Jeffrey Lord

Slave of Sarma

It is the fourth book in the Richard Blade series.
Blade's newest mission: Projection by computer to Dimension X, to track down and kill the Russian agent posing as his double. In Sarma, land of weird customs and barbaric punishments, he could survive only by satisfying the cravings of the royal women. Failure meant live burial, or being hurled into the flaming jaws of Bek-Tor. And always the danger from the man who was his double...and might prove to be his final destruction.
Chapter One

It had been misting all day and, as London's lights began to go on early, a dark brown fog crept in from the Thames. Pavements were shiny and treacherous, slimed by fallen leaves. Fog horns on the river were raucous and surly, their mood matched by that of millions of Londoners as they began the vespertine shove into tube and train and car. A dour day, in all, with Indian summer gone and the drear of winter upcoming.

At 391/2 Prince's Gate, Kensington, the mood was no less dour.

The house was tall and narrow, of early Victorian vintage. It had been in Lord Leighton's family since he could remember. But because it was at times rented, at times idle, His Lordship was inclined, until reminded by his agents, to forget that he owned it. The district was no longer fashionable - a matter of little concern to Lord L, who was not very fashionable himself - and it was J who had seen the possibilities. J ran the affairs of MI6A, a most special branch of the Special Branch. J was also immediate superior to Richard Blade, who at the moment was at his cottage in Dorset and, with another foray into Dimension X coming up, was not alone.

J was not thinking of Blade. He sat by a glowing coal fire, a glass of scotch and soda balanced on one impeccably clad knee, and watched the two men duel. J's money was on Lord Leighton, but he had to admit that the Right Honorable Hubert Carrandish was no mean opponent. Carrandish was a Member of Parliament from the West Riding area in Yorkshire, and he reminded J of a well-dressed and articulate rodent. J, a fair man, did not go so far as to equate the MP with a rat; there were, after all, other species of rodent. As he listened, keeping out of the battle, J felt himself becoming increasingly livish. What the Yanks called an upset stomach. This Carrandish, with his broad Yorkshire speech - surely an affectation, because the man was Oxford - was dangerous. Not in himself, perhaps, but in what he represented. Snooping.

The Right Honorable gentlemen was chairman of a committee. A House of Commons committee set up expressly to scrimp and save and cut corners and, in effect, to halt waste and preserve the Queen's Purse. He was very good at his job.

Now he said, "I have a great deal of authority, Your Lordship, and more than adequate funds and personnel. I pride myself that I work hard. I have been nearly a year on this job. I have had, I think, more than a little success in ferreting out waste and extravagance in government."

Lord L dumped cigar ash on the carpet and stared at the man with yellow bloodshot eyes. Never a patient man, and not taking to fools, so far he had been patient. J knew why. This Carrandish was no fool.

"What you manage to save," Lord L said, "will just about pay for the cost of saving it, eh? That's been my experience. You chaps organize your bloody committees to investigate other committees and the end result is that in the end nothing is saved. Or accomplished. Time and money spent and nothing to show for it, eh?"

J smiled at the fire. Lord L was trying to lay a false trail.

The MP from Yorkshire was having none of it. He was not a drinking man, or a smoking man - possibly because both cost money which could be better spent - and now he pushed away his untouched glass and an empty ashtray and leaned over the table toward His Lordship. He clasped his long bloodless fingers and his eyes, fairly close to a long nose, glinted at the old man in the ragbag suit.

"None of that, sir, is relevant. As you must know. This interview was arranged, with your very gracious permission, so that we might speak in private and without public record. I came, in fact, to ask you one specific question."

Lord Leighton brushed a wisp of white hair away from his high balding forehead. He sat a little sideways in the tall-backed chair - this eased the eternal pain in his hump - and his leonine eyes studied his inquisitor with a mingle of wariness and contempt.

J felt a moment of compassion. This was his work, really, not Lord L's. Yet he could not intervene, even if circumstances had allowed it. Lord L had warned J, in no uncertain terms, to butt out!

"Then," said Lord Leighton, sounding like a much-tried and very patient lion, "get on with it, man. Ask your bloody damned question and get it over with."

J began to feel a little sorry for the Right Honorable gentleman. Lord L's temper was beginning to slip.

Carrandish was not an easy man to bully. He slapped his hand on the shiny surface of the table and some of the respect in his tone had gone.

"I have asked the question, Your Lordship. I have asked it at least six times and in half a dozen ways. So far I have received no intelligible answer."

Lord Leighton reached for a box of cigars. "Are you implying, sir, that I have gone bonkers? It is possible, I suppose. I am an old man and I work very hard. Long hours, you know. I get very little sleep, not nearly what my doctor tells me I need, and I never have eaten well and then of course there are all the aches and pains that come
with old age. Our brains begin to deteriorate as we grow older and - "

The MP's patience had already deteriorated. He shrugged his narrow shoulders. His smile was gelid, his gaze flinty, as he said, "That is just what I mean, sir."

Lord L, still holding on to his temper, contrived to look like an idiot. "Mean? Mean what? I don't understand what you mean. Not at all. Not to be wondered at, I suppose. None of you young people know how to talk these days. Nor write, for that matter. Can't think what they teach up at the schools these days. Now in my time - "

J suddenly understood that the MP had received a reprieve. The storm was being held off. Lord L was enjoying himself.

Carrandish was not. J watched with interest as the man made one last great effort.

"I had no intention of implying, sir, that you have gone, er, bonkers. Not at all. I merely - "

"Senile," said Lord L cheerfully. "I suppose that must be it. Pity, but it comes to all of us. And now, Mr. Carrandish, I am afraid I must ask you to excuse me. I am tired and I am sure you have other things to do, more important things, than talking to a doddering old wreck like me."

The MP raised his eyes and stared at the ceiling beams for a moment. J struggled with his desire to laugh. But the MP was tough. "I would like to put the question to you once more, sir, if you don't mind. Just one last time. I may?"

"What question?"

Carrandish closed his eyes as if in silent prayer.

"With your permission, sir. Once again - I have isolated some three million pounds. What we on the committee refer to as vagrant funds."

"I like that," said His Lordship. "Vagrant funds. Very well stated. Good use of language. Maybe I did you young people an injustice."

Carrandish raced ahead, his eyes glazing and a dew of perspiration on his pale brow: "Some of the vagrant funds quite naturally gravitate to Secret Funds, sir. That is well known and is not questioned. But there are vouchers and they must be signed and the entire process of vouchering must be carried out to its final conclusion so that Her Majesty's books can be balanced: I am sure, Lord Leighton, that you see this."

His Lordship, who hated shaving, stroked a stubbled chin with fragile, liver-spotted hands. He smiled. And when this old man, this high boffin, this chief of all Britain's scientists, smiled, he could be very charming indeed.

He nodded. "I can see that, Mr. Carrandish. Indeed yes. Any fool, and I am not quite that yet, can see that we can't have all those pounds lying around unaccounted for. What I don't see, Mr. Carrandish, is why you come to me?"

Mr. Carrandish pounced. J admitted his error. The man was no rodent. Mustela furo. The weasel family.

"Over a million and a half pounds of the vouchers in question, sir, have been signed by you."

His Lordship sighed. "I am getting senile. Signing things and not remembering it." He glanced over at J. "You may have to see about putting me away, old man. Straight off to the looney bin."

J, by herculean effort, kept his face straight. He shook his head, said nothing, and the uneasiness grew in him. He was beginning to get a professional feeling about this little farce.

Carrandish, stern, looking as much like Britannia determined as his thin features would accommodate, patted his forehead with a square of handkerchief and forged ahead.

"You do understand, sir, that I am as much bound by the Official Secrets Act as you - as anyone. I would have to be, to have access to the accounts, the bookkeeping, relevant to the Secret Fund. You do understand that, sir?"

The old lion was growing surly again. "Of course I understand it," he snarled. "What in the bloody hell has it got to do with me?"

Carrandish kept charging into the cannon. "But the vouchers, sir! You signed them. Over a million and a half pounds' worth. For what, I haven't been able to find out - the purchase orders appear to be coded, so masked that the nature of the materials, or services, whatever, are hidden. I run into a blank wall every time I come anywhere close to finding out what that money was actually spent for. Your own signature, sir, is barely legible. But it is your signature. I had it carefully checked by an expert. So, in sum, and putting it as simply as possible, Your Lordship, you have spent a million and a half pounds of Her Majesty's money for something that I cannot find. Something that cannot even be explained. Money that has, apparently, gone down a drain and even the drain has vanished. I have a right to know, Lord Leighton. I am empowered to - "

Lord Leighton stood up. He clung to the table for a moment, to give aid to his polio ruined legs. His gaze was lethal, but his voice was level and courteous.

"And I, sir, am empowered to ask you to leave now. I can't answer your question. Good evening, sir."

Carrandish had also risen. He nodded sullenly, glared at J as though he were the real malefactor, picked up his briefcase and marched to the door. He bowed slightly to the old man and ignored J.
"I can," he said, "ask the same questions in the House, you know. And you, Your Lordship, can be called upon to answer them under oath. Good evening, gentlemen." The door closed just a bit harder than was necessary. J stirred the fire with a poker. He said, "He might do that, you know."

Lord L, in his chair again and already working on some papers he had taken from a desk, snorted. "He won't. I can see to that. I'll get on to the Prime Minister tonight and see that our little man is put on a false scent. Harry will cooperate to the fullest. He knows how important Dimension X is to us."

J dropped a few lumps of coal on the fire. He replenished his glass with a splash of soda. He went to a tall window and stood gazing out at Prince's Gate Crescent. Street lights were on and macintoshed pedestrians drifted in and out of the nimbi like damp ghosts. A few last stubborn leaves hung despondently from stark branches moving in the wind like dark mobiles. J dropped the heavy drape into place and went to prowling the room.

The table top was already littered with sheets of paper. Lord Leighton scratched industriously away with his pen. J prowled back and forth over the worn Oriental, crossing and recrossing before the fire, wishing he had his pipe. He concentrated better with his pipe. But his favorite was in the shop, being repaired, and he had forgotten to bring a spare from Copra House.

His Lordship glanced up from his work. "For God's sake, man, stop pacing like a tiger. And stop looking so worried. I told you - the Prime Minister will put a spoke in the Carrandish wheel. More than likely Harry will have the man in for a little chat. They'll have a sherry or so and Harry will tell him to keep his long nose to himself and that will be that."

J stopped prowling long enough to chunk up the fire. He scowled at the flames. "I doubt it will be that simple, Lord L. The Prime Minister will have to tell him something - "

The old man chuckled. "Harry will think of something. He's a good liar. Made it to the top in politics, didn't he? Now do be a good fellow and let me concentrate. I may be getting senile after all - I have a simple nanosecond equation here that a babe should be able to solve and I'm having trouble. Very upsetting, that Carrandish type, very."

J regarded the old scientist with affection and exasperation. England's top man of science he might be, but in certain matters he was a babe in arms. He knew nothing of the jungle in which J and Richard Blade must work and survive. Lord Leighton reigned high in his Ivory Tower, lost amid his giant computers, thinking in symbols that only a few men could understand, enmeshed in cybernetic jargon, screened from the real and dirty world of plot and counterplot. The world of bullet and knife and noose and poison. "I don't like it," J said.

Lord L dropped his pen. He pushed his papers from him. "Don't like what? Get it off your chest, man, then go away and let me work. Get on to Blade, for one thing, and tell him I want him here in two days' time. Now - what don't you like?"

J resumed his pacing. "Carrandish will go the Prime Minister, Lord L, and since he is already bound by the Official Secrets Act, and as nosy as a ferret and as slithery as an eel, my guess is that the PM will end up by telling him about Dimension X Project. As the most effective way of stifling him up."

Lord Leighton nodded. He pulled one crippled leg over the other and sought comfort for his hump. "So, J? You may be right. It would be the most effective way of stifling the man. But why worry - Carrandish may be a bother, I agree, but that doesn't make him a traitor."

J despaired of making the old man understand the laws of averages and permutations - as they applied to espionage. To J's way of thinking only two men could really keep a secret, and even that was chancy. Bring in a third man and you no longer had a secret.

"My point is," he said gloomily, "that Carrandish will be just one more who knows about Project X. And there are far too many now. The thing is getting out of hand and I just don't know how much longer I can promise absolute security." If, he thought, there is such a thing.

His Lordship tut-tutted a moment, then agreed that J might have a point. "But you must have foreseen this, J. You knew that PDX was going to grow and need more money and more personnel and material. Even I saw that and I" - his smile was faint - "I am not a very practical man, as you know."

J nodded. "I have taken every bloody precaution I could think of. I know my job, Lord L, and I have done it. And it hasn't been enough - this Carrandish comes straight to you, like a hound after a hare, and starts blathering about vouchers and unexplained money. That shouldn't have happened, Lord L. Something was overlooked - there should have been a cutoff somewhere and there wasn't."

Lord L was sympathetic. "Someone in your organization made a mistake, J. It happens. I have to read off my assistants a dozen times a day. But don't let it fret you - you can't be everywhere and do everything."

"You can tell that," said J fervently, "to the bloody Horse Marines! Maybe I can't be everywhere and do everything, but I've got the responsibility just as though I could. I am responsible to you and to the Prime Minister and to Her Majesty."

Lord Leighton clapped his gnarled old hands. "Hear-hear. The man is going to make a speech after all. But not
here, J, please! Go down to Hyde Park corner and make it and let me get on working, eh?"

J smiled a little sheepishly as he went to the chair where he had left his bowler and mack and umbrella. He bent to tug on a pair of stretch rubbers, American made.

"Sorry," he told Lord L. "But I am nervous these days. I am in a nervous profession anyway and all this PDX, on top of my other duties, may just be a little much. I don't know, Lord L - maybe I'm getting on for work like this. I think more and more about retiring."

His Lordship snorted. He had heard talk like this before. "The thing for you to do," he said, "is to take a little holiday. Go down to Dorset and join young Blade. I'm sure he can find another totsy for you. That's it, J. Take a few days off. Get drunk. Knock off a policeman's hat. Have Blade find you a totsy and have an orgy. Then, when you're over your hangover and remorse, you can get back to your job."

It would not be overstating to say that J was a little shocked. He stared at the white-haired gnome, a look of doubt on his well-bred Establishment features.

Lord Leighton chuckled maniacally. "You look like you've just been goosed by the Queen, man!"

J's jaw dropped. His false teeth glinted in the firelight. The old scientist chuckled again.

"Blade is having a go with the totsies, isn't he? Ever since his girl, Zoe? Since she found another chap?"

J nodded. "I suppose so, Lord L. Really, you know, I don't pry into the private lives of my people. I - "

"The hell you bloody don't," said His Lordship inelegantly. "Don't give me that cock, old man. I'll bet you know every time they go to the WC."

By now J had regained his composure. "Not always," he smiled. "Now and again they manage to nip in without me knowing about it."

Lord Leighton, having seen J smile, scowled. "Then go and check, man. One of your agents might be doing number two now and you in the dark about it. Go find out. Let me work. And have young Blade up here in two days, remember. I've only a few more adjustments to make on the master computer and we can send him out again. His fourth time, eh! Should be smooth as silk this time. I'm looking forward to it."

On his way back to the dingy office in Copra House, while the taxi crawled through fog, J wondered if Richard Blade was also looking forward to his next trip into Dimension X. There was, sighed J inwardly, really no way of knowing. Richard Blade did his job, performed his duty, and let it go at that. He didn't talk about it.

As the taxi slowed and became jammed in traffic, as the fog seeped in a crack of window and spread tentacles like a dank brown octopus, J's mood began to sink once more. He did smile once as he recalled Lord L's bawdy attempt to cheer him - the old man did have prescience in other than scientific matters - then his mouth dropped. He was worried. Things had gone too well for too long. His stomach pained him and that was a sure sign. The truth was, J admitted as he stared at a flashing Bovril sign without seeing it, that the Project, PDX, was due for trouble. Law of averages. Inexorable. You could never get away from it.

How true. When J got back to his office in Copra House the proof was waiting on his desk.

Richard Blade had left Moscow.
Chapter Two

Somewhere in the Kremlin, tucked away deep in the basement labyrinth, is a department known simply as TWIN. In keeping with the implied dichotomy, and to keep an eye on each other, TWIN is run by two high ranking officers: Ilich Yevgeniy of KGB, Victor Nikolayevich of GRU. The two men, apart from the usual departmental rivalry, worked well together.

TWIN is not a Russian, or an original, idea. The Russians adapted it from the Germans, who called it Doppelganger. The Germans in turn had stolen it from the British in World War I. The British called it Code Gemini.

J, as a young officer in World War 1, had worked in Code Gemini for a short time. J never forgot it.

The basic idea behind TWIN, laughably simple, is predicated on the old belief that every man, and woman, has a double Somewhere in the world. A ringer. The Russians have developed the idea to the Nth degree; where they could not find a double they made one.

A double for every enemy agent known to the Russians. They helped nature by plastic surgery when necessary. TWIN proteges were schooled, at times for years, in walking and talking, mannerisms, background and education, foibles and virtues. They were permitted to speak Russian only during the few days of leave granted each year. The rest of the time they lived in mockups, sets, of English villages, French towns, Brooklyn backwaters, Chicago slums, New York apartments. Hong Kong penthouses. Japanese farms. Peking pagodas.

They were surrounded by people who spoke only the particular language in which the "double" was being schooled. Educated speech, slang, idiom, localisms. They wore the right clothes, smoked the proper tobacco, followed the right sports in the right newspapers. Read the same books and magazines, listened to the same music, that their prototype, an agent employed by some power somewhere on the planet, read and listened to. When possible, scars and dental work were duplicated, as were hobbies and skills and, in some cases, even sexual perversions.

Some of the doubles were never used. They retired, with generous pensions, and were usually given a new Zil sedan. Working in TWIN was a life-time career; you aged exactly as your counterpart aged; you retired when your counterpart retired. If, for some reason, your counterpart came out of retirement, so did you. Just on the chance that you might be of some service to The Party. And make some slight return for the millions of rubles spent on you.

Because it all cost a great many billions of rubles over the years. There was grumbling and muttering among the budget men. Every year TWIN had to fight for its life, justify its existence, and every year it managed to scrape through.

J, some years before, had managed to penetrate TWIN. His man, known in the MI6A files as Monster, was an absolute duplicate of J himself. It was a delicious irony and, for one of the few times in his professional career, J found it hard to keep the secret. He was nearly tempted to go into Kensington Green some night and dig a hole and whisper into it. A thing like that should be shared. This being impossible, J contented himself with the next best thing - when he retired and wrote his book, and when the J in Moscow also retired, then he would tell the world about it.

In the meantime J, alone in his office, his stomach throbbing, stared at the bit of paper he had just taken from his IN basket.

The Russian Richard Blade had left Moscow two weeks ago.

Two weeks. J's stomach fluttered like a gaffed fish. He reached for one of the phones on his desk, telling himself not to panic. He didn't know anything yet. And yet, as he waited for the trunk call to Dorset, his skin crawled. He told himself not to be a fool. There could be a thousand reasons why the pseudo Richard Blade had left Moscow. A vacation, a love affair, a training mission of some sort. An operation in a far part of the world having nothing to do with PDX.

J drummed on the desk and opened a drawer to search for his best spare pipe. He managed a smile at himself. Hell! He had been with Blade, the real Blade, only two days before.

Sitting right in this office, talking about the upcoming trip into Dimension X.

He found the pipe and a pouch of tobacco. But had it been the real Richard Blade?

J bit hard on the pipe stem. In this jet age you could get from Moscow to London, or Dorset, in two hours. Forget two weeks!

J nodded to himself. The trouble was here. The law of averages had run out. From now on he must exercise great caution, watch every P and examine every Q, dot every I and cross every T.

Then he smiled. His stomach eased a bit. He had one sure and infallible check. Even granted that the Russians had stumbled onto PDX - he could not see how - but even if they knew about it, and were trying for a plant, they
must be sure to fail. No Russian had ever been out into Dimension X. Only the real Richard Blade had done that. Only the real Richard Blade could answer questions about the dangers and the weird adventures that had befallen him after be went through the computer.

J smiled again. Then immediately frowned. What, then, were the bastards up to? It would nag him now, he would never have any peace, until he knew.

The call to Dorset went through. A girl answered. She sounded as though she had been crying.

"Hallo? Who is it?"

"Mr. Blade, please. Richard Blade. This is his cottage?"

"Yes. Yes, it is. But Richard isn't here just now, I'm afraid. He is down on the beach."

J glanced out his single window at the thickening fog competing with oncoming night, "The beach, my dear?"

A sniff. Then a moist laugh. "Walking, you know. Not swimming or anything silly like that."

J frowned at the phone. The caution of years could not be shaken off. And yet it was probably nothing - just another quarrel with another of Blade's girls. He had had a lot of them lately. Trying to find another Zoe.

J said: "Who are you, young lady?"

"Mary. Mary Hetherton. I - I'm a friend of Richard's." Silence. Then what J could only identify as a sob.

"I really must speak with him, Miss Hetherton. I wonder if you would be so kind?"

"Of course. Hold on. He can't be very far."

But it was five minutes - J watched the little clock on his desk - before Blade came on the line. "Hallo?"

"Richard? This is J, dear boy. How are you?"

"I'm fine, sir." Blade sounded puzzled. "Why, sir? Shouldn't I be?"

J nodded and smiled at his end of the line. No mistaking that voice, that cheerful, well-spoken, light baritone.

This was the man who had worked for him, for MI6 before it had become MI6A, ever since J had, in person, recruited him at Oxford.

Wasn't it?

"Just being conversational," J said with a laugh. "And, of course, a bit of business. A certain boffin wants to see you right away, Richard."

Unthinkable now to waste two precious days. It might already be too late. There was a tiny snapping sound. J stared down at his spare pipe, the stem broken in half in his palm. You, he told himself, had bloody well pull yourself together and bloody fast, too.

Blade said: "Lord L, eh? I didn't think it was quite ready yet, sir. Not that I mind coming up at once, but the last time I saw you I got the impression that - "

J leaped at it. "Oh, that - er, yes. When did I see you last, Richard? My memory is getting fuzzy these days."

Silence. The wire hummed in desolation. J thought he heard gulls screaming in the background. He guessed at the puzzlement on Blade's face. The lad knew there was nothing wrong with his, J's, memory.

Blade did sound puzzled. Cautious. Remote now. J smiled. Blade was a professional like himself.

"Day before yesterday, sir. In your office."

"Right," said J. "That will be all, Richard. Get up here at once, as soon as you hang up. Go to Lord L's place. You know it?"

But now Blade wasn't giving anything away. All he said was, "I know it, sir. At once. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Richard."

J hung up and sat staring down at the broken pipe. Were his nerves really all that strung up? He tossed the bits of pipe into a wastebasket and reached for another phone. No time to waste now.

As he worked he stared occasionally out the window. Here, in the city, just off Threadneedle Street, it was quiet. Raining again, adding to the murk. There was no shimmer of neon, no street noise. The brokers and the merchants had gone for the day.

J locked his door, a thing he had not done in years. Before he went back to his desk he went again to peer out the window. Out there somewhere, perhaps not in London, or even in England, but somewhere, was another Richard Blade. A double, twin, doppelganger, call him what you would. He was there. As perfect a replica of the real Blade as years of training could make him.

J went to his files and unlocked them. He found a manila folder and scanned it rapidly. The Russian version of Blade had been in the works for some ten years. They had never used him.

Why now?

Could the Russians, impossible and incredible as it seemed, somehow have found out about PDX? Dimension X?
Chapter Three

Richard Blade had never been cut out for the role of rejected suitor. Massive, handsome, steel-thewed, endowed with a superior brain that matched his superb body, he was a man moulded for heroic things. Yet here he was, lurking in a dark areaway on a day of pouring rain, watching another man marry the girl he had loved and bedded. Any moment now she would come out of the little church across this quiet Mayfair street, borne on the triumphant arm of Reginald Smythe-Evans, CPA.

Blade made a bear-like sound in his throat. Reginald Smythe-Evans, indeed! Reggie! Blade spat and pulled the collar of his trenchcoat tighter against the rain. It was almost obscenely like something out of P.G. Wodehouse. Reggie was pale, thin, and had spots. And a great deal of money, because Reggie, Sr. owned the firm.

Yet none of that explained it - Blade knew what did. Zoe Cornwall wanted a man around the house. Operative word - around. A man who would be there when wanted, whether for love-making or fixing things. A man who would not be forced to lie to her, by silence or omission, because the Official Secrets Act had him trussed like a Christmas goose.

Blade sighed and forgot it. That was over and done with. Zoe was out of his life and he wished her well with Reggie. There was a job to be done now, duty to be fulfilled, and the wedding of Zoe and Reggie had - how she would have hated the idea - set the stage.

If matters went well today, if the trap worked, they would take the fake Richard Blade.

The three of them, J, Lord Leighton, and Blade, had devised the plan during an arduous eighteen hour session at the house in Prince's Gate.

Blade, peering through gray ropes of rain at the blank gothic arching of church doors, smiled as he recalled how J had made him recount certain details of his three previous adventures into Dimension X. J was not a man easily satisfied. For a long time Blade had answered questions about the land of Alb, about his adventures among the Caths and Mong's in the Jade Mountains, the perils he had faced in the weird twilight world of Tharn, the strangest of all the X Dimensions into which the computer had sent him.

It was Blade's private opinion that J overdid things at times. His Lordship must have been of the same opinion and, being His Lordship, did not have to remain quiet about it.

"Don't be such a ruddy ass," he told J. "Who in the bloody hell else could it be? Let us have less 'security,' J, and more creative thinking. How are we going to trap this fake Richard Blade?"

J, sulking a bit, retired with his newly repaired pipe to a chair before the fire. Blade and the old scientist talked and, half-heartedly, tried to come up with something. Neither tried very hard. Both knew that in the end it would be J who solved the problem.

And so it was. An hour or so later J had it all worked out. The wedding, the next day, was fortuitous. What more natural than that a rejected suitor, a little the worse for wear, needing a shave and with whiskey in him, should hover in the shadows and watch his lost love?

Lord L rubbed his hands in half-contemptuous glee. "Pure Stella Dallas. But it might work."

Now Blade glanced at his watch. A quarter after four. There was music in the church and massed shadow play behind the vaulting stained glass. One of the great double doors swung open. Any moment now the bride and groom would be descending the rain shiny steps to the waiting limousine. Blade took a step upward from his dark railed area-way so he could look up and down the street.

The driver of the rented bridal limousine was J's man. So was the helmeted, rain caped "Bobby" making his slow patrol near the church steps. One of J's cars half blocked the end of the narrow street. The far end was a cul de sac.

J himself was one of the guests. He was in the church now. When the throng began to bubble out of the church, tossing rice and old shoes and generally effusing, J would have to bubble and effuse with them. Blade wondered how J had wangled his invitation.

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A taxi came down the street at the same moment the crowd spilled from the church. Blade stepped down into the area again and peered through the spiked iron grille. This was the essence of J's plan. A third Richard Blade! J was offering them a decoy and hoping they would bite.

The taxi halted just short of the church. The crowd, perhaps sixty-odd men and women, surged down the steps, broke around the tall figure of J's Bobby and formed two roughly equal groups flanking the lane down which would come the happy couple.

Blade watched the taxi.

The man who got out and paid the driver, refused his change, and stared in a sullen, hurt manner at the church doors, was an excellent actor. J's makeup people had labored for hours. The result, the real Blade admitted now, was
astounding. For a short time, in bad light, the man could pass for Richard Blade. Now he stood, swaying a little, scowling, hands in pockets, waiting for a last look at the girl he had lost. The actor had been coached by J in person.

J came out of the church, moving a bit out from the crowd and remaining at the top of the steps. He was carrying a bouquet and a large paper sack of rice. Blade grinned. J was a thorough man.

J did not expect the Russians to make an attempt at snatching Blade on the church site, or even near it. What J did expect was that the Russians - provided they showed up at all - would pick up the actor - Blade and tail him away from the wedding after he had run through the histrionics of a half-drunk sore loser. That was the script: the Russians would tail the actor - Blade and J's men would tail the Russians. At the proper time J and his men would pounce. And, since the Russian Blade had not put in an appearance - neither Blade nor J had really thought he would - the captured agents would be taken to a certain old house in Hampstead Heath and, in J's parlance, 'questioned a bit.' When J's men questioned you, you usually talked.

It did not work out that way. Not at all.

The florist truck came down the street and passed the church. Traveling slowly, it went on up the street, reversed in a drive, and came back down the street. As it neared the church and the little crowd it slowed to a bare crawl. Blade, concealed in the area-way, watched the truck with a little tic of unease. Still - what more natural than a florist truck, late because of weather and traffic, delivering flowers to a church? J's men guarding the end of the street had no orders to keep anyone out. This was supposed to be a trap - you had to let the quarry in.

A riffle of sound arose from the crowd, a melange of shouts and laughter and old jokes and flung rice and shoes. The happy couple were coming down the church steps arm in arm.

It was a tribute to Blade's professionalism that he took one look at Zoe's face, remembered her body for a last time, and then kept his eyes on the actor - Blade. That talented gentleman, under orders to make a discreet scene and call attention to himself, was trying to push through the throng and get to the newlyweds. He was having rough going. The crowd was small, but tightly knit, and it took the actor a couple of minutes to make it through the last clot of friends and well-wishers. Then, of course, the ham in the actor came out. He faced Zoe and Reggie, the latter taking a fast backward step, and, swaying drunkenly, made a wild gesture and said something. Blade was caught between laughter and pity for Zoe. She really didn't deserve this. It was just bad luck that she and Reggie, and their wedding, had to be caught up in J's machinations with the Kremlin.

Zoe thought it was the real Blade. A drunken, demented Richard Blade. She clung to Reggie as the actor pointed an accusing finger and declaimed something. The babble of the crowd died as they sensed something unusual. Reggie, by neat footwork, managed to remain behind his bride.

Richard Blade, fascinated as he was by the absurd little tableau, was still to blame. He should have been more alert than he was. But Blade was man, not superman, and at the moment he was empathic with poor Zoe. His gorge rose and yet he was near laughter as she in turn pointed a finger at the man she thought was Blade and began to tell him off.

Blade wrote his own dialog for the scene: "Have you gone mad, Richard? This is not like you. Not at all like you! And drunk in the bargain! Oh, Richard, Richard, how could you come here like this and - "

The florist truck nosed to a stop behind the wedding limousine. The back doors flew open and four burly men leaped out. They carried coshes and brass knuckles and used them expertly as they smashed a path through the little crowd.

All of J's plans were knocked into a cocked hat. The Russians, eschewing subtlety, were going after Blade in the most direct manner. Knock down and drag out!

The real Blade had his orders. Stay out of it. J had not even wanted him along. He clutched the area railing, fretting, wanting to get into it and smash about a bit.

J, seeing his plans go wrong, put a silver whistle to his lips and shrilled a warning. The Bobby leaped into the melee. The driver of the limousine came running around his car brandishing a blackjack. J's car at the end of the block spun its wheels, burning rubber, and came tearing down to the church. Women screamed and men cursed.

The four men got to the actor - Blade, smashed him over the head with a cosh and began dragging him down the steps toward the florist truck. J, his whistle trilling all the while, fought to get down through the mob. The Bobby grappled with the men and was knocked aside, went down, was kicked. The limousine driver dove into the fracas, brought one of the toughs down in a superb tackle. The two men wrestled about in the gutter. J's car screeched to a gut-chilling halt, tires smoking, skidding in to block off the florist truck, and four of J's men spilled out eager for combat.

That, the real Blade thought with regret, should do it. The odds were with J's people now. Too bad. He had been looking for an excuse to get into it.

Just too late he heard the oily snick of a door opening behind him. A door he had tried when he had first taken up his position in the areaway and found locked.
There were four or five of them, he was never sure, and they were silent and swift and sure. Blade spun his elbow in a face, kicked one man in the knee, got in a flurry of straight punches. He tried to yell and a leather sleeved arm choked off the sound. Something smashed behind his ear and he went to his knees, still fighting, smashing at the first crotch available and hearing a yelp of pain. Lightning skewered his skull as he fought to get to his feet. They were sapping the hell out of him - one - two - one - two -

Someone said: "Not too hard! Don't kill him!"

They stabbed him. He felt the sting of the long needle as it jammed cruelly through trenchcoat, jacket, shirt and into his hard muscled shoulder. Blade cursed and struck out again, feeling the strength flow out of him, seeing the wet trash strewn concrete of the area-way floor come up to meet him as his knees buckled and he went off the high board into deep, deep darkness.
Richard Blade found that by concentrating on the oriel window at the far end of the long barren room, and by trying to count the acanthus leaves twining on the supporting corbel, he could in some measure resist the milder of the two drugs he was given. During the long hours he came to regard that oriel window as the eye of Cyclops, of God or the Devil, even as a possible orifice of escape should he get the chance. There did not seem much likelihood of this.

And yet he had the means to escape any time he chose. There was only one drawback. To escape he would have to blow up his captors - and himself along with them. He waited.

Not that he was given much choice as matters stood. He was seldom left alone. There were a lot of them and they worked in shifts. They all spoke English and, indeed, seemed to be English. This did not surprise him. Every nation has traitors for sale.

He lost all track of time. When he regained consciousness he was naked on a long table in the barren room. In darkness except for four brilliant lamps trained on his massive body, so helpless now because of drugs and straps and chains. His captors were only shadows and voices beyond the fringe of the lights.

He knew they were running a Bertillon on him. He was well drugged, yet he understood this. It gave him hope. Credit his own brain power, or Lord Leighton’s brain stretching machines and psychological regimes; whatever, it meant that he could fight off the drug meant to keep him unconscious and docile.

Blade feigned unconsciousness. It was the only weapon he had at the moment, other than the lethal capsule he carried in his bowels, and he might not get a chance to use that.

They were very methodical. He felt the occasional touch of a pencil on his flesh as a voice droned out the sum of his scars, moles, warts. His arms and legs were measured and graduated clamps affixed to his skull.

"Dolichocephalic," a voice said. It went on to register a cephalic index of 70 odd. So he was a long head - Blade could have told them that.

Along with the Bertillon he was given a thorough physical search. They stuck wooden blocks in his mouth and examined every tooth for false caps. Blade had none. His teeth were perfect.

He was turned over and had one hell of a time to keep from squirming as a greased rubber glove searched his rectum.

"Nothing concealed on him," a voice said. "Absolutely nothing. I'll swear to that."

Not on me, Blade thought. In me! Waiting to blow you bastards to hell. As soon as I can figure a way to do it without killing myself, too.

After a long time they left him alone. Still naked, still strapped to the long table, Blade opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was the oriel window at the far end of the room. A round bar of moonlight leaked through it. Blade adopted it as a talisman, a refuge, something to cling to. A window was symbolic of a world beyond. It led to freedom. All he had to do was get through it. And as long as he knew it was an oriel window, could count at least some of the acanthus leaves, he was not a total loss, not a mindless thing. He waited patiently, not trying to snap his bonds. Useless, that. They were much too strong. And he did not particularly want his freedom yet - not until he knew more about his situation and about the number and disposal of his enemies. Knew where he was. As of the moment he had not a clue other than the quiet and the hourly chime of a far off bell. He was in the country and not too far from a church. That was all he could be sure of.

He was disappointed when they did not drug him again that night. The stuff was wearing off and so he must face them, fully conscious and deprived of his only weapon. Other than the death he carried in his guts.

When morning came he was given a light breakfast. His right hand was set free and a tray placed on the broad table. Two men served him, one with the tray and another lurking in the background with a pistol in his hand. Neither man would speak. Blade, after the first rebuff, watched the man with the pistol and soon understood that they were all being watched. There was a peephole.

When he finished the meal his right hand was manacled again and the men left. Blade, conscious that he was being watched, lay and stared at the oriel window. The weather was changeable. First a pale beam of sun, then a light flurry of rain, then gloom and, finally, more weak sun. He cared nothing for the weather - the fact that he could see it was important. The oriel window led to the outside.

A man came into the room. He stopped by the door and looked at Blade. Blade stared back. Behind the man the door closed and a bar fell noisily into place.

The man was tall and thin. He wore a well cut suit of blue with a tiny red stripe. Black shoes. Discreet socks and tie. His head and face were covered with a black sack-mask of nylon or silk that made him look like an overdressed executioner. He took a few steps nearer the table and halted, staring at Blade. The eye slits were narrow.
All Blade could see was a flash of white cornea.

The voice was impersonalized, void of intonation or accent, as near a mechanical tone as the man could purposely make it.

"You are Richard Blade?"
The big man on the table nodded. "You know that."
"Of course I know it, Mr. Blade. I want to hear you admit it."
A tape recorder hidden somewhere. Along with the peephole. They were running a last check on the real Blade before they put the phony into circulation.

Blade gave the masked man a cold smile. "So I admit it. I am Richard Blade."
The man nodded slightly. "You are J's man? You work for MI6?"
They did not, then, know about MI6A.

Blade played along. No point in doing otherwise. They knew all about him and about J. Just as J, and Blade, knew all about them and about TWIN. All this was pointless preliminary, a mere skirmishing of pawns.

"What is the object of all this?" Blade said petulantly. "You know all the answers. We are both professionals and you just happen to have won this round. So come off it, eh? I'm cold and I have to go to the bathroom. How about it?"

Blade thought he heard a chuckle from behind the mask. "You will be allowed to go to the bathroom. Not just yet. First I want to put your mind at ease - we are going to drug you again, very shortly, and we have found that an absence of fear increases the potential of the drug. So let me reassure you now, Mr. Blade - you will not be harmed physically in any way. No torture or compulsion of any sort. We do not, er, operate on so crude a level."

