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Prince of Scorpio

Dray Prescot #5

Alan Burt Akers

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CHAPTER ONE

This is the Fair borrows my Savanti sword

I, Dray Prescot, of Earth and of Kregen, once more trod the beautiful and brutal planet of my adoption, and in the engaging way of the Star Lords who had brought me here, was faced instantly with headlong action and deadly danger.

A bulky man in black leathers ran full tilt upon me, seeking to pin me to the ground with his rapier. The slender blade glistened redly in the mingled light from the twin suns of Scorpio. I do not argue when a man tries to kill me.

The guttural shouts and hoarse screams in my ears, the flickering impression of frenzied action all about me, and the black galvanic forms of men contorted in violent conflict running and stabbing and caught up in a confused melee washed around me; but the burly man with the bushy brown moustaches and the eyes of a killer lunged down fiercely upon me.

I rolled.

He cursed and dragged his blade free of the thin earth that dribbled over bare rock, swung himself forward for another essay at mounting me like a butterfly in a glass case.

Nothing else mattered in the world — either this world or the world of Earth distant four hundred light-years — beside that professional killer and his blade.

“You panval cramp!” he said as he advanced, with a little more wariness this time, a trifle of cunning evident in his clear wish to spit me as I rolled.

I shoved up on my hands, getting my feet under me, not rising on hands and knees. I was, as always when I landed on Kregen, stark naked. There were no handy weapons — a sword, a spear, a helmet — just me, Dray Prescot, naked as the day I was born.

A shrieking man ran past, his matted hair streaming, pursued by another of the killers in his black leather uniform. This screaming wretch, too, was naked, and so I reasoned that no one was surprised at my absence of clothes.

“Rast of a panval!” The killer lunged and I sprang, attempting to slip beneath the blade and so grasp him in my arms and break his back.

But he was quick. He eluded me, and a line of bright red wealed up along my thigh.

Now it was my turn to curse.

Normally I never bother to shout and curse when in action; it wastes breath and I do not need my morale boosted in this way.

“By the Black Chunkrah!” I yelled. “I’ll take your Makki-Grodno infested tripes out and wrap them around your diseased neck!”

He was coming in again as I shouted and he looked at my face. He hadn’t bothered to look before; all slaves look alike to their indifferent guards. Now he looked. He checked. He faltered in his attack in so obvious a way that I knew I was wearing that old ugly powerful look, the facial expression men say gives me the look of the devil, and I did not waste my chance.

I fended off with my left hand and sent his rapier skewering empty air skyward. I took his throat in my right hand and squeezed, then I brought my left fist down and around and under and hit him in the belly.

He would have shrieked, but no air could get past my constricting fingers.

He wriggled and flailed and tried to shorten his blade to stab me in the back, but I glared into his eyes with what I know is a wild and maniacal stare habitual to me when someone is trying to kill me, and I choked him and flung him down like a harvested sheaf of grain. I took his rapier. His left-hand dagger swung still at his waist; of what need had he of main-gauche against an unarmed slave?

With the weapons in my fists I sprang up, and at a half-crouch, ready for the next fool to show up, I surveyed the scene.

The bare rocks, with their thin scattering of dirt cover in which straggly beach-grasses and thorn-ivy struggled to grow here and there, led down to a shaly beach. Scattered along the beach an enormous mass of timbers, bales, bundles, ropes, and spars indicated a shipwreck. At first I thought the naked, screaming running men and women had been oar-slaves, but what was left of the vessel did not match my knowledge either of a swifter of the Eye of the World or a swordship of the Sunset Sea.

A fellow rolling with muscle, vociferous, authoritarian, yelled and waved his rapier. “Round ’em all up, you calsanys! Every last one of the Pandrite-benighted panvals.”

Like the other guards he was clad in black leathers, and tall black boots. Like them he wore beneath the leather tunic a garment whose sleeves covered his arms with bands of red and black. He wore a helmet,

narrow-brimmed at the sides and curled up at the fore and aft brim, after the fashion of a morion. His face was congested, bloated, full of annoyance that his command had broken down in what to him was clearly a most messy business.

