. Beyond the moil he saw Org's four ranks of reserves moving into position to attack, and behind them, moving slowly in a wide horned crescent, were the war chariots. Totha was leading them, standing beside her driver and brandishing a spear.

Xeno appeared at Blade's side. Blade was about to give him orders when new disaster struck. The catapults were now back into action, all of them, hurling arrows, balls and chunks, fire and shrapnel into the battle that was beginning to shape on the plain. Isma had managed to get her women into a square, and for the moment was beating back the barbarians, but now the deadly hail from the catapults was falling short and wreaking havoc in the square.

Blade sent Xeno on the run to silence the catapults. He went to join Isma in the square. There was still a chance, if he could get the women back up the glaxis and into the fort again. Blade was grim as he made his way through the crowded ranks of the square. It would not be easy to withdraw in the face of constant fierce attack.

Another barrage of arrows from the catapults slammed into the packed square. One arrow gutted three women just beside Blade. They fell, screaming and bleeding and thrashing about, strangely linked together in death. A huge block of teksin slammed four more women into bloody mush. Blade pushed on, becoming more and more alarmed. Isma had formed her square badly. It was too tight.

Then he was beside her. She was attended by what was left of the Lordsmen. They were few now, and badly frightened, the fight gone out of them.

Not so Isma. She rested in the center of the square, leaning on a lance, a bloody sword at her side. Her helmet was missing and her hair was down around her shoulders, streaked with dirt and blood. Her corselet had been slashed away, and one of her breasts was exposed and bleeding from a long scratch. As Blade approached her dark eyes were enigmatic and her smile was chill. She greeted him.

"You see, my Lord Blade, how my people can fight! Soon we will destroy these barbarian scum."

He regarded her grimly and shook his head. "Not this way, Isma. We must get back into the fort. Quickly! While we can. This way we are fighting Org's battle!"

Another salvo of shrapnel from the catapults sprayed through the square. A Lordsmen screamed and fell with half his face gone.

Isma did not flinch. She stared at Blade in defiance. With her hair wild around her she looked like a beautiful bloody witch.

"I will not, Blade. I stand here. Here we fight. Here we win, or perish!"

Org's main reserve had not yet come into the attack. His bowmen, what few were left, poured a desultory fire into the square that was not nearly so damaging as the catapults. The war chariots had wheeled out far to the left and halted, still in crescent formation.

Blade ran it all through his mind in a split instant and made his plans. There was still a chance.

Now he pointed to where some half-dozen of the women, wounded or dead, had been dragged into the Pethcine ranks and were being raped. There was no system about it, no order, and Org, if he even noticed, did not seem to mind this contravention of discipline. The women had been stripped of their armor and lay naked on the plain. Some moved, writhed, showing signs of life. Some were obviously dead. It made no difference to the Pethcine warriors who were so inclined: they dropped their weapons, raped the dead or badly wounded women for a minute or so, then recovered their weapons and got back into the ranks. The moans of the still living women could be heard at times above the battle din.

Blade pointed with his sword. "That will happen to you, Isma, and all your people unless you obey me!"

She glowered at him. "It will not. Nothing can defeat me - I am Isma, High Priestess of Tharn!"

It was useless to argue. Blade knew it. She would not be cajoled. He would have to make the best of it.

He stepped close and seized her arm. She tried to pull away and he was brutal, tightening his grip until she would have cried out in pain but for her fierce pride. One of the Lordsmen, bolder than the rest, stepped forward. Blade glared at him. The man shrank back.

"Very well," Blade said. "We will fight your way, Isma. And the Gods have pity on us. Look. See that?"

He released her arm. She followed his pointing finger. Org had sent a column of Pethcines to get behind them, cutting the square off from the fort and the glaxis.

Blade shrugged. "It is decided now. We fight here.

But listen to me, listen well, and there may still be a chance."

Isma, with the fickleness of women, did listen. She had had her way, and she knew that Blade planned well.

Blade loosened the square. He formed six ranks, detaching the Lordsmen and sending them into the front rank, and remained with Isma in the center of the square. The catapults had ceased firing now, for which Blade was thankful, but there was no sign of Xeno. The ceboids on the flanks had reformed and were waiting for orders. The glaxis and the plain around the square were choked thick with the dead and dying. Org's column, once it had moved in to cut them off from the fort, had halted and was waiting. Blade noted that many of the savages in that column were wounded or battle weary. He did not think they would attack. Org was running short of manpower and was using his wounded as a cork, to plug up Blade's escape.

The wind had fallen off now and the rain stopped. Rays of faint sunlight fought through the massy clouds and set the Pethcine banners to shimmering. Still the main attack did not come.

Isma sank white teeth into a scarlet nether lip and stared at Blade. "Why do they wait? They are cowards, then? Afraid!"

"Not Org," said Blade with a grim smile. "Be patient. They will come when they are ready."

He gave orders and had a platform of corpses built so that he could see above the battle. He must know how it was with Zulekia and Honcho.

Four bodies this way, four bodies that, then another cross-hatching of dead women and Lordsmen and another, and he had a platform. He leaped up and peered in the direction of the Pethcine tents. What he saw gave some slight encouragement. He was gambling that Honcho, to save himself in the bitter end, would try to save the Maiduke girl if Org was defeated. Then he would try to bargain.