"That is nice to know," said Blade. But not exactly surprising, he thought. They didn't want to harm him, rough him up. They intended to smuggle him out of England and ship him to Russia. There the real experts would take over and start working on him. Brainwash him. Milk him of everything he knew. Maybe even make a good Communist out of him. It had happened before.

The masked man's tone was nearly genial. "Yes. I thought you would enjoy knowing that you have nothing to fear in the, er, physical line. I am not even going to question you without drugs. You would only lie to me."
Blade nodded. "You are so absolutely right."
A nod. "Yes. Whereas under the drug you will not be able to lie, no matter how desperately you try. Drugs are a marvelous thing - they make life so much easier for all concerned.

Blade stared at the oriel window. He counted acanthus leaves. The bastard was right, of course. They were probably going to use sodium pentathol on him, or some variant of it, and if they knew their technique he would soon be babbling like a babe in a crib. Yet there might be, must be, some technique by which he could fight back. But what?

He was deliberately vulgar. He said: "You may be right, whoever you are, but right now I have to take a shit. Right now! Unless you do something fast I will have shit, past tense, and your people are going to have a mess to clean up."

Blade did not really have to go to the toilet. In any case he was not ready to pass the deadly bomb he carried in his entrails - not until he saw a way out of the place. But he wanted to know where the bathroom was, and he wanted to start setting a pattern.

"I'm not kidding," Blade said harshly. "I ate breakfast a long time ago. I can't hold it much longer."

"Very well," said the man. "I will send someone for you."
He went to the door and rapped. There was a whispered conversation. In a few minutes the men who had given Blade his breakfast appeared. Both carried pistols. A third man stood near the door, cradling a Sten gun in his arms, as the two men loosed Blade and tossed him a rough blanket to drape over himself. They were still not talking. They pointed to the door.

As Blade walked stiffly past the Sten gunner - he was cramped and sore from the long hours on the table - he grinned and winked and said, "You want to watch those old Stens, chum. They are very nasty things to blow up."

He was ignored. They took him down a short hall, distempered in scabby green, and across an open cobbled court. They had made their first mistake, in not blindfolding him, and Blade hoped they wouldn't think of it. He stepped out briskly before them, three guns on his back, and using his eyes for all they were worth.

He was in an old stable. There was still a lingering odor of horse and leather in the dank air. There were stalls and tack pegs and an exercise post in the middle of the court. The open side of the court was hedged by a crumbling red brick fence with a rusty iron gate. Beyond the fence, along a road deep in mud and bordered by yews, Blade caught a glimpse of a Georgian manor house. It looked deserted.

A pistol jammed into his back. "Get along with it, mate. No use to gawk about - you won't be coming back here."
The toilet, filth encrusted, was in a narrow cubby. No door and no windows. There was a scant roll of paper and a thin piece of soap for the brown stained lavatory. The three men watched him from a safe distance.

Blade draped the blanket over a hook and squatted. He pretended to defecate, thinking that in his profession you had to do a lot of crazy things. Things that never got written up in the spy books or put on the telly.

Who would have believed, for instance, that if he wished to do so - which he didn't - he could here and now shit a bomb?

The men watched. Blade put on his act. Thinking hard. By the time the man with the Sten got impatient and told him to come off the throne, Blade had an idea how he was going to defeat the truth serum. How he was going to try to defeat it. Tell them the truth! A carefully edited, skillfully confused truth. They would never believe him. But could he manage it?

He washed his hands in a thin stream of rusty cold water, donned the blanket again and was hurried back to the long bare room. As they crossed the cobbled area he heard the church clock booming somewhere in the distance.

There were two masked men awaiting him now. The new arrival was short and round, not so well dressed as the taller man, and was pulling a pair of rubber gloves over broad spatulate fingers as Blade entered. A doctor, Blade thought. Near the table was an old tea cart with an array of bottles and trays and a box of cotton fluffs. A short piece of rubber cord and three glistening hypodermic needles. Ampoules of some dark fluid.

Blade fixed his mind for the ordeal.

Concentrate, Blade! Tell them the truth. Easter that way. But only part of the truth. Tell them what they cannot possibly believe. Confuse them, gain time, no real harm done if you kill them in the end.

Cold of alcohol on his arm. Frosty ring. Nice of them to do that. Rubber tourniquet twisting and binding. The sly incisive bite of the needle. Intruder in the vein. Pain slight. Dark liquid flowing into his big body. Flowing - flowing - flowing -

He was in a spinning coracle on a blue-black sea. Far ahead on jutting white rock a phallic lighthouse.

Voice from lighthouse: "Can you hear me, Mr. Blade?"
"Yes."

His own voice? Amplified and distorted so? He must believe it. Believe in himself.
"Good. Can you understand what I am saying?"
"Yes."

Summon now all will and strength. Fight. Concentrate every last bit of power, brain, guts. Cling. Hold on.

"We know, Mr. Blade, that some new installation has been built under the Tower of London. We think it has something to do with MI6. Is this true?"

Truth still easier. "No."
"Come, Mr. Blade, come now. You must tell the truth, you know. You cannot help but tell the truth. Now again - what has MI6 to do with the new construction beneath the Tower?"

"Nothing."

So sly. So true. Blade laughed and laughed in the dreamland where he roamed. Truth paid. Best policy. MI6 didn't have anything to do with the Tower or the computer. It was MI6A. But they didn't know about - about - about -

"Comp her."

Voice: "Repeat that, Blade. Try to speak more distinctly. What kind of a machine?"
"Pute her."

Voice: "A computer? Explain that to me, please. What sort of computer? What does it do? How are you connected with it?"

Tell truth. Sleep now. Leave alone. No! Lie a bit. Lie - lie - Truthful lie. Try - try -

"Skull wire. Wire skull. Explode brain and send out - out - all brain molecular structure torn, scrambled, put back in new place - new place - go Alb see Taken - kill Horsa - Horsa - "

Voice, bitter: "This is sheer nonsense! He's talking about horses. And that bit about the computers doesn't make much sense, either. You must do better."

"Give it time. The drug is just beginning to work. And you mustn't expect miracles. He is resisting the drug - I have never before seen such resistance!"

"You mean he could be lying? Even drugged?"

"I don't know, The possibility is there. I told you not to expect miracles with a subject like Blade. All you can do is make notes and try to sort it out later."

Voice: "Tell us more about what the computer does, Blade. Do you like to work with it? Does it make you feel good? Talk, Blade. Just talk. Empty your brain. You will feel so much better then and you can sleep for a long time. Talk - talk - "

"Pute her. Brain wire. Fly and sink - pain - hurt - pain - no clothes and cold find sword axe - wall so long never ends and did not believe but was so and not true for did end and Mongs and Caths fight fight forever and big cannon shoot and - "

"Sheer gibberish!"

"Sshhhh - you never know."

"Heads falling all time like tree apples - love perfume smell death of women - women - thighs and breasts rub together thighs so silky and smooth hair gone and skin like lemons and lemurs - ha-hah - that is good - lemurs and lemons - axe-redbeard and Beata come cage - I - I - Taleen - I - "

"Absolute nonsense, I say. He is foxing us."

"Shhhh - I don't think so. Not now. He is deep under. He is talking out of his subconscious now."

"Alb bronze axe jade - warrior horse tharn - tharn - the power gone - the power gone - "

"This is no good at all to us. A waste of time."

"Maybe not. Get it all down anyway - you can use it as a guide when you question him again under torture."

"Not me. That is their job."

"Shut up, man, and do your job. Copy down every word he says."

Blade groaned deeply. "I slaveface am - the gorge - towers and the gorge - rain pink sun never - kill the head - head ball bouncing into wine - poison redbreard dru drusilla did always did cold lady maiden could suck suck suck life from suck me - "

Voice, querulous: "This is a failure. No point in going on with it. I am not interested in his fantasy life - I want hard facts. We may as well stop now. How long before he comes out of it?"

"Several hours. Four or five at least. And I wouldn't call it a complete failure. You have some interesting notes."

"Hah! That's because you aren't in my shoes. You don't have to face them with a dozen pages of insane raving. No - I shall just have to do it the hard way. It's all laid on. I only have to make a phone call."

A thick blanket of purple fleece settled over Richard Blade. He smiled and slept. The voices were gone, he was alone in the universe. Peace. Sleep.

Blade came awake feeling weak and sick. Still on the table, still bound to it, still naked though the blanket had been tossed over him. He stared at the oriel window. Dark outside.

A man cleared his throat. Blade swiveled his eyes. It was the same guard, the silent man with the pistol, sitting on a camp chair and nodding a bit, fighting sleep, the pistol drooping into his lap.

Blade felt a surge in his bowels. This would be it, then. The time was as good as any. Night. Sleepy guards and himself coming weak and dazed out of a powerful drug. They would not expect him to give trouble. That might give him just the slight edge he needed.

He strained up against the straps and chains. "I have to go to the bathroom again. Hurry up. And I feel sick - like I'm going to vomit any second. You want me to do it here?"

The man stood up. He had been expecting this. He waved the pistol at Blade. "Hold it, mate. Just hold on to it for a bullet few bleeding seconds."

He went to the door and tapped on it, then came back to cover Blade with the pistol. A minute or so later the other two men came in, one with a pistol and the other with the familiar Sten gun. Blade noted that the Sten was on safety, the cocking handle in the lock slot. He grinned at the Sten gunner. "That thing hasn't blown up in your face yet?" His answer was a grunt.
They herded him along the same passage and over the cobbled area to the toilet cubby. A fine rain greased the cobbles and it was so dark that Blade could not see the brick fence to his left. Coming back it would be to his right. He didn't care about the gate. He would have no time for gates.

As they approached the toilet he began to pray silently that the single rusty razor blade would be on the washbowl. He needed it. He was planning on it. He had spotted it on his previous trip and now all his hopes of success hung on it still being there.

It was there. As he squatted and let himself spew he cast an eye at it. Ancient, eaten with rust, staining the already dirty porcelain, it might have lain there for years. Awaiting this moment.

Blade strained and groaned. He put his head in his hands. "I'm sick at both ends," he complained. "What did those bastards shoot into me, anyway?"

One man grinned. Another spat. All regarded him like a clinical specimen. Nothing to do with them. They did their job, got paid, and asked no questions. And yet the rhetorical question had value. Patter. Patter to distract the audience.

Blade put his head in his hands again, groaned louder, and" peered down between his legs at the toilet bowl. Nothing. Panic flared in him. Suppose he didn't pass it? Suppose it was tucked away somewhere in his guts and refused to come out? Then he must find another way.

There it was. A shiny aluminum capsule that shielded yet another inner capsule. Between the two capsules was a thin buffer of acid. Acid that would be activated by air.

Now the tricky part. His three guards were becoming impatient.

Blade got partially up, groaned hideously, then sank to the seat again. He tried to smile at the men. They stared blankly back at him.

"Be just half a mo," Blade said. "Ohhhhh - now my guts are cramping. Ohhhhhhh - "

He raised, turned, put his hands on the sides of the bowl and began to retch miserably. It was a convincing performance. One of the men said, "He is a sick bloke, all right. Glad it ain't me."

Blade reached down into his own excreta and palmed the capsule. Done. He retched for another minute, acting out his part, then staggered weakly to the washbowl. The razor blade lay waiting. This was also tricky. The capsule was the size of three aspirins - he had swallowed it with oil - and he held it between his left thumb and first finger as he washed his hands. His guards watched.

Blade retched again, bent over the bowl, groaned. He brushed the razor blade into the bowl and waited. Had they seen it?

"Get a jump on," one of them said. "You think we want to fool with you all the bleeding night?"

Blade washed his hands. He gashed the thin shell of the capsule with the razor and dropped the capsule and blade into the bowl. He ran a thin stream of water, saw the capsule vanish down the drain. The acid was at work. Two minutes.

Blade dried his hands on toilet paper as he began to count to himself. Nothing could stop the explosion now. The RXD 1, cyclonite hexogen, T 9, was a liquid plastic that was the latest thing. Only atomic fission exceeded it in fury. In the tight space of the drains it was going to tear everything to hell.

A minute and a half now. The acid was eating away at the inner capsule. It was precise. Two minutes and the acid would eat through and activate the explosive. The explosion, Blade thought, would be mainly upward. But there would be a fringe effect and he would just have to take his chances. He kept counting.

He slowed his steps. Not too fast. He set the training post in the courtyard as his marker. Beyond that he could not go. The rain had thickened. That might help.

Blade listened for the Sten gunner taking the cocking lock off. That he didn't want. That would mean that he took a burst in the back as he ran for the wall. He did not hear the snick he dreaded. They were approaching the training post now. The rain wept and the cobbles were like dirty glass under his bare feet. He began to pull the blanket around him with one hand, bunching it.

They were at the post. For the first time he thought of it as an executioner's post. Stop thinking. Time to go.

Blade stopped and pointed. He screamed, "Rat! Look at that big rat!"

The man behind him bumped into him. Blade whirled and flung his blanket at the Sten gunner. It fluttered and folded over the man's head. Blade butted hard into the man behind him and hurled him back into the third man, who had just raised his pistol. Blade ran.

For the wall on his right. He ducked and he ran, not trying to zig-zag - too slippery for that - and he put on a burst of speed that he had not known he was capable of. Behind him a pistol snapped and the bullet whirred past, smacked the wall and disintegrated. Fragments stung his bare legs. Another shot.

Blade lunged at the wall. It was six feet high and he caught the top with one mighty bound, getting his elbows over and pulling himself up. His spine was an icy rod. Where was the Sten?
A nasty chatter told him. Part of the brick wall exploded at his left elbow. Then Blade was over and falling into the soft earth of a flower bed and running into darkness. Roots and weeds and branches caught at him and clawed and slashed his flesh. He fell. He got up and kept running into nothing. He held his hands outstretched to keep from braking himself on a tree or another wall. He slipped down an incline and rolled through gravel and rock, punctured himself a few more times and ended up against a thick hedge. Dark. He was as good as blind.

The sky lit up behind him. A huge red flower blossomed in the wet night sky. It turned yellow at the edges and before the blast knocked him into the hedge he saw that a lane ran just beyond it. He was flung painfully into the hedge and half through it, wedged into it, while a great G force slammed at his belly and he watched dark objects rise and Soar over what had been the stable. Strange shrapnel pattered down about him as the first sharp flame began to die.

Richard Blade forced his way on through the hedge, came out on the narrow muddy lane and began to run as best he could. He hurt all over.

Thomas Chatters, of the Salisbury Fire Department, never forgot that night. He was to tell the tale a thousand times in the pubs, while his friends stood him pints, and as an old man he told it to his children's children.

He would say: "Got this call to Nine Yews Manor, we did. Lord Hale's place, only the Lord wasn't living there since his divorce. Empty, it were, or supposed to be.

"Engines from St. Giles got there first, you see, and we come along after. Right when we're turning into the lane there comes this great bloke walking out of the woods. Naked as the day he was born, I swear. All cut and bleeding, too. I swear, and don't mind saying he give us all a bit of fright. Great huge lad, he was, and as cool as ice. Walks right up to Ned, as was Captain then, and asks for a slicker to cover him. When he gets that he takes Ned aside and whispers to him. We was all watching, like, and could see poor Ned was puzzled and maybe a little afraid. We see Ned shake his head. Then this big bloke - dark man he was with a stubble, dark, too, and a mean look - this bloke reaches out and shakes Ned like he was a baby and yells something at him and Ned he sudden agrees to whatever it was and the next thing we know Ned puts me in charge. Just like that. And Ned is driving away with the stranger in his own car, turning back to Salisbury. Strangest thing is - Ned never would tell what the stranger said to him."

Blade was dropped off in Salisbury at a police station near Poultry Cross. He whispered a code word to the Sergeant and was given a private room and a phone. The Sergeant left him to rustle up some hot tea and a drop of something to stiffen it.

J was not at Copra House. The night duty man said that he could be reached in Prince's Gate.

Lord Leighton answered the phone himself. His Lordship wasted no time. He congratulated Blade on being alive and, he hoped, well, and turned him over to J.

J sounded ravished. Like a man in shock and drawn so fine that he might go over the edge any moment. After listening to Blade's brief explanation J said: "Stay there. I'll start a man down immediately for you. Any emergency needs?"

Blade said that he could do with some clothes. All of the local coppers were small men. Or so it seemed. J would see to it. He sounded so apathetic that Blade said, "I get the feeling that something has gone badly wrong, sir. Aside from the whole plan, I mean. They made fools of us. But there will be another time. And there are a few of them that will never bother us again."

J was silent. Blade said, "I know something is wrong, sir. You haven't asked me for positive identification yet. How do you know I am the real Richard Blade?" He laughed.

J did not laugh. He said, "I don't have to, dear boy. I know who you are. I should, damn it all! We just sent the fake Blade through the computer."

Blade could think of nothing to say. He was not sure that he had heard correctly. The connection was not too good.

"And you," J continued, "are going after him. Get up here as fast as you bloody well can."
Chapter Five

So far it had been total disaster. Defeat. J was wan and haggard, close to a nervous breakdown, and even Lord Leighton was subdued. J insisted that there was not a minute to lose and briefed Richard Blade on the run, as it were, preparing him for his trip through his computer into some new Dimension X.

They were far below the Tower, in the computer complex. Blade was naked again but for the usual loincloth. Lord L smeared some tar smelling ointment on him against computer burns.

Blade, immediately after meeting the two other men, pointed out the obvious.


Lord L was inclined to agree with Blade. Not so J. J was feeling guilty and inadequate. He had let them all down. The blame was his, and his alone, and he could not rest until he knew the fake Blade was dead.

"Go after him, Dick, lad. Find him. Kill him. That's the one sure way of knowing that he won't somehow manage to get back with the secret."

Lord L poo-pooed this. "You aren't thinking clearly, man. How could he get back - unless I bring him back through the computer?"

"Because," snapped J, pacing the lino-floored preparation room, "because we don't know where he has gone. We have no idea how many hundreds, or thousands, even millions of X Dimensions there are. Suppose you sent the phony Blade into an XD so far advanced in electronic science that our stuff looks like kindergarten? If he survives, and he is smart enough to, all he has to do is explain to the right people and they will send him back. Build their own machine and pop him right back into our dimension. Right into the Kremlin more than likely. Then where are we?"

They headed through the rooms housing lesser computers, walking in single file through the buzzing, scanning, light flashing machines. Men in white coats, all cleared for highest security and representing some of England's best brains, paid them little attention. Blade thought that Project DX had come a long way since that first afternoon when Lord Leighton had sent him to Alb by mistake.

As they approached the master computer, where even J must leave them, Lord L said: "Blade is scheduled for this trip anyway, J, so I am not objecting to that. But you realize that there is no guarantee, absolutely none, that he will land in the same Dimension X as his counterpart! The Russian may be in another dimension entirely."

"I know that," snapped J. "How well I know it! But we must try, take the chance. You haven't changed the computer settings? We agreed, you know - "

"The computer settings are exactly the same," His Lordship said tersely. "That is still no guarantee. There are many factors to be considered and I cannot possibly calculate them all in the short time we have. But we can try."

They reached the final security station. Blade and Lord L were photographed and fingerprinted by automation. J lingered in the back with a burly guard. As Blade vanished through the last door J flipped a hand at him and called out, "Find him, boy. Kill him."

Blade smiled and waved. If he could he would. If he could -

Lord Leighton led him into the entrails of the giant master computer. To the small glass booth sitting on the square of rubberoid, to the chair that so resembled an electric chair. Lord L, his parchment skin stretched drum tight over his fine old bones, was busily applying the shiny electrodes to Blade's body. A web of red and blue wires began to enmesh the big man.

His Lordship said. "J blames himself too much for all this. It worries me, how hard he is taking it. Could have happened to anybody, you know. Just bad luck and, give the devils their due, a lot of bloody guts on their part. Who would have thought the man to be so bold?"

The fake Richard had gone to J's home at three in the morning. He had been wearing a long heavy coat. Beneath the coat he wore a harness containing enough high explosive to level six city blocks. A single wire connected the HE to a simple push button in the man's hand. One squeeze, even in dying reflex, and how many innocents would die?

J had obeyed orders. Carefully and exactly. They picked up Lord Leighton and went to the Tower, and with the threat of total devastation hanging over them, passed through all security and into the innermost sanctum. No wonder, Blade thought now as Lord L taped the last electrode into place, no wonder J was a wrecked man.

The fake Richard Blade had insisted on being shown everything. "As like you," J told Blade, "as if you came from the same egg."

Even the old scientist was forced to concur. "If I didn't know the truth," he admitted, "I would say that you and the other Blade are monozygotic twins. And not only in physical likeness - the Russian had your speech, your coolness and flair, your - "

"I do," the old man said grimly. "I believe it. He sat in the chair and laughed at us and dared us to experiment with him. He hadn't believed a word of our story. He sat with his finger on that damned button and made me put on the electrodes as best I could and he laughed, just like you, Richard, and he said now send me someplace. I did, of course."

"And I," said J, "became an old man! The explosive, you know. We had no way of knowing what the computer current would do to it."

Lord L tapped Blade on the shoulder. "Ready, son?"

Blade nodded. He had doubts that he would ever find his double, that he would land in the same Dimension X - that, and the fears thereof, were products of J's guilt and overwrought nerves - but he still had a job to do. This was his fourth time out, the pitcher's fourth trip to the well. In the strain and intensity of the moment he forgot the imposter. To hell with that. The man had overplayed his hand and was gone. Probably forever. In the meantime -

Lord Leighton smiled at Blade and pressed a switch.

Electricity bubbled in Blade's body. Current flowed in his veins, moving sluggishly at first like stagnant canal water dammed and held. Then the dam burst.

BURST!

Blade, still conscious, saw his body change into a rocket. His brain flared and exploded and there was a scream of power. He left the pad and was launched and flared high into black space. He felt his mind melting, drooling, running into shiny liquid puddles that formed and reformed and melted and remelted.

He soared. He was alone and the universe not yet made. He soared forever because there was no beginning and so could be no end.

Fear. The total potential of terror. Cold and heat and light and dark. Gone. Nothing - nothing - nothing -
Chapter Six

It was as it had been three times before - he lay naked and unarmed in a strange dimension, the molecular structure of his brain so altered by the computer, the neurons and nucleic acids and proteins so scrambled and rearranged, that his cerebral cortex was in effect brand new. He could perceive a new world, a new dimension that was denied to men with normal brains. The human brain was an unexplored abyss: Lord Leighton calculated that the permutations were unlimited; there were thousands upon thousands of new dimensions into which Blade might venture.

Which one now? Where was he? Could he survive?

Richard Blade was already a different person in many ways. He had the same brawn and good looks, the enormous musculature that stood him in such good stead, the rough black stubble that grew fast and would soon become a beard. He retained his memory of Home Dimension better now than he had at first, and His Lordship had succeeded in developing a "memory bank" in Blade's unconscious. He would not have to consciously strain to remember in this new Dimension X - it would all be there for debriefing when, and always that terrible if, the computer found him again and snatched him safely back to HD.

But above all Blade was now a cunning human animal. Survive. There was sure to be danger. Isolate it, identify it, cope with it. Survive.

The slight pain in his head vanished. Blade lay on dirty brown sand. He could smell salt water and could hear the faint sound of waves. He was near the sea. Then a new sound - a feral clicking sound, a gnashing, menacing sound that was very close by.

Blade watched them closing in on him. A ring of crabs.
They had dull brown backs and yellow bellies and they were as big as wolf hounds. They clashed and skittered and watched him with nasty gleaming eyes. They formed a circle and gradually they crept inward.
Blade leaped to his feet. The giant crabs scuttled back in hasty sidewinder movement, clashing great pincers at him. Blade stood in the circle and watched them, at the same time casting about for a weapon. There were a dozen of the crabs and if they all attacked at once his stay in this new dimension would be brief.
The crabs stopped retreating. They watched him, weighing and considering, and he could read intelligence in the cruel eyes. These were no ordinary crabs, quite apart from size. These monsters could think!
There was a good sized rock buried in the sand at Blade's feet. He began to dig it out even as he made a rapid survey of the place. To his left a sea lapped in placidly. The water had a purple tinge to it. Patches of yellow fog drifted here and there. To his right he could see sere brown mountains in the distance.
Scattered up and down the beach, as far as he could see in either direction, were stout poles set into the sand. From each pole hung a skeleton, some of them gleaming fresh and blue-white, some of them old and bleached. The crabs ate well.
They were hungry again. They began to tighten the circle about Blade. He picked up the rock, his big muscles straining, and raised it high over his head. The leader crab, a bit forward of his fellows, paused and the little eyes stared at Blade.
Blade measured the distance carefully. He took a step and heaved the rock. The crab scuttled back, but not in time. There was a nasty liquid sound, as though one had stepped on an enormous cockroach. The carapace shattered and a bloody ooze leaked out. A fetid smell filled the air. Blade felt sick. The remaining crabs fell on their dying leader like a pack of wolves.
Blade ran, vaulted the line of crabs and kept running. At full tilt down the long beach, naked and more than a little afraid, and under a sky as leaden as his spirits. It was a bad beginning in this new Dimension X.
He paused to examine one of the fresher skeletons lashed to the poles. The crabs had left nothing but gnawed bones.
Blade grimaced. What crime could the man have committed, to be so horribly punished?
It had been a small man, judging from the skeleton, and he had died as naked as Blade was now. No sign of cloth or metal or leather. Blade passed on to the next skeleton. Another small man.
He reached the end of the line of poles. The brown beach stretched away into mist. The purple sea, polka dotted with fog, made lonely sounds on the sand. Arid mountains looked inland. Lonely. Desolate. Only skeletons for company. Blade glanced behind him. The crabs were following him.
The cry came faint and forlorn from somewhere ahead of him. Blade stared down the beach. Nothing there. The crabs were getting closer.
Again the cry. A moaning sound filled with anguish and longing and fear. Blade shivered, though he was not cold. There was nothing out there. He moved on down the beach, keeping his distance from the pursuing crabs.
Once more the cry. Blade halted and stared. It was a human sound, what was left of it, and now it came from nearby. But where? He squinted through fog now rolling in from the purple sea.

"Help me! For the love of Bek, help me!"

Blade spotted it. A dark splotch on the sand. It could have been a melon or a ball, a mossy rock. It was a head. A head that moved feebly and a mouth that gaped and cried. "Help me - for the love of Bek, help me!"

The big man glanced back. The crabs were closer now. He ran toward the dark blob on the sand.

The man was buried to his neck in the sand. When he opened his mouth to cry out sand fell into his mouth.

Blade knelt beside the man. Long dark eyes stared up at him in anguish. The head was long and narrow, bald except for a dark babyish fuzz. The eyes implored.

The mouth said: "Save me, master. In Bek's name save me."

Blade looked over his shoulder. The crabs were coming along at a rapid pace. Blade began to dig with his hands. Slow going. He found a shell and began scooping. Sweat popped out on him.

"Try to help yourself," Blade grunted. "Twist and turn, push with your feet. Use your hands and elbows."

"I cannot. I am bound."

Blade cursed and looked back. The nearest crab was now only fifty feet away. The man was only half uncovered. Blade dropped the shell and ran to a solitary pole that stood some ten feet away. It was eight feet high, of iron hard wood and a foot in diameter. It was fitted with iron rings and straps. As he stooped, put his arms about the pole and began to pull, Blade wondered why the man had been buried instead of bound to the pole as obviously intended?

Blade strained. The pole was set deep into the sand. Sweat greased Blade's face and trickled down his body. The great thews in his arms and shoulders writhed like snakes under the smooth hide. Slowly Blade came upright, the pillars of his thighs bulging as he pulled the post out of the clinging sand.

The buried man screamed. Blade, the post on his shoulder, spun around. The crabs had arrived. One was darting at the helpless man. A great claw clashed and opened and reached out to tear away the face. Blade ran.

He rammed the pointed end of the pole through the crab just in time. The impaled creature gave a screaming sound and wriggled in agony. Blade used the pole to push the shattered carapace closer to the other waiting crabs. They fell on it in a fury of slavering and gobbling sounds.

Blade went back to digging, keeping an eye on the gorging crabs. The smell was terrible.

The man's hands were bound with leathern thongs. Blade sawed them loose with a sharp edge of shell. "Now help yourself," he commanded. "Those crabs will be at us again as soon as they finish their brother."

The man tried, groaning with pain. He nodded toward the ravening cluster of giant crabs. "The capado are bad, master, but not so bad as those who set me here. We must hurry. They will return soon to make sure I am dead."

Blade dug, panting hard. "Who will return?"

"The slave patrol, sire. Who else? With Equebus in command. Equebus who is the crudest man in all Sarma - may Bek strike him with fire and burn him slowly for many years."

"Be quiet man, and dig - dig! We can talk later."

"I nearly free. A little more about my legs."

Blade picked up the post and speared another crab. The feast began again. He went back to the man, made a swift survey, then seized him beneath the armpits and yanked him out of the sand. When he let him down the man collapsed on the sand. Blade knelt and began to massage the thin hairless legs. These Sarmaians, for what he had seen so far, were all fragile people. But then he had not seen many of them - one live one and fifty skeletons. None of that mattered right now. First things first. Stay alive and out of danger until he could get his bearings.

He killed one more crab, fed it to its kin, then pulled the slight man to his feet. The long opaque eyes regarded Blade with a touch of wonderment and fear. The little man edged away a step or two from this brawny hirsute giant.

Blade saw it and frowned. Best get matters straight at once. He had a sense of sand running fast from the glass, and he still naked and without arms or any helpful information.

"You need not fear me," Blade said. "Have I not just saved your life?"

The man looked at the crabs, writhing and crunching, and he shivered. Nodded. "You did, sire. I am grateful."

Blade smiled and nodded, then extended his big hand. The man stared at the hand, but made no effort to touch it. Blade laughed.

"In my land we have a custom - when two men decide to trust and help each other they touch hands. Now, I
have helped you and I would have you help me. I am a stranger in your land and I need help. As much as you
needed it just now. Do you agree? Will you touch my hand?"

The dark eyes narrowed as they studied Blade. Then they widened and a hint of a smile touched the lips and the
smooth beardless face was friendly. A small-boned hand sought Blade's in a slight pressure.

"I agree. I am called Pelops. I was a slave, but am no more. I will never be again. I owe you much and I will try
to pay the debt and help you. As long as you do not seek to make me a slave again."

"I make no man slave," Blade growled. "But there must always be a leader. I lead." He gave Pelops a cold stare.
"If you do not accept that, and hide by it, we had better part now. I can make my way without you if I must."

Pelops' smile involved his whole child-like face. His teeth were small and white. "I accept that, sire. I will
follow - so long as it is understood that I am no slave."


"Now or ever - at least to me. But now to things of greater moment - when is the next slave patrol to pass this way?"

Pelops pointed. "Before I answer that, sire, you had best kill more of the capado. They are still hungry."

The crabs were creeping in once more. Blade slew four of them with the sharp pole and tossed it aside. He
grinned at the little man. "Can you run?"

Pelops could. He and Blade backed away from the feeding crabs and broke into a lope, Blade tempering his
stride to his companion. They ran in silence until the brown sand ended and rough shingle began to hurt their feet.

The beach narrowed and Blade led the way into a marshy area where rushes grew thick and tall. A mile ahead of
them the land jutted out in a sharp finger-like promontory.

Watery sun began to leak through the overcast. They squatted in the dense rushes and Pelops broke off a stalk
and thrust it into the muddy earth to observe the shadow. Blade watched in silence.

Pelops crumbled the reed in his fingers. "In less than an hour the patrol will start from the fort." He indicated
the promontory with a finger. "There is a fort there and a small harbor. You cannot see them from this side. The
patrol comes this way and will spend the night at another fort far down the beach. Tomorrow they will return. Or so
is the ordinary way - today it will be different."

Blade stared out to sea. For just an instant he saw a ship moving in the light fog. Or had it been his
imagination? A rakish galley with a great golden sail and a double bank of oars?

He turned to look at Pelops. "How will it be different?"

The little man spread his hands before him. "It must be, sire. They will not find my bones, that is the trouble.
They will find only a hole in the sand and a lot of dead capado. I have escaped again. They will: begin looking for
me. They will never stop until I have been found and killed. And this time, because I have escaped again, I will be
gutted and cooked on a slow fire in public."

Suddenly, with no warning, two silver tears left the dark eyes and slid down the hairless cheeks. "I am afraid," said the man Pelops. "The fire will be worse than the capado. And the sharp knife - "

Blade patted his shoulder. "That will not happen," he promised. "I am a stranger, cast ashore by a terrible
storm, but I come from a far land where we know how to deal with such matters. Obey me, Pelops, serve me well,
and I promise that you shall not be harmed."

Pelops nodded and wiped away his tears. Blade, after a moment, added, "Or, if it must be, I will suffer with
you. I will not desert you."

Blade was an honest man. It would not do to promise more than he could deliver. He was in Sarma now, not
Home Dimension. And still without clothing, arms, or shelter. This he mentioned to Pelops, who was beginning to
watch the promontory with anxious eyes.

"Slaves are not permitted clothes." said the man. "Nor weapons. Except the battlemen, of course. They are
permitted both clothing and arms, though they are still slaves."

Blade watched him. "Battlemen?"

Pelops nodded. "The ones who fight in public. For entertainment. Those who die to make a show for others.
But you, as a stranger, would not know of this."

Blade snapped his fingers. "You are wrong. I, as a Stranger, do know of this." Gladiators. His agile mind, in
that moment, began to weave a plan.

Pelops pointed to the spit of land. "No matter now. See there - the patrol is coming. They always search these
marshes, without fail, for many foolish slaves hide here. They are always caught. We will be caught."

Pelops began to search the ground about him. "I must have a sharp stone - I will cut my veins. I will not be a
slave again."

Blade scanned the sea. No sign of the galley now. The fog was about the same. He peered from beneath his
hand at the file of foot soldiers and horsemen just winding down the far away cliff to the shingle below. He made a
quick estimate. They had half an hour at most.
Blade plucked a tall reed and examined it. It was hollow. He blew a thin little tune through it. Pelops watched him.

Blade pointed to the sea a hundred yards away. "We will hide in there, beneath the water, and breathe through these. Select a good one."

Pelops did so, but his small shoulders were still hunched in dejection. "It may work," he admitted. "It is clever. I would never have thought of it. But we gain nothing but a little time - I told you, when they do not find my body the alarm will be spread all through Sarma. We will be hunted down. A slave hunt is a great festival in Sarma. And you, sire, because you are so -"

He broke off and would not look at Blade.

Blade smiled grimly. "You are thinking that I am too big? Because of my size I cannot hide easily and will be taken soon - and you will be taken all the easier with me? That is what you are thinking, Pelops!"

The little man did not deny it.

Blade said, "You must make up your mind about that, then. Stay with me or take your chances alone. I am going to hide in the sea while there is still time."

He began to crawl over the rough shingle to the sea. At the water's edge he glanced back. Pelops was coming along behind him.

The purple tinged water was tepid and so heavy with salt that they had difficulty staying under. Pelops especially, so light boned, kept popping to the top. He had trouble with his hollow reed and sputtered and thrashed about after a mouthful of water. Blade swore and helped him as best he could. He sounded the bottom until he found heavy rocks. By holding on to these they could stay under.

Blade sent Pelops under first and told him to stay there. Only a scant three inches of reed was above the waves, which were small, and Blade nodded in satisfaction. Barring bad luck it should work and the patrol pass them by. He lingered on the surface, his eyes and nose just above the water, and watched the slave patrol approach.

There was a double file of foot soldiers. Fifty of them. They wore kilts and short jerkins of leather, sandals cross-gaitered to the knee, and flat leather caps on which sparkled metal badges. Some carried long spears, some crossbows, and all carried shields of metal and leather. They were, Blade noted, all small men.

There were half a dozen horsemen. Or so Blade thought at first. Then he saw his mistake - there were five horsemen and one horsewoman. She rode well, her long mass of golden hair fluttering in the mild sea breeze. She alone rode without a saddle, her long white legs clinging securely to the prancing animal. She wore a short leathern skirt and metal breastplates that flashed like mirrors in the sun. She carried no weapons.

Blade delayed ducking under the waves. A little tableau now taking place on shore interested him. The foot soldiers and some of the horsemen were in the marsh, combing it out, walking and riding back and forth. The footmen poked their lances here and there into the rushes. All this was done with a mechanical efficiency that bespoke routine. They did not really expect to find any runaway slaves today.

Blade was watching the girl and a tall, thickset man who was obviously in command of the detail. He rode a white horse and now spurred it close to the girl's mount. Blade's eyes were 10-10 - a fact that none of the doctors in Home Dimension could quite believe - and though he was a hundred yards distant he easily made out the flash of white teeth under a great hooked nose in a dark bearded face. Jewels glinted from a spiked helmet. The big man said something to the girl, leaning close and placing a beringed hand on one slim leg.

She slashed at the hand with a riding crop and shouted at the man, her scarlet lips thin with fury. She pulled her mount around and went galloping down the beach. Equebus - blade knew it must be he - stared after her with a stony composure. His hand went to his belt and half drew a shiny dagger, then thrust it back into the scabbard. He shrugged, spat, and rose in his stirrups to bellow at his troops. Blade went under water and breathed through the reed.

When he surfaced the patrol was out of sight. He nudged Pelops with a foot and the little man came gasping to the surface. As they waded in to shore Blade said: "We will hide in the marsh again for a time. They will not think to search it twice."

He told Pelops of the incident between the patrol leader and the golden haired woman. Pelops grinned slyly and nodded.

"That was Equebus. A nose like a sword? And very dark of skin and beard? Yes - that would be Equebus the Cruel. And you say the girl struck him?" Pelops tittered. "I would like to have seen that."

Blade lay in the mud, brushing away a swarm of gnats. He was beginning to be very hungry and his longing for clothing and arms increased by the moment. Yet he knew he must bide his time and be patient. Wait and watch and listen. Reserve all value judgments. Survive.