I looked at the sea — to me, then, an unknown sea — and felt the deep longing for the fresh sweep of the breeze and the clean feel of a keel beneath me scudding through the waves. Then I advanced on this man, this leader of men who slaughtered unarmed men and women as they shrieked and begged for mercy.

The jagged boulders beneath my feet felt decidedly uncomfortable after my sojourn on Earth wearing decent shoes, but I have spent most of my life barefoot, and I took little notice. The Star Lords, this time, evidently had asked a very great deal of me. As always I had been dumped down on Kregen naked and defenseless, and as always a crisis situation was presented to me. This time I had been flung headfirst right slap into the middle of the action.

I jumped down off the rocks onto the beach and for a moment the big ruffian was hidden from me by contorting bodies. A girl screamed right at my feet and I looked down and to my left. She sprawled on the shaly beach, and I saw that the chains between the fetters on her ankles had tripped and brought her down. A black-clad guard was quite callously, quite intentionally, preparing to drive his rapier through her stomach.

I bent and with the main-gauche slewed a scatter of the shale into his face. He cursed and sprang back. He saw me. His main-gauche came out with the practiced ease of the fighting-man, and I knew I would have to take him first.

He tried to circle me. That was a waste of time — of my time, for his was going to finish here and now.

A second guard ran across with a four-foot-long javelin and hurled it at me. I swayed and the missile hissed past. The second drew both his blades. The girl lay, staring up with wide eyes; fear had drugged her emotions, so that she could no longer weep or cry out.

I wanted to get over this fight quickly. There were well over a hundred naked men and women in chains, and something like fifteen or twenty guards methodically butchering them. The two split up, to take me from left and right.

I have fought many times, and no doubt will fight many more times. These two were fair to middling examples of rapier men, which meant that, combined, they added up to a combination that could always take the better single man. I just had to be better than both.

They both succumbed, one after the other, to timed thrusts.

The shipwreck, the black shale beach, the susurrations of that unknown sea, the black rocks, and the evil thorn-ivy bushes coalesced into the backdrop for wild action and devilish murder. I dispatched two more guards. I could hear a roaring and a raging nearer the scattered timbers of the wreck and I ran toward the focus of the sounds, dropping another guard as I ran.

On the beach the big bull-roarer of a guard captain was down. He sat on the black shale looking stupidly at the stump of his left arm. The red and black sleeved arm lay on the ground at his side, still with the hand clutching his dagger.

Three other guards were backtracking rapidly. I looked at the man facing them, and I felt a painful and

thrilling thump of blood from my heart tingle all through my body.

Oh, yes, I recognized who that young man must be!

Fair and open of face, with smooth blond hair, and eyes of an icy-blue, he fought with a grace and a delicacy that warmed my heart. Young, strong, confident, bold, he weaved a net of glittering steel before him, and, one, two, three, down went those guards, gouting blood.

He wore soft leathers cincturing his waist and drawn up between his legs, the whole held in position by a wide belt the buckle of which gleamed dully gold. On his left arm he wore a stout leather bracer. He wore soft leather gloves. On his feet he wore leather hunting boots. I had worn that gear once, myself, in the long ago. . .

And his sword. . .

Oh, yes, I felt all the strife and evil of two worlds flowing out and away from me and the beginnings of a new and altogether glorious promise. Here, before me, was my passport to paradise!

“Hai!” shouted this gallant young man, and he charged headlong for a group of guards who withdrew their reeking blades from the corpses of their victims and sprang up to face him.

Before me, half crouched on the beach, a naked man clasped a woman close, the black iron of their chains harsh against their skin. They were middle-aged, with faces lined with care, and yet for all that, the man could look up at the young man with eyes wide with wonder.

“Now in the name of the twins! Where did he come from?”

“Hush, Jeniu, hush!” His wife dragged him down into the black shale, burrowing for shelter.

