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CURSE OF THE FORBIDDEN TEMPLE!

Valish Kadarnu disappeared, and in his place sat Shaphath, grinning evilly, the Spear of the first Valzar still in his chest—where Jamnar had cast it, over a year ago! Jamnar stumbled to his feet, nausea still grappling with his vitals, but before he could speak, Shaphath vanished utterly —and with him went the room they had been in, everyone in it, and the whole city of Khaldiriam —leaving only Jamnar, alone on an immense plain.

Then a band of fighting men of the Viadhash came over the crest of a nearby rise . . . and he had no weapon, no clothing.

"*Prepare!*" One voice spoke, but hundreds of men mouthed the words. Jamnar recognized the voice—it belonged to Inzu, the sentient computer who lived in the Forbidden Temple!

LORD OF BLOOD

Dave Van Arnam

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A LANCER BOOK

LORD OF BLOOD

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INTRODUCTION

From *Qim's Brief Histories Of The Barbary Stars*, 2d Ed., PreStandard Text Series, 6129

. . . After the Quiet Compact, then, interplanetary trade and almost all communications disappeared permanently throughout most of the 350 human-settled Barbary Stars.

One of these isolated planets, Morkath, possesses several aspects of interest for this history.

Physically, it has two large land masses between which there has apparently been little communication throughout the planet's six thousand year history, for the southern continent, Shan'kath, has long been entirely under the domination of the inward-turning, man-searing Hierarchy of Lashhhalthal. The northern continent, Kathram, has a lowland temperate-zone in the west, on the Zaldiger Sea. Here, in the Flanage Lands, are half-civilized cities, city-states, principalities, kingdoms, all arising, striving against each other for dominance, and falling once more. The Flanage has been such a cockpit of conflict for almost six hundred years, since the effects of the Quiet Compact made themselves felt in the last major onplanet war at that time.

This warfare left the Flanage without a strong technology and with a certain prejudice against technology; so the art of weaponry fell back to a pre-pelletgun level.

North of the Flanage for hundreds of kilometers run the Deadlands, traditionally avoided since the planetary war. And north of the Deadlands lie the Viadhash Borderlands, where the so-called barbarian Valzar, or Jamnar, began his career as a mere herder of kaphals, and as a

forest hunter. (See Qim's *Long* Histories, Vol. 426: *Star Barbarian.*)

Valzar's precipitous rise—and fall off a cliff at the instigation of his usurping uncle—has been told. And in the eastern waters of the Zaldiger Sea, in sight of the harsh Deadlands coast . . .

CHAPTER ONE

"Shipmaster Ulthor," Pharian of Rozuth called languidly, "kindly steer seaward a trifle." The looming Deadlands cliffs shadowed the deck of the *Sartaxu* as its galleyslaves drove it to the south.

Shipmaster Ulthor, peering at the cliffs for identifiable landmarks from the *Sartaxu*'s cluttered bow, stiffened angrily and turned toward his sterncastle, appropriated by the Rozuth lordlings.

An improvised screen of canvas hid the lower part of the sterncastle from the banks of galleyslaves toiling in the ship's midsection. With slow deliberation Ulthor strode the walkway from bow to stern, aware of the men in the rigging who would be able to see over the canvas barrier as they worked to repair the damage of yesterday's storm.

He stepped through a flap in the canvas and approached the plumpish, blue-caped young man leaning casually against the ship's rail.

"Lord Pharian," Ulthor said, making only a token bow to the youth, "I do not complain that you take my stern cabin and my private walking-deck. You are of the Rozuth, who own this ship, and I am but a recently-promoted Oarsmaster, a former bondslave to boot. I do not mind ill-treatment when I understand its nature. Yet even you dare not weaken my personal authority over the two hundred slaves who sweat for us beyond that canvas. We drive our oarsmen hard, Lord Pharian. They are always dangerous, and—"

"Yes, yes, Shipmaster, very well. I fully understand," said Pharian lightly. "Do have a creshot-fruit; they're still fresh, though that wretched storm has delayed us long

enough to rot them by porttime. His Awesomeness, my father, will not care that at least 30% of the fattest part of the profits of this voyage are thereby forfeited, but that is neither my worry nor yours. Storms are their own master."

"Well . . . yes, thank you, Lord Pharian," said Ulthor, somewhat mollified—partly because the creshots were incredibly valuable but also because the men in the rigging had just seen the man who'd insulted him back down by offering one. Ulthor had also spotted a likely piece of driftwood out ahead of the *Sartaxu*; no doubt it had caught Pharian's eye. Very well. he would be willing to change course for that; it was good to be ahead of the lordling.

"Now then, Shipmaster, one of my brothers skylarking in the rigging has told me that there are two men lying out there on a crude raft, and I have taken a fancy to the notion of rescuing them. Bit of extra oar-work for the slaves, I expect; bound to make them even touchier and perhaps I should have thought of that."

Shipmaster Ulthor allowed himself to consider that a second apology; and as a concession of error in judgment it was a rather handsome one at that.

"Made you back down, eh, dear Pharian?" Pharian's older sister Leliel peered from the ladderwell below deck, then came lightly up, giggling slightly.

She wore a closefitting blue velvet tunic the same shade as her brother's cape. One small breast was almost defiantly bared. She wore scarlet hose up to her waist, where a narrow silver chain bound the tights over the tunic.

Pharian's eyes glinted with appreciation for the figure his sister cut in the new style of Tharadian, from whence the *Sartaxu* was returning them home after a year in the western isles of myriad pleasures. He found it much more difficult of late to be greatly irritated by her.

Ulthor's eyes were too self-disciplined to more than

flick over her. It was a pleasant-enough sight, but almost as risky for him as for his galleyslaves. He felt a moment's envy for their peaceful ignorance behind the canvas; no canvas for him here!

He drew his attention to the raft. "There it is," he said. "And there does seem to be movement . . ." He turned and called a change-of-course order to the man at the tiller. Moments later the motion of the deck under their feet changed as the *Sartaxu* moved some thirty degrees into the breeze and waves.

Some minutes later, two sunburned figures lay prostrate on the deck, while slaves poured tiny sips of water into their mouths.

The larger man was almost two full meters in height, a head above the Flanage average; his black hair accentuated his strong features.

By comparison, the other seemed but a boy, though a strange one with his chest, arms, and legs coated with thick matted hair.

Footsteps sounded on the ladder below as Pharian's half-brothers and sisters appeared, followed by his sister Ailaisha. Two seventeen-year-old youths came first, resembling each other save that one had pale white skin while the other's was startlingly red. They were followed by three girls of the same age. The first two girls had reddish skin; the third was creamy white similar to Leliel. Each was clad in the style of Tharadian, one breast or the other bare—but never both, for "that would be immodest!" Leliel told Pharian, laughing and yet blushing slightly even as she spoke.

Pharian addressed the strangers, "Now then, who are you two, and from whence come you? Do not lie. There are several barbarian slaves in Khaldiriam and I can easily see you are of the northland wildernesses. You can hide nothing."

Hairy chest still heaving, the smaller figure tried several times to answer Pharian. "I . . . I am Lynor," he

finally got out. His voice cracked with fatigue as he hastened on, a strange look of desperation on his face. "I am bondslave by a fearsome geas cast by terrible magicians—bondslave to Valzar here, and must never be separated from him on penalty of death in hideous form!"

"Ooooh!" squealed one of the red-tinged girls. "How like a prince the little hairy one talks! And of magicians, too! A rare catch indeed, Pharian! Will you give him to me?"

Pharian grinned; he had dredged up an interesting catch indeed, whether the boy spoke false or true. "I would not bring geas-doom on such a fine yound lad, Yidiri! And he has taken my fancy besides; I shall have him by me and none other. Now, you, Valzar! Can you speak for yourself? Or are you mute, deaf, and idiotic?"

The tall figure did not move, but lay gasping still for breath.

"Perhaps I should throw him back overboard, or—"

"*No!*" Lynor shouted, horrified. "He is only exhausted. The storm . . . over and over again he swam against the raft to keep it from being drawn against the rocks. That is all; he had not long since finished another such swim when you came upon us."

"That is *all?*" Pharian laguhed. "That cursed storm will have us days late to Khaldiriam; our creshots will be worthless. And he swam against such a storm, and is still alive?" Pharian turned away for effect, obviously not expecting any answer to his heavy sarcasm.

"He speaks his speech in perfect mime, poor hairy wild boy," said Leliel, "and says no more, kind monkey attempting to save his sodden master there!"

"He needs rest and looking after, not scorn," said Lynor sullenly.

The Rozuth lordlings laughed; but then Ailaisha stepped forward. "They have been many days in the sun; the boy speaks truth. We shall learn far more after they have been brought back to health."

Pharian shrugged. "It is true that they should be able to concoct a more amusing tale for me. Let them be tended to, then."

"Four days at oars up the Akanar River to Khaldiriam," said Pharian conversationally to Jamnar as they stood by the rail. "You'll be branded, of course, and a rag soaked in your blood will be hidden away for the trackers; they're bad, very bad, the Trackers. They can be set on any slave who has left the city without his owner's authorization. They work rapidly, too; never been known to take more than five hours to dispose of their man. Not used much, any more. Never much call to; *you* understand?"

Jamnar smiled, then wondered why. Was it the blandly mocking manner of this plump youth who said he owned him now? He was less than a year older than Jamnar, yet talked as endlessly as if he had the wisdom of lifetimes to impart.

He looked over the railing at the gentle countryside the Deadlands cliffs had given way to, three days after his rescue. "You call me and my people barbarians. What, then, is your civilization?"

Pharian grinned at him. "By Thrin's quadruple tail, I could not tell you! I know that several centuries ago there were a series of great raids from the previously-forgotten Viadhash. Cities in the Flanage were burnt and there was much slaughter and destruction of, well, of civilized things of value. This was considered barbaric."

Jamnar looked at Pharian's smiling face. "We have no legends of such raids. No stores of plunder were brought to the Viadhash, no . . ."

Now Pharian's face turned serious. "Do you think the barbarians escaped unscathed? There could not have been more than a few thousand of them, while Khaldiriam holds some forty thousand alone within the city walls, and the whole land of Khaldir perhaps twice that

number. Khaldir is one of the larger lands of the Flanage, that is true, but then there are some thirty lands here all told, depending on what ruler has conquered or married whom at a given moment."

"What happened to them, then?" asked Jamnar. "Were they wiped out?"

"Mostly, yes. The rest fled to the lands to the east; but they had already ceased to be fertile, and it is thought they all perished there. They called themselves the Zakkat, if I recall."

"Ah," said Jamnar. "It was a sept of the irZakkat that went off in search of new lands, then. They must have gathered others from the Viadhash."

"Perhaps," said Pharian. "Nevertheless they managed to give barbarians a rather bad name in the Flanage! Tell me, are you not a man of consequence? By your ancient pure accents, you might be of a line of true kings."

"No," said Jamnar, feeling a twinge of apprehension. He was certain it would be unfortunate for him if it were learned that he was the High Kan of the Viadhash. Why had Lynor given his new name? In spite of the Deadlands between, tribesmen occasionally moved to the southern kingdoms; sooner or later they would bring the news of Valzar's astonishing conquests to these strange people. "No," he repeated, "it is but the way of the northlands; even my bondslave Lynor speaks thus, as you know."

No need to mention that Lynor was the only surviving son of the late Gaharn, kan of the irZakkat, magically bonded by the evil Kvunuvun priests to serve the new High Kan for mysterious purposes of their own.

"My sisters call you the slave-prince," said Pharian, munching now on a creshot; he did not offer one to Jamnar. "No doubt you will be something of a celebrity when I show you off around Khaldiriam, for certainly you have a less scruffy air about you than those few barbarians I have seen before. And Lynor, whom I shall

call Shaggychest, may be even more popular; tell me, does it disturb you that this might occur?"

Jamnar smiled slightly. "I have no wish to be more or less known than anyone else. I wish only to return to my people, but—"

"Ah, but, but, but. But you cannot return to your people, since the Trackers never fail. Perhaps you need to think more on that fact? Good conversation from a slave ofttimes advances him; think on that also. Farewell." And Pharian turned and strode off, a pettish expression on his face.

"My brother can be such a prig," Ailaisha said to Jamnar with a laugh, as she came up to him. She looked sidelong into his face, standing close enough that one bare breast just touched the side of his arm. "I cannot understand how Father was so happy with him that he insisted all his other women bear him children as soon as possible. His luck was better than he deserved!"

Jamnar glanced once at her; smaller and more delicate than northern women in size and features, she surprised him by seeming very desirable. And yet he could hardly understand what she said to him; it seemed impossibly inconsequential, but that might, he thought, be due to the fact that he really knew nothing about these castled Flanage lands and their ways.

He looked out at the rolling green hills again, and tried idly for hunter's mind. Perhaps then things would be clearer; but his head still ached, and he gave up after a moment.

"You are silent," Ailaisha said, pouting her lips delightfully. "I like to hear your strange patrician accent, so, please, you must talk to me. Oh," she giggled again, "your face is so dour, so stern, when you can think of nothing to say!"

"True," said Jamnar, "I have nothing to say; yet there are things I might ask."

"What, like a dull military man? I cannot spare much time to be inquired of." Yet her eyes sparkled mischievously as they looked up at him.

"Your knowledge might help me to survive," he said. "Where there are Trackers, what else might there be?"

"Trackers? Why, they haven't been used in, in years! Not since the last revolts when king Athandur defeated three adventuresome would-be usurpers in hand-to-hand conflict. And that was when I was only nine!"

Jamnar cocked his head. "Do you mean they are not really a menace?"

"Oh, well, I suppose they are; but they are nothing to *worry* about, do you understand me?"

"You needn't worry; you are a Rozuth. I am only a slave."

"Well, and so what? If you do your work well, you need not stay a slave forever. My brother, whatever his faults, is a reasonably generous soul, and has freed slaves before."

Jamnar looked at her. He supposed, now that she mentioned it, that he would work well even though a slave; but he would do anything as well as possible, without even questioning it. Apparently she could not. It left him once more with a vast feeling of having nothing to say.

"Yes," she said, giving him again that sidelong glance, "I should imagine that life in Khaldiriam should be very rewarding for a handsome slave. I almost envy you!"

CHAPTER TWO

The whip was only a single strip of uncured kaphal-hide, but a small jagged burr of metal was embedded about half a meter from the whip's end.

Too late, Jamnar tried for hunter's mind; the whip slashed at him and he grunted involuntarily at the impact. There was a chuckle from behind. Jamnar had first heard that chuckle only half an hour earlier.

The whip slashed a second time, but this time Jamnar remained silent. The chuckle came again, Hazund, Lord Elder of the Rozuth, was entertained by all aspects of a whipping—the bravery as well as the cowardice, those who fought the pain as well as those who collapsed helplessly into it.

At the third slash the metal cut a gash in his chest. The pain seared against his attempt for hunter's mind, but he redoubled his efforts, thinking of Lynor's horror struck face when Hazund, catching sight of Jamnar among his son's retinue, had casually told Pharian that he was taking that handsome barbarian for his own. There had been nothing Pharian could do, though he had tried to explain that, on separation, the hairy one would die. Hazund had chuckled.

Jamnar grunted again at the fourth slash, but this time it was because he had begun to clear his mind. Hazund had had him taken away and branded on the outside of his left leg. Then he had been brought to his courtyard. "The Lord Elder always has his new slaves whipped," one slave had said to him stolidly.

He did not feel the fifth slash. He was concentrating on trying to forget Lynor, the huge low walls surrounding the Rozuth estate, the sun bleached courtyard inside

the villa, the chuckles which had begun from behind him once more at the sixth slash, the voice which said, "Six is enough," in bored tones contradicting its chuckles. "Throw some salt water on him and get on to the more interesting ones."

Thongs were unwrapped from Jamnar's wrists, which had been tied to a bar overhead. He was tall enough that his feet touched the ground even when suspended, so he fell only to his knees when released.

Pain stung at him back and chest, but he had finally attained a semblance of hunter's mind. It had been difficult; his mind had been swirling for days with the flood of conversation Pharian and his sisters and brothers had loosed on him. So much that had been important to him —and so much that seemed totally useless. Coming up the wide Akanar River through the old empire of Akanar, now four smaller kingdoms, he had learned of their wars and of the wars of the other dozens of kingdoms in the Flanage. He had learned also of their poetry, their modes of flamboyant dress, the quality of lovemaking as it varied from land to land, until he felt that he wished never more to learn another thing.

But now the pain, instead of further dividing his attention and battering at his nerves, was under his control, a source of strength. He got slowly to his feet and looked about.

"Hmmm, you recover well," said Hazund with boredom. "Ah, here is the little serving girl who likes to dally with my eldest son!"

A lovely blackhaired girl in her twenties was being brought through one of the small courtyard's five archways. She was nude, and her light skin glistened with sweat as she struggled almost futilely against the two burly, grinning slaves who were half-dragging her along to the whipping-hitch.

Hazund, Lord Elder of the Rozuth, sat in a small canopied chair a few paces from the whipping-hitch, two

large male slaves on either side of him. Hazund was fat, bald, and ugly. Clad only in a white sash from waist to knees, he too glistened lightly with sweat.

"Well, Sharishtra," Hazund said, grinning though his small eyes were cold, "it is almost a year since I have had need to call you here. You have served me well, and I have been satisfied with you many times. Thus it is that you must understand that your twenty strokes are not for enjoying yourself while apart from me. I am not ungenerous; after all, I myself have other amusements. But you allowed Marath to wheedle from you the performance of certain actions I have reserved for myself." He shook his head as if in mild astonishment.

The two slaves thereupon began fastening Sharishtra with the straps that had held Jamnar, while the whipmaster amused himself flicking the tip of his lash about in the dust.

"Such a girl can never take such punishment," said Jamnar suddenly. No woman had ever been whipped in his tribe. "She cannot know much about pain."

"That, my dear Valzar," said Hazund softly, "is what I am here to teach her more about. Would you like to take her strokes yourself?"

"Very well," said Jamnar, and Hazund blinked his tiny eyes.

"I hadn't expected you to take me up, you know," he said lazily. "However. . . ."

Sharishtra was taken down, and Jamnar tied up again; and then the whipmaster began counting his heavy strokes.

Jamnar stood patiently under the blows, channelling the pain so that it sharpened his concentration, until by the time the whipmaster panted "twenty," there was no pain but only an awareness that time for healing would soon be required.

This time when they untied him he did not fall to his knees.

"Well, *well*," said Hazund, "by the look of you, you learned little of my lesson. Here, put Sharistra up once more, and give her twenty. That should clarify matters marvelously, yes, indeed! Much simpler, much more sensible, much more satisfactory! Perhaps you would trouble yourself to learn *this* lesson?"

Jamnar turned slowly toward Hazund; his face briefly flared with hatred and anger, and Hazund started backwards in his chair.

But Jamnar only narrowed his eyes and said, "I took her strokes. Do you not keep your word where slaves are concerned?"

Hazund flushed, but said with a calm malicious smile, "You took her twenty lashes, true enough, and by a fair agreement which I acknowledge, as is my custom even to slaves, though not everyone is as punctilious as I."

He paused and observed Jamnar in silence a moment. "You are really in remarkable control of yourself; I must beat you more often. I am certain you will provide me with plenty of cause; you have that surly stubborn quality about you that leads to this courtyard so many times. Well, I kept my bargain. Perhaps what distresses you is that she is now to receive the twenty lashes punishment you deserve for having the impudence of pretending to moral superiority though you are only a barbarian and a slave!"

A rough hand was clapped onto Jamnar's right shoulder. "On along, now," said one of the slaves who had brought Sharistra in.

Then Jamnar had the man's wrist in his own left hand, and squeezed; the slave dropped to his knees, totally unprepared for such excruciating pain.

"You have to earn the right to touch me like that," Jamnar said, voice calm but anger on his face once more. "You are all people of little value; Gaharn was clean, compared to you."

"My fine new slave Valzar," said Hazund in a low tone, his tight-lipped smile harsher and crueler than ever, "you have too many scruples. Patharnatta, my slave-master, has none. Patharnatta, there are six of you present in this courtyard. Can you earn the right to touch my slave-prince, eh?" His voice was like sly music.

Patharnatta, though not Jamnar's height, was tall for the Flanage. His heavily muscled red-skinned body glistened in the heat. He smiled and nodded to his fellows standing beside the litter.

"Very well," Jamnar said, realizing that he had lost hunter's mind in his confused anger at Hazund's casual brutalities.

Four men approached him from Hazund's litter, Patharnatta beside them. Another slave was almost upon him.

Jamnar let go of the wrist he still held, with a quick backhanded chop to the side of the kneeling man's neck; he fell forward into the sand.

Then the other was there, arms up and extended to grasp Jamnar and hold him for the others to maul.

The blackhaired barbarian stepped to one side slightly, took his attacker almost gently by the wrist, turned, and propelled him on around and straight back into the other four.

"I forsee difficulties," Hazund said dryly, in a tone that reminded Jamnar suddenly of Prosperon; then there was the sound of a handbell.

Now the men moved quickly, surrounded him, and attacked swiftly.

Even as they reached him he dropped to the ground, dealing savage blows from below among the confusion until suddenly he realized there were only two left fighting against him.

Warily he rose from his knees—and guards came running through the archways into the courtyard.

Jamnar darted for a wall to put his back against, but staggered at a blow on the head from behind. He fell bleeding in the dirt and more blows fell on him.

Even as unconsciousness seized him, Jamnar heard Hazund's pleased voice. "Twenty lashes for Sharishtra, now; don't forget in all the confusion!"

When he awoke he was lying on an open pile of straw that smelled of kaphal-urine.

It was dusk, and though the bare grey walls ordinarily seemed plain, the rich color of the air gave everything a look of momentary magic.

Then Jamnar groaned with the shattering ache of his head, and sought hunter's mind briefly and unsuccessfully.

He got to his feet slowly and stiffly, as half a dozen older male and female slaves entered the large yard where he had been lying unconscious. Each carried a large package, held to his back by large cloth straps, the knotted ends of which they clutched in their hands.

One paused by Jamnar a moment. "You're one of the new ones, eh? Follow us; we're taking this to the women's quarters. Afterwards we'll return to slave's quarters. There'll be some stew there, and someone can tend to you a little before you rest." And he was trotting away to catch up with the others.

Jamnar thought a moment, then limped after the slaves as quickly as he could, trying to clear his mind of the sudden angers and resentments tearing painfully at him. Lynor, dead by now after inconceiveable agonies; the slavegirl Sharishtra, receiving twenty lashes for bedding Hazund's own son with tricks reserved for the Lord Eldest's sole pleasure! It left him only a narrow ledge upon which to stand indignantly, he thought then with a certain caustic self-amusement.

After some minutes of trudging through small court-

yards and narrow halls, the small procession reached a large interior room.

"Wait," came a high clear familiar voice, startling Jamnar, "don't set them down there, put them over here —greatchests go against that wall." It was Ailaisha; she had perhaps hesitated a moment on sight of him, but after that she paid no attention whatsoever to Jamnar. He forced a stiff shrug and tried to recall a suitable curse from Pharian's store to lay upon Hazund, the entire house of Rozuth, the city of Khaldiriam, the land of Khaldir, and all the Flanage lands. None of these people, not even the slaves, seemed to be really straightforward in anything they did or said.

He had no way of judging intents, he realized; it would be better, then, not to try—at least for now.

Ailaisha finished instructing the slaves, they disposed of their loads as she indicated, and she dismissed them with a curt phrase.

Jamnar walked with the other slaves through the courtyards and halls in silence for a time.

"You are the barbarian Valzar," said the slave who had spoken to him before as they passed by a fountain in whose shallow waters half a dozen Rozuth youngsters were splashing. "I am Tegar; I am from Chaitor Zun."

Jamnar looked him in the eyes and smiled at him, the northland acknowledgment.

"The one called Shaggychest; the tale is he was bound to you personally by fearsome enchantments, that he should die if separated from you?"

"Yes," said Jamnar curtly, stung by the reminder that the boy must now be dead. He had never felt any particular affection for the young heir of tragedy, but his sense of personal responsibility was intense—no doubt as the Kvunuvun priests had intended. How they must have hated him for shattering their mysterious, evil plans for Gaharn, kan of the irZakkat.

"Ser Pharian amused himself with an experiment," Tegar continued. "Seeing that the boy did not fall down in convulsions the moment you were taken from the same room to serve the Lord Elder, he conceived a plan to test the spell's limits."

"Does the boy live, then?" said Jamnar rather gruffly.

"He took the boy throughout the entire villa, then through the estates themselves. Nothing happened save that Shaggychest remained in a state of great fear the whole time. Then he took him outside the gates, thinking to show him the avenues of Khaldiriam—and Shaggychest fell to the ground in hideous convulsions. The moment he was carried back inside the gate, the convulsions ceased. Most wondrous! I think there are no such wizards in Khaldir or Chaitor Zun!"

A surge of relief relaxed Jamnar's aching muscles for a moment. They were passing through a large gate which seemed to be permanently ajar and unguarded.

"Slaves' quarters," said Tegar. "There is food if you are hungry; we go first to our quarters to prepare for the night's feast." And the party of slaves turned aside, leaving Jamnar.

Inside the gate there were several large kettles over fires, tended by very old slaves; these handed a large bowl of stew to each slave who passed by the low table. Tegar and the others were already disappearing through one of dozens of archways, and Jamnar realized that hunger was tearing at him as ferociously as his wounds.

"If you want the wise word," said a bent, wrinkled old woman who handed Jamnar a bowl of stew, "stop fighting back. Learn how to be a live slave with a clear head. Else when they're done torturing mind and body, they'll throw your corpse behind the kaphal stables."

Jamnar blinked at her words; he had been too aware of his pain to follow them closely. She ladled an extra helping into his bowl.

"The sick always get extra," she said, and laughed

harshly. "So it's not your pleasing conversation. And, look you, get a fresh straw pallet over through that archway, then take any place on the floor in the rooms past the bothrau-tree."

The savory odors of the stew were too much for Jamnar; he began eating. The woman would have him starve while talking with him, though he understood she was helping him.

"You won't sleep too well tonight. It's a great welcome-feast for the safe return this morning from Tharadian. We are all commanded to be especially happy—which we are, since someone is usually freed and there are always extra coins, even vints and krons, for the slaves."

At last she seemed to be done, and Jamnar started to walk away. "If you can't sleep," she called after, "see if you can find someone to tell you how to get along here; you really should.

"Or you won't survive."

CHAPTER THREE

Strangely-pitched drums followed the sounds of alien instruments; music seemed to come from every courtyard. Dusk and fresh torchlight made more grotesque the odd amusing masks on every slave.

Having cast his straw pallet in the shade of the bothrau, Jamnar ate his stew, observing the extensive festival preparations from behind a small, gaudy-glittering mask covering his eyes. Someone had thrust the mask on him, then stumbled tipsily away.

A girl's voice pitched low came from behind. "Are you interested in knowing how to survive now?"

He turned, back aching, and looked upward. "It was suggested. Sit; and talk if you wish."

She came around in front of him. A dark veil was her only mask; but neither it nor the neck-to-knee swaths of cloth typical of female slaves could hide the fact that under all was a lithe, beautiful girl.

Then, before he could react, she leaned over and hit him twice, cross-handedly, across his face, once with each hand, open-handed. The two slaps cracked almost simultaneously.

"*You are a slave.*"

Her voice was cold and harsh. "And that is your lesson. Learn it quickly and completely, or you will die here, hideously. The fat one will be most meticulous and most exacting with one like you, should you prove recalcitrant; oh, yes, I can promise!"

"Sit down," repeated Jamnar with his slight smile. "You make your points forceably, but you confuse them together too much."

She stared down; then, after a moment, she sat in front of him. slightly out of reach.

"You speak with the accents of a lord of ancient times, yet—as one would expect from a northlander barbarian—your manners and conversation are as direct and crude as any son of five generations of slaves.

"And do not think you are in fact a slave-prince, as I've heard you named already; you understand, Hazund scarcely thinks of slaves as human. No doubt he is surprised you even know words. Barbarians never last long in the Flanage, or so I'm told; great sport, they're called. I think it is because they don't really understand what is happening."

"None were hunters, I'll warrant," Jamnar said. She frowned at the word, but he continued. "I am quite willing to learn; you don't need to apply violence."

"Don't fear it from *me*," she retorted. "It is the Lord Elder you must fear."

"Fear?" said Jamnar. "I shall be cautious; but fear is wasteful. I must find out what it is to be a slave, it seems; well then, afterwards I will find what roads lead north. But that need not concern any other slave."

"That's just the attitude I mean," she responded with alarm. "You must understand that there is no escape. You are a slave in Khaldir."

"The Trackers?" Jamnar said. "An unseen enemy, but no enemy is invincible, save one."

The veiled girl looked at him in silence for a time. At last she said softly, "The Trackers are death; and so they are invincible."

"More than that must be known about them," said Jamnar.

She shook her head. "*I* know nothing about them, be they man, beast, or . . . something else. I know this, that none has escaped them, for anyone who had succeeded would have been a figure of legend and long long tales around the cooking-pots."

"I shall have to find out, I suppose," Jamnar said calmly.

"It wouldn't take that many years for you to hope for freedom of sorts," she said. "Hazund will not live too many more years; he is given to excesses, and he plots deviously against dangerous adversaries. With a milder master . . ."

"I do not know," said Jamnar. "If that is how it happens, very well. But I shall be helping myself where I can."

Again there was a pause while she studied his face; then, unexpectedly, she asked, "I've heard men of the north take many wives in time of war, when men become in short supply. Tell me, is this true?"

"It is practical, and it is the custom, yes."

"How many do you have?"

He thought a moment. Envaro had been arranging for new wives from the moment they had arrived in huQayal with the army. It was necessary to secure alliances if High Kan Valzar was to be an effective ruler.

He smiled. "I am not really certain. At least ten, by the time I was kidn —by the time I left."

"*Ten.*" It was hardly more than a whisper, but it conveyed deep shock. She rose then. "That is a great deal even for the Tharadians."

And with no more words she turned and walked away.

Immediately Jamnar was astonished to find himself arguing the pros and cons of whether he should get up and follow her. Arguments tumbled briefly through his mind till he rose and shook his head.

Follow? But what more should he say to her? She was mystery to him, pure mystery of storming Flanage emotions. Did neither slaves nor masters here attempt any control over themselves?

She was passing through the far archway leading back to the pallet-room. He rose and walked stiffly after her, on an impulse; when he reached the archway, she was

just disappearing through another, this one to the entrance-courtyard of the slaves' quarter.

Puzzled, he continued after; and when he reached the courtyard, it was to see her passing through the great open gate.

It didn't mean anything. He already realized that slaves passed freely through Rozuth estates.

Still, perhaps it had been fortunate he had not attempted to restrain her; and then his mind was irritatingly impaled on the impossible problem of what she had meant, after all, by her entire performance.

A slight touch of dizziness reminded him that he needed to rest his wounds. He turned and went back to the bothrau tree, and presently he was sound asleep while the discordant music of the Rozuth festival grew louder.

The Rozuth estate lay entirely surrounded by four of the great avenues of Khaldiriam. Half of the land was covered by Hazund's sprawling villa, the rest by a park, which seemed to Jamnar to be a small, imaginary wilderness.

Hazund was now extending his villa; for three weeks Jamnar's life was nothing but hard work carrying heavy loads to the site. Although there was brutality, the constant pressure by the slavemasters to instill fear in him, to Jamnar it only seemed pointless agitation. He did whatever they said, calmly and as well as he could, and so the slavemasters got steadily more and more agitated.

Most of the others seemed to live as slaves with as little difficulty as Jamnar, until he wondered why that girl had been so insistant. True, he had started off as a slave by trying to fight several dozen guards, but he had no intention of getting himself into such a situation again. She must have supposed he fought solely because he enjoyed it!

