

BLADE OF THE DRAGON

Part One

In an age undreamed of, a world akin to our own was embraced by the scintillant coils of the Dragon, a creature beyond all imagining. Within time this world was threatened with oblivion, and in his fury the Dragon unleashed his terrible power upon mankind. From amid the ruins of civilisation a lone warrior emerged to restore order from chaos. Here then is the tale of the last such warrior, and a blade imbued with the spirit of creation . . .

Chapter One

The merciless heat of the noonday sun scorched the crimson sands of the desert from a cloudless sky that stretched from one barren horizon to the other. No trees or shrubs, bushes or even weeds grew in this sanguine heart of the nation men called Zhembier. Only a few igneous rocks littered the otherwise featureless plain of sprawling dunes. Yet here, where nothing whatsoever stirred, a caravan of weary travellers marched west in single file along a well-trodden path through the sand. A convoy of five wagons were drawn by the gently rocking gait of camels, clad in a rich violet canvas, two bearing a magnificent standard: a golden phoenix clutching a writhing serpent in its talons. Escorting the wagons was a score of riders with all but two of their number dressed in armour. Battered iron breastplates, notched shields and dull iron helms bore testimony to the repeated onslaught of a ferocious enemy. Leagues of open desert had taken its toll on the languid procession. The riders sagged on their saddlebows like tired old men and few had the strength to raise their chins from their chests that they might see what grim fate lay before them.

Leading the caravan was a proud and stoic figure atop a magnificent stallion; an ivory coloured beast with a squarely cropped mane and tail and trimmed in silken

finery. The rider wore the traditional garb of the Zhebierian warrior, clad in kaffia and wool-spun kaftan with matching leggings and a violet cape of finest silk.

Abruptly the stallion shuffled to a halt and snorted the dry air, flicking his tale in irritation. Warily the rider removed the veil tucked into the rim of his kaffia, shielding his face from the sun whilst travelling through the day. His face bore the hard-edged features, bronzed skin and dark eyes that typified his race, while his dark beard and moustache were trimmed to a point beneath his chin. Shielding his gaze from the sun at his zenith he studied the flat horizon with the whetted eye of a man born to the desert. A swirling cloud of dust lay directly in their path and, blinking drowsily, blurry-eyed from the unrelenting heat he wiped the sweat from his brow. Straining in his saddle the rider re-examined the dust trail more carefully, and there, on the sweltering edge of the horizon, like careless drops of ink upon an azure and crimson canvas, he beheld a score of riders. Experience told him that there would likely be more however, obscured by the ghostly trail of dust that rose from the horse's hooves. Casting a glance over his shoulder to his subordinate the warrior gave the signal to halt. Wagon drivers and guards alike weighed on their reins and the caravan came to rest. The dromedaries groaned their familiar guttural protest and spat on the ground while the carriages they pulled gave an appreciative creak in response to the brief respite.

The second rider, dressed similarly to the first, reined in beside his commander. He was a young man,

clean-shaven and smaller in stature than his superior, but his noble features still bore the lines of a hard life.

“Why have we stopped brother? We should reach Zhemobia by nightfall if we . . .” Following his sibling’s gaze into the distant haze he too noticed the dust trail that rose like an eerily silent spectre before them. “Ahmed, you were blessed with the eyes of a hawk. A sand storm perhaps?”

“No, I do not think so my brother,” Ahmed murmured almost to himself. “Give the order to circle the wagons Hazir and order the men to prepare for attack.”

Hazir detected the urgency in his brother’s words. Obediently he turned his steed round and spurned it back toward the caravan, his silken cape unfurling from his shoulders. Hazir had long ago learnt to have faith in his brother’s judgement, especially in the tactics of war, at which Ahmed seemed to possess an unholy gift.

“So Goran, you mean to end it all here in the desert by taking the Princess?” Ahmed snarled, affecting a spit in contempt for the leader of his enemies. Whirling his mount round he set off toward his company at a gallop, cursing between gritted teeth. “Damn them all to Eldrad’s Nine Hells!”

Hazir waved the wagon drivers into a tight circle then bid them release the camels from their bridles and harnesses and bring them into the centre, so as not to loose them if they were frightened away or worse, butchered by the enemy. Then he canted over to the carriages that bore the royal crest of Ghann, where its passengers were now disembarking.

First to exit were three handmaidens dressed plainly in flowing saris with little embroidery, their ebon hair restrained tightly behind their crowns and eyes respectfully downcast. Hurriedly they parted the rear curtain and placed an intricately carved stepladder at its base, to allow the royal personages dignified egress. Next to emerge was the King's retainer-in-chief and trusted friend, the Abbot Imor-Els. A tall, elderly man dressed in sombre robes hemmed with silver arcane symbols of esoteric meaning and a leather cowl to protect his shaved scalp from the harsh sun. Ashen skin like aging parchment and a bristly white-flecked beard and moustache accentuated his dark, inquisitive eyes. Finally the ambassador for their journey emerged from the shaded carriage. It was the King's only daughter - a beautiful young girl with hair that shone like golden silk, flashing emerald eyes and pouting lips. She wore a light shade of violet in the form of a full-length regal gown and a diaphanous pearl scarf, which she used to shield her exquisite features from the sun. Stepping delicately from the ladder with the aid of her handmaidens she produced a fine paper fan from her sleeve, which she unfolded in one deft motion and began to flutter absently at her cheek. Squinting in the bright sunlight the Princess moved in Hazir's direction, with her ladies in waiting in tow.

"Why have we stopped Sergeant?" she asked coyly.

"My lady, it appears we have been betrayed by Bahkesh," replied Hazir with a stiff bow from his waist, "but fear not Jewl, for I shall protect you from these barbarians." Hazir tried desperately to conceal his

infatuation with the Princess, but with little effect; his feelings for Jewl ran deep and stemmed from the innocence of a childhood spent in her company within the palace grounds. Yet his admiration remained unspoken, for he would never dare admit it to anyone, or to himself.

The Abbot strode to the Princess' side placing his hands reassuringly on her shoulders. "Fear not my dear," he declared as if addressing the entire royal court. "The valorous warriors of Ghann shall protect you to the last. What would you have us do young man?"

"My lord, remove the canvas from your carriages and anything else that may shield you from attack. Form an awning in the middle of our defences so that you may not easily be seen. We shall overturn the carriages and use them as a barricade."

"Hazir Kored, do you expect me to lie in the sand?" asked the Princess incredulously.

"My apologies my lady, but it is the best way to protect you. We cannot outride the Zhemobians whilst defending the wagons."

"We shall do as you ask young man," assured the Abbot, "and may the Prophets guide your blade. Quickly now girls, make hast!"

The party of royal envoys and servants scampered back into their carriage and began to cast out onto the sand trunks filled with jewellery, monies, ceremonial apparel, anything that was unnecessary and solid enough to withstand an attack. Two burly drivers helped to remove the rough canvas from the wains and methodically tied them down with rope and peg. Meanwhile Ahmed had the rest of his men empty and overturn the remaining

carriages and soon their defences began to take form. Gaps within the barricade were filled with spears and pikestaves wedged into the sand.