His stomach growled. Blade scowled and slapped at the plague of insects. "The golden haired woman - can you also name her?"
Pelops narrowed his eyes at the big man. He appeared quite content in the marshy sludge and the gnats did not bother him. Now he favored Blade with a wry and mirthless smile.

"I think I know. Her name is Zeena and she is the daughter of Queen Pphira, she who rules Sarma in Bek's name. Equebus gets much above himself if he lays hands on Zeena. A bad mistake, that. Just as it is a mistake for you, sire, to think about women at a time like this. When we are naked and starving and unarmed. When I, for one, am terrified. This is no time to think about women!"

Blade's discomfort and empty belly nearly made him lose his temper. He checked himself in time. He stroked the dark stubble on his stubborn chin and regarded the little naked man. Then, because it was his nature, he could not restrain his laughter. The sound burbled up from his massive chest like thunder.

"In the first place, man, I am not thinking about women. I am thinking about food! Then weapons. Then clothing. In that order. But if I were thinking of women I do not see that it is your concern. I like women. I will have women when I please, and I do not need an undersized school master - for that is what you sound like - to say me yes or no. Neither do I need moralizing or philosophy, for neither of them will feed us or keep us alive. I hope all that is clear, Pelops? If it is, then answer my question and leave out the advice - who is this Zeena, a daughter of the Queen, you say? - and I suppose that makes her a Princess? - who is she that she rides with a slave patrol instead of adorning a palace?"

It was near to a tirade, for which Blade later blamed his belly and his frustration, and the little man shrank away. Yet his eyes met those of Blade squarely and he folded his hands on his chest in resignation. There was a primness about the gesture that began to rekindle Blade's anger.

"For that matter," said Pelops, "I was a school teacher. And in the palace, too. In the capital city of Sarmacid. I was a very fine teacher, very likely the best in all Sarma."

Blade took a deep breath and regarded him darkly. "Then what do you do here, little man? Sitting forlorn and naked, hungry, in a stinking marsh with a man you have never seen before? Answer me that, since you do not like to talk about women."

Pelops made a T sign on his scant, pouter-pigeon breast. "I was betrayed by a woman, sire. My very own wife. Me, Pelops, who was the favorite of her six husbands - or so I thought until she betrayed me to the slave patrol. Later, when I was taken, I found out that she yearned for a new and younger husband. This she could not do until I was made a slave and so was no longer considered husband to her. So you see, sire, why I say beware of all women. They are a trap and a snare and a - "

"A delusion," muttered Blade. "I know what you mean, Pelops." There were, he had found, certain constants in any dimension."

His anger ebbed away. Six husbands? This he must know about. He patted the little man on a frail shoulder. "Tell me about Sarma," he ordered. "It will fill the time and there is much that I must know. The more the better. Talk, Pelops, talk!"

Pelops made a tower of his fingers and stared over them at Blade. He nodded and smiled. Blade thought that the man had spoken truth - he had been a schoolteacher.

Pelops cleared his throat. "Of what shall I speak, sire?" He might have been about to address a class.

Blade scowled, then repressed a chuckle. "Of everything, little man. Of anything that comes into your head. Of ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings."

Pelops widened his eyes. "I do not remember having heard of - "

"You wouldn't," said Blade. "Don't let it worry you. Talk."

Pelops was in his element. He did not talk so much as lecture. Blade, interrupting now and again with shrewd and pertinent questions, ingested a capsule history of the land of Sarma in the next hour.

The lecture came to an abrupt end. A horseman appeared far down the beach, coming from the direction in which the patrol had disappeared and making for the fort on the promontory.

Pelops was instantly in despair. "A messenger to the fort. They have found that I am missing. A message will be sent from the fort to Sarmacid and in a few hours the whole country will be looking for me. And you, sire."

Blade was at the edge of the marsh and peering at the oncoming horse and rider. It was the girl with the golden hair.

He spoke over his shoulder. "How will they send a message to this Sarmacid?"

Pelops crawled through the mud to join Blade. The little man was pale and shaking. "There is a semaphore," he quavered. "Flags on a pole." He pointed to the range of brown hills inland. "There are such poles all the way to Sarmacid. The message will be picked up and passed on. It will be in Sarmacid by nightfall."

Blade nodded, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He watched the horse come slowly down the beach, still half a mile off. The beast was tired and the girl was not forcing it. Blade made his decision. He had a half formed plan, still valid, but this new idea could do no harm - if he brought it off.
He turned to Pelops and spoke rapidly. "I - I don't know, sire, if I can do it. I am not a very brave man, as you must know by now." And he made that curious sign of the T again.

Blade frowned at him and growled, "Do what, man? I ask you to do nothing! Just that - you will lie on the beach and play dead. As though you have used all your strength in trying to reach the sea, and have expired just as you did reach it. Just play dead. I will do the rest. Hurry now - she can see you and so put on a good act. Stagger from the marsh and fall. Get up. Fall' again not too far from the marsh edge. I want no great distance, for I must take her by surprise." He was remembering those slim white legs. She could probably run like an antelope.

Pelops forgot his fear in his horror at what Blade intended. It had just dawned on him.

"You would put hands on her? On the person of Zeena, daughter to Queen Pphira?"

"That," said Blade grimly, "is the general idea. I need a hostage. She will do as well as any."

Pelops began to tremble again. He made the T. "That is sacrilege, sire. Bek will swallow us alive. We will die in his fiery maw. I cannot - "

Blade clenched a great fist, then thought better of it. He was in Sarma now and Pelops could not help what he was. Blade folded his arms over his chest and stared down the beach at the horse and rider now only a quarter of a mile distant.

"I see now," said Blade, "why you were made a slave. It fits you, slavery. You were born to be a slave. And you will be a slave again, I can see that, too, because you are afraid of even a little risk. So be it. I will try to do it alone. But I cannot catch a horse, even a tired one, and if she gets away and warns the fort we will be taken at once. I will not be taken because I will die fighting. But you - "

Tears glinted in Pelops' dark eyes. He dabbed at them with a finger and said. "No! I will not be a slave again. I will do it."

Blade gave him a little shove. "Get on with it, then. And remember, die not too far from the marsh. Die well and convincingly and leave the rest to me."

A strange little man, Blade thought as he watched Pelops stagger from the marsh. An odd mixture of cowardice and courage. Blade crouched at the very edge of the marsh and watched the girl approach on the tired horse. He cast a glance at the promontory, thankful that this strip of beach could not be seen from the fort. That would have been fatal.

The girl, Zeena, responded as Blade had guessed she would. At the sight of Pelops staggering and falling on the shingle she reined in the horse. She shaded her eyes and peered down the beach. Then, reassured that it was only the slave they were seeking, she dug her bare heels into the horse's sides and forced it into a weary gallop. Blade smiled grimly and waited.
Chapter Seven

Pelops played his part well. He lay so inert and lifeless that Blade wondered - had the little man chosen that moment to depart life?

The girl, her full breasts jouncing beneath the metal plates, did not so much as glance at the red-fringed marsh. She reined up beside the limp body of Pelops and stared down at it for a moment. She raised a graceful hand to push golden hair away from her eyes. She leaned down for a closer look. But she did not dismount.

Blade cursed silently. Get off the horse. Get down! He willed her to dismount. Otherwise it would be very chancy. He could not wait too long.

She slid sideways on the horse and reached with a long white leg, poked at Pelops with a tentative toe. Blade fretted. And got ready to do what he did not want to do, or even think he could do - run down the horse.

She was not going to dismount. Blade could not afford to let the horse get a start. He had no choice. He pushed himself from the reeds with a great bound, attaining full speed in three strides and running as silently as he could.

Blade gained a precious few seconds as the girl stared at him in shocked surprise - this naked brawny giant! Her eyes widened, her scarlet mouth was a frightened O, she gave one small scream of terror. Then she reined the horse around and dug her heels into it with a shout of command. The beast leaped away.

Blade had momentum. If he was to catch her at all it must be in the first few seconds. He put everything he had into it, oblivious of the jagged shingle ripping his bare feet.

He came even with her and grabbed one of her legs. She slashed him across the face with her crop, screaming now in fear and anger. His fingers slipped from the smooth flesh and he hit him again with the crop. The horse was getting into full stride. Blade grabbed again for her leg. She raised it and kicked him in the face. Blade stumbled, recovered, and put his last strength into clutching at the reins. He tugged. The reins broke.

She was cursing and whipping him now, her lovely face a mask of fury. Blade ignored the blows. He had a grip on the full mane of the horse and was running along with it stride for stride. But the horse was picking up speed.

Blade made a desperation move. He had never bulldogged a steer in his life, but he had seen it done, and if a man could bulldog a steer he should be able to handle a horse. All he could do was try.

He leaped into the air, throwing himself up and halfway across the long arched neck of the horse. He reached around and caught his left wrist in his right hand - he had killed men with such a headlock - and he applied pressure at the same time his heels dug into the shingle. Blade gave it all he had in a single gut wrenching twist of his great arms and shoulders. The neck of the beast came around. It stumbled. Blade hung on and twisted, his eyes popping, streaming sweat, his muscles knotting and roiling beneath the sleek swart hide. The horse went crashing down.

The girl went sailing over the animal's head. She landed hard and lay stunned, twitching a little. Blade ran to her. She lay on her back, arms and legs outflung, her eyes closed and breathing shallowly. A strap had broken and one perfect breast hung free of its protecting plate. It was her left breast. Blade knelt and put his ear against the velvet flesh, felt the nipple stir in automatic reaction to his touch, listened to her heart action. It was strong. He picked up a limp blue-veined wrist. Pulse good, too. She would be all right.

He spun around at a sound behind him. Pelops, crossing himself again and again with the T sign, stared from Blade to the girl and back at Blade. His expression was a mingle of admiration, panic, hope, and abject terror. He was trembling and near tears again.

Blade stood up. "She will be all right, little man. Only stunned and the wind knocked from her." He pointed. "Get that horse on its feet and get ready to move. We must not linger here."

The animal was still stretched on the shingle. It quivered in spasmodic little movements and could not raise its head.

Pelops said, "The horse is dying, sire. You have broken its neck."

Blade cursed, then shrugged his shoulders. "Then we shall have to do without it. That is bad luck, but it cannot be helped." He pointed down at the unconscious girl. "Keep an eye on her while I find a rock and kill the horse. I cannot leave it suffering like this."

Pelops took a step back and made the sign of the T. "I - I cannot do that, sire. Do not ask it. She is Zeena, Princess of Sarma. I taught her as a child. I can do nothing against her person. Or against her word. If she commands me I must obey. So I beg you do not charge me to do this thing."

For a moment Blade stared at the little man, arms akimbo, trying to keep his anger in leash. His impulse was to cuff the man to his knees. He restrained it. At last he shrugged.

"So I must do everything, then? So be it. But you make matters difficult, Pelops. A thing we will speak of later."

He searched until he found the riding crop. It was made of plaited leather thongs. Blade speedily unraveled the
thongs and used them to bind the girl's ankles and wrists. Pelops looked on in horror and moaned and made the T sign.

Blade was in a hurry now. He kept scanning the beach to right and left. It was still empty. He found a good sized boulder and approached the horse. One glance told him that Pelops was right - the beast's head was twisted at an odd angle and its legs kept trembling and threshing on the shingle. "Sorry, old fellow."

Blade raised the boulder high and brought it down on the animal's skull. It died instantly.

When he got back to the girl she had regained consciousness. She did not struggle against her bonds as Blade approached, but watched him with a mixture of cold hatred and curiosity. Pelops stood by in silence, wringing his hands and making the sign of the T. The girl ignored him.

Blade stared down at her. For the first time he was acutely aware of his nakedness. Her eyes, wide and a cool gentian violet, deep pools the color of the nearby sea, roamed over every inch of Blade's body. They missed nothing, those eyes, and their stare gave Blade an uneasy feeling.

She forced Blade to speak first. He smiled, using his charm consciously, if a great naked brute could be said to possess charm, and said: "Do not be afraid, Princess Zeena. I am not going to harm you. I had need of your horse, but the poor beast is dead. And I have even more need of you. But you will not be harmed and as soon as I can I will let you go."

The violet eyes probed his. "Who are you? How are you called? And how do you dare lay a hand on a Princess of Sarma?"

Blade made a little bow, contriving for the moment to cover his genitals with his hands. "I am called Blade. Richard Blade. I am not in Sarma of my own will - but that I will explain later. I dare hold you prisoner because I must. That also I will explain when there is time. Now we must leave this place."

She flashed small white teeth at him. "How came you by my name?"

Blade indicated Pelops. "This little man. He claims he is a teacher - he even claims that he taught you as a child. This is true?"

The violet eyes slanted at Pelops. Her laugh was cruel. "He speaks true. I remember him now. Of all my tutors he could talk the longest and say the least. Until now I had only that against him. But now I shall share your fate when I am set free."

Pelops cringed, made the T sign, and dabbed at tears in his eyes.

Blade laughed harshly. "We will see about that, Princess. In the meantime you will be our guest for a little while."

He bent over her. One lovely taut breast was still showing. Blade lifted it back into the breastplate and secured the strap. She spat in his face. He cuffed her lightly with the back of his hand. Pelops moaned aloud.

The girl lay quietly, staring up at Blade with wonderment and disbelief in her violet eyes. It was, he knew, the first time she had been struck. It had been no blow at all, merely a token warning, yet the effect was as if he had bashed her solidly. Their glances locked and held and Blade thought he recognized another element, a spark, a bare beginning and recognition of something other than hate or anger or resentment. He had seen that look in women's eyes before now. He would exploit it if he could.

Blade, unspeaking, picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder. She was silent. He nodded brusquely at Pelops. "Back into the marsh, little one. You lead. Stay under cover and get us into those hills yonder as soon as possible." Blade nodded toward the sere mountains on the horizon. "And use those scholar's brains of yours - we must have clothes and food and weapons. Consider it an equation and let me know when you have the answer."

Pelops stopped trembling long enough to point at the dead horse. "They will find that. And our tracks lead into the marsh. They will be after us."

Blade grinned. "We will take that chance, then. Forward, little teacher."

For hours they toiled through the swamp. Insects pestered them and small animals scuttled away at their approach and several times they saw snakes. The brown hills appeared to draw away as they approached. The smell of the Purple Sea vanished, the stink of brackish water replaced it, and it began to grow dark.

As the light faded they came to a spreading lake of black water in which thorn trees grew closer together. At this malign and forbidding sight, Blade called a halt. They would have to wade the lake - Pelops said this was possible - and Blade did not want to chance it at night. He found a fairly dry spot where two giant rocks arched together to form a partial cave, and dropped the Princess without ceremony. With intent. That which he had glimpsed in her eyes was still there and Blade meant to use it. For what advantage he could. A tenuous advantage, to be sure, and not to be trusted, but for the moment it was much better than nothing.
The Princess Zeena said, "I am bound too tightly. I hurt. Will you loose me, Blade?"
The big man smiled. "Can I trust you, Princess? You will not try to run away?"
The violet eyes met his gravely. "I will not run away. You have my word for it. Where could I run? We have
come far and I am as lost as you may be."

He had intended to free her anyway. Free her and watch her closely to see what she would do. His plan, after
all, depended on her attitude. He could have misread her eyes. A woman's eyes have been known to lie.

As he began to unknot the thongs around her ankles she added, very softly so that Pelops could not hear, "I do
not think I want to run away, Blade. I am most curious about you. I see now that you spoke the truth and will not
harm me, and I want to know about you. I have never seen such a man as you before - I did not know any such man
existed - and I have many questions. And - " she glanced at the darkening swamp, "I would be afraid to venture there
alone. There may be dangerous beasts and foul things that come out at night. No, Blade, I will not run away."

He left her chafing her wrists and ankles. He set about making the best camp he could. It was not much, yet
better than he had expected. Pelops, much to Blade's surprise, fumbled about the lake edge until he found some
sharp flints. The largest flint he used as a knife and dug the punk out of a fallen log; he managed to start a fire with
smaller flints, and then set about gathering brush that was dry enough to burn, albeit very smokily. He found slender
saplings and bent and tied them with reeds to form a crude lean-to over the cavern rocks.

The Princess Zeena watched all this in silence. Blade, pleased, slapped the little man on the shoulder. "You do
dwell, Pelops. You also amaze me. I take back some of my churlish thoughts about you. But I don't suppose that even
you can find us anything to eat? If I starve much longer my stomach will stop complaining and disappear."

Pelops smiled shyly. He had lost some of his fear and awe of the Princess, seeing her carried like a sack of
grain on Blade's shoulder. And, a much more efficient leveler, watching her beg to be allowed to squat and make
water within their view. Since Blade would not let her get out of his sight.

Blade, watching this with a secret smile, had known something of what little Pelops was thinking. A woman
may be a Princess, she may be lovely and desirable and aloof, untouchable and out of sight, yet when she squats to
piss or shit something happens. The gloss wears thin.

Zeena herself, though she complained at first, appeared to have immediately forgotten the incident.

Now Pelops, new confidence in his tone, said, "I will try to find us food, sire. I have heard of a lake called
Patmos Tarn; most people fear it, but it is said to contain strange shelled fish that come out at night. It may be that I
can find us food."

He nodded toward the lean-to, where the Princess Zeena sat and slapped at insects. "You trust her not to escape,
sire?"

Blade grinned. "I trust no man. Nor woman. Go search for food, little man, and leave the Princess to me."

In more ways than one, Blade thought as he went back to the lean-to. If the initial part of his plan worked he
would have made an ally and so increased his chances of survival in Sarma. He would also have a woman on his
hands. Blade had no false modesty about his sexual prowess. Yet he wanted help, an ally and a friend, not an
encumbrance. He shrugged his big shoulders and laughed at himself. There were worse fates.

Blade fed the fire with some of the drier brush. It crackled and sparked. The Princess Zeena watched him with
cautious eyes. Blade sat staring at the fire in silence. He now had, as he had not had at first, total recall of Home
Dimension. Where on his other trips into Dimension X his memory had been fogged - on his first trip to Alb it had
been very bad - now it was clear and sharp. Credit Lord Leighton for that.

What were Lord L and J doing at the moment? Blade's lips creased in a wry smile. That was easy. J was
worrying himself to the edge of a nervous breakdown; Lord L was working like a beaver and was happier than more
normal, and less talented, men.

Blade, lost in his thoughts, firmed his mouth into a hard line. The stable near Salisbury was gone, total
destruction, and only a few parts of bodies had been found. He recalled the strange shrapnel falling about him as he
lay in the hedge. They would never bother him or MI6A again. As for his twin, the double, the pseudo Blade, that
would have to wait until -

Soft fingers touched his biceps. She had moved close without a sound. Her fingers continued to stroke his great
sleek muscles. She leaned to peer up into his eyes.

"Who are you, Blade? What are you? Why do you affect me so strangely?"

He put an arm about her and pulled her gently against his chest. He was no longer conscious of his nakedness.
He knew now that what he had been thinking of as a necessary task was going to be a pleasure. Still necessary, still
something that must be done if he could do it, but a pleasure. He began to lie, fluently and softly with the skill
attained by three trips into the unknown.

He cradled her as gently as he might hold a child. He stroked her long golden hair and ran his fingers lightly
down her spine. She shivered in his embrace.
"In my country," said Blade, "in the far land from which I come, and of which I will tell you when the time is right, we have a sign between men and woman. A sign of trust and faith, of friendship and love. Do you in Sarma have such a sign?"

Zeena nodded. Without hesitation she grasped his half limp penis in a firm hand. "We have such a sign," she murmured. "This is the sign. A woman touches a man so, and the man touches the woman so. It is the sign of all the things you mentioned. This is so in your land?"

Blade, being the man he was, handled it well enough. Her touch had made him instantly tumescent, ready for love, yet he only leaned down to kiss her.

"Not exactly," he explained. "This is what I meant. We do the other, as you do now, but we do this first. It is called kissing. Come, Zeena. Try it. If you do not like it you will not have to do it again."

She held fast to his penis. At first she shied away, pulled back, tried to disengage her lips. Blade persisted gently, holding her, pressing his mouth on hers until she began to respond. Her mouth was soft and warm and moist. Very gradually, at his skillful urging, it opened and he felt her teeth and the tip of her tongue. She began to breathe faster, the air sobbing through her nostrils. She pressed the cold metal of her breastplates against his chest. At last, reluctantly, she released her grip on him. Her arms crept up and around his brawny neck. He held the kiss for a long, long time and then put her gently away from him. He smiled down into the gentian eyes.

"Kissing," he said softly. "That is called kissing. Do you like it?"

She nodded. "It is very strange. I have never done it, or heard of it before, but I like it." Her red mouth crinkled in a smile. "But I like our way, too. I would not like to give it up. Can we not have both?"

Blade smiled and told her yes - they could certainly have both. They heard Pelops coming back and she moved away from Blade and put a finger to her lips.

"When he sleeps," she whispered. Blade was relieved to find the idea of privacy was not unknown in Sarma.

Pelops flung three large turtles on the ground near the fire.

"These were his strange shelled fish. But how to get to the edible meat? The flint knives were not equal to the iron-hard shells. Blade solved that by simply tearing the shells off with his hands. They ate well enough of turtle steaks roasted on the ends of sharpened sticks.

Zeena retired into the brush for a few minutes. Blade let her go. He did not think she would run away now.

Pelops regarded the big man over the fire. His gaze wavered, then came back to face Blade's stare. He was clearly trying to muster his courage. Blade waited.

"The Princess Zeena - " Pelops began.

Blade nodded encouragement. "Yes, Pelops? What of her?"

Pelops swallowed hard. "She is a Princess, Blade. Daughter of Pphira serving her time as a cadet with the slave patrols so that she may one day learn to govern. All royal women must do this - learn the arts of war and administration, of justice, from the time they are little girls. I myself taught the Princess the art of eloquent speech by reciting day after day the famous speeches of past Queens."

Blade yawned. "You were well chosen for the task, Pelops. But what has this to do with me? And I warn you - no lectures! I am in no mood for them."

"Nor I," said Pelops. "I am a coward, as you know, and much too frightened for lectures. But I must warn you - commoners are forbidden by law to marry royalty. The penalty for so doing is a terrible one - the commoner is hurled alive into the flaming jaws of Bek-Tor."

Pelops made a hasty sign of the T and muttered something that Blade did not catch. He gulped hard and said, "I saw you. I came quietly with the shelled fish at first. When I saw what you were doing I made noise."

Blade regarded him with amusement. "You are a brave little man, Pelops. And you are also something of a fool - I have no thought of marrying Zeena. Why do you think of this?"

"But I saw," exclaimed Pelops. "I saw you touching each other. That is marriage, Blade, and it is forbidden between you."

Blade sighed. He got it now. Sex and marriage were one and the same thing to Pelops and, by extension, in all of Sarma.

He stood up, stretched tremendously, yawned, and patted Pelops on the head. "Don't worry about it, my small friend. Go to bed. And sleep - do not pry. Think of the future - your own future. What you do not see you cannot be witness to. You understand me?"

Pelops stroked the baby fuzz on his skull. "I understand, sire. You command. I obey. But never forget that I warned you."

"You warned me," Blade said curtly. "Goodnight."

Pelops was already snoring in a corner of the lean-to when Zeena came back. She was dripping from a bath in
She came closer to him. Blade could smell the clean woman flesh. And something else - the faint musk odor of a woman aroused.

"Oh, Blade," she whispered. "I want you."

She removed her breast plates and dropped them with a little clatter. The full white rounds, pink-brown tipped, blue veined and swollen now with her excitement, trembled like living marble as she moved to him. They spread and flattened against his chest as he took her in his arms. She put her mouth near to his. "Kiss, Blade."

They kissed, standing, for a long time. She was a fast learner and presently drew his tongue into her mouth. She began to manipulate him. Blade kissed and sucked her breasts and let his hands roam over her body, the small waist, hard firm nates, the long legs, and back.

But when at last he took her to the ground, gently, and tried to take command she would have none of it. She squirmed agilely, with surprising strength, and rolled atop him.

"You do not know," she whispered. "In Sarma it is done so - I am a woman. You are only a man. You must obey me in these things, Blade."

For the moment he humored her. He was aroused and having trouble with his breathing and wanted only to get on with it. Yet she delayed.

Blade lay supine, waiting, his enormous lingam a tower up-thrust. Zeena regarded it, her violet eyes narrowed. She touched it and bent swiftly to kiss, then retreated and made the sign of the T. She stared at the dark sky, then down at earth and scratched a symbol in the dirt. She began to mutter, a prayer or litany of sorts, most of which Blade could decipher although she slurred words and spoke softly.

"I offer myself, Bek-Tor! Two bodied God, God of two, God of good and evil, of sky and earth. I immolate. I marry. I shed my virgin blood and so stain this man with it that never can it be washed clean."

Blade blinked. Virgin? He had not counted on this.

Zeena came to stand wide legged over Blade. She stared down at him with eyes slightly glazed now. Slowly she began to lower herself. Lower - lower -

Blade ached, wanted, desired, demanded. His fingers arched and clawed at the earth. At the moment he was more stallion than man, more beast than human, and knew it and did not care. A sound came out of him that he had never heard before.

Lower. Zeena reached down and found him and guided him to that sinking pink orifice. Flesh touched. Blade fought back the urge to lurch upward and penetrate her. Do it her way. For now.

She raised both hands to the sky. Blade put his hands on her breasts.

Zeena cried out, shrill and sharp, "I marry, Bek-Tor. I marry!"

She let her weight fall on Blade. She pushed down with all her might. Her face twisted in agony and ecstasy and she screamed once. Blade felt the warm stain of blood as it trickled down his thighs.

As his senses fled, as he began to thrust into her, as the slick maddening friction began slowly to build, Blade had a last clear thought.

He was sure as hell married. Married in Sarma, to a Princess of the Royal Blood. What might come of it?
Chapter Eight

In the next week Richard Blade learned much. Enough to stay alive and to see his schemes prosper. He threaded a maze of danger and walked adroitly amid gin and pitfall; he coaxed and cajoled and demanded and threatened. He survived.

It was not without irony, and this he admitted to himself, that his survival was largely due to his phallic prowess. Blade, so magnificently conditioned in body and brain, so painstakingly educated and nurtured through his formative years - and now the end product of Lord Leighton's computer and millions of pounds - now depended almost solely on his ability as a cocksman. There must surely be a moral in the predicament somewhere. He made a firm decision to think it out when he got back to Home Dimension. If ever.

It had been very simple. After the first love making, after Zeena broke her hymen on him, Blade had taken over. To be more exact he had turned her over. When at first she resisted he used force and told her, "I am the man. In my land it is done this way. And this, Zeena, is the way it is going to be!"

And so it was. Zeena soon lost her look of bewilderment, forgot for the moment that women ruled in Sarma, and began to slide under him at every opportunity. Even Blade, as robust as he was, would have welcomed a respite. He was careful not to let Zeena see this.

He developed his plan, revealed it to both Zeena and Pelops and took their acquiescence as a matter of course. If he had learned anything from his excursions into Dimension X it was that he must always be in command. He must stay on top of the situation, think and plan ahead, and hold his mistakes to a minimum.

So, according to plan, they had come to Barracid, where the battlemen trained for the great gladiatorial shows in the capital city.

"Where better to hide," said Blade, "than among slaves? As slaves. Who sees the trees when he is in a forest?"

Pelops objected at first. He cried, literally and vocally, and said he would not be a slave again. It was Zeena, not Blade, who talked the little man around. For by this time Zeena was Blade's slave. Her eyes seldom left him and she leaped at every opportunity to make love. She loved him in love. She doted. She lavished herself on him. Blade had shown her a paradise hitherto unsuspected by any woman in Sarma, and she was not about to lose it.

All this, as Blade well knew, could turn out to be a problem. But for the nonce it fitted into his plans.

He told them a great lie about being shipwrecked. His twin brother, in appearance exactly like himself, had vanished in the storm and wreck. Blade now sought him. In this Zeena promised to help.

After a long council of war it had been decided that Blade, as a stranger, was not, could not be, rigidly bound by Sarmaian law. He did not, in fact, exist in Sarmaian law. He was a stateless person. In Dimension H he would have been a person without a passport. If this was a handicap it was also an advantage. Blade, cunningly thinking ahead - and on the basis of information from Pelops - declared that he would become a battleman. A gladiator. He saw at once that it was the path to fame, fortune, and status.

"I will not have it," cried Zeena. "You will be killed. You are husband to me now and I would have you live."

She moved close and began to caress him.

Blade stroked her and nodded at Pelops. "Ask him."

Pelops, who was to go as Blade's servant - not slave - rubbed his fuzzy skull and said that if Blade was familiar with arms, which he said he was, then he should have no trouble. There was not a man in Sarma to match Blade in strength.

"Unless," Pelops hedged, "it be Mokanna. The High Captain of Battlemen. I have never seen him, or seen him fight, but I have heard that he is a monster among men."

Blade shrugged his big shoulders. "That may be. Let us go, then, and meet this Mokanna and find out. You, Zeena, will do as we have agreed."

Zeena, as a Princess of Sarma, had the right to sponsor a battleman. She would pay for his keep and his education and he would fight for her in the lists. This, Pelops explained, was often done. And it was not unusual for a woman to marry a successful battleman.

"It is the best way," Blade said. "Go to Sarmacid, Zeena, and tell your story. As a Princess of the Blood you will not be questioned too much -"

"My mother the Queen will question," said Zeena with a tight laugh. "She questions everything, my mother. She is a witch and jealous of all her daughters."

By this time Blade was aware that no love was lost in the Palace. Zeena, as she prattled between love bouts, told him some weird tales of intrigue and double-dealing and murder.

"No mind," said Blade. "Go tell your story. Pelops and I surrendered to you. You took mercy on us and did not turn us over to the slave patrol. Instead we are to train at Barracid and I am to represent you at the next great battle
show. Do it, Zeena. It is a story that will be believed."

"But I will miss you too much, Blade. I will not have you to bed me."

"If you do not," said Blade grimly, "I will eventually be hunted down, as will Pelops, and then I will be made a
slave in fact, perhaps even executed for aiding Pelops. Is that what you wish?"

Zeena had gone to Sarmacid. A royal escort was provided by the High Captain of Battlemen, Mokanna, with
much fawning and servility. At first it amused Blade, then gave him serious thought, to see the power of a woman so
absolute. Sarma was a matriarchy with a vengeance. Blade cautioned himself not to forget it. Life in any Dimension
X was tricky enough - in a land ruled by women it might prove to be fatally so.

They were quartered in rude stone huts on a vast brown plain not far beyond the black lake called Patmos Tarn.
Beyond the pale khaki mountains lay the city of Sarmacid. On the plain outside the encampment, near a row of T
gallows, stood a small stone image of Bek-Tor. The God of Sarma.

On this day Blade was running. Each battlemen did five miles a day for conditioning. They were not watched,
or even guarded very closely, for all logic was against any attempt to escape. Legally the battlemen were either
slaves - though not often treated as such - or men who had volunteered to escape slavery and perhaps make their
fortunes. In certain cases a man might be given such a choice. Much depended on the judge - always a woman,
because women held all power in Sarma.

Blade, clad only in a loin strap and carrying a sweat rag, stopped to gaze at the statue of Bek-Tor. The thing
fascinated him and made him uneasy at the same time. Yet his survival depended on understanding, and unless he
understood Bek-Tor and the dark religion He-She represented he could not understand the Sarmaians.

He-She. Bek-Tor was a hermaphrodite god.

Blade wiped sweat from his face and stared at the god with the revulsion he always felt. Not a usual thing with
him. He understood well enough that all men, in all times and all cultures - and it would seem all dimensions -
created their gods as they must. An inexorable law - that man must create a god of some kind.

Blade wiped sweat from his eyes and grimaced. With a grin, on impulse, he cocked a snook at the stone image.
The face gave him a stony leer in return.

The face might have been that of a lovely woman or a beautiful man. The hair was cut short and thickly curled.
The breasts were full and pointed with long nipples, the waist slim and incurving.

At the waist the figure changed into that of a man - and a woman. The legs were sturdy and powerfully
muscle. Both sexes were represented in the genitals - there was a mons veneris, a stone vulva, and below this
dangled a penis and testicles.

This was Bek-Tor. Bek the woman - good. Tor the man - evil. Tor was never mentioned when it could be
avoided. Sarmaians did not like to speak of evil. When they made the sign of the T it was to invoke Bek, but more to
propitiate Tor. They warred, these gods sharing the same body, and sometimes Bek won, sometimes Tor. Bek
looked upward, to good. Tor looked down, to the earth where evil reigned.

Blade had heard of the bestial sacrifices made to Bek-Tor. Girl babies cast into flames. Male children were not
considered important enough to sacrifice.

He spat in disgust and was about to turn away when someone called his name. Mokanna stepped from behind
the statue of Bek-Tor. His grin was evil, his stumpy teeth stained black from chewing a tree gum the Sarmaians
called chicso. He carried a whip and around his paunchy waist was belted a short sword.

Mokanna pointed with his whip to the stone image. "You have committed sacrilege, Blade. I saw it." He
pointed to the gallows. "For that I can have you hanged and whipped."

It was a cruel punishment which Blade had witnessed once. For sacrilege, for disobeying an order, for failing to
do your best in practice, for any number of things a man could be hanged. A slender but strong cord was looped
around the penis and testicles and spliced into a longer and thicker rope. The man's hands and feet were bound and
he was hauled up. The duration of punishment varied with the offense. Few men survived the ordeal and those who
did, as the grim joke had it, would never marry and make children.

Blade stared back at the man. Ever since his arrival at Baracid he had been expecting trouble with Mokanna
and here it was. Mokanna resented Blade's physique and skill with arms. While Blade lived he was a challenge, as
yet unspoken, to Mokanna's authority. Blade knew well enough that were he not a protege of Zeena, sponsored by
her, both he and Pelops would be dead by now.

He forced himself to speak calmly. "No sacrilege, Mokanna. I only spat. I have been running and my mouth is
dry. What can you make of that?"

Mokanna showed his black teeth. He was shorter than Blade by a foot, but by Sarmaian standards he was an
enormous man. His bowed legs were like tree trunks and over a round belly his chest and shoulders were massive
and knotted with muscle.

"I make of it what I wish," said Mokanna. He snapped the whip idly in Blade's direction. "If I wish to make
sacrilege of it I will do so. If I wish to string you to a gallows I will also do that. I do not like you, Blade. You are a stranger, such as we have never seen in Sarma, and I do not trust you. In short. Blade, I wish you evil. I invoke Tor to do you harm."

Blade was puzzled. What was the man getting at?

He crossed his arms on his chest and met Mokanna's glittering dark stare. He gazed beyond the man at the cluster of stone huts on the far horizon.

"You have come a long dusty way, Mokanna, to tell me that which I already knew! Come, man! You are a monster and I will not weep when you are killed; but you are no fool. Nor am I. What really brought you to spy on me?"

Mokanna laughed, a harsh sound, and drew the plaits of the whip through his fingers. "No, Blade, you are not a fool. I give you that. And you are right. I did not come to accuse you of sacrilege against Bek-Tor." He bowed to the image and made the T sign.

Blade waited patiently. He was curious - and alert. They were alone on the vast plain. Mokanna had the sword and whip. Was it murder?

Mokanna took a step toward him. Blade leaped backward in a defensive karate position. Lord Leighton's work on Blade's midbrain had been extensive. He forgot nothing. He brought all his skills into Dimension X.

Mokanna stopped, flicked the whip in the dust, and laughed again. "I do not seek to harm you, Blade. You have my word on that."

Blade barely kept the sneer from his voice. He did not really want to push the man too far at this time. His own position was not a strong one.

So he muted it. "I trust no man. Say what you must and leave me alone."

Mokanna shrugged his big shoulders, on which the black hair grew in profusion. He wore only a leather vest and short breeches of the same material. A chain of some silvery metal hung around his thick neck as a badge of office.

"I come here that we may speak in secret, Blade. There is a man called Equebus. You know of him?"

Blade's puzzlement increased. Equebus, the Captain of the Slave Patrol? The same who had made the pass at Zeena on the beach and been lashed with a riding crop for his pains? What had Equebus to do with him?

He nodded. "I know of the man. What matter?"

Mokanna prodded at his ugly mouth with the butt of the whip. "Much matter, Blade. Equebus came to me last night, after you battlemen were bedded down. We spoke of you, Blade. We wasted three torches in speaking of you. Equebus is also your enemy, Blade, as I am."

Blade smiled coldly. "So? In my land a man is known by his enemies."

Mokanna shook his head. "I do not understand that. Nor you. Nor this land you speak of. But I do understand Sarma - and Equebus. The man is ambitious. He wishes to be the first husband of the virgin Zeena."

"He comes a little late for that," said Blade. And could have kicked himself. It was a mistake.

Mokanna leered. "So that is how it is, eh? T had that thought myself, when the Princess was so concerned about you and that little man of yours, Pelops? Ah, I had that very thought. But it is not my place to think about such matters, so I forgot it. You are not just a stranger, a slave, who gave yourself up and begged mercy. You have known the Princess. You are married to her!"

Blade waited. He was still puzzled as to Mokanna's motives and could not see where all this was leading.

Suddenly the other man went into a gale of rough laughter. He slapped his hairy thigh with the whip. "Equebus is not going to like this when he knows - unless he already knows, or guesses, which is possible. But it still changes nothing, Blade. Equebus wants you dead. Last night he promised me money and promotion if I would see to it."

Blade retreated another step. Mokanna was fingering the hilt of his sword.

Blade said: "Are you, Mokanna? Going to see to it?"

The Captain frowned. He narrowed his eyes in thought. He half drew the sword, then thrust it back into the scabbard with a clang.

"I am tempted," he said at last. "Vastly tempted, Blade. I have no love for you. But if you are really married to Zeena it makes a difference. Are you?"