Then Hazund caught sight of him one day, and,

shortly, Patharnatta came by and ordered him to exchange his canvas harnass of a common work-slave for one of leather, stained the deep blue of Rozuth.

"Don't you even want to know why?" asked Patharnatta, as Jamnar calmly accepted the new harness.

Jamnar smiled a small smile. "Will it change what I am to do, for me to know?"

Patharnatta gave him a cold smile back. "You learn very quickly. Well, you are to be one of the Lord Elder's litter carriers; so runs your good fortune. An attack of hired thugs yesterday lost him two carriers. It was fortunate Captain Nurab was with him at the time. He was able to summon some nearby free companions, else Marath would be Lord Elder this day."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Pain is so important, dear Hai'jorth. I wonder that you as a soldier find so little use for it in disciplining your men."

"Then I would not lead a *Free* Company," Free Captain Hai'jorth Nurab sat beside Hazund, Lord Elder of Rozuth, while eight sturdy slaves, two at each of four poles, trotted along at a moderate pace. Behind the litter came a squad of soldiers from Nurab's Free Company; and behind the soldiers trotted Lynor Shaggychest.

For Jamnar was second hind left carrier, and Lynor's geas still held, beyond the walls of the Rozuth estate.

"Besides, Lord Hazund, discipline and pain are not precisely the same thing. In the Free Companies—mine, at least—pain without an understandable discipline or justification is more wasteful than useless. They are trained to withstand pain, of course. But discipline is to obey military necessity even when a man's common sense would have him far away and still running!"

"You remind me of my barbarian lackwit there on the hind pole," said Hazund in a kind of sullenness. "I shall have to whip him from time to time to make him more resentful; then I shall feel certain I control him."

"Yet you own him," said Nurab, "while you do not own me, any more than I own my free companions and bondsoldiers."

"I do not own his spirit," rejoined Hazund. "That will take some time. But I have nothing else in particular to do, and it must be done. A recalcitrant slave . . . it is like adding vinegar to the wine; if the vinegar is strong enough, you cannot call it wine any longer. So with a batch of slaves."

Nurab smiled. "I cannot argue. It depends upon the point at which you start."

"Come now, enough of these shreds of talk, then. Will you still not discuss the moves of the High Prince? I will be open with you; I have certain word, in secret, that Rallan seeks to extend the borders of the High Principality not only *to* the Dalvardava, but beyond it. Since Dalvar is Athandur's second chief ally after Ruldoun . . ."

"I will gladly continue our discussions on Belcamnaron; Old Akanar affairs are not in the king's direct attention. But I have told you before that I will not discuss any of the border problems. I will not discuss High Prince Rallan's intentions, nor which way the Dalvardava flows, nor any matters in between."

"Curse you for a thickhead, captain," said Hazund, his irritation showing under the friendly jocularity of his tone. "I'm not asking you to breach your faith with King Athandur!"

"You know I will not."

"I only want to discover . . ."

"My duty does not permit such a conversation. Nor—though you know it also—does my sense of obligation to my company. The information we exchange on affairs in Old Akanar helps us all, and is not the king's direct interest now. Should the company decide to break the contract and move west . . ."

"You needn't fear being overheard, you know. None of these lads wants to be smelled by the Trackers!"

"You are forbidden their use within the city." Captain Nurab's voice remained at the same calm conversational level, while Hazund's changed constantly from wheedling to friendly to bullying.

"If one of these betrayed me," said Hazund, and the note now was of sheer cruelty, "they would know Khaldiriam would be no safe place for them." Only when he had finished did he turn away from Nurab and raise his

voice. "The litter hardly moves! On smartly, now! We shall be late to the duels!"

"We do not know your lands," said Jamnar. "I have no idea what might pass for a wonderworker hereabouts."

"Well," Pharian said, unsuccessfully attempting a harsh tone. "*I* have never had cause to go in search of a magician. I don't even know that they exist—except, of course, that the impressive agonies of your small friend here have testified to their existence, oh, yes!"

Lynor's face was pale. "Then there are no wizards' quarters in the Flanage lands? I have heard many stories since we got here, speaking of such matters. Otherwise I shall have to take a knife to myself; I would not voluntarily ever taste such pains again."

Jamnar's face set grimly, as Pharian answered, "No, no, those are only stories; and who knows if they even originated on this world? Lad, I'm sorry I could not bend my father's will. Perhaps the pain will go away when the spell, er, realizes Jamnar is not in danger simply because he is separated from you."

Lynor shook his head. "Separation, the Kvunuvun said. I was grateful enough that the spell permitted me separation under the same roof. I could not risk what you suggest."

"It was crude and imperceptive of him, as well. Why he should object to you accompanying his guards simply because the foolish urchins of the street were amused at your fine chest of hair. . . ."

"We have but this one day," Jamnar reminded him. "Do the stories Lynor speaks of mean nothing, then?"

"Oh, stories or history, all mere tales, all very frustrating. We have no way of knowing the truth of it, nor is it important. What *is* important is that I know nothing about finding them, nor have I any hints."

"Let us then simply inquire in the marketplace," said Jamnar, with only a trace of sarcasm.

So, many times over, Lynor spoke for Pharian to tradesmen and hucksters throughout the central marketplace. "My master bids me inquire of you," he would say to a scowling fishwife, "whether you know the whereabouts of a reliable wizard, or other worker in hidden arts. If so, he will reward you."

The fishwife would scowl even more blackly, and turn away, perhaps with a muttered, "No."

In spite of the proffered reward, no one would give more than a regretful shrug. There was not even any discussion as to whether they existed; they simply would not speak of the matter at best.

All this, Jamnar observed in silence; and Lynor continued his inquiries. At last, after several hours, Pharian insisted on stopping for a goblet of wine, and then another one, inside a small dark room filled with citizens loudly arguing. There were even barelegged slaves there, drinking wine and ale.

Out of curiosity Jamnar asked for Bythire wine, but Pharian grimaced and said, "Never order such a drink in Khaldiriam; you will be thought a rare poor judge of wine indeed! And besides, it is mainly produced not in Bythire, but in Shazna'purn."

Jamnar thought this remarkably pointless, but kept his judgements private. "I think you are not being told the entire truth about magicians," he said instead.

"What do you mean?" Pharian asked, scowling as he drank deeply from his goblet.

"I have been watching those with whom Lynor spoke," Jamnar said. "They look once or twice at your gorgeous cape, and they scowl deeply. Always they do this; and then it is as if they hardly even hear what the boy says."

"Bah," said Pharian with complete casual assurance, and set his goblet down heavily. "They are only tradespeople and slaves of Khaldir. They have nothing to hide,

no way to hide it, and no reason to. I am a Rozuth, after all; I may ask them what I wish."

Jamnar suppressed a very strong urge to smile. "It is true that most we encountered seemed to know nothing. But it was clear enough that at least some Lynor talked to had some idea of where we might find what we were looking for."

Pharian's ever-deepening scowl made him look more and more absurdly younger than the tall northlander, who was actually younger than he. "Is this so? Why did you say nothing? You do not serve me well—nor yourself, and this brave lad least of all."

"I do not know your people well," answered Jamnar. "It took me till a little while ago to become reasonably certain, but those that deal in herbs and healthful teas were invariably made most uneasy at Lynor's questions."

Pharian wrinkled his brow. "Yes. Magicians need such things, eh? For their stinks and smokes and whatever else they do? But why do they say nothing?"

"Perhaps they are afraid—whether of you, or of the magicians, I could not say. Fear, caution, I know not. Perhaps, too, you have not offered enough money. Gold speaks in a louder voice than silver. But as I said, I do not know matters here well enough to say."

"Bah!" said Pharian. "A silver vint will do for such a paltry bit of information as a trickster's whereabouts."

"It is a question of the lad's life, after all," answered Jamnar calmly. "And if the address we gain is only of a trickster, even a vint would be thrown away on it."

"Very well," said Pharian. "A few krons don't really matter to me, after all. By Udra, you would think they had something to fear from a Rozuth."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Well, now," said the thin little man, a bit uncertainly, "it is true that I am called Valish Kadarnu, and that I have found my way into some crannies of knowledge generally unknown and potentially quite useful. Yet I would not term myself a magician; I might say I am an unmagician and have done with discussing it."

The unmagician's mud brick hut stank as much indoors as out in the garbage-strewn alley. For three small gold half-krons, they had been led here by an unhappy apprentice to a gnarled old rootseller, through the winding, stinking alleyways beyond the central marketplace.

"Come, come, you look as frightened as the wretches in the marketplace. Surely a . . . an unmagician has faced worse terrors than a young nobleman and his two slaves?" Pharian's bluster covered his own increasing nervousness.

"I do not customarily deal with those of your station, lord; I confess I am distinctly uneasy. Yet you mentioned much gold, and my researches need financing, so . . ."

"It is to save the lad's life," said Jamnar, seeing that the two could keep on dodging each other for an extended period of time. "He was cursed by evil men of his tribe, and may not leave me now on pain of hideous torture and death."

Valish Kadarnu frowned and stared at Lynor, who had gotten very uncomfortable at Jamnar's words.

"Your life, eh?" he said to Lynor. "Is life so terribly important? I don't know."

Lynor stared blankly back at him, and Valish Kadarnu went on briskly, "You think you'll die if you are forced

away from him? Curious, curious; I have not come across such a thing in many years."

Pharian sighed loudly. "Do you mean we have paid good gold and gone tramping through the garbage-heaps of the city, only to find you know nothing and cannot help us?" But he did not offer to depart.

"I *might* not be able to help him," said the unmagician, rather loftily. "It is a matter of how the boy looks at the whole matter himself. As for me, I suspect I know what might have been done to him; and yet, even if so, I cannot break such a spell completely. You must know that from the start."

"You must speak your meaning more plainly," Pharian said impatiently. "Do you understand the lad's talk of spells or do you waste my time to wheedle gold?"

"No, I do not much understand it, nor do I think he could give me any useful description of what was done to him. The most I might manage would be sufficient, oh, that they need not always be in the same room, and perhaps—"

"He has that already," said Pharian impatiently. "We need him to have the freedom of the city; my father does not care for Shaggychest trotting after his magnificent new barbarian litterbearer, you see?"

"Now that," said Valish Kadarnu with considerable satisfaction, "means that I can be of service to you. The lad was either too stupid or too wise for them; they did not give him a total conviction. Hm, yes."

The little man rose and went to a huge chest at one side of the shabby little room. Throwing back the lid with a clatter and a cloud of dust, he rummaged around until he brought out a small jar.

"Very good! Xynth-fungus, from the Channasadtha Mountains. That's far to the east of the Flanage lands; it's expensive, oh, yes, just for a mere nibble. But you are one who can pay well, eh?" He peered at the bluecloaked lordling and grinned.

Pharian scowled his youthful scowl. "I will pay a fair price."

"For life, and knowledge? What is a fair price for two such jewels? Beyond your comprehension! Dread lord, you should think more about the impermanencies of the world!"

And now the young Rozuth tossed back his head and laughed easily. "I have no time for mere *thinking*, wizard! But I will pay a proper price if it free this boy from even part of his foul unfortunate bondage."

Valish Kadarnu nodded. "Very wise, very wise. Hm, three of you, but only a brief matter; five little pieces of gold, what do they call them here, half-vints? half-krons? eh? No matter; five of them, and then afterwards if you are content with my . . . unmagic, you may feel a spontaneous desire to press more fitting rewards upon me. And I will not object."

"You're to cozen him, not me," said Pharian almost goodnaturedly; but he brought out four small gold coins and a large one.

"No, no, do not think that," said the unmagician. "There is no cozening nor thought of any dishonesty here. If you are thinking that, there is little I can do to help. Only honesty avails against evil. Lad—what is your name, eh?—you must believe that what happens next is real; it is not made up; I do not wish to take your master's money and leave you to die in agony."

"I . . . I am Lynor called Shaggychest, and . . . and I believe you. At times you even speak as Kdulnon did. Do you know of the Kvunuvun?" The boy's fearfulness had reached a peak and was now being succeeded by a kind of confidence.

"I know them not, but if they deal in the things called magic, why, then there are certain things that are true, probably, and certain other things that are not—probably. Fortunately for you, I happen to know the difference, at least in your case."

"You have said that before," said Pharian. "Give the boy his wretched fungus, then, so that he may be cured and I may be away from here; for the stench is stupendous."

Valish Kadarnu opened the jar; a pungent aroma filled the room. "It's still quite fresh. Now, I must explain a thing or two to you all, since it is better that you all partake of it together—"

Pharian's glower returned. "Fungus? Me? I don't think—"

Now the unmagician scowled back. "Sir, if you wish my aid, you have it; and it consists in this, that all of you must take the fungus or I return your coins back to you and my attention back to my vital studies."

Pharian blinked and looked at Jamnar, who said, "It seems simple to me; let us take part in this ceremony with a good will, since it is necessary." He felt a surge of almost affectionate irritation at the way these men were almost like helpless children, at times needing the most elementary advice.

"Ceremony, yes, the very word," said Valish Kadarnu. "Ordinarily there would be a very elaborate ceremony, as no doubt there was when these Kvunuvun worked their work, eh, lad?"

"I know not," said Lynor. "I remember only the terms of the geas, which they told me afterwards; I know nothing more, save that I am tied by hideous powers to a life with no future in it and with a past of horror."

"Excellent," said Valish Kadarnu, at which Lynor looked even more sullen. "I mean that you remember no ceremonies; thus, dispensing with them will be no hindrance."

"And with all this talk?" asked Jamnar.

"Presently we dispense with talk," the unmagician said, and his tone was now much firmer. "You should understand a thing about this fungus—that it has vast potential powers. You must not become alarmed if for a brief time

you are enabled to understand even the nature of ultimate reality—which you will grant includes a great deal!" He chuckled.

"Bah," said Pharian, "if I'd known this was to be a religious ceremony . . . but if you are blessed with such knowledge, how is it you live in such filth instead of being high priest of Shavartha or Falkar; you could be Dka, or reign as Old Father to the Teshlites. Why not be Emperor of the whole planet? Ultimate reality!"

"Perhaps I cannot remember it long enough," Valish Kadarnu said gently. "So I spend my life poring through such elder texts as I can find, after the many despoilations of war and the ignorant hatred of practically everyone for the old ways and the old knowledge—"

"Oh, let's get on with it," Pharian snapped suddenly. "I have no particular desire to grasp the nature of ultimate reality, but if it must be done, it must be done." He squared his shoulders, tried to draw his stomach in, and attempted an odd look of determination which his rather plump features were incapable of.

"No, no," the unmagician said, still more softly. "We will take only a small amount; it will probably not advance your understanding very greatly."

He reached inside the jar and brought out a small crumbling bit of yellowish-red fungus, which he placed on a sheet of ink-smeared paper in front of him. With a knifeblade he carefully separated the thumb-sized fragment into four parts, one of which was about twice the size of each of the other three.

He pushed the three smaller portions away, indicating they should take them, and took the larger portion up on the blade.

He swallowed the morsel convulsively and said, "Bah. Foul taste. But that's part of the treatment, so get on with it, now!"

Lynor reached for the small piece of fungus nearest him, and held it just in front of his mouth. Then hastily

he opened his mouth and swallowed, making a terrible face.

"Why did you take a larger portion?" Pharian asked, suspicion heavy in his tone.

The little man peered at him. "Because I have a better idea what I am doing than you do. Swallow it."

Pharian hesitated a few more moments, then swallowed his shred; while Jamnar took his without protest.

"Are you perceiving ultimate reality yet?" asked Jamnar.

"To some extent," said Valish Kadarnu equitably. "The xynth-fungus works with a deal of rapidity, though the effect is over within, oh, half an hour. Most convenient. Of course if you took more it would last longer, but I would have to discuss many things with a man before I permitted that."

To Jamnar it seemed a contradiction; but then he realized that he had dropped into hunter's mind, and the contradiction did not seem so important.

Pharian was now sweating heavily; Jamnar sensed a great fear building up within the young nobleman, and wondered what was causing it.

Then Lynor screamed and stood up suddenly.

"*Father!*" he screamed. "Aaaaaaaaaaaagh! The knives!"

And throwing his hands in front of his eyes he swayed back and forth a moment, then toppled over onto Pharian, whereupon they both fell over to the dirt floor, raising dust. Pharian lay motionless, while Lynor writhed about.

Valish Kadarnu looked unhappy, Jamnar thought, wondering why; everything seemed to be proceeding amusingly enough. Had the fungus gotten contaminated somehow, or gotten stronger with age in the way Prosperon spoke so lovingly of his keg-aged Bythire wine?

Then he peered closer at Valish Kadarnu.

His features were changing. The dust in the room was getting stronger. Jamnar's eyes were watering.

In fact the dust was as strong as the smoke from a half-quenched fire, like the fires of Raham Kan's Great Tent in huThartesh that day of the irZakkat raid. . . .

Sweat now broke out all over Jamnar's body as the accumulated anguishes of the year and more since then all battered at him at once. The sack of huThartesh and the death of all his male kinsmen, save for his half-brother Envaro; the battles against neighboring tribes as Arteleon tribe struggled to survive its disaster; the confrontation with Gaharn, kan of the irZakkat, and the death of his beloved Tashai'a. . . . he felt at the same time each separate pain and all of them together, while his stomach gave a sudden lurch. He fell heavily to his knees on the dirt, half-digested food pouring out his mouth almost independently of anything he could call his own will or desire. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

When Jamnar looked up from his damp mess on the dry dirt, Valish Kadarnu had disappeared.

And in his place sat Kezile Shaphath, grinning evilly, with the Spear of the first Valzar still embedded full in his chest—where Jamnar himself had cast it, over a year ago!

Jamnar stumbled to his feet, hair raising along the back of his neck. Nausea still grappled with his vitals, but he paid it no more attention than he did to Lynor, who twisted and writhed on the floor, or to Pharian, who still lay motionless where Lynor had thrown him in his first convulsion.

"What are you doing here?" Jamnar started to say—but before he even knew whether he had said it, Kezile vanished utterly, vanished with the room they had been in, vanished with everyone in it, vanished with the whole city of Khaldiriam . . . leaving only Jamnar alone on an immense plain.

Then he was not alone.

Appearing at the crest of a nearby rise was a small motley-clothed band of armed fightingmen of the Viadhash . . .

He looked about him; naught but the grey plain with light mists rising—and the fightingmen were advancing, spreading out to surround him.

He had no weapon; he had no clothing.

The men strode silently closer, brandishing swords and spinspears.

Who are they? he wondered. *Why do they attack me?*

"Prepare!" It was one voice that spoke; but hundreds of mouths opened and closed around the word. "You

caused us to die," said the single voice. "Now you shall cause yourself to die—*now!*"

He thought of hunter's mind, but the thought vanished even as the horde of men launched themselves across the plain.

"Now let's see," a new voice said. "This next is interesting—old material I haven't gone through, oh, in several hundred years. Some is even pre-space. I don't expect you've ever come across more than passing references to it."

The men had vanished.

All was darkness.

The voice was Inzu's—the sentient computer who lived in the Forbidden Temple of Telshashoth.

But he had not heard Inzu's voice in his mind for a long time. The computer had since suppressed most of the information "he" had once passed directly into Jamnar's mind, in order to preserve the young kan's sanity.

Now the bodiless voice was coming to him again—over hundreds of kilometers—and Jamnar writhed with the effort to comprehend what was happening.

"I've never understood this material a hell of a lot myself, in fact. Before you get into listening/hearing/thinking in this area, see if you can get in touch with me. I understand some of it, naturally; much of it relates to humor, as you will see, and I *do* understand humor, of course. I imagine when they learned how to get that across to a machine, they really thought they had something; and sonofagun they were right. Well, now. Have fun with this area, and do remember to drop a line, won't you?"

Memories; memories flooding back; for a ghostly moment the totality of information the computer had given him was present in his mind simultaneously.

Then the voice in his mind continued. "There are a lot of items in this area; I won't give my estimation of each. The first one here's a curiosity—it isn't complete." The

ghost of a machine chuckle: "And unfortunately it's not the sort of thing I can go check on, any more!

"Immediately, I became aware of the vivid sensation of being attacked and ripped to pieces by a hungry panther. Next, I saw God. Finally, I was transported to the realm of absolute truth, where I wholly grasped the nature of ultimate reality. I still remember the nature of ultimate reality quite well, and am consequently quite wise."

Jamnar blinked.

The voice of the computer was gone, vanished like Kezile Shaphath and the horde of attackers.

He was back in Valish Kadarnu's wretched stinking hovel.

Then darkness and the voice returned. Was it coming from hundreds of kilometers? Was it his own mind speaking? He was astonished to find himself capable of sustaining such questions while the world shifted underfoot.

"Now, then, I have indexed several ancient texts and entered them in appropriate categories. You'll get used to it, but it isn't really scientific; it's hard to be scientific about such contradictory material, and—"

"Are you back with us, then?" came Valish Kadarnu's voice rather harshly, and there was a blow on Jamnar's shoulders.

The voice in his mind vanished once more with the unmagician's words, and the darkness lifted with the blow.

Jamnar tried to see in the sudden brightness of the room; then he realized a candle was being held close to his face.

"I—I don't know," said Jamnar. "What happened?"

"How should I know? I was hired for this clod's betterment, not for yours. You I should charge ten nice large gold pieces extra, yes, ten krons. The fungus was erratic; by the look of you while the mood was on you, you got far more than your master paid for. Do you think you can waken him so that you will all leave? I

have much that must be done besides the mere acquisition of money."

"I mean about Lynor," Jamnar said with some impatience, his head feeling impossibly light. "Did you loose him from the Kvunuvun spell?"

"Well, what do you think?" Valish Kadarnu answered with great asperity. "He will have the freedom of any town or city so long as you both are within its limits. Should you leave and not return immediately, he would then still die in agony. Almost immediately—a matter of less than an hour, in fact, I should imagine."

"But how did you do it?" Jamnar asked, his mind filled with shapeless apprehensions. "Why didn't I get to see what you did? It might be important . . ."

"Can you explain to the boy what happened to you?"

"I . . . I suppose not; not right now, at least. But that's because I don't understand it. But *you* seem to understand it well enough."

"Well, the lad can explain even less to you. I don't know why you didn't remain with us; it would have been a considerable help. But now is too late; what was paid for has happened. Were I now to explain it all to you laboriously, to the limited extent I am capable of, it would cost you more gold. And as by your fresh brands you are new slaves I doubt you have any to spare. Now get that irritable fool of a lordling out of here. I have work to do, and for you two, you both did well enough here, on balance. Pardon my sententiousness, but greed, mind you, is a great evil, a fearful evil."

Pharian groaned and scowled up at them from the floor. "What nonsense is this," he asked sourly, "to be thrown to the floor by my own slave in a fit of madness?"

Lynor was sitting on the floor against a wall, a rather blank look on his face.

"These two will explain what they can," said Valish Kadarnu with no more civility than Pharian. "Your com-

mission has been successfully executed, however—and with some to spare." He glowered at Jamnar.

"Is this true?" Pharian demanded of Lynor, who nodded hesitantly.

Pharian got awkwardly to his feet and, with little grace, reached into his leathern pouch and drew out some large gold coins.

"I will be back for these, wise man," he said, "should things be not as you imply."

Valish Kadarnu took the coins with no sign of concern, and scowled once more at Jamnar.

"The hour grows late," Jamnar suggested to Pharian. "Should we not be out of this foul sty and evil surrounding?"

"Evil!" The unmagician exploded a sour laugh. "You know not the first aspects of the meaning of that term. Go, go, all of you, and play with your *evils* you so freely speak of. Ha! Answer me what evil is—or get out!"

Jamnar saw he was not angry—but he did not expect an answer to the question, and he did expect them to leave.

Jamnar walked to the low doorway, stooped, pushed filthy doorhangings aside, and went out.

Outside, the air seemed hardly fresher, but the deep blue cloudless sky lifted his spirits.

Lynor came out, followed after a moment by Pharian, who hesitated as he stood in the doorway, hangings held away from his richly-figured blue cloak.

The young nobleman turned his head and spoke back into the hovel. "As for evil," he said as if lecturing, "it is the teaching of our age and lands that evil does not exist —is this not so? For if there were evil, we would suffer; and yet only the slaves, who surely are not evil, suffer."

And he barked a single laugh—which was followed immediately by a hollow laugh from inside the hut; a laugh, but no other answer.

Pharian stepped out into the filthy alleyway beside

Jamnar and Lynor, and there was a somewhat worried expression on his face. "What in the name of the little gods that wash feet *happened* in that pit of a lifetime's sewerage?"

"Don't expect me to explain anything," said Lynor, unexpectedly defying both his masters. "I don't know what it all meant. I didn't like it, that is certain, but I didn't expect to. It was not enjoyable when the geas was set on me, and . . ."

After a long pause the boy shrugged. "My father was there, who was slain horribly and seemed to be trying now to slay me, or so I understood it. Then Valish Kadarnu said many things to me, and many things seemed to happen, and . . . and I stopped worrying so much about the curse, and that's all."

He paused again; then came a rush of words. "Only, only, only if Ja—if Valzar leaves the city, oh, that would be fearful. But I won't worry about it.

"Evil; good. How foolishly older people talk. Pain—*that* makes sense. I will speak no more of this, for say what you might, my father was a man, and a great one of his line, and it would be weakness in me to speak further of my time of weakness. Evil and good? What of pain and weakness?"

At Lynor's first words, Pharian had halted in his tracks; and so the three stood together while Lynor spoke, as if from compulsion beyond the boundaries of all their knowledges. . . .

When the boy had finished, they began walking slowly, in silence, while Jamnar attempted to remember and find meanings for what had happened to them.

Already dreamlike and fading, the mysterious words of the computer in his memory puzzled him at the same time they seemed to tremble on the brink of being meaningful. If they had only continued a trifle longer! He had not remembered any of Inzu's memories since Loras kan

Loras had tried to assassinate him—and, even more alarming, he had not even realized it.

What had happened to him back in that filthy hut?

And what had happened to him, that gentle evening when his uncle had tried to have him slain? The blows on his head—had they hurt him more than he realized, or had it been due to the computer's own attempts to suppress the information? It was impossible to say, and meanwhile the old cyvu-toothed Lòras was sitting like a garbage-scavenger on his stolen, useless throne of the Valzar of old.

What use a Valzar's throne without a Valzar? With a man of greeds and passions, such a seat would prove only a moment's useless glory; and then a lifetime of hideous struggles . . .

Jamnar shook himself absently. Why was he now brooding about such matters? He tried to throw the gloom of his dark thoughts from him; but back they came, to settle on him like flies on an open wound beginning to fester.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"It is a trap," Hazund said calmly. "Set the litter down, gently, and come arm yourselves."

It was late evening a week after Valish Kadarnu's partial exorcism was reported to the Lord Elder of Rozuth; and Hazund was journeying home, alone in his litter. They had found the carcass of an old kaphal lying in the middle of a narrow street, and had turned aside down another—only to find two more dead kaphals, and the sound of gateways being opened with sharp creaks.

The eight litterbearers set down their load while the squad of six of Hai'jorth Nurab's mercenaries, detached by the Free Captain for this service, spread out around the litter with drawn swords.

Hazund stood up, knocked several pillows off the litter's seat, and hauled up on the seatbottom. Reaching inside, he brought out swords which the litterbearers grasped eagerly.

In the darkness there came a soft growl; and then there were other growls, and the men around the litter moved closer together involuntarily.

"Hunting-cats," said Hazund, calmly handing out weapons. "Called shaithols. Very dangerous, oh, my, yes. If there are more than one of them, we may none of us live."

Jamnar could tell there were three cats, one on either side of the street and one coming rapidly up the street from behind. There was no time to speak of it, however; with strange shrieks the shaithols bounded forward.

Phareth lay low on the horizon, barely above the low-lying roofs. In its red gleams Jamnar could see each of

the shaithols had found prey, and was rending it asunder to horrible manscreams.

With his hand on the last sword handed out by Hazund, Jamnar turned to the nearest cat and sought hunter's mind, unsuccessfully, even as he swung the blade at its dirty-orange fur.

As the cat fell away dead from his mangled prey Jamnar found himself wondering if it were simply Phareth's red-gleaming light that made the fur such an ugly ochre; and then he struggled again for hunter's mind as, with baleful shouts, a horde of armed men poured out of the building on the far side of the litter.

Jamnar ran lightly round to the back of the litter and slashed at the great cat there just as it raised itself from one guard to launch itself at another.

The shaithol fell writhing and snarling to the ground, biting at its almost-severed haunch, while Jamnar came to the third cat, just finishing its third kill. It reared and made to spring at Jamnar, but the northlander was already upon the beast, cutting straight at its demon eyes and splitting its skull asunder.

Three litterbearers were dead, and two of the mercenaries, and now the human assassins were upon Hazund and his nine surviving men. There seemed to be about a dozen of the enemy; each wore black, with a tiny patch of white to mark them safe from each other, and a nasty stink which Jamnar immediately guessed was to keep the shaithols off their allies. He struck at one of the patches, and his blade threw sparks as it hit armor.

He swung again at waistlevel, and there was a choked-off scream. "They wear armor only at the shoulders," he cried, and at the same moment slipped and fell heavily.

Stunned, he lay there a moment while the struggle continued around him. *Why should I kill men for a man who kills at whim?* he thought suddenly, then wondered to find himself in a kind of hunter's mind as he tried to get to his feet.

Up on one knee, head spinning, he found that Hazund's men had formed a tight fighting-circle, and that some of the would-be assassins, dismayed at the loss of the shaithols, were already running back down the dim street.

The circle changed to a line, and the mercenaries and litterbearers began driving the remaining assassins toward the two dead kaphals at the near end of the street—and the remaining assassins broke apart and melted away in the dimness. The fight was over.

"Three dead shaitols," said Hazund equitably. "Most remarkable. Shall we be on our way?" But his hand trembled as he sheathed his own sword.

His men looked round at each other; one helped Jamnar to his feet, still dazed.

"You killed three shaithols," the man said to him, awed, "without a scratch. You northlanders!" Then he turned hastily to stripping the corpses along with the others.

"What's that?" Hazund asked sharply. "Who slew those cats? Valzar? Come here. And not a wound on you, eh? Yes. Well, perhaps it's foolish of me to have such a fearsomely sturdy fightingman hauling at my litter. You should be one of my guards."

Jamnar looked into Hazund's small gleaming eyes and realized with a start that the man's fierce intensity was strangely akin to Valish Kadarnu's. The northlander frowned a moment in puzzlement.

Hazund laughed shortly. "You are cool of nerve, slave, to frown when your master proffers you an almost painless step upwards! It bespeaks an interesting frame of mind. Yes, by all means you must become one of my guards. It will be much easier to observe you under a variety of circumstances, to probe that icy frown. But come, come, it is late. We must be back. Up with the litter now. Enough corpse-plundering!"

At their master's harsh tones of command, Hazund's surviving guards and slaves ceased their swift picking over the bodies of the slain on both sides. The dead kaphals were dragged aside, and the soldiers took stations at the litterpoles alongside the slaves. Then the small party made its way at a trot through echoing, shadowy Khaldiriam streets.

In the next month, Jamnar trotted alongside Hazund's litter with a drawn sword in each hand and helped save Hazund three more times from small assassin-bands. Inevitably he began to learn more about Hazund's part in the life of Khaldiriam and the Flanage; for Hazund, it seemed, played games of power with many other players in each citystate.

Most of the information Jamnar gleaned was almost impossible to keep track of, especially since the references were so often uterly cryptic—a part of a name here, a hint of a particular ruler there, a trifle of lore. Life in the Flanage all seemed incredibly, and unnecessarily, complicated; and if it had not been the habit of the Lord Elder to speak freely around his slaves and guards, Jamnar would have paid no attention to it at all.

But he easily grasped why Hazund was the target of so many assassins; it was common enough, and the Lord Elder was obviously not disposed to be frightened by the attempts. So Jamnar was not surprised one afternoon when, guarding Ailaisha and Leliel as they traveled to a party through the broad avenues, men began dropping out of a large bothrau-tree as they passed under it.