I jumped over them, and because it seemed the right thing to do, as I leaped I shouted down to them.

“Remain quiet and you will be safe.”

“Opaz the all-glorious preserve us!”

So far I had seen no beings other than humans among these guards and the slaves they were butchering to prevent their escape. There were no representatives of the half-men half-beasts of Kregen, those other races of intelligent beings who share the planet with human men and women.

The young man — I had the fleeting wonder if he might not also come from the planet Earth — had engaged nobly with the guards, and in pressing them back, was displaying fine swordsmanship. As I fought, indeed, as I do almost anything, I kept a weather eye open and alert. If a fighting-man sought to leap on me from the rear he more often than not found me suddenly facing him with a naked brand in my fist.

If you tread dangerous paths that is an essential to staying alive — on Earth as on Kregen.

So it was that I had to stop twice more to deal with inopportunistically pressing men in black leather, with their red and black sleeves, and their morionlike helmets. I observed a naked man, with a shaggy mop of brown hair and brown hair on his body so that he resembled a great brown bear, wrapping his chains about the neck of a guard and apparently on the point of severing head from body. This huge man, as

thick in the chest as the barrels in which palines are shipped for sea use, roared his delight. I saw the suns-light glisten and gleam along the hairy muscles of his forearms as he leaned back. He saw me as I stepped outside a guard's lunge, dazzle him with what — I confess — was a flamboyant flourish of my dagger, and bring the rapier in for the terminal thrust; and Brown Bear yelled, hugely delighted. "Hai, Jikai!"

"Hai, Jikai!" I roared back. "We will finish them all very soon — and then I will strike off your irons."

"Not until I am done with using them. Never, by Vaosh, would I have believed I could love my chains so much! Ha!"

All over the beach and the soil-covered rocks just above, the bodies of slain men and women sprawled. But many more had reached some kind of sanctuary among the rocks, and among the dead lay many more guards than any of the escaping slaves had any right to expect. Brown Bear had accounted for his share, and I, mine — and this glorious youngster to whose aid I now sprang had fought right well and nobly.

Perhaps he was too noble; certainly, for all his skill and training he lacked experience. Twice I had dodged flung javelins. I saw it all. I shouted — uselessly, vainly, stupidly. There was nothing else I could do but shout and hurl my dagger; but long before the dagger found its mark in the javelin-thrower's throat, the cruel steel head of the flung spear smashed bloodily red out through the chest of the gallant young fighter.

It is not easy for me to speak of that moment. I can clearly remember that sharp steel javelin-head sprouting from the lad's chest. I can recall with exact clarity the way the twin streaming mingled light of Zim and Genodras cast sharp ugly shadows down over the muscles of his chest and the smooth tanned stomach, before he doubled up and fell sideways, drew his legs in, and began to cough up blood.

After that my next memory is of drawing my rapier from the leather-clad body of a guard, and looking around for more, and finding them all lying dead in the abandoned postures of complete destruction along the beach. Evidently, at the end, they had tried to flee from me.

I looked back up the beach.

A small clump of naked men and women had gathered, and more were creeping out from their hiding places among the rocks and boulders and thorn-ivy bushes.

The huge brown bear of a man stood a little way in front.

All stared at me.

None would approach.

I ignored them.

I went back to the dying youngster.

He lay still on his side, for the javelin prevented him lying in another posture. He was conscious and his eyes followed me as I approached. Those blue eyes were still bright and brilliant, but the face had drained of blood.

“Llahal, Jikai,” he said painfully, dribbling blood. “You fight right merrily.”

I did not reply with the rolling double-L of the unfamiliar greeting of “Llahal” of Kregen; instead I said: “Lahal,” which is used only to those one knows.

He looked surprised, but his weakness made him incurious and unable to ponder the matter overlong. I knelt by his side. There was nothing material I could do for him.

I looked at him, and I waited until I felt a light of intelligence in those eyes, struggling up past the engulfing waves of blackness seeking to drag him down forever.