Having already made the mistake, Blade decided to gain what he could from it. He nodded. "Yes. I did not lie. By your Sarmain law we are married."

"Hah!" Mokanna rubbed his chin. "So. Married. And you train here as a battelman while she goes to Sarmacid to soothe the Queen and prepare her for the news. That is about the truth of it?"

Blade nodded curtly. "In part. But I am to be a battelman and fight under Zeena's sponsorship. That is no trick. There will be no begging off. I must earn my way." He did not add that only by so doing would he achieve status and freedom enough to continue the search for his double.
Mokanna was silent for a long time, his brow creased in thought. Such deep thinking, Blade noted, was foreign to the man.

"A man must choose the winning side," Mokanna said at last.
Blade smiled and nodded. "If possible. It is not always so easy to know."
Mokanna grumblingly agreed. "But you are already half way to what Equebus aspires to. Position and preferment in Sarmacid. And you have known the Princess Zeena, married her, and she works for you in the city. You are far ahead in this matter, Blade. I will choose your side." He beamed at Blade as though he were bestowing an accolade.

Blade made a mock bow. "I thank you, Mokanna. You do me a great honor."

The sarcasm was wasted on the Captain. He waved a huge hand. "It is really nothing. But there is a slight problem - I have taken money from Equebus and made him certain promises. But one does not have to honor promises, or return money, to a dead man. You must kill him, Blade. This very night. It will be easy. I have arranged everything."

Blade nodded. "I would have bet on that."
Mokanna blinked, then went on. "There will be one small change. Instead of Equebus slaying you, as an escaping slave - for legally you are a slave - you will slay Equebus. It will be simple. Then, you will tell the Princess about me, describing me as your friend and the man who saved your life, and I will get the position in Sarmacid that Equebus seeks. It is agreed, then?"

"I make no promises," said Blade. "But I will listen. Tell me the details of this plan of yours."
Mokanna stared at the stone huts in the distance. Clouds of dust hovered over them now as the battlemen drilled and practiced killing with wooden swords and lances. "Come," said the Captain. "It is a long walk and I am hungry and dry. I will tell you on the way."

Blade joined him, still wary and keeping his distance. Mokanna laughed at that. "You need not fear me, Blade, until I find that you are not going to win. Then beware me."
A faint smile quirked Blade's mouth. "You are an honest rogue, Mokanna. I give you that. I may even have some regrets when the time comes to kill you."

Mokanna pointed away in the distance. Flags were fluttering from the signal pole in camp.
"Equebus," explained the Captain. "He is signaling from the black lake, where he and his men are waiting. He will be wanting to know how his plans go."

Blade said nothing. He must take Mokanna's word for it. Pelops could read the flags. Blade could not. It was a thing he must do - learn to read the signal flags.

"It is a simple plan," Mokanna was saying. "There's to be a slave uprising tonight in the huts. A conspiracy of the battlemen to kill me and escape. I myself have arranged it, for I have many spies among the slaves, and you are to be the leader, Blade."

"Me?"

"Of course. At least you will be accused of it. I have already paid my spies, with Equebus' money, to swear that it is true - that you are the ring leader. Equebus and his slave patrol will be waiting nearby. You will be taken, the uprising will fail, and you will be executed immediately. It is a good plan, yes?"
Blade agreed. "It was. Until you told me."

"Yes," said Mokanna. "Now it is a better one. I will tell you where Equebus waits and all you have to do is kill him. Be sure you kill him, Blade. I do not want him for an enemy."

Blade thought a moment. "One thing I do not understand, Mokanna. How came Equebus by this knowledge of me, and of the Princess Zeena? How did he know that I am here in Barracid, training as a battlemaster?"

Mokanna looked at him in surprise. "The flags, man. All Sarma knows. When the Princess disappeared a signal was sent to Sarmacid at once. Queen Pphira herself sent a signal back. Equebus relayed it to me. I sent another signal to Sarmacid to relieve the Queen's mind about the Princess. And Equebus has been signaling me every day to know of you. Simple? What was not so simple was to drive a bargain with Equebus."

Simple. Blade supposed it was. Zeena, when she arrived in Sarmacid, would find her mother the Queen in full possession of the facts. Possibly mixed with a few lies and some gossip. Well, Zeena would just have to handle it as best she could.

Flags. Poles. A primitive form of communication - and so effective. Blade felt a little stunned. For a people, a culture who had not yet guessed the secret of the wheel, the Sarmaians were pretty crafty.

He felt uneasy. Matters were beginning to slip out of his hands. He was being forced into doing things he did not really want to do.

"Of course," said Mokanna, "if Equebus kills you tonight I will have to swear that you did lead a slave uprising."
Chapter Nine

It was a trap. Blade had feared this, yet when Mokanna provided him with a real sword and shield, and a short stabbing knife, instead of the dummy weapons he had been using, Blade decided to go through with it. If Equebus was such an enemy as his plotting indicated, if he would spend so much money and time to get rid of Blade, then the sooner he was taken care of the better. There was always danger in Dimension X. Blade lived with it. Every threat known and dispatched was so much gain for Blade, and increased his chances of survival by just that much.

Now, under a blood red Sarmaian moon, he stalked the little ravine where Equebus was supposed to be hiding, a mere crease in the brown plain, and he found nothing. Far off he could see the moon shadows of the T gallows and the stone image of Bek-Tor.

Mokanna had explained: "Equebus will ride to the ravine and wait. His slave patrol will hang back. My spies will start the slave uprising and one of them will force a sword and shield on you. When there is uproar and confusion enough I will make a torch signal and Equebus will pass it on to his men. They will move in and the rising will be crushed and you, Blade, will be taken in arms. Equebus will say that he only chanced to be riding past, or had camped nearby, and came to my aid when I signaled. You will be executed at once and Equebus can dream again of becoming the first husband of Princess Zeena. But you, Blade, must kill him first. Then come to me at once. With Equebus dead I will be able to command the Slave Patrol, for in this region I am next in rank to Equebus."

The ravine was empty. Blade made sure of that, then lay in the shadow of a great rock and scanned the plain roundabout. Nothing. He had been duped. But why? By whom? Was Mokanna more crafty than he seemed?

Blade studied the grim encampment of stone huts called Barracid. Only one light showed, in the largest of the huts where Mokanna lived and had his headquarters. The other huts were dark. In one of them, Blade knew, Pelops was awake and crying in the dark. Timid Pelops. Poor little cowardly man. Blade shook his head. Pelops had warned him against this thing.

"It is a snare," Pelops cried when Blade told him of the plan. "I know it. You forget, Blade, sire, that once I lived and taught in the palace. I heard much. I saw much of intrigue. Equebus is an ambitious man, too ambitious, which is why he was sent to the dreary work of slave patrolling, and he is determined to go as far as a man can go in Sarma. He is far from a fool - and he and Mokanna have been enemies for a long time. I think they plot against each other, Blade, and are using you. Do not go tonight."

The light in Mokanna's hut went out. Barracid lay in total darkness but for the bloody moonlight. Blade, straining his eyes and ears, thought he saw shadows move across the drill grounds, thought he heard a faint clang of steel on steel. He could not be sure.

Mokanna's light came on again.

Mokanna had agreed not to send the torch signal to the waiting Equebus until he was sure Blade had failed and was dead. Then, to protect himself, he was to send a belated signal and swear that Blade had escaped beforehand, deserting the uprising he had inspired, and had come on Equebus in the ravine by accident.

There was no signal. The solitary light glowed in Mokanna's quarters. Barracid waited for Blade to return, brooding in the dark night under a red moon, and Blade was now convinced that it was another trap. Something had gone badly wrong.

Blade left the shadows, sword in hand, and began to walk back toward the encampment. There was nothing else to do, nowhere for him to go. If he struck out alone, on his own, he would be classed as a deserter, a runaway, and so forfeit the protection of Zeena and, through Zeena, the Queen Mother Pphira. Blade needed all the protection he could get.

And he could not leave Pelops to the not so tender mercies of Mokanna. With Blade labeled a runaway and deserter the little man would have no protection at all. It was only Blade, and through Blade, Zeena, who kept the teacher alive and with some degree of freedom as Blade's servant.

Blade entered the first ring of stone huts. He heard men snoring, men crying out in their sleep, men awake and cursing and whispering. The battlemen, at least some of them, knew that something strange and dangerous was afoot tonight.

He went wide of the hut corners, his sword ready. Nothing moved on the broad drill fields. Blade stopped with his back against a stone wall and peered at the big hut of Mokanna. The light still glowed through an open window.

Something lay in the dirt near the door of Mokanna's hut. A body. A headless body.

He took a few steps toward the thing. Not headless. The head was there. Neatly perched atop the leather clad buttocks. Mokanna's head.

Blade stopped. Nothing moved. No sound. Yet the hut of Mokanna waited for him, waited as though it were a living, breathing thing. A chill traced down Blade's spine. He did not like this.
He stopped a foot short of the body and stared down at it. It was Mokanna right enough. The big hairy shoulders, the powerful bowed legs. Moonlight glinted on the head. The mouth was open, the teeth showing, the eyes staring. Something shiny sparkled and Blade saw that it was the chain of office. Someone had draped it over the head and around what had been a neck.

A shadow at the window. A voice said, "You who are called Richard Blade! Come into the hut. You will not be harmed. But drop your sword first. At once. Drop it!"

Blade hesitated. The window was empty again, the shadow gone. The hut waited.

"Obey, Blade! I, Equebus, give the order in the name of Queen Pphira. You will not be harmed. You are under the Queen's protection now."

Relief surged through Blade. Zeena! She had worked fast in Sarmacid, had seen her mother and told her of Blade and the marriage. The Queen, then, had not been so difficult as Pelops had warned. Blade nearly laughed. Pelops was an old woman in the guise of a man. It was all right. He tossed his sword down near the body and stalked toward the hut Mokanna's dead eyes seemed to follow him.

A dozen torches flared as Blade kicked open the hut door. A little arrogance now, he thought. A time for showing absolute confidence.

Blade went down before the rush of a dozen men. He let out a bellow of rage and struggled to his knees, smashing heads together in his fury. He caught a glimpse of Pelops lying in chains in a corner.

Blade fought like a demon gone mad. He broke an arm, cracked a neck, drove awesome punches into guts and faces. He went down time and again and kept getting up. More men rushed at him. Lance butts shattered over his head and broad back. Blade winced and bled and planted his legs like stone columns and fought back.

Equebus, scarlet cloaked in a far corner of the big room, looked on with a sneer.

"Are you children?" he asked his men scathingly, "that one man can defeat you all? Take him. Now! At once. Use your lances on his head - but do not kill him. The man who kills him dies!"

Blade used a judo hold and flung a man at Equebus. The Captain of the Slave Patrol skipped nimbly to one side, his mouth a thin line of contempt beneath the feral hooked nose. "Beat him," screamed Equebus. "Beat him down! Beat him bloody! Only keep him alive and break no bones."

More men leaped into the fight. They were Sarmaians and small men compared to Blade, but well muscled and wiry. They were slave catchers and they knew their trade. Blade at last went down and could not rise again. Lance butts smashed him into oblivion.

Blade was not out long. When he regained consciousness he was face down on the dirt floor and he was in chains. Massive iron manacles on his wrists and ankles were linked with chains and fastened to another great chain around his waist. The mere weight of the chains told Blade that he was well caught. He could not break these bonds.

The hut was silent. Where was everybody? Blade groaned, his bones ached and he bled from a dozen minor wounds, and rolled over and tried to get to his feet. A foot caught him from behind and kicked him off balance. Blade went sprawling into the dirt again. Pain lanced his beknobbed skull. He cursed and rolled over again to stare upward.

The tall man who stood wide legged, his thumbs hooked into a sword belt, was the same man Blade had seen on the beach that day with Zeena. Equebus. Captain of the Slave Patrol. Thickset, sturdy and as tall nearly as Blade himself, he was a giant among the Sarmaians. What had Pelops called this man - Equebus the Cruel? Blade could believe it.

The swarthy face was axe-like, the nose a hooking scimitar over a thin bloodless mouth. The beard was black, bushy and tinged with gray here and there. The narrow eyes were a Sarmaian dark. But Blade knew that this was no true Sarmaian - too much hair, too rounded a head, much too tall. Blade put a hand to feel his mouth - he seemed to have all his teeth.

At last the man spoke. "I am Equebus. Now that Mokanna is dead I am in sole command here. You know of me?"

Blade rubbed his sore mouth. He glared back. "I know of you. You are said to be cruel - you are also a liar!"

Equebus raised his foot. Blade brought his manacled hand up into a defensive position. "Kick me and I will tear your leg off."

The Captain moved away to one side. He nodded and his teeth glinted pale behind the black beard. "I think perhaps you would. So I will not kick you again - because if you touch my person I would have to kill you and that would be contrary to my Queen's orders."

Blade glowered. "I say again that you are a liar. You promised that I would not be harmed - yet I am beaten near to death. If this is the Queen's protection I can do without it."

Chains clanked in a corner. Pelops was staring at Blade, his eyes wide with terror. Blade winked at him.

Torches flared in wall and ceiling sconces. Equebus pulled up a three legged stool and straddled it, leaning to
study Blade in the wavering yellow glare. He took off his silver helmet, bejeweled and spiked, and cradled it on his knees. In his glance there was some puzzlement.

"I was angered," he said at last, "at the ease with which you handled my men. They are sturdy enough rascals and I have never seen them so beaten before. I did not admire, for I admire none, but I was impressed. You are a battleman such as has never been seen in Sarma. Is it true that you are also proficient in weapons?"

Blade, who worked out with battle axe and mace and lance in London, where most men chose tennis or handball, nodded sullenly. "I am that. I would like to show you now if you will take off these chains."

The cold dark eyes studied him. The thin mouth did not smile. "That is not possible. I take you to Sarmacid on the orders of the Queen. She is quite anxious to see you, for a reason you will know soon enough. And in Sarmacid you will be given a chance to show off your skill and strength. You are to fight in the games when Otto the Black comes to the city. If it were not for that, and her Majesty's wish, you would now be as dead as Mokanna."

Blade glanced at the cowering Pelops. The little man shook his head at Blade. Blade winked again and stared back at Equebus.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Equebus took a narrow scroll of parchment from his pocket and began to read the chicken tracks that passed for writing in Sarma. Pelops had begun to teach Blade to read and write in Sarmaian, but they had not made much progress yet.

Equebus read the scroll in a formal voice of authority. The gist of it was that one Richard Blade, known to be a stranger cast ashore by storm, and now training as a battleman at Barracid, be brought to Sarmacid at once to be held for the pleasure of the Queen.

Equebus smiled at that phrase. Smiled and cast a sly glance at Blade in his chains on the floor. "There is more in that sentence than meets the eye," he said. "Which you will come to know for yourself."

Blade hardly heard him. Zeena had done her work well. Perhaps she had even begun to spread Blade's lie about his twin brother. It would help. Thousands of eyes were better than just two - he might find the Russian agent, his double, if the agent was in this particular Dimension X.

Equebus was still reading. "... said Blade to be handed over on presentation of this scroll by Mokanna, Captain of Barracid."

Blade allowed himself an evil grin, even though it hurt his bruised mouth. "That is not the way Mokanna told it, Captain. I remember something about a slave rising, a frameup, and I was to be killed. Whatever happened to that little plan?"

In the corner Pelops groaned and his chains jangled as he made the T sign. Blade smiled at him. "Stop worrying, little man. It's going to be all right. You heard the Captain - we're under the Queen's protection."

Equebus tossed the scroll away. "You are right, Blade. There was another plan. Before the rider brought this message in the Queen's own name. Until that time I had only received flag signals to find you. Which I did."

Blade had figured it out long ago. "So you cooked up a little scheme with Mokanna? Only he double-crossed you. And you triple-crossed him!"

Equebus stood up and kicked away the stool. His smile was superior. "Mokanna was always a fool. I have known him since we were boys together in cadet school. He was twice a fool to match wits with me. I did not know his plan, nor did it matter. I distrusted him just because he was Mokanna. And I have spies here in Barracid just as he had spies in my fortress. This time my spies were best. Mokanna is dead. And you, Blade, live only because the Queen wishes it."

Again the odd sly smile. "In the end, Blade, you may yet regret that I did not kill you along with Mokanna."

Equebus clapped his hands. Armed men came into the hut to hustle Blade and Pelops away.

Blade pointed to the little man. "What of Pelops? He is servant to me, and also friend. I would have him well treated."

The Captain's shoulders moved in a contemptuous shrug. "I care nothing for servants and slaves, even school teachers. He will be well treated - as well treated as you are."

There was, Blade thought, something ominous about those last words.
Chapter Ten

The long line of weary battlemen wavered across the dusty brown plain like a crippled snake. They marched in pairs and a massive chain, half a mile long, stretched from front to back between them. Each man was attached to the master chain by his individual manacles. The slave patrol marched with them, prodding them with lances when they faltered. Captain Equebus rode ahead on the same white horse Blade had seen on the beach.

Blade and Pelops were in the middle of the file and linked together by the master chain. After the first day - it was three marches to Sarmacid - the little man swore that he could not go on. Blade coddled him and swore that he would. Until he could come again to Zeena he needed Pelops for guide and mentor. Despite all that had happened to him he was still very much a stranger in Sarma. Quite apart from all this, and a bit to his own surprise, Blade found that he had grown fond of the timid ex-school teacher. He did not want anything to happen to him.

They were well fed and watered, for they must be in condition to fight in the upcoming games in honor of Otto the Black's visit. Yet, if a man fell more than three times, he was taken from the chain and examined by the Captain himself. If he was thought worth saving the man was allowed to ride on a sledge drawn by horses. If Equebus made a fist and slashed it downward the man was lanced on the spot. Blade counted a dozen bodies that first day.

He gave Pelops most of his own food and water, having no doubt as to the Captain's decision should Pelops fall. Even so the little man fell once the first day and again on the second. Equebus dropped back occasionally to ride near them, silent and watching with a faint sneer. Blade marched with one big hand hooked into the chain about Pelops' middle.

Once, as the Captain rode close by and watched, Blade called out, "I can carry him easily enough. He is no weight."

Equebus shook his head and laughed. "It is forbidden. If he falls again I will examine him and decide." His dark stare mocked Blade. "You doubt my mercy?"

Blade tried to spit, but his throat was too dry. He had given his last ration of water to Pelops. But at least he made the gesture.

Equebus laughed again and spurred away to speak to two of his patrol. After that, Blade noted, the two guards marched close and kept watching Pelops. Blade hardened his jaw and tugged at his curling black beard, now well grown and full of tangles. He lifted Pelops off the ground with a sudden jerk.

"Keep going," he growled. "You can do it, little man, because you must! One step after another - that is the way. Just think of it as one step and then another step and then another. One at a time. Cry out if you are about to fall, but not too loudly. I will hold you up."

"I cannot," moaned Pelops. "I cannot, sire. Let me go. Let them kill me. I care not."

"I care," Blade said grimly. "I need you, Pelops. Think of me, small one. I have no friend in Sarma but you."

Pelops stumbled. Blade snatched him upright and glanced at the guards. They were talking and had not seen.

"You have the Princess Zeena," Pelops muttered. "Though I have begun to wonder - "

"As have I," Blade concurred. "Something has gone wrong."

It was the first time he had voiced the thought, though it had been with him since the march began. He and Pelops were given the same harsh treatment as the other battlemen - even harsher. Blade could not fathom this - not if Zeena had successfully intervened with her mother the Queen, had told of the marriage to Blade and received a parental blessing. Surely the Queen would not treat a new son-in-law and his servant so harshly. Ergo - Zeena had not been successful, or at least not altogether. Blade remembered the words of the Captain - he was being taken to Sarmacid at the Queen's pleasure. Not a word had been said about Zeena!

One thing Blade understood only too well: The Captain was obeying his orders, but just barely. It would please him if something happened to Blade and Pelops enroute, and no doubt he would have a plausible story ready for the Queen.

At night they slept in the dirt, still attached to the great chain. Men defecated where they lay and slept in it too weary to care. Blade, by constant dinning and nagging, kept Pelops awake as long as possible so that he might learn more about Sarma. He learned the basics of the Sarmaian script and the secrets of the signal flags. He memorized (he table of organization of the matriarchy that governed the country. He studied the religion of Bek-Tor. Even during the march he gave Pelops no peace, questioning constantly, feeding the information into his expanded memory center. Lord Leighton had promised him, and now he found it to be true, that he would not have to consciously struggle to remember. The material would file itself and be ready when wanted.

During his last stay in Home Dimension Blade had been at first cajoled, then ordered, to expand his studies. He fretted at first, for it took time away from his regular duties with MI6 - he still thought of himself primarily as a secret agent- and it also interfered with his sex life. For a time, after losing Zoe, he had been like a faun in heat.
Now, as his cortex was receiving and storing new engrams and neutral patterns, as new dangers and consequent survival patterns were imprinted, he was grateful for his study in ontology and epistemology. In teleology. For by late afternoon of the third day Blade had come to realize that he was deep in trouble. To mortal danger.

The column of chained men, like a wounded lizard, crawled painfully up a steep and narrow pass and debouched on a high plateau. They halted for rest on the brink of sheer cliff. In the distance, touched dull silver by the westing sun, glittered the towers and turrets and cubes of Sarmacid. The salt air tingled in Blade's nostrils and beyond the city he saw again the Purple Sea. A long rectangular harbor, guarded by moles, was crowded with shipping. He knew, from Pelops, that Sarma was essentially a seafaring country.

Pelops groaned and dropped in his tracks. Men did likewise all along the length of the cruel chain. Blade stood, brawny arms akimbo, and surveyed the plain below the cliff. It was in essence a triangular peninsula jutting into the sea. The city was built at the apex of the triangle and well guarded by a fortified isthmus. In the exact center of the city, on a single eminence to which all streets led, was the Palace of Queen Pphira. A low rambling building of white stone with one tall tower to which was attached a flagpole.

As Blade watched a gaggle of colored flags of different shapes and sizes fluttered up the pole. He read: WELCOME EQUEBUS - BRING THE STRANGER AT ONCE - PPHIRA

Pelops, having regained his breath at last, also read the flags. He looked up at Blade in fear. "They will separate us, sire. I know it."

Pelops sighed. "If you see her, sire. If - there is still much you do not understand of Sarma. Queen Pphira is cruel and hard, though not so much as Equebus, and she is jealous of her throne and her beauty. It is whispered that she orders girl children destroyed not because they are sick or ill formed, but because they show signs of beauty. She has lived forever and will live forever. She has had ten thousand lovers and her beauty never fades. She never ages and will never die."

Blade nudged him with a contemptuous foot. "Be quiet, little man. The long march has addled your brains. We agreed, remember, that such stories were myths to frighten children. No more of it. We have to keep our wits about us. I -"

At that moment there was a thunderous roar from the plain below them. A pale yellow haze of smoke drifted up. Blade sniffed and made a face. The odor seemed compounded of brimstone and burnt meat and bones.

"What is that stink, Pelops?"

Pelops pointed to the great image of Bek-Tor that loomed on the plain away from the city walls. Blade had noticed it in passing, but forgot it in his interest in the city and harbor. Now he scanned the image in detail and did not like what he saw.

This particular image of Bek-Tor, towering a hundred feet into the air, had an open gaping mouth. A twisted yawn of menace. As Blade stared the sound came again and a huge gout of fire and smoke belched from the mouth. Again there was the smell. And again Blade made a face and looked askance at the little teacher.

Pelops made the sign of the T. "It is the Bek-Tor of Sarmacid, sire. The priests are cleaning it of burnt bodies and bones, and that is the smell that offends you. When Otto the Black arrives there will be sacrifices, and slaves and criminals will be executed. It is always so when The Black comes. Girl children are given to Bek - the criminals and slaves who are condemned go to Tor." Pelops began to shiver. Tears welled in his eyes. "I think, sire, it would be as well if you could join your Princess soon. B-better for both of us."

Privately Blade agreed. He did not like the charnel smell. Again he watched smoke and flame gush from the mouth of the image. There had to be a large bellows concealed somewhere in the image.

Equebus rode up then on his white steed. He had six guards with him. They struck off Blade's fetters.

"We go to the Palace," said Equebus. "At once. I think your Princess is impatient and longs for you, Blade. Would you join her?"

There was a hint of mockery in the Captain's tone, of satisfied malice in the narrow stare. Uneasiness rolled in Blade again. He nodded curtly.

"I would go." He pointed to Pelops. "Loose him also. He is my servant and I need him. And we are both under the protection of the Queen."

Equebus roared with sudden laughter. He slapped his leg, leaned down to peer closely at Pelops, then went into another gale of laughter. He pointed at the little man with a shaking finger.

"That one? The Queen would protect that one? Bek's blood! As skinny as a post and a weeping coward into the bargain. I know something of history - his own wife betrayed him to the slavers! Some man he must have been, eh, for his wife to do that?"

The Captain went into more laughter. The guards joined in and poked at Pelops with their lances. The little man cringed in his chains and would not look at Blade.
Equebus broke off his laughter and turned gruff. Curtly he ordered the guards to bring Blade along. Pelops was to remain behind. "It will distress Her Majesty," the Captain said with a leer, "to be deprived of your beauty and strength, little slave, but she will have to endure it. She bears many Ts now - this will be one more. March!"

Pelops raised his narrow fuzzy skull and stared defiantly at the Captain. His eyes were dry. "Do not call me slave," he said in a voice that quavered just a little. "I am not slave - I never will be again."

Equebus drew his sword and struck Pelops over the head with the flat. "You are what I say you are! Now we march." Blade moved too late. They knew his mettle now and there were three men hanging on each of his arms in an instant.

He did not struggle. Pelops, not badly hurt, raised his head from the dust as they dragged Blade away.

"I will do what I can," Blade shouted. "Do not be afraid. Be a man."

Pelops only nodded. His eyes followed Blade until the big man, well escorted, was out of sight down a winding path that led to the plain below.
They said of Queen Pphira that she was ageless. Legend had it that she had never been born, having always existed, and that she could never die. As Queen she had the right to take as many lovers as she chose, where and when she wished. The lovers might be men or women. Perversion was not in the Sarmaian vocabulary. Probably, thought Blade, because no one had thought of it yet. Just as nobody had thought of the wheel.

All he knew he had learned from Pelops. Now, as he faced the Queen and her High Council of Priests, he felt naked and unarmed and very alone. There would be no help from Zeena. Once again he was dependent on his magnificent body and his youth. This time he feared they would not be enough. The priests were hostile.

They were in a large chamber overlooking the harbor. There was a ring of chairs carved from the soft white stone that was everywhere in Sarmacid. The chair of Queen Pphira was on a low dais. Below her, ranged in a half circle, were the chairs of the priests. The High Council or, as Pelops called them, the Council of Five.

Blade, as prisoner, slave, husband of Zeena - he did not really know his status yet - stood on a block of stone between the throne and the semi-circle of priests. He had been standing so for two hours and his legs were beginning to cramp. He was bored. He was also angry, but this he contrived to conceal. This was no time or place for anger, for he had not a single friend at court.

"The marriage is forbidden and annulled. The Princess Zeena is banished to a punishment ship."

That was all they would tell him. All! He was forbidden to raise the subject again. Zeena was to be forgotten. As though she had never been. Blade, helpless for the nonce, must perforce play it their way.

Now, bathed and barbered and clipped, perfumed, wearing a leather kilt and high gaitered sandals, naked to the waist, enjoined to silence, he stood with his huge arms crossed and watched the Council of Five. And bet against himself.

The Five were barefoot. They wore black robes. They were typically Sarmaian, small with narrow skulls and opaque eyes. No man in Sarma had much facial hair, but the priests shaved their skulls of even the fuzz. Blade thought they looked like five aging vultures with their scrawny necks protruding from the black robes. They made him very nervous.

Kreed, the leader of the Five, stood up to make a point. The others, long chins cradled in skinny hands, watched. Thorus. Baldur. Avtar. Odyss. Their eyes were dull little buttons that stared at Blade now and again. He knew they were anxious to put him into the fiery maw of Bek-Tor.

Kreed waved a hand. "Otto the Black arrives in two days, my Queen, to collect his annual tribute. We must pay, as always, for we are too weak to resist him. He will be given the meta, as ever, and there will be games in his honor. Games and sacrifices. Now, we all know of Otto's tastes - therefore I suggest that we make him a present of this Blade. It will make a fine first impression. And when Otto has used him he will give him back to us and we can make sacrifice to Tor. You see the point, my Queen? Since Otto the Black is himself divine, and if he uses Blade for his divine pleasure, it will make the sacrifice more pleasing to Tor. So Tor may prevail upon Bek to grant us favors - such as sending us a plan, providing help, that we may rid ourselves of The Black One forever!"

The other four priests stared at Kreed. They leaned to whisper, a row of dozing buzzards come alive. Blade, who understood little of what was going on, and none of the complex theology involved, shifted his glance to Queen Pphira.

She did look ageless. She was tall and pale and well formed. There was no fat on her, no wrinkles marred the dead white skin. Her hair was jet black and piled high on her head and held with jeweled combs. Her eyes were sloe berries, set wide, her brow high, her nose straight and long over a wide vivid mouth. Blade suspected that she colored her lips. If so, it was the only artifice about her.

Unlike the other Sarmaian women he had seen, Pphira wore no breastplates. She was as bare to the waist as Blade himself. Her breasts were surprisingly small, more like the breasts of a young girl than those of an "ageless" woman, but very firm and white and with long brown nipples each surrounded by a vermilion aureole.

The Queen raised the wand she carried in her right hand. It was slim, jeweled, and crested with an entwined B-T. She pointed the wand at Kreed.

"Be careful how you speak, old man. What you have just said is treason. Legally. We pay tribute to Otto the Black, a thing I dislike as much as any, but he is the stronger and we must do it. And live with it. We have signed treaties with him and so are in fief to him. And as you know, or should know, being such wise men, Otto seeks an excuse to discredit the treaties and invade Sarma. For years he has wanted this - any slight excuse will do. So, Kreed, no more talk of gaining our freedom."

Kreed bowed low. "I'm sorry, Majesty. But I only thought of - "

The Queen leaned toward the old priest. "Except in very private, Kreed. Now that will be all - let us get back to
this man Blade. I do not think I agree with you."

Blade tried to follow it all, trying to winnow something that would help him. He kept his face impassive, put on a bold enough front, and gave back stare for stare - and knew that his only hope lay in the Queen. And she, until now, had evinced no particular interest in him. A fact that Blade was human enough, and vain enough, to resent. And immediately chuckle at himself. This was no time for vanity. This was life or death. And death in Dimension X, as Blade knew so well by now, was as final as death in Home Dimension. Lord Leighton's computer had altered the molecular structure of his brain - it had not conferred immortality on his body.

Blade watched Kreed. The priest at first looked puzzled, then sly, then resigned. He said, "But what to do with this stranger, my Queen? Why not get some use of him?"

Blade watched the four other priests. Their shaven heads were nodding all in a row, in agreement. Old vultures in concurrence. No mercy there.

Pphira slapped the wand into her palm. "Do not make another speech, Kreed. I forbid it. We have been at it too long now, and nothing settled."

Kreed bowed low. "That is only because you have not decided, my Queen. We can only advise - you must have the final decision. But I ask you to remember the trouble this man Blade has already caused in Sarma. Captain Mokanna dead, slain of necessity by Captain Equebus. Why? Because Mokanna plotted. Mokanna! Who had always been a good subject and a fine officer. Why would Mokanna do this, your Majesty? Why ruin a fine career and meet such a death? I suggest, my Queen, that this Blade instigated it all. That he put the thought of treason into Mokanna's head. He has a way with words, this man. He has a power in him. We have all witnessed that."

Blade got it then. The High Priest, Kreed, and Equebus were somehow in league. Why, for what reason, to gain what? This he could not fathom at the moment. Both Pelops and Zeena had warned him that intrigue enmeshed the palace like quicksand. Kreed was his enemy because Equebus was. At least he was warned.

Queen Pphira absently stroked one of her small pale breasts. Even at this moment, with his life in the balance, Blade felt himself aroused. She had not until now had that effect on him. Nor he on her, seemingly. That was the trouble. His only way out now was through Pphira. It was iron. The Queen had the right, even the compulsion, to be erotic and promiscuous. It was her duty. By ancient Sarmaian law she was bound to produce as many children as possible, preferably healthy females to perpetuate the matriarchal line. A child a year was the norm. Beyond that she had a right to pursue her own pleasure without stint.

Their eyes met. Blade stared, unblinking, wondering if his own weapon, sex, was going to fail him. It was so unlikely that he could scarce believe it. It had never happened before if you discounted Zoe - and she had loved him well enough. There was always a first time. A fatal time.

Pphira stared back at him. Her mouth moved slightly and Blade detected a gleam in the dark eyes. He thought she nodded, he could not be sure, and in that moment his heart was lighter. Maybe after all -

The Queen said: "I have decided. He is a stranger and protected by the Hospitality Act."

Kreed murmured. "The Act can be voided at your discretion, my Queen. Think what a gift he would be to The Black Otto."

One of the priests, Avtar, made a high tittering sound.

Kreed squelched him with a glance.

The Queen smiled. "I am thinking, Kreed, of what a gift this stranger may be for me."

Part of the pressure in Blade's chest lifted. He was going to make it. In bed. So be it and what matter - it would gain him time.

Kreed was not surprised. The old priest had known all along that it would come to this, Blade thought. It fitted with what Pelops had told him. Sarmaians were very formal; each letter of the law must be observed.

Kreed said, "But what of Tarsu, my Queen? This comes as a surprise. I thought you well satisfied with the blind one."

She pointed the wand straight at Blade. "This one does not cringe. And he does not lie."

Blade had no trouble repressing his smile. This was no time for smiles. He had lied, of course. Mightily, but very skillfully. And had struck gold in an unexpected manner which, at this moment of decision, did not seem very
important.

Pphira went on speaking, emphasizing her words with the wand.

"He says that he and his twin brother were wrecked and cast ashore by a great wind. This is true. There was such a storm on the Purple Sea. We lost many of our own ships."

Pure coincidence, for which Blade was now grateful.

"He did have a twin brother," continued Pphira. "We have had word of this other stranger by courier, as you well know. By mischance he was carried far out to sea, captured by pirates, then left to die in the Burning Land."

Blade could not restrain himself. He had been constrained to silence, under threat of instant death, yet he broke it now and shouted.

"My brother? This twin of mine! You say he is alive?" It was the first hint that the Russian agent had landed in the same Dimension X.

The Five stared at him coldly. Malice and sadistic pleasure glittered in ten beady dark eyes. Blade had spoken without leave. Blade was condemned.

Blade watched only the Queen. In her eyes he thought he read amusement and even approval.

Kreed said, "He must die immediately, my Queen. A pity - Otto the Black would have been pleased with him."

The Queen waved the wand at the old Head Priest "Enough of this, Kreed. Formalities are all very well, but I weary of them. I rule Sarma. I will say when Blade dies - if he does."

But Kreed persisted. "He has spoken in the presence of the Five, and in your presence, Majesty, without permission. You know the ancient law - that is sacrilege! None may flout the old law, Pphira. Not even - "

The Queen smote her leg with the wand. "Enough, Kreed! You presume too much. You offer to teach me, Queen of Sarma, the law?"

"But, Majesty, I - "

She ignored him. Blade did not. As Kreed bowed low and backed away he saw a smirk of satisfaction on the old man's face.

The Queen pointed her wand at Blade. She smoothed her skirt, of ankle length and worked in gold arabesques, around her taut buttocks and trim thighs. On either side the skirt was slit nearly to the hip.

"You may approach the throne, Blade."

He left the block of stone and did so. Behind him he heard the hissing of indrawn breath. He wondered at the smirk on Kreed's face. Had the old man wanted Pphira to break the law?

Pphira leaned to tap his great bare chest with the wand. "You will kneel to me, Blade."

He did not think it a time to quibble. He went to his knees before her, but kept his head proudly erect and stared into her eyes. For a long moment their glances locked and held, then her eyes moved elsewhere, down his body and back up again. She nodded slightly and a tip of pink tongue slipped through her small white teeth.

"A giant," she said. "You make nearly two of poor Tarsu. Yet I think you will have trouble killing him. We must be fair. You will be as blind as Tarsu."

His spine was an icy bar. They were going to blind him? The spasm of despair passed. It was not likely. Yet - To brush away the thought he blurted out, "My brother, Queen? You tell me he is alive?" Where? How to get to him? How to find him and kill him as ordered? In the last few minutes all his plans, the entire perspective, had been altered.

"I did not say he is alive, Blade. I said that he was marooned in the Burning Land by pirates. None live in the Burning Land. There is no water and the sun flames like the mouth of Bek-Tor."

From behind Blade came affirming nods and hisses. The Five were in agreement.

Blade had been thinking fast. Now he made his first tentative positive move. He had been helpless. Now, though still in a shabby position, he was not quite helpless. Not if he played his cards right.

His eyes held Pphira's. He did not entreat. He spoke boldly and with resolution. He was prepared, remembering what J had told him about Code Gemini.

"I must go and seek for my brother, Gemma, your Majesty. We have been very close all our lives. I cannot forsake him now. If there is a bare chance that he lives I must find him. I ask your gracious permission - "

The Five were clacking like a crowd of old hens.

The Queen smiled at Blade. "Perhaps. I do not think it likely, but perhaps. If you live. If you please me enough to persuade me to indulge you. But first there is the law - he who would succeed another man in my affections must first kill that man."

Blade, still on his knees, gave her back look for look. He could feel the priestly eyes gnawing at his back.

Queen Pphira had a sudden thought. She frowned and leaned forward and Blade saw the glitter of something deadly in her eyes. She spoke softly through compressed lips.