It was a brief combat; Jamnar was attacking even before they had recovered from their falls, and the other litterguards, who had learned to attune themselves to the barbarian's quick instincts, were into the sharp fight with hardly a pause for the surprise the assassins had obviously planned on.

In minutes the remaining attackers fled down one of the avenues, leaving four dead behind; and the litter continued on its way.

When the party returned, Hazund rubbed his hands together with vigorous satisfaction. "Not so many this time, eh? Nor so brave? Our friends are perhaps starting to run low on funds for hiring calves for Rozuth butchers. Pharian's a bright lad, rescuing such valuable flotsam from the Zaldiger Sea! Events are shaping nicely, very nicely."

And that evening, while Jamnar lay on the straw pallet in his tiny slave's hut, there was a rustle of soft cloth and a faint scent of girl at the doorway.

"May I enter?" her voice said huskily.

It was the girl who had attempted to school him in slave-survival. She still wore the dark veil; but now she was dressed in the Tharadian style, one fair small breast prettily bared, legs also bare below her light green tunic.

"You have done well since coming here," she said, seating herself close at his side at his gesture of welcome. "Twice promoted in a mere two months, that is most unusual."

Jamnar shrugged and looked into her eyes. Their gazes locked for a long moment.

"I have decided," she said at last, her voice a trifle breathless, "that you deserve a reward for absorbing my lessons so well. Stand up."

Jamnar smiled slightly, but stood. The low thatched roof was only a handsbreadth above his head.

The girl came up off her feet and pressed herself warmly against him.

Not entirely surprised, he held her to him and looked down into her eyes again. The line of the veil sat under them, emphasizing their dark liquid depths.

"And the veil?" he said.

She hesitated, frowning.

"Well, then, where is he?" Hazund's voice said impa-

tiently from somewhere near the hut door. "The Captain and I cannot wait. We must be on our way or we shall not be back before Phareth sets."

The girl shrank away from Jamnar and looked frantically about the hut.

Then Hazund stood in the doorway, Hai'jorth Nurab behind him. "Ho!" he said jovially. "Our northlander has become as decadent as we are. I thought he was in training to become a saint. Come here, wench, let us see if you are fit for a mere slave and sworder, or—I said *here!*" he broke off sharply.

The girl had backed away from the Lord Elder of Rozuth until her back was pressed against a rough mud-brick wall, where she stood trembling, slowly shaking her head back and forth.

Hazund strode toward her and ripped off the veil in a motion.

It was Ailaisha.

Hazund stood motionless, jaw slightly agape, for a moment.

Then he slowly drew a richly-figured dagger from the jewel-encrusted scabbard at his waist; and Ailaisha gasped and then fell silent, staring in horror.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Do not do it," said Captain Nurab from the doorway, stepping forward and partway drawing his own sword.

But Hazund had turned away from his terrified daughter to Jamnar.

"Valzar," Hazund said in a soft whispering, "you have earned yourself an exquisitely painful death, yes; it may well take weeks. Tell me, lad. Are you happy?" And, incredibly, Hazund laughed lightly.

"Do not do it," Captain Nurab said again. "Hurt neither of them. You know I have an affection for your daughters—and I have a high respect for this man's fighting ability."

Hazund turned his head slightly in the captain's direction. "I do not see that it is your affair, though you may pardon Ailaisha if you wish. This is my slave, however, and I shall deal with him as I wish."

"No," said Captain Nurab. "I have need of men like this. You will sell him to me."

"I will not," said Hazund with a gentleness that gave Jamnar a chill in spite of himself. "I have need of him as well, for, after all, he is mine to toy with."

"Twenty krons—and, as you know, the Lord of Blood's personal authority to take whomsoever I wish into my company, at a fair price. Your personal risk, of course, should you choose to cross the king's implied desires."

Hazund turned slowly toward Nurab and stared at him for a time.

"So you too would cross me?" he said at last. "Would you, indeed? This may be an ill night for you and your Free Company, good Captain."

"All times may be ill times, my Lord Elder of Rozuth —for anyone."

Hazund sneered and turned back to Ailaisha. "Well, then, my trembling little one, and what of you once these brave *noblemen* leave, eh? Shall we not enjoy some hours with the implements in my private rooms, eh?" He spoke unevenly now; Jamnar was surprised to see the man begin to lose that selfcontrol he had never let slip in the past.

"You will not harm her, either, Rozuth," said the Captain calmly. "There are two of us here, after all."

"And after the two of you leave, eh? She will still be here. Shall I swear an oath to you?" He smiled, sneering; but his voice trembled.

"Not to harm her?" asked Nurab, chuckling humorlessly. "No. I have known you for some years. But I and this stalwart barbarian will return and gut you like a kaphal in the shambles if you do aught to her."

Hazund laughed as humorlessly as Nurab. "Will you?"

"Yes," said Jamnar suddenly, and took several paces toward him.

Hazund stepped back jerkily. "No, no," he said, "do not threaten me. I know you are a superb killer; no need to emphasize the point. Her I will not harm. You shall yet die in a sea of pain."

"Perhaps," said Jamnar. "Certainly *you* will, if you harm Ailaisha."

"I believe he understands," said Captain Nurab, grimly. "Let us be off, then, Valzar."

"A matter of twenty krons, eh?" said Hazund evenly.

Free Captain Hai'jorth Nurab solemnly counted out twenty large pieces of gold into Hazund's sweating palm.

"Kasul, called the Nimble, and at your service; bondsoldier to Nurab's Company these three years and more. One of these years I'll buy my blood back from the king's trackers, but until then . . . Ho, there—ale!"

Jamnar sat at a bench in the noisy inn, sipping at a leathern jack of Bythire wine and occasionally trying to remember what old Prosperon had said about it. He himself could not understand why anyone would take such harsh tasting, fuddling drinks, but everyone in Nurab's Company seemed to take the opportunity to visit an inn whenever they had an opportunity.

He had almost decided to leave, foregoing this pointless chance to grow more companionable with his new fellow bondsoldiers, when a slender figure in a dusty brown cape over soldier's rough leather sat down casually beside him, introducing himself.

A blowsy, surly-faced serving wench slammed a jack of foaming ale in front of Kasul the Nimble and stuck out one dirty palm.

Kasul placed a large copper coin on it with an exaggerated gesture of deference. "There, good Mrathna, and always be ready with more ale, correct? Served with your lovely smile?"

Mrathna glowered as she scurried off at another call.

"Torthnunon's Inn is not elegant," said Kasul with a chuckle, "but the servants here are marvelously good-natured. It is why I prefer it to all others. Ah, but you frown at my words; you find them perhaps paradoxical, is this not so? Do not fear; you will come to understand me—perhaps."

Jamnar smiled, conscious that by Flanage standards it was a rather grim smile. "As what you people call a barbarian, I was not approached with much friendliness while a slave, and I have hence come to understand very little since I was brought here. I am not sure that bothers me."

Kasul blinked, then chuckled. "You speak well for a barbarian northlander. Of course, though it is not generally realized, you people are not barbarians at all. You speak a patrician Standard, you are found in towns, you

live in relative peace much of the time, you grow much of your own food tilling the soil. So much I have gleaned over the years. You are perhaps nomads. Still, it makes no difference here. You will always be the barbarian in Khaldiriam."

Jamnar smiled his grim smile. "Yet I will not always be in Khaldiriam."

Kasul peered closer at him, then grinned. "Perhaps not, perhaps not. Still, I have heard of you—is there not a matter of a certain geas, and a lad who will die in agonies we dare not consider, should you depart without him?"

"You seem tolerably well informed about me," said Jamnar with some perplexity. "How does this happen?"

"I am Kasul the Nimble; and I know many, many things. Too many things, in point of fact, though I do not let that bother me. So you would let the boy die, then? And what of the Trackers?"

"I did not say I would let the boy die. And as for the Trackers, I will be wary till I find out what they are—and what they cannot do."

"They are technological," said Kasul, and Jamnar frowned at the unfamiliar word. "That is to say, they are about the only manifestations left in the Flanage of the old days of civilization before the war. They *called* it civilization. Well, and that means the Trackers are over five or six hundred years old. The trouble is, they show no signs of wearing out, for they still track and destroy their prey."

Kasul drained his tankard and slammed it on the table with a shout of "Ale!"

Mrathna set a fresh jack of ale in front of him, glaring at Jamnar because he was not drinking his wine, then moving on to another bench.

"And the Trackers' weaknesses?" asked Jamnar.

"Drink up, lad, drink up! And perhaps I can tell you something of interest about Trackers, one day," Kasul

said, taking a deep draft of ale. "Would you like to come with me in a small adventure this night before we return to quarters?"

It had been well past the middle of the night when Jamnar had become free to visit the inn for the first time since he came to Nurab's Company nine days ago. A succession of lances, sergeants, and lieutenants had spent the intervening time throughout each day, doing their best to completely exhaust Jamnar and a number of other new members of the company.

So Jamnar was tired, but he shrugged. "And what is adventure, in Khaldiriam?"

Kasul laughed. "Never fear; come along! It is time to be on our way if we are to accomplish anything!" He drained his ale and stood up.

Jamnar looked down at the jack of Bythire, shrugged again, and took another mouthful of it. Then he set it down with a frown.

But his insides burned rather pleasurably now, and he went out of the inn behind Kasul into the chill night air.

Phareth had set; the streets were dark. Without a moment's hesitation Kasul strode away.

After several blocks Kasul stopped suddenly, and, his voice low, said, "You walk as silently as I; good, you will do well. See yon high spiketopped wall? You must stand here by this tree after I go over the wall. I will be gone only a few minutes; should anyone come by during that time, you are drunk with wine and not worth paying attention to. If they seem to want to take an interest in you, you must make some slight continuous noise that will warn me to be cautious in my return. Now then, help me over the wall and on with the adventure!"

Jamnar looked at Kasul's face in the dimness, trying to judge what his words meant. Vaguely he thought of trying for hunter's mind, but the streets were deserted at this hour and it did not seem a time of any particular danger.

"Theft is uncommon in the Viadhash," he said softly, and wondered at his own calmness; but this was no land of any concern to him.

"Bah!" Kasul whispered. "This is Khaldiriam. The Flanage lands are built on theft and such devices!"

"How will you pass over the spikes?"

"My cloak is heavier than it perhaps looks," Kasul answered. "And I carry a vial of scent so that if there be guardcats, the shaithols will not care to come near me. And since they are silent beasts—except when leaping at their prey—they would not raise the alarm. No matter; will you help?"

Jamnar considered briefly; he owed nothing to Khaldiriam—yet nothing to Kasul, either.

"Come, come. I have visited such places a dozen times a month since I arrived here. There is nothing to it; I shall return in five minutes. Give me a boost upwards, that's all."

Jamnar sighed lightly and walked with Kasul to the wall, as high as two men. He allowed Kasul to climb onto his shoulders, and then with a swirl and flurry of his cloak the nimble one was gone.

Down the empty avenue now came the sound of distant kaphal hooves, and Jamnar felt a moment's pure thrill of fear.

He moved swiftly to the dark bulk of the treetrunk, but the distant clatter had already disappeared down a cross-street.

Stars were only intermittantly visible through heavy clouds and the tree's sparse leaves. He thought again of trying for hunter's mind, but his stomach glowed reassuringly and so he merely stood there in the silent cold, waiting.

CHAPTER NINE

"What did you take?" Jamnar asked curiously as they once more walked down the dark avenues, turning toward Nurab's Company at the first cross-street.

"Just what he took from me," said Kasul with a grin. "The younger brother of a pile of kaphal-guts fancies himself a businessman of affairs, able with impunity to swindle honest soldiers. Six gold krons is all I took, the same that he charged me but yestereve for a pair of wretched boots, supposed to be of tulivur, that burst asunder the first time I put them on this morning. You have proved yourself a true and constant friend of Kasul the Nimble this night, friend Valzar!"

"Your trust in a man you do not know is awesome, Kasul," Jamnar said, with his slight smile. "How, then, may I understand this strange matter?"

"Eyes, friend, your eyes, which hold steadily; most do not. You observe; others do not. And you speak less frequently than do most. But these are not the real reasons . . . for there is no real reason. Impulse; instinct. That is all. For in such ways as thievery and odd friendships I add interest to the otherwise incredibly boring life of a bondsoldier."

To the northeast of the great palace walls in the center of Khaldiriam was a large forested parkland. Here Nurab's Company, both its Free Companions and its bondsoldiers, five hundred sturdy professionals when at strength as now, trained in their stock of physical exercises and field maneuvers.

Jamnar found it not difficult to take orders he had once been accustomed to giving, for Nurab's men knew

what they were doing. "We are not in the business of dying," one burly scarlet-caped lieutenant said during one hot afternoon two weeks after Jamnar's arrival. "We leave that for the noblemen when they sally forth with us. Now let me see once more how quickly you can all disappear without a sound."

In moments the fifty men, who had been standing on a grassy knoll in the midst of the forest-park, had hid themselves in the surrounding trees and bushes.

"Well, then," Lieutenant Ghradhur said as he walked among the trees, "if you weren't all so noisy you might, perhaps, surprise a few timid, unwary amateurs. Ho, there, Valzar, where are you this time? Come out; let's show these incompetent wretches what the captain wants. Sell half of you back to slavery, that's what I'll tell the captain. Will *that* improve your skills?"

The lieutenant was standing beside a cluster of low shrubs; Jamnar rose silently from behind them, two arms'-lengths from Ghradhur's short scarlet cape as it fluttered slightly in the warm wind.

Ghradhur started perceptibly. Jamnar's face was impassive, however, and the lieutenant broke out into a broad grin.

"That earns you a chance at a red collar, a lance of ten men. Teach them to slip into the shadows the way you do —you won't have much time, I'll admit—and the collar is yours, both scarlet and grey."

Jamnar slapped palm on leather breastplate in acknowledgment of the implied order. A surprising leap of savage joy surged inside him at the chance to do something reminiscent of his past life; grey, the color of field command.

He quickly learned there was not time to teach them anything useful about hunter's mind, especially since the constant pressures of slave and soldier life kept him from it himself, more and more.

Three of his ten men were slowwitted, former slaves to

masters worse than Hazund; but they were fiercely strong. The remainder, seven sturdy slaves purchased as Jamnar had been, were far quicker to grasp Jamnar's sketchy instructions in woodsmanship.

Now in the midst of a new life of strain Jamnar began to gain a clearer idea of what was happening in Khaldir and the Flanage. Some things he knew but had not put together; others he learned for the first time, as the life of a lance in charge of ten placed him ever more and more in a position of having to know.

Nurab's Company had been in Athandur's employ for some five years. As there were some fifty free companies in the Flanage, and, currently, only thirty two separate citystates, Athandur's had been a reign of relative peace, for all that his bloody public executions kept bright the title of Lord of Blood that went to the man in the crimson throne of Khaldir.

In the past two months, however, King Athandur had begun accumulating what was a vast army, indeed. A hundred men and officers from Nurab's Company of five hundred had been detached to train specially-purchased slaves from scratch, as with Jamnar, and for three weeks a new Free Company had arrived in Khaldiriam each week. Rumor did not put a limit on further arrivals, while the trainees were regarded as either replacements-in-advance or as the nucleus of one or more new companies.

And there had not been a new company formed in the Flanage for two decades.

Hazund had been trying to pry information out of Captain Nurab for some time, relevant to the king's planning; interest everywhere now was beginning to rise. Which of the seven countries surrounding Khaldir would the Lord of Blood strike at? Or would the Flanage lands nearby take alarm, all or in part, at this imbalancing of power?

And . . . when?

"You are fortunate Sergeant Doorth still finds enjoyment in marching maneuvers," Kasul said dryly as he and Jamnar sat down in Torthnunon's Inn.

"I will try the ale tonight. I am afraid I find Bythire wine to be worse than promised, even after close study," said Jamnar, grinning briefly. "The sergeant was quite willing to understand that barbarians know nothing about close-order drill, which is true. My ten are fortunately capable of learning woodcraft, and your advice to begin by getting drunk with them has certainly helped them to overlook the fact that, to them, I know nothing *but* woodcraft!"

Kasul laughed, and Jamnar smiled although he was not quite certain what he said. Mrathna set down two foaming jacks of ale, and the two men drank deeply.

"What are you going to do about Lynor," said Kasul then, setting his ale down.

Jamnar frowned. "I do not know. If the company is sent outside the city. . . . well, I have been trying to see Captain Nurab for several days. Perhaps he could buy the lad from Pharian. If he joined the company, there would likely be no problem; there is always work to be done, and Lynor is fit enough though he is too young to bear arms."

"Look you now, talk is that we shall be called upon to leave Khaldiriam in a matter of weeks," said Kasul. "Affairs have grown very tense between Khaldir and Vraltor; Rallan of Vraltor is almost certain to attack Dalvar to gain the west bank of the river Dalvardava. Then, too, there are rumors that Chaitor Zun to the west plans to attack our ally Ruldoun."

Jamnar nodded and drank more ale. "I will do something, even if it is to steal the boy away. Pharian did not take his blood for the Trackers, so . . ."

Kasul studied him for a moment, then said, "Would you care to meet my fairest love of all, tonight? The legendary mistress of my heart that everyone in the com-

pany has heard me speak of, yet no one knows? You are a quiet enough man, Valzar; a sturdy man and quiet; and I crave to have my good taste at last approved, by one who will not spread the tale further, eh?" He drained his ale and stood up decisively, clapping Jamnar on the back.

Jamnar got up slowly, draining the rest of his jack of ale, and followed Kasul outside. Phareth was on the increase and high in the night sky.

They walked in silence for a long time. Jamnar found himself relaxing, absorbing the sounds and scents of the night. Life here was intense, compared to his own wintry northlands; he had begun getting as nervous and irritable as his fellows.

"We are here," said Kasul softly. "See, this limb over the wall? It is leafless and appears rotten, but it will hold. Then, once inside, follow me—and softly, for kindness' sake, with all your skill at it!"

Kasul jumped lightly upwards, grasping a limb and hauling himself into the tree.

Jamnar followed him up, and out along the limb.

Past the wall, there was a small drop to a low roof. The two men paused there after heavy thumps of arrival; but no sound of alarm had been raised. "These are but outbuildings," Kasul whispered. "Come along the roofs now to the main quarters, where we must make the dangerous entrance into the corridors."

And he darted lightfootedly along the low rooftops toward a distant looming shape.

"*Hold!*" whispered Jamnar urgently, just as they reached the main quarters.

Kasul halted instantly, turning a suddenly pale face this way and that, looking for the danger.

"Nay," said Jamnar, "no immediate peril. But this is the villa of the Rozuth!"

"Why, yes," said Kasul. "You came from a brief stay here, did you not? But what of it?"

"Nothing," said Jamnar, "save that I imagine Hazund would be delighted to slay me on sight."

"Well, and what would he do to me, who comes wooing his fair daughter Leliel, eh? Now come along, softly and quickly!"

CHAPTER TEN

"Kasul!" Leliel said eagerly. "It has been these two weeks since you thought to come see me! And the slave-prince! I shall call Ailaisha!" She turned away and went to a far door, talking briefly with a slave outside.

"Come along in, then, Valzar," said Kasul jovially. "I told you she would greet me with joy!"

Somewhat reluctantly Jamnar stepped through delicate pink hangings into the perfumed quarters. He was irritated with himself, especially so since he realized it was because it upset him to be here. These southern cityfolk had made him as nervous about times of peril as they themselves; for he could see that Kasul's confidence was in part bluster, not the calm lack of apprehension of a hunter.

"It is good to see you," said Leliel. "Our Rozuth men become very tiresome; Pharian is off in his quarters and Father is off plotting, as usual. King Athandur will have him boiled in his own blood yet, and if you think that would be a loss to any of us here—"

"Plots?" Kasul said, eyes lighting up. "I must know more of this, Leliel! Information is more valuable than gold at times."

Ailaisha entered Leliel's chambers, and gave a little shriek of joy at seeing Jamnar. "Valzar! How brave to come into the household of your greatest enemy! Do you come to the bidding of barbarian instincts, to win glory and defend your king?" Her eyes danced with amusement as she spoke; and Jamnar could not tell whether she meant the words or the amusement.

"The two of you may make sport of it," said Kasul

with a mock sternness, "but we *are* risking our lives to come here, and . . ."

"And not to see us," said Leliel, pouting. "Ailaisha, my dearest, let us say nothing. After all, we owe our father . . ."

"Nothing but our lives, and that was a long time past, and besides our mother did far more, if tales I hear are true," said Ailaisha. "Nay, my slave-prince makes his way upward in the Flanage, and I am pleased, yes, *my* slave-prince, and pleased *and* proud I am."

"Ohhhh," said Leliel disappointed, "I want Kasul here to talk to me; I want his outrageous lies again. And here you want to go advance their, their careers." Yet she did not seem to be greatly angered.

Suddenly Jamnar was angry, though he tried to conceal it. "Do I understand you propose to betray your own father?" he said, his voice quivering slightly.

"You have met him, have you not?" asked Ailaisha, mildly indignant, and turned away.

"In betraying his king he endangers his entire family, for I am certain the Lord of Blood would see us all into the hands of his executioner. And have you seen a public execution here? They take *hours*—for each man," said Leliel.

"And woman," Ailaisha whispered, paling.

Kasul placed a hand on Jamnar's shoulder a moment and said, "It is a particularly horrible sight; but it's the tradition. It goes along with being the Lord of Blood, which is a Khaldir epithet that some say predates the old wars themselves. Now, if we can persuade them to let us take advantage of this opportunity to rid the world of a man who betrays his land, his king, his family, and beats his slaves a good deal, too, why . . ." He ended up chuckling, and turned away as if to say that it was now decided.

"What of the other members of your family," Jamnar persisted. "Might they not hold other opinions?"

"Marath is eldest," said Ailaisha, "and plots as much as father; he is the heir, you see. Pharian hates father deeply, for such things as taking you from him, and others much like; besides, he need not fear greatly. He has a secret home elsewhere in Khaldiriam that even father knows nothing of. I suppose we would all be safe from father's wrath there, should anything go wrong. As for the others, they are but half-relations—born of healthy slavewomen. Their opinions do not count, though they too have little affection for the Lord Elder."

"Then it is settled, then?" Kasul prodded. "Ailaisha? Leliel? And Valzar, then?" He looked at each in turn as he said the name, and went to the next only at an answering nod.

Most reluctantly, Jamnar nodded. How astonishingly different these girls were than Shannai'sha—or Tashai'a. He stood there in a kind of shock for some moments, until the others called to them from the doorway.

He followed in a confused haste quite unlike him, trying to follow in memory the thread of what had happened.

After some minutes treading softly through silent corridors, they paused at an intersection; Leliel pointed at a door down the second hall. "There are half a dozen strange men in there with Father and Marath," she whispered. "Come in here."

They stepped inside the empty room she indicated, and shut the door carefully behind them.

"There's a ladder to the roof in here," Leliel continued. "The window ledges do not continue around, but you can hear them through their window from above unless it's closed. Then you'd have to climb down onto the single ledge there. Come along, we'll show you! Ailaisha and I know all the little hidden ways . . ." Up the rough ladder she climbed with a light laugh, and the others followed.

From the roof above, they could see the conspirators'

window was closed. Shadows on the courtyard beyond showed men walking about in the room, but only occasionally could they hear a briefly-raised voice, muffled and unintelligible.

The room beneath them was low-ceilinged; it was only a slight drop from the roof onto its narrow ledge.

Here, crouching precariously on the ledge, they could hear the words spoken inside the room, while Leliel and Ailaisha stayed above, keeping a sort of watch.

". . . can't have it every way," someone was saying.

"No, nor do I wish to," Hazund's voice said. "With our assassin from East Tharet now in his private service, we may be rid of Athandur whenever we wish—and I say the time has come. Our friends will simply have to take the event as it comes. Or do you not believe my information, Nemilion?"

"I would trust it more had you not so foolishly broken with Captain Nurab. There must have been much of interest occurring since then that he could have let you know about. What a foolish falling-out, Hazund!"

"It was the privileged matter of my daughter's body and a slave who—"

"May the green demons of Zhard rape your daughters, all of them! Curse you, Hazund, we're talking about the whole future of the Flanage! And let me tell you, it is hard for me, almost impossibly hard, in a few words, to believe Athandur is so foolish as to be planning an attack on *all* his neighbors! At the same time, you would even insist! Why, even King Rokhul the Black avoided attempting the impossible!"

"My dear Nemilion," Hazund said smoothly, his voice shaking only a trifle, "you may believe as you wish. But with a king's-table servant now in my pay, I shall not long await your credence. I have plans of my own for Khaldir and for those splendid Free Companies the Lord of Blood has so quietly and carefully acquired. You know *I* do not crave empery over the entire Flanage—it

would be far too much work for me, for one thing! And for another, I would use them to enforce what Athandur has always lacked the iron nerve for—the inexorable, and detailed, rule over the people of Khaldir. How lax a reign, after all; how much more interesting mine would be, with executions every day instead of once a week, and—"

A new voice, heavier, more solid and assured than Nemilion's, interrupted Hazund. "I say strike tomorrow and strike hard. With the king dead against no combatant, the chamberlains will make certain the nobility picks a successor quickly. The Lord Elder of Rozuth has the support of many Firebrands, we know; and enough of the Watchers are amenable to the combined bribes we can offer—"

"We have not the certainty," came a highpitched voice.

Hazund said loudly, "Tarchu, you will respect Larthan's right to speak; we will hear from you and Sallten in due time."

"Nonsense," said Tarchu brusquely. "There are many others who could combine to proffer bribes against us; and the new occupant of the Bloodjewel Throne—should your candidacy fail—might drive a nice bargain with High Prince Rallan. No, no, things must proceed much more slowly."

The harsh scrape of a heavy chair being slid back cut across Tarchu's words. "I do not know about Sallten nor Tarchu," said another rather highpitched new voice. "Cesh Vran says strike. We shall clear away the air in these lands as simply and directly as I clear the accursed smoke from this room. The sooner we are done with this and ruling things, the quicker we can find ourselves at ease wherever we wish, not fearful at every . . ."

Kasul scrambled away from the window as Jamnar reached upwards for the roof, but even as they moved the window was swung inward.

A pale sweating face with a selfconfident look leaned forward into the darkness and took a deep breath of fresh night air, even as he looked casually from one side of the ledge to the other—and yelled incoherently.

Ailaisha shrank back against Leliel as Jamnar's head came over the top; then in a moment Kasul was with them, while there was a scrambling inside the room below and shouts of "What?" "Spies?" "Where?" "Treason!" "Guards!"

As the four on the roof looked round to pick a direction to flee in, Kasul looked over the edge. Cesh Vran began climbing out the window, clumsily trying to draw his sword at the same time and shouting out into the courtyard for guards.

Then Leliel was signaling them to go back down the way they had come, and they were running back along the roof to the hole they had emerged from.

Abruptly Cesh Vran ceased his bellowing.

"Ha!" said Kasul triumphantly. "They are close to the avenue-walls here, and they don't want to rouse the streetwatch, after all! Sallten and Nemilion are two of Athandur's particular worst enemies among the Dalvar nobility. We will have a good chance to make our way over one of the walls . . ."

Down into the small dark room they descended; and Kasul opened the corridor door just slightly. Then he whispered to them, "Quick! They haven't yet opened their own door—they must be in a rare panic just now! It's our only real chance!"

And in a moment he was running down the hall, followed by the two girls and, some paces behind with drawn sword, Jamnar.

Round several corners they ran at full speed—then Kasul came to an abrupt halt.

"Wait—guards up ahead. Can we get to your quarters this other way? Then we can get to the back roofs and over the wall."

Leliel and Ailaisha both looked round frantically, then both pointed down another corridor. They darted in that direction—and a shout of alarm came from behind them.

"If we can get to the outside wall, I'll run for help," Leliel gasped.

"So will we," Kasul said with a grin and a hard breath, as they turned into another corridor, torches flickering calmly in their braziers as if a festival were about to begin.

"Into here," Leliel said, and they darted inside a room with heavy blue hangings over the doorway.

To their dismay they heard the clatter of booted feet above.

"Curse 'em," muttered Kasul, "they're on the roof. What's the quickest way from here to any wall? I'm lost."

"This is our slaves' personal resting-room during the day," said Ailaisha. "*We* do not whip them as father does."

"Out the window," said Jamnar. Torches gleamed in interrupted fits at other windows opening on the court-yard below; several men ran through the yard shouting confusedly at each other.

"It's a short drop," said Kasul. "Swing them down, Valzar, I hear them in the corridor outside!"

Jamnar helped Ailaisha over the sill and, holding her hands, let her down as far as he could; it seemed still almost a meter drop, but Ailaisha relinquished her grip and fell with a stunned gasp.

Moments later Leliel sprawled beside her; and then the two men were there helping them up.

"The outer provisioning-gate is through here," Leliel sobbed out, fighting for breath.

More slowly and cautiously they moved through one courtyard, then another, and along a wide open-arched hallway.

Abruptly a single guard carrying a lighted torch came

to a halt just as he darted out directly in front of them. Jamnar had the torch in his own hand in a moment and had cuffed the man into unconsciousness with a single blow to the back of his neck.

In the last courtyard, a large strawfilled cart stood near a gate.

"Locked!" said Leliel in a small horrified voice.

"Of course!" Ailaisha said, her own voice almost despairing.

"Steps up the inside of the wall!" said Kasul. "Hurry!"

Jamnar looked at the straw in the cart a moment, then pitched the torch into it. There was a flareup, and in moments the cart was entirely in flames.

The glare cast giant shadows ahead of them as they struggled hurriedly up the awkwardly narrow stairs; it picked out the line of rough stone steps up to a walkway behind ornamental crenelations a low story above the gate.

Peering down from the crenelations at the quiet avenue outside, Jamnar felt more than one twinge of dismay. There was no way to get the girls over the wall and to the ground safely, not here—and there was certainly no safety left within Rozuth walls!

Footsteps now were coming at them along the walkways on the walls, drawn from both sides by the flaming cart; while below in the courtyard a halfdozen more guards arrived, looking puzzledly around them.

"It would seem to me," said Kasul with a shrug, "that the only thing we have left is to go out of the world fighting against hopeless odds! Well, it's a better way than some I've heard of!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jamnar pointed to the courtyard and then along the wall; so they ran to their left along the walkway, out of sight of the burning courtyard before any guards below had seen them there.

In front of them they saw four figures running along the walkway in their direction.

"They don't realize yet we're coming at them," Kasul shouted back as he ran along in front. "Easy!"

Before the startled guards realized what had happened, Kasul had run directly into them and incontinently flung the first two screaming downward to the paves below.

Now the other two, their swords brought to the ready, stood uneasily almost side by side on the narrow ledge.

"Rozuth dogs!" Kasul howled, his own sword out and engaging them, pressing them back as they struggled awkwardly along the narrow way.

Shouts came from the wall behind Jamnar; he wheeled to face three more guards running along the narrow ledge toward them. Ailaisha and Leliel between him and Kasul, they awaited the new onslaught, even as there was a drumming sound from the avenue beyond the wall.

Jamnar hazarded a glance just before the guards reached him, and saw a troop of forty or fifty men on kaphals racing toward the tall fire behind Rozuth's provisioning-gate.

He smiled grimly at the guards . . . and pointed over the wall with his sword.

The men running towards him glanced in that direction—and halted in confusion.

"King's Guard!" someone shouted—and Jamnar and Kasul were left without antagonists.

"We should get quite a reward for this!" Kasul shouted at Jamnar in glee; but almost immediately his face became serious and he spoke quietly and forcefully to Leliel and Ailaisha. "Things will not be as they were for you, though since you aided the king's cause the estates will probably not be confiscated entirely away from your family—only from Hazund and Marath. But you will have the king's favor—this East Tharet assassin at work in the royal kitchens should really impress him!"