I spoke.

“Happy Swinging,” I said. My voice was not my own; it was hoarse, strange, harsh. “Happy Swinging.”

He looked at me with the same shock his face had shown when the javelin pierced him through.

“Happy Swinging—”

“Tell me, dom. Where lies Aphrasöe, the Swinging City?”

He coughed and blood dribbled from his mouth, for he was almost gone.

“Aphrasöe!” He tried to move and could not. “I was there — there in Aphrasöe — only moments ago. I talked with Maspero and bid him Remberree — and then I was here. And—”

“Maspero is my friend. He was my tutor. Where lies Aphrasöe?”

The cords in his throat moved and shuddered, and I saw he was trying to shake his head. His voice was faint.

“I do not know. The transition was made — cold and darkness — and then — here. . .”

I had to know where Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, was situated on the planet of Kregen. Next to my concern for my Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains, next to my love for her, I must know the whereabouts of Aphrasöe. For Aphrasöe was paradise.

He was trying to speak again.

“Tell Maspero — tell him — Alex Hunter tried — tried—”

“Rest easy, Alex Hunter. You have come a long way from Earth, but now you are with friends.”

He looked up into my ugly face with its gargoyle-look strong upon it, and the bright blueness of his eyes faded and he sighed, very softly. His blood-smeared mouth smiled — he smiled, looking upon me, Dray Prescott — and then he died.

I stood up.

I turned to face the gathered naked people.

“Are any guards left alive?” I called. My voice rose harshly, bitter and cutting.

The big brown bear of a man shouted back. “They are all dead.”

I nodded.

“As well for them they are. By dying they escape my wrath.”

Then I turned and looked out to that unknown sea and I did not weep. For many memories had poured upon me and I could face no one until I had purged myself of weakness.

CHAPTER TWO

Sweet and refreshing is canalwater of Vallia

The released prisoners wanted to build the cooking fires into conflagrations of joy, and I had to explain to them as gently as I could — and, Zair knows, I am a gentle enough man when the occasion calls for it — that as no one of them knew where we were, and I did not, the night would almost certainly contain hostile eyes. We must cook our supper carefully, and post watches, and be ready with the gathered-up weapons to defend our newly-won freedom.

They all seemed to think I had been in the prison ship with them. On her way to the Penal Islands, a gale had driven her off course. No one knew where we were — but they all knew from whence they had come.

Vallia!

I was on an island off the southeast coast of Vallia. Somewhere over that sea lay the island empire ruled by the despotic father of my beloved. Over there lay my target, Vallia, the island I had vowed to reach and storm, bare-handed if necessary, and claim my Delia before all the world.

Prosaic matters obtruded themselves now, however. The released prisoners were far too weak to march, and we had espied not a sign of life or a habitation of any sort. The prisoners could not march; I could not stay here.

The big brown bear of a man — Borg — said, when I queried him: “Prisoners, dom? Aye, we are prisoners, truly enough. Politicals.”

At a guess, I said, “The Racter party?”

He glowered. “Aye! The racters, may Gurush of the Bottomless Marsh take them all.”

I have spoken of the Racter party, those great lords, landowners, and wealthy tycoons who were bitterly opposed to the wedding between myself and Delia. These people were almost all of the Panval party, a more popular front, although containing many folk, I suspected, who had joined together in mere opposition to the ractors as through any common ideology.

Borg was a canalman. The canals of Vallia are one of the wonders of Kregen, spreading out over the entire island, fed by the awe-inspiring Mountains of the North, which have various names in their various districts. The canalfolk are a people apart and a way of life apart. Borg’s name was Ven Borg nal Ogier. *Ven* is a title applicable only to canalmen, as *Vena* for the canalwomen. Ogier was his canal, the Ogier

Cut, from which he took his patronymic. That the canal was upward of six hundred miles long, with many branches and loops, spreading across many counties of Vallia, meant nothing. Mere land area was of no account to a canalman; he marked out his lineage in the canal his parents traversed.