So far the gamble was a good one. The horses and drivers were gone now, no doubt pressed into the battle, and Zulekia was staked out on the plain near the tents. The neuter Honcho, peering beneath his hand at the square, was pacing anxiously to and fro. Blade's smile was cold. Honcho was a worried neuter! He could not know when, or if, Blade and Sutha would again summon the Power. Until they did Honcho was himself shorn of all technical tricks. If Blade never did have recourse to the Power—and by now Honcho must suspect that such was the case, a thing he would not understand at all—then the Pethcines had to win the day or the neuter was in the deepest trouble.

Blade, peering across the death strewn plain, could almost read Honcho's thoughts.

Blade watched Org step from the ranks and raise a small horn to his bearded lips. Org had found new armor and helmet, and was carrying a new and larger shield. He looked as fat and fierce as ever, and appeared not in the least bit battle weary. Blade extended a reluctant admiration to his foe. Barbarian, savage, yet he was all warrior. He watched as Org began to sound the little horn, wondering at the significance. Why the horn instead of the braying trumpets?

A moment later he understood. Org was playing a little tune on the horn, a reedy, high pitched, simple little strain with four notes. Immediately the massed Pethcines separated and reformed, marching and counter-marching into a new

formation. Blade cursed fervently. They were going to attack three sides of the square at once. Blade shot a look at the glacis. There Org's column, set to interdict any escape, was unmoving. It had formed into two ranks, one kneeling with long spears, the other back three paces with swords and a small contingent of bowmen. They would, Blade knew, wait until the square began to break and then cut down those who tried to flee up the glacis and into the fort Org meant to make a thorough job of it this time.

Org was playing a different note on the horn now. Totha brought her crescent of chariots a little closer up behind Org's center. Blade leaped from the platform of corpses and shouted at Isma. She nodded understanding, and in turn gave orders to several of her women officers.

Xeno tugged at Blade's sword belt and made slaveface. Blade growled at him. "You were long enough!"

Xeno clutched at the necklace Blade had given him, as though his Lord meant to take it away then and there. "It was very bad among the catapults, Lord Blade. They would not obey at first, would not stop firing. I had to take harsh steps, summon whippers, before the Maidens would listen to me. Their senses had left them and they did not care where they fired or whom they killed."

Blade nodded and patted Xeno's shoulder. Battle frenzy took strange forms. "You did well enough. Now stand by. I want you always close to me. Understood?"

"Understood, Lord Blade."

And now the time had run out. The trumpets blared their harsh summons and the Pethcine hordes came on for a last attack. Blade watched it with some trepidation and not a little sense of triumph. He had bled them! He had bled them terribly, a fast reckoning made them no more than two thousand odd. Now, if only Isma and her women would obey orders for once, and execute them properly, and if Totha's chariots could be handled.

Org sounded his little horn again and the barbarians broke into a run, shouting bloodthirsty threats. They came in from three sides, the trumpets clamoring brazenly and incessantly. Terror tactics.

Blade swung his great sword in a glittering arc and called down to his troops: "Stand steady. Hold fast and remember your orders. Above all—obey, orders when they are given!" He could only hope they would.

Xeno handed Blade a standard with a long pennon attached. He waved it over his head. The catapult crews saw it and went into action again. This time they were on target and the machines fell into a regular *chonk-chonk-chonk-chonk* rhythm as their missiles began to chew up Org's lines. As the front ranks went down Org pushed new men in to fill the gaps.

Blade gave another signal and arrow and airgun fire began to come from the flanks and the smaller forts. It was wavering and inaccurate, but now every dart and arrow counted.

He had arranged the front rank of the square with spearwomen kneeling. Behind them the second rank wielded swords and a few bows and airguns. The third rank stood ready to step into the gaps. The next three ranks, back to Blade and Isma, stood ready in reserve.

Org had timed it well. The attack washed against the embattled square on three sides, simultaneously. The din was outlandish, deafening, a garbled symphony of

hate and fear, a howling of demons unfettered. The 926 screeching their battle songs. The Pethcines snarled like wolves as they began to hew a lane into the square.

Org led the first threat, as Blade had known he would. He meant to be there. If he could kill Org before the chariots, under Totha, could be brought into action it might well carry the day. But Org was too cunning to send his war chariots against a square - he knew the horses would die and pile up and form a barrier. Org knew the chariots were his last resort and he would not use them until the square had been broken and thinned. Then he would send in the chariots, with their cruelly scythed wheels, to finish the job.

Org, at the point of a spear of barbarians, savaged his way into the square. His was the only breakthrough. Otherwise the square held fast as the Pethcines, dying on spears and swords, piled up and blocked the passage of the warriors behind them. But Org had pushed a mortal enclave into the Tharnians, mortal unless it was healed at once. Blade went in to heal it.

Their swords glinted and chimed together, hack and slash, counter and parry. Org, his beard soaked with blood, his piggy eyes gleaming red through a mask of fury, let out a hoarse shout as their swords crossed.

"You again, Lord Mazda! Ha—Ho... Blade, the traitor who calls himself Mazda... I, I, Org, will show you who is a God!" For a moment he drove Blade back with the sheer ferocity of his attack.

Blade taunted him. "Where is Totha? Where is your slut of a daughter, Org? I would bed her once more, before I give her to my ceboids for their sport." He began to press Org furiously, the big sword licking in and out like a steel tongue, wounding Org in the shoulder, the thigh, slashing his sword arm above the elbow. Org began to drop back. Most of his men had fallen now as the Tharnian women closed in to heal the gap in the square.

Blade slashed off part of Org's beard. "You should not have listened to Honcho," he taunted anew. "You see where it has led you. You are being defeated by women!"

That was too much for Org to bear. He might have slipped back and disengaged, fought his way out of the square, but instead he let out a dreadful yell and rushed at Blade. All his men were down now and the square close in behind him.