Ailaisha's face too was serious, though not unhappy; Leliel only looked stricken.

Jamnar broke into a grin. "Then these fancy-mad girls will be safe! And Lynor—I can surely obtain him from Pharian under the circumstances! Or if there is time, perchance another visit to the unmagician. Valish Kadarnu is perhaps wiser than he seems." He looked over the wall. "Perhaps we should speak to the captain of the Guard—they will be inside in a moment."

The King's Guard had been chopping away at the great iron nails that held the provisioning-gate locked on the other side.

"Hazund will be out through a bolthole immediately he learns the King's Guard has sprung his gates—with a chest of gold and jewels. But if the conspirators separated to search for us, ha!"

They hailed the captain of the Guards from the stairs as fifty men poured through the shattered gate and past the still violently-blazing cart.

"A plot on the king's life discovered!" Kasul shouted melodramatically, causing the captain to halt in astonishment.

"Dangerous enemies of the king," Ailaisha added quickly, to Jamnar's amazement. "Sallten and Nemilion of Dalvar! Larthen of Chaitor Zun! Search the entire estate immediately!"

At the name of these well-known enemies of the king, the captain turned away and began issuing orders rap-

idly; and the troop began separating for an orderly search.

"I'll warrant the king sees the great square filled within three days," Kasul said enthusiastically to Jamnar. "That is, if these stalwarts here do their proper work!"

Cesh Vran and Nemilion were executed at midday two days after their apprehension while trying to flee the Rozuth estates. The poisoner from East Tharet was also there on the platform above the throngs of commoners and soldiers. The other conspirators had fled with Hazund and his son, and were presumed in hiding somewhere within the city walls.

It was, as Kasul whispered to Jamnar as they stood at a place of honor in the front rank near the deed, a typically bloody affair, no more nor less horrible than all the others. This was perhaps the only consolation Athandur's victims had, that they were partaking in a ceremony as old as the title of Lord of Blood.

Jamnar saw dozens of implements of torture glowing redly; the fire was also heating a small cauldron of something emitting ghastly smells.

And inside a nearby glasswalled cage a number of small hissing and snapping creatures scurried and crawled. "From the rainforests to the southeast of the Tharets, beyond the Flanage," Kasul whispered. "I shall be glad of some ale when this is done!"

Jamnar nodded, and wished for hunter's mind as he stood with no great patience in the midday heat; already the three were screaming, and the six executioners were sweating with their exertions, while nearby on a throned dais held above the crowds by thirty slaves Athandur watched without a sign of any interest in the matter . . .

The screaming did not stop for a long time; it echoed out many times over the great wide plaza in front of the king's palace, echoed over the silent multitudes come to

watch, echoed over ranks and ranks of bondsoldiers and free companions.

When at last the howls faded away, the tall gaunt Athandur rose in his iridescent scarlet robes from the Bloodjewel-throne, carved from a single gem and, said legend, no other like it.

"Thus perish the enemies of Athandur and of Khaldir," said the king in a steady voice pitched to carry over the silent crowds. "The Lord of Blood once more makes known the penalty for conspiring against the good of the realm; thus it must ever be. Yet I would not have you, my people, creeping home with fearful trembling, wondering what next may befall and where, and by and for whose benefit.

"This day, then, let it be known that, after detailed private questioning of the late prisoners, I learned that troops of High Prince Rallan of Vraltor are even now moving towards the Dalvardava River—the most prized possession of my dear cousin, his ducal potency Kulmendur of Dalvar.

"Most foolishly, the High Prince has attacked the Duke my ally with but the Free Company of Rhakhhal to supplement his own private guards.

"Therefore I am ordering the Free Companies of Hai'jorth Nurab, Turtunnull, and Zagranda Lashvaer to move northwards to Dalvar's aid, at dawn tomorrow. The remainder of the companies at my disposal will move southwest, to the border of Chaitor Zun and Ruldoun, as this treason also touches on workings there.

"A new time has begun for Khaldiriam and for all Khaldir! Upon the return of my Free Companies, there shall be held a triumph, the first of the reign of Athandur, and like the legendary festivals of Allioth. All manner of amusements and pleasures shall be licensed then, and paid for by your king.

"Farewell till then, and may you pray heartily to the

hundred deities that our soldiers return in peace and safety!"

The surging roar of approval from the multitudes astonished Jamnar. The king's reasons had not seemed much like reasons to him; he could never have moved a tribe of the Viadhash into war with such a speech. But these strange people seemed to understand and approve.

"Ill fortune," Kasul muttered unhappily into his ear. "I had hoped for commendations by name in front of the Companies. *That* would have given me leverage to get my bond released. Ah, well, war has its spoils."

The king's dais was being borne away, swaying above the crowds toward the palace.

"And notice, Valzar, my swordbrother, how ambitious our good king is—not in conquest, but to call a Free Company his. He may find *his* Free Captains nodding rather stiffly at his orders, which will not please . . ."

"It pleases us very little, but there is little we can do at the moment." It was Captain Hai'jorth Nurab, standing directly behind them.

Kasul mock-winced before turning with Jamnar to salute their captain, but he paid little attention, pushing forward between the two.

"Well, come along. I have orders to receive from the king, and no doubt you do too or I would not have been told to bring you. Certainly he has cause enough to be grateful to you. On with you, on with you. You cannot keep a king waiting who is called the Lord of Blood—and who fancies he owns Free Companies!"

All of this was muttered angrily while the two hastened to keep up with him. Captain Nurab strode unheeding, brushing past anyone who chanced to be in his way, peasant, citizen, soldier, officer, or noble, without the slightest apology.

Ahead of them swayed the Bloodjewel Throne, being borne on its dais up a great ramp into the immense palace.

Then Free Captain Hai'jorth Nurab of Qantisius was striding through the great onyx pillars.

After him Kasul the Nimble of Telmarnar, bondsoldier and thief for pleasure, moved less confidently.

Last came the grey-eyed barbarian, crimson-collared Valzar the bondsoldier, called the slave-prince—and the pride with which he almost unconsciously walked was of a very conscious Lord Kan of the Viadhash oddly come incognito to visit fellow royalty . . .

CHAPTER TWELVE

"It was not built by the present dynasty," Captain Nurab said conversationally, his mood-shift taking the two bondsoldiers by surprise. The three were striding through great highroofed corridors.

The captain chuckled. "Nay, you could say it was not built in Khaldiriam, nor by the Khaldir people. For when it was built, the city was called Allioth. That was a thousand years ago and more, before the last great war tore down the old world and left us with this.

"Then it was this vast tomb was built, which some would call an enviable palace. *He* claims it a monument of his reign because he has remarbled portions that had long been in disarray . . ."

They neared a large red curtained doorway guarded by a dozen armed men on each side. The captain smiled. "Thus it is with most of the high pretentions of the Flanage lands! Look a bit into history, that is if you can find it, and today's glories generally turn out to be yesteryear's memorials."

Jamnar thought Athandur's palace resembled only too well the vast unpleasant castle-city of huQayal, from which he had ruled the northlands for a scant week and a half. It was still a mystery to him why anyone should choose to live in such bleak surroundings; but since he himself did not so choose, it seemed unimportant.

The curtain was drawn aside for them and they were ushered through.

"The presence chamber itself," murmured Kasul with approval. "Perhaps this runs a cut above my puny ambitions!"

The Bloodjewel Throne dominated the far end of the

large chamber, shimmering at the top of a dais ten steps high. On it sat the tall gaunt figure of the king, still clad in iridescent scarlet.

On the lower steps and throughout the chamber were courtiers and nobility in many-hued garments cut in every mode of the Flanage. Gems glittered everywhere, sparkling counterpoint to the constant low excited hum of conversation.

It was distinctly startling to see two rather plainlooking scarletcloaked men in soldier's leather making their way up the dais steps. Ahead of them climbed a chamberlain cloaked in heavy silver threads on deep black.

"Zagranda Lashvaer and Turtunnull," Kasul observed to Jamnar. "The chamberlain is Vithunvar, very rich and very corrupt."

Captain Nurab made his way through the nobility and courtiers with as little ceremony as in the central plaza.

Another silver-and-black-cloaked chamberlain met them at the foot of the dais. Above, they could hear the king, speaking in a richer deeper voice than the one he had used to the crowd.

"Moreover, Captain Turtunnull, no one should find it hard to believe I personally find such ceremonies distasteful. It is simply that they are necessary. Then too they benefit all who watch, for they can go home easier in their own minds, knowing themselves escaped from such a deal of dooms as I dealt today!" He chuckled. "I must have my court poet insert that in his epic of my reign." He chuckled again, then saw Nurab.

"Ah, Captain! And here are a sheaf of orders for you as well; my clerks were busily engrossing them during the day's festivities. Open them only after a day's quick-march northwards. Well, the decision to move came suddenly, after all. I trust you all will forgive me such short notice, but it is a soldier's life, is it not?"

Captain Nurab could not but bow humbly and accept the packet of orders from a third richly-cloaked cham-

berlain, while at a gesture of the king Turtunnull and Zagranda Lashvaer bowed and left the dais.

"And are these the lads who tracked our late acquaintances to their lair at the traitor Rozuth's estates, eh? The Nimble and the slave-prince." The king chuckled.

Kasul bowed immediately, Jamnar only after a moment when his eyes locked with Athandur's.

"Well, then, a purse for each of you, and your bonds released into free companionship—the standard contract, of course, and the crown will retain your bloodmarks for the Trackers. A mere matter of form, of course; I have everyone's bloodmark in my army, except of course for my captains."

Captain Nurab bowed rather stiffly at the king's words, while Jamnar realized the king had been talking softly; he allowed himself to be impressed at the force of Athandur's personality.

"As they helped you, I am permitting the Rozuth heirs to retain much of their estate; and I might be disposed to give you some of his goods when Hazund is finally captured and brought to my executioners. As for that amusing tale about the shaggypelted barbarian lad and his geas, he should not die solely because my orders remove him from you; you are to take him along, as waterboy or something.

Oh, and Captain Nurab, if these two do well in the coming campaign, I will finance their promotions to higher rank. As that would be taken as a sign of particular favor on my part, it means I am calling upon you two to show further resources in aiding what I intend to be, after all, to the mutal benefit of all of us."

The king made a languid sign to one of the chamberlains, who immediately indicated that the three soldiers had been dismissed. They bowed.

"Oh, by the way," King Athandur said gently, halting them after only a few steps, "on reading your orders you may find, certain unusual aspects to them. It will be a

most highly satisfactory campaign; good Captain, if you will but see them carried out with your usual meticulous care. Rest assured that these are matters of the most fundamental importance to Khaldir. High favor awaits the successful. Enough."

And he waved to a chamberlain at the foot of the dais. Several orange-clad noblemen of Lanastur, whose clashing green ribbons showed them ambassadors, began climbing the steps.

Jamnar knew Lanastur was the northwesternmost Flanage citystate, as distant as Qantisius from Khaldir; and the High Kan smiled his old grim smile a moment. Obviously it was as hard and boring to rule a tiny citystate here as it had been for Jamnar to rule his growing empire in the Viadhash.

As the three soldiers made their way back through the crowded presence chamber, Jamnar realized he was now smiling broadly. The king's boring work somehow made the twistings of his own destiny a trifle less forbidding.

Free Captain Hai'jorth Nurab strode up and down a small platform at one end of his company's large counsel-of-war tent. His anger and dismay were startling in their ferocity.

Below the platform sat Nurab's ten lieutenants—caped in grey rather than red, now that a campaign had begun. Their twenty sergeants were also there, in grey short capes half the length of the lieutenants', which were half the length of the captain's floor length cloak. Fortyfive of the fifty lances were also there, representing the remainder of the men, both free companions and bondsoldiers.

"I will not hide that I am disturbed at the orders I have just read. What is more, I am going to urge that the company's command here gathered take vote not to execute the commission!" And he sat down with a rather sardonic smile.

"He will let them shout as much as they want to while

he sits," Kasul told Jamnar, and grinned. "They know he will not answer them; he wishes to make his statement uninterrupted. Watch!"

"Refuse *Athandur's* commission?" It was Lieutenant Ghradhur, rising almost lazily to his feet and speaking quite calmly. "Do you have an estimate available on our chances of evading the Trackers? For when he learns of this, he would not hesitate to use the bloodmarks. It seems to me this difficulty should be made clear at the outset, lest persuasions blind us." And Ghradhur sat down.

"Rumor promises incredible loot!" shouted a young lance. "Isn't that our real business, after all? Why even argue about it!"

"He is a free companion," Kasul said to Jamnar. "They speak rather more boldly than most bondsoldiers can bring themselves to, despite the fact all words in counsel are high-privileged."

"Perhaps with our kaphals rested we might outrun the Trackers," said another lieutenant. "And who knows how many there are, after all these years? Perhaps a full company of five hundred such fighters as we could even defeat them! *Then* we could name a price for our services!"

The captain got to his feet, even while others were still trying to speak. After a moment they took note of this aberrant behavior and fell silent.

"To hasten your decision to let me speak at length, I shall point out that these orders promise after a successful campaign—and it seems well planned, for what it is—there will be booty enough and more, easily enough for each to buy his bonds free. That is, *all* of the bondsoldiers bivouacked out there, in all three companies. We are promised a legendary revel—with no enormities, however."

Jamnar had already learned this was the everpresent

problem with newer bondsoldiers; even free companions allowed themselves great savageries at times.

"He confuses me," said Jamnar frankly. "Kasul, why is he forever speaking on all sides of the question? He pretends to consider arguments, but he seems always to know what he will do, no matter what others say. Well, that is understandable, but . . ."

"But it's different from your northlander ways," said Kasul. "And then you blame me for analyzing everything—why these questions? He is about to speak again—quiet."

At the promise of loot, the men fell silent at last. They had not had an opportunity for it since hiring to Athandur five years ago and more.

"Very well, then. You have been told we go to aid Dalvar repulse an invasion from Vraltor. You are not surprised, of course; Athandur has been planning war with considerable openness these last months. The secret was, war with whom? I myself believed Chaitor Zun the obvious land for Khaldir expansion.

"Our orders are simple in outline. We move north to the banks of the Dalvardava. Kulmandur of Dalvar will have a defensive force in the vicinity, with which he intends, after joining with us, to attack High Prince Rallan of Vraltor.

"Rallan has hired Rhakhhal's Company and a private force of several hundred; Duke Kulmendur has perhaps three hundred men, but presumably fears not because we are stronger than Rallan.

"But—" and here Captain Nurab's voice failed a moment as he shook his head in amazement. "But here begins the charade!"

"For when we arrive, we are to attack not Rhakhhal, but the king's ally, Duke Kulmendur! And this is by prior arrangement with Rallan—not because of any pretended confessions the king might have spoken of at the execution!"

There was a certain stir at all this, but Kasul shrugged. "It is rather a neat switch, but it is not entirely unique. Why is he so worked and strained over it?"

The captain stopped his pacing and faced the assembly. "At this point we begin to collect our rewards. Dalvar is to become entirely appended as a part of Larger Khaldir, which will come into existence as a result of our actions. Our three companies and Rhakhhal's will have a chance at the general treasury—the duke's private wealth is of course reserved for Athandur. Cousins, they are; sisters marrying two deadly enemies; *you* know."

"Once the booty is gathered in and apportioned correctly," and here Captain Nurab paused for a deep breath, "I hand a notice of capture to Captain Rhakhhal, who will of course surrender immediately since we outnumber him about three to one. His men will be disarmed and escorted to the northeastern border of Dalvar —with their booty, of course. As I said, the king does not expect us to commit enormities. It is unlikely that the High Prince will summon the will to fight us with his own few hundred, but it would be no problem if he did.

"Then we move west to occupy Vraltoriam, looting its general treasury—reputed to be far vaster than the duke's —and when *that* is properly apportioned among only the three of our companies, we pause to await further orders.

"His additional information provided with the orders clearly indicate what King Athandur will then order us to do.

"We shall move back east through Dalvar, and then south against Xindurbil and Yuunn. This is no great surprise, nor will they provide very notable victories for us, since the king could have conquered them practically at any time within the past ten years.

"Thus the king intends to dispose of four of his seven neighbors, and engorge his army and his country with looted wealth. It will give the Lord of Blood the price of another halfdozen Free Companies, with which I am now

almost ready to believe he expects to capture the Flanage in its entirety. I am not one to glory in such days as these. I bring the matter to you under the Covenant of our company. It seems to me far beyond what we should be called upon to do, but I have no answer for the Trackers. We would have to examine Lieutenant Ghradhur's objections in considerable detail."

And Captain Nurab sat down, no longer smiling.

There was a stretch of comparative silence, till eventually Sergeant Doorth arose slowly.

"It is, of course, a notable treachery," Doorth said, delivering each word carefully. "But we as soldiers have a good idea of the amount of money that might come to us in the looting of treasuries such as those in Dalvariam and Vraltoriam. So inactive we have been that we would not, I think, sneer even at the thin treasuries of Yuunn or even Xindurbil. I do not argue with your feelings of distress, captain—but it is my opinion, as I think it is that of my companions, that the guilt lies upon Athandur. Who blames the axe for the fallen tree?"

Sergeant Doorth eased himself back onto his bench.

"For such rewards," said the brash young lance who had spoken before, "most of us would not care if Athandur wanted us to march through the deadlands to the Viadhash. I say again, what is there to argue about?"

Only two of Nurab's lieutenants spoke with him against accepting the commission, and a grizzled old sergeant squelched them.

"You speak nobly, sirs; but you are free-boughten. I have been fighting and soldiering in Free Companies for sixteen years and my bond weighs as heavily on me now as ever. Besides, who are you to pass up loot as rich as this?"

There was general approving laughter, and after that there was no question but that Nurab's Free Company would move north at quickmarch again in the morning. The other two companies would move with them; the lure of wealth was too great.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Athandur had planned well, if not with prescience then with prudence; for Duke Kulmendur of Dalvar unexpectedly proved to have hired a free company. Nevertheless he was taking the worst of preliminary skirmishes between his forces and High Prince Rallan's.

And hardly had Athandur's three companies been welcomed by the hardpressed Kulmendur when Rallan, seeing the new arrivals, launched his prearranged attack.

Kulmendur and his company turned their attention toward the attack—and within five minutes had been completely disarmed by their southern allies, who took them unawares and easily, and safely, from behind.

A scattering of bowshots had taken a few lives in each of the contending forces, but as Kasul pointed out to Jamnar it was less bloody than most engagements, even between the most careful captains—position being much of their warfare, and selfinterest never forgotten.

Afterwards Kulmendur sat stiffly on a camp chair, waiting the arrival of the High Prince Rallan and the victorious captains.

He did not accept their bows of greeting. "By such treachery you win the day, as has not been seen in the Flanage this hundred years."

"There have been many plots of late by lesser men," said Rallan, expansively pleased. "The time came round to show that kings may plot as well."

"So you will expand your title by absorbing part of my lands, eh? And shall I then retain my throne?"

"I do not know," Rallan said. "I must confer with Athandur at our leisure, now that it is done. We shall pass

onwards to Dalvariam, for a pleasant afternoon and evening."

"And, I trust, a sad morning," Kulmendur said, his face pale but his voice firm, while the captains began issuing orders to their officers, and men to depart the banks of the wide Dalvardava.

That evening in Kulmendur's ducal throne room were mingled the men of the counsels of all four free companies, with High Prince Rallan's handful of Vraltor nobility. By the ducal throne were ranged some dozen or so of Kulmendur's nobility. Torches flared in every niche, heightening the festival feeling of the victors, who had already divided Kulmendur's general treasury.

"Duke Kulmendur, High Prince Rallan, Captain Rhakhhal, I speak now for my king, though I would prefer not to—as perhaps you will understand, ser Rhakhhal, if you glance over this paper?"

The blackbearded Free Captain glanced at the High Prince Rallan, shrugged, and took the proffered sheet.

After a moment he looked up and said calmly, "We are permitted our spoils?"

"What? Permitted? What?" asked the High Prince, his languid mein transformed into confusion. "What is that paper? *What is that paper?*"

"I am afraid that your Free Company, ser Rhakhhal, has been disarmed by now, and will be sent to the borders of Eraphaln at sunup. The Lord of Blood especially directs me to ask you, Duke Kulmendur, to observe the completion of a cycle of history, the peaceful resolution of the ancient combat between Dalvar and Vraltor under the firm sway of Larger Khaldir. High Prince Rallan, you are in the power of King Athandur, and all your lands are to be annexed to his crown."

The High Prince Rallan stood whitefaced. "What is this?" he whispered. "Treachery, from you, Captain Nurab?"

"From Athandur," said Nurab impassively.

"Yes," said Rallan, his voice trembling. "May I have leave to take my life?"

Nurab shook his head solemnly. "I have nothing in my orders permitting it, but am commanded to bring you and Duke Kulmendur to Khaldiriam. I will inform the king of your request in my next dispatch, but . . ."

"I understand," said Rallan, and, although he was still pale, he smiled. "Kulmendur, I trust this has improved your evening?"

"I see we must look on this as a work of artistry, in its kind," said Kulmendur, breathing deeply. "I had thought Athandur a good workman at his treasons, a pleasure to watch—but I would have been wiser to retain my distance from its effects. We must share a glass of wine from time to time in our exiles, eh, my good High Prince?" The duke's smile curved his sad face oddly.

The looting of Vraltoriam's treasuries was done, five days after the double treachery, and a combined counsel of the three Free Companies were attending Captain Nurab's summary of new orders from Athandur.

"He says he has heard that Xindurbil and Yuunn, enraged at his peaceful settlement of the Dalvardava dispute, have combined their forces for an attack on Khaldiriam itself. We are therefore directed to move southeast at once, sacking where we wish if we meet resistance. This is a most unlikely tale he tells, but it is true we shall have to permit open sacking if we meet any resistance. Having each gained enough to buy his freedom ten times over, none of our men will be over-eager to throw themselves into the chaos and last nighttime of death. They will insist on continued reward, if they are to risk their own selves. Bah! We should have invaded Yuunn at the start and moved northwards; that would keep the fighting edge on our men."

"The king badly wants the colors of legitimacy, thus in time to obscure the treacherous origins of his great sway," said Turtunnull, grinning.

"Thus he clears four of his seven borders," said Zagranda Lashvaer in gruff wonderment. "The effect will be tremendous! This Larger Khaldir he speaks of—"

"Will be even larger than you realize," said Captain Nurab. "He has sent copies of dispatches from Parphadian and Thrimmur's Companies. . . ."

Here Captain Nurab paused and looked round at them all, a helpless look fading into, at last, a certain vast amusement.

"Well, in short, and with greater economy in that he used but two Free Companies," said Nurab at last, "allied with Ruldoun against Chaitor Zun, he has betrayed one against the other in a provoked conflict, and their treasuries are already in his hands, that not distributed to the men. And, of course, Parphadian and Thrimmur are even now marching north to Olnar."

And Captain Nurab sat down.

"*Seven* countries," whispered Zagranda Lashvaer. "He completes the circle round Khaldir. He wishes to sweep all away before him—Rokhul the Black is returned! Ah, well, it is something to be alive in such times!"

"Surely it is not possible?" drawled Turtunnull. "Did they not all know he planned treachery from the start?"

"They all did," said Zagranda Lashvaer. "His plans have taken him on past their games, that is all. The Lords of Blood have been content to rule Khaldir in more or less savage cruelty; no one expected him to be setting up play for an empire, after all these years of carefully small betrayals."

"And so within a handful of days our king captures seven lands," Turtunnull said. "Well then, let us be on with it. This may well be called the greatest treachery seen in the Flanage this hundred years! So I am for it!"

"March on!" said Zagranda Lashvaer, getting suddenly to his feet. "March on! We shall see a triumph when we return to Khaldiriam beyond imagining!"

Captain Nurab sat in his chair, and said nothing.

Poorer lands than their neighbors, Xindurbil and Yuunn had not hired Free Companies to defend them. But they maintained standing forces of some few hundreds nonetheless, and these were determined to make the passage of the army of the treacherous Lord of Blood as difficult as possible.

Through Xindurbil the three free companies swept all aside before them, so that there was little real fighting.

As they neared the border of Yuunn, after the unsatisfactory looting of Xindiam, the captains decided their men were likely to grow unsoldierly if kept successful yet untouched by warlike realities; and so the three companies were broken into eight equal smaller detachments under the senior of the four lieutenants in each group of almost 200.

The necessary coordination delayed their advance for a day; and so when Sergeant Doorth led his twenty two men along a path to attack the base of the Tower of Kadran, the defenders had been given time enough to gather more men and strengthen the fortifications.

Sergeant Doorth never really realized he had led his men into a trap, for he was slain almost immediately when a rock cast from an upper level of the tower drove itself through his skull.

Kasul, who had been given a lance's collar after their interview with the king, was not in his command long enough to be easy, and unskillfully allowed his ten men to be driven back by an enemy sortie of some thirty men that emerged with ferocious yells from the base of the tower.

But Jamnar stood firm and unshaken with his ten former slaves, and, each armed with an ordinary fightingman's sword and a long sturdy knife, for a time the eleven held the patch of broken ground before the tower.

Jamnar, calmer than he expected to be in battle, met enemy thrusts and turned them aside easily with the long knife he had chosen for his men from the company's ar-

mory, while Yuunn soldiers got in each other's way to get at him.

Presently, Kasul and his men, unpursued in the ferocity of the attack on Jamnar's men, turned and pressed back on the enemy, taking them somewhat unawares and relieving the pressure on the tired Jamnar and his men. After some time while the two sides hacked at each other, the Yuunns retreated away from the base of the tower while Kasul and his men began fighting their way inside it, where the defenders seemed determined to fight till each was dead.

Then Lynor, acting as a runner for Lieutenant Ghradhur, came upon the scene and immediately scrambled away for more men. These arriving on the scene, the remaining Yuunns outside the Tower of Xadran surrendered; and Kasul's men were relieved in their attacks on the fierce resistance continuing inside the tower. It had not been fifteen minutes since Sergeant Doorth had been struck by the rock.

Similar resistance was met elsewhere along the Yuunn border, and inwards toward Nniam. As a result the sacks in Yuunn were more numerous and far more savage than any in Xindurbil, especially so since there was even less to plunder here. Only a relatively few lieutenants bothered to try to keep order in these sacks; Jamnar was one, and he persuaded Kasul as well. Lieutenant Ghradhur did not seem to care particularly, one way or the other.

So for six days there were the smoky skies of war everywhere in the land of Yuunn; Nniam the capital had been set to the torch; and villages as well, and all fortifications that could be so treated in a short time were knocked to the ground. And then finally the army marched west, into Khaldiriam where the next day a weeklong Triumph was proclaimed, to climax on what ever thereafter was to be called Kingsday, the ninth of Saldduj, in the twenty second year of the reign of Athandur, Lord of Blood, King of Larger Khaldir.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"This being a hero of sorts," shouted Kasul at Jamnar, "it is rather well, is it not, Valzar?"

The five victorious Free Companies of the two expeditions had marched through the center of Khaldiriam for the seventh time in as many days, and were now marching to positions near the front of the great plaza. In the center of the plaza were some thirty thousand people of the city, slaves, citizens, lesser nobility, raised emotionally to fever pitch by the intense festivities of the past week.

Jamnar grinned back. Special detachments had brought the king's own captured treasures back in advance of the armies, and it was obvious that the king had lavished a noble portion of his gains on delighting the populace. Each day had feted a different company, followed by a day for the entire army, and, today, the king's own triumph.

Each day of the week, the king had personally purchased a keg of wine and a keg of ale in each of the city's inns, taverns, and alehouses, for the free use that day of the citizenry. The innkeepers were not entirely happy with this, for the king paid them only keg-prices, not drink-prices; and many of these innkeepers moaned that the celebrations were harder on them than on the king. No one else in the city minded this injustice a bit, however, which Jamnar recognized as another piece of good judgment on the king's part.

Captain Nurab, impressed with Lieutenant Ghradhur's report on the capture of the Tower of Xadran and with the restraint Jamnar and Kasul had put upon their men

during the lootings in Yuunn, had promoted them both to sergeant's capes on the road back to Khaldiriam.

Now once more the two stood in the front rank of their Free Company near the dais on which his litterbearers were raising King Athandur on the Bloodjewel Throne high above the multitudes.

The Lord of Blood stood in his crimson robes and addressed the crowd.

"Larger Khaldir has come into being, fully completed at the outset. I would not have attempted such a deed without knowing it could be completed in time. To defend the new borders of our land I have engaged five additional free companies and have been developing three more from beginning to end. There are now eleven companies in our service.

"For we *are* safe now. We are ready to be prosperous as never before.

"If we are attacked, we need fear nothing. If we are not attacked, we shall grow rich and peaceful by ourselves—which cannot help but prosper the whole Flanage!

"Let those here today who will carry my words to the powers of Old Akanar, to the Tharets and Iammirna and Talakon, hear my words well. We wish no more war, for that is not the path of prosperity. Our actions in the future will clearly demonstrate we wish no further war. Consider well, ye other lands.

"My people, it is but for you to disperse now and recreate yourselves at the games and taverns and the shows about the city retailing the famous stories of our recent victories! The golden days of our age are upon us!"

King Athandur raised his right hand high in sign that he was finished speaking; and a tremendous shouting of approval began reverberating over and over in the packed square.

Presently the king's litter was borne away from the center of the press, while the plaza echoed behind him

with cheers. Then when the king disappeared up the palace steps the throngs began dispersing in a confused manner.

Lynor was now beside Jamnar and Kasul. "Valzar was attacked by an assassin last night," he said to Kasul. "Did he tell you that?"

"Assassin! What happened? Why would—"

Jamnar raised a hand slightly. "Who, why, and other questions I cannot answer, though I know of one man who likely counts me his mortal enemy and who, I am told, recently escaped the clutches of the king's guard with a quantity of valuable gems."

"Then you do believe it was an assassin now," said Lynor, rather resentfully.

Jamnar smiled his brief smile. "I realize the question is as important to you as to me—but no more. Facing doom, we are equal. No, I am by no means certain it was what it seemed, but I shall be more cautious in the future."

"But what happened?" asked Kasul angrily.

"The man acted drunk, staggered against me. It was in a crowd. Some court carriages came thundering by, kaphals panting. Well, I was knocked into their path."

Kasul's look of astonished horror made Jamnar laugh. "It is not easy to run down a northlander! But I'll admit I barely dodged in time!"

Kasul's anger turned into a reflective frown. "Hazund, for certain. And he has as much reason to be rid of me; I believe I will take some precautions. I see not only the king has cause to deeply regret Hazund's escape. Was it not a brave speech of the king's?"

Now Jamnar frowned, till he realized Captain Nurab had come into earshot.

"In many lands of the Flanage," said the captain, waving his hand at the general confusion in the plaza, still half-filled with departing people, "those folk would be

taken in hand and made to depart in a coherent fashion. Yet I have even heard people complain about the harsh rule of the Lord of Blood."

"Indeed!" said Kasul, and now he was almost grinning. Jamnar realized the captain had merely taken an indirect way into what he really intended to speak of.

With no change in his conversational tone, Nurab continued. "The king will likely order us west very shortly. I believe he has kept us here only because he wanted to experience the Triumph. He enjoys the trumpets and the cheers and the banners flapping in the breeze.

"But there are rulers in Old Akanar, it seems, who are not entirely happy about the new era of peace here in Larger Khaldir. No doubt you are puzzled why I should speak of such matters to you; may I suggest you join me in my quarters this evening in, say, the third hour of nightwatch? More mystery, perhaps; and yet some answers?"

Captain Nurab began by tacking up a large map of the Flanage, with the new borders of Larger Khaldir freshly drawn in.