"You do find me desirable, man?" Mockery now. And menace. "You are conscious of the honor that may come
to you?"

He knew how near he skirted the chasm. Blade smiled, using all his great charm, his teeth gleaming white in the curling back beard.

"I know, my Queen. I am not fit, yet I desire you beyond all things. Even, perhaps, my brother's life. And that is an evil thing to say. But I am a man - how can I slay a blind man? That is also an evil thing. I cannot do it."

She leaned to tap him on the shoulder with her wand. "It may be that you cannot, Blade. Tarsu has slain the last three men who sought to take his place. He may kill you as well."

Pphira leaned back. She tapped her teeth with the wand. She smiled at him again. "I think that I would regret that."

Puzzled, Blade said, "But how can I fight a blind man in fairness?"

"You will see."

She looked over Blade at Kreed. "Let it be arranged. At once. I would know who shares my bed tonight Tarsu - or Blade?"
Chapter Twelve

They did not let Blade see his opponent. Blade, under heavy guard, was taken to catacombs beneath a huge square stadium built of the ubiquitous white stone. He was lodged in a narrow cell, unchained. The surrounding stench was overpowering, a mingle of urine and excrement and unwashed flesh. A burble of cries, screams, weeping and laughing and cursing, washed through the subterranean chambers like a miasmic surf. He was alert for a sight of Pelops but saw none. This turned Blade gloomy, for he thought that the little man's chances were not even as good as his own.

He was well fed and before the cell could befoul his new clothes, or his temper more than it was already, they came to see him. Equebus and Kreed. The Captain and the High Priest. Their heads close together and whispering like the conspirators that Blade now judged them to be. Why they conspired, this unlikely pair, he could not guess. He did not care. He had to kill a man and keep himself alive. In total darkness.

Equebus explained with pleasure, staring down his hooked nose at Blade. Kreed, behind the Captain, nodded from time to time and dry-washed his hands.

"Since you are obviously a man and a warrior," said Equebus with a sneer, "and no slave, you will not want to take unfair advantage of a blind man. You will fight this Tarsu in a dark room. You will be as blind as he, then, and it will be a fair fight."

Blade scratched his beard - it itched a little - and glowered at the Captain. "Weapons?"

Equebus leered down at Blade's big hands. He pointed. "Those alone for you. Tarsu will have a sword - he is much the smaller man. You object to this?"

"He cannot object," Kreed cackled. "The Queen has ordered it. She is smitten with Blade, I think, but she will not weaken in this. He must earn the right to replace Tarsu."

Equebus regarded the big prisoner. The Captain tugged at his beard, now combed and pomaded into a point. There was, Blade sensed, something ambivalent about Equebus today. He was both pleased and displeased. At times he smiled like a wolf, at other times his hatchet face darkened as he looked at Blade.

He said: "You have done better than I expected, Blade. Oh, you have lost Zeena, who is sent to punishment, but it may be that you have gained the mother instead."

"You have also lost Zeena, Captain. If she is in a prison galley, she is as far from you as she is from me. At least I have known her. You never will!"

The good did not work. Equebus glanced at Kreed. Both laughed. Equebus said, "You are right, Blade. Much good it will do you. There is much in Sarma that you do not understand - and never will. Now enough of talk. You go to fight. Allow me to wish you the worst of fortune."

The Captain bowed to Blade with a mocking leer, then snapped an order to the guards. Blade was dragged from the cell and escorted to the center of the vast stadium. Rows of empty whitestone seats towered on every hand. It would, he calculated rapidly, seat a hundred thousand or more.

The guttering torch revealed a small narrow room. Three walls of stone, the fourth of wood. Chephron,
smirking and bowing, muttering all the time, rapped on the wooden wall. "Tarsu? You are ready?"

A voice came back deep and gruff. "I am ready."
"Your hand is on the wall so you will know when it is lifted?"
"It is. Have done with chatter and begin. My sword is thirsty."

The executioner turned to Blade, grimacing horribly. He pointed to the wooden wall, then to the single torch in the ring bolt. "You understand, my master? Simple - quite sun-pie. I will take the only torch with me. When I am out and the trap door is closed you will be in darkness." His bleating laugh was shrill and high. "As dark as Tor's bowels! Not a single ray comes down."

Blade nodded at the wooden wall. "That rises, then?"

"Ah, yes, master. It rises. On the far side there is another room such as this. You will be alone with Tarsu, master. In the dark. As Tarsu has always been in the dark. Heh-heh - I do not envy you, master, and I do not think I will see you again."

There came an impatient rapping from the far side of the wooden wall.
Chephron extended fingers to Blade in a twiddling motion. "It is the custom, master, to give something."
Blade's skin was crawling. This creature was like a slimy thing that had lived in darkness forever.
"I have nothing," Blade said harshly. "But this!" He moved the executioner toward the stairs with a sound kick. "Get out!"

Chephron rubbed his behind and drooled. Slaver ran from the corners of his toothless mouth. "I thank you, master. It will be a great pleasure to drag your body away."

"Out!"

Chephron scuttled up the steep stairs with the torch. He vanished around a bend and Blade was in near total darkness. He waited and listened. He ran to the end of the room and threw himself flat, belly down, on the floor. He rested his fingertips lightly against the wooden wall. From far overhead came a sullen clang of stone on stone as the heavy trap door was dropped into place.

Blade was in darkness. The wall began to rise.
Chapter Thirteen

The wooden wall slid away from Blade's touch, upward into darkness. There was a faint click. Then silence absolute. Pit dark, Stygian. Blade held his breath.


SWISH - the sword cut the air just over Blade's head. Tarsu had been at the same end of the room, touching the wall, directly opposite Blade.

Blade rolled frantically to his left. Sparks flew as the sword beat on the stone floor. Could the man smell him, Blade?

He got on his hands and knees and scuttled, for all the world like one of the giant crabs, to the rear wall of the room. There he went to his belly again. He took a deep breath and held it until his ears popped. He made a mental picture of the room. The stairs were behind him and about ten feet distant. They were narrow and there was no room to swing a sword. If he could entice Tarsu to fight him on the stairs -

Later he would try that. For now, if he could only come to grips with his enemy before the sword could inflict a mortal wound - if he could get the sword, or make Tarsu lose it.

Something rattled on the stone floor just in front of Blade. He lay unmoving, breathing softly through his mouth. An old trick. Tarsu had tossed a pebble, a fragment of the wall. Blade smiled grimly. His opponent would have to do better than that.

There was the smell again. This time of sweat mingled with something else. Grease? Oil of some sort -

Blade moved just in time. The sword glanced off the wall just over him and sparks showed like tiny golden stars in a miniature eternity, a macrocosm of space. Tarsu grunted, a foiled animal sound, and Blade launched himself in air, feet first, at an unseen point three feet behind the sparks.

His bare feet rammed into solid flesh. The man went down, the sword chiming "wildly on stone, with Blade half on him, half off. Now!

Both men were mute. Blade tried to use his weight and his great strength. Tarsu, the smaller man but wiry and with lightning reflexes, withered and fought back with a fury Blade had not expected. The man's body was heavily greased and Blade could not hold him. It took both his hands just to keep the eager sword away from his throat and when he tried to pin Tarsu with his weight the man kept slipping from under.

Tarsu tried to get his teeth into Blade's throat. Blade butted him cruelly in the face and heard the nose crack. Tarsu got his hand into Blade's beard and began pulling it out by the roots. He slammed a knee into Blade's crotch and the big man went sick. He held on to the sword arm, trying to break the wrist, unable to get the right leverage. They rolled over and over across the cold stone floor, nailing and biting and scratching. Blade's face contorted as he put his last strength into breaking the wrist, the arm, anything.

Tarsu saved his arm by letting go of the sword. It fell with a clang, slid and stopped. Blade let go of Tarsu and dove in the direction of the sound. But Tarsu clung to him like a leech, biting and clawing at his flesh, and it was Tarsu who found the sword again. He kicked it far across the room. Blade cursed and seized Tarsu by the beard and smashed a terrible right hand. The blow only partially found its mark. Tarsu went falling backward, away from Blade. Blade groped. Nothing. He fought to control his breathing, to cut off the gasps that could betray him. There was no sound from Tarsu.

A slithering sound. A scraping and brushing sound. Tarsu was feeling about for the sword. Blade, on his hands and knees once again, began to crawl in the direction of the sounds. He would have to play bulldog now - get a grip on the man's throat and hang on, no matter what. Hang on until Tarsu was dead.

"Hah!"

A grunt of triumph from the darkness. A slither of metal on stone. Tarsu had found the sword. Blade stopped and began to inch backward.

He had his breathing under control. Very slowly, inch by patient inch, he began to work his way toward the stone stairs in a corner of the room. He reached the wall, brushed it with his hands, began to feel for loose mortar. If he could tug one of the crude undressed stones free -

Blade was nearly to the stair before he found it. A stone twice the size of his fist and loosely set. Within a few seconds he had tugged it free. A weapon of sorts. But how to use it?

Tarsu heard the trickle of mortar or a tiny scrape of stone on stone, something. And spoke for the first time since he had found the sword. His voice came from the far end of the room.

"So, Blade, you take to the stair! Others have done that before you. They thought I could not use my sword in close quarters. They were wrong. You are wrong, Blade."

Tarsu was moving in, his feet light on the stone, stalking, knowing where Blade must be. Blade retreated up the...
first step and raised the stone high. Yet he dared not hurl it. He could hear Tarsu stalking, coming at him out of the gloom, but he had no target. If he hurled the stone at random into the darkness he was certain to miss. The chances were a 100 to 1 that he would. Keep the stone.

He could hear Tarsu grunting now. "Unh-unh-unh-unh - "

A rhythmic sound that puzzled Blade for a moment. Then he understood. Tarsu had gone to the point. No more wild cutting and slashing about. He was thrusting furiously ahead of him as he moved slowly and cautiously. Blade could picture it in his mind's eye.

Tarsu was working rapidly, crouching, exploring with a foot ahead of him, and all the time thrusting into the gloom with the sword. High - low - to one side and then to the other. Thrust - draw back - thrust again. The sword point would bite deep when it struck. Blade's guts chilled for a moment; he did not like the thought of two feet of cold iron through him.

Tarsu stopped grunting. Still Blade could hear the very faint sibilance of the sword as it thrust and poked and darted for his life. He retreated up another step.

Blade put the rock between his knees and clenched it there and spread his arms. He could not quite extend them. Good. His legs were longer than his arms. An old mountain climbing technique might save him now.

A man can climb a narrow mountain chimney, a vertical rift in the rock, by putting his feet against one wall, his back against the other, and worming his way up. It can also be done by spreading the legs wide and, with each hand and foot, pushing upward. It requires timing, great skill and experience, and tremendous strength. Blade had all these. He also had the stone to carry.

He could smell Tarsu again. There was no sound. Not even the whisper of steel. Tarsu was waiting, collecting himself, preparing for the kill. He was sure now that he had Blade trapped in the narrow confines of the stair. And so he had.

Blade, conscious of time running out, held the heavy rock in both hands. He put his back solidly against one rough wall and his bare feet against the other. With his toes he got a purchase in the old eroded stone and began to exert pressure with his legs. He slid his back upward, feeling the stone tear at the skin. He wriggled. He gained a foot, then another foot, and brought his legs up even with his torso. His knees were slightly bent and he was hanging in mid-air over the stairs. Yet not high enough, for that feral sword would come licking any second now, like a flashing serpent's tongue lacking venom but thirsty for blood.

Blade eased up another foot. His big thigh muscles corded and rolled and a cramp began to gnaw at him. Blade ignored it. He turned slightly to his left, to clear his own body, and raised the stone high over his head. Everything now depended on his timing. He hung there, naked but for the leathern kilt, very much aware that his genitals were cruelly exposed to the sword. He scowled in the dark. Grim irony if he should lose his manhood, kill Tarsu, and then go castrated to Pphira.

Queen Pphira even now was waiting in her chamber for the door to open and a man to enter. She had a sense of the dramatic, did the Queen, and she had given orders that she was not to be notified beforehand of the outcome. When her chamber door opened she would know the winner. In that moment Blade knew that he would make her pay for this cruel charade.

No more time. It had leaked away like water on sand. The smell of Tarsu was strong, the oiled body pungent and close below Blade. The sword darted and darted in the narrow space. Tarsu grunted. He was confident now. He thought he was forcing Blade up to the top of the stair. There he would finish him.

Rotten mortar crumbled under his foot. Blade slipped an inch down. The mortar struck the probing Tarsu in the face. He gave an outraged grunt of surprise and twisted the sword upward, in a direction from which he had never expected danger. The steel bit deep into Blade's left leg.

The top of Tarsu's head touched Blade's buttocks. Blade slammed the stone down with all his might, missing the man's head and breaking his shoulder and collar bone. Tarsu groaned. The sword jangled on the stairs. Blade dropped.

His legs were slippery with his own blood as he twined them around the man's neck in a dreadful scissor hold. Together they tumbled down the stair to sprawl into the room. Tarsu, weak with pain and fear, still fought like a desperate animal. He managed to get his teeth into Blade's inner thigh and bite deep and Blade screamed with the pain. He held Tarsu's head firm in the scissors of his legs and exerted terrible pressure. Tarsu began to kick and flail about wildly as he strangled.

Blade got his fingers into the man's hair, trying for a firm hold, but Tarsu was Sarmaian and had but little fuzz. Blade twined both his big hands around the neck and loosed his scissor hold and struggled to his knees. He began to smash the head against the stone floor. Again and again until the sound was pulpy and hollow and blood and brains mingled on his fingers. He tossed the body away and stood up, exploring the wound on his thigh. It was on the outside, halfway between his knee and hip, and he did not think it very serious. Yet it bled freely. He fumbled for
the body of Tarsu again, found it and removed the sword belt and wrapped it around his leg just above the wound. He hobbled to the stair and found the sword and thought a moment - he had intended to use the sword as a lever, to hold the tourniquet, but now he decided against it.

He had won. He intended to make an impression, stage an act, to assume a dominance he did not yet have. It was bluff but it might work. Bluff had worked before now and would again. When he, Richard Blade, climbed out of the pit, waving a victorious bloody sword, he meant to create an illusion, to take to himself the leadership and authority that had not, in fact, been promised or offered. It was all a gamble.

Blade slashed the belt with the sword and managed to tie it around his leg. By this time the sword reeked with blood - no matter that it was his own - and it would make a good prop. He went slowly up the dark winding stair and rapped heartily with his sword hilt at the trap door. He took a deep breath and roared so that all Sarma might hear him.

"Open! I command you to open!"

Sounds. Grunts, straining, curses and the cracking of whips on slave flesh. Slowly the block of stone was drawn back. Light blinded Blade for a moment. He stared into it and did not shield his eyes. He leaped up the remaining stairs and out into the arena, ignoring his wound. It did not pain him much and he carefully avoided limping.

There was a ring of curious faces. Slaves crowded in the rear and stared at Blade with awe and envy. Blade strode to where Equebus and Kreed stood surrounded by their guards. A sub-leader stepped to block the way and Blade brandished him aside with the bloody sword.

The High Priest cradled his long chin in skinny fingers and nodded at Blade. "You have won against Tarsu, then? I did not think it possible." He frowned. "It would not have been possible without the favor of Bek-Tor. That favor, also, I did not think possible. You are not Sarmaian and Bek-Tor is not your god. And yet - "

Captain Equebus whispered something and Kreed, still frowning, said no more. That the priest was shaken was evident.

Not so the Captain. He stroked his pomaded beard and regarded Blade coolly and with a new disgust.

"So you have been lucky once more, Blade? Or was Tarsu only a weakling after all? I suppose we shall never know."

Blade reached with the sword before anyone could halt him or guess his intent. Calmly, without haste, he wiped the stained blade on the Captain's ceremonial cloak.

"You will know, Equebus! One day you will know. That I promise you. Now do as you have been ordered, High Priest. Your Queen is waiting for me. Take me to her."

The Captain's scowl was black, yet he made a slight bow and stepped aside. Kreed glanced in puzzlement from Equebus to Blade. For the moment he appeared confused. The Captain nodded to him.

"Do as Blade commands, High Priest" The narrow eyes darkened at Blade in rage.

"For it appears that he does command now! For the time being, Take him to the Queen."

He turned his back on Blade and spat a command at the grotesque Chephron. "Get you down and remove that carrion. See that it is burnt in Tor's belly."
Chapter Fourteen

Richard Blade, newly bathed and clothed, bejeweled and perfumed to within an inch of his life, his wound treated, pushed open a heavy stone door and stalked into Queen Phphira's chamber. It overlooked the harbor, whence came a sea smell, and was lit by two tall candles near her bed.

Phphira lay naked on the bed.

When she saw that it was Blade she smiled and stretched her arms over her head, as sinuous as a cat, pulling her small breasts up high and taut. She thrust her tongue through white teeth and licked her lips. She began to caress her slim pale body with her fingers.

"Ah, Blade! You have slain Tarsu."

Blade bowed. "I am here, my Queen. That would seem answer enough."

She left off caressing herself long enough to pat the bed beside her. "Come, Blade. Sit here and tell me everything. How did you kill Tarsu in the dark? He was strong and very cunning. He had killed many men in that dungeon."

Blade sat beside her. He was much aroused, his blood high and singing in his veins. Not all his battle frenzy had worn off - and no matter what her age, no matter the tales whispered of her, Phphira was beautiful. He wanted her. Now.

He also wanted a great many other things. Through Phphira he might gain them.

He took one small breast in his hand and squeezed it gently. A brown nipple stiffened. Blade leaned to kiss, taking it in his mouth and sucking and barely nipping with his teeth. She stiffened for a moment, writhed, and then to his surprise pushed him away.

"You are too bold, too soon." But her voice was soft. She made him keep his distance while she stroked herself between the thighs and drew her fingers lightly over the breast he had kissed. Blade sighed and restrained himself. Maybe Phphira was old, though she did not look it. She must prepare herself by autoeroticism.

And something else. She made him recount every detail of the fight with Tarsu. She made him repeat the more bloodthirsty parts. Her mouth opened slowly in a scarlet O as he told of smashing the man's head again and again on the stone. Something began to go sour in Blade and he lost much of his anticipation. She would have listened with the same avidity had it been Tarsu relating how he had slain Blade!

This was no time, Blade thought fiercely, to lose his edge. He had won the battle in the dungeon. He still had to win the battle of the bed. Must win it, else he had gained nothing. He must force the matter before it was too late. An impotent Blade, sick with disgust and made limp thereby, was no better than a dead Blade.

To stop her questions he swept her into his arms. He clamped his lips over hers and, roughly enough, invaded her body with two of his big fingers. She struggled and tried to cry out. He smothered the cry with his tongue, all the time manipulating her. Three fingers now deep in her vagina. He took a small breast completely into his mouth. She writhed and struck at him feebly.

"Stop, Blade! I command it. I am a Queen - and this - this is not the way of Sarma. Women rule - women do the things - oh - oh - I forbid you, Blade - OH - "

He boxed her lightly, with quasi-affection, on each cheek with his huge hand. Phphira was so honestly astounded that she broke off her complaints and stared at him. He had dared to strike her? Even so lightly! She showed her teeth and snarled at him. "I will have you killed for that, Blade, I swear it."

He growled back. "Later! First I will have my way with you. I have killed a man for you and I intend to have my reward. My way! I know of your Sarmaian love making and I cannot say that I care for it. This night, Phphira, you will learn something - even as I taught your daughter."

The dark eyes glittered and the pale mask firmed as anger muscles came into play. He had touched a chord not intended. She was really angry now. She struck at him with a fist and fought to pull away.

"Another law broken, Blade. Those banished to punishment are never mentioned. Let me go! Or I will scream for my guards."

By this time he was again ready. Tremendously ready. Blade was big by any standards and by Sarmaian measurement he was huge. Nearly grotesque. He ripped off his leather kilt and flung it away. Queen Phphira took one look and screamed, but not for her guards. She backed away from him, inching up the bed, her hand pressed to her mouth.

"I cannot, Blade. I cannot! You are too big. You will kill me."

Blade pulled her back. "I recall," he said with mock lewdness, "that it is said to be a pleasant death. And you make too much of it, Phphira." Cruelly, with deliberate malice, he added, "Zeena made me no complaints." And he thrust his fingers into her again. Not too gently. He did not like this ageless beauty, nor trust her, but he wanted her
at the moment. More important - he must dominate her. It was now or never. A sword of flesh, he thought wryly, is sometimes better than a sword of steel.

She did not cry out for her guards. Blade had gambled that she wouldn't. He seized her, ankle by ankle, and pulled her apart in a slim white tender V. He raised her legs high and over his broad shoulders and he battered at her with no mercy.

Pphira was small and compact, very tight and moist, and she did scream softly as he ravaged her, filling her near to bursting. Again came the soft scream, this time muted and blurred. She locked her legs around his neck and pulled at his buttocks. She began to claw and scratch. His wound throbbed and Blade ignored it.

It was not the first time that he had made love for his life, for his plans, to gain his objectives, and he supposed it would not be the last time. A man must do what he must and take it as it came. One thing he knew - he had never enjoyed it more.

Blade was as skillful in love making as he was in anything he did. He was that kind of man. If he did a thing he did it well, or not at all. Now he timed himself and used every trick in his considerable book. He touched all bases, left no nerve untitillated, kept pounding at her with a fury and a lust unabated by her groans and prayers for mercy. Pphira began to have an endless series of orgasms and to cry out louder with each succeeding one and still Blade kept at her like a stallion. He hurt her and knew it and kept going. He was little more than an extension of his penis now, and knew that also, and did not care. The more he racked her, the deeper he penetrated, the more he must keep on.

When at last he broke and spewed, it was his turn to cry out, a harsh guttural sound that lacked sense to any but another copulating animal. The two-backed beast was dead. It lay broken on the bed, swamped in sticky moisture, floating in limbo and near death and careless of it.

Blade was smashing the little breasts to mush beneath him. She stroked his hair and whispered, "You are crushing me, great ox. Move before you break my bones."

As he went limp inside her Blade knew he had won. For the present. Now to strike while he held the advantage. It had been his experience that a really satisfied woman would do almost anything for the man who had satisfied her if he was but canny about it. And quick.

And yet he did not overdo it. He lay prone, catching his breath, her head pillowed on his massive chest, and let Pphira undo herself. Like all tyrants, the Queen, when she did unbend to a favorite, swung too far toward benevolence. She lavished her favors.

"I would have Pelops as my personal servant," said Blade. "Not as a slave."

She had her cheek to his belly now, toying with him, admiring the blue-veined hose-like appendage that had pleased her so much. She swore that in all Sarma there was none like it.

"In this land from which you come, Blade, are all men made thus?" And she gave him a tweak.

He smiled down at her. "Many are much bigger. In my own land I am not considered a giant." There was some truth in that. Not too much. He had never had any complaints in Home Dimension.

Pphira was awe-struck. She stroked the now upthrusting creature with a finger, then bestowed a light kiss on it. It was coming to attention again.

"What of Pelops?" Blade insisted.

Pphira nodded. "It is done. You may have him - if Kreed and Equibus have left anything."

It took all his restraint to keep him from making the jest. "What does that mean, Pphira? How do Kreed and the Captain come into it?"

She traced her fingers over his flat muscle corded belly. "I suppose you are right. What of it? What is this Pelops to you?"

"My friend," said Blade.

"In that case," said the Queen, "you shall have him. Or what is left of him. She tugged a cord beside the bed. In less than a minute a house slave appeared. Pphira made no effort to cover herself or Blade. She gave brief orders
and the slave left.

She kissed Blade and rolled atop him, moving up so that her little breasts were against his face. If she was ageless, the man thought, she was also insatiable. His sigh was inward. It was the name of the game. Show fatigue or boredom now and he might lose everything. He began to will himself to new passion.

Pphira was shrewd enough to know what was happening. She kissed him, examining his tongue with her own, then began to lick his face like a cat.

"Ask, Blade. What else would you have? I am not often in such a mood. You had best take while I offer."

"I would be Captain," said Blade. "In command of a ship. I would fight in the games when Otto the Black arrives."

"Granted. What other?"

Captain Blade, now very sly, a little fearful lest he overstep, thought it best to wait a while. He pulled her up and positioned her astraddle his big body and let her ride him long and far and fast into screaming contentment. When she fell exhausted he cradled her tenderly and stroked her hair.

When she breathed normally again he said, "There are certain things I would know, questions I would ask. Not of idle probing, for I am not given to that, but if I must make a life in Sarma I must have knowledge."

She nodded against his chest. "Ask your questions. Then let me sleep, for I swear I have never been so pleasantly weary."

"I may anger you, my Queen."

"No, Blade. I promise it. Nothing you ask of me at this moment will anger me. So ask ahead."

He took the plunge. "What are Kreed and the Captain Equebus to each other? How do they connect? To me they have the look of plotters, there is a smell of conspiracy about them, but I cannot see to what end?"

Pphira laughed softly. "It is very plain, Blade. They plot against me. So my spies tell me. And I have many spies."

"And you permit this?"

"I permit it. It is not a new thing - there are more plots in Sarma than there are people. I would rather have them plot than act. And they, Kreed and Equebus, are also lovers. Or at least the priest loves - I think Equebus merely permits himself to be loved."

So that was it! Blade, knowing that any form of sexuality was considered normal in Sarma, began to form a picture for himself. He put it to the test.

He said: "So Kreed, an old man, loves the Captain. A man in his prime. This means much to Kreed - very little to Equebus. Kreed is the vulnerable one, then, and you have a certain hold on him. If something should happen to the Captain - "

"Kreed would be desolate," she said softly. "He would beat his breast, put on mourning and leap into the fiery mouth of Tor."

Blade nodded. "I think, my Queen, that I know at least one of your spies. He even spies against himself."

"And against Equebus," she added. "Equebus whispers to Kreed and Kreed whispers to me. He must, and knows it, to save his lover. And now, Blade, I must ask you a question. Are you my man? Will you cleave to me when Otto the Black arrives? For this time Equebus plots with Otto himself - for the promise that Otto will place him on my throne. Otto himself would like this - he wants a docile puppet on the throne of Sarma instead of a trouble-maker."

Although Pelops had briefed Blade well on Sarmaian politics he was not prepared for this. He was out of his depth and admitted it.

He frowned. "At my first audience you reproached Kreed for speaking against Otto the Black. You spoke of being a fief and - "

She put a soft little hand on his lips. "So I did. I pay lip service to Otto, as does every Sarmaian who wants to live, but in our hearts we are all rebels. We would be free of Otto's yoke. But this cannot be spoken aloud - for every spy I have, Otto has ten. That is why this time Equebus has gone too far. He really intends to serve Otto when I am killed. Equebus is no true rebel. He is - he - "

She put her face against Blade's chest. He felt a tear on his flesh and marveled at it. This woman weeping? And over Equebus the Cruel! There was much, far too much, that he did not understand.

Pphira did not look at him. She clung, a woman for the moment disarmed, soft and vulnerable, and said: "Equebus is no true Sarmaian. Only half. I alone in Sarma know this."

He held her close. "How do you know it?" And half guessed the answer.

"Equebus is my son," said Queen Pphira. "The only son I have ever borne. Years ago there came a man from the land of the Moghs - a far place beyond even the Burning Land - and I fancied him and he me. It did not last long, but I have never forgotten him. He was a warrior, fierce and proud, and much learned. He did not like Sarma and
returned to his own land. I wept but I was too proud to beg him to stay. A few months later I bore Equebus and, as must be done with all male children, put him away from me. He does not know his birth. No one knows but me, for those that did know I had slain on some pretext. And now, Blade, you know. Two of us. See that you keep the secret, for it can be used against me. And knowledge of his birth can be of no use to Equebus, for no man can rise above the rank of Captain and none can rule in Sarma."

"Unless," said Blade, "Equebus and Otto scheme to overthrow you. Then Equebus can rule - by mandate of Otto."

"For a time," she agreed. "Not for long. Otto has a son, Jamar, whom he hopes to place on the Sarmaian throne when he is old enough. When that time comes Equebus will be killed like any slave. I am a fool, Blade, and weak in this, but I would not have my only son slain thus. He must not reach the throne of Sarma."

Blade was already planning far ahead, and his plans were cruel and hard, but for the moment he had a certain tenderness for her. He held her close, marveling, remembering the gray in the beard of Equebus, knowing that she must be an old woman by Home Dimension standards. This was hard to believe as he stroked the tender white flesh and gazed down at the firm unwrinkled face, the taut little breasts, the firm legs. Ageless indeed.

"You have watched over Equebus as best you can," he told her gently. "You have protected him and favored him and, I daresay, saved him many times from his own folly. But now you must have done. He is a man and so is accountable and must stand on his own feet. You agree?"

Blade wanted her acquiescence, for he was sure that he was going to have to kill Equebus.

Her nod was slight. "Yes. I - I can do no more."

A thought occurred to Blade. "You are sure, positive, that Kreed does not know of this?"

Again the nod. "Only you and I know the truth, Blade. Until this moment it has been my secret. You see how much I trust you, Blade."

He saw it was another burden to shoulder. Later he would think of that. Now to plunge once more into dangerous waters.

"I would speak of Zeena," he said. "As you must know, we were married soon after I came to Sarma. She is your daughter. Soon after our marriage she came to Sarmacid, leaving me in the camp of the battlemen, to explain to you and intercede. Now I hear that she is put to punishment, on a ship of some sort, and there is only silence when I ask questions. I would know all the whats and whys of this matter, Pphira. You say you trust me. Prove it now, for I know there is something very strange about this disappearance of Zeena."

Blade dared. Now he waited the consequences. She tightened one hand into a claw and raked at the flesh on his chest. A trace of blood seeped through his heavy chest hair. She raised herself and peered long into his eyes, looking for falseness there and not finding it, though, by her interests Blade was not pure at heart. Blade was looking after Blade. And the mission - to find his double and kill him. None of this was visible in the clear stare he gave her.

Pphira was thoughtful now, as though debating how much to tell him. Blade grew uneasy. Had he gone too far? She nibbled at the tip of a red tongue with sparkling little teeth, all the while watching him.

At last: "It is true. Zeena is my daughter and as such may one day rule in Sarma. Or may not. There are - that is, I have many daughters, Blade. You must understand that. It is my function, my duty, as Queen to bear daughters. Women who will rule and strengthen Sarma, since this is forbidden to men. What do you know of all this, Blade? Of how these things go in Sarma?"

Pelops had been helpful on this point. Blade winced a little even now as he remembered the lectures. He explained this to the Queen.

She nodded. "Yes. You know much. But not all. So listen - there can be no natural heir to my throne. I bear children, females when I can, but I do not raise them. No Queen is also mother. I put my daughters from me as soon as they cry the first time. That is the law. Tutors bring them up. Teachers. Women slaves look after them when they are young. Then the priests take over. I am told nothing. It is not my concern to know. Some die, some are killed one way or the other, some plot and some do not, some marry and so renounce all rights to my throne. For no Queen of Sarma may have a male as consort. All are taught, Blade, and all must struggle, learning and serving, if they would come to the throne at last. It is harsh but it is the only way. I myself did it, Blade. I had thirty sisters and I survived and came to the throne. So impatient was I that I grew tired of waiting and poisoned my mother, the Queen. She would not die to please me, so I had no other course."

Blade masked his eyes. It was said so naturally, so utterly matter of fact, that he took it nearly as much in stride as she did. It was simply the way things worked in Sarma. And Blade knew he was hearing utter truth. Life in Sarma was dog eat dog - or rather cat eat cat - and no bones about it The Sarmian court had treachery and intrigue, and all the by-products thereof, built into its very structure.

He mulled this over for a time, pulling at his beard. Her eyes left him now again to gaze downward, to see if he was once again ready for love - he wasn't and she began to help out - but now some of the tenderness had left her
gaze. He noted it and trod carefully.

"Zeena is safe, then? On this punishment ship?"

Pphira shrugged her smooth white shoulders. "Safe? Of course. No common person dares to touch a daughter of mine. Except myself or one of her sisters. Only we can strike Zeena, or punish her in any way. We have the right. As she has the right to plot against us, or punish us, if she can find the power and the will to use it."

He was of a mind to ask how many sisters Zeena had, but decided against it. Pphira was showing signs of heat again and, with her hand and mouth, was manipulating Blade into a like readiness. He held her off for a time.

"How is she punished on this ship?"

Pphira bit him. He would have tooth marks there for a day or so. "She rows, Blade. She pulls an oar in a galley like any slave, though she is not beaten. It is a ship of women, all women but for the master, one Marius, I think, who is a seaman. I have found, though I do not understand it, that women do not make good sea captains."

Blade tried to imagine what it would be like to captain a ship full of women. He came up with some pretty lurid ideas and had to chuckle.

Pphira stopped what she was doing, which was very pleasant and exciting, and regarded him.

"I was only thinking," Blade said with half truth, "that I was worrying about Zeena for nothing. I liked her well enough, Pphira, and I would not like evil to befall her. Now I find that she is not harmed - only being disciplined a bit. Though I confess I do not yet know why."

Before she bent to him again Pphira gave him a long look, and in those dark eyes she saw at last the years and the bitter wisdom.

"I will tell you why," said the Queen. "Zeena is much in love of you, Blade. This in itself is not good for one who may one day be Queen. Love softens the heart and makes it weak. A Queen cannot be weak. And Zeena spoke much of you. Too much. It was Blade this and Blade that. Of your prowess as a lover she never tired of telling, nor of your beauty as a man. She told how huge you were - a thing I did not believe until I saw for myself - and she also spoke of your wisdom. She spoke of your marriage and, before the Council of Five, she renounced all claim to the throne of Sarma. She wanted only you, Blade. She wanted only that I order your release from Barracid and that you be greeted and welcomed as a freeman and a stranger."

Blade writhed on the bed. He had thought himself drained, but pleasure was beginning to take over once more.

"And you could not grant Zeena even this?"

Pphira did not look at him. "How could I? I had heard too much, Blade. I wanted you for myself. And I am Queen."
Chapter Fifteen

Otto the Black came to collect his annual tribute - one hundred tons of meta. This was a jagged, rock-like mineral dug out of the brown mountains by slaves and melted down into small knuckle shaped ingots. The ingots were hard, heavy and with the whiteness of nickel. Otto had them made into square coins with a hole in the middle for easy stringing, and very few of the coins ever returned to Sarma. The Black One held the right of coinage and counterfeiters were flayed alive and the skinless body boiled in oil.

Richard Blade did not at first pay much attention to the meta ingots. He was too busy plotting, and as adept at it as any in Sarma. Pelops had been delivered to him along with, of all people, the monstrosity Chephron whom Blade had kicked in the dungeon before the fight with Tarsu. When Blade objected to the man Pelops pleaded his cause.

"He was once a friend of mine," said Pelops. The little scholar was clean and well dressed and only one of his legs had been twisted by Kreed's torture. He limped a bit, but got around well enough.

"Chephron was not so fortunate as I was," said Pelops now. "When he was made a slave there was great need of men in the meta mines. That is a living death, sire. Men die quickly of the mine sickness - and before they die they suffer greatly of the sores that never heal. Chephron only volunteered as executioner that he might escape the mines. I, or even you, sire, might have done the like in his case."

They were on the poopdeck of a great trireme in the harbor of Sarmacid. The ship was new launched, named the Pphira, and had a crew of Blade's own choosing. In a few hours now the sea games would begin.

Blade scowled at the miserable wretch with Pelops. Chephron still wore his leather kirtle, was still bald and pockd and malformed. Still wore his iron collar. Still had the high bleating voice and the great sores on his legs. Blade did not want the man on his ship. And yet -

"I will vouch for him," said Pelops. He moved closer to Blade and whispered, "He is as desperate as any man you have aboard, sire. He wants freedom, as we all do, and he will fight well and die for it if necessary. Give him his chance."

Blade stroked his beard in thought. "Very well, then. Against my judgment, Pelops. Those sores on his legs - you are sure they are not infectious? When we escape, if we do, there will be perils enough without having sickness aboard."

Pelops nodded quickly. "He will spread no disease, sire. I swear it. Those are mine sores, as I said. All mine slaves have them. It is said to be something in the meta. No one knows the truth of it."

Blade, had he not been so harried and busy plotting, might have guessed at the truth of it then. But the moment passed and he none the wiser.

Blade gave in. He nodded curtly and said, "All right. Bathe the man and strike off that iron collar. Find him new clothes and some ointment for his sores. And keep him out of my sight, Pelops."

Chephron, for all his bowing and scraping, met Blade's hard stare with eyes that did not flinch away. "I thank you, Captain," said the former executioner. "I have a debt to you now and I will pay it when it comes due."

When they had gone Blade had a deep conference with Ixion, his second in command. Ixion had been a sailor before being enslaved for debt, and wore only wide legged pantaloons and a sailor's cap of pointed leather. He was Sarmaian to the tips of his dirty toes. Pelops, who had done most of the recruiting at Blade's bidding, also vouched for Ixion. Blade trusted the man because he must. There was so little time. The sea games began in an hour. If Blade had his way they would not last very long. He had things to do - when he had done them he would be on his way. Pphira had a clean bottom, being just off the skids, and there was nothing in the harbor to catch him. He had a crew of slaves and they would be rowing for freedom and life itself.

Ixion drew close and whispered. "I kept them working all night, my Captain. In pairs. This new thing you call a file works well - I think the chain will break."

Blade glanced at a huge chain stretched across the narrow gut of the harbor. The Sarmaians did not know the wheel, but they were great for chains. He could still feel the weight of the great slave chain on which he and Pelops had trekked from Barracid.

He looked at Ixion. "They were not seen?"

"No, Captain. Else we would have trouble now. The middle link is half cut through."

Blade crossed his arms on his chest and stared beyond the chain to the outer harbor and the Purple Sea stretching away to a fog obscured horizon. The yellow fogs came frequently.