Blade parried a blow, then slashed at Org's hand. The hand, with the sword still in it, flew high into the air. Org screamed and stood staring down at his arm. Before Blade could strike again Org reached and wrested a sword from one of the last Lordsmen. He charged at Blade again, using his left hand now, waving his bloody arm like a battle flag.

Blade took a backward step and held the long sword straight before him. Org, in a raging and baffled fury, ran straight onto the sword. It cut through his armor just below the breastbone and, as he still pushed on, stood out two feet behind the broad back. Org, defiant and hating until the last, ran right up on the jeweled hilt, face to face with Blade. Then, with his eyes dying, he tried to spit.

Blade lowered the sword and let the Pethcine King's body slide off to the blood drenched earth. Isma watched him, and Xeno, and all of the inner ranks. On the perimeter of the square the battle still raged loud and feral. The Pethcines did not yet know their King was dead.

Blade hacked off Org's head and impaled it on the sword. He leaped high on the corpse platform and brandished the bloody head at the Pethcines. He cleared his powerful lungs and bellowed so that he was heard above the wailing trumpets.

"Pethcines. Here is your King!"

For a moment there was no effect, then as more and more of the barbarians saw the lifeless eyes of Org staring from the sword point, his blood still dribbling down the steel, the battle clamor began to still. The Pethcines in the rear, those not yet committed, began to wail. The front ranks, so fierce only a minute before, began to disengage and fall back.

Blade spoke sharply to Xeno. "Signal the catapults. They must fire everything now—everything they have! Fire until the last arrow is gone."

Blade raised on his toes and waved the head at Totha, still waiting out on the plain with her chariots. Totha was impulsive, a murderous little savage to the core. But would she take the bait?

Totha did. The watching Blade saw her scream in fury at the chariot driver beside her. She raised a shell horn to her lips and sounded a blast. The crescent of war chariots began to move forward, slowly gaining momentum. Blade grinned like a tiger over meat and shouted his commands at Isma.

"Break your square. Wheel out, wheel out! Double ranks, close order. You all know the trick, but wait, wait until you hear me give the order!"

The Tharnian women broke the square and began to wheel into a thin double line. There were less than 500 of them left. Blade was everywhere, praising, cajoling, threatening, cursing, trimming and dressing the line. He was close to victory now. He could smell it. If only Totha, mad for revenge, brought her war chariots into the trap...

But there was now new chaos on the plain before the Tharnian front. Blade groaned. To lose total victory now, when he was so close, would be a cruel blow. To lose it because of the panic inspired by Org's death, for which he was himself responsible, would be ironic. Blade stared out at the deadly confusion and scowled. Totha was being given time for second thoughts - she could still disengage and order a planned retreat, and the Pethcines would live to fight another day, the last thing Blade wanted.

The fleeing Pethdne warriors, as the rout gained momentum, ran straight into the advancing chariots. Totha sounded the charge and the war chariots picked up speed. There was no turning back now. Running men met speeding chariots in one great shock wave. Instantly the plain was a wilderness of awesome disorder, or screaming legless men, flashing wheel scythes, cursing and frantic drivers and warriors, rearing and plunging horses. The chariots slowed, the charge blunted, and some of the Pethcine warriors, in their confusion and fear, began to attack their own people in an effort to get clear.

Totha, in a frenzy of screaming rage, set about putting matters straight. Blade watched admiringly as she wheeled around and around in her chariot, shouting orders and spearing anyone who got in her way. Gradually she got her chariots free of the crush of retreating men, and back into battle line. She sounded her shell horn again and the chariots came on. Blade nodded and waited. It had worked out well for him. Totha was coming into the trap, thinking the Tharnian

line an easy prey for the chariots. But now there would be no time for the chariots to pick up speed again, and Totha could not guess at Blade's guile.

Totha was well in the van as the scythed chariots crunched down on the line of women. Each chariot carried a warrior and a driver. As the chariots drew near the warriors began to send a hail of arrows into the Tharnian line and a few women fell. Blade, with Xenos, at his side, stood a little back of his right flank. Isma and her by now pitifully small bodyguard had the same position on the left.

Fifty yards. The drivers were whipping up the horses. They came on with eyes wild and flashing, manes tossing, hooves drumming out a sullen beat on the packed bloody earth. The drivers and warriors were screaming in a thin threatening crescendo. The Tharnian line waited in silence, as Blade had ordered. They must hear his command when it came.

Twenty-five yards. Blade took a step nearer the line and tucked his sword under his left arm. He cupped his hands around his mouth.

Ten yards. Five yards. Blade drew air deep into his lungs. A wheel came off a chariot and bounded high in the air, skipping toward him. Horses, chariot, and occupants went down in a bloody screaming heap.

"Now," Blade yelled. "*Now!*"

The Tharnian line parted nimbly to left and right in segments, to let the chariots race through. Those who could not get out of the way threw themselves beneath the gleaming scythes, and some rose unharmed. Still there were casualties aplenty. Some of the women did not move fast enough and lost both legs above the knees. Others fell on the scythes and were cut in half or disemboweled. But in large part the maneuver worked.

Blade gave the order, trumpeting through his cupped hands. "Wheel about! Charge and destroy!"

He might have saved his breath. The women knew what to do and they set about it with screams of triumph and rage. They, as did Blade, scented victory.