"You see that to the east there remains but one tier of states; these are weak, but their lands are undesirable. The King is unlikely to attack them and cause undue alarm. To the south is the tier of the Tharets, East and West. These are somewhat stronger, and besides they have ties with the Old Akanar powers. To the north are two tiers of states, and it is quite unlikely the king will do anything to alarm them further. An alliance of the northern tiers could destroy Larger Khaldir, and Athandur knows it.

"To the west, extending along both banks of the great Akanar River to the Zaldiger Sea, are the four richest countries of the Flanage—once united as Old Akanar, the dominating power of the Flanage for the first few hundred years after the old technological wars had laid waste to the whole continent of Kathram."

"These are simple lessons indeed," said Kasul.

"Yes," answered Captain Nurab, "and I hope you master them all. The Old Akanar powers are the four richest countries of the Flanage—Septaphesh and Telmarnar bordering on the Zaldiger Sea, Adranarpha and Belcamnaron bordering Chaitor Zun. They have warred and then made peace with each other in an endless shifting pattern of alliances for several lifetimes, the Flanage in miniature. They are all at peace now, Septaphesh and Telmarnar being currently the most prosperous since defeating Belcamnaron and Adranarpha a few years ago; but they are beginning to snarl at each other. This, no doubt, is one reason the king attacked when he did.

"Still, the western lands are not kinged by fools; they will recognize with no difficulty that Larger Khaldir, should it but remain as at present, would come near to being as powerful as two or three of them put together."

"It is most flattering to be told all this," began Kasul, pleasantly enough, but the captain interrupted him angrily.

"If there is flattery it is of Valzar. *You* are capable enough, but if not for him you would be content to remain a footsoldier the rest of your days."

"Not so long, I think," said Kasul in a soft lazy tone; but he did not interrupt Nurab again.

"Perhaps your impatience will be curbed somewhat when I tell you that a force of presently-undetermined size has been gathered together in Adranarpha, and is already moving cautiously into the western hills of Chaitor Zun? Ah, that takes your interest. Then perhaps you will permit me the remainder of my lecture?"

For a moment Jamnar became interested; he had been as bored as Kasul, though what the captain had been saying was far more familiar to Kasul. But Jamnar was bored with the captain's interesting insights, and was spending a great deal of his attention on adjusting to the idea of his new promotion. It was not exactly that he was impressed

by it; but his expectations in the months since he had arrived in Khaldiriam a slave by no means included his getting this far.

So the news of the invasion of Chaitor Zun took his interest at last, since it related to his own situation. But then Nurab began discussing how the affairs of citystates in the northwest Flanage affected matters. Jamnar tried briefly to follow it—Iammirna traditionally acted as a restraint on Septaphesh; the Princess of Iammirna was about to wed the second son of the ruling house of Talakon; the first son was suspected to be dying of some baleful rare disease; Septaphesh would have its attention drawn aside from Larger Khaldir. . . . on and on it went, incomprehensibly.

Though it related, at last, to himself again, Jamnar found it impossible to follow the developments or to remember them. But to his mild surprise Kasul was listening with intent fascination, nodding his head in a knowing manner Jamnar was surprised to find irritated him sharply.

"What it means," said Nurab after a great deal more of his intricate analysis, "is that there will be employment for soldiers in the Flanage, likely for years to come, if our king does not grow too careless in his manipulations." He chuckled grimly, then went on.

"And there are now scarcely forty Free Companies in the Flanage; this will not be enough. Nor will it satisfy Athandur even now, to have a fourth of them. I am certain he thinks only too often and too clearly of the other thirty, for they might somehow all be bought for use against him before he can afford the price to make him finally secure."

Nurab chuckled again. "Secure! Well, that is why he is so busily raising new companies from direct volunteers, healthy bondslaves, and, now, modest levys from the new provinces."

He looked at the two men in scarlet short capes, and

fell silent for a time, so that slowly their attention became more fully focused on what he was about to say.

"These new companies would not be easy to command even for an experienced man, nor would any present Free Captain wish to exchange his own company for leading such a motley horde into battle, not until the men had been trained together for a year at least. That is, if they are to fight against *real* Free Companies."

Kasul cocked his head and rubbed his fingers idly against the scarlet cords around his neck. "I, for one," he said, more silkily languid than ever, "have come across enough gold pieces in the past few weeks to keep me contented for a few years; and mayhap I found a few gems that might see me through a decade or two in, say, Lanastur. A hut in the willowpine forests . . ."

Captain Nurab looked at Kasul in silence for a time, but the latter did not grow greatly abashed.

"We have all," said the captain, with a certain gentle sarcasm, "come away from the first Campaign rich enough to buy us ease for a considerable time, far from the troubles of the military life. But do you think the king is interested in our desires? Do you forget your bloodmark in the king's hands?"

"No," said Kasul quietly.

"Neither does Athandur," said Nurab. "He well knows he is in danger from outside attack from now on, and will wish to keep his army. Money will not help him; you have enough to free yourselves with already.

"No, with the Trackers at his beck he can keep you at work. And he knows no captain will vountarily leave his men. So he has us in a sort of vise, and he has pinched us once, and thrice more, and then some. He took twenty percent of the men out of our five original companies here; we stormed long at him, or he would have taken full half. These were made the centers of new companies, though I hardly think the term for these will be *free* company. Slaves and levys, four to one. Impossible.

"Well, I'll warrant he plans to have them ready, or some of them, as soon after this Chaitor Zun campaign as possible. That, in case you are still puzzling, is why I have told you all these intricate matters. If you do well on this next campaign you may find yourselves promoted once more. The new companies need leaders; would you fancy yourselves lieutenants?"

"No reason but that?" asked Kasul. "Really, my dear captain . . ."

The captain smiled, rather tiredly as Jamnar thought. "Naturally I should like to retain some influence on men who may go elsewhere. To be a successful captain of free companions one must always know a great deal more than those around you think you do. So I give you information at the first, before you ask, so that you may take better advantage of the opportunities that may arise.

"You understand," and here the captain smiled again, more warmly, "I have no hold over you, should you depart, nor do I imply one. You are both unusual and interesting men, each in your own way. Should I gain anything from you later it will be a pure gain, not a reward. Ideally there should be much more common understanding between the captains, but in practice understanding is limited to a matter of traditions of warfare—if you confront another and your position is obviously inferior, you do not cause everyone a lot of bother and get a lot of good men killed trying to argue about it with swords. It is unfortunate that kings and princes do not accept even this much tradition, but that must be because the world has not yet perfected itself, eh?"

Jamnar did not grasp everything; nonetheless he understood, and he smiled his old brief smile, grimly.

After all, he thought, it was not his business to argue with the captain that if the kings abode by reasonable traditions there would be no work for the free companies. To point it out would be the Flanage way; yet the captain surely knew it.

But even free captains, it seemed, talked nonsense on occasion; it was the universal Flanage custom to speak in order to enjoy the sound of one's own words.

"Enough of this," Captain Nurab said suddenly. "We had best make use of the time; orders might come at any moment. To your beds and women, lads, we march off soon enough!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jamnar and Kasul rode at the head of forty seven men, while Lieutenant Ghradhur rode silently beside them for the most part.

"My good sergeants," he had told them, "I expect to do almost nothing during this campaign, and under orders to boot. We hear our specific instructions at the border of Chaitor Zun."

Now they had come two days' march in one, thanks to the herds of kaphals Athandur had distributed among Nurab and Turtunnull's Free Companies along with their preliminary orders to move west.

It amounted to about one kaphal for every two men; and since this was their normal carrying-capacity, travel time was cut. These kaphals were, however, much more docile and lazy than those in the Viadhash.

"Why have you never trained these beasts for fighting?" asked Jamnar, as his kaphal ambled along beside the other two.

"We are rather tradition-minded," said Lieutenant Ghradhur with his sour smile. "And it had been far too long since the plagues."

At Jamnar's puzzlement, Kasul explained. "There were no kaphals in the Flanage in all the hundreds of years since the old wars died away in their own wreckage. As I understand it, men tried to bring them up many times from the south and east, but they always died soon after arriving. Later the weather shifted a little and everything there became either dry or swampy. Past East Tharet stretches a vast impenetrable rainforest, who knows how far? And deserts further to the west . . . well, kaphals came back thirty years ago, and they stayed alive, and

thrived. They are not well suited for war, being far slower than those our old stories tell of, and the captains have not tried very vigorously to breed and train them up for war."

"They are good for transport," said Ghradhur, and fell silent again.

"But what did you use for transport before the kaphals returned?" Jamnar persisted.

"A sickly beast by comparison, and the return of the kaphal has already driven them from much of the Flanage," said Kasul. "Some called them steds, others mulitos; I have heard they are not native to this world and never adapted as humans did. Or perhaps the plagues weakened them."

When the two companies reached the border of Chaitor Zun they halted, and Athandur's campaign orders were read.

The king, said the orders, wanted Adranarpha and the other Old Akanar powers to know his intentions were to do no more than to protect Larger Khaldir. He did not wish to affright Old Akanar by dealing Adranarpha a savage blow, though all now must know he had the strength for it.

Hence the two companies were to split up into groups no larger than fifty; no larger units were to offer battle, and sergeants and lances were to be given as much opportunity as possible to show independent judgment.

There were to be absolutely no attempts to inflict major defeats on the enemy by combining more than fifty men against them, though it was perfectly all right for the smaller units to take the chance of offering battle. And, the king pointed out, future promotions in the army of Larger Khaldir might well depend to a considerable extent on the combination of restraint and initiative shown by the men engaged in this, the Second Campaign for the glory of Larger Khaldir and their dread Lord of Blood, Aldamar the Great in Khaldiriam. . . .

These orders intimidated the less stalwart, and delighted the more daring, especially when news from Athandur's regent in Chaitoriam told of some six hundred men come from Adranarpha. Many fortifications to the west of Chaitoriam had been occupied by small numbers of these invaders, and the rest were roaming the land in smaller units, seeking out Khaldir outposts and reducing them.

Chaitoriam itself was safe and free from siege; there all urgent messages were to be sent, should a greater invasion threaten from Adranarpha or Belcamnaron.

As Kasul, in a kind of hesitation, had told Jamnar he would take his own sergeant's twenty where Jamnar took his, and since Lieutenant Ghradhur had said he himself would issue no orders whatsoever to either of them, Jamnar led his and Kasul's men for four days' steady march to the west.

Not until they neared the border of Adranarpha did they see enemy soldiers, and when at last they did it was a mere halfdozen that scurried away at the approach of a superior force.

But Jamnar sent men in pursuit, and captured two of the Adranarphans, who told of a force that had taken a number of small strongholds to the north.

"It would seem the king's judgment is sound," observed Kasul. "Those in Old Akanar are not so excited as the establishment of Larger Khaldir might have justified, since they send such a tentative thrust at the king. And I am just as happy, on balance. Septaphesh, for example, has three of the finest Free Companies under permanent contract, and has for these eleven years. Should they have been ordered hence, we would have had an exciting time of it!" He shook his head. "Too exciting."

"I think we might try recapturing some of those strongholds they speak of," said Jamnar. "Haqa Di'n is only a short march north."

Kasul frowned. "Like as not we could return safely to

Khaldir without undertaking anything so risky, and return without blame as well. As you know, Athandur does not wish us to make Adranarpha and the rest of Old Akanar unhappy."

"You are a strange man," observed Jamnar, "and you do not understand me any more than I you. To me it seems obvious I must make my way forward in the Free Companies, if there is a way there for me. I know of no other means I can use here to return me eventually to my people, my land in the north. Once, and not long ago, I was only a slave. Yet I had the same desire—if not so many words!" He ended chuckling at himself.

Kasul only shrugged lightly. "Now I am from Telmarnar, at my first of things—though I will thank you not to repeat such information to anyone else. At any rate, I could spend this entire campaign trying to think of a reason to return there, and would not find any. What is a homeland, after all? It is the place you started. Return when you're ready to die, perhaps; that is what *I* say."

The quick end was that they marched north to the village of Haqa, reaching it by early afternoon.

The strongpoint Haqa Di'n squatted above a low knoll just north of the city; and Jamnar took care his men kept well out of view of it. Beyond the knoll a high cliff loomed near a swiftflowing river, while a broad track ran southwards between cliff and river. Haqa Di'n commanded this, and another broad track running from east to west, fording the river nearby. In ordinary times there would have been traffic constantly moving along these roadways.

Nothing moved now, however.

"Been as much a plague to us as others I could name," said a querulous headman of the village; Jamnar's scouts had brought him from Haqa to the grove of bothrau trees where the main body of men waited.

"Would you see them out and us gone?" asked Jamnar.

"How many are there, and what is the rank and temper of their leader?"

"Not more than twenty; there were twenty four at the start but some left, messengering no doubt. Not too many for you, but the walls are strong and three meters tall. Night's the time soldiers usually pick to attack the Di'n."

"Nighttime's a bitter soldier's death," said Kasul, frowning.

"Their leader?" Jamnar asked the headman insistently.

"A Telmarnar fop, Kethnon by name. Spoke like a fool and was not much liked by his men. They seemed illcontented, and were from all Old Akanar. Not regular soldiery at all, not judging by Free Companies, no."

The headman fell silent; Jamnar said nothing, but turned somewhat and looked almost idly at the bothrau trees in the grove. In these warmer southlands they grew much taller and straighter than in the Viadhash; yet fyzur did not seem to grow here at all.

When Jamnar looked back at the headman, he realized everyone had been holding silence. They were waiting for him to speak, waiting for his plan.

"Do you have bows? Here in Haqa, I mean?" Jamnar asked the man with no real forethought.

The villager frowned at him. "We are not a fighting-folk, captain."

Jamnar frowned back at him. "These hills must have bowshot game; come, come, man, I'm not planning to press your people into our service. I'll borrow their bows only—long enough to discomfort those at the Di'n. Perhaps a bit longer, if the tactic is successful.

The headman stared sullenly at Jamnar for a time. "Yes, there are bows in Haqa. We shall want some of your famous coins of victory for the lending of them, though."

Now Jamnar grinned. "A kron a bow, the bows to be

returned when we're done with them. Bring them here—and in secrecy, or the whole thing's useless."

Gold parley-pennon flapping smartly in the afternoon breeze, Jamnar, Kasul, and Lieutenant Ghradhur led their forty seven men over a low rise. Half marched; half rode kaphals.

The troop halted, a long bowshot from the fortification, and the three leaders rose slowly forward till they were within a dozen paces of the small, heavytimbered gate of Haqa Di'n.

There they waited for some small time. Finally the gate opened and a short plump figure looked out hesitantly for a moment.

Then he walked out into the sunlight.

"Kethnon," said the portly Telmarnarian, his face pinched and unhappy with the sudden problems of war.

Lieutenant Ghradhur waved his hand negligently toward Jamnar. "My sergeant will speak for me, ser Kethnon."

"Valzar, of Athandur's Bowmen," Jamnar said gravely. "We can accept your surrender now, if you wish; the main forces will not arrive for at least some few hours. It would make your departure much simpler."

"*Surrender?*" said Kethnon, trying to sound as if the idea offended him deeply. "Main forces?" he said more weakly, after Jamnar continued to regard him in silence. "Mounted bowmen? King Endrukarn said he did not think your Lord of Blood would dare defend such treacherously-gained lands—he told us that; he promised us that."

"Very well, Endrukarn was wrong. Five hundred of us are marching up to the western road, here, fresh from the conquest of Vraltor Dalvar, Xindurbil, and Yuunn. Think you they will take long overrunning your position—and slaying you all for offering resistance? Come along, now, we offer fairer terms than I'll warrant you expect." Jamnar smiled.

Kethnon cleared his throat nervously. "I . . . I am ordered also not to throw my force away on foolish moves."

"We are not tyrants," Jamnar said encouragingly, "but only soldiers doing our simple duty—you as well as we. When a force is certainly doomed, eh? as yours is? why should it not avoid that doom? Such is the custom among professionals."

"What . . . what, perchance, are the terms you offer?"

"Ah." Now Jamnar spoke as if he had no real further interest in the matter at all. "Your men will be disarmed and released at the Belcamnaron border. You and any other men of rank with you must accompany us a few days, but you will be freed then. We are not tyrants, as I said. Will you accept the terms?"

Kethnon brightened as Jamnar spoke. "Very well, on those terms I am prepared to surrender. I have a goodly-handed clerk within, to inscribe the specific terms for signing."

Jamnar nodded. "Good. But let us be about it, then. My men and I wish to reach Hanar Di'n before sundown, else we will be reached by the company. Then too, if the company arrives and your men still with weapons in their hands, difficulties might follow . . ."

Kethnon paled again. "Well, then. Well, then. I'll fetch my clerk." He turned and scurried inside the fortification.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When Jamnar rode to the gate of Hanar Di'n, he had Kethnon of Telmarnar as unhappy fourth to his side of the new parley. So Jamnar's tale to the commander of Hanar Di'n, a courtier of Septaphesh and even less secure in his sense of command than Kethnon, found easy acceptance, and twenty eight more disarmed men were sent southwest to Belcamnaron.

Thus for the next week Jamnar led his mock-archers to the north, taking strongpoint after strongpoint by the same straightforward ruse.

"You have captured six now," said Lieutenant Ghradhur, as they waited the return of Lynor from Chaitoriam with messages. "They could each have been easily defended against such a small force, yet you have not lost a single man—nor a single piece of equipment, even an arrow, for that matter. It is rather nicely done, I must admit, even though I am not sure it can be done—nor, since it now has been done, why it wasn't done many times in the past."

"Perhaps it has been," said Jamnar. "After all, when princes of the Flanage can be swindled out of their lands by a clever lie or two and a modest show of force, there is obviously room for others to practice the cozening trade!"

"King Endrukarn's attitude has certainly helped," observed Kasul. "Though I think your technique might well have worked in any case. In any case, the Lord of Blood should be pleased at what we have learned about Old Akanar's reactions. It is pleasant to see all sides to a dispute taking the same cautious approach."

"It is very human of Endrukarn," said Jamnar wryly.

"The four Old Akanar powers decide to send a small force to Chaitor Zun to test Athandur's reactions. Athandur reacts by sending men to Chaitor Zun with very restrained orders. Endrukarn is told to supply the forces, scrapes up what he can, not wishing to send either of the Free Companies he has recently hired—and sets such useless nobility of the other three lands to lead as happened to be in Narpham at the time. A great honor for them!"

Jamnar shook his head, smiling wryly again; but more because he wondered why he was rattling on with such a flood of half-right words.

"It certainly made Kethnon and the others timid!" said Kasul.

"They must have been afraid from the start," Jamnar agreed. "Athandur's conquests, after all, have been quite impressive. Kethnon and these others could not be as philosophical as their kings in the safety of their capitals." Then Jamnar laughed outright. "Scowling at them helped, too!"

"I beg you not to make the mistake of thinking that all Telmarnarians are cut from such soft dough as Kethnon!" said Kasul with a grin. "They are not all as timid, else the land would not be so rich and powerful."

At that point Lynor rode up on a somewhat less lethargic kaphal than the average. "Orders to return to Chaitoriam and wait further orders there," he called, and Jamnar nodded.

"I must release our courtier-warriors, then," he said. "Kasul, if the captain has sent us any of his customary reflections on the implications of everything that has lately happened, study it well and explain to me whatever is important. I must go explain my trickery and give them the impression King Athandur wishes them to transmit to Endrukarn."

When Jamnar explained there had never been but the fifty men, with only seven true bowmen among them, Kethnon merely looked coldly at him.

"Do you think we have not at last figured it out? We have faced reality and its implications, and to save our reputations from total disaster we are agreed to speak of your skill in these . . . matters, a skill sufficient to talk fish from the stream and convince Rokhul the Black to fly. Ballads will likely be composed on the topic, scurrilous ones no doubt—but if *we* hire a few to be composed they will emphasize our part less and yours more. Your career will no doubt continue to advance; you have the politician's skill at gulling."

"Then you should tell Endrukarn also," said Jamnar, "that he is safe from Khaldir invasions from Chaitor Zun, for all our victories, you see, were small ones. We did not seek destruction of the forces that opposed us; only their neutralization."

"Very professional," said Kethnon, still chilly.

"Very professional," agreed Jamnar calmly.

"Well, the king need not fear fifty men led by one clever northlander. Why do you pretend that the one in lieutenant's garb is the leader? It seems a curiously unnecessary modesty."

"I *am* only a sergeant. If the lieutenant had led us, we would have cleared out the whole western quarter. It is but another proof of our king's pacific intentions."

"Yes," said Kethnon, but dubiously.

The results of the second campaign had been, in two weeks, sharp defeats of the Adranarphan forces in twenty nine of thirty four engagements, which was very pleasing to King Athandur; routine patroling of Chaitor Zun was to continue under the same orders, and the heroes Valzar and Kasul were by personal order of the king to accompany Nurab's next dispatches back to Khaldiriam.

Now the two stood again on the dais in the presence chamber of the Lord of Blood; those who had been near the royal Athandur drifted out of casual earshot.

Athandur studied them for a long moment; then he pointed one long finger at Jamnar.

"You shall be Free Captain Valzar of Larger Khaldir, and this nimble one may accompany you as sergeant or lieutenant, as you wish. You will have about a hundred experienced men; the other four hundred have been training under them for several months—marching, exercises, toughening-up. They are slaves and levys; I do not expect you to have them performing as capably as Turtunnull's Company, or Nurab's. Nonetheless they should know how to hold fast in battle, and how to obey orders inbetweentimes.

"After you have had a week or two to familiarize yourself with your company, you shall have orders to the Marches of Ruldoun, hard by the Belcamnaron borders. Raiders have been filtering over, and I have no doubt you will spend many tedious months tracking them down the whiles you attempt to turn your unlikely horde into an efficient fighting force.

"I am told," he continued conversationally, "you understand the nature of command as if instinctively, and I am not at all certain about instinct. Were you not perhaps a man of some consequence in the Viadhash? I must send an expedition there; but that is for the distant future."

He spoke as if of matters of no consequence; but his eyes were always on his new Free Captain.

Jamnar stood impassive, but wondering if he had already picked up the southern habit of showing one's emotions.

Kasul nudged him sharply; the king, should he engage in conversation, must be answered conversationally. It would be a serious breech of court etiquette not to.

"Nay," said Jamnar, and "sire," he added after a moment. "I did nothing of any particular importance in the Viadhash; being but a younger son of a younger son, I had little more to do, most of my life, than tend kaphals

and track game silently through the wilderness. I was called a hunter."

He had not meant to say that, and felt sudden alarm. He was too talkative a guest of this silky-dangerous Lord of Blood.

Athandur merely nodded. "Yet you take command of men and lead them safely—and successfully—in battle. Is it a gift of barbarians, then? Can they school their civilized cousins? I really must give more thought to that northern expedition. . . ."

This time Jamnar remained in control, impassive. "It is a land sparse of riches, sire. There is little gold, few gems; for most of the things of life we barter directly. The earth grows good crops, but only here and there, enough to support those who live there now—and already there are enough. Invaders would likely find a harsh climate and a folk with very little but a great determination to hold whatever life has left them."

"You speak forthright advice to a king," mused Athandur with a faint smile. "Do not invade this land; that risk is a poor one for you; perhaps you should do otherwise than you intend. Excellent, excellent, Captain Valzar! I do not mind the truth—when it *is* spoken to me."

Jamnar, puzzled at the thrust of the king's oblique words, said nothing.

Athandur's voice took a petulant tone. "You make a poor courtier, not to follow your king's wit where it leads. Let me school you. I meant a play on the telling of truth, namely that it is an excellent thing for kings, but a poor one for his subjects. In other words you must keep true counsels to yourself—and to me. May you prosper in my employ."

Athandur made a gesture of dismissal and the two men bowed. A chamberlain led a spangled fop of Olnar past them to the personal presence of the ruler, as they left that presence in search of Valzar's Company.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The company Jamnar took over that same evening had been training for several months under lieutenants and sergeants taken from the many Free Companies now in the king's service. They could march, follow the routine orders, and had begun to learn how to endure the military life. There were, however, no organized units of bowmen; no Free Company had been willing to weaken itself in that manner, no matter what threats King Athandur had made darkly to them.

He was briefly surprised to find that most of the men in his new Company were awed and delighted to have him as captain. The capture of six Chaitor Zun strongpoints and over 200 men, wasting not one life of his mere 50, was the essence of what Free Companies strove for, and these newcomers knew it as well as any.

Not that it was easy for him to continue their training, since without access to Inzu's memories Jamnar's knowledge of military theory was not extensive. But most of his lieutenants and sergeants were reasonably experienced, and Jamnar hardly needed to emphasize his personal desire that his men be trained in whatever ways would increase their chances of surviving actual combat.

It also did not help that the new prosperity of Khaldiriam had made life cheap. Half the slaves in the seven conquered territories had been confiscated, half of these going to Athandur, half for distribution among the citizens of Khaldir. As a result there was burgeoning a new way of life, of pleasure, of relaxation, and of general recreation.

And life had become cheap.

This Jamnar discovered when he checked reports of a

constant drain of men slain and wounded in tavern brawls and in the nightly street festivals that had become an instant tradition in the city.

Several times, in fact, such brawls had come close to engulfing Jamnar, Lynor, and Kasul as they went about through the city; but, ever alert, they avoided serious trouble for nine days.

On the tenth day, Kasul took Jamnar and Lynor to a small blacksmith's shop, where the smith held up three pairs of astonishingly lightweight undertunics of small steel rings.

"I feared you would not agree," said Kasul. "So I took some of my recent riches and ordered these made to our sizes without telling you. I am concerned about the number of times we have been endangered in crowds, and I think that while we are in Khaldiriam these incidents will increase. Hazund is about the city somewhere, keeping good track of our affairs, you may be quite certain about that."

Jamnar studied the tunics, as they glittered in lanternlight. "They are handsome," he admitted. "How is it that such costumes are not more widely used in the Free Companies?"

"They are not considered in the manly tradition," Kasul answered, grinning slyly. "So I never bought one in the past. Also, of course, I could never afford one!"

"Soldiers' lives seem rather uneventful, even safe, from what I have seen," admitted Jamnar. "I can almost see why men might look down at someone who took unusual precautions for his life. Still, there is nothing like being practical, is there?"

Kasul grinned more frankly. "Only the rich can be truly practical. Come, let's put them on."

Jamnar unhooked his floorlength captain's cloak and untied the knots of his leathern soldier's garb.

The chain-tunic fell partways to his knees, protecting him from neck to genitals.

"The arms are bare," said Kasul, "because it would have taken the smith too much time to affix the additional rings. I thought it better to have the protection for our lives; our limbs must trust in our skill, wit, agility, and luck!"

"An excellent combination," Jamnar grinned, nodding. "But we must return to the company; there is much still to be done, and Athandur may find cause to send us to the Belcamnaron marches in Ruldoun at any moment." He began fastening his soldier's leathers back on over the mailed undertunic.

Kasul's face became woeful. "I thought we might visit our covey of Rozuth briefly; we are not far from Pharian's secret villa, and . . ."

"And you would see Leliel again; very well. Perhaps I have been concentrating too much on my own affairs—such as they are."

A dour-faced slave opened the wellbolted door to their secret knock, for all within were terrified of the vanished master of Rozuth, slaves and heirs alike.

Pharian greeted the three gloomily as they entered a small inner courtyard. "Eh, but this is a poor prison," he said listlessly. "'Tis not the reason I purchased it, but . . ." He sighed heavily. "Bring you interesting news from court and countryside? Lynor Shaggychest—enjoy you the soldiers' marches and countermarches?"

"Our gossip would be incredibly boring and peaceful," said Kasul. "Where are your sisters?"

"How abrupt you are, Lieutenant!" Pharian said with listless reproach. "Leliel is dozing upstairs; we sleep much of the day here, as well as the night, for as you know we dare not invite even our friends here for fear of some betrayal. I have not seen Ailaisha in some hours—though, eternity knows, there are not many different places to be, trapped in here."

"Visitors?" came Leliel's eager voice from a hallway.

"Kasul!" she exclaimed delightedly as she came upon them in the courtyard. "Valzar and Shaggychest!"

Then her face fell almost comically. "Oh!"

"What *is* the matter, Leliel," Pharian said, petulantly. "Shrieking about so is hardly calculated to improve my disposition, you know."

"Nor is aught else," said Leliel sharply, then turned to Jamnar. "It is Ailaisha! She will be upset at having missed you, and, oh, I do not think she should have gone, but she so wanted to get some particular pastries in the marketplace! Our cooks, you know, were taken, the best of them, for the king's kitchens. There was simply no holding her back, for she would not come to you to beg permission, dear Pharian."

Jamnar's look made Leliel suddenly break off with another gasp as she stared at his angry face.

"Well," he demanded, "how long ago did she leave, and when should she be back? This is a cursed foolishness of hers! She is safe enough, perhaps, but should your father learn your whereabouts. . . ."

"You have learned well how not to be a slave, once more, my friend Valzar," said Pharian rather sourly. "Mind you, I am holding no blamings against you. My father knew the game he played was dangerous."

"Nor are the blamings against you," said Jamnar, including Leliel in his answer. "His ambition was not for you, nor did it take into account the chance consequences to you, should he fail, nor . . ."

"It is all one to me, as it has come out," said Pharian. "This is as like to a dungeon as any in the Black Prison. Eh, Lynor Shabbychest, and how are your enchauntments these days? I suppose there is more to campaigning, than sitting about in this hidden hermitage with a number of highly irritable people."

Lynor looked rather blankly at Pharian. "I go where I must go, and have no other choice. I do not know that

there is anything to be said about happiness under such circumstances."

Pharian grinned mirthlessly. "*I* said nothing about happiness, did I?"

"Nobody did," said Leliel pettishly. "Except Ailaisha, and she is not yet returned."

"I think we should go to look for her," Jamnar said, after a long pause while everyone looked down at the plain stone paves of the courtyard.

Leliel shrugged. "She *would* go. But, you know, the central markets occupy space enough for ten Rozuth villas. You would not find her."

"I think we should try," Jamnar insisted with a new quick vehemence. "Lynor, let's be off. Kasul?"

Kasul nodded with some reluctance, glancing at Leliel.

There came a loud banging at the street door; presently it opened, and moments later Lieutenant Runethk entered hastily, one of the few in Valzar's Company privy to the secret of the small villa.

"Orders have come from King Athandur," said Runethk, slapping his chest as he faced Jamnar stiffly. "Reports arrived into the king's hands that several companies have left Belcamnaron, to invade the heartland of Ruldoun through the Belcamnaron marches. A matter of an ancient claim of Belcamnaron's to the marches. Apparently Belcamnaron does not accept the Adranarphan experience in Chaitor Zun and is yet fearful of Athandur's intentions. Or so runs the estimates among the older soldiers."

Jamnar stood irresolute for a long moment. "Immediate departure? I . . . I had something I was going to do . . ."

Runethk shook his head. "No time, sir. The king's messenger implied that if you had not got the Company out through the city gates by dark, it would be taken exceeding ill."

Kasul grinned sourly. "One does not lightly irritate a king with pursuing of one's own affairs, Valzar. I do not know what you can do about finding Ailaisha, but . . ."

Runethk stood a little more stiffly. "Just before the king's messenger arrived, a street lad delivered this note for you. It was not inclosed in anything; I took the liberty of reading it, in case it be urgent, and so I was about to depart in search of you when the king's man came to the company."

Jamnar snatched the note from Runethk's hands and read it aloud.

"Written in greatest haste, my good Valzar. Thanks to her most typical heedlessness I have regained my dearest, most headstrong daughter, Ailaisha; may the rest of my brood likewise soon forget to take care. Dear lad, I do not think that you will last much longer at these heights. A slave-prince is a slave first. Slave, till you lie helpless at my feet I am your enemy, Rozuth."

Jamnar crumpled the paper in his hand, conscious even as he did it that it was a mere gesture. "I have been a castaway, a slave, a bondsoldier. Now I am a Free Captain—and I am more helpless than ever before," he said bitterly.