Beyond the horizon, and the fog, what? Just opposite Sarma was Tyranna, the land of Otto the Black. A place to avoid, especially after today. And Blade was not interested. His desire was to find Zeena, if he could, and then to the Burning Land where pirates were reported to have set his double ashore. Blade had a full report on this from one of Pphira's officers who had been second in command of a galley that had captured the pirates and put them to death.
Several of them, before they died on the T, had babbled of the man they had saved from drowning and eventually put ashore because there was no profit in murdering him.

Pphira's officer, on looking at Blade for the first time, had been awe-stricken. "I did not see this man you seek, Captain, but before they died the pirates told me of him. Men do not usually lie just before death - and the stranger they described to me was you!"

So be it. The Russian agent was out there somewhere, beyond the Purple Sea, in the desert, alive or dead. If the latter, Blade thought now, he would like to see the bones before he returned to Home Dimension.

He was wool gathering, dreaming, staring at the horizon and freedom. Ixion plucked at his sleeve. "Captain - Captain! They signal from the flagship."

Blade came back to Sarma and dismissed Ixion after giving orders to sink the "files" to the bottom of the harbor. He had fashioned files from ordinary swords by pounding out the serrature with a sledge. Crude things, but with enough willing hands they had worked.

He raised his telescope and studied the signal from the flagship lying near in to the main wharf. The telescope was a narrow long waterproof box with glass set into each end. The glass was flawed but it worked. Water sealed in between the two bits of glass did the magnifying. Blade shook his head in disbelief as he read the flag. These Sarmaians. They could make a telescope and not a wheel!

The flag was red with white markings. Games to begin in half an hour. Pphira and Otto were an the way to the harbor now as part of a long procession after having witnessed the sacrifices to Bek-Tor on the plain. As Blade put down the spy glass a whiff of roasted flesh came to him on a breeze. Bek-Tor, that He-She divinity, had feasted well this day. All morning the smoke and flame had been thick over the plain, and unceasing the regular chunk-whanggg as catapults flung trussed and screaming slaves into the fiery maw with deadly accuracy. Blade, accompanying the Queen, had soon pleaded business and begged off, but he had noted the accuracy of the catapults. Now, as he paced his deck, he studied the catapults on the ships of Captain Equebus. His adversary for that day. For Otto the Black had decreed everything, and Otto did not intend to lose the games given in his honor. It was, Blade conceded now as he studied the enemy, a well rigged game. Otto, Equebus and Kreed, had taken every precaution. Blade could not possibly win. His smile was grim. They thought.

As he studied the enemy galleys with his glass he felt a cold anger rising in him. An unusual thing in a man so professional as Blade - death and suffering in MI6 had always been rather impersonal, in the way of business, and one did not allow one's emotions to interfere. But then Blade in X Dimension was not the same Blade. More changed than his brain molecules.

The night before, at Queen Pphira's side, Blade had gone to the stadium to see the opening of the games for Otto. Though he bore it well enough - folly to do, or show, otherwise - he had been sickened to his guts. It had been a bloodbath such as he had never seen. In the flaring light of thousands of torches he watched the battlemen stalk and kill each other in a forest transplanted and set into the sand of the arena. Two only had survived and had been spared by Otto, who had an eye for their fine bottoms. So Pphira had whispered in an aside.

Blade only nodded. There was no news in the fact that Otto was a fanatical pederast and that he liked unwilling victims above all. Rumor had it that Otto employed twelve strong men, all ex-favorites, to hold his screaming love objects securely while he attacked.

Blade turned the glass on the piles of cannonball-sized stones piled beside the catapults on Otto's ships. They were really the Queen's ships, as Otto would not risk his own, but Equebus would command them in Otto's name. It would be victory - a symbol of his hold on Sarma.

Blade's four small galleys had no catapults. Nor any of the smaller catapults that fired arrows. Neither had his command ship, the tireme on which he now stood. All of Otto's ships were equipped with both weapons. The rigging of his ships was crowded with archers. Blade watched closely as officers barked orders and the huge catapults and lesser catapults were levered back. They were powered by twisted rope and hair. Otto had nine ships, Blade five, including his own trireme.

A great cheer went up as the procession debouched along the quayside and headed for the out-thrust pier where thrones had been set up for Otto and Pphira. Blade studied the yelling crowd and smiled - battlemen, not used in last night's carnage, were whipping all that did not cheer. One way of getting an audience.

It was nearly time.

Pelops came to stand on the deck near Blade. Ixion took his place atop a short companion leading down to the first rowing deck. Blade had fashioned a speaking trumpet of leather and instructed Ixion in its use. Now the mate put the trumpet to his lips, glanced at Blade, and waited.

Blade watched Pelops narrowly. The little man was trembling and biting his fingers convulsively. Blade patted the small shoulder and grinned hugely. "Why are you afraid, Pelops? I have explained how we are going to win."

Pelops wiped sweat from his brow. "I cannot help it, sire. You know I am a coward. I am sick with fear. And
even if we win I may still die."

Blade stared at him, his grin vanished. "So you will die. A free man. Think on that, little school teacher. And get yourself a weapon. I will have no unarmed man on my deck."

Pelops extended his hands in a helpless gesture. "I know nothing of weapons. You know that also, sire."

Blade gave a command and Ixion tossed him a short sword. Blade gave it to Pelops who stared at it as a child at a new toy.

"Learn," commanded Blade. "You will never have a better chance." Then: "You got my word to the Queen, Pelops? Of the black flag?"

"I did, sire. I sent a servant who brought me back word that the Queen Pphira understood."

Blade said, "Good. I have done all I could. If we win I will be quits with Pphira. If we lose there will be no harm done and she no worse off."

Pelops quavered, "If we lose, sir? But you said - "

Blade clapped him hard on the shoulder, so hard that the little man reeled and nearly fell. "So I did, my tiny friend, and so I mean it. Now look to yourself, for I will be busy. It is beginning."

Otto and Pphira were on their respective thrones. Otto the Black, a giant of a man - Blade estimated 400 pounds of richly clad flab - raised a beringed hand to straighten one of the small tapers that flamed in his luxuriant black beard. Blade studied him through the glass. If his plans worked out this would be the last time that Otto would even halfway resemble a man.

The Queen had one hand on Otto's fat knee. She leaned and whispered and Blade could almost see the hate and revulsion on her timeless face. He saw it because he knew it was there. Otto did not see it.

Otto was not much interested in the lady. He toyed with the candles in his beard - Blade confessed wonderment that the fat man did not go up like a Christmas tree - and eyed the behind of one of Pphira's house slaves. He smiled and licked his liver lips and nodded to something that the Queen said. The spying Blade remembered that Otto had given special orders - Blade to be taken alive and unhurt, to be brought to his quarters in the Palace immediately. Where the twelve, undoubtedly, would be waiting to subdue him and ready him for the grand entrance of Otto.

Otto raised a fat hand and dropped a gayly colored scarf.

Immediately the catapults on Otto's ships, Captain Equebus in command, began to thunk and twang. The range was too great. Towers of water built as the huge projectiles fell short. The enemy's nine ships, formed in a bow shaped line, began to move toward Blade's little fleet.

His preparations had been long and thorough. He had had no sleep and until now had been drooping with weariness. The moment the first catapult spoke he came alive. He spoke softly to Ixion.

"What of the wind?"

Blade nodded in satisfaction. "Fair enough. They have more canvas and would soon have the gauge of us. Look - the fools are going under sail anyway."

True. Each of Otto's, ships carried a huge square sail rigged to a single slanting spar. The sails hung limp and lifeless, impeding, doubling the work of the sweating slaves. By that stupidity alone Blade gained the edge in speed.

Blade raised his sword and made a chopping motion. Ixion began bellowing orders through his leather trumpet. The orders were picked up by a slave in the bow, with another trumpet, and passed on to each galley in turn.

He had pulled his hooks at precisely the right moment and now he watched as the four ships, looking miniscule by the side of the large craft attacking, began to fall into a single file behind the trireme. Blade smiled grimly. There was already shouting and gesticulating on the command decks of the enemy. Equebus had expected Blade to assume a broad frontal defense, to spread his ships into a smaller bow to ward off the larger attacking one. Equebus wanted a series of ship to ship battles with his the larger craft and almost double in number.

Blade raised a finger, Ixion his trumpet, and three rows of oars began to rise and dip, flinging droplets of water like a million diamonds. The big trireme leaped forward. These were galley slaves promised freedom and they would row their hearts out for it.

The drumming came up in a regular monotonous thrum from the second tier: Dum-dum-dum-Dum-dum-Dum-dum-Dum-dum-dum-dum.

"I put Chephron on the drum," said Pelops. "He seemed best fitted for it and he is no better with the sword than I."

Blade ignored him. He spoke to Ixion. "Increase the beat - up twenty a minute."

Ixion bellowed the order and the trireme began to throw a bow wave as the long oars flashed in unison. The slaves were putting their scarred backs into it. They began to sing. The drum increased the cadence - dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum...
Blade took the helm himself. It was a side rudder, a big oar that reminded Blade of those on Viking ships. It was alive in his hand. He could feel pressure tingling in the wood. Pphira had enough way on her to answer immediately. Blade studied the battle line of Otto's ships. About three hundred yards now.

Blake called out, "Fire buckets ready."

Ixiv relayed the order.

"Shields up."

Crewmen scurried to secure wooden shielding along the railings. They would give some protection from arrow fire, none from the catapults.

"Archers aloft," cried Blade and Ixiv sent the order on its way.

Blade's attacking force was now in a single line, led by the trireme Pphira. The flagship of Equebus was a hundred yards ahead and coming up fast. Blade touched the tiller and took the trireme a point to starboard. The huge flagship, a quadreme, a clumsy floating palace, nevertheless had a nasty underwater ram. Blade's little fleet had not been allowed rams.

Blade put his glass squarely on Equebus for a moment. The Captain paced the command deck of his flagship, brave in scarlet cloak and silver helmet, heavily armored, waving a sword as he screamed commands. He had realized the mistake of hoisting sail in a dead calm and was trying to repair the damage. Meantime his slaves, lacking the inspiration of Blade's, fell out of rhythm and caught air instead of water and cursed and cringed at the lash. There was no whipping on Blade's ships.

Equebus had no speaking trumpets and had to transmit his orders by flag. This added to confusion - wrong flags were flown and even these misread. Blade grinned satanically as he watched Equebus lose his temper and strike out at his junior officers.

To add to the Captain's woes there came an errant gust of wind, precursor of the breeze promised by Ixiv. It did not last long, but while it did it blew steadily against Equebus' ships, most of which had not yet furled their sails. The wind negated the labor of the oar slaves. The nine ships of Otto slowed, halted, and began to drift aimlessly without rudder or way.

Blade cupped his hands and screamed at Ixiv. This order must not be delayed or misunderstood, "Diverge!"

Ixiv trumpeted the word through leather. The four little galleys behind Blade fell off to right and left, two in each direction, and rowed at top speed to pierce the line of enemy ships.

Blade took the Pphira another point to starboard, avoiding the ram of the flagship, then brought his ship back in close. From the corner of his eye he saw a great jagged stone, flung by a catapult, smash one of his galleys amidships. The galleys, one that had diverged to the left, its back broken, fell off and began to sink. The harbor was dotted with slaves sinking or swimming as best they could. Blade could do nothing. He counted on losing his four galleys in any case - his hopes lay only in the trireme - and at least the oar slaves had not been chained to their benches.

Arrow fire was heavy now. Blade took Pphira in close to run alongside the flagship at top speed. He was within lance and javelin range. One of his archers fell screaming from the top lines and landed bloodily on the poop deck. Pelops screeched and cowered against the rail. Blade gave the little man a shove. "Get rid of it!"

Blade brought the tiller hard over and the big trireme ran past the flagship. Ixiv had ordered the port oars retracted just in time. Not so aboard the flagship. Equebus did not guess at Blade's maneuver until too late.

Pphira, propelled by her starboard oars, flashed down the side of the flagship. Scraping, sliding, bumping. The big quadreme carried fifty oars to a side. As Blade's heavy ship smashed the oars like matchsticks the carnage on the rowing benches was all the worse for being unseen. One great cry of anguish and terror and pain lifted to the Sarmaian skies. Broken oars smashed heads and limbs, flying splinters disemboweled deck officers. The flagship lost what little way she had and began to drift aimlessly, already half destroyed.

"Fire pots," yelled Blade.

Pelops had trained the men well. Blade gave him credit now as dozens of flaming pots were whirled at the end of long lines and tossed. Smoke and flame mounted. More screaming from the holds as the white hot coals scattered amid wrecked flesh. One of the pots caught in a fold of the half furled sail and a bright sheet of flame leaped and devoured. Smoke billowed back over the command deck where Equebus still fought to bring some order out of this chaos he had never foreseen. Blade was not fighting by the rules.

They were past the flagship and into a tight turn, Blade meaning to run back on the other side and smash the remaining oars left to Equebus. The Captain guessed at that and ordered the oars in. Blade smiled. The wind dropped away as suddenly as it had come and now the flagship had no propulsion, was little better than a drifting burning hulk. Ixiv had the port oars out again and, with the starboard side backing water, was turning the Pphira in her own length. Blade took a moment from the fray to focus his crude glass on the pier.
Otto the Black, with the aid of his slaves, had been hoisted to his feet. He peered out over the harbor at the disaster, with a look of petulant disbelief. Blade thought he looked like a giant baby about to have a temper tantrum. The Queen sat quietly, her face masked by a hand as she peered at the carnage. She would be, Blade thought, watching for the black flag. His lips quirked in a little grimace that had some cruelty in it. The Queen did not know what to expect, would not know Blade's plan until it was too late to alter it. Blade waved his sword at her. He would do what he could, what he must, and after that Pphira must handle it alone. He turned back to the task at hand, taking in the entire picture as the trireme began to run back toward the burning flagship.

He had lost another galley but five of Otto’s ships were burning and drifting. Blade's remaining two galleys were attacking one of Otto's ships, tossing fire pots and sending in heavy arrow fire, while the remaining three lay by and did nothing. Blade put his glass on these ships; it was as he suspected, and had hoped. The slaves aboard them were revolting. For Blade had commanded Pelops to plant spies, provocateurs, men to spread the word that all slaves who survived and could make it to the Pphira would be welcomed. He could not hope to save many of them, in fact had already discounted the four galleys and their crews, but now the strategy was paying off. Hand to hand fighting was raging on all three ships.

One of the burning vessels got its catapults back in working order and began flinging huge rocks at Blade's trireme. A slab of rock buzzed across the poop deck, just between Blade and Pelops, and took off the head of the helmsman now back at the tiller. The body stood upright for a moment, the hands still clenched around the blood spattered tiller, then toppled overboard. Blade watched Pelops.

That little man, having somehow gotten the body of the archer over the side, stood clutching his sword with determination. He glanced at the headless helmsman, swallowed, then looked back at Blade and tried to smile. Blade nodded encouragement and yelled above all the commotion, "We'll make a warrior of you yet, Pelops!"

Pelops did not seem convinced, but he nodded, clutched his sword still tighter, and turned to peer at the flagship now coming up on the larboard. Equebus, in the respite granted him, had managed to get some of the fires under control and to man his decks with every available archer and spearman. He had his sail, still burning, over the side. He crowded his lines and fore top with archers and prudently drew in his remaining oars. Four of his catapults, and two of the smaller catapults, were still working and could range the oncoming Pphira. Equebus was fighting back.

Blade nodded in satisfaction. He did not want the flagship to sink until he was finished with her. He glanced again at the pier. Otto the Black was seated again, staring disconsolately with fat chin in hand. Blade made a brief prayer that Otto would not move. It would spoil everything.

He yelled at Ixion from his place at the helm. "Step up the beat again. Another twenty."

Ixion nodded and bellowed the order. The oars began to flash faster as the drum went into a high frenetic dum-dum-dum-dumming. Slaves from the sunken ships, or those who had broken their chains and gone overboard, cried out piteously as they tried to clutch at the chopping oars and were slashed to bits or slammed beneath the water. There was no help for it.

Blade manned the tiller with one hand and kept his glass on the flagship. Equebus had worked a miracle by restoring even some semblance of order. He stood near a tall catapult on the afterdeck, speaking to an officer, and pointing to Blade on the Pphira. The offer nodded and yelled commands. The catapult was loaded and levered back - Thwanggggg.

The boulder smashed six feet of railing just abaft of Blade. He did not move. Arrows flailed the air as the catapults went into action. They threw six foot arrows that passed with a nasty hissing sound. Pelops and Ixion were both crouching on all fours. Blade remained upright. He was conscious that every man aboard Pphira was watching him. He must set an example now that would last into the future - if there was to be a future. So he ignored the urge to duck, the leaden feeling in his legs and belly, the ice along his spine. It would soon be over one way or the other.

They were within bowshot now. The hissing flights of arrows came in serried clouds that darkened the skies. Blade began to lose men. Pelops reverted to form for a moment and whimpered. Blade scowled him into silence. An arrow slashed off his helmet, another went through the loose sleeve of his jerkin. Blade smiled at Ixion.

"In port oars. Lower the beat on the starboard side. Prepare to drop the boarding gangway. Post men at bow and stern with grapnels. When we strike all rowing slaves are to find weapons and join the attack."

The boarding gangway Blade had remembered from his study of ancient sea battles. It was a hasty improvised job, a long wooden bridge four feet in width now tied up against the main mast. When the lines were slashed it would fall across the rail of the flagship. The Sarmaians knew of, and used, grapnels. Of the boarding gangway they had never heard.

Blade brought down the oar beat again. They were drifting close to the flagship. The air around Blade was filled with snakes, a constant sssshh-ssshh-shss-shss -
The voice of Equebus came roaring over the din. "Kill Blade! He there at the tiller. Every man fire at Blade!"

Three arrows plucked at Blade, one after the other, nipping his flesh and tearing at his armor. Ixion took an arrow in the throat and went down writhing and screaming and trying to tear it out with his bare hands. Pelops gave a cry that had little human in it.

Blade left the tiller, Pphira having nearly lost way and drifting, and sprang to gather up the leather trumpet. He lifted it and roared at the top of his voice.

"Prepare to board. Drop the gangway when we touch. Watch me. Keep your eyes on me!"

They drifted closer. They were in under the catapults now and safe from all but the arrows and lances, but that fire was steady and deadly. Blade strode to the head of the companionway and stood looking down at his men. Slaves, every one of them, but slaves with weapons in their hands and a determination that warmed him. He raised his sword and they let out a great cry even as the arrows and lances bled them. They were so closely packed on the fighting deck that men who died could not fall.

The cry went up. "Blade - Blade - Blade!"

"B-Blade!" It was Pelops, behind Blade, holding his sword aloft with a shaking hand.

"Brave little man," said Blade, hoping he was right. "Follow me and watch out for yourself."

The ships crunched together.

Blade yelled: "Grapnels over. Drop the gangway. Over the rails and kill the bowmen first. Keep the gangway clear. Keep it clear!"

He leaped down to the deck. Sword in his right hand, stabbing dagger in his left. An arrow plunked off his chest armor. Men made a way for him as he ran toward the gangway now fallen and resting on the rail of the flagship. After the first impact the Pphira had rebounded, drifted a bit, and now two feet of water separated the two ships.

"Tug your grapnels," Blade screamed as he pelted toward the gangway. "Bring her in close and bind her."

He leaped up on the gangway. He must be first over. Someone tossed him a shield.

The shield saved his life as a hail of arrows swept the gangway. Blade raised his sword and ran forward, yelling at the top of his voice.

"To me. Follow me! Board - board! Mercy to slaves - none to masters!"

Grapnels brought the two ships together again. They kissed. Blade's slaves swarmed over the rails in a screaming, hacking, howling mass of retribution.

An officer leaped to the gangway and met Blade as he charged. The swords chimed, sparking, and Blade feinted his opponent's shield high and ran him through the belly. The dying man fell forward, clutching Blade's weapon, and as he tried to wrest it free another officer aimed a terrible blow at him with a battle-axe. Blade ducked. The blow killed a man just behind him. Blade backed off, kicked the dead man off his sword, ducked another blow of the axe, taking it on his shield, and hamstrung the officer with a backhand blow. A slave daggered his opponent in the throat.

Blade was barely off the gangway and needed fighting room. It was too cluttered, too jam-packed, for effective sword play. Blade shouted and brought his sword in at half length and laid about him with a fury that soon widened the circle. He was already covered with grime and sweat and blood. His breath rasped in his throat, though he was not yet tiring, and he tried as best he could to concentrate on killing officers and such freemen as owed a mistaken loyalty to Otto and Equebus.

He ripped out a throat, daggered another man in the belly, smashed a skull with his shield and began to fight his way back toward the poop where Equebus stood watching his ship and crew die. Through sweat and blood that stung his eyes like nettles Blade saw the Captain standing, waiting, hands on hips, for what he surely knew was coming. In the same instant that he parried a blow, ran in hilt to hilt with his enemy, stared into shocked Sarmaian eyes, then blinded the man with a dagger slash, Blade regretted slightly what he must do. The Queen had no other son - and she had lavished much on this one. Still it must be done. In the end Pphira would be better off.

A man just behind Blade died with a high scream. Blade turned to see Pelops withdrawing a bloody sword from a chest. The little man stared at Blade as though he did not know him, his teeth showing in a feral rictus. He slashed again and again at the dying man.

"Save it for the live ones," Blade grunted, and plunged forward.

The slaves aboard the flagship now began to throw down their weapons and beg for mercy. To all slaves it was granted. Officers and freemen who cried for quarter were butchered. Blade dispatched a last man and stood on the battle deck just below the poop. From the top of the ladder Equebus stared down with an enigmatic smile.

It was over. Nearly over. Blade gave a few brisk orders - he did not want the catapult officer slain yet - and his officers set about bringing some order out of the bloody charnel house that was now the flagship. The fires, though somewhat under control, still blazed and Blade did not want them spreading to Pphira. He gave orders to get the
dead overboard, all the while keeping an eye on the shore. There came a great tumult and outcry from that direction,
and some rioting was evident, but Otto the Black and the Queen were still on their thrones.

There was no present danger. The Queen had no ship left for Otto to commandeer and his own fleet, save for
the small escort that had brought him to Sarma, was far out on the Purple Sea. Such had been his contempt for
Sarma.

A quiet fell over the ship now. They were all waiting. All watching Blade and the Captain Equebus. Equebus
who stood on his command deck and had not even drawn his sword.

Blade plunged his stained sword into the deck planking. It quivered and stood upright. Arms akimbo, he stared
up at Equebus. The Captain stared back, a leer of contempt on his bearded lips.

"Well," said Blade, "do you come down to fight, or must I come up?"

He was prepared for anything but what came.

Equebus smiled. "I will not fight you, Blade. I am not a fool. I surrender and demand that you seek ransom for
me - if you are fool enough."

Taken aback, Blade still did not believe it. He was genuinely puzzled.

"I know you are called the Cruel," he said at last. "I know also you have earned that name. But I had not
thought you worthy of still another name - Equebus the Coward!"

Outcry began to burgeon in the packed ranks about Blade. Pelops, that now fierce warrior, spoke for all when
he said: "Give him to me, Captain Blade. We will make him fight - or wish he had."

A shout went up. Blade stilled it with an upraised hand and grinned at Pelops. "You have grown very
bloodthirsty, little man. But I command here and I decide what is done with Equebus. Anyone who doubts that had
better speak up now."

There was only a little muttering.

Blade turned back to the Captain, still strutting and preening on his deck as though he had not lost a battle. Yet
now Blade thought he saw terror in the man. Terror well masked, but terror just the same. If so, Blade was the only
man who saw it.

Blade asked once again, "Will you fight?"

Equebus smiled his smile and flung down his sword. It clattered at Blade's feet. Along with the smile of
contempt there was honest puzzlement in the Captain's eyes.

"You will not kill me, Blade. What could it gain you? You are already, my strange friend, in a great deal of
trouble. You have spoiled the games and slain a great many of the Queen's officers and freemen. You missed the
point, Blade. You were to lose and so be spared your own life, for I know how the Queen feels about you. Or did
feel about you. Now I am not so sure. Are you mad, Blade? Really mad?"

Equebus shot a glance at the pier, where Otto and Queen Pphira still watched from their thrones. He frowned.

"You are mad. Or it was a plot - you and Pphira! But would she dare so much against Otto?"

"You should know of plots," said Blade. "You were deep enough in one against your own Queen."

Blade saw a flicker of movement in the cabin beneath the poop deck. He gave an order. "In there and fetch me
that priest. It is Kreed, I think, hoping to be overlooked."

The young officer, a slave promoted by Blade only the day before on the word of Pelops, hesitated. Blade's
smile was grim.

"Make up your mind, young man. Who do you fear more - Bek-Tor and his priests, or me?"

The officer led five men into the cabin and came out a moment later dragging Kreed, the High Priest, cringing
and sniveling and begging for his life.

Blade gave the slaves time enough to take in the sight. "There is your Bek-Tor," he said. "A false God and
faulser priests. As much a coward as the Captain there."

A slave muttered, "Too bad we are not on the plain - Kreed would burn well in the maw of his God."

Kreed fell to his knees and began to gibber. "No fire for him," said Blade. "Water."

He picked Kreed up by the scruff of the neck and carried him to the side and dropped him overboard. The ship
roared with laughter.

Blade made a signal by prearrangement. A black flag was run to the masthead. He hoped the Queen would see
it and understand.

The catapult officer who had been spared was taken to his huge sling and given instructions. A rock half as
large as Blade himself was selected and placed in the basket.

Blade touched his sword. It quivered in the decking. "For the last time, Equebus, will you have an honorable
death? I will not ask again."

The Captain was on the verge of breaking. He glanced at the chain across the harbor mouth, then back at Blade,
and his mouth worked under the beard. His eyes were haunted. Yet he tried.
"I do not understand, Blade. You cannot escape. The chain bars that. In time you and all these slaves will be hunted down and slain. The quicker if you harm me. Why not take your victory, try to survive it if you can, and put your trust in Pphira? I doubt she can save you now, but she might try. Or if you let Otto have his way with you - " And Equebus grinned lewdly through his terror.

Disgust filled Blade. Get it over with. He made a great lap up the ladder and seized Equebus and flung him down. The Captain did not so much as struggle. He was dazed, still not quite believing that Blade would dare what he feared Blade would dare.

Blade made a sign. A screen was raised before the catapult and Equebus hustled behind it. Blade looked shoreward. Queen Pphira had read the black flag and was not in view. She had made some excuse and left. Otto the Black, enormous blob of fat on his throne, was peering out at the harbor and fuming. A small boat was already halfway to the two locked ships. Otto's couriers coming to find out the truth of matters.

Equebus, gagged now, watched in growing fear and disbelieving wonder as he was bound to the great rock. His eyes widened and he made pitiful sounds behind the gag. His and the rock were readied for flight.

Blade put his sword to the throat of the catapult officer and explained: "I have seen the accuracy of these weapons. I want it now. You will adjust and lever it so that the rock, and Equebus, falls directly on Otto the Black. Fail and you die. It is as simple as that."

The officer blanched. His knees were knocking together. "But I - that is, sire, one cannot always hit a target. Sometimes there is bad luck and the wind, er, yes, the wind. That is very chancy. The wind is - "

The wind was indeed rising, just as Ixion had promised. It was setting steadily from the land. Blade probed the man's throat with his sword point. "Adjust for the wind. You are a expert - now save your own life. Get ready."

He had no intention of killing the man. He knew how chancy the catapults could be at times, though they were marvelously accurate. Yet he wanted the officer's best efforts and fear would ensure that.

The long springy arm was twisted back, this being masked by the screen of matting. The levers were all in place and the trigger only awaited a slight tug of the cord. Equebus, staring over his gag in horror and supplication, trussed to his rock like any fowl, kept shaking his head and drooling horrible sounds.

"A low trajectory," Blade ordered. "I do not want his Fatness warned in time to run away - if he can run." Slaves tittered.

Blade raised his arm. Equebus moaned behind his gag. The screen fell away. Blade dropped his arm.

PTHWANGGGGG.

The arc was low. Blade saw the crowd around Otto begin to scatter, tardily, as they realized what was happening. The huge boulder with its human cargo hissed through the air.

Blade, who had not really expected too much - the gesture would have satisfied him - watched with gleeful amazement as the great stone zoomed at its target. It was zeroing in like a guided missile back in Home Dimension.

Otto the Black, who had never known a threat to his person in all his royal life, was equally astounded. When at last he screamed there was no one to help him. They were all running away.

Otto could not stand easily without assistance. He was too fat. Now he tried and fell to his knees. He rolled. He scrambled. At the very last he cowered and screamed a command at the descending rock. In his very last moment of life Otto saw, or thought he saw, a very strange thing. Something, a man, was bound to the boulder that was about to crush Otto. No! Such things could not be. But this could not be, either. Not to Otto the Black. Death.

The boulder made a squishy sullen thud on impact. Blade was happy that he did not have to see the result. He leaped to the poop and raised his sword and barked out a string of orders. There was much to be done, to be done quickly, before the Queen could come out of shock and realize that Blade did not intend to return to her. And he had killed her only son.

An hour later, during which there was no interference - three small boats sent out to investigate were turned back by the catapults - Blade had the trireme, the Pphira, under way again. The flagship was burning and slowly sinking. Blade had lost all his galleys, though saving some of the men, and only one of Otto's ships, a bireme, remained afloat. It fled to an inlet and refused to fight.

The wind was strengthening all the while. Blade, with a new helmsman, put the Pphira straight at the massive chain. Pelops, who had not wiped the blood from his sword, stood beside him on the deck.

"What of Ixion?" Blade asked.

"He lives, sire. The arrow missed a vital point, though he bled a great deal. I cut oft the arrowhead and withdrew the shaft very skillfully. I am somewhat skilled in medicine, you know, and thought to be the ship's doctor. But now that I am a warrior - "

Blade patted his shoulder. "Now that you are a warrior you had better pray a little. The chain is coming up. If we cannot break it all our trouble has been for nothing. If we cannot make the open sea we are all as good as dead."

He turned to the man at the tiller. "Bear steady. I want the full weight of the wind. Pelops, tell them to step up
the oar beat by thirty. We must snap the chain at our first try - if not I doubt that we can do it at all."
Dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-
They rowed for their lives. The big square sail bellied out, full of a following wind. The oars Hashed down and in and up and down again.
Blade took the tiller, Pelops hovering beside him. "We must hit it dead center," Blade muttered. "We must strike the weakened link. Otherwise we are as much prisoners as before."
"I wish now," said Pelops, "that I had believed in Bek-Tor. At least He-She might answer my prayers."
The Pphira struck the chain at full speed. There was a grinding sound, a crunching, as the boat ran up a bit on the chain. The big vessel shuddered and lost way abruptly. The chain held.
Blade cupped his hands and bellowed. "Row, damn you, row! Row for your lives!"
Long oars threshed water into creamy frenzy. A moaning song came up from the rowing benches.
"Row!"
The chain parted. The big trireme was free.
Chapter Sixteen

From the writings of Aknir, Palace Philosopher of Greater Sarma, in the year 10536 AB - After Blade - concerning the Secret of the Oxem:

(Oxem is an old Sarmaian word for leather, now generally considered archaic and in some disrepute.) The reference is to a leathern bottle, made water tight with gum, in which the strange writings of Captain Richard Blade were reputed to have been found, washed up by the Purple Sea, after many years, near a small fishing village in what was formerly called Tyranna but has long since been annexed by Sarma. IE - War of Liberation, circa 10344-10350. That Blade ever existed is doubtful, yet the myth persists to this day, and in some parts of Greater Sarma he is regarded as a quasi-deity nearly on a par with Bek-Tor. In writing so long after the events a scholar must go with care, weighing fact against fiction and myth, and I hope I have been sufficiently circumspect in this regard. I myself am disinclined to believe that a Blade ever existed, so the writing in the leather bottle must have been some kind of a hoax. Why? By whom? I cannot answer. There is no question that the myth persists strongly - do we not now date our moon sequences thus, After Blade? The sad truth is that we can never really know for sure. And it is sad because I, Aknir the Philosopher, commissioned by Her Majesty Queen Fertti, Ruler of Greater Sarma, would like to believe in Richard Blade. On the evidence available, as a man of reason, I cannot. I can only present the writings, purported to be written by Blade in the ancient Sarmaian script and translated by me.

A final word about the translation. There were great, almost insurmountable difficulties. If Blade did exist he was certainly no Sarmaian. His grammar is execrable, his choice of words poor, his style - if one may presume to call it by that name - barely on a level with the barest beginner today. Whoever the writer he seems to have had the barest smattering of Old Sarmaian. Many times he uses words that, if not made indecipherable by time and the sea, were surely never spoken by a Sarmaian tongue. This translation had been a labor of love and, in many times, very nearly a labor of hate. My personal physician, Cyclo, will testify how many times I have come to him pleading hysteria as a result of working on this manuscript.

So I can only offer this with the comment that I have don’t a9 the best I can. Whether or not Richard Blade ever lived in Sarma, the old Sarma, each reader will have to decide for himself. One thing is sure - there is a vitality, a crispness of spirit, a motivation of freedom and determination, about the tale that strikes the heart even over rational disbelief. This is, to my belief, the first transliteration of the Log, or the Secret of the Oxem, into Modern Sarmaian. I think it will take a firm place in our literature.

LOG OF THE TRIREME PPHIRA.

I must cast back a bit to bring this log up to date. Probably a lot of damned foolishness anyway, keeping a log, but Pelops found writing materials in the same village where we took on food and water, and it helps to kill the time. Odd, that, because I may not have as much time as I reckoned on. Yesterday I had a pain in my head, frontal lobes, and though it might have been only a headache it might also be Lord L probing for me with the computer. I hope not. I am, at the moment, a hell of a long way from finding my doppelganger.

(Despairing note of translator - I have consulted planet wide authorities and can find no meaning for doppelganger.) The Pphira is well found and clean bottomed. There is enough of sail cloth and cordage, spare oars, and all nautical supplies. This I can only suppose to be another oversight by the officers of the late Otto, when they were selecting the ships for the sea games. Pelops says they were all drunk on kippe at the time.

Speaking of kippe, I found several casks, aboard and had them moved to my cabin. The stuff is a little like rum, though with less body, and Pelops tells me it is brewed from berries found only in the swamps of Sarma. I think I will keep it away from the men, though I had thought of emulating the British Navy and doling out a pint a day, or so, but decided to hell with that. This is not the British Navy!

I have been following the Sarmian coast south and sending occasional parties ashore for information. The Word I get is that all Sarma is in revolt against Tyranna now that Otto is dead - what a mess that must have been - and that Queen Pphira is organizing an expeditionary force to invade Tyranna before Otto’s son - what in hell was his name? - can invade her. I hope she gets away with it.

I have wasted the better part of a week in getting the ship organized and in working out a few problems. One of the problems is that I just have too damned many men! Pphira is over-crewed with 200 and I have 400. All former slaves. My only solution is to find another ship. Have called Ixion - who is recovering well - and Pelops into conference and explained the situation to them. Ixion just grinned and said no problem - capture another ship and put half my crew aboard her. I think he is right. Pelops, who is getting to be something of a problem himself, went into a long lecture about how that would make us pirates. I asked him what matter, so long as we did not kill when it was not necessary, and told him to shut up. Pelops took it badly. He actually put his hand on his sword and glared at me. I had a hard time not laughing, for I do not want to hurt his feelings. The little man has found his manhood now
and I like that, but I wish he was not such a little bastard about it. He shines his armor all the time and neglects his work, and struts around like he owned the ship. Hate to do it, but sooner or later will have to take him down a peg.

No more head pains. Maybe it was only a headache after all.

The goddamnedest thing happened today - I wonder how stupid a man like me can really be! It has been right under my nose all the time and I didn't see it. Uranium. Mountains of uranium. Now, if I make it back to Home Dimension alive, all Lord L has to do is invent teleportation and England will be a great power again. The stuff will be so cheap that we will be making atom bombs for a shilling each. That is good?

To hell with it. I am an agent, not a do-gooder nor yet a bleeding heart or philosopher. Uranium is a fact of life. And His Lordship hasn't invented teleportation yet, though I wouldn't bet against it. But to get to the facts, m'am, as they used to say in that Yank TV show - Christ, I hope nobody ever reads this log! I really let my hair down in it. Sometimes I feel like a girl with a diary. But it does fill the time and I sort of enjoy it. I am no writer and don't have to be, and anyway Pelops says that nobody, but absolutely nobody, will ever be able to read my Sarmaian. He tried to read one page and got to laughing so hard that I finally had to kick him out of the cabin.

To get back to the uranium. It was Chephron who did it. I know he makes the Hunchback of Notre Dame look like a beauty contest winner, and I really can't stand the man, but I have to be fair. He is a good oar drummer and knows how to handle the men and get the most out of them. Everybody takes a turn at the oars. Except myself and Pelops and Ixion.

Pelops, who fancies himself as a medical man, was trying to cure Chephron's sores with some salve he found aboard. It didn't work, but Pelops did find out that Chephron, the idiot, was carrying around a piece of raw meta in his pocket.

"It is a luck piece," Chephron said to me. "I carry it just to remind myself that I no longer toil in the mines. Whenever I am sick and the sores pain me and make people avoid me I look at the piece of meta and tell myself how much better off I am."

I quote him verbatim in the above. Anyway Pelops got the idea that the raw meta had something to do with the sores. Chephron wouldn't part with it. So Pelops, who is now the ship's doctor and, I suppose, as good as any, had Chephron up in front of me. As long as I am writing this at all, taking the trouble, I may as well put that into quotes also.

Pelops said, "I want to throw it overboard, sire, but the fool will not part with it. He has carried it since the mine and I believe it makes him sick and keeps his sores from healing. He will not listen to me - but if you order him!"