Even then Totha could have recovered had she kept her head and given the right order, set the right example. She could have whipped up her horses and kept going, slashing through the ceboids now closing in on the flanks, and come around for another try. Or retreated. She did neither. She ordered her driver to hold up sharply, wheel, and charge back directly at the Tharnian line. The other war chariots, obeying her, did the same. It was fatal, as Blade had hoped it would be. Before the chariots could wheel about and pick up new speed they were inundated by the Tharnian women, some of whom had been given special orders to hamstring the horses. The orders were carried out furiously and efficiently. The poor beasts began to go down, taking the chariots with them, in a kicking, screaming melee. Drivers were speared and hacked to pieces with swords and the warriors, fighting back valiantly, fared little better. They were not accustomed to fighting on foot and they were outnumbered now by the women who swarmed over them like vengeful Furies.

Blade kept a watchful eye on Totha. She was still fighting magnificently. As soon as she realized the trap, she had pushed her driver from the chariot and taken the reins herself. She cut a scarlet swathe through the ceboids coming up in the flanks, then whirled and whipped her horses back into the midst of the fray.

Blade, watching, knew that Totha meant to die here, near where her father had died. His smile was grim. It was fitting enough.

The Tharnian women, mindful of what had been done to their sisters, were taking revenge. As the Pethcines died, or fell badly wounded, they began to cut up the remains. One towering war maiden ran past Blade, smiling and screaming at him, and holding up a pair of bloody genitals.

Blade turned to Xeno. The battle was won, all but the mopping up, and he had not much stomach for this. He tried to see beyond the melee, over the plain to the Pethcine tents, but swirling dust obscured his vision.

Blade nodded toward a chariot and team that stood nearby, the horses unharmed and calmly grazing on some errant mani that had somehow seeded here. The chariot was intact, the driver slumped in it with a spear through him.

"Fetch me that," said Blade. It was time to go after Zulekia and Honcho now. More than time. It might even be too late.

Xeno, wondering, tumbled the dead driver out of the chariot and brought it to Blade. Blade leaped into the chariot, sheathing his sword. He picked up the reins.

"I have something to do," he told Xeno. "You will tell Isma that I will return as soon as possible. I..." Xeno, who had been watching the diminishing battle, and the growing carnage as the women sated their bloodlust, let out a shout of warning.

"Careful, my Lord Blade! The barbarian Princess!

Totha, by some miracle—and tenacity of desire for revenge—had broken through and was whipping her horses straight at Blade. Her helmet was gone and she was bleeding from a score of wounds. Her hair streamed about her bloody face, and her screaming mouth was just another gaping wound. She came at Blade full tilt, a last spear poised in her hand. She rode down two women who leaped to check the horses, and a third was decapitated as she slipped and fell before the scythes. Blade had only time to wheel his chariot broadside before Totha was upon him.

Totha hurled the spear at him. "Die, Blade! Die with me! Die with Totha, daughter of Org!"

Blade ducked away. He had no shield. The spear point caught him in the side and ripped a long seam in the flesh, a bloody but minor wound. He tried to draw his sword. Totha's horses crashed into Blade's chariot, rearing and pawing at it, and it was smashed sideways. Xeno leaped at Totha, only to be beaten back by her flashing sword. She brought her chariot close alongside Blade's, controlling her team with one hand, and slashed at Blade. He was partially stunned trying to keep his footing, and had not yet had a chance to draw his sword. Totha screamed in triumph and was on the point of leaping into his chariot to finish him when she choked, stood stiffly upright, her eyes glaring, and then clutched at the basketwork of the chariot.

Blood cascaded from her open mouth, a spear point protruded from her left breast.

Totha, still standing, holding to the chariot side, stared at Blade. She tried to speak but choked on blood and fell over the side, between the chariots.

Isma walked to the body and tugged out her spear. She looked up at Blade. "It is over," she said. "The Pethcines are all but destroyed. Forever. We can hunt the

others down as we choose. And I, Blade, have saved your life. I, Isma, High Priestess of Tharn."

Blade nodded gravely. "That is true. My thanks, Isma." He was tense now, alert. She had never been so dangerous.

Isma smiled at him and made a sign. A cup bearer came forward, a neuter whom Blade did not remember seeing before. The neuter handed Isma a tall chalice of teksin. Blade caught the odor of soka.

Isma handed the cup to Blade. "A victory cup, my Lord Blade. I will drink after you."

Blade was thirsty, so much so that his tongue was cleaving to the roof of his mouth. He smiled at Isma. She thought him a child, a low-level neuter, a witless ceboid? To fall prey to such a trick?

He was preparing to fumble and drop the cup when Xeno sprang forward with a cry. "No, my Lord! No! Do not drink! I saw the cup prepared. It is poi..."

Isma drove her sword into Xeno's heart. Blade grieved inwardly. Poor Xeno. Had he only kept his mouth shut...

Isma left her bloody sword in Xeno and stared defiantly at Blade. He stared back. Behind her the Second Neuter moved uneasily and would not meet Blade's eye. The women, battle weary and stained with bloody sweat, crowding around with their grisly trophies, muttered and exchanged puzzled glances. They had no clear idea of what was going on.

Blade tilted the cup and poured the contents slowly to the ground between himself and Isma. The soka puddled there, mixing with the blood of Totha who lay close by.

Blade pointed to the puddle. "That will always be between us, Isma. Remember it!"

He flung the cup at her and seized the reins of the chariot horses, shouting to them. As he wheeled the chariot around the women leaped to escape the scythes. Isma and the Second Neuter stepped back to safety and watched him go, whipping the horses furiously across the plain.