Kasul slapped him on the shoulder, and said with a sigh, "Come along then to the Belcamnaron marches of Ruldoun. Her own father won't hurt the lass, surely; and there is the king's work to be done. Let us to it!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rain had fallen since just after sunup. When the clouds broke for a brief time in the late afternoon, the Belcamnaron marches seemed nothing but a stinking bog among low hills.

"They are still on either side of us, Valzar," Kasul reported to him. "Scouts say they have lost more men than we have, in the day's confusions and evasions, and they are a deal more strung out along their lines of march than we are."

For two weeks Valzar's Company had maneuvered through Ruldoun's Belcamnaron marches, encountering enemy soldiers who fled at their approach. Two days ago they came across two full enemy companies who immediately asked for their surrender on the grounds of being outnumbered, but Jamnar refused with a laugh and moved his company away.

Since then, however, the two companies had been keeping pace with his, one on either side, while the rains fell, hiding them all from each other.

"We are being herded like our own kaphals," Kasul added morosely. "We are being led to the other two companies. Then we shall have to surrender, and that will be an end to that."

"Do their scouts still pass in front of our line of march and behind it to ensure our location?" asked Jamnar, and Kasul nodded. "Very well," he continued, "we shall be attacking very shortly."

"*Attacking!*" Kasul looked openmouthed at Jamnar. "We are outnumbered two to one!"

Jamnar nodded, even as a burst of raindrops signaled another downpour. He and Kasul rode at the head of

four files of men, half on kaphals, half on foot. "But when we attack, it shall be two to one in our favor."

"They are as sorry a band of ragamuffins as we are, I'll admit," said Kasul. "Yarizun of Belcamnaron should have spent more money on established Free Companies, instead of dividing one up into four parts and making each the nucleus of a new company. As if he had stolen Athandur's notion—three quarters of a company of remitted slaves and lesser wretched prisoners freed to serve as fighters for a time to gain their freedom . . . but even so they are two to one against us today."

Jamnar smiled. "Can our scouts dispose of their rearmost scouts, so that if I ordered it we could march unnoticed to the rear?"

"They have already volunteered to do so on order," Kasul said, grinning for the first time. "They are very happy with themselves."

"Good," said Jamnar more grimly. "They will have to do it swiftly and without giving any alarm."

"Wait," said Kasul with sudden alarm. "March to the rear? But look you, though we are out of their sight due to the low hills we are passing through, they yet remain in earshot. Think you it is easy to conceal the sound of an entire company? A quarter of them are seasoned military men, after all."

"As soon as the orders are clear with each of our own men," said Jamnar, "half our force, our kaphal-mounted men, will reverse their line of march completely. A few kaphals should be left at the head of the men who will continue on foot; these beasts should be made to screech with great frequency. That should help continue the illusion that our entire force continues unchanged."

"Half?" Kasul's voice faded away as if he could not bear the weight of Jamnar's words. Then he slapped his hand against his leg, and said angrily, "When the enemy first appeared, you had the right to surrender without

prejudice. You would never have commanded a company again, of course, surrendering so early in your command, but you would have retained your lieutenancy."

"So you told me several times, Kasul," said Jamnar wryly. "Our scouts having cleared our rear of enemy scouts, our kaphals will continue in that direction until the entire company now to our right has passed by. Then we shall move around to *their* right, and ride forward until we form a line of 240 kaphals parallel to the rear half of the enemy company. At that point I shall send Lynor back with the word for our footsoldiers to halt, tighten up their line, then move to the right. By the time they engage the enemy they should be even with the second half of their force. Two hundred and fifty mounted men attacking 250 foot, with 250 more foot attacking from the other side. Two to one, eh?"

Kasul looked at Jamnar a short while, then slowly broke out into a smile. "A *very* rough-and-ready plan, my Valzar . . . but suited well enough to our halftrained men." And he began breaking down Jamnar's orders and passing them on to the other lieutenants.

Presently all but a few of the mounted kaphals came to a halt, then turned about and began marching back the way they had come. With a roll of distant thunder the rain began tumbling down upon them all with increased fury.

"I shall go with the kaphals," Jamnar told Kasul. "You see that the footsoldiers close up, rear-to-front, and when Lynor brings the word, attack to the right in as straight a line as you can." And he wheeled and rode off after the kaphals.

When the scouts reported to Jamnar that they were now behind the enemy, the kaphals lurched off the track to swing behind and around them.

Here there was no clear track, and the scouts were kept busy reporting the enemy's progress to Jamnar as the kaphal-troop moved forward once again. Finally a

scout brought word that they had come level with the center of the enemy line, and Jamnar slapped Lynor on the shoulder, and the boy lumbered off on the swiftest kaphal in the company.

Ten minutes to carry the word to Kasul—then attack! Jamnar thought, while the kaphal-troop ambled slowly forward to keep their relative position with the enemy.

Time passed; then Jamnar gave the word. The troop turned left and began moving toward the enemy in a long line. Through the straggly underbrush and the rain he could now dimly see moving shapes—the enemy company, marching slowly forward.

"They *are* rather scattered apart," mused Jamnar aloud to no one, his hand tensing on the hilt of his sword.

A young lance nearby grinned. "That should make it all the easier, sir!"

Now came the sound of a brief clash of swords; enemy soldiers looked casually about them—and saw Jamnar's kaphal-troop coming at them, all along their line! A look in the other direction, and there came Kasul's footsoldiers!

Seeing the enemy alerted, the kaphal-riders gave great warwhoops and urged their sluggish mounts forward, some cutting across in front of Jamnar to sever the two halves of the enemy column. "A Valzar! A Valzar!" they howled.

Nearby now was a knot of some twenty five enemy soldiers clustering together, gawking at the soldiers making for them from either side.

An enemy sergeant in grey field cape saw Jamnar's command cape and stepped forward hastily from his men. Jamnar urged his kaphal forward, and the sergeant held out his arms without weapons in them—the offer of battlefield parley.

Jamnar extended one arm in return, signifying that he would accept only a brief parley.

The sergeant nodded, shouting through the rain, "I have little enough to say—except that I surrender my men! A good maneuver, sir! Splendid! May I be the first to say that I believe it will be your day?"

Through the rain Jamnar saw Kasul making for him, grinning, his long hair plastered by the rain raggedly all over his face. "You must have the men move quickly forward again!"

Jamnar nodded. "We must attack the front of the column as quickly as possible, before they grasp what has happened and reform against us!"

Kasul grinned again but said only, "I do not think you know quite as much about the Flanage as you seem to think!"

Messengers began arriving from all along the line of attack. There had been some skirmishes, but most of nearly 200 men had surrendered without offering a blow. Jamnar sent the messengers back with urgent orders to reform and move forward. If the Belcamnaron company were full-strength, Valzar's Company had just reduced it by almost a half.

Valzar's Company began gathering around Jamnar again, while a scout brought word that the 300 remaining enemy troops ahead had become alarmed at the sound of conflict to their rear and were now trying to gather themselves together for a battle.

"We shall move at quickpace off to the right of their line of march again," Jamnar ordered.

Kasul nodded. "The men will be assembled shortly. I have detailed a sergeant to remain with his men and supervise the disarming of these we have captured."

Five minutes later Valzar's Company was off in quick-march through the rain, which was still falling without letup.

In a quarter of an hour scouts reported that they had contacted the remaining enemy troops, still in a state of

confusion. Jamnar ordered his men to close up; then the company wheeled and marched toward the enemy's flank.

Seven ranks deep and shoulder to shoulder the foot soldiers marched, and the kaphal-riders kept steady pace forward with them.

And, presently, throught the rainy mists, they once more saw the enemy ahead, struggling to make a formation in the gloom, and with shouts again of "A Valzar!" the kaphal-riders surged forward.

Immediately Jamnar saw men throwing down their arms in total panic.

"We attack from their other side!" Kasul said exultingly. "They do not realize they are attacked by only one company—they think they are surrounded, even as we ourselves were, before!"

Jamnar allowed himself a smile while watching his men already gleefully collecting enemy arms once more, herding into manageable groups the agitated enemy soldiers who had surrendered.

Kasul rode forward to gather reports amid the confusion—then returned in haste to Jamnar.

"It's the other company!" he shouted, voice momentarily racked with horror. "Scouts say they discovered we had slipped them! If they attack now . . . we are in disarray! Our riders are . . ."

Beyond the dim confusion of the struggle, Jamnar and Kasul saw a detachment of kaphals from the second enemy company. The riders stood in their stirrups amazed at the sight of Jamnar's men overpowering and disarming the enemy.

"They do not understand; they thought to herd us safely to a rendezvous with the other two companies, and overawe us into bloodless defeat with four to one odds. Oh, they must be perplexed!" A certain gleefulness had crept back into Kasul's voice.

Suddenly the enemy scouts wheeled about and thundered away through the mud.

"Now we shall have to prepare for a fight indeed," said Jamnar grimly. "Can we get our men into some order in time?"

"I do not know," said Kasul softly. "They are not yet finished with this timid folk . . ."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"We must do what we can, then," said Jamnar, and urged his kaphal forward.

It was exceedingly difficult to make out what was happening in the rain and confusion; but an ever-larger group of prisoners were gathering, while many of Jamnar's men were now sporting extra weapons.

There came the screeching of kaphals from beyond the scenes of struggle. "The other company charges us already," said Kasul. "Raggedly, let us hope, but . . ."

Jamnar did not need the sentence completed. His men were too occupied, distracted by their present fights and takings of prisoners and weapons. An attack could scatter them immediately, untrained as most of them were.

"Victory and defeat in the same day," Jamnar whispered. "It will be interesting." A lancing memory of another day of mixed victory, confronting Gaharn Kan of the irZakkat, and the flaming arrow arching upwards between them, flashing downward, and then Tashai'a . . . the memory bit deeply and he winced.

Not till after another half hour of murky strugglings did it become clear what had happened.

The second enemy company attacked erratically; it had not, after all, expected action in the rain any more than had the other. Had they moved concertedly, as Jamnar had, he knew it would have caused as much dismay among his own men as they had just been causing.

Instead, the enemy had attacked under their lieutenants in units of fifty men, who had marched off immediately as the word to attack filtered through their company.

To most of Jamnar's men, therefore, it seemed only

that their struggle continued onward against relatively small bands, for they took the new enemy for part of the first company they had attacked.

Hence, though they were as new to battle on one side as on the other, Jamnar's men for the most part stood their ground with an absolute assurance borne of knowing that, under the inspired Valzar, they had already won the day.

The second company had also been demoralized even while charging over to the aid of the first, in coming continually across small bands of their previously disarmed fellows. This gave many the sure feeling that Valzar's Company had made rendezvous with another force and that they had been decoyed into being mercilessly butchered if they did not surrender . . .

There were a number of sharp clashes, but the attackers were half-convinced they were already defeated. In half an hour they had all thrown down their arms, and the day was over. A thousand men had been defeated by half that number.

"Though three quarters of them be slaves and criminals," said Kasul gleefully, "yet they learned well enough the old tradition of Free Companies, surrendering to the inevitable! On both sides together there are less than fifty slain and sorely wounded! I think our men will not be unhappy, though with such a sorry lot fighting for King Yarizun the loot will be small. The weapons of a thousand men and half their value-possessions . . ."

"See to it that the division is fair and that the prisoners are treated decently," said Jamnar.

Kasul nodded absently. "We are made men, Valzar! Such a day as this has not been seen in many a year! A new captain of great repute is abroad in the lands, and fortune shall . . ."

"Fortune is with those who are watchful," said Jamnar. "I am not so certain this day bodes fairly for us. Look you, I have now vastly upset the trend of our king's or-

ders. As in Chaitor Zun we were not expected to win major victories . . . though fortunately I was not ordered to separate my men into smaller units.

"But certainly I was not bid to capture half the enemy in one day! Belcamnaron may with some face of righteousness become seriously alarmed at this foray."

"Is that what troubles you?" Kasul spoke carelessly, playing now with two gold-hilted rapiers and watching their tips whip about through the leaves of the low trees among which they were talking. "I have already told Yarizun's captains whom it was they faced this day—none other than that Valzar who captured six fortresses in Chaitor Zun with but fifty men disguised as a great army of menace. They were much impressed! The story, it seems, had already come south from Adranarpha. I think you'll find this exploit today will be considered cut from the same flambuoyant cloth and that Belcamnaron will no more fear your invasion with a free company of novices, than Adranarpha needed to fear Sergeant Valzar's lone fifty! King Yarizun will be secretly as pleased as any other admirer of the Free Companies, at the rising of a new great captain in the Flanage."

"They play at war, merely," said Jamnar. "How easily they accept clever actions as great deeds of legend!"

Kasul abruptly sheathed his rapiers, then stared straight at Jamnar. "So much so that both captains—who were lieutenants in the old company Yarizun gave into fourths—have offered to enter your service. And they are certain that three quarters of their men at least would go along with them."

Jamnar stared back into Kasul's eyes that danced with delight; and at length a great alien feeling of laughter and relief welled up from somewhere deep within him.

Then the moment was gone; Jamnar turned away and looked up at the darkling sky.

The storm-wracked sun was nearing the horizon; through the drizzle, a brief glow of mighty colors shot

through the whole landscape from the approaching sunset, then was gone into greyness again.

"Enter my service?" Jamnar said, turning back. "I have not heard of such a thing. A captain is usually hired by the free companions who then are under his direction, in effect, is this not so? And a company is but five hundred men. I would be gaining more direct power than many of the kings and high princes I have heard of here. I do not understand. Nor do I think King Athandur would permit such a thing of one in his service, to become so powerful."

Kasul nodded. "He is a jealous monarch! Most like he would not be pleased. It is an unusual offer to you, I admit. I am even surprised; it has happened that such offers of change of service have been made, but seldom by captains! Were it not for the king's Trackers I would say 'accept'."

"There are two more of Yarizun's companies here in the marches," said Jamnar. "We do not know where precisely they are, but there are a thousand men, eh? Perhaps, my friend, I shall accept these captains' services and such as come with them, till we meet with their fellows. We can decide on Athandur's reactions following resolution of our next conflict."

"The Belcamnaron marshes, not marches," muttered Kasul. "At least the sun has come out today. Rain for three days and three nights! At least *they* won't be any happier."

Scouts had located the enemy, and Jamnar and Kasul rode their kaphals to the top of a low hill to observe them.

Morning sunlight drove ground mists up all around; the air was clean, fresh, spiced with meadow-scents. Insects chirred and fought their tiny wars among the grass, oblivious of human wars above.

A long slope curved down the hill in front of them,

hollowing into a far stream beyond which the two enemy companies were arising from their camp. The shallow stream was overflowing with the runoff from many days of rain, causing shallow broad lakes beyond the streambanks.

Valzar's Company formed along the hillcrest; and then the eight hundred men who had volunteered to join Valzar moved up on either side.

"It looks like three companies against two!" said Kasul, sighing. "Thirteen hundred men to a thousand. I am certain now that they will avoid us! We shall not have to worry about dying in battle today!"

Jamnar looked at him with mild astonishment. "Do you worry?"

"Of course I worry!" said Kasul indignantly. "Life is joy—at least, often enough to make the kaphal-dung that is the rest of it seem worth enduring."

"*Enduring!* Were I a slave the rest of my life, shovelling kaphal-dung about Rozuth courtyards, I would still be myself! I would still be alive! I would have as much as Rozuth himself—life and the prosperity of a mind at peace with itself." But even as Jamnar spoke, he frowned slightly. *That used to be true*, he thought; *but is it still?*

Kasul started to grin. "I have never heard you speak of religion, which is . . ."

His voice trailed off, while his jaws stayed open.

Down at the stream there was a great commotion. A dozen men on kaphals, crimson cloaks and capes flapping behind them with the speed of their dash through the shallow water, had emerged from the mist-shrouded companies behind the stream and were now coming straight up the hill toward Jamnar and Kasul.

Kasul rose in his stirrups and motioned warningly to the company, armed and ready for a fight since before dawn.

"Do not worry," said Jamnar. "See, the gold pennon; and dress-cloaks, not field. They wish only to talk. It will

be interesting to see if they try to bluff me in my own manner!"

The parley-troop paused on the near side of the stream to regather; then it plunged forward up the long sloping hill.

Kasul stirred uneasily. "There may be some trick."

Jamnar slapped him on the shoulder and grinned. "So I was talking religion before, eh? I know nothing about it, myself. My beliefs about life and death are my own, though they are of course much like my people's. Then too there is the worship of Shaphath, the accursed dark one whom we drove from huThartesh; and there is the worship of Astaphar, which I did not have time to come to understand. But, after all, priests and priestesses tell us how the gods wish us to live—which seems to be how we would wish to live anyway, at least in the Viadhash."

Kasul's laugh was shaky. "Discussing theology while the enemy prepares to attack! Seek you to take my mind off my troubles, eh? Ah, well; in the Flanage, Valzar, believe as you wish as long as you prevent no one else from believing as he chooses. It is a sensible way, as you can see; folk will believe as they will, regardless of what they are ordered to believe. This was discovered even before the great old wars of destruction, or so I am given to understand."

"It boils down to much the same, then, doesn't it?" Jamnar said. "Except that I am optimistic while you are pessimistic."

"Pessimistic? Me?" Kasul protested; but now the approaching riders slowed, and the scarlet-caped man bearing the gold pennon waved it several times nervously.

"Captain Valzar?" came his call. "Captain Endrukarn and Captain Irthun are here, wishing to arrange terms for departure."

Kasul scowled. "How dare they suggest we leave, after—"

"Hush," said Jamnar gently, then raised his voice, calling to the captains. "Why should we accept terms?"

One of the captains rode closer to Jamnar, a look of mild astonishment on his face. "If you wish to fight for the sake of fighting, or for reputation, we cannot stop you. Yet we are willing to depart without offering further battle; will you not at least hear our terms?"

"By the worms of Ruphar! *They* are quitting!" Kasul whispered, new merriment in his tone but his face now as stern and impassive as Jamnar's. "We've won again!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

"My dear Captain Valzar!" said Kasul grinningly, unable to restrain his enthusiasm further, "you could take the title of Lord of the Belcamnaron Marches this day, and I think even King Athandur would pause before attacking you!"

Jamnar found himself grinning, but said nothing. Captain Endrukarn had just ridden off with Captain Irthun, and their aides were now arranging details with Jamnar's lieutenants.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Kasul went on, "if Athandur ordered you and the company a triumph! Larger Khaldir has a new hero—it would be shocking if he did not reward you in some fashion. To defeat two Free Companies and drive two more away, with the loss of 19 men. . . . Oh, they will write long dull poems about you in Khaldiriam, mark my words!"

Jamnar shook his head. "I doubt there will be a triumph, Kasul. Yarizun and Athandur may both misinterpret what has happened. I had no orders to clear the land of the enemy, too; this was an expedition to show Athandur's awareness that his new borders were being violated. Most particularly I was to engage the enemy only when necessary."

"Well, it was certainly necessary," Kasul said, indignantly. "It is not your fault you came against two thousand cravens! Just as well you're turning your eight hundred volunteers loose with these others; they did not serve their last master very well."

"I have in mind dispatches telling the king precisely what has happened," said Jamnar. "If Yarizun accepts

that I plan no invasion of Belcamnaron itself, I think Athandur will not find it difficult to see my position."

Then Jamnar grimaced and turned away. "I have no interest in these matters; how is it that I am embroiled in them?"

"You have hardly begun," said Kasul. "You must learn it, like walking; which is but a controlled falling-forward, is it not? Rather like your life in the Flanage!"

"Controlled?" Jamnar looked at his friend, and thought of Ailaisha and his own helplessness; but of that there was nothing to say.

Twenty six days of quiet patrols through the marches drifted slowly by, while Jamnar awaited dispatches from the king in answer to his own.

When orders did come, they were for Valzar's Company to return to Khaldiriam. Yarizun of Belcamnaron had informally agreed not to invade the marches again; the company was no longer needed.

Jamnar was a hero.

And as he stood by his kaphal just inside the Khaldiriam gates, arguing the need for his men to water their kaphals, a rider came from inside the city, and before anyone knew it he had ridden close to Jamnar, stooped over, and driven a large knife at his chest.

It staggered the barbarian to his knees—and then all who were watching gasped as, slowly, he rose to his feet again.

The would be assassin wheeled about to make his escape—and paused in spite of himself to see Jamnar standing there, a rent in his tunic in the center of his chest.

Suddenly one of Jamnar's men darted for the assassin and was on the kaphal's back behind him. A moment later the two toppled to the ground.

The assassin's neck snapped dryly as he hit the ground on the side of his head. His legs twitched a few times; then he lay still.

Half an hour later, as Jamnar strode up the broad steps of Athandur's palace, a crowd surged near him shouting his name. As they surrounded him and the three lieutenants who were accompanying him and Kasul, there was a flash of steel—and a knife was lashing out at Jamnar's back before the lieutenants saw what was happening.

In the crush, Jamnar was pushed forward only half a step; instantly he whirled and had the appalled assassin's wrists firmly in his own strong hands.

"Will Hazund buy your way free of the king's prison?" Jamnar snarled. "I would kill you now, but the Lord of Blood has much more interesting methods."

The man's face paled, and Jamnar felt a leap of fierce joy. This one was terrified—perhaps he could be persuaded to give away Hazund's hiding-hole.

For that would lead him to Ailaisha.

The assassin's face a mask of terror, he writhed convulsively in Jamnar's grasp.

Then his legs collapsed under him and he fell toward Jamnar.

There was a knife in his back.

"Hazund is a careful man," observed Kasul after a shocked pause, but his voice quavered out the calm words.

Jamnar stared at the body a long moment, then turned and resumed his way up the palace steps through the crowd.

Before Jamnar and his four reached the Presence Chamber door, a forbidding figure in black and silver chamberlain's cloak met them, drawing Jamnar away into a nearby vacant antechamber.

Vithunvar, the chamberlain, widened his eyes when he noticed the rents in Jamnar's tunic and cloak. "It is completely improper to appear before the king in such garments," he said, his long face in a disapproving mask.

Jamnar shrugged. "Twice, assassins attempted my life on the way here today. I have not had time to change my

garments since then. I was most specifically ordered to attend the king here immediately upon my arrival."

Vithunvar paled slightly at the words of attempted assassination, but said, reluctantly, "You are already the hero of the day; it will be all right, it will but add glamour. You were right not to return for unmarred garb.

"But now, somewhat more to my purpose. For the king, I must tell you, intends to honor you today—a small, nonhereditary title of nobility, carrying no lands, nor revenues. The king but recently revived the degree, and has created some dozen others in the title. You will be Free Captain Count Valzar of the Marches. Count of the Marches in honor of your most astonishing victories there, of course; as I said, no lands append." Vithunvar looked again rather disdainfully at Jamnar's torn tunic.

Jamnar looked at Vithunvar, who returned the gaze briefly, then looked away. "That is not what you intended to say to me," he said, finally.

"No," said Vithunvar, and stifled a mock yawn. "You must understand that what I next say is not from any personal admiration. You are but the right man—perhaps—at the right time for my, or rather for *our* purposes."

"Which are?"

Vithunvar frowned at the calm question. "Do you know enough of our politics to understand, I wonder?"

Jamnar smiled without noticeable sarcasm, but said nothing.

Vithunvar cleared his throat. "Very well. There are three parties of opinion among the nobility, the more important administrators of the realm, and other advisors of the king. The Firebrands wish immediate attack to the east and south, saying that but a weak line of paltry nations stand between us and final security on half our entire new borders."

The chamberlain narrowed his eyes a moment and studied Jamnar. "It is believed the king eventually intends to do this, but that for now his appearance of

supporting and listening most to the Watchers inevitably means his actions will be more restrained for the time being.

"The Watchers hold simply that we should stand with what we now have, securing our new position of power in Larger Khaldir and being most cautious in our protecting of borders. There are several wings to the Watchers' party, but these are unimportant for the present.

"There is a third, smaller group, the Shielders. These insist we should be prepared to deal away portions of Larger Khaldir in return for absolute treaties of guarantee, holding we will seek no further territories in return for free possession of what has not been dealt away by the treaties. The Belcamnaron marches, for instance, might go to Belcamnaron, with the rest of western Ruldoun to the banks of the Xid. Too, western Chaitor Zun would pass to Adranarpha. These fainthearts are not likely to win the king's serious attention.

"I am a leader of the Watchers, and in short we wish your name as a political gesture. We are trying to ensure a continuation, at least for the present, of patroling the new lands with as small a show of force as possible. It would be clearly understood in court circles that this is only a political gesture; you will not personally need or attempt to join in court politics. And, at any rate, you strike me as a man little interested in such matters, eh?"

Jamnar smiled a trifle. "And what is the benefit to me?" he asked gently.

"Why, my favor," said the chamberlain, vaguely astonished. "I am a man of considerable power in the land. Shall we then speak of this at a more convenient time? I must take you in for your audience."

"Later? I see no reason not to," Jamnar said with some reserve.

"Excellent," said Vithunvar. "Now come along."

They gathered the four lieutenants and entered the Presence Chamber.

Jamnar was leading his men behind the black-and-silver cloak through the press of courtiers, when suddenly he stopped short, grasping Vithunvar's shoulder, while Kasul bumped into him from the rear.

The chamberlain turned with a frown. "What—"

"Over there—*what is she doing here?*" asked Jamnar with grim urgency.

"Whoever and whatever are you talking of?" Vithunvar said impatiently. "The king now sees and expects you. You cannot keep him waiting to . . ."

"It is Ailaisha, there, in the dark blue. She is looking away, but—"

"Ailaisha?" The chamberlain's lips curled slightly. "You had best ask the king, then. Come along."

Jamnar stood obstinately still. "If you know, tell me; I go not a step further otherwise."

The chamberlain made a sound of impatience. "She has been held captive by Hazund, as you surely know, but managed to escape, putting her father on the run again. So she is now under the protection—the *personal* protection—of the king. He is most pleased with her, though idle rumor has it she will have little to do with him, finding him, it is thought, too old. Now, come along. Enough dangerous gossip. It is a matter for the king alone to speak of."

And Vithunvar turned to make his way onward through the press; then he turned back with a mirthless grin on his face.

"You understand, I do not actually suggest you broach this topic to the king. His interest is technically a private one, and a privacy of a king such as this one . . ." He chuckled, then turned once more and strode toward the dais.

"Come along, then," whispered Kasul. "You can find out more at your leisure—not at the king's!"

Anger and apprehension warring futilely within him,

Jamnar allowed Vithunvar to lead them to the king on his dais.

Seeing them approach, the king waved away several courtiers who had been conversing idly with him, and smiled, beckoning them up the steps to the Bloodjewel Throne.

"Captain Valzar," said the king as Jamnar reached him, "you have acted with excellent discretion, to the greater fortune of Larger Khaldir. In recognition, and as a sign to Belcamnaron, I have prepared a title of nobility for you. Now, Count Valzar of the Marches," and the king rose and placed a hand on one of Jamnar's large shoulders, "come with me. I have a private commission to discuss."

And to the astonishment of his lieutenants, their captain was escorted by the king through a scarlet arras behind the Bloodjewel Throne.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"It is not an immediate matter," said the king without further preamble, "since I need to display you about the town as a hero for a time. And of course there is the unfortunate possibility of further war, which would also preempt you."

King Athandur walked to a low table on which were set a number of varicolored bottles of irregular shape, and poured a small mug of liquid from a bottle which resembled a lizard's foot.

Jamnar realized with something of a shock that the king was as tall as he was; he seemed charged with physical strength, and moved with something of the same ease of an animal, some great beast of prey.

"Pure water, from Talakon," said the king, turning to Jamnar and smiling briefly as he raised the lizard's foot cup and drank from it. "It does not disturb my stomach, as I fear even the finest wines would."

The king drank again, then chuckled without much humor. "Every peasant is certain he sleeps sounder of nights than a king; well, he eats and drinks better than a king, too, if he reigns in interesting times."

Jamnar almost smiled, but kept his face impassive; he had not been High Kan long enough for proof or disproof and instinct would have kept him from mentioning his own position in any case.

"Well, and in brief," said the king, setting down the cup, "I am much impressed with your abilities, my good Count Valzar, and would have you lead an expedition to the Viadhash Borderlands to recruit from among your people—if any might be interested, and if they can easily be spared."

Uneasiness shot through Jamnar, but he answered, glad to be able to say something intelligent. "Spared? Why, yes. The Viadhash is overcrowded—nothing like the press of population here in the Flanage, but unpleasant to us. Many would be interested, though times are changing so rapidly now it were foolish to promise anything irrevocably. There are the fatal Deadlands in between, of course. And as to whether *I* would go . . ." Then at last Jamnar's heart leaped, as he realized the opportunity the king was, apparently, proffering him.

"I realize," the king said dryly, "that you may well be seethingly consumed with a desire to return to your homeland; it is natural. I have no intention of being a tyrant in the matter. As for the Deadlands, well, they were dangerous enough for the first few hundred years after the old wars, perhaps—dangerous enough to gain a fearful reputation. But they have been harmless for at least a lifetime. The legend of the Deadlands is now more potent than whatever caused the legend. So you may visit your people—though I will expect you to return, and the rewards, I assure you, will be high."

King Athandur poured himself a small amount of water and drank it. "You are not to discuss these matters with any of your associates or friends—*any* of them. This is a matter of my own personal long range policies. They concern only me, and you for the time."

The king beckoned to Jamnar to follow him back through the scarlet arras to the Presence Chamber. "Bah!" he added unexpectedly. "How magnificent to be a king! Yet it would all tumble down about my ears, did I not spend many tedious hours in there, gathering information, dispensing rewards and punishments, maneuvering constantly to keep at bay the hordes of enemies that surround me and Khaldir.

"It is bitter at times to be a king, Count Valzar, though I do not expect you or anyone who is not a monarch to understand. It is bitter hard work." Then he smiled rem-

iniscently and a bit sadly. "It has its rewards, of course, though they too are not as inevitable as you might think. Were I not the son of a man who seized this throne, however, I tell you honestly I do not think I would have sought it."

And he gestured that Jamnar was not to walk behind him out of the private chamber, but in front. "For I do not distrust you as an assassin," he said dryly, "especially with the evidences of your own peril still torn about your chest and back! But a king must be in the cautious habit; there is no future for him elsewise."

"I cannot speak of the king's private conversation, but I suspect it was unimportant anyway. As for Vithunvar, he has proposed I become titular leader of a court faction." Jamnar dropped his hands with forceable irritation, finding he had been twiddling nervously with the clasp of his cloak.

Kasul nodded. "There is no telling what that might lead to. Vithunvar is a wily old schemer, and has been a chamberlain to the Bloodjewel Throne since the latter part of the reign of Athandur's father."

"He spoke with me again after the audience, and I told him if he would not help solve this strange matter of Ailaisha's being at the court, I would do nothing for him. He said he would discuss it with others of his faction, and would have an answer to me directly it was resolved." Jamnar frowned at finding his mind unwilling to drop the subject. "Do you think they will agree?"

Kasul cocked his head and considered, staring off to one corner of Jamnar's sparsely-furnished room. In the corner their swordbelts dangled from the swords leaning against the wall, Kasul's leather richly-figured and highly-polished so that it gleamed curiously, in sharp contrast with Jamnar's belt and scabbard of plain unworked leather.

"It would go difficulty with the Watchers if they

crossed the king's specific will and this became known to him. Also, there are the risks to you."

Kasul paused, pondered what he had said, and waved his hand negligently. "Of course they are not concerned with you personally; you might die in hideous agony at any moment, and their concern would be only that their plans were altered. Then too, they would be in difficulties if the king grew aware of your continued activity in relation to Ailaisha, that is if you were identified as their man. But that is digression, and so, no, I do not know what they will do."

Jamnar smiled. "Yes," he said, "life for you and for all the Flanage is a constant digression. It is difficult to hold to a simple clear thought among so much activity everywhere . . . and now I am digressing!"