“I shall go and find help,” I told Borg. “These people must be cared for.”

He had taken a guard’s leather tunic, but his arms and legs were bare. He carried the rapier and left-handed dagger as though he knew how to use them. He nodded in agreement.

“Good. Then, Koter Drak, I will come with you.”

Koteris pure Vallian, equivalent to our Earthly “mister.”

“No, Ven Borg. If you will, you would do best to look after these people. And without disrespect to you, I can travel faster alone.”

He glowered at me, and fingered the plain steel hilt of the rapier, but he saw my face, and agreed.

“By Vaosh the all-glorious! You are a hard man.”

“Sometimes I have need to be.”

My feelings after Alex Hunter had died revealed another facet, but I would not discuss that. The thought occurred to me to wonder if the Star Lords had brought me here because they knew Alex Hunter would fail? But that would indicate a prophecy, a power to foretell what would happen. I put nothing past the Star Lords in those days, but the idea made me prickle a little up the backbone. Then the further thought came to me that the Savanti had sent Alex Hunter on a mission similar to those I would have been sent on had I passed all the stringent tests of Aphrasöe, instead of having the Savanti boot me out of paradise. I still bore them no ill will for that. They had their nature as I had mine. Whatever the truth of the business, I was here on Kregen and — given I could avoid too obvious a collision with either the Savanti or the Star Lords — here I intended to stay and reach Vallia and claim Delia as my bride.

And such was my mood, I was beginning to feel to hell with her father.

So far, the thought that I must in some measure demean him in her eyes had halted me, had checked my footsteps, had held me back from the headlong rush to Vallia and the arrogant barging into Vondium I knew I would have, one day, to make.

I gently unwrapped and unstrapped Alex Hunter’s Savanti hunting leathers from him, before I buried him with solemnity and two prayers. Then I washed the leathers in a stream of clear water — how marvelously supple is the hunting leather of the city of Aphrasöe! — and donned them, pulling the end up through my legs and buckling up the wide belt. I hesitated before pulling on the boots, but I might need them if the going became rough. After my march across the Owlrah Waste and through the Klackadrin I felt my foot soles could march across hell without flinching.

And the sword.

The Savanti sword!

It was a beautiful specimen, with that subtle straight blade that in some alchemical way combines all the best features of a rapier’s flexibility with a shortsword’s harsh thrusting action, together with the slashing

capabilities of a broadsword. I felt, then, handling that superlative weapon with its basket hilt, that even a Krozair longsword could not compare with the Savanti sword. I suppose, in mundane weapons, it most resembled an English basket-hilted sword of about 1610 with that cunning Savanti curve to the hilt to enable rapier work to be put in. The blade retained a brilliant sharpness of edge without continuous honing. I had no conception of how it could be done, then, and even today I am sure that no metallurgists of Earth could reproduce that exact mix of metals, that fantastic alloy. But then, as I knew to my cost, the Savanti, although mere mortal men, were capable of superhuman powers.

“Well, Koter Drak,” said Borg, proffering a rapier and left-handed dagger. “You had best go prepared.”

I slung the baldric of the Savanti scabbard over my right shoulder and let the sword dangle at my left hip. “I will take this sword, Ven Borg.”

“It is a strange blade, and yet a useful one, as I judge.”

I took the baldric off. I had grown accustomed to having my sword scabbards attached to my belt in such a way that all my upper body was free from strappery. I fabricated a sling, and the lockets would serve. Borg watched me, critically.

“On the canals we use the rapier and the dagger, the Jiktar and the Hikdar, but rarely, they being weapons not easily come by.”

“You have used them before, Ven Borg.”

He chuckled. The camp fire threw his mass of brown hair into deep tangled shadows across his face. He bit hugely into the thigh of a bosk — a rather less stupid and smaller relative of the vosk — from the provisions we had taken from the wreck. “Aye. I was accounted a fair swordsman, along the Ogier Cut, Koter Drak.”