Blade lashed the horses on. They had rested and were fresh enough. He made his way through a nightmare plain, littered with dead and still dying, toward the Pethcine tents. There were a few looters, dazed and maddened, and the walking wounded, but no one paid him any attention or tried to harm him. One Pethcine warrior, badly hurt, had dragged a Tharnian corpse back toward the tents and was methodically cutting it into small pieces. He stared without interest as Blade thundered past.

Zulekia and Honcho were gone. Blade was not surprised. He had been too long coming, and the neuter would have known the battle lost when he saw Org's head. He would not have tarried for the grim finale with Totha's chariots.

The stakes to which Zulekia had been bound were still in place. Blade contemplated them briefly, then whipped his horses around and headed north. There was only one place Honcho could go.

Chapter 16

The old King of Neuters, Sutha, knelt beside the sarcophagus of Astar I. He had been kneeling for a long time and his bony knees were sore. His hands trembled as he put them on the edge of the sarcophagus and pulled himself up. It would not be long now before they came. Sutha had employed a staff of young neuters to keep him abreast of the news from the battlefield, and the last messenger had departed only a few minikronos before. No—it could not be long.

Sutha stood looking down at the dual face of Astar and Isma. Astar I had been the first. The Astar recently murdered by Isma would be the last Sutha was sure of it. Blade's coming had changed everything in Tharn. Had changed Tharn itself. For the better, Sutha prayed, when it was all over. It was not over yet.

As he gazed down at the dead and long mummified flesh he wondered why he bothered to pray at all. He did not really believe. Nor did any true homid, the intelligent Tharnians, the People. Belief had been lost for multikronos now, lost in the engulfing mists of cruel superstition and heartless technique.

On impulse Sutha reached and touched the cheek of Astar I. He had never dared before. He snatched his hand away. Cold. So cold!

He sighed and went back to the teksin ledge, glancing down into the Power Pool, at the glimmering box in the quiet depths. Blade was right, of course. Sutha understood, though Blade had never put it into so many words. The Power had been good at first. Now it was bad. The Power had taken over. It dominated them all, even to the last ignorant ceboid. With what Blade proposed to replace the Power Sutha did not know, nor care much. That was Blade's problem.

There was a stack of slates on the ledge beside Sutha. He had filled this time of waiting by writing a long missive that Blade might someday find. Or might not find. That did not matter much either. What did matter was that Sutha, through stylus and onto slate, had managed to transcribe thoughts, at last, that he had never dared admit before.

In that moment he found that he could feel deep pity, he thought he understood the word now, for Honcho. They were, after all, a great deal alike. Both aborts, both so nearly homid and still lacking in the ultimate manifestation of manhood. It was, had been, cruel. Had he not been better adjusted, deeper read, a step higher in intelligence, he might easily have chosen Honcho's path. Honcho had not studied the ancient mysteries as Sutha had, had not ruined his eyes with years of probing for an elusive thing called Truth. And now it was too late for both of them. Tharn must be destroyed before it could be rebuilt again.

Sutha picked up a fresh slate and poised his stylus. Then he put it down and reached for the first slate he had filed. He read it over with a grim little smile.

My Lord Blade: I write this so that you may understand. I do not know the why of your coming to Tharn, nor what it will mean, or even if you will ever see this. But I think, in spite of all my ignorance, that you have been sent to save Tharn. To rebuild it. For it must first be destroyed, the Tharn we now know, a cruel and decadent Tharn that is ignorant in its vast wisdom. So I—Sutha, a very old and ignorant neuter—am going to do what must be done. Perhaps, if you live and prevail, you will one day understand the how and why of all this. I do not know. I cannot guess. I can only act. And I am afraid, very much afraid...

They were coming now. Sutha put down the slate on the neat stack and prepared himself. He had never really understood pain, but now he would have the chance to find out about it. For him, now, there could be no easy and painless destruct. He only hoped he could go through with it. Neuters did not have much courage.

They were here.

Isma, tattered and stained with battle, strode into the Sacred Chamber. Behind her followed the Second Neuter, a smirk of anticipation on his long face, and half a dozen of the women who had been made privy to Isma's plans.

Isma did not bother to make obeisance to Astar I. She walked briskly past the sarcophagus and confronted Sutha. She had discarded her battle sword and now carried an ornamental and sacred phallus blade.

Sutha inclined his head. "My greetings, Isma. High Priestess of Tharn. I have heard that the news is good. The Pethcines are crushed?"

Isma glared at him. "That is so. No thanks to you, Sutha, who have sulked here in safety and, worse, denied us the Power. Denied me the Power. Me. Isma! How dare you do this?"

Sutha showed his long neuter's teeth in a smile that was meant to be gentle. "I dared, Isma, because Lord Blade thought it best. By so doing we denied the Power also to Honcho, Honcho the renegade, who would have destroyed us all. Has it not worked out for the best, Isma?"

Isma scowled at him. Her face worked in anger and she pointed the phallic sword at him. "I have lost over half my People, old fool! That is how well it has worked out. It was not necessary. All my Lordsmen gone! Blade planned that. I know it. And you, Sutha, have served Blade too well and me not at all. I will not suffer this any longer. I do not need Blade now. I have tired of him. Nor do I need you. I depose you, Sutha. Second Neuter is now in your place, King of all Neuters."

Sutha looked past her at the Second Neuter. "That should please him. He has long plotted and coveted this moment."

Isma waved the sword at Sutha. "You are under arrest. Because you are old, and have served well, before Blade came, you shall be destructed painlessly instead of tortured."