"And becoming philosophical as well; and that is a thing I have never heard of in a barbarian whether—what in sacred ape feces is *that?*"

A strange highpitched howl rang out, over and over again through the low long building in which the men of Valzar's Company shared fiveman rooms.

Jamnar was on his feet and into the corridor before Kasul had finished his expression of amazement. It had taken Jamnar only a moment after the howl first began to recognize the crackling sound he had heard, the moment before the howl.

Now the howls stopped short; but Jamnar stopped at a door partway down the corridor, and threw it open.

In the center of the room lay a free companion.

Up against the wall, cowering beside his bedding, slobber dripping unnoticed down his chin, was another free companion, the whites of his eyes startlingly bright in his taut, half mad face.

And, in his hands—Jamnar saw in a moment long enough to recognize the extra setting for 'blast'—was an electrostun, the stungun's butt towards Jamnar.

It was a weapon from three thousand years in the past;

Inzu had given him fifty; and they were all supposed to be hundreds of kilometers to the north, beyond the Deadlands.

And only one of the stunguns had a 'blast' setting—and it had belonged to Jamnar.

He acted even while part of his appalled mind was still trying to reason out how his personal stungun had reached the Flanage.

He took the stungun from the soldier's lax grip, and the man slumped slowly down till he was sitting on the floor, back to the wall.

Jamnar looked closer at the setting. It was at 'stun'. So the man lying there in the middle of the room was only unconscious; his belly or chest had not been blasted away.

Kasul hurried into the room; behind him were other footsteps. "What in sacred . . ."

"Close that door. Tell everyone to go away. I wish to talk to these two men," said Jamnar. "And not even the others from this room are to enter till I have finished."

Kasul nodded and whirled, ordering back several men who had already started to enter behind him.

Jamnar held the stungun at his side, hidden by his cloak, until Kasul had finished and had closed the door with finality.

"Now," he said, taking firm hold of the man's shoulders as he sat against the wall, and picking him up onto his feet, "what has happened here? Where did you get this?" He brandished the stungun at the horrified man.

"In . . . in the marches, in the . . . the first engagement. I . . . I found it in someone's pack. Several of them slipped their packs and ran when we shouted your name and attacked."

The free companion's courage seemed to return somewhat. "I . . . I didn't know what it was, and so I just took it, and put it into my own pack. Purngrul and I were

. . . were examining it a few minutes ago, and . . . and then he fell dead after a horrible noise came from it, and . . ."

His voice trailed away, strength gone again.

Jamnar nodded. "Purngal isn't dead," he said; but the man just blinked at him. "The weapon knocked him unconscious. I take it the man who owned this wasn't captured; too bad. I would have enjoyed a conversation with him. . . . What is your name?"

"Traishan, Captain," the man answered. "I was a Free Companion of Nurab's Company for three years."

"Good; then you know how to take orders." The man nodded, only a trifle dubiously, and Jamnar continued. "You are not to talk about this to anyone, and I shall see to it that Purngrul understands this also. To keep you from the temptation of your fellows, the two of you may have the freedom of the city while we are still here. Later I think it will make little difference, but I'll tell you this—if I can keep this to ourselves, if only for a few weeks, it might well prove to be the making of all our fortunes. Or," and Jamnar grinned briefly, "maybe not."

There was a groan from Purngrul, and he stirred slightly.

Traishan's eyes widened again. "He *isn't* dead! I . . . I can't believe it!"

"You can count yourselves fortunate," said Jamnar dryly. "You would have carved him into ruins if your luck had shone more darkly."

Traishan blanched as Purngrul struggled to rise.

Some minutes later Jamnar entered his room, the stun-gun loosely concealed in his cloak, a still-perplexed Kasul following him.

Vithunvar stood awaiting him, a frown of impatience set sternly in his long face. "You were in great haste for my answer, Captain; yet you kept me waiting."

Jamnar shrugged. "A Free Captain has some five hundred men to look after, as I am sure you will realize if

you think about it." He was startled to hear himself rebuke the chamberlain; and decided he was too shaken by the arrival of his stungun in the Flanage.

Vithunvar flushed. "At any rate, I am here to inform you that, for the time being, it will be impossible for the Watchers to aid you in the matter of the girl Ailaisha."

Jamnar's sudden scowl made the chamberlain hasten onward. "We have information, though, that she is in little danger from the king at this time. His mind is far too occupied with the intricate affairs of Larger Khaldir. If you call it danger," he added with an insolent shrug of his own.

Jamnar forced himself not to make a hot reply.

"Then, too, some have brought in question your next orders from the king. No one knows at the moment what these may be, and enough of us wish to see how well you execute them, before striking a completed bargain with you."

Jamnar turned away to keep from cursing. "May I ask," he said carefully, "what will be this bargain's benefit to me, when and if it is made? It seems you cannot help me in the only matter I cannot help myself in; what advantages, then, *will* I gain?"

"Would you be tempted by your freedom from the affairs of the Flanage, eh? The chance to return to your homeland? Perhaps even with the girl, if our affairs prosper sufficiently? Yes? In the meantime, I advise you: just go about the city being a hero—and try not to get assassinated."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Well," said Kasul impatiently as the door closed behind Vithunvar, "what *is* that thing?" He motioned at Jamnar's cloak.

Jamnar took the stungun from the cloak's folds. "It is an electrostun, a stungun. The only one of its kind, as far as I know—on this planet, at least, which amounts to the same thing."

"You are a man of surprises indeed," Kasul said, his eyes widening. "But it's . . . it's technological; it must be from before the old wars! Where did you find it? Are there more? Can we get them? With such weapons a dozen men could rule the Flanage! And . . . and it looks almost new! How is that?"

"New? It is three thousand years old!" Jamnar could not help smiling.

Kasul sat on Jamnar's bedding and whistled softly. "Are you going to explain this mystery to me, or do I just trot after events with a look of doglike devotion on my face, not even pretending to understand?"

Jamnar looked long and steadily at Kasul.

"A year and a half ago I was Jamnar, a kaphal-herder and a hunter; then our tribe was raided by the irZakkat and all the men of my family were slain. So I became Kan of Arteleon; and, for my great deed to hold that title, I stormed the Forbidden Temple of Telshashoth, where I obtained this stungun and 49 others like it."

Jamnar paused, and grinned briefly. "With these, some skill, and a fair amount of good fortune, I conquered most of the northlands. In short, I became Valzar, High Kan of the Viadhash."

And he made a mock court-bow, while Kasul gaped at

him. "What in—how is it you are here, then? And let me tell you, you have much to learn about telling a story properly! You should have spent the rest of the day springing your surprises on me!"

"Ha. Life for me has been nothing but surprises so far; I do not study to make things more surprising. What happened to the High Kan? I was attacked when alone, save for Lynor, who followed me to the cliffs overlooking what you call the Zaldiger Sea. They threw my unconscious body off the cliffs, and in despair of his geas he threw himself into the sea. I slid down with a rock slide, and thus landed barely alive on the shore. He saved me, made the raft on which the *Sartaxu* found us, and there you have it."

Kasul stared in silence for a time. Then he shut his eyes and leaned back on the bedding with a great sigh. "So you were a great captain even before you came here. It should have been obvious, I suppose—rising from slave to count and favored captain in half a year. High Kan of the Viadhash!"

"Favored? I am not so sure, though he—no, I was ordered to say nothing of what he plans for me."

"Bah!" said Kasul, and clapped his hands together several times. "Congratulations for obeying your king so faithfully. Do you think he will reward your silence? Since you question your favor, yes, he might consider you a dangerous man, and then there is Ailaisha. And you are not as wise in Flanage treachery as the merest child here. You want some advice; and know this, I will say no more about the king's secrets than about the High Kan's."

"He wants me to lead an expedition to the Viadhash, when things are somewhat more in hand," said Jamnar. "He wishes to recruit more . . . barbarians, in hopes they will prove a valuable addition to his forces."

Kasul gave Jamnar a pitying look. "And you believed him? I cannot say what he might actually have in mind,

but you have just told me the classic device for a ruler to rid himself of a personal threat. And he only needs to *think* there is a threat, of course."

"Perhaps. Yet what am I to do?"

"Ah. That depends on what you want to do," said Kasul. "And mean that seriously."

"You are sage this afternoon," Jamnar said with impatient irony. "If I knew perfectly what I wanted, it would need no discussing. Look you, there is my homeland, my kingdom. Loras my uncle will not, I think, rule it well. Yet the people will live on, even if I should never return, while Ailaisha . . . well, it seems I . . . I have conceived a need for her, myself. And yet that reminds me of something that stabs even deeper, for the High Kan had many wives, and some of them were precious indeed to me. So here I am, Count and Free Captain Valzar—and what am I to do?"

"But," said Kasul softly, "there is the stungun. How did it come here? And what can it do besides terrify?"

"How? I do not know, though Lynor told me once he overhead the two who threw me from the cliffs speak of going to the south; for, understandably, they feared Loras. *This* stungun not only can knock a man unconscious for a quarter of an hour or more—it can carve through solid stone. I had Inzu give me only the one such; the other 49 were solely for winning, not for killing or destroying."

Again Kasul was silent for a time. "I am concerned about these villains from the north who somehow brought your weapon. Should they hear the story of Free Captain Count Valzar, ocean-plucked barbarian slave become warleader in half a year . . . well, they may sense their work was but half-done. And I am not sure I am comfortable at the thought of word coming to Athandur that his new captain is a ferocious monarch of the north." He stopped and blinked. "Who is Inzu?"

Inzu. Jamnar cursed aloud, remembering the times

when the computer's knowledge ran in his brain, and he wished achingly for Inzu's aid, or his half-brother Envaro's; even strange Prosperon's ways might have helped him here.

"Inzu," Jamnar said softly then—and remembered the last time he had tapped the pool of information that was locked away somewhere in his mind.

"You are a fool," said Valish Kadarnu nervously. "Why do you risk coming to one with such a questionable reputation as I?"

"It should not worry you," said Jamnar. Though he had come by himself, he was not worried. "I wish ten krons' worth of your fungus."

"There is no assurance you will gain any further access to the memories you tell me so guardedly of. You know nothing of these matters; anything might happen."

"Ah, but I shall take the fungus here, and *you* understand its workings, well enough. And I am not unused to taking chances."

"You . . . you interrupt me in studies of the greatest importance," said Valish Kadarnu. "Great concentration is necessary, and . . ." Beads of sweat were now on his brow.

"Surely ten krons are worth a quarter hour of your time?"

The unmagician made a short gesture at a low bench which sat near a small fire in a projecting fireplace. "Very well," he said, swallowing. "Ten krons is ten krons, and the fungus acts quickly. Sit down."

Jamnar inclined his head with a sardonic smile and sat, while the little man got out the Xynth-fungus and broke off a portion as big as two fingers. Jamnar put it in his mouth with no ceremony, and took ten krons from his leathern wallet.

The fungus was dry and musty, but Valish Kadarnu made no move to offer Jamnar anything to drink.

Coughing and choking, Jamnar finally got it all down. He looked about him, and waited.

For a moment then it seemed he was back in hunter's mind once more, and for a brief moment he realized it had been months since he had spent any amount of time in hunter's mind.

Then the room began to glow warmly with a wild melange of stupendous colors. Jamnar grunted, finding himself sitting on the floor beside the bench, close to the fire.

He looked at the fire, his mind swirling like the flames, and then for an indefinable moment the room seemed entirely filled with a spirit of utter horror.

He groaned involuntarily, shutting his eyes against the sudden onslaught of anguish howling wordlessly in his mind. He was dimly aware of falling the rest of the way over, and felt a soft bump, his head slamming against the floor.

He forced his eyes open, the physical pain blotting out the mental for a time.

Shimmering and shifting, the figure of Valish Kadarnu shrank away from him. *When would Inzu speak again,* Jamnar thought in a moment's clarity.

Then the power of the fungus lurched through him again; and in a great cloud of blue, coming through the rear doorway, was Hazund, Lord Elder of Rozuth.

Jamnar laughed, his head booming with the fungus-drug. The comic figures of Hazund and Valish Kadarnu danced in a brief pantomime, while, helpless now with laughter, Jamnar recalled how he had been terrified by visions, the time before. The visions had always gone away after a time, to be replaced by other visions.

The time before, one of the visions had been the computer-memories, or a fragment of them. Very well, he mused to himself, he would lie here calmly and await their return, and in the meantime he would pay no attention to whatever else might seem to be happening.

He laughed again to see Hazund now brandishing a

sword that seemed a burning flame; and the figure of Hazund too was laughing hugely and shouting indistinctly. The thought of being frightened of this laughable mannikin made Jamnar try to smile; but for a moment that sense of utter horror returned upon him.

The mood was broken when there seemed to come a banging at the front door, reverberating in Jamnar's mind in circles of violent colors.

Hazund after a brief clash, then ignored him while they Valish Kadarnu darted immediately for the rear door.

Into the room poured armed men, who disarmed Hazund after a brief clash, then ignored him while that came to stand above Jamnar, who was lying helpless with giggles at the comic scene.

"Here he is, then," Jamnar heard distinctly. "Let's do him in right now, and . . ."

"Wait! Wait! See here! This one! It is the Lord Elder of the Rozuth, the king's enemy! A far greater reward for him, I think!"

There was a great commotion which Jamnar attempted to pay no attention to; fear and laughter kept warring strangely within him now, and he knew not what to make of these strange new puppets whirling and dancing about him.

"Arrr. But then what is this one doing here? Why, they must be acting in a collusion! Oh, yes, there is no doubt but that the king will be glad to see them both!"

With nothing but vast amusement rocking through him, Jamnar felt himself picked up and carried from Valish Kadarnu's hovel. Most amusing! It would be interesting to tell the computer about it, or Prosperon.

Most amusing!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

He woke in darkness.

There was the sound of dripping water.

There was the feel of chill stone, on which he was lying.

Another vision?

He could not tell. Hushed silence reigned, over a deluge of subtle stinks; occasional distant sounds dimly penetrated, but were impossible to identify.

He shuddered involuntarily, and rose slowly and stiffly.

"Hoy!" he shouted on impulse. "Who is here?"

There seemed to be only echoes. A fungus-vision of total loneliness?

What in the name of all that Kasul held sacred had happened to him?

There was a wall beside him; he reached out, traced out cracks in the stone. They were huge stones, held with a rough cement.

He walked forward slowly, hands against the wall, came to a corner, turned again. Halfway along this wall was an opening; set inside was a heavy wooden door with a small grill at eye level.

There was no way to open the door from inside.

He felt the grim smile on his face and nodded, and the memory of Hazund and the strangers in Valish Kadarnu's wretched shack came to him in a renewed clarity.

It had not been a vision.

He was locked in the dungeons of the Lord of Blood.

Waves of fear, of terror, swept over him at the realization, and, astonished in his trembling, he strove to counteract it by going to hunter's mind.

But he could not reach it; his thoughts were racing, remembering what had happened, testing hypotheses about it, wondering where in the dungeons he was, wondering where Kasul and Lynor were now, wondering when food might come—if ever.

He sighed, cursed, and returned to inspecting his cell, the first surges of fear subsiding.

His prison was a little over four strides on a side. There was no bedding on the floor, nor any furniture. In one corner was a small hole that stank of excrement and urine.

Through the door's grille came faint flickering light, a distant torch down a long nameless corridor outside the cell. As Jamnar's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he began idly picking out the patterns of stones in the walls.

Dripping water splashed just at the edge of the dunghole—was there someone in the cell above?

He looked up. The ceiling was stone, supported by four crosstimbers, half a meter above his head.

He went over by the dunghole corner; there was a similar hole in the ceiling there. He shouted up at it.

There was no response.

He went back to the door, aware of an undercurrent of panic in his mind that moved him too quickly from place to place—here, where there was no place to go.

Through the grill he shouted incoherently several times; then, listening, there was nothing but silence after echoes.

Had he been thrown in here to be left until dead?

Panic surged up within him again, and sweat came coldly to his forehead. He sat down heavily, back against the door.

He could only wait.

But—could he stand it here? Huddled away from the sun and the sky, what was left to a hunter?

How little he had looked about him these last months;

how little there was in his recent memories to sustain him, to clear his mind, in this long moment of despair.

Kasul, Ailaisha, Lynor, his Free Company, Hazund, King Athandur . . . thoughts of them whirled through his mind, and a real desperation began building up until he felt the need to scream and scream and scream. His body shook with the effort of remaining silent.

He thought of hunter's mind again, and in the darkness he frowned, trying to follow the line of thinking.

First, it was absurd to get into such an agitated state. In hunter's mind, what could bother him? He could remain here, in a peaceful frame of mind, as long as necessary.

Then . . .

Why couldn't he reach hunter's mind?

Fear touched him again.

Time would pass at its own good rate, he told himself; but he shivered. If someone came for him soon, that would be all right. If not, it would be better to use the time to find out what was confusing him, pulling him away, blocking him, from hunter's mind.

There was certainly nothing to hinder him from studying the problem now, he thought sourly, whatever his excuses for not doing so for the last few months might have been.

He tucked his legs under him and tried to remember old hunters' words around forest campfires when he was nine and just beginning to learn hunter's mind.

Talak the Eld had been his especial guide in the ways of hunters. The two of them had sat out under the fyzur trees, many kilometers from any other humans . . . Jamnar strove to remember what Talak had said, and then realized suddenly that Talak had *said* very little. He had left it to the boy to make his own way inside his own mind, with only occasional guidance.

And now he had no guidance, and no hunter's mind.

Part of it was not to think; no, that wasn't right. Talak had said he wasn't to be worried or distracted if he did

have a thought; that in itself was natural. Rather, it was a matter of bringing the mind somehow to rest, so that it was thinking or doing only one thing at a time—thus ending its otherwise endless chattering to itself.

It was the chattering to himself that was preventing him from reaching hunter's mind. At nine years it had not been so difficult; there had not been so many things, after all, to occupy his mind. Now he found himself trembling.

He straightened his back and slowly brought his feet round into the crosslegged pose, each foot on the other thigh. "It hurts," Talak had said, "but that is part of the lesson your mind must learn."

It became painful almost immediately, and with a curse Jamnar uncrossed his legs again and stretched them out. Cramps tore at his calf muscles. He had not sat thus since leaving the Viadhash.

Then he cursed again at his slackness, brought his legs back across each other, and, ignoring the pain as much as he could, he began the first step Talak had taught him at nine.

In and out he breathed, counting them silently in his mind to ten and then starting over again.

Immediately his mind tried to smother the counting in a welter of thoughts, so that, over and over again, he lost count and had to begin at 'one' again.

Within minutes the sweat was pouring off him from the mental effort and from the pain in his thighs, knees, calves, ankles, and back that also made it almost impossible to continue his concentration on the counting.

He groaned involuntarily. How had he allowed himself to get so far away from himself? His rapid rise in the Flanage must have glamoured him. He nodded; here was where *that* ended.

He stopped himself from uttering another curse aloud, and found he had once more lost count while entangling himself in emotional trains of thought.

After he had counted the cycle for what seemed several hundred times, the pain in his legs became such a pure single sensation of absolute pain that he felt he had to stop.

He loosened his legs carefully from their cross, and forced himself immediately to his feet against the agony.

The agony of returning circulation in his legs almost took him involuntarily back off his feet, but he remembered this pain now; Talak had been most insistent that it had to be faced.

"Walk with it," he had counseled. "Make your legs work though they feel bathed in flames. It will not truly harm you, and your mind and your concentration will gain by it. Only, it will take time. Do not expect to conquer pain quickly and easily. I am an old man and long in hunter's mind, yet even I have not conquered it completely."

That was small comfort now! Jamnar thought, as he halted painfully around and around the tiny cell, still trying to keep count of his breaths. To make that easier, he breathed in time with his slow pacing.

Now the pain in his legs reminded him over and over again of who and where he was—a youth from the open northlands, trapped inside immeasurable piles of stones, perhaps forever—a High Kan, ruler of many tribes, good enough in heart and will not to wantonly kill his enemies, yet a king in captivity—and a proud, capable, famous Free Captain, leader of brave men, panting now with the fear of a wild thing against some caged human doom too vast for it to comprehend.

For hours he sat, rose, walked, over and over again, striving to keep his attention solely on his breathing through the millionfold distractions of his situation and his memories. Pain came and went, and always brooding over him was the weight of his monstrous prison, and the awful knowledge of how helplessly he was trapped.

Over and over again he struggled to concentrate his

mind only on his breathing, to forget all distractions . . . and all fears.

Yet the cold stones remained, and his fear remained.

At last he crumpled to the stone floor in a half-faint. Hunter's mind still seemed as remote as freedom. He lay there quietly for a time, the sweat chilling his body; and then he let himself drift off into a light doze, troubled by teasing dreams. They had left him his mail shirt under his tunic; its weight alternately comforted and tormented him.

And when he awoke, nothing had changed.

He could not tell how long he had been asleep.

It made no difference how long he had been asleep.

He was still right where he was before he went to sleep, in body—and in mind.

He broke out into sweat again.

After several more hours of trying to keep his attention centered on breathing from the pit of his stomach while sitting and while walking, he wrenched himself out of the sitting posture with a strangled cry.

His mind obstinately would not clear; instead, there was still only the fearful whimpering of his mind, wretched in its appalled realization of where his body was.

His cravenness astonished him; surely when he had faced fear as a boy, it had not been like this? It assailed him at every turn of his body and mind.

Too many memories . . . when he was a boy there had been no Ailaisha to think of—and Tashai'a, and Shannai'sha and all the new pleasures of the body he had shared with his two most favored wives. He was not nineteen now, yet he felt his mind still seething with a full lifetime's memories, the tent of the Kan, the Lord Chief of Arteleon, under the fyzur trees, in the cool morning, Tashai'a coming to him in filmy wisps of blue . . .

Tashai'a, Tashai'a, the flaming arrow arching downward—downward for *him*, and Gaharn laughing with the bow in his hand . . . he moaned once and writhed briefly on the stone.

Then he stopped stock-still.

Tashai'a?

But he had accepted her death long ago. Why now was he mourning her again? She had not perished but the one time—and here in his mind he was killing her over and over again!

He thought about that a few moments, and about the other griefs that had been racking him along with the myriad physical agonies.

Then suddenly the grief left him, somewhat, and he sat up.

He felt groggy, but reasonably calm—for the first time since his first waking in this hellhole.

A certain familiar grim amusement rose strongly within him then. Here he was, prisoned away from all he loved and desired and valued in life. Was he improving himself by cringing in fear at every shadow of a thought or memory that crossed his mind?

Almost, he thought, he might chuckle at that; and then he did chuckle.

It had a hollow sound to it, perhaps; but it was a human sound, and a more cheerful one than any others he had heard, or made, here.

Down here in these rocks, there was a man, a man who was still a man and who was still alive.

He chuckled again.

A man with nothing save a stone box . . . and time. Time, patience, and determination, that was what hunter's mind required.

Another mournful chuckle, and he wrenched his feet gently back into painful position.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

He fell into a pattern of sleeping every few hours, as well as he could judge the time. For with the passing away of his original fears, a new enemy had shown itself: boredom.

Whenever he significantly slowed the flood of ideas and plans, the useless words, now an utter boredom took hold of him.

Time stretched out, became unbearably prolonged. Counting to ten required a seeming ageless imprisonment within himself, within his own mind, with nothing to do.

After half a dozen sets of sitting and walking, he fled the boredom in sleep.

But now he began to worry on a deeper level, that perhaps he would never be able to attain hunter's mind again. Surely it should not have taken this long? The great fears—were they the indications he had slipped too far away from hunter's ways?

Had he become unworthy of it?

Slowly he began to realize how he had become subtly proud, in his rapid progress upwards in the Flanage; how little time he had even given to planning his return to the north, or even thinking about it at all, that cold throne of the Viadhash hardly alluring compared to his thorough taste of the tone and flavor of life here . . .

Here? That called up a chuckle.

Kasul had certainly taught well his distractions from hunter's mind; how cool and relaxing would be a jack of that ale served in Torthnunon's Inn!

So here he was in a black prison, sitting in the silent darkness doing nothing; and yet he had to admit to himself that it was rewarding. He felt more himself, more in

charge of himself, less a prisoner of his Flanage-grown desires.

He drew himself back to the counting, then thought about Kasul, cheerful, somewhere outside; thought about Athandur, delighted on his throne; thought about the swirling events outside that had caught him up . . . and found amusement growing in him. Let them, any of them, find themselves where he was—would they even have hunter's mind to flee to?

But that brought into the open another fear, one that had been creeping steadily back upon him. The long hours of waking and sleeping had half-convinced him that no one would ever come for him, that he was destined to die here when his strength ran out, when hunger and thirst passed the mystic point.

He shook his mind away from that train of thought.

After all, he thought after another attempt at concentrating, in hunter's mind he would be able to sit conserving his energy for a much longer time. He might even hope to double the time he had; and in that time, someone might come.

But fear clamped onto him again—was hunter's mind, perhaps, only a mirage of its own? For whatever its virtues, it would not, could not, free him from this predicament! He would still be trapped in this cell!

Slumped and sweating, he forced his back to stiffen; and, ignoring doubts, fears, possibilities, he concentrated yet again on his breathing. In, out; one, two . . .

Had it been a day? Two days?

One, two; three, four; five, six; seven, eight; nine, ten; one, two . . .

There was a distant jingling, varied occasionally with other metallic clanks and creaks.

It seemed to form a regular pattern of sorts. Slowly Jamnar allowed himself to become aware of it.

A warder? Bringing food?

But he could not let himself become distracted; having finally gained some slight control over himself, he renewed his concentration steadily on his breathing while the noises slowly grew louder.

"You are new," said the jailor, standing in front of the grill, a sour expression of satisfaction on his face. "Do not speak to me of any matter, pleading, informative, or whatever. Else you will get nothing till the next time I come round."

The jailor unlatched the grill as Jamnar peered through at him. Then he leaned over the small cart he pushed, and ladled some stew onto a battered metal plate.

"Food," he announced. He poured several dippersful of water into a worn leathern jack that immediately began leaking slightly. "Drink."

He handed the plate and the jack through the small opening left by the grill, and grinned without any humor. "Well, I'll have another chat with you, this time tomorrow!"

"Food," said the jailor. "Drink." Jamnar took them and the jailor grinned at him; it was his second visit. "Your friend Hazund, Lord Elder of Rozuth, spent the morning very comfortably in the hands—and other things—of the public executioners. It was most . . . colorful. Well, until tomorrow, then!"

And he went away. It took Jamnar two sittings to begin to dispel the images of torture that now thronged his mind.

"Food," said the jailor. "Drink. Rumor says the king plans to attack Belcamnaron, or perhaps Adranarpha. Think of the looting!"

Jamnar ate, and returned to his concentration.

He no longer had to count in order to keep his attention on his breath, but the weight of the prison and the emptiness of his hunger tore at him.

Dimly, too, he was becoming aware of voices; he could not yet quite discern what they were saying, but, even when he ignored them in concentrating, they got louder. He knew then that he was approaching hunter's mind at last.

The fourth time he heard the jailor's keys far down the corridor, he heard the voices in his mind again.

But this time his hearing was sensitive enough to grasp snatches of what they were saying.

"Curse you, don't walk so fast . . . It's a pity to treat a poor soldier so, wounded sorely in the service of the king's majesty himself, and twenty five krons in your pocket as well."

It was not in his mind! That was Kasul's voice echoing in the corridors!

But—wounded? His footsteps, familiar enough to him and different than the jailor's, distinctively, were uneven now, and there was an extra 'thump' that did not seem to be something the jailor would be doing.

"Tis none of my worry," came the jailor's voice. "You've paid your way in, true enough, but you haven't bought other considerations. I have no time to waste, to halt along on my rounds with the likes of you. Also you might reflect on your good fortune, not to be more permanently near your captain."

"Doubtless the kings thinks differently, or I would be," said Kasul. "But I did not bribe you to tell me cautionary tales."

The jailor answered nothing.

"How is it," said Kasul after a moment, "that none of the prisoners speak to you when you give them their food?"

"Ha! They are well-trained! They have learned well that I do not feed those who speak. Hence they remain marvelously silent; and I can tell you that it makes my duties infinitely easier. Oh, yes."

Kasul snorted. "I have no doubt. Are you paid well?" he added sarcastically.

"Not particularly," said the jailor with a chuckle. "But I receive a great number of bribes from outside. Here we are! I shall lock you in with your captain, and on my way back I shall let you out again. Best be ready to leave at that time, or I'll keep you in with him a day, eh? Hehehe!"

Jamnar listened to the jailor tittering as he fumbled with the main lock of his cell door; and then, slowly, heavily, the door swung inwards.

Kasul stumped in, leaning on a large crutch, and the jailor hauled the door shut behind them, locking it.

"A quarter of an hour," he said cheerfully, and left them there.

"How can you see in here?" said Kasul irritatedly. "It's pitch-dark, and—ow!" He had kept on hobbling inwards, and had hit the rear wall.

"After the first few days I could see rather well," said Jamnar. "What brings you here? And why are you all crippled and hobbling? What has been happening?"

"Ah. You have questions. Is there any place to sit, in here?"

"Try the floor," Jamnar retorted curtly. "Are you going to tell me what is happening?" The reality and stark horror of his imprisonment once more pressed in on him, with Kasul's presence from the world of freedom outside.

"It is complex, yet simple. A team of assassins tracked you to Valish Kadarnu's. Hazund had been hiding there, since his daughter escaped from his previous safety-hole and betrayed its location to the king. I presume he felt Valish Kadarnu, being a wizard of sorts, would not be able to resist gold. It was a desperate measure on Hazund's part, and proves once more it is not easy to evade the king's wishes.

"Well, the assassins found you stupefied and were

about to satisfy their orders by despatching you, when they realized who it was they had disarmed and who had been standing over your body laughing like a madman. So the assassins carried you both away. Hazund was very well treated by the executioner the other day. It was only after his execution that I could even find out where to begin to make my bribes. Those in charge know the jailor is always susceptible to bribes, *any* jailor. So they cut themselves in—it cost me another fifty krons just to gain an introduction to that nameless jailor, and they always get a look at those who are bribing their way inside the prison."

Jamnar nodded slowly. "I have been thinking, having little else to do. I was under the influence of that cursed Xynth-fungus, but the men were sent for me. Yet they attacked both me and Hazund and consequently were not Hazund's men. But is it not so that Hazund was the man sending assassins to me?"

"Then you have not been thinking clearly; or else you yet do not grasp the extent to which treachery can extend. Consider: when you came to the city gates, was there not a daggered attempt on your life—foiled by your undercoat of mail? And was there not an identical attempt on your life later on the palace steps? Can you tell my why the second assassin from the same source would attempt the same unsuccessful type of assassination? In short, the two attacks were paid for by two different men!"

"I had wondered about that," said Jamnar, "but then I decided I simply did not have enough facts. So I occupied my mind with . . . other matters."

He frowned in the dimness.

Kasul's rattling-onward conversation seemed abnormally upsetting after the complete peacefulness of the past five days. All that painful effort, seeking hunter's mind—had it gone for so little?

It was an extremely disquieting thought. His head spun

dizzily and he made himself try once more to get hold of his mind.

"I will tell you a thing, then," said Kasul. "The assassin at the gate was sent by the late Hazund."

Kasul paused, and Jamnar saw him lean forward in the dimness.

"And the assassin on the palace steps was sent by the king, with a second man there to speed the first to another reward, should anything go wrong, as it did. The Lord of Blood can be quite meticulous."

"Because of Ailaisha? And he spoke to me as he did in private, seeing the marks of his assassin's failure in the rips of my tunic?" It would make everything fit, Jamnar realized.

Kasul nodded, then grimaced and shook his head, forgetting Jamnar could see him. "Something of that," he said, "yes, and your successes in the marches. Those eight hundred men willing to enter your service must have rankled with him, for he knows he is held in affection and respect largely because of the generosity of his recent months. Not that he is a bad king, as they run in the Flanage. I also learned that Ailaisha repulsed him rather strenuously, and mentioned your name—which was incredibly foolish and unfortunate, and useless besides, since a king may have his will of any maiden or otherwise in his kingdom, assuming he can find her.