I was not absolutely sure how these people had my name as Drak. Drak is the name of a legendary figure, part-human, part-god, who figures largely in the three-thousand-year-old myth-cycle the *Canticles of the Rose City*. Culture is widespread on Kregen, and the old legends and stories travel the world, and are repeated over and over again. Also, Drak had been the name of the Emperor’s father when he ascended the throne. I had a dim memory of saying, in response to a query, “I am Dra—” and then of a shout or a scream interrupting me. I believe it was the women called the Theladours; they had found a guard half alive, and had finished him off with their hands. Anyway, the beginning of *Dray* and the instant associations with *Drak* had named me. I did not care, then, what they called me, for I intended to leave them in the morning when the twin suns rose, and after finding help for them, see about taking myself across the stretch of sea to Vallia to the west.

Also, I did not fail to realize that the continent of Segesthes, and the enclave city of Zenicce, lay across the Sunset Sea to the east. In Zenicce stood my own proud enclave of Strombor. I was the Lord of Strombor. But Strombor and all my friends there would have to wait — as they had waited for years — until I had won my Delia finally.

From the shattered remnants of the wrecked prison ship we took what we could of food and wine and I saw that the survivors, about a hundred and twenty or so of them, men and women, would not suffer from starvation before help could reach them. For what Borg said, I judged that he would be very careful how they accepted help; for as political prisoners their fate would depend much on the tendencies of their rescuers.

The political situation in Vallia was complex and finely balanced, the racters and the panvals in their eternal struggling for power, the Emperor now strong, now weak, eternally seeking help from one side, now the other, always asserting his own power and demanding absolute obedience from the citizenry. To hell with all that! Vallia, Vondium, and Delia!

Much banging and ringing of iron finally fell quiet and the last of the fetters had been cut off. I found a snug hole down between two boulders, and with a scrap of cloth from the ship to serve as padding and cover, went to sleep. On the morrow, after a great dish of fried bosk rashers and a jar of some sweet rose wine — a vintage of western Vallia, so Jeniu told me — I was ready to leave.

They waved to me as I set off. They were a starveling crew, eating properly for the first time in many a day, their nakedness covered as best they could manage. I waved back, and I confess, to my shame, that I scarcely thought more of them except as people to whom I owed the duty of what help I could give. Beyond that — Delia!

“Remberee, Koter Drak!”

“Remberee,” I shouted back, striding on. “Remberee!”

Many times I have marched through country completely new to me, alone or with companions. Memories ghosted up — but I would not think of them now. I studied the land critically. It looked bleak, bare, somehow tired and dispirited. Clumps of thorn-ivy grew along the way and, a dismal prospect on Kregen, no palines. No palines! Not a country for me, I decided, and thereby, as you will hear, made a stultifying mistake.

The Suns of Scorpio cast down their opaz beams and the weather, although warm, was in no wise stifling. If what the prisoners had told me was true — and their ideas of where we might be were almost as chancy as mine — we must be on a latitude sixty or seventy dwaburs north of the southern coast of Vallia. That, as far as I could judge, would be on a latitude about the same distance south of Zenicce.

I marched on and soon I walked through the remains of a village. The houses had been constructed of wood, and they had burned. There were bones among the ashes. The sad relics of an abandoned living-site passed to either side as I walked through what had once been a bustling main street. No birds waited to scavenge. This had happened some time ago, for the dusty vegetation was creeping back.

The prospect opened up beyond this dismal scene and hills closed in on my left, so that I walked for a space beside a stream. Here vegetation had taken a hold and I saw many varieties of the myriad growths that flourish so freely on Kregen. Here, too, I came across paline bushes and so could pick a handful and munch them as I traveled.