There was a sudden coldness in the chamber that Isma did not like. She glanced around uneasily. She knew she had violated taboo by bringing the Second Neuter and the women warriors into the Sacred Chamber. But what matter? She, and she alone, would rule Tharn now. When the Power was restored it would be easy to hunt down Blade and destroy him, along with the Maiduke girl he had gone after and obviously preferred to herself. That was an insult never to be forgiven!

Isma beckoned to the Second Neuter. "Place him under arrest. Take the chain of office from him. It is yours now."

"I do not think so," said Sutha. At that moment he found that he was not afraid. Not afraid at all. He fell backward off the ledge into the Power Pool. He had taken the precaution to line his tunic with the very heaviest of teksin so he would sink rapidly. He did. The glimmering casket at the bottom of the Pool waited for his touch.

The Second Neuter did not even have time to scream.

Richard Blade, whipping the chariot horses to their limit, did not see the first explosion. His back was toward Urcit and he was following the faint moving dots across the wide plain; it could only be Honcho and Zulekia. Here and there, on his flanks, were scattered little groups of stragglers, sullen and unheeding, Pethcine warriors intent only on getting back to the Gorge.

His first intimation of the holocaust was the terrible slamming wind at his back, a fierce draft across the plain, as though giants had opened their doors to all the winds of the cosmos. It flattened the mani fields on both sides of the faint track and pushed the galloping horses and chariot into a crazy stagger that sent them reeling sideways and smashed a wheel to splinters. Blade was pitched from the chariot, but landed on his back and shoulders and rolled to his feet unhurt. He stared back at Urcit.

There were no flames. Only smoke. Thick, black, roiling columns of greasy smoke already building amorphous turrets and castles where Urcit had been. Blade, in the instant, could not fathom what had happened. One thing he knew. The Power was gone forever. Everyone near the blast must have been destroyed. But there would be survivors. There always were. And it was with the survivors that Blade must reckon, and work.

He began to trudge rapidly across the plain, the great sword ready in his hand now. A man in a war chariot was one thing, a man on foot another. Some of the Pethcine stragglers might be looking for revenge.

But nobody paid him any attention. They stayed away from him and his terrible sword. Blade kept walking, at times running, toward the now motionless chariot and horses of Honcho. Something was awry with the neuter. His forward progress had ceased, as had Blade's for the moment, with the devastation of Urcit. Now, as Blade moved on, Honcho made no move to escape. Honcho, in fact, made no move at all.

Blade drew close enough to distinguish details. The chariot was undamaged, the horses quietly pulling at mani roots. Honcho was slumped in the chariot, lolling, his legs trailing off onto the ground. The Maiduke girl, Zulekia, stood motionless off to one side and watched Blade's approach. She had been naked. Now she had a wisp of teksin fabric twisted around her loins.

Blade knew at once that Honcho was dead. How, or why, did not matter to him. That threat was past. He drew near to Zulekia, thinking that she was even more lovely than when he had first seen her on the terrace at the Gorge Tower.

Her long hair now, as then, cascaded in bronze-gold over her shoulders and covered her naked breasts. She stood erect, proudly, and waited for him. Blade wondered if she would make slaveface, and was pleased when she did not.

He halted six paces from her. "Zulekia! It is good that you are safe and well." Pale words for a lover. But that would follow. He was sure of it now. This was not a time for passion, or for telling of love.

Her gentian eyes, as huge and luminous as he remembered them, were grave. She did not smile. "Yes, Lord Blade. But I am not surprised. I knew you would come for me."

"You knew?"

"I knew, Lord Blade."

It must be true, he thought Even as he had known, somehow from the very first, that he wanted this woman above all in Tharn. This was no time to seek explanations. There might never be such a time. The fact was enough.

With the long sword Blade pointed to the dead Honcho. "How did this come about?"

"When he saw the explosion he took something. A very little pellet. Of a golden color."

"What did he say?"

Her smooth, tawny shoulders moved in a shrug of negation. Muscles rippled beneath the golden flesh.

"He said: 'Blade has won. My Thara and my Urcit are dead. Perhaps Blade is a God after all.'"

"That is all he said?"

"All, my Lord. Then he smiled and looked at me with those green eyes of his and died. We are well rid of him, my Lord. He would have made trouble for us still."

Blade moved the sword in an arc. "Not for long. But it is as well. Zulekia..."

"Yes, Lord?"

"You will not call me Lord in future. You will call me Richard."

"Richard?" The name came hesitantly from her ripe mouth. A hint of a smile as she said it again. "Richard—what does it mean?"

He went to her and put an arm about her smooth shoulders and smiled down into violet eyes that were full of glints and shadows. She nestled close to him.

"It means kiss, perhaps? I like kiss."

He kissed her for a long time. She clung to him.

Blade, still with his arm around her, turned to stare at the smoke hanging like a grim canopy over Urcit.

After a moment the girl said: "Urcit has been destroyed forever?"

"Not forever, Zulekia. We will build it again. A better Urcit."

She watched him with puzzlement. "But who will rule Tharn now?"

Blade held up the sword. At that moment a ray of sun struck through the black pall and glinted along the steel.

"I will rule Tharn," said Richard Blade.

Zulekia nodded. It was complete acceptance. A natural thing. Blade, aware of his own doubts and fears, felt his spirits lifting. It could be done! It must be done.

"There will be much toil," he said. "Sweat and work such as you have not known. Fear, terror, failures... but we will do it, Zulekia. As I came a stranger into your world—now you will be, at first, a stranger in the world I shall make here in Tharn."

Her expression told him that she did not really comprehend. He sighed and patted her smooth shoulder. She would understand. In time. Time, he thought, was about the only thing he could be sure of now. And how much of that? Blade shrugged his massive shoulders. It would be as it would be...