I did not like looking at Chephron and his sores - a thing I am not proud of, but in this log I am telling the truth, since nobody will ever see it anyway - and I wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. Chephron did not smell so good, either, though I make all the men bathe once a day in sea water.

"Let me see the thing," I ordered. "Take it from him, Pelops, and hand it to me."

Chephron growled a little, but he obeyed. I examined the chunk of raw meta closely.

Strange how the human brain works even when it has been distorted and reconstituted by Lord L's computer. The chunk of meta was about half the size of a cricket ball. Heavy, with a lot of mass and density, a mixture of black-brown in color. I flipped it in my palm, not really thinking too much about it, ' and studied poor little Chephron. For some reason, only Bek-Tor knows why, as Pelops would say, I remembered something I had read back in H Dimension. Something about the chemical table of the human body and what it was worth in money. In dollars and cents - it must have been a reprint from a Yank paper. I could even remember the exact figures - that the value of body chemicals and minerals was up 257% since 1936. In that year they had been worth about 98 cents. Now they were valued at $3.50. Carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorus, all of them, even a little gold and silver, worth almost four dollars. I was looking at Chephron and thinking that on that scale he was worth about sixpence.

The important thing was that it got me to thinking about minerals. I took a better and longer look at the meta. Something started buzzing in my mind, but it wouldn't come out in the open.

I flung the chunk of meta on my bunk and told Chephron that I would decide later after I had studied the stuff. He grumbled a little but in the end he bowed and took off. Then I had to listen to Pelops.

He glared at the meta. "If you keep it around, sire, you will get the sores and the sickness. I am convinced of it. Let me throw it over the side. I have long thought, ever since I - "

By this time I knew when he was getting ready to go into a lecture and I cut him short. I was a little curt with him.

"One night will do no harm," I told him. "Forget it. And here is an order - find me an ingot of refined meta, or a coin of the stuff, and bring it to me at once. Hurry up."

He thought I was bonkers. "An ingot of meta, sire? Where would I find that aboard this ship?"

I admitted the unlikelihood. "Find me a coin, then. Any coin. They are all made of meta, aren't they?"
"Of course, sire. What else? But surely you know - Otto the Black controlled all coinage - even the Queen had few coins - how am I to find a coin among slaves? It is impossible. I myself have not possessed a meta coin in years. And as I was about to say, sire, when you switched the talk to coins, I -"

I leveled a finger at him - remember to clean your nails, Blade - and said, "As you are not about to say, Polonius, get the hell out of here and find me a coin. You have four hundred ex-slaves to search. Surely one of them somehow and somewhere, will have concealed a coin. Look for it. Don't come back until you find it."

When I get that tone in my voice Pelops knows I mean it, But he stopped at the cabin door and looked at me. "Polonius? I am Pelops, as you well know. Why did you call me by another name? Who is Polonius?"

It was hard to keep from laughing, but I managed. "A very great man in the literature of my own land," I told him. "Very wise. Of the finest character. A fount of good advice and much looked up to. He only had one failing."

Polops, all smiles now, mollified, was bowing and smirking at me. "His failing, sire? What was it?"

"HE TALKED TOO DAMNED MUCH. OUT - OUT! FIND ME A COIN!"

When he was gone I examined the chunk of raw meta again. I forced my memory back to a class I had attended at the Naval School in Greenwich. I had made me go.

Just suppose, I thought to myself. Symbol U or UR. AT. no., 92 AT. wt., 238.07.

It all came slipping back into my mind. Possible? Hell - I was in Sarma! Who would have thought that possible before Lord L came up with his master computer?

Just before dark Pelops came back with a small square coin. He had washed it well, he explained, because one of the former slaves had had it concealed up his anus. I did not ask how Pelops had come by it.

I examined the coin with the crude telescope I had inherited. Not very satisfactory, but good enough. I scratched it with a knife. Heavy, dense, nickellike. Very hard. It could just be.

That night, before the cabin lamp was lit, I lay on the bunk and studied the chunk of raw meta. After staring at it for a long time I had to call in Pelops and Ixion for their opinions. I was beginning to doubt my own eyes.

They saw it, too. A faint glow in the dark, just a hint of fluorescence, a barely seen nimbus around the chunk of meta.

Pitchblende.

For the first time in four trips out into Dimension X I had found a treasure that could really be called a treasure. In Sarma there were whole mountain ranges of pitchblende. Chephron had radiation sores.

I have decided to have a special pocket made in my clothes for the piece of meta and the coin. Recompense the man for his coin.

All the above is written in retrospect, long after the fact, for the simple reason that I have just gotten back to this log. A hell of a lot has happened since I identified that chunk of meta ay pitchblende. Most all of it bad. Some good, though. I have found Zeena again!

Not that finding her turned out to be such a good thing. It really wasn't. But none of that, because I can't bring myself to write about it. The biggest trouble is that I now have another woman on my hands. The two of them are driving me crazy.

Let me see. It is hard to pick up a log like this after so much time and so many events - so I will just say that I was lying there thinking about the pitchblende and wondering if Lord L could ever invent teleportation so we could get the stuff back to H Dimension, when Ixion came in with bad news. I am trying to remember just how he put it. I do remember that he still had a bandage around his neck and was very pale. Ixion was a good man and a fine seaman. If it were not for Ixion I wouldn't be writing in this log again.

Ixion said, "There is weather making, Captain Blade. Looks like one of the Purple storms that come this time of year. We had best get off the land as far as we can."

We had been coasting south.

I wasn't particularly worried, I remember. I did my time in the Navy and I've been around boats most of my life. And he was right, of course. I didn't want to fool around with a lee shore.

I can remember distinctly that I was sleepy. I must have yawned. And said, "So take her out, Ixion. We'll heave to, rig a sea anchor, and ride out the weather. No problem."

Ixion frowned. He wasn't having any of my cheerfulness. I did not, it seemed, understand much about the purple Sea. He took a leather chart out of a case and showed me.

The thing about the Purple Sea was that it was so narrow. I hadn't actually realized. Ixion put his finger on the chart and showed me - the Purple Sea was only about fifty miles across at the widest point. Most of it was much narrower than that. Directly across from us now was Tyranna. I sure as hell didn't want to go there. Neither did I want to hang around Sarma.

To the north were uncharted waters - as far as Ixion knew the sea stretched out to infinity. No sailor had ever reached the end of it. I wasn't about to try.
Ixion said the Purple storms blew for days, even weeks. Even with sea anchors and bare poles we were sure to be driven. To east or west we would be driven aground. To the north were uncharted waters. That left the south, where lay the Burning Land, where I wanted to go anyway. I thought it solved the problem. Run before the storm, always to the south. Ixion left the cabin shaking his head - the Captain Blade had never been in a Purple storm. I would see.

I saw, all right. As I write this I can still see those waves. Mast high. Higher. It was like being in a valley surrounded by purple-black mountains. The wind was at least typhoon strength - by H Dimension standards - and it never let up. Kept shifting from quarter to quarter, shrilling and screaming and blowing the tops off the huge waves.

We lost four rudders in two days. I lost a dozen men overboard in the first hour before we got life lines rigged. I had myself lashed to the tiller and took the worst beating of my life, but I managed to keep her from broaching too badly. We bailed all the time. They were working for their lives and they knew it and they bailed. How they bailed! It wasn't enough. The Pphira was tight enough but we kept shipping tons of water with every wave. And the waves never stopped.

By the end of the third day I knew we were licked. Pphira was low in the water and getting ready to sink any minute. Then we got a miracle. The storm passed.

I will put this in quotes, too, in an effort to get it down just as it happened. The storm let up suddenly and I grabbed Ixion's speaking grumpet and let them hear me good.
"Bail, you misbegotten bastards! Get this ship dry. You cooks start your fires again - we'll all be better with hot food in our bellies. You bo'suns" - for I had Pphira organized down to the lowest rating - "you bo'suns get your crews to clearing up the wreckage. Everything we can't use goes over the side. Check the drinking water. And remember that it's rationed! Any man caught stealing water goes over the side. Empty and clean the latrines. All sick or injured men report to Pelops immediately."

I kept bellowing, sounding as tough and cheerful as I could to put some heart in them. They needed it. So did I. I hadn't been off my feet in two days and the ropes that bound me to the tiller had rubbed me raw. I was about at the end of my tether but I couldn't let them see it.

Pelops was in worse shape. Along with everything else he had been sea sick - I've never seen a worse case - and he spent most of the time in my cabin, hiding under the bunk and throwing up. Those mountainous waves had taken all the strut out of him. I didn't blame him much, but now I had to roust him a little.

"You've got sick call to look to," I told him. "Get down there and get those men patched up and dosed."

His complexion was like green slime. He held his belly and groaned at me. "I am still ill, sire. I cannot. My belly is in my throat. Anyway I have few medicines and my splints and bandages are in short supply. I -"

I scowled at him and shoved him off the poop deck. "Do the best you can, then. Set a good example, at least. The worst is over."

When Pelops had gone Ixion looked at me from the tiller, where he had taken over, and said, "You are wrong, Captain. The worst is not over. It is yet to come."

Remember that I was as sick, tired, hungry and thirsty and beatup as any of them. I gave him a nasty look. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Ixion pointed to the sea around us. It was calm as far as the eye could see, as calm as though oil had been spread on it.

"You do not know the way of the Purple storms," Ixion reminded me again. "It will return. In an hour, or a day, or even several days, but it will return. There are always two parts to a Purple storm, and there is always a calm between. You will see."

I had to believe him. Ixion had never been wrong yet about seafaring matters. I cursed for a time - a lot of good that did - then asked Ixion if he had any idea where we were. He didn't, much, except that we had been driven south all this while and there was no land in sight. Not much help. But I knew what I had to do.

"Get the men to rowing as soon as possible." There wasn't a breath of wind. There wouldn't be, Ixion said, until the storm came blasting back.

"We'll make all the southing we can," I decided. "We've got to sight the Burning Land sometime. Maybe we can find a harbor to protect us. What would you know of this?"

Ixion shrugged. "I have never been to the Burning Land, Captain. Few Sarmaians have. I know only what I have heard of it - that it is a terrible place and is a great distance from Sarmacid. It is said that none may cross the Burning Land but the Moghs, who live beyond it."

I was not interested in Moghs at the moment. I glanced at the sky. It was yellow and shot with red. Patches of the familiar yellow fog were dotting the tranquil sea like mushrooms. Looking at that glassy smooth surface now it was hard to conceive its recent fury.

I stared at Ixion. "You are sure the storm will return?"
He made the sign of the T. "As sure, my Captain, as I stand on this deck a free man."
"Get them rowing," I snapped. "Tell Chephron to get all he can out of them. I know they're sick and tired, and a lot of them crippled, but we have to try it. Pphira won't last out another blow like that last one."
"The second storm," said Ixion, "is always the worst."
I gave him a sour look. "You're just a little ray of sunshine, mate. That is what I love about you."
He didn't get it and I didn't bother to explain. I dragged my weary carcass down among the men and did the best I could to cheer them. They were a pretty bedraggled lot but in half an hour I had them on the benches, putting their backs into it, and starting a sea chantey. I went back to the poop.

We had lost our single mast, snapped halfway down, and I couldn't step a new one at sea. There was a spare - marvel in itself - but I couldn't risk lying to and stepping it when the new storm might catch me. I sent a man up to the splintered stub to lash himself there and let me know the instant he saw land.

That damned desert shore - which of course I took the Burning Land to be, desert - couldn't be much farther on. If we could make it and beach Pphira. I had enough men to drag her high above the tide line and dig a shallow hole for her bottom. She would be safe then and I would have a base of sorts. I knew I was going to have to cross that desert and I was not looking forward to it.

Burns said something about the best laid plans, etc. The old drunk knew what he was talking about. We had been rowing about five hours, making good speed, when the lookout on the shattered mast let out a yell and pointed off the port bow.

"A ship, Captain! A ship - sinking."

A ship in distress. With all my trouble it was the last thing I needed. I cupped my hands, and yelled at the lookout.

"What do you make of her, man?"

"I make her a pirate, Captain. There is a skull nailed to her prow. Her mast is gone and she is down by the head. Women aboard her, sir! Women!"

I could hear the muttering all through Pphira at the word. Women! More trouble.

"I shot a glance at Ixion. "What do you make of it? Could it be one of the Queen's punishment ships?"

Zeena!

Ixion took the glass from me and studied the ship. With my naked eye I could see women leaping and shouting aboard her, waving their hands, and bits of colored cloth. Most of them were bare breasted. No sign of a man.

"Those are women right enough," said Ixion. He licked his lips.

"I know that," I told him coldly. "Keep your mind on the matter at hand. What of the ship?"

He nodded slowly. "She's a pirate, Captain. In bad shape, too, but I don't think she's sinking. Certainly she is not a galless, no crime ship. She's only a unireme and all gallesses are biremes at least, usually triremes. And there is the skull nailed to her prow - none but a pirate would carry that."

I tugged my beard and wondered aloud. "Then where are the damned pirates? Not women pirates, certainly?"

Ixion handed me back the glass with a cool look. "No, Captain. My guess is that the pirates attacked a galless and sank her. They took some of the women aboard their own ship."

I knew a way to find out. "Stand by to lie close to her;" I said. "Battle stations. This could be a trick to lull us with women. She is probably crammed with pirates below decks."

I was wrong. It turned out that the pirates had taken a galless, one of the Queen's punishment ships. They killed the Captain, one Marius and the only man aboard - did not Queen Pphira mention that name to me? - and they had a lot of fun with the ugly women before they tossed them overboard or slit their throats. The cream of the crop, of the women crew, criminals under Sarmaian law and set to the oars, the pirates took aboard their own ship. All women, as I found out later, were communal property.

I am getting ahead of things. When we found no pirates we came alongside the unireme and took the women off. More of that later. Too much of it, by far. Sheer hell! Zeena was among them.

Ixion was right about the unireme. She could be saved. That really gladdened the old Blade heart. I hated to lose Ixion, but he was the best man I had and he was needed, I told him, in the presence of Pelops, that he was now a Captain.

"Take anything you need and repair that ship," I ordered. "Keep her afloat. Take a hundred and fifty men with you. Appoint your own officers - you know them better than I do - and work as fast as you can. I'll lie hove to until we see how it is coming out."

I saw him watching the sky and knew what he was thinking.

"Pray a little," I advised him. "Maybe the storm will hold off long enough."

To Pelops I said: "I place you in charge of the women. See if Zeena is among them. Herd them all into my cabin and keep them in it - see to their needs as best you can. No one but you to enter the cabin without my
permission."

Ixion interrupted me, a thing he seldom did. "There is something, Captain, of which I must speak. It is important. Much so. Neither you nor I want a mutiny."

I knew it was coming, I said, "I listen."

"If I am to have nearly half the men, Captain, and a ship of my own, I will also need some of the women. Surely you see that? Otherwise there will be fighting and mutiny. These men are slaves, as I was, and some have not had a woman in years."

Pelops nodded at me. "He is right, sire."

Of course he was right. I was in Sarma and had to do as the Sarmaians did.

"Find the Princess Zeena," I told Pelops curtly. "If she is among them. I care not what you do with the others. You are a teacher, a scholar. Use your math to figure out the ratio - one woman to so many men. Just so you keep them at peace. Now do it."

(Translator's note - here a large segment of the script is missing or in such condition from sea and time that it is unreadable. Many of the pages are only fragments. It is possible to attempt an interpolation of the missing, or indecipherable, pages, though such an attempt is always presumptuous and carries the risk of misleading. With all this in view, I have still made the effort.

The women were divided among the crews of the two ships. Blade had no alternative and it was the custom in those crude old days. He did find his Princess Zeena, though not as he remembered her, and he found another woman as well. One would indeed give much to know the outcome of all this, of this triangle, if in fact it ever happened. Alas that we cannot know.

We know that there were some thirty women - this indicated by fragments of script not shown here - and that they were happy enough to be with the men on the two ships. One can, even in these somewhat effete days, imagine what it must have been like.

The unireme was saved and made sea-worthy. With Ixion in command it followed Blade as he continued his search for the coast of the Burning Land. Beyond doubt what we today call the Xbec Sands. Whether or not he made it we do not know. It would seem not, by the evidence of these papers themselves which Blade sealed, or at least stored, in an empty kippe bottle. We come now to the final few sentences in the missive. Blade must have written it just before the storm swept back and struck again.)

I am writing on the poop deck, having been ejected from my cabin by Zeena and the other woman. Who calls herself a Princess, also. A Princess Canda. Two of them?

Zeena did not recognize me. She is in very bad shape mentally. It is clear that she had a bad time among the pirates. The other one, Canda, seems not to have been harmed. I really don't know what to make of her yet. She treats me, and poor Pelops, like dirt under her feet. She claims she is the daughter of some great king across the mountains of the Burning Land. El Kal of the Moghs. Whoever he is! I don't know. This Canda may just be a beautiful liar.

Tried to talk to Zeena again. No luck. She is afraid of me and shrinks into a corner of the cabin and stares at me with that haunted look. She has been passed from hand to hand by the pirates, that much is obvious, and it has tipped her over the edge. Question is - what can I do? How can I help her?

I have a job to do, damn it, and it has to come first. If we ever find that goddamned coast!

There is something about that other woman, Canda, that disturbs me. She keeps watching me with a funny little smile. As though she knew something. She is a cool customer, too, and would like to take over my ship if she could. She has been ordering Pelops about as if he were a slave again. We all seem slaves to her.

A beauty, though. Luscious. Even with most of her clothes off, which is the way all the women came aboard.

Canda is watching me now from the cabin with that imperious look on her face and that odd smile. Breasts that are out of this world! Down, Blade. You are in plenty of trouble without that - besides there is poor Zeena to think of. Yet I wonder - could Zeena and I still be married? Under Sarmaian law probably. To hell with that!

Ixion is signaling from the unireme. That damned wind is coming up again. Sky very bad. Waves starting to build. Here we go again! I will put this -

(Translator's note - That is all. We know that Blade, if there was such a person, stored his manuscript in a wine bottle of leather. The bottle was sealed when found. And here we must enter into speculation once more: surely, for all those centimoons, the wine bottle did not float about in the Purple Sea. It must, always supposing it to be genuine, have found a lodgement in some sea cave, or grotto, or even a wreck, while so many eons passed it by. Then, by chance, it was freed and eventually drifted into our own time and was at last discovered by the fishing villagers. This is, I must repeat once more, only speculation.

But then Richard Blade himself is speculation! This poor scholar has already gone on record as a disbeliever. My own theory is that the papers are a hoax perpetrated long ago, in an age contemporary with the Blade myth.
Some submerged genius, perhaps, who believed in the myth and wanted his chance at playing Blade.
We shall never know.
Chapter Seventeen

Often, in those interminable days of trekking across the desert, flayed by the sun in daylight, frozen at night when they camped without shelter, Blade envied the man he meant to kill.

His doppelganger, the Russian agent, was living a life of luxury at the court of El Kal, King of all the Moghs. More than that - the double was now Vizier of the Kingdom, in a position of power and prestige, and was anxiously searching for his twin brother. For Blade!

The Princess Canda - for Blade was now convinced that she was indeed a Princess - had imparted this information. Not at first. But at a time and in a place of her own choosing.

As night descended Blade set about building the usual cairn of stones to catch water. It was all they had, all that kept them alive, and stemmed from a resourcefulness the big adventurer had not known he possessed. During the hot, sun blasted days he noted that the wind always blew inland from the Purple Sea. It was laden with moisture. The second night, with all of them raging with thirst, Blade built a high cairn of relatively cool stones dug out of the sand with his sword. Within half an hour moisture was collecting on the stones and trickling to form a tiny pool. Blade monitored the drinking, again with his sword, and filled a small wine bottle that the wretch Chephron had happened to have attached to his belt when the Pphira broke her back on a reef and sank.

After completing the cairn Blade stood gazing at the snow tipped mountains on the far horizon. They seemed no nearer than they had at the beginning of the march. Blade, had he not known better, would have sworn that the mountains retreated stealthily during the night.

Beyond the mountains, if ever they reached them, lay the Land of the Moghs and a great city where El Kal ruled. So said Canda, who claimed to be only daughter to El Kal.

There was an oasis, said Canda, not far from a pass leading through the mountains. When they reached the oasis - a matter on which Blade was not at the moment sanguine - a signal would be sent and a party would come to greet them. Blade was not especially looking forward to this, as irksome, uncomfortable and dangerous as his present plight was. His double at the moment held all the good cards. He was established and powerful. Had all the advantages. Blade had a pair of leather breeches, fast wearing out in the crotch, and his sword.

He had also been having pains in his head again. And wondered - was the Russian agent also having them?

"I am hungry, Captain. Why do you stand and dream at the mountains when you should be providing food?"

It was the Princess Canda. Naked to the waist, with a twist of linen about her loins, sunburned and tousled and as filthy as any of them, yet utterly lovely. Her jet dark hair fell to her waist and she had caught it back with a thong. She had a perfectly oval face in which gray eyes were set wide. Smoky eyes with glints of gold in them. She was nearly as tall as Blade, slim and regal, with pink budded breasts that, for all their generous size, were taut and with no hint of sagging.

Blade regarded her for a moment without speaking. He glanced to where Zeena lay being ministered to by the misshapen Chephron. Zeena was no better. He knew in his heart that her mind had gone forever. Yet she had been as lovely, nearly as beautiful, as this girl before him. Now - for Zeena still did not recognize Blade - her gentian eyes were hollow and shadow-laden and her body fast withering into gauntness.

Canda made a stamping motion with one shapely bare foot. "I am still hungry, Blade."

He drew his sword and she stepped back in mock alarm. Her smile had a teasing sweetness. "You would not dare! Remember how much rests with me when we come at last to the oasis. The people know me. You, and these others, they will fall upon and slay."

It was likely the truth and Blade nodded. "I am going to kill our dinner, Canda. Nothing more. I do not attack helpless women."

Again her odd smile. "I am not so sure, Captain Blade. I am not sure about anything with you. There - there are too many of you for my comfort!"

He ignored her and turned away. She had been hinting at something ever since they left the coast. In her own time she would get to it.

Blade left them and, sword in hand, went in search of snakes. If it had nothing else, the Burning Land had snakes in plenty. They were non-poisonous, or so Canda said, and they came out at night. A hundred were to be found in any shallow ravine.

He killed a dozen snakes in as many minutes and took them back for Chephron and Pelops to skin and bone and prepare them for dinner. Cut into bite size and taken with what little water there was, they would furnish strength for another day of marching. Maybe you gagged a little, Blade admitted, but you got them down. Funny what a man could eat when he was starving.

He went back to the cairn. Pelops was there waiting for the first trickle of condensation to form. The little man
had lost weight he could not afford, the fuzz on his face and long head was long and dirty, and he had lost his armor and sword in the sea. He looked, Blade thought, to be on his last legs. Yet there was a resilience about the man that continually amazed Blade. And his habits did not change. Even now, looking like a mistreated scarecrow and with only a scrap of leather twisted about his privates, Pelops had not lost his tendency to lecture.

"It is my thought," said the little teacher now, "that we should abandon Zeena. She delays us, sire, and she will get no better. And it sickens me to watch her, for I remember her from better days when she was a child and I taught her in the palace."

Blade stared hard at him. He did not, could not, blame the man for what he was saying. Pelops was Sarmaian and could not help what he was.

"I remember Zeena," said Blade, "from the time of our first meeting. When I took her to save your life, Pelops. When I married her in your Sarmaian law. We will not abandon her. There are graves enough behind us."

There had been nine in the party starting inland. Five were left. Blade, Pelops, Chephron and the two women. The dead men had all been slaves too weak and emaciated to stand the trek. Of the women taken from the pirate craft none had been saved but Zeena and the Princess Canda. Of Ixion Blade knew nothing at all; Pphira had become separated from the unireme long before she struck the reef and went down in a churning welter of fifty foot waves. Blade had barely made it ashore with the women, with the Princess Canda doing her share, and Pelops, strange irony, owed his life to the former mine slave, Chephron.

Pelops stared at a first small trickle of water tracing down the cairn. "I wonder at times, sire, if you are not a man of magic. Such as lived in the old times in Sarma. To find water like this, out of nowhere!"

"A simple matter of physics."

"I do not know the word, sire. But let me tell you - "

Blade laughed in spite of himself. "You know enough words, little warrior. Too many. Spare me them. Speak only of what I wish to know - and that is about this Princess Canda. What of her, really? Is there a land of Mogh? And such people as the Moghs? Could there be such as El Kal, whom she calls her father, and who rules this land? What do you think of all these tales?"

While Pelops pondered, chin in hand, Blade watched Chephron caring tenderly for Zeena. Feeding her. The man's leg sores were healing somewhat. More proof, Blade thought, that the meta was really pitchblende. And that in Sarma there were mountain ranges of the stuff. Uranium.

Lord L and J would just have to take his word for it when Blade got back to H Dimension. He had lost the chunk of raw meta, along with the log he had started, when the Pphira went down.

Pelops said: "I think she speaks the truth, sire Blade. I have, er, had some converse with her these days. As you may know?"

"I know," Blade said dryly. "She speaks more to you than to me. What of, little man?"

Pelops looked startled. "Oh, sire, of nothing much. She is only a woman after all. She lacks company and when you stalk ahead, aloof and forbidding, and Chephron nurses Zeena along, the Princess falls back to talk to me. It is nothing."

"Slowly, calmly, Blade put his great hand about Pelop's throat and gave it a slight pressure. "Do not lie to me, little one. Of what does the lady speak?"

Pelops began to tremble but his eyes met those of Blade. "Yes, sire. I did lie. For a moment I was a fool. But I was, I am, frightened again. She, Canda, said that if I told you what passed between us she would have me tortured when we come to Mogh."

Blade released him. "She may yet. But you are not in Mogh - you are here with me. And I will not torture you. I will merely beat you. So talk, and tell me the truth."

Pelops, rubbing his throat, explained that the lady spoke only of Blade. She asked questions. Always questions. No end of questions. She wished to know everything about Richard Blade. And about the Princess Zeena.

Blade heard him out. "So you think she really is a Princess? There is a Mogh and her father is El Kal?" Blade pointed to the unreachable mountains over which floated a yellow paring of moon. "And you think there is an oasis there - a place of water and grass and trees?"

"I think all those things, sire. For I have heard of the Moghs before. Not much, and perhaps only rumors and gossip, but I have heard. It is whispered that once, long ago, a Mogh ruler came to Sarma and lay with our Queen. With Pphira. He did not stay in Sarma. This was in the first days of Pphira's rule, just after she had poisoned her mother, and I happen to know another scholar, very ancient now, who - "

Pelops was off on a long rambling tale. Blade listened with slight amusement and half an ear. There was, he supposed, an inevitability about the matter. This El Kal, whom he might one day meet, must be the father of the late Equebus.

That little bit of information, Blade thought grimly, I will keep to myself.
Later it grew bitter cold, as ever, and Blade could not sleep. Not that the cold bothered him so much, but that his mind was uneasy about the future. He was in a defensive and, almost, hopeless position. His Russian counterpart had established himself in Mogh, even as Blade had managed to secure himself in Sarma, and surely the first order of business would be to kill Blade.

He got up, cast a glance at the others - Chephron had taken to sleeping with Zeena, enfolding her in his scrawny arms to give her as much of his body warmth as possible - and strolled out into the desert moonlight. It was a stark, sere, moonscape-like scene. Cold. Bitter and brooding. By now the snakes had vanished. Blade sat on a rock and pondered the future, his future, should he have one.

His double would be calling the shots. At least in the beginning. That much was certain. Blade had only his sword. Not much use against a Vizier of Mogh. Blade smiled coldly. The man had wasted no time in consolidating his position. Just as Blade had not. And his double had begun a search for him. Just as Blade had.

It occurred to Blade that they must be thinking very much alike. They were, after all, twins in everything but blood. Lord Leighton's words? Monozygotic twins?

The thing to do was to put himself in the other chap's place, probe the Russian's persona and act as if he were in the other's stead. If he wanted to kill Blade.

And stay out of trouble doing it.

He had not gotten very far along with it when he heard her step and saw the moon shadow fall athwart his rock. The Princess Canda.

I am very cold, Captain Blade."

She looked cold. Her delicious breasts were goose pimpled.

Blade said, "We are all cold, Princess. What of it? What would you have me do?"

"Do? Are you a fool then? Ixok."

She pointed to where Chephron was sleeping with the mad Zeena in his arms.

"Even a miserable wretch like that knows what to do. Knows how to shelter the one with no mind."

Blade stood up. "Is that what you want, Canda? Shelter?"

She moved toward him. "The wind is cold. I do want shelter - and perhaps other things as well. And you are a fool, and insulting as well. I have never had to ask before."

The humid musky smell of her came strong in his nostrils. Blade was ready for love, more than ready, and smiled at the thought that his worn breeches might not bear the strain.

Canda saw his smile. "You laugh at me, Captain?"

"At myself, Princess. You see?" He indicated his front, where a massive protuberance strained against the rotten leather. She stared. At that moment the leather parted with a ripping sound.

Canda stood staring at him for a moment She shivered. "I am not so cold as I was."

"Nor I, Princess."

They did not kiss. If she knew of tenderness she did not evoke it, or give it, or seem to want it. She refused to lie on the cold stony earth and so Bade turned her and pressed her back against the big rock. She gasped and grabbed at his ear with her teeth when he entered, but the entry was easy enough and Blade knew he was having no virgin this night.

Canda fell quickly into a panting rhythm of her own, not bothering to match her pace to Blade's thrusts. She wound her arms about his neck and little by little he bore more of her weight as gradually her long legs came up and entwined his waist and he was locked solidly and deeply into her flesh.

When he knew she desired, and could go, for a long time Blade began to pace himself. Holding back. Canda fell into frenzy several times, biting and clawing at him, raking his back and shoulders with her nails, before she went into her one great and grand and final surge. She let out a trembling cry to the cold moon. Blade, deadly workman, thrust her soft buttocks back against the rock and plunged impossibly deeper each time until he came to his ending as well. His groans and her sighs made a single sound.

When he stepped back away from the rock, she still locked around his big body, riding him face to face, she tossed her hair back and gave him that same strange smile.

"I cannot decide," she said.

Blade, going limp in her, that rigid flesh now become a worm and sliding out moistly, stared down at her in surprise. She had suddenly become heavy.

"Decide what?"

"Which of you is best. Which gives me the greatest pleasure. You or your twin."

So the Russian had been before him. With a pang that was more concern for his life than any jealousy, Blade disengaged and lifted her lightly to the ground. He made himself smile, forced an exudation of confidence that he did not in the slightest feel.
"Suppose you tell me of this, my Princess. I am most interested."

Her teeth flashed in the moonlight. "I thought you would be, Captain. And I am interested in you. Your man Pelops has told me much - but not all I would know. I have waited until the proper time to speak - when we are within five days' march of the oasis - and now it is time. What would you know of your brother, Captain?"

"Everything. More than I know now, which is very little."

"Strange. Those are his very words when he heard that there lived in Sarma a man that must be his brother. His twin. He seeks desperately for you, Captain."

No doubt, Blade thought. Desperately.

Something pinged in his mind. "How came my brother to know that I lived?"

"A rider came. A messenger from the Council of Five in Sarma. I forget his name, or never knew it, but he claimed to be sent by the priests to see if your twin lived."

Kreed's fine hand. Checking him out. Did Kreed still live? Had he made it to shore? Blade did not know, or care. If Pphira had any sense she would get rid of the old priest one way or the other.

Blade put his arm about her. "You and I," he said softly, "had better have a long talk. But first tell me truly - was not I, just now, better than my brother. Did I not pleasure you more?"

Canda frowned. "It is very difficult to tell about such things, Captain."

Blade supposed it was.
Matters did not fall out as Blade had foretold and feared. Fortune smiled, albeit falsely, and Blade did not cavil at what he took to be unexpected good luck. He counted his blessings and waited, and wondered, what the price would be.

The Princess Canda had been exactly right. In five days' trek the little party reached a large oasis where they were given food and clothing and drank their fill of a sparkling spring. In those last days the mountains did move closer; from a tent on the edge of the oasis Blade could see the pass through which a party of Moghs would come to greet them and escort them to El Kal.

Canda made herself available to Blade at night, but kept to herself and moved among the villagers during the day. These were a tall, loose jointed people with dark brown faces and dark eyes and inclined to gauntness. They were Moghs, Blade was informed, but of a lesser tribe and subservient to El Kal. The women went veiled and the men wore long loose robes of linen caught at the waist by sword belts, and wrapped their long hair in turbans. Blade, and indeed all the party, were treated with unfailing courtesy. Blade was stunned to learn that this was on the orders of the Vizier - Blade's double.

They recovered well from the trek and nearly ate the village bare. Pelops drank at the spring until he developed a paunch and was ill. Only Zeena languished.

Time and again Blade tried to speak with her. She would only stare at him with pain filled eyes, then suddenly cry out in terror for the slave Chephron. He alone could comfort her. She clung to him like a lost child and he would stroke her hair and croon her into silence.

On one such occasion the Princess Canda watched and, later, spoke to Blade.
"She will be mindless forever, that one. There is a place in El Kal for such as she - I will see that she is sent there and looked after."

Blade stroked his black beard, new combed and washed, and answered, "I would not like that. In a way she is my responsibility - under Sarmaian law I was married to her."

The Princess snapped her fingers. "Fie! You are not in Sarma now. Anyway they are only stupid barbarians. And would you have a woman like that - who was passed around among the pirates forty times a day?"

Blade, who now felt nothing but pity for Zeena, found himself angered at the callosity.
"I have been curious about that," he said curtly. "Zeena was used as a whore by the pirates. But what of you? You were as much prisoner as she. How were you left in peace and she debauched?"

Canda, now wearing a skirt and short bodice, glared at him over her veil. Blade glared back and waited. Canda was the first to look away.
"I am the daughter of El Kal," she muttered. "The pirates knew this by certain writings I had in my baggage. A caravan of Moghs escorted her to the coast and a waiting ship. Meantime - there was no way of knowing exactly how long before - the pirates sighted and sank the galleass to which Zeena had been sent for punishment.

From what Canda told him Blade had been able to piece the events together. The princess had been on her way to visit in a land beyond Tyranna. A caravan of Moghs escorted her to the coast and a waiting ship. Meantime - there was no way of knowing exactly how long before - the pirates sighted and sank the galleass to which Zeena had been sent for punishment.

They next took the ship on which Canda sailed. When the great storm broke the pirates panicked and deserted the unireme, taking to small boats under the delusion that their ship was sinking. Leaving the women to their fate.
"I think they all drowned," Canda said bitterly. "I saw many of the little boats capsize. Two of the pirates swam back to the ship and some of the women beat them to death with boat hooks."

While they waited for their escort Blade whiled away long hours in the shade of a tree near a spring. It was a lesser spring, near the edge of the village, and few came to disturb him. Here, after hours of pondering, Blade came to achieve a peace of mind. For the moment he put worry away. He was still puzzled by the actions of his doppelganger, still at a loss as to the man's motives in ordering them well treated. Blade had feared the Moghs would have orders to kill him on sight. This not being the case, the double must have other plans. Blade was like a counter puncher; he could only wait for his enemy to make the first move and then strike back.

He had been lolling beneath the tree for an hour when the pain struck him. The first in a long time. It daggered at his brain and skewered behind his eyes and Blade could not resist crying out. He rolled in the sand in sheer agony.
The computer was reaching with a vengeance.
The pain subsided as quickly as it struck. Blade sighed and wiped sweat from his face. That one had been a bastard! He looked up to see Pelops regarding him with concern.
"You are ill, sire?"
Blade shook his head weakly. "It is nothing. A headache for a moment. I am all right now."
Pelops, brave in new clothing and well filled out with food and water, squatted beside Blade.
"Are you sure, sire? I am something of a medical man, as you know, having seen me at work among the slaves, and I would be glad to concoct a dosage of - "
Blade, hard put to refrain from laughing, held up a hand. That will not be necessary, little man. I tell you I am well again. The sight of you, once again yourself, has made me well in this instant."
Before Blade could protest he went on, "Sometimes I deserve it. I am not really the fool I seem at times. But what matter - I am feeling well. I have gained weight and I have clothes. When I have armor again, and a weapon, I will be more than content. I will return to Sarma and fight for the Queen against Tyranna."
As Blade studied the little fellow an idea began to creep into his mind. He had often amused himself with it.
"You would return to Sarma, Pelops?"
A nod. A blank stare; "What else, sire? I am a Sarmaian, am I not? I shall most certainly return to Sarma - if I live. But there is always that."
Blade inclined his head, deep in thought. "Yes. There is always that. Pelops - "
The little man stared at Blade and waited. Blade drew pictures in the sand with a twig.
"Yes, sire? You were going to speak?"
Blade made up his mind and grinned. He would do it. Why not? He was on his own in Dimension X. He had a right - and how could he do harm to the time-space-dimensional continuum? He saw no harm. And it was only a prank, something that would amuse him for years to come when he thought of it.
Blade said: "Pelops, how would you like to be a genius?"
The little man tugged at the few hairs on his chin. "I might like it, sire, if I knew what it was. We do not have the word in Sarma."
Blade reached to pat the scrawny shoulder. "A great man! One who will never be forgotten. People will write and talk about you for centuries and even build statues, images, to you."
Pelops' eyes were round. "Build images - you mean such as the great effigies of Bek-Tor?"
"Bigger," said Blade. "And handsomer, too. At least you are - all a man! And statues have a way of looking better than the model."
Pelops nodded. "I would like that very much, sire." Then he looked sly. "But would I have to die first?"
Blade laughed. "You will have to die sometime, but not because you are a genius. Are you ready, Pelops? I am going to tell you a secret that will make you a genius."
Pelops gulped, swallowed, then grinned back at Blade. "I am ready. I trust you, sire, and I will take a chance. It would be a great thing for me, who was once a slave, to be a genius and have images built to me."
"Then watch closely."
Blade took his twig and drew a wheel in the sand.
"It is the sun," Pelops said eagerly. "Or the moon. But how does it make me famous?"
"It is neither the sun nor moon. Keep quiet and watch and listen. It is called a wheel. And this is another wheel. And this is called an axle. Now listen and heed well."
In half an hour Blade explained it all to him. Pelops nodding, somewhat awe-stricken, totally bemused by the simplicity of it. He scratched his skull fuzz.
"Why has not someone thought of this before?"
Blade could not answer that. "It is always simple, or seems so, after someone does it for the first time. There was once in my own land a people called Indians. Also Incas. Both these people had civilizations, religions, calendars, medicine, many things. Yet they did not think of the wheel. They used sleds and drags, just as you do in Sarma. But never mind that - now that you have thought of the wheel you will be able to change the whole way of life in Sarma. Look at this!"
Blade made more sketches in the sand, showing how to use cogs and pulleys and interlocking gears. Pelops, silent now, followed every word and sketch avidly.
Blade tossed away the twig. "There. You are now a genius. Take heed and keep it to yourself until you return to Sarma. I do not think the Moghs know of the wheel, either. Do not put anything on paper. Keep the secret in your head."
Pelops squared his tiny shoulders. "Ah, yes, sire Blade. I will keep my secret. And you are right - I am a
Blade stood up and peered at a cloud of dust on the horizon. Their escort. He rapped his knuckles lightly on Pelops’ bald pate. “You are that,” he agreed. “I cannot understand why you did not think of it before.”