Far away on my right and ahead, obscured occasionally by cloud and by intervening rises, the tall blue outlines of mountains jagged against the sky. Snow glistened on their peaks, so they were of a size. The forests thickened, and I saw lenk and sturm, an occasional sporfert, and many trees of secondary growths that are common both to Earth and Kregen. Grass grew more lushly — and then I walked out upon a great clearing where the neat rows of samphron bushes lay all untended, where the crops had ripened and seeded and rotted, and where I saw a small village laid waste, burned, destroyed, abandoned.

I began to wonder if I would ever find succor for the prisoner survivors here in this desolate land.

The way I followed had seemed to me to mark itself out by its contours as a track and when this

wended into a valley and ran side by side with a sheet of water, I felt certain I trod a dirt-packed way that once had been a highroad. Now grass and weeds thrust through, worts, ragbladders, creeping vines, and here and there the banks had slipped into the water. At the far end of the lake I came across a lock. Its wooden gates were closed, and I was downstream. It was such a lock as I was perfectly accustomed to back home on Earth. The navigators had made of the country a different place, and the genius that had put the lock to work, so that narrow boats and barges might rise and fall through mountains, had laid the foundations for the Industrial Revolution.

Dangling over the lock gates a yellowing skeleton brought me sharply back to Kregen.

Wedged in the skeleton's backbone was an arrow.

I studied it. Knowledge of one's opponent's weapons is a psychological knowledge of him, as I have said before.

This arrow had not been loosed from a Lohvian longbow. It was shorter; the point was, although of steel, merely an arrow-shaped barbed wedge. The feathers, bedraggled, were not, to my mind, set by a master-fletcher. They were red and black.

Red and black had been the colors of the prison guards' sleeves.

I left the arrow where it was, and saluting the skeleton's departed spirit — what some Kregans call *theib* — I passed on.

That night I had to face a decision. I could not cross the stretch of water and reach Vallia to the west without a boat, and to find a boat I needed help. But I had also my duty to the prisoners, prisoners no more, although for how long they would retain their freedom I did not care to speculate. If I circled — then I faced facts. This land had been raided dry. Slavers had done this. Their handiwork is all too plain. I must press on, look for the lay of the land where it was likely to find habitation, and then see about a boat.

The next day I swung a little more to the west, leaving the canal. I found only scorched earth and moldering skeletons. I wended back to the east, crossed the canal, and pressed on through woodlands and open spaces where great fires had raged and the growth was only just beginning to sprout through. This was hard going.

On the third day I came across a fine metal road. Oh, it was no road of Imperial Loh of ancient times, but it was easy to walk on. I felt absolute certainty that there was no other person near me; long before I suspected I was approaching humanity I would be off the road and into the trees.

The road struck off due east.

This was taking me away from the coast, and I must perforce accept that annoyance, for I now saw that this land had been struck by raiders from the sea who had ravaged the coastal belt clean. I suspected these signs of destruction were more than two seasons old, and the still-dangling skeleton seemed to confirm that the inhabitants had not dared return. I was on an island, therefore I might find someone on the eastern coast or in the inland massif.

Drink was no problem, for the canalwater was surprisingly sweet. On reflection I assumed this to be the result of the absence of traffic. I saw a string of sunken narrow boats. Food was relatively easy to come by, a few carefully laid traps of plaited reed, a spirited rush, and a stupid bosk wriggled in the trap. Also,

there were palines.

The impression I gained was that this had been a prosperous farming community of interconnected villages and towns, and the wild animals I might have expected — leems, gaint, zhantils, and the like — had been banished long ago and had not found their way back. These bosk, now, must be the descendants of domesticated herds. Then, as though to prove me right, I came walking down into a valley where crops grew in neat rows, tended crops, with the sign of mankind strong and orderly upon them. There were, however, indications that the harvest was poor, and here and there the ground showed dry and dusty. Indeed, it had not rained since I had landed here.

The canal I had been following had curved away the previous day, but the road which had tracked the canal had seemed the more likely prospect. Feeling I had been proved right I trod on — warily! — and was most surprised to discover the road, wending with the course of the valley, swing away from that glimpse I had had of crops. I walked on for a bur or so, pondering, and then the explanation occurred to me. The road did indeed follow the natural line; those crops I had seen and the village they suggested must lie adjacent to them, had been sited away from the road, off the beaten track, hidden. They had been revealed by some local flaw in the tree cover.