"Richard?"

"Yes?"

"There is something I must say. There has been a strangeness in me—in my body—since that time we had coi in the Gorge Tower. I have read of such things. Of course it is illegal that I bear..."

Blade stared at her. Harshly he said, "The laws of Tharn have been changed!" Then, with a smile, he kissed her gently. "I am ruler now, and I declare it legal that you bear my child. In fact, I demand it!"

It had been, from the very beginning, from the time of his first adventure in Alb, and then in the Land of Cath, a hazard. Lord Leighton had pointed it out. His Lordship had toiled to invent the little chronos computer, a device to "stretch" Blade's memory capacity so the big man could store data without conscious effort on his part. This aided greatly in the debriefing.

When Blade was brought back through the computer Part of his mind became a tape recorder, a memory tank, which was easily tapped.

There was still the hazard. Blade tended to forget his real persona, in his real dimension; in the heat of action, and danger, battling for survival or in the throes of love, Richard Blade forgot who Richard Blade really was! And so it was now, when the pain began in his head, that Blade was startled and genuinely surprised.

Zulekia's lovely face began to blur. Blade must have made some sound of anguish as the pain grew more intense, for the girl clung to him, alarmed and stared into his face.

"Richard! What is it? You are so strange. You... you..."

The plains of Tharn shimmered and tilted. A dozen suns hued red hot lances through his head. He clutched at the girl and felt that solid tawny flesh turn to vapor. Blade himself was fast becoming bodiless, his limbs dissolving and floating away. He tried to look at Zulekia a last time, for now he understood it, knew that Lord Leighton was calling him back, but the girl was a bird that fluttered away from him.

He was shrinking fast to dwarfdom. He was a fluid running from positive to negative and soon he would be nothing at all.

Blade was conscious, barely conscious, that he still clutched the great sword of the Pethcines. From a great distance, an echo in a labyrinthine shell, he heard a voice say: "Zul... I lo..."

He was gone.

Chapter 17

Richard Blade, as always after his jaunts through the dimensional rift, was in a state of semi-coma and mild shock. Judging from past experience it would be at least twelve hours before he adjusted to life in London in 1970. Before he was once more the Richard Blade who was a top agent for MI6A, and who had for a boss a querulous, tweedy old man called J.

Lord Leighton, with J in anxious attendance, was peering into the glass cubicle set in the innards of the monstrous computer. His Lordship's little yellow eyes gleamed with delight as Blade's big body began to materialize in the chair on the rubberized pad.

J let out a sigh of relief. "I say, old fellow. We did it again. But I don't mind telling you I was getting a little worried. I know that you know what you're doing, Leighton, but I still fret Must we always use Blade? Couldn't we..."

Lord Leighton did not look at him. "You know the answer to that, J. No. The PM's orders. So long as Blade continues to volunteer, then Blade it is. There! He's very nearly back. We can go in in a moment. What's that he's got with him?"

J peered through the glass where Blade now sat, naked, in the chair that so greatly resembled an electric chair. His brawny body was festooned with electrodes which led away through portholes into the giant computer. Blade sat unmoving, staring straight ahead of him.

J frowned. "Looks like a sword, of course. What else? A great bloody broadsword. I'm damned. Wonder where the dear boy has been this time?"

The little hunchback scowled at him. At these times it was all that Lord Leighton could do to maintain a scientific calm. He had—quite by accident—wrought the scientific miracle of all time, and he wondered if his nerves would, in the end, prove equal to the strain.

He tapped J on the arm. "We'll know soon enough. Come. It's all right now. You know the procedure."

"I should," said J grumpily. "It's my third time through it."

He stood aside to let Lord Leighton precede him into the glass chamber. His hand inadvertently brushed against Leighton's hump, grotesque under the white smock, and J felt an odd moment of revulsion. For the first time he really understood just how out of place he was in this scientific jungle. Lord Leighton belonged here. J did not. Lord Leighton was a modern Merlin, a space age wizard, and this monster computer was to him no more than an erector toy. J was a rather old-fashioned, middle-class, spy master. He shrugged and followed his Lordship into the glass cubicle. Things were as they were.

Richard Blade did not appear to recognize them, or even see them. He sat quietly and stared straight before him. Lord Leighton began detaching the electrodes. When Blade's body was free of the wires Leighton tried to take the sword from him.

Blade's big hands tightened on the hilt of the sword. He would not let it go.

Lord Leighton stepped back, not at all disconcerted. "It's all right He'll let it go later on. Now I'll just get on with the hypnosis and we can get him down to quarters."

Leighton began to move a scrawny, prehensile hand back and forth before Blade's eyes. It was a technique he had evolved, after much experimentation, since Blade's return from Alb. Blade, who normally could not be hypnotized at all, was responsive at these moments, and the mild hypnosis helped smooth the transition between dimensions.

They were ready. Lord Leighton took one of Blade's arms, J the other, and they walked the big man out of the computer room and down a long hallway to a small self-operating elevator.

They were, at the moment, some two hundred feet beneath the Tower of London. The little elevator dropped them another hundred feet to a tiny hospital complex that was complete in every detail. Here Blade would rest in an air-conditioned room while he was debriefed. When he had slept, and when he was out of

hypnosis, he would be examined and tested by a dozen famous specialists. He would be subject to every test known to medical science, the gamut running from a sampling of blood to the probings of a world renowned psychiatrist.

It was a tribute to J, and to his security organization, that none of the people involved knew exactly why they were doing it.

Blade had not spoken. He did not speak now as Lord Leighton took the great sword away and handed it to J.