It was the escort. Two dozen Mogh soldiers under command of a Lieutenant. The Vizier had not come in person. They were to be escorted to the city of El Kal and shown every courtesy and comfort. The Lieutenant handed Blade a writing done on scraped animal hide.

Greetings, my brother! My heart was joyful at the news that you lived. I long to see you again. Hurry. Your loving brother, Gemma.

Gemma! The very name that Blade had made up while in Sarma.
Chapter Nineteen

It was, Blade thought, like seeing your mirror image move and speak. The two men, except for the color of their turbans, were identical. Blade's turban was white. His double wore scarlet.

They were in a large square room in the palace of El Kal. Thick walls of sun-baked mud - the entire city was built of dried mud brick with ingenious gutters to prevent the infrequent flash storms from washing it away - made the room shadowy and cool. There were handsome rugs on the floor and as wall hangings. The only furniture was a long low couch and several ottomans and a taboret supporting an earthen jug of cool water.

Blade, as did his double, wore skin boots and baggy breeches and a handsome vest-like garment that left the chest bare. Blade could see a raw seamed cicatrix on the other man's belly, placed there by a surgeon's knife. His own identical scar had been attained in Hong Kong the year before. These Russians kept up to date.

"The name Gemma," said his likeness, "was pure coincidence. Natural enough, I suppose. When I got my wits about me after the trip through the computer I realized at once that you would come looking for me. You people know of TWIN, of course? So I called you Gemma and began searching for you as my twin brother. You obviously did the same thing."

The double was lounging on the couch, his legs carelessly crossed, a picture of coolness. Blade was slowly moving about the room, pausing now and then to gaze out across a small balcony at the mud towers of the city. Blade was highly nervous and alert. He knew the other man must be the same, despite his appearance of calm. Blade did not deceive himself. This was a formidable adversary - was he not in a sense fighting himself - and this meeting was as deadly, as dangerous, as though they had been facing each other with weapons.

Blade turned away from the window. There could be no violence now. This was not the time for it and there was El Kal to consider, and the Princess Canda. Especially Canda.

His doppelganger took a pipe from his breeches and stuffed it with a finely ground root called hebac. He lit it with a taper from a fire bowl beneath the taboret and puffed smoke that was white in color and had a tang of incense in it.

"I step out of character," said the Russian. He waved the pipe at Blade. "Something I would not dare do in Russia, except on leave. I have always regretted, Blade, that you do not smoke a pipe. Most inconvenient for a fellow who loves a pipe as I do."

The voice was Blade's own, the English impeccable.

Blade had not really had time to put his own thoughts in order. The meeting had been sudden and unexpected. On their arrival in the city the Princess left him. He was separated from Pelops and the former mine slave Chephron and Zeena. Canda, after promising they would not be harmed, gave Blade a strange smile and vanished into another part of the palace. Blade was taken to the baths and given into the charge of a dozen doe-eyed maidens who wore hardly anything at all. After being bathed and barbered he was taken to the room and left alone. Moments later the Russian entered. And now?

The Russian recrossed his legs and puffed more fragrant smoke. He smiled - his dental work identical with Blade's - and said, "Come off it, old chap. Relax. Sit down and we'll have a long chat. I have a great many questions and, for that matter, I suppose you have a few, too. So relax and we can make a pleasant time of it. There is no danger, you know. No threat to you. Quite to the contrary - we are more or less allies, you know."

Blade grinned. "I didn't know. Just how did you arrive at that conclusion? I have been operating on the theory that we are deadly enemies."

The Russian used the Blade charm on Blade. His smile was a masterpiece.

"I know. I was afraid of this. But you must see how wrong you are! Back in our old lives, yes. Our two countries are more or less at war. But here? Wherever the hell here is! In a mud city surrounded by Moghs. And you coming from someplace called Sarma! I'll admit, old chap, that I have been damned confused and frightened. I haven't been searching for you to kill you. Far from it. I need you! I need information. I want to know what happened to me. And I want to get back to Russia someday. You are my only hope."

Blade straddled one of the ottomans. He shook his head. "I can't help you there. Have you had any pains in your head?"

The double touched his temple. "Yes. Terrible splitting headaches. Why? Does that mean anything in particular?"

Blade held an advantage. He had been in on the computer experiments from the beginning. This was his fourth venture into Dimension X. How best to use that advantage? He could not trust this man, or believe anything he said - yet there was a chance he was telling the truth. The issue might have to be decided back in Home Dimension.

He said: "The pains are a sign that they are probing for us. Trying to get us back."
Get him, Blade, back. He should have killed the Russian by now.

The double nodded. "I thought it might be something like that. I worked in cybernetics, on an elementary plane, before I was recruited by TWIN and became your double. A strange life, Blade, and not entirely a pleasant one. One tends to lose his own identity. I am more British than I am Russian, though I was born in Minsk and my name is Gregor Petroshansky. Who would believe that to see me now!" And he laughed.

Blade watched him. The man could not know about the uranium in Sarma. No sweat there. What to do, how to handle it? For a moment Blade toyed, barely toyed, with the idea of taking the man by surprise and strangling him. If he could. The double was probably as strong as Blade himself. And there remained the Moghs. He was in a Mogh city, in a Mogh palace, and he had seen the bodies of murderers hanging from hooks on the walls as he came into the city.

And there was Canda. The Princess. Blade could not know how she felt about this Russian. She had admitted sleeping with the man. She could not decide who pleasured her most.

No, thought Blade. Not yet. Play it cozy. Cunning. Use guile. Match the man facing him - trick for trick, cunning for cunning, lie for lie and guile for guile. It was the only way. The safest way. Wait. Watch for his chance. See which way the cat jumped.

As if following Blade's thoughts, as though they were telepathic twins as well as physical, the Russian said: "We must work out some sort of accommodation, Blade. Pledge a truce, old man! To tell the truth I daren't harm you just now. I, well, I sort of overdid the lost twin bit, I'm afraid. It would look damned odd, you know, if after all my wailing and lamentation I stuck a shiv in you the moment you turned up. No. That won't do. This El Kal is an absolute monarch and not a chap to fool about with. I've seen him in action and it gave me the bloody chills. He has a sign he makes when he is talking to a man - if he touches his throat, draws his finger across it, that man has had it. All you ever see of him after that is his bloody head, and I do mean bloody."

Blade could act with the best of them. If the man wanted it that way! Very well. They would play a little cat and mouse.

Blade walked to the couch and thrust out his hand. "I think you may be right. I need you as much as you need me. You know the ropes around here. I don't. We have to trust each other for the time being. And I have a proposition that I think might interest you."

They shook hands. Their eyes met, steady and penetrating, and Blade had the sensation of peering into his own soul. The feeling was uncanny, nearly frightening, and Blade sensed that his double felt it also.

The Russian slapped his knee. "There! That's done, then, and a good thing. And now, since I do know the ropes a bit better, I'll get us something to celebrate on."

He went to a thick leather door studded with brass. He opened it and clapped his hands three times. A moment later a young girl came into the room carrying a large jug on a tray. There were two mugs. The Russian signed for the girl to place the tray on the floor before the couch. As she turned to leave he placed a hand on her bare arm. She wore only a pair of filmy pantaloons.

The Russian winked at Blade. "Now, my friend, observe closely. There are many things to be said for life among the Moghs - and this is one of them."

As Blade watched from the couch the Russian kissed the girl on the lips. She stood unmoving, her arms limp at her side. When the man had finished kissing her she smiled and said, "Thank you, master."

The Russian winked at Blade again and chuckled. "You see. They all act like this."

He stepped behind the girl, then reached around her to caress her bare breasts. She stared ahead with a fixed smile. The Russian manipulated her breasts - Blade could almost feel the flesh on his own fingers - squeezing and pushing first to one side, then the other, his fingers twiddling at her nipples.

The hands went lower along the tiny waist and slid over buttocks and reached around and explored her front. The girl trembled and moaned a bit, and Blade felt himself reacting.

The Russian gave her a little push and stepped away. "That is all. You may go."

The girl bowed. "Thank you, master."

The double came back to sprawl on the couch beside Blade. "How about that, old man! They're all like that, all happy to oblige, and there must be a thousand of them around the palace. Nothing like that back in Russia, I assure you. I doubt if there is in England, from what I've seen."

Blade sampled his wine just as the Russian did. Blade had poured and waited. The double raised his mug and his white teeth flashed. "No monkey business, chap. No drugged wine. Not bad, is it?"

The wine was tart and dry. Blade guessed it had figs or dates as a base. He nodded. "Very good. Now - are you interested in hearing my proposition?"

The Russian filled his glass again. Blade nurtured a faint hope, vain as it turned out, that the man was a drunk. It would make things easier.
"I'm listening," said the double. For the first time there was a hard glint in his eyes that Blade recognized. He had seen it in his own.

Blade explained, briefly and without giving away any secrets, that the agent could regain Home Dimension only through Lord L's computer. There was no other way.

"This is not a time-space thing," Blade said. "Nor is it an all a dream, a reversal of reality. Nothing like that at all. There is no time slippage that can be corrected. I can't really explain it, and wouldn't if I could, but take my word for it. You are not going to suddenly wake up. Your brain was altered, molecularly restructured, by the computer. What has happened, in the simplest of terms, is that you have become aware of a new dimension that has been there all the time. You may very well have been walking through it, without perception, every time you entered the Kremlin. And the computer is the only way back."

"Wizard," said the Russian. "Absolutely wizard. You chaps are far ahead of us. Our boffins haven't a clue to anything like this."

Blade smiled. "We hope to keep it that way. And I may as well tell you, by the way, that you overdo the 'British' bit a little. You sound like a stage Englishman."

"Do I now? Strange, that I've only been copying you, Blade."

Blade had to grin. "Then I had better look to myself. Funny. I thought I was beginning to sound like a bloody Yank."

"The proposition, old man?"

"Just that you defect to us."

The Russian's amazement was genuine. "Defect? Me? My very dear fellow, I - "

Blade watched him closely. "Why not? In time, after all your security stuff is out of the way, you would have a better life. England is a better place to live, you know."

The other man nodded slowly. He stared at Blade over the wine mug. "That is opinion, not fact. But granting it - how could this be arranged?"

"Not difficult at all. You arrived naked, did you not?"

Another nod. A wry smile. "Did I! Naked in a raging sea. Thinking I had lost my mind. If I hadn't found some floating wreckage I would have drowned."

"You will be naked when you go back," Blade said. "You will be stunned and helpless and you will be arrested immediately. As a spy, an enemy agent, a man who threatened to blow up half of London. You will be put away for a very long time. You might want to defect then, but coming after the fact it won't carry much plausibility. But if you defect now, if you arrange it now with me, I can vouch for you when we get back. If we get back."

The man leaned toward Blade. "If, old man?"

Blade wanted to ruffle him, to worry him a bit. The man was too cool and sure of himself and Blade didn't like it. Psyche him a little, as the Americans said.

"There always has to be a first time," he said gravely, "when the computer will fail. When they won't be able to take contact."

The Russian lit his pipe again. He took his mug of wine and went to the balcony and peered out. It was beginning to get dark. It was a trick to keep Blade from seeing his face and there was nothing Blade could do about it.

"Tell me, old man - can a dead man be transported back to your Home Dimension? A body?"

"No. A man is dead when his brain dies. The computer can't alter dead cells."

A blare of weird music came from the courtyard beneath the window. Blade could see torches weaving patterns in the gloom. The Russian came back to the center of the room.

"That little celebration is for us," he explained. "For you, really. I had mine when I first arrived. But we are reunited now, twins who love each other, and they will really turn it on tonight. Feasting, dancing girls, the whole lot. Afterwards you will have your audience with El Kal. That will be rather important, you know. The Kal is going to decide which one of us remains as consort to Canda - and which one goes into exile. Classic situation, eh?"

Blade kept his face impassive. This was a new situation, an abrupt volte-face, and he needed time to cope. At the same time he was a trifle angered and let it show through.

"Canda? Who the hell cares about Canda? I thought we were discussing a serious matter! About your possible defection - you may not have all the time in the world, you realize? When the computer really finds us - "

His double smiled with all the Blade charm. "Oh, that. No problem there, old man. Of course I'll defect. I had already made up my mind about it. You have my promise as of now. What you don't understand is that we have to stay alive until the computer finds us. And you say that you can't know when that will be?"

Blade shook his head. "I can't. It might be in the next second. Might be a year. All I know is that they are trying - We've both had the pains. But I don't understand - "
"About Canda? And death? No, of course not. So listen to the morbid news, old chappie. El Kal runs the Moghs and Moghland, but Canda runs El Kal. But good, as the Yanks say. No mistake about it. What Canda wants Canda gets. And Canda wants both of us."

Blade, still puzzled, shook his head. "So? Still nothing but a trifle - surely an arrangement can be made."

The Russian went back to the couch and sank onto it. He filled his mug again. "One would think so. One would be wrong. There are several good reasons why - the chief one being that exile, here, is just another word for murder. Mogh law is very complicated and tricky. As I have good cause to know. God - they haven't found the wheel yet and they have a legal system that makes ours look on kindergarten level. All based on ignorance and superstition, but laws just the same. Unwritten laws are just as binding as the written ones, maybe more so."

"Anyway - any suitor for a royal Princess who is refused is sent into exile. Naked. Literally. Stripped of all his possessions. They give him a day's start. Then the pursuit starts - there is a nomad tribe, called the Ouled, who make a specialty of tracking down these poor bastards and killing them. They bring the head back and El Kal sticks it on a pike on the wall. This, mind you, is supposed to ensure a happy marriage."

Blade stared. "A happy marriage!"

"Yes. The rival is dead, you see, and can never trouble again. Mogh women are very highly sexed and very promiscuous. But that particular suitor will never cause trouble - his head is the proof of that."

"But - "

"Hear me out, old man. Under Mogh law a Princess can have only one consort."

Blade's smile was limp. "And Canda wants both of us?"

"That is the bind, old bean. She says she can't make up her mind which of us is better in bed. I would gladly surrender the honor to you, but she isn't having any."

"For my part," said Blade, "you can have the honor."

The double sighed loudly. "Like something out of the Arabian Nights, isn't it? But it does have its compensations, eh? That Canda is a bit of all right, no? One beautiful bird! But damned if I want to die for a bit of quiff. I want to stay alive and defect."

All Blade could say was that he would be eternally goddamned.

"I don't know about that," his double said, "but I do know that we are both in a spot of trouble unless we can figure something out. One of us is for it. Are you sure there is no way you can hurry that computer?"

"I am positive. It may never find us. I told you that."

The Russian agent stood up and raised his glass to Blade. "Well, here's to us. I hate to be smug about it, but at the moment I am the front runner. I left Canda just before I came here and she seemed very much satisfied. Of course it won't last. You'll have your chance tonight after your seance with El Kal."

"Seance?" Blade thought it a strange choice of words.

"You'll find out," said the double. He poured them more wine and raised his glass.

"They'll be coming for us any moment now, I expect Cheers, old man."

Blade drank. The wine had gone bitter.
Richard Blade stood alone in the great echoing hall of the temple. Torches guttered feebly here and there. The temple, like all structures in El Kal - the city took the name of the current emperor - was built of mud brick. A feat of architectural genius, turreted and spired and buttressed all in mud. Huge frescoes covered the inner walls. Most of them, Blade judged, were portraits of the reigning El Kal. As was the giant image he now confronted.

The idol was fifty feet high and squatting as Buddha squats. There was a great convex belly and above that the head. The carven face was familiar to Blade. Equebus.

The hooked nose, scimitar sharp, the thin mouth and beard, the painted dark eyes that seemed to follow his every motion. Blade's mouth was dry. He had slain Equebus, this man's son. But how could El Kal know that?

On either side of the image a censor smoked on a tripod. Between the tripods was a small thick rug. Blade, following the instructions of the Russian - who claimed to have gone through this himself - approached the idol and went to his knees. He genuflected and spoke.

"I, Richard Blade, have come at your bidding, El Kal, to hear my fate from your lips. I make obeisance. I wait."

Nothing. From far off Blade could hear the weird music of tambour and lyre. They were still celebrating. Blade had left the Russian with a dancing girl on each knee. Canda had not put in an appearance.

He waited. At last there came a volcanic belch from the idol. A deep rumble of sound, a belly basso, a stentorian roaring that had a giant seashell quality. The voice filled the temple.

"Blade! I give you welcome to the kingdom of El Kal. All strangers are welcome here - so long as they do not break our laws or go against our customs. I am happy that you are reunited with your twin. Both your hearts are happy?"

Blade bowed his head and nodded. El Kal was seated somewhere in the belly of the idol, speaking through tubes that amplified his voice.

"Our hearts are happy," lied Blade. Just then, when matters were exactly as serious as life and death, he fought to repress an insane giggle. He was remembering the scene from the Wizard of Oz. Cut it out, Blade! This El Kal is no phony.

"And yet," roared the deep voice, "and yet there is a problem, Blade. A serious problem. My daughter wishes you both, she loves both, she desires both. This cannot be under our law. What do you say to this, Blade?"

Blade was puzzled. What could he say? At that moment a single pain lanced his skull and was gone. The computer.

He shook his head, as much to clear it as in a negative. "I cannot answer that, El Kal. It is you who disposes these matters, not I."

That should be properly servile.

In that instant he caught it. Something he was not meant to hear. She was incautious and spoke too loudly and Blade distinctly heard her say: "Get on with it, Father!"

Canda. She was in the idol's belly with El Kal. And no doubt laughing at Blade. Laughing and scheming.

The voice boomed again. "You speak truth, Blade. I dispose. Would you fight to the death with your twin? Would you kill a beloved brother for a woman?"

Blade pondered. Was there a trick, a trap, in the phrasing? It all seemed too pat, too simple an ending. Yet he had been sent to kill the imposter. Why did he hesitate?

When he answered he spoke more truth than he knew. "If I must I will fight my brother. But with a heavy heart. I do not want to do this thing."

There it was. Treason? Certainly disobedience of orders. Blade faced the truth - he did not want to kill the Russian agent. It was too much like killing himself. And the man had promised to defect.

"There is another way," the voice said. "We will try it first. If it does not avail then will be time enough to talk of killing. So listen well, Blade."

He could imagine Canda whispering into the old man's ear.

"There will be a trial of strength, Blade. Betwixt you and your brother. My daughter Canda will be judge. You will each visit her on different nights, four nights in all, and vie to prove yourself the best man. In the end my daughter will decide. The loser will be exiled. You agree to this?"

Because Blade was Blade he raised his head and stared sardonically at the idol. "I have heard, El Kal, that among you Mogns exile is the same as death. Murder. What of this?"

Silence. Blade thought he heard a bare flutter of sound as Canda whispered.

Then: "This is true, Blade. It must be so. Even El Kal cannot change the ancient laws. Now - do you agree to this test?"
It was, thought Blade, as good a time as any to bargain. To ease his mind of certain matters.

"I agree," he said. "But I would beg certain favors of you, El Kal. Nothing for myself. For others."

More whispering. Then the voice boomed back. "Favors, Blade? This is unusual."

"The situation is unusual," said Blade dryly.

"Ask your favors, Blade. If possible they will be granted."

Blade made a little bow. "I thank you. They are as nothing to one so great as you, El Kal. It is the woman who
came with me - the one who has no mind. I would see her well taken care of, but not placed in a mad house. There is
a former slave, one called Chephron, who is kind to her and whom she loves and obeys. If they could stay together -
perhaps even marry. And be given subsistence?"

It was the best he could do for Zeena. Never mind the irony, the bitterness, the mine slave married to a mad
princess. It was not only the best, it was all he could do.

"It shall be so," boomed the idol. "And now - "

Blade raised his hand. "There is one more thing."

Impatience now. "Then ask it, Blade. And let it be the last."

"There is a friend, a companion of mine, a servant if you will. His name is Pelops. I would have him given safe
court back to his own land of Sarma."

After a moment: "The man is known to us. But can you vouch that he is no spy? We do not trust Sarma, now in
revolt against its lawful master."

"Pelops is no spy. That I vouch, for if he is spy so am I a spy. And I am not."

Hasty whispering. Canda was hardly bothering to conceal her presence now.

At last: "This also is granted. Your friend will be given an escort to the Purple Sea and a ship will be procured
for him. That is all I promise."

"It is enough. I thank you again, El Kal." Go, little man, and become a genius in Sarma. Invent the wheel. Blade
bowed low to conceal his smile.

The voice again, "Go then, to your quarters and await a summons. You will visit Canda this night. The first of
four. Go."

Blade backed away from the idol as he had been instructed. A last shred of girl laughter came to his ears.

Oversexed little minx. Playing with fire and men's lives. Canda was the one who stood to lose nothing in this weird
upcoming contest. Little nympho! She was the gainer any way you looked at it - she stood to end up well screwed no
matter the outcome.

He was met outside the temple and taken to his sumptuous quarters. Pelops, nervous and afraid, but trying to
hide his jitters, hovered about as Blade bathed again - one must go clean to the lady - and donned fresh clothing.
Blade informed him of the promise extracted from El Kal.

Pelops began to weep great silver tears. "I will not go, sire. I will stay with you. I am not afraid, at least not
very much, and I have come to love you. I stay."

"You go," Blade said sternly. "It is your own wish, remember. And you have work to do in Sarma. Have you
forgotten the secret I told you? Have you forgotten that you are to be famous and have images built in your likeness?
Come, little man. Show a bit of courage now. Anyway it would do you no good to linger in the city - I will not be
here."

Another pain skewered his head as he donned a vest. Blade grimaced and sat down for a moment, holding his
head in his hands.

Pelops wrung his hands. "You are ill, sire. I know it. So I cannot go. How would you fare without me to look
after you? I am greatly skilled in medicine, as you know, and though it may take time I am sure that I can
experiment and find this illness of yours and pronounce a cure. If you will just put yourself in my hands and give me
full charge. I remember a time, long ago, when - "

"Be quiet!" roared Blade. He pointed to the door. "Out. I want to think and I cannot do it with you gabbling. Go
and make your preparations for travel."

Pelops left, still sniveling.

They came for him. A Lieutenant of Guards and a soldier bearing a flambeau. He was led through twisting
corridors and up stairs and past open doors whence came the sounds and smells of many women. El Kal was reputed
to have a thousand wives. Yet Canda could have but one consort. It hardly seemed fair. Blade, as so often before,
reminded himself that life was very seldom fair - in any dimension!

His escort left him at the door to Canda's chamber. A great door of leather, brass studded as were all the palace
doors. The Lieutenant halted down the corridor and watched until Blade pushed the door open and entered.

There was a low bed with a stand near it. On the bed lay the naked Canda, her body laved, caressed, by the
flames of two tapers nearby. Blade halted and drank in the scene, feeling a hot ache and strain in his groin, reacting
immediately to the exposed flesh, the taut upthrusting breasts, the mixture of perfume and musk she exuded.
She spoke softly. "You hesitate, Blade? Why? Surely this is better than a bed of sand and rocks."
"It is that, my lady." Blade slipped off his vest and let it drop. He walked slowly toward the bed.
Canda smiled. Her hair was a night wave, dark as sin, floating about her bare shoulders, tendrils kissing her
breasts. Her pubic area was a curly triangle of the same jet black. The wide gray eyes, sparkling gold, watched him
in anticipation.
"You are slow, Blade. Formal. You are troubled?"
There was a small box made of some exquisitely carven stone on the bedside taboret. Idly he picked it up and
opened it. The contents looked like stringy tobacco, oily and coarse, and gave off a sweetish odor.
"It is called ashi," said the woman. "Chew a little and it dulls the brain, the nerves also. You must swallow the
juice. It is said to greatly extend the male powers. Do you need it, Blade?"
He snapped the box shut. "Not I, my lady. As I will show you soon enough."
She extended her arms to him. "Prove that to me, Blade.
Prove it well. I would have you win this trial, you know. In my heart I want you above your twin. But you must
prove the better man."
He smiled down at her. "I think you lie in your beautiful teeth, Canda. How is it that you are not sweating? You
must have hurried to get here from the temple."
She raised herself to an elbow and frowned at him. Then a glint of teeth. "You know, then?"
He nodded. "That you were in the belly of the idol? Of course. A childish trick, that."
Canda lay back with a sigh of exasperation. "Did you come to talk, Blade?"
He dropped his breeches. Canda gazed at him and her moist red mouth twisted. She darted a pink tongue
between her teeth. "That is better. Much better. So come now - and no more talking."
Before the long night was over Blade did think of having recourse to the ashi in the stone box. She was beyond
any woman he had ever known in her demands. There was scarcely time to catch his breath between bouts. When
she exhausted all known postures she invented new ones.
Dawn saved him, barely in time. As he was leaving she pulled a cover over her glistening moist body and
favored him with a last sleepy smile.
"You are indeed a man, Blade. As of this morning I favor you - but who can tell? Tonight it is your brother's
turn. He is also a man. Though I admit he uses the drug, the ashi. Still I do not hold that against him so long as he
satisfies me. Good morning, Blade."
So it went. Blade was not permitted to see the Russian again. Canda gave him no hint as to her final decision.
Pelops left the city with his escort, after a final weeping farewell, and the Russian, in his capacity as Vizier, sent
Blade a note stating that Zeena and Chephron were married and given a sinecure in the palace. They would have
enough to live on. It was a note of cheer, the only one during a bad time. The pains were getting progressively
worse, but still the computer did not take him. And Blade was mortally tired. As he was taken to Canda's chamber
on the fourth night he decided that, if he must, he would use the ashi. He was at the end of his tether. Canda was no
woman, but a succubus draining the life from men.
As usual the Lieutenant watched until Blade pushed open the leather door. Blade entered the bed chamber.
Canda was on the bed, naked as always. She raised her arms in greeting and invitation.
"I have been longing for you, Blade. I thought the day would never pass. Come to me - hurry - hurry!"
As he moved toward the bed, divesting himself of his garments, he knew something was wrong. Either that or
his nerves were beginning to go. He halted and gazed around the chamber. It was the same. No windows, leather
hangings on the wall, the same sparse furniture, the stone box of ashi on the taboret. On impulse he opened the box.
It was empty.
Canda writhed impatiently. Blade bent close and peered into her gray eyes. No golden sparks tonight. Her eyes
were dulled, lackluster, the pupils enlarged. She put up her arms to caress him and her smile was loose, simpering.
Dark juice drooled from her mouth and crusted in the corners of her full lips. She was drugged.
She seized him and pulled him down atop her. She raised her legs and enclosed his body, squeezing. "I want
you, Blade. Now - now - "
He hesitated. Pain in his head. Canda opened her eyes again, wondering that he had not entered her, then
slapped him across the face.
"Now, Blade! This instant. Else I will call my guards and have you beheaded before my eyes."
She was out of her mind, deeply drugged, and capable of carrying out the threat. Blade plunged. Canda groaned
deeply.
He heard the leather hangings rustle too late. The lance point was in his back, just over the heart.
"Just keep on doing what you are doing," said the Russian. "I'll let you have a few minutes, old man. You must

admit it's a grand way to go out."

Canda sighed and moaned and tugged at Blade. She did not seem to know the Russian was there. Blade, sweating now, kept working away. Duped. Had. He did not understand it. What could the man gain?

The lance point, razor sharp, dug painfully into his flesh.

The Russian said: "The pains are getting worse, chappie, but I think I have figured out a way to beat the computer. The drug. The ashi. I've been loading myself with it. My brain is practically paralyzed now. Maybe the cells won't react to your damned computer. Anyway it's worth the gamble. Keep plugging away, laddie. Our Canda here is hard to satisfy. As we both damned well know - but with you out of the way things might be a little easier."


"I had one hell of a time getting the stuff into her," said the double. "But I did and she won't remember much. So much the better for me."


"Your bloody England won't be much better," said the Russian. "For that matter, our world won't be any better. Much worse. I've got it made here with the Moghs, and I am staying. I'll be consort to Canda and probably end up on the throne. Now that is something to look forward to, eh? But I can't afford to have you around, chum. You see that? You would only louse things up. Two of us is just one too many I Sorry, old man. You have got to go."

"But the computer, man! Any minute now it will - "

"No good, old boy. You said yourself that you can't trust it. I don't want to go and I can't know when it will take you, if ever. Killing you is the easiest and surest way. Finished yet? No? Well, I'm sorry for that, but no help."

Blade moved sideways, fast as angel's flight, taking the point of the lance in the loose flesh under his left armpit. He felt the tear of flesh and blinding pain as he ripped away. Canda, so drugged that she did not even scream, took the point in her breast. Blood gushed.

Blade, bleeding like a butchered pig, was off the bed with an armful of bed clothes. The Russian cursed and jabbed again with the spear. Blade flung a pillow and took the lance on his flimsy shield, felt the point nick into his leg near his groin. He let out a piteous moan and fell to his knees, hoping the Russian would take the bait.

The man leaped on the bed, straddling the dying Canda, and raised the lance for the death thrust. Blade got both hands under the edge of the bed and heaved. Every muscle in his massive shoulders worked as he threw the bed and man and the woman against the wall with a tremendous crash.

The Russian shouted a curse and tried to disentangle himself. Blade leaped across the room like a great cat and seized the butt of the lance. He and the Russian strove mightily for it, silent now, grim, their bare feet shuffling on the floor as they moved back and forth across the room.

The butt end of the lance broke off in the Russian's hand. He smashed Blade across the face with it. In so doing he loosened one hand from the lance and Blade gave a mighty tug. He had it. Had the weapon.

The Russian turned and ran for the door. Blade leaped after him, remembering that he had put the door on lock. The man would have no time. Blade prepared to jab with the broken lance, to run it through the man from the back. Get it over with.

The Russian screamed and fell. He writhed and tore at his head. Blade, stunned by his own terrible pain, gazed down at the screaming man and then looked dully at the lance. He had not yet touched the man.

New pain seared his skull. He knew. The computer had him. This was it!

The Russian arched his back and screamed again. Blade, already falling into the void, managed by a last effort to point the lance at the man's heart. Slowly - so very slowly - he placed the lance point over the heart.

The chamber spun green and gold. Voices clamored for Blade to come, to come, to come -

A huge hand appeared from nowhere and beckoned. Canda came alive again and smiled at him from a far off mountain and he saw that she was all covered with blood and sweat and long fine hair. She was desirable. The smell of her smashed into his nostrils. He reached for her. She vanished.


Blade was strangely leaning on a stick. He fell and the stick gave beneath his weight. The stick made a scrunching sound. The stick broke. Blade fell onto something wet and kept going and kept going toward the music
and the stars...
Chapter Twenty One

Lord Leighton said: "Try to calm down a bit, J. It's all right now. The boy is going to come through in fine shape. And please do stop pacing - you interfere with my concentration."

J told His Lordship, in no uncertain terms, what he could do with his concentration. Blade was in surgery, fighting for his life, and His Lordship was worried about his bloody tapes and closed circuit TV and his ruddy concentration.

J was in a bad state of nerves - this whole operation had been demoralizing - and Lord Leighton was prepared to make allowances. J was as a father to Blade, that was it, as though the boy were his own flesh and blood, and that sort of thing was understandable.

They were in the debriefing room beneath the Tower. Banks of tape recorders reeled and clicked. On a square oblong of lighted screen they watched Dr. Kenneth Bates-Denby, Royal College of Surgeons, operating on Blade. Two masked assistants hovered near him.

Until now the small, compact, completely self-sufficient surgery had never been used for anything more than patching minor wounds. It was wired into the debriefing room and J and Lord L could hear as well as see.

Bates-Denby extended a hand and a gleaming tool was slapped into it. "I'm going to trim a few centimeters of flesh from beneath the skin flaps," the surgeon said. "There will be scarring, but not too bad. Have those sutures ready. We're just about ready to finish up."

J turned away from the picture. For a man in his job he had a peculiar aversion to blood. Maybe, he thought, I am getting too old for this sort of thing. It needs thinking out. When the boy is on his feet again perhaps we can take a little holiday together. Thrash matters out. Maybe I can talk him out of going into X Dimension again. Hope so. The lad has certainly done his bit!

Lord Leighton hobbled to a white steel table and picked up the bloody lance point. It was broad, triangular, razor sharp and there was a foot or so of hardwood shaft fitted to it. His Lordship touched it gingerly with a finger, then picked up a typed slip of paper and read it for perhaps the fifth time.

He turned to J. "Three distinct types of blood on the lance point. Three! What do you make of that, J?"
"Very little. As usual. We'll have to wait until the boy is well enough to undergo hypnosis and debriefing. All we have gotten so far is some muttering about a purple sea and uranium."
"Ah," said His Lordship. "Ah! Uranium. I am looking forward to hearing about that."
J fumbled for his pouch and pipe. "Much bloody good it will do us out in X Dimension."
"You never know," Lord L said cheerfully. "I'm working on something now that is going to amaze you."
J scowled. "Spare me for now. I am sufficiently amazed that Blade got back alive - with a hole in him large enough to drive a tank through."

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Lord L went back to perusing the lance point. "You exaggerate," he murmured. "As usual you exaggerate. Though I will admit the lad was one hell of a bloody mess when he turned up in the computer. But that is over and done with and all is going to be well - I wish I could puzzle out this, little spot of mystery. Three distinct types of blood! Two of them well known to us. One is Blade's, of course, and the other also Caucasian. It's the third type that is the puzzler, J. A new blood type - unknown to our science. Hmmmm - the best the hematologist can say is that it approaches R type, but not exactly R. Hmmmm - leaves us nowhere."

J lit his pipe and puffed deeply. It did not comfort him as much as usual. "Blade was out in X Dimension," he said a bit acidly. "God only knows what creatures he met."
"Hmm - yes. You're right. Well, it will all come out in the debriefing. Under hypnosis it will pour out of his memory bank. And I suppose we can take it for granted that he killed his man? Certainly there must have been some bloody fighting at the very last, eh?"
"I take nothing for granted," said J crossly. "You are right about one thing - no use straining our wits, we'll just have to wait and see. Ah, Bates-Denby has left the surgery."

A moment later the surgeon came into the debriefing room, still wearing his surgical gown. He was a thin man with a placid face, probably the best surgeon in all of England, and selected for this job on a need to know basis. At the moment he was dying of curiosity which neither J nor Lord L intended to satisfy. Lord L had tossed a cover over the bloody lance on the table.

"He'll do," the surgeon said. "Do very well, though it will take time. I'd like him kept in the intensive care unit for a week or so. I'll see him every day, of course, but recovery should be routine. Amazing man. Built like an ox and with the constitution of one. Lost nearly all his blood, still survived. Looks like he has been through a meat grinder, though. Old, partly healed wound in the thigh, any number of lesser cuts and abrasions, but it was the damage in the region of the axilla that nearly did for him. Terrible wound. I've seen bayonet wounds like it. Damned
near thing, too, for the weapon, whatever it was, stopped just short of the lobar region. Another half inch and - well, no point in discussing that. It didn't happen."

J broke into the machine gun delivery. "So he is going to be all right? Recover? As good as new?"

Bates-Denby smiled. "Outlive us all."

Lord L said, "Thank you, doctor. We're very grateful."

The surgeon understood the dismissal, but lingered. He looked wistful. "I don't suppose you chaps are going to tell me anything? I am a bit curious about the weapon, you know. Terrible wound. Ripped out a good two or three pounds of flesh."

They gazed at him in silence. Bates-Denby shook his head. "No? I didn't suppose so, really. Well then, cheerio. I'll be on my way - got a thing at Barts in half an hour."

At the door the surgeon turned back a moment. "Oh, yes. He did say a funny thing just as he went under. Thought it might mean something to you chaps."

J and Lord Leighton said it in unison: "What did he say?"

Bates-Denby shook his head. "Made no sense at all to me, naturally. He said. 'Maybe the Russian was right.'"

They waited. The surgeon shrugged his shoulders.

J said, "That was all?"

"That was all. Just that - 'Maybe the Russian was right.'"

When the surgeon had gone J and Lord Leighton stared at each other. Lord L spoke first. "So he found your man, J. And must have killed him. Now you can rest a little easier. Sleep better tonight."

J didn't, of course. He rolled and tossed all night long.

"Maybe the Russian was right."

What could Blade have meant?
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