At once I turned off the road and headed straight down into the valley bottom.

In the event, my clever supposition, although right, was rendered totally unnecessary. As I slithered and scraped through the trees down the slope I saw below me the same confounded thorn-ivy hedge that surrounds any boundary of cultivated land against the wild. The thorn-ivy was not of recent growth, for what was wild had once been tamed, but it gave me a few nasty jabs and stabs and scratches before I went through.

Cursing, I stood up, and there, coming down smoothly and decently from the road above, was a side road, all neat and clean and easy. And I'd gone headfirst through a thorn-ivy boma!

So much for my cleverness.

“Sink me!” I started off to let rip a whole string of the curses of two worlds and several colorful cultures — and then I stopped. I didn't laugh, for as you know I laugh seldom and then in situations that seem not to call for laughter as the correct critical response; but I could see the humorous side of that slide down the valley side and the crash through the boma. I was still picking thorns out of my shoulders when I walked into the single main street of the village.

The houses were more like huts: bark-logged walls, large leaves of the papishin trailed over a ridge-pole for roofs, mere holes for doors, and of windows not a sign. A pen contained a dozen or so bosks, squealing and grunting. A few ponshos, languid in the warmth, their fleeces, although heavy in poor condition, were actually nibbling the grass growing up between the logs of the huts. There was a well. I walked straight to it. It had adobe walls and a fractured cover, but there was a rope and a bucket. I threw the bucket down, hauled it up, and drank deeply, then plunged my head in the icy water.

When I lifted my head and shook it like a ponsho-trag a quavering voice said: “Llalah, dom.”

I turned slowly. I turned carefully. I still held the well bucket in both hands and I could hurl that and draw my sword with blinding speed, if I had to.

The old man confronting me did not look any kind of threat.

He was old, for his hair was white and his thin beard draggled whitely across his shrunken chest. He must be at least two hundred years old, I judged. He wore a simple garment of orange cloth around his middle, hanging to his knees, with a broad fold thrown up and over his left shoulder. For only a single instant could the foolish fancy that he was a Todalpeme attract me; but I knew he was not, for around his waist he did not have a colored tasseled rope; the robe fell loosely.

“Llahal, dom,” I replied.

His weak eyes regarded me. “You are welcome to our poor village. We have little, but what we have is yours.”

The words might have been rote — as I wondered then, they might be a trap — but I sensed in this man that what he said was true; he and his people were friendly to me. I saw a number of other people gathering and saw instantly that they were all old or babes-in-arms, held by their great-grandmothers. I knew these signs of old.

They were desperately poor. The strong young men and the beautiful young girls had either been taken up as slaves or had run off into the central massif. These people were abject. They had been shattered by a continuous succession of slave raids, and they had no fight left. They accepted their fate with a fatalism that, while I could not share its abnegations, I could understand.

The old man, Theirson, led me to his hut and I sat on the packed dirt floor, and they gave me a bowl of fruit, gleaming rounds of the fabulous fruit of Kregen. I picked up a squish. I thought of Inch and his taboos, and then I did not think over those memories again. I munched a mouthful of squishes as old Theirson talked.

“You had best not linger here, Koter Drak. You are most welcome and we would love your help in the fields, for the work is hard and we are old. But no young man is safe. The aragorn, for whom the Ice Floes of Sicce most certainly wait, ride through and take what they will and no man dare say them nay.”

His wife, Thisi the Fair — she was old and stringy and her hair as white as his own — shivered. “Do not speak of the aragorn, Theirson, I beg you. If only the old days were here!”

I felt a peculiar sensation in my stomach, and I rubbed it. I felt hot and yet I felt cold. I drank a cup of water. I wanted all the information I could get; yet the hut walls were receding and closing, swaying