"Of course, Ailaisha came to him, but she has already regreted this. At any rate, the king in his infatuation and several jealousies of you, became incredibly enraged, says one of my informants, and drafted a set of assassins' commissions within the hour. You were already on your way from the Belcamnaron marches at the time."

"Obviously it is possible to be a hero and a villain at the same time, in King Athandur's lands," said Jamnar, "following his examples. Well, and when does he plan to destroy me?"

Kasul waved his hand negligently. "That is not so im-

portant to him, it seems. He has become embroiled in spending long hours at new plans. Some new attack is portended, so goes the tale about town. I imagine he intends to bring you out when he has full leisure to enjoy using your body painfully, and thus also to persuade the girl to yield more gracefully."

Jamnar grimaced sourly. "You'd say I was relatively safe, for now? It will be good to remember that, in here."

He saw Kasul not bothering to hide a grin. "Are you not curious about my new injury?" he asked.

"Oh, well, yes," said Jamnar abstractedly; then a touch of sarcasm entered his tone. "Of course. Forgive me if I occasionally drop into preoccupations of my own."

Kasul only chuckled, and began fumbling at the side of the crutch.

There was a jingling at the door.

"I'll accept another fifty krons tomorrow, lieutenant, but for today your time is up," said the jailor through the grill as he fumbled with the lock.

"I must get the cursed thing out or we are lost!" whispered Kasul urgently.

The door swung ponderously open and the jailor peered in; and Kasul was drawing Jamnar's stungun from within the hollow crutch.

"Ha!" cried the jailor, "a weapon!" And he danced backwards, swinging the door shut as he went.

"*Quick!*" shouted Kasul in desperation. "Or we're trapped!"

He forced the stungun into Jamnar's hands; and the blood ran chill in Kasul's veins when Jamnar chuckled grimly.

The door shut with a clanging finality.

Outside, the jailor laughed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jamnar pointed the stungun at the door, pressed the firing stud at its side, and a thin beam of light flashed almost noiselessly in the dimness. He cursed, chuckled, released the stud after a moment, and looked at the door.

Nothing had happened to it.

Kasul moaned rather horribly, but Jamnar chuckled again and moved a control in the butt.

This time when he fired at the door there was a sizzling 'crack,' and a hole appeared in the wood.

Keeping the stud depressed, Jamnar moved the stungun-beam in a slow circle round the lock. Choking woodsmoke began to fill the cell.

But now the smouldering lock mechanism fell away at a push, and, slowly, Jamnar hauled the thick door inwards.

The jailor was cringing against the corridor's far wall, his face twisted in a grimace of horror. Beside him was a great burned circle gouged in the solid stone.

Jamnar looked at him a long moment, searching for hunter's mind. He squeezed his eyes almost shut against the comparative glare of the torchlit corridor, and wondered how long it would be before he could see in the light without pain.

"We must hurry," Kasul said nervously, staring at the deep scars in the far wall with almost as much horror as the jailor. "Let us kill this wretch and be on our way."

The jailor paled even whiter, uttered a low moan, and slid unconscious to the corridor floor.

"How quickly can we get to the outside?" asked Jamnar—and then in a great flood of calm clarity, hunter's

mind came to him, so that Kasul's response did not bother him.

"I . . . I don't know," Kasul said with a stricken look. "There were many turns, many corridors, many levels. This one," and he pointed to the jailor, "kept me distracted with talk."

"Never mind," said Jamnar. "We have the stungun and hunter's mind, and that can solve many problems. What kind of men are imprisoned here?"

"Athandur's enemies, and men awaiting his justice. Ha! Yes! Free them with your stungun and confuse the guards, eh?"

Jamnar nodded. "Let us be at it, then. You came down that way, right?"

Kasul returned the nod abstractedly, staring at the slumped jailor with a kind of fascination. "I . . . I never thought about getting outside!"

"*And* you wanted me to kill him! Come along!"

They went along the corridor, Jamnar pausing at each cell door to blast it open.

But three of every four were empty, and half of the men they did find within refused to leave their cells, fearing, as one of them said in a croaking voice, that it was a trick of Athandur's.

After turning several corners and climbing two flights of stone stairs upwards, they had accumulated six men willing to try to leave with them, but, thoroughly unhappy, Kasul said, "It's no use. I've lost track of the way. All I remember is that there must be at least three or four more flights upward. But there were turns and corridors."

They turned another corner. "There is a stairway," said Jamnar. "Come along, and . . ."

A squad of ten men appeared at the head of the stairs, and one, catching sight of the freed prisoners, raised a great shouting.

The guards began running down the stairs at them, drawing swords and yelling ferociously.

Jamnar raised the stungun, hastily lowered it and changed the setting to 'stun,' then raised it again and pressed the firing stud.

The sizzling snap lashed out, and the guards began falling.

As the last one tumbled slackly onto the stairs, he exhaled, realizing it had happened so quickly he had taken only one breath.

"Now we're in trouble," said Kasul. "The alarm has been raised."

The other prisoners looked at the stungun and the guards in a kind of horrified amazement.

Jamnar patted the stungun. "The past has been raised, too. Up the stairs, quickly!"

At the top of the stairs a barred window overlooked a courtyard. The daylight glare again almost blinded Jamnar, who had barely gotten used to the torchlit corridors. The six others had to be helped to move in the right directions, since each had been in darkness for months.

"Oh," said Kasul in a low tone. "That's another thing I forgot."

"What?" said Jamnar patiently.

"I came *up* two flights when I first came in. We weren't as far below the surface as I had thought."

"How did you ever become a master thief?"

Kasul said, with a kind of mock indignation, "Did I ever claim to be a *master* thief? I'm reasonably competent, and I don't get caught, which is very important. But there are no doubt a great many who know more about it than I. It's only an avocation with me, after all."

Around the corner some ten meters in front of them a pair of guards came running. They halted, seeing the men at the window, then shouted back the way they had come, "This way—escapees!"

Jamnar laughed and slapped Kasul on the back. "Now I know which way to go! Come on!"

Kasul stood slackjawed as Jamnar began running—toward the oncoming guards, stunning them as he ran. "But, but more are going to come that way!" he shouted to Jamnar. "We must go back another way!"

Jamnar reached the intersecting corridor and began firing down it. Moments later he called to Kasul, "Come along. We can get out, wherever they come from. Do you think still that this is a toy?"

Kasul gulped and followed Jamnar, and the others followed reluctantly.

Two more ten-man squads came at them in the next corridor, only to fall before the stungun.

"I recognize this ramp!" Kasul said suddenly. "Two flights down these stairs to the main entranceway, round the corner from the great square!"

The stungun flashed out here and there as they ran down the stairs; and then they were in a large anteroom.

The far side consisted of the outer gates of the prison.

The large anteroom was deserted. "They've closed the gates and all gone here and there in answer to the alarms," said Kasul. "You'll have to burn your way through that gate, if you can. Nobody's going to open it for us."

Jamnar changed the setting on his stungun and ran for the gate. Great iron staples held a series of gigantic bolts in slots that fastened the outward-swinging gates.

He aimed the stungun at the point where the two doors met, fired, and ran the beam slowly down the center, cutting through the heavy bolts.

The beam cut through the bottom one at last, and the gates shuddered slightly. Jamnar threw his shoulder against the open side. Kasul and the others joined him, and slowly the ponderous door swung further outward, until they could just slip out.

There came a distant series of loud cheers, as from an immense multitude.

"It is another festival day," said Kasul. "The king makes a proclamation at high noon."

The eight men threw their backs into closing the gate behind them, while people hurried through the avenue in front of the prison, toward the central square. But none bothered to notice the damage to the gates.

A wide flight of stairs led downward to street-level; they walked slowly, calmly, down. Jamnar glanced across at a high wall running along the far side of the avenue; on the wall was a great vertical slash carved by the stungun.

Jamnar pointed at it, and Kasul shook his head with a wry grimace.

"I'm not used to it myself," admitted Jamnar.

The six men they had freed were looking hesitantly about, still squinting against the glare. "You should have a fair chance of escaping," Jamnar told them, "unless the king holds your bloodmarks."

The men began drifting away, mingling with the crowds, while moving away from the prison and the square.

Jamnar walked slowly along with Kasul. "Leave your weapon on the blast setting, friend Valzar," Kasul advised. "If our luck should happen to thin out, we'll need every edge we can get."

Jamnar adjusted the setting. "That is why I am changing it back to stun," he said. "I have a feeling I could destroy the entire city with this—which I do not think would be wise."

Kasul shrugged. "It has been like a dream anyway. Might as well bring it all crashing down about our ears, eh?"

There was a gigantic roaring from the crowd.

"The king has just proclaimed either war, or peace,"

added Kasul with a grin. "The question is, what is there for us to do in his realm after this morning?"

Jamnar realized he had lost hunter's mind, and halted in silence to calm himself again.

Then he smiled at Kasul. "Perhaps that depends on whether he has proclaimed war or peace?"

Kasul cocked his head at the sky. "The king said he would speak at midday, and it is not yet that time. Perhaps the crowd but cheers some announcement of additional festivities. I have heard such tales of them in the past few days since we returned, that make me wish I were a commoner of Khaldiriam. The king wisely spends of his new treasure on pleasing his people."

Jamnar looked thoughtfully at his stungun. "I do not believe I have used half an hour's worth of the power." He smiled at Kasul with a new grim satisfaction. "And it is supposed to last for thirty seven hours of constant use. They must have fought like demons, not men, in the days of this weapon."

He shook his head with annoyance. He had fallen out of hunter's mind again. Kasul seemed to get him thinking of a dozen different matters at the same time, which invariably wrenched him out of the clarity of hunter's mind.

"Let us be on our way," said Kasul, quite nervously now. "We have been standing here by the prison far too long."

"You are right; the guards will be awakening. Well, then, let us take that street round the square. Perhaps we can get near enough to the palace steps to hear him when the king appears."

"You are speaking in jest," said Kasul; but his voice showed his uncertainty.

"We must know what the king plans, eh? And perhaps it would not be best for the Flanage, should Larger Khaldir embark on another war."

"You plan to stop it, then?" Kasul asked sarcastically.

"I plan to let even the Lord of Blood have his say—first."

Jamnar smiled grimly once more, and Kasul shut his eyes for a moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"See, who stand beside the king!" said Kasul. "Not only Vithunvar of the Watchers, but Chobu of the Shielders. What a strange policy he must have decided upon!"

Kasul had taken them to the back of a villa fronting on the square, and now they stood on a small balcony peering over tightly-packed commoners, and ranks of Free Companions surrounding the king. They had entered and moved through the villa with ease, since the villa's owners were all observing the occasion from another balcony.

At a gesture of the king's, the chamberlains, resplendent in their black, silver-worked cloaks, raised their arms commandingly.

Slowly, the great throngs of people fell silent, voices dying away even past murmurs, that the king's words might not be missed.

"I see only four of Athandur's eleven companies here today," said Jamnar. "Is mine here? Who commands it?"

"There are but four; the others are awaiting new orders, and today is expected to be the day they are given. Ghradhur commands Valzar's Company—and has not yet had its name changed to his. The men are distressed at your continued absence, for the king has not yet announced your imprisonment, nor its justification."

The four Free Companies were formed in a square around the king's dais, where the Bloodjewel Throne glittered like a frozen flame. Beyond the soldiers were the people of Khaldiriam, some thirty thousand, in every kind of festive garb.

"My people!" King Athandur called stridently. "Are these not the days of prosperity I promised you?"

There came an immense roar of approval from the throngs.

"Endless weeks of festivities," said Kasul sardonically. "Of course they approve."

Jamnar nodded, intent on the king's words.

"These days of good fortune shall continue! Yea, they shall continue—though you must know now that East and West Tharet have taken upon themselves the heavy burden of alliance with Belcamnaron and Telmarnar. The intent of this alliance is to force us to yield up Ruldoun and Chaitor Zun. If we do not, they will all attack us."

A great awed sigh now swept over the multitudes.

Kasul whistled tonelessly. "That should make them pause for thought! Telmarnar alone is as mighty as Belcamnaron and the Tharets together. It is not a prospect that should cheer these helpless citizens!"

The king stood silent for a time, and the crowd-murmurings subsided once more.

"Do not fear! For, this morning, the companies of my armies in the east, west, and south have received orders to proceed southwards to crush the Tharets! Until this has been completed, these companies here today shall, this evening, proceed westward to protect Chaitor Zun and Ruldoun. When the Tharets have been conquered, the combined army will attack Belcamnaron and drive King Yarizun westwards into the merciful embrace of his cousins of Telmarnar."

Now the king paused again, breathing heavily with the effort of making his voice ring through the plaza; but the crowd waited in silence as if paralyzed by the enormity of the king's statements.

"I have ordered this, solely because our enemies will not deal honorably and evenhandedly with us. Know you, and know all others, that I had made no plans to attack those who did not plan to attack us. I carry no guilt for that which now is to occur.

"But there are those who wonder at my actions no more than at my words, that I should explain my actions to my people. It is not the custom for monarchs to sue for understanding.

"Yet I am a man, no less than any of you. At some time I shall die—and whether I then journey mindlessly into the howling chaos beyond, as some say, or whether I shall vanish away utterly, as others insist, or whether I return or find myself in hell or heaven, know you this: I have done what I can to make my kingdom happier than it was before." Once more he paused for breath.

"I have heard fearful whispers bruited about, that I am the dreadful avatar of Rokhul the Black himself, that notable scourge who wasted so much of the Flanage in his day. Yet I say to you I am not Rokhul, for he brought his people to the sword and doom by calling them to fight against the peoples he strove to conquer.

"You, my people, live in peace, though in the midst of wars. Why? Because of the Free Companies I have hired to keep us from the angry swords of enemies—and know you now that when my army attacks Belcamnaron and moves thereafter to Telmarnar, it will contain fifteen Free Companies! Such a force has not been seen in the Flanage since Rokhul armed his land, twice a hundred years ago!

"Think you we shall be victorious?

"Think you we shall then prosper as never before?

"Think you we shall have such festivals as these for days, weeks, months, and years to come?

"What then of dangers, what then of hatreds and fears? We shall be the happy land, and be a joyful folk for the emulation of all the Flanage!"

Surging, roaring cheers burst from the crowds as King Athandur stood with arms outflung, his face sweating with exertion but warmly smiling.

"His father was not a popular ruler," mused Kasul with

a wry grin. "I think he has found the way to surpass him!"

Jamnar frowned in puzzlement. "Do you think he believes what he says? Does he think he can build a land of contented peace upon the wreckages of such war?"

Kasul looked oddly at him. "Moralize as you wish, my friend. Yet he may well succeed. It will cost many lives, but soldiers' lives are paid for in their hire. And he has fifteen companies! Though some are newly-formed and little-skilled, it is surely twice the combined strength of his opposites. Contentment? I do not know. But it will not fail because Athandur's will failed, I am certain of that."

"And then? Will there not be more wars after, and more fear? Will his enemies, those that still live, be less fearful of him? Will he and his people think themselves more loved?"

"Do you think they will care?" Kasul's smile was bitter. "There will be wars enough to keep me and all my companions hard at work for years to come! Should Athandur conquer the Tharets and defeat the armies of Belcamnaron and Telmarnar, Telmarnar will surely ally the remainder of its strength with Septaphesh and Adranarpha before Athandur's armies reach Telmarnar. Old Akanar's power will at last be roused, even if somewhat crippled. A Rokhul to his soldiers he remains."

"Enough!" Jamnar's voice was soft, his face expressionless.

The crowd's cheering had somewhat died away, but the king stood back toward his throne, as if to say he would speak no more; and so the hubbub of confused noise continued.

Of a sudden, Jamnar leaped up onto the balcony's railing, sent a crackling stunbolt upwards, and shouted, "Enough!" at full voice into the plaza.

Seeing him, Athandur moved back against his throne

in staggered astonishment, but the crowd's attention was not yet taken.

Jamnar pressed the firingstud again and left it down; and as the crackling beam continued to pour skyward, the people fell rapidly silent and stared at him.

"Enough!" cried Jamnar again, and released the firing-stud.

"Well, you have their attention," Kasul observed wryly. "What are you going to do with it?"

Jamnar laughed aloud, filled with a sudden dark surge of joy he could not name.

"Valzar of the Northlands says your war has gone on long enough!" he called to the king, and the crowd muttered in vast astonishment.

The king laughed openly. "Not yet!" he shouted back. "I do not know how you escaped my prison, but it will matter little, after all, since you were so foolish as to show yourself again."

Athandur turned and called an order to the captain on his left, commanding the company nearest Jamnar's balcony.

The captain turned when the orders were done, looked toward Jamnar again, hesitated, then went to his men and began issuing his own orders. It was Turtunnull.

Fifty men broke away from the captain's company and began making their way through the crowd toward Jamnar. The crowd surged restlessly and tried to get away from the soldiers.

"Order them to halt, your highness," called Jamnar. "There is no need to prolong this."

King Athandur stood by his throne with a crooked smile on his face, and said nothing further.

The fifty soldiers came to a space already cleared by the rapidly parting crowd, and moved forward at a trot toward the balcony.

"You know he will not," said Kasul, urgently. "Use your weapon!"

"Very well," said Jamnar, and he raised the stungun and fired it at King Athandur.

He cursed and dropped out of hunter's mind; he had missed the king. Vithunvar fell with a strangled gasp, but the king threw himself behind the Bloodjewel Throne, disappearing from Jamnar's view.

There was a collective moan of horror and excitement from the crowd.

The lieutenant in charge of the fifty men glanced upward at Jamnar with ashen face, but he and his men kept moving forward resolutely.

Jamnar looked down at them, took a deep breath, regained hunter's mind, and began playing the stungun beams over them.

In seconds, all fifty lay motionless on the paves.

In frantic agitation the crowd nearest this ghastly scene of apparent slaughter tried to push backwards and away; but the confused, surging press of the multitudes made this almost impossible. Moans of anguish now arose.

King Athandur still could not be seen behind the throne, but he was calling orders, and courtiers were darting to the four companies.

Jamnar dropped lightly off onto the balcony while Kasul ducked back inside the villa, and Jamnar kept his arms behind him; presently a flight of arrows arched upwards and down at them both.

Most rattled harmlessly off the stonework; but three became stuck in his tunic, stopped by the mail beneath.

He sprang back up onto the stone railing, to gasps from the crowd. "What next, Athandur?" he called.

A few more arrows wobbled up at him but did not come close; he made no move to avoid them.

Athandur now peered around the side of the throne, screaming, "Take him! Take him! A gift of Xindurbil to the man who brings him to me!"

There was great visible hesitation in the ranks of the Free Companies, and most of Valzar's Company held fast.

But then, with many shouts of mutual encouragement, the other three companies broke, swarming toward the balcony, while the commoners struggled mightily to get away from them and from Jamnar's terrible weapon.

And Jamnar began firing at the soldiers.

First he cut a wide swath from side to side, along the middle of the mass of men struggling to cross the square to him.

Then he began running the beam from front to back at angles, varying a patternless design almost as the whim seized him; and always as the beam ran along them men fell to the ground without protest.

Yet this took time; and many of the soldiers in front were getting dangerously close to the balcony. He began concentrating on them, as stray arrows began falling around him once more. Briefly he wondered why the bowmen did not try harder; but his reputation for invulnerability from assassins' daggers, and the three arrows, deflected by his mail shirt and hanging in the fabric of his tunic, must be sapping their wills, he decided, while still he played the stungun beam along the front ranks of attacking soldiers.

Then . . . all movement toward him seemed to shudder, then stop.

At least half the free companions lay motionless on the paves of the great plaza.

Now the remainder stood suddenly irresolute, in silent confusion, looks of horror full on all faces.

Athandur's voice came distantly from behind the Blood-jewel Throne. "Kill him! Kill him! Yuun and Dalvar as well to the man who brings him down!"

Behind the dais there was commotion; the courtiers were beginning to withdraw from the safety of its shadow, while the king's voice ranted on.

A voice from somewhere cut very clearly through the murmurs of horror waving through the awed masses.

"Single combat! Single combat!"

There was a flurry near the dais. Crimson fluttered, and two Free Captains began clambering up the clumsy structure.

"Is that Turtunnull with Nurab?" asked Kasul, from behind Jamnar, and Jamnar nodded, a frown of concentration on his face.

"Captain Valzar," said Hai'jorth Nurab, voice shaking, as he and Turtunnull reached the Bloodjewel Throne. "It has been proposed that this ghastly slaughter be ended honorably. I propose, then, that you join in the traditional device of single combat."

"Your safety before the engagement is guaranteed," added Turtunnull. "But you must fight with your sword, not that murderous slaughter-machine."

"Single combat with whom?"

There was a struggle behind the throne, and several shortcaped lieutenants came around it, bringing with them King Athandur.

"Why, with the king, of course," said Turtunnull.

Jamnar nodded, a little startled. "Very well."

"Foolish, foolish," muttered Kasul, as they entered the villa to go down to the street level. "You could have safely done in the king from here. Why risk yourself?" But he did not seem to expect an answer; not did one come.

"What stakes are there, besides our lives?" asked Jamnar conversationally as they came down into the plaza.

"Single combat with the king?" said Kasul, and as they walked by the bodies of the soldiers, the crowds murmured and kept out of their path. "The stakes? Why, if he wins, he takes everything of yours—including that very dangerous stungun, and, of course, your life—for which reasons I devoutly hope the king's prowess is less than is vaunted. For you must know he is considered an excellent swordsman, having been taught daily in the arts by the greatest masters he could attract to Khaldiriam."

"And if *I* win?"

"Why, you shall become Valzar the First, King of Larger Khaldir," said Kasul, and now he struggled to keep his tone calmly conversational to match Jamnar's own coolness. "In charge, I might add, of the greatest army seen since the time of Rokhul—primed and moving already to the conquest of Old Akanar and, I doubt not, the whole Flanage!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jamnar and King Athandur stood facing each other on opposite sides of the dais, from which the Bloodjewel Throne had been unceremoniously hauled off.

"There are no rules here," said the king softly. "Afterwards, I shall have your hide flayed from your body and cut into small pieces which I shall in future distribute to those I wish to mark particularly with my favor."

Jamnar listened calmly, seeking to broaden hunter's mind and keep away extraneous thoughts. If the king were a good enough swordsman, Jamnar might survive; but he could not allow that to matter to him or he would never remain sufficiently in hunter's mind.

Only one anxiety assailed him. Could he kill the king if opportunity showed itself? Could he kill so coldly in hunter's mind? He had never thought about it before, but the prison days of almost fruitless struggle with himself, with his own mind, had made him begin at last to realize what it was that had made his selfcontrol so difficult. Hunter's mind required a more simple life than that of a slave turned Free Captain in the Flanage; there were simply too many distractions.

And now the king was moving slowly to the center of the dais platform. It was about five paces by seven—scarcely larger than his cell, Jamnar realized.

The king smiled mockingly at him from the center of the dais, and made a court-bow. "When you are ready to die," Athandur said, "simply step forward and begin fighting. Take your time; courage is not always easy."

That would surely enrage me or anyone, were my mind not under control, thought Jamnar, and then he cleared his mind with an almost desperate surge of will.

Now in hunter's mind and sure of himself, he drew his sword, held it at ready, and moved slowly out toward the Lord of Blood.

The tips of their blades touched for a moment; then with ferocious speed the king launched his attack.

Jamnar moved back under the press of Athandur's blade, meeting each thrust and slice very precisely with his own. In hunter's mind it was far easier to judge which of the king's strokes were real and which were feints; and thus he kept himself alive the first few minutes, moving slowly away from the king's vigorous attacks all the while, turning as he neared the platform's edge, keeping always away from the king's blade.

Suddenly the crowd roared. Athandur stepped in close, locking swords, and the king's knee jerked convulsively upwards into the barbarian's crotch.

Jamnar avoided the full force of the blow, but groaned involuntarily and staggered backwards, leaning slightly forward with the pain.

For the first time in the fight he felt real uncertainty—and the pain had knocked him loose from hunter's mind!

The king moved forward to the attack again, though he appeared to be breathing somewhat harder than Jamnar.

At the end of the next exchange of blows, a line of blood appeared on Jamnar's chest, drawn there by the tip of the king's sword.

The crowd roared again.

For a moment Jamnar closed his eyes, then he turned the new pain to use and was in hunter's mind again.

And now he knew it was time to attack.

The king launched a swinging heavy blow at Jamnar's left side—and instead of stepping away or merely fending the blow off in a crude parry, Jamnar swung his own blade as strongly as he could.

The two blades met—and Jamnar's snapped off at midlength!

The crowd screamed and screamed at that—and immediately after, screamed even louder.

For, his mind now clear and resolute, Jamnar had understood what had happened to his weapon before the king did—and he leaped full at the astonished Lord of Blood, grasping his sword-wrist in one mighty hand while with the other, dropping his own ruined blade, he aimed a blow at the side of the king's head that felled him to his knees.

His sword fell from the king's lax hand, and while the crowd howled on and on, the tableau held, briefly frozen: the king kneeling motionless in front of Jamnar and obviously reft of his senses.

Then in a fluid motion the king launched himself upwards at Jamnar, and his teeth sank into the flesh of Jamnar's throat, and he worried and struggled at the throat to get a better grip while Jamnar, forced backwards and offbalance, stumbled and fell heavily to his back. Momentarily stunned, he realized the king's teeth had lost their hold.

The crowd howled its disappointment, since few now could see what was happening on the platform floor.

As they wrestled together on the floor, closely struggling, the advantage began to go to Jamnar's strength of youth, until at last Athandur lay gasping on his back, Jamnar kneeling on his chest.

"I want no more kingdoms," Jamnar panted. "I wish only to return to my people."

And he rose, somewhat stiffly, and stood quietly by the king, who raised himself up on his hands, panting for breath, and glared upwards with a pure hatred burning in his eyes.

"You will let him live?" screamed a voice from the crowd.

"Kill him! Kill him!" others called hysterically.

"His life is as valuable as yours," Jamnar said calmly in a loud voice, "or as worthless."

The crowd murmured irresolutely.

"They expect a more bloody conclusion," Kasul said from just below the top of the dais, a step away from Jamnar and the king. He held the stungun and was carefully watching a group of the king's more loyal personal retainers. Behind him were the men of Valzar's Company. "Their lord has brought them into prosperity, but already they have become used to prosperity. He has given them gory shows for their delight, and their delight in that has paled also. They are nothing for him. Kill him and be done, Valzar!"

Jamnar looked down at King Athandur, who still glared up at him with hate-filled eyes; then Jamnar looked up again at Kasul and started to speak. "No, friend, I shall . . ."

Athandur moved then with his startling speed, writhing over on one side and onto his knees in a motion, then launching himself at Kasul's knees.

And as Kasul toppled backwards onto several of his men below, Athandur wrenched the stungun from his grasp and stood, shakily, holding it in his hands and panting.

Jamnar held motionless, looking into the man's eyes; they gleamed redly, madly.

"Haaaaaa!" the king screamed. "Death to all traitors, then!"

But before he could press the firing stud, Jamnar, calmly sure in hunter's mind, was upon him and wrestling the muzzle of the stungun up and away.

Stunbolts sizzling constantly, the king's hand pressed involuntarily now against the firing stud, the two men struggled for possession of the weapon for a timeless, almost motionless moment; and then the king's hands, wet with nervous sweat, slipped from the barrel.

Jamnar had not time to hold back; his own forceful grip pushed the stungun muzzle back till it sizzled for

another timeless moment against Athandur's left shoulder.

The king screamed one last time, horribly; then he stiffened, stepped backwards one awkward boneless step, two steps . . . and toppled off the dais onto his horrified courtiers.

There was a low collective moan from the crowd, and then awed silence fell.

Kasul had gotten to his feet and climbed back up to the top of the dais; now he stood beside Jamnar.

"Nobility of Khaldiriam, citizens of Larger Khaldir," he intoned in a loud penetrating voice. "Will you accept this Free Captain Count Valzar, having defeated your king?"

A foppish courtier stood forward and called up, "Nay, I say, for this man Valzar has caused today a slaughter here that bars him from *any* leadership. Said he not that he desired to stop all battles, and hence challenged our king? And yet here be more bloody deads and dead men lying about this very moment than have died for Khaldir in a hundred years!"

There were frowns and mutterings at this, and once more the people looked doubtfully toward the piled bodies of the soldiers where they had toppled onto each other.

Suddenly there came loud horrible screams near where the first fifty had been struck by the stunbolts. "Look, look they rise! They rise and walk!"

Now Captain Turtunnull clambered up to the dais, Nurab behind him; and then the two captains looked over to where fifty men were quivering, shaking themselves, raising themselves stiffly off the ground.

"What dread sorcery is this?" demanded Turtunnull of Jamnar.

"None," said Jamnar simply. "My weapon did not slay, but only stunned them."

Captain Nurab frowned. "It is a cursed weapon of the ancients, eh? But how is it that it still works?"

"It is ancient," agreed Jamnar. "And yet it works. How I do not know." That was true enough as long as he could not reach Inzu's memories, Jamnar thought.

While they spoke, others of the hundreds of other free companions struck by the stunbolts began to show signs of returning life.

"It is something like a miracle," said Turtunnull, slowly. "And you have bested the king. But he too will live, then; by the tradition of single combat, Valzar, you must kill him now, or renounce claim to the fruits of your victory."

Now Vithunvar rose from where he had been leaning over Athandur; and Chobu held him steady on his feet. "Your weapon is a strange and fearful one, and no thanks to you for using it on me," Vithunvar said in quavering tones. "As for the king, Athandur is Lord of Blood no longer. For me and the others, I know not how it is that we live, but the king is dead."

For a moment Jamnar closed his eyes, and felt hunter's mind wavering away from him; but then he opened his eyes and smiled, rather grimly.

"And so," he said wryly, "I am now your king? Is that it?"

"Well," said Turtunnull, then said no more, but looked where black-and-silver robes glittered.

Slowly the chamberlains Vithunvar and Chobu climbed up the dais, their gorgeous robes stained with dust, their faces drawn and shaking.

"There are certain matters," said Vithunvar, his voice quavering; but then he was seized by a fit of coughing.

"It is an old tradition, the conquest by single combat," said Chobu, "but it is not absolute. We shall have to have a council, to judge your qualities."

"Yes," said Vithunvar. "The combat does not win a

crown for someone who is obviously incompetent to rule, and . . ."

"*Qualities!*" said Kasul indignantly. "Incompetent! He has defeated four Free Companies with but one! Is that not leadership, and competence?"

"Enough," said Jamnar quietly. "Let us have this council meeting, by all means. We will all learn more, and then you will hopefully be content with your decision."

Chobu and Vithunvar inclined their heads, while, quietly but urgently, Kasul whispered in Jamnar's ear. "Tell them of your kanship! That will win it all, I'm certain!"

Jamnar shook his head slightly, and turned toward the masses of people still standing in wonderment throughout the great square.

"Let the festivities continue as the late king planned!" he shouted. "The council meets this afternoon to decide who shall be your next king!"

Murmurs rippled through the crowd, and then came scattered cries.

Kasul's unhappy face brightened as he made out the words.

"Valzar!" shouted one and then another, and then the cries spread. "Valzar! The barbarian for our king! The new Lord of Blood! Valzar! King Valzar! *We will have Valzar!*"

SLAVE–AND SLAVER!

Condemned to death, the barbarian hero Valzar was thrown into the sea, along with his bond-slave Lynor. The peace of the slavemasters had returned to the lands of the north...or so it seemed. But the slavemasters reckoned not the gods of chance, those frivolous supernatural beings who delight in fouling the plans of men. And more important, they reckoned not the magic of the ancient science that still lived in the Forbidden Temple.

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