"Your department, J. To the labs at once for minute analysis. Be careful with it. There's a fragment of something caught there in the hilt that might be valuable."

J nodded in admiration. He had seen nothing caught in the hilt. Now he looked and did see it, a minute sliver of something that looked like plastic. He hefted the sword. God! How heavy it was. Could a man really wield such a weapon? Even a man as powerful as Blade?

Blade was beneath the white sheets now. His tanned face was serene. Only a flicker of his eyelids showed that he was not yet asleep.

Lord Leighton spoke softly: "You will sleep now, Richard. You will sleep and you will talk. Talk! Tell us everything that happened. Everything! You will talk, Richard. Tell us everything... everything... everything."

His Lordship nodded to J. J pressed a button set into the wall near the door. He could not hear them, and he could not see them, but he knew that the rolls of tape were spinning. Every word that Richard Blade uttered for the next twelve hours would be caught and held in time and space.

It was time to go. Yet J and Lord Leighton lingered for a moment at the door. J found that the weight of the sword was making his arms tired.

The big man on the bed spoke suddenly. His voice was harsh and resonant and J raised his brows at Lord Leighton. He would never really get used to this witchery.

His Lordship shrugged. Most interesting. The voice was not that of the Richard Blade he knew, but there could be no doubting the command, the authority and power in it.

"There is a place called Tharn. Once, for a little time, I was King there."

Lord Leighton nodded and pulled at J's arm. They left the room. The door slid to behind them with a hydraulic sigh. Blade was sealed in and nothing could disturb him until he pressed the buzzer that signaled Leighton's private phone. By that time his brain would have emptied himself into the tapes. Later would come the personal debriefing, with only Lord Leighton, J, and Blade present. And the tapes.

As they ascended in the little elevator J said: "That voice... not like Richard at all."

Lord Leighton shrugged and his hump wriggled. "Nothing to worry about, I shouldn't think. It will pass. His voice will be as it was. The timbre of the voice is, to a degree, controlled by the brain. The speech centers. In this case the cortical cells in question may have been a little slow in reassembling into the original pattern."

J did not speak again until they were in Leighton's private lab, well away from the computer complex.

Then: "I have noted," J said, "that each time it takes a little longer to bring Richard back to exactly what he was. Is it possible to project, Leighton, to foresee

the ultimate? I am sure you know what I mean. What do you propose doing about it?"

Lord Leighton was busy removing the sliver of foreign substance from the hilt of the sword with a pair of delicate forceps. "Hmmm... looks like a common plastic, right enough, but I'll bet a few quid it isn't."

He put the sliver in an envelope and sealed it, scribbled on the envelope with a red pencil.

"Do about it, J? I propose to do absolutely nothing about it, except what we have been doing. I intend to send Blade out as often as he will go, and as long as he is fit."

Leighton's small yellow eyes gleamed at J in puzzlement and anger. "What else, man? You know how important this is! You heard the PM say it himself. England's future, the fate of millions of people, might very well depend on what Blade can learn from these explorations. Why do you worry so, J? Blade doesn't."

J let it drop. His Lordship was right, after all. Blade, who was most concerned, accepted the risks gladly time after time. But then Blade was a very brave man, J wasn't.

As J left the Tower that night and was driven home he thought: Tharn? Now what, or who, the bloody hell was Tharn? A place, that had been it. A place called Tharn. J lit his pipe and tried to relax. He would know soon enough. It would all be in the tapes.

J thought that he would give the dear boy a month's vacation. A whole, complete and total month off to himself. Well—J smiled briefly—there would be girls. Naturally there would be girls. J puffed and scowled. He did feel a little guilty about that. Shouldn't, of course. Duty and all that. Still Zoe had been a nice girl and she had thrown Richard over because of his prolonged and unexplained absences. So Richard had no more Zoe. Not that there weren't plenty of others, of course. Still—and J nodded to himself—duty could be grim at times.

Richard Blade did not, in fact, have any trouble in getting a girl to replace Zoe. He found several, and when the exhaustive debriefing was at last over, he chose one and took her to the south with him. There, in Dorset, they made love and walked the lanes and did a little sailing. In the evenings, at times, they played darts in the local pub and drank beer until they both swished, then they walked home to make more love. Her name was Ann Watkins and she was an editor of a small art publishing house. She was an eminently sensible girl and there was no nonsense about love and marriage, and no mention of the future. There was camaraderie and affection and sex.

Sometimes, as she lay breathing quietly beside him, Blade would lie awake and listen to the wash of the Channel on the shingle below the cottage. At these times he would, a little, miss Zoe. But of course that would never have worked out. Wives were funny—they wanted husbands at home with them. Not roaming around in all manner of strange worlds.

The lab had analyzed the teksin sliver that had somehow been caught in the hilt of the sword. They were baffled. But if they could reproduce teksin, synthesize it, England would have taken a giant step ahead in the economic race. A sorely needed step.

Blade kissed the sleeping Ann gently on the cheek. He lay back and closed his eyes. He did not really care about the teksin, or what the boffins did with it. It was not his job to care.

He frowned in the moonlight that drifted into the bedroom. There was something that puzzled him because he did not understand it. Could not understand it. He had held something back from the tapes this time. He didn't know why, couldn't explain it, but he had not told them about the child he had left in Tharn.

In his present persona it was past all understanding. But it was still a fact: somewhere in the cosmos, beyond the dimensional rift, there was a child to be born. His child. A child that might one day grow up to be a King, or a Queen, of a land called Tharn.

Richard Blade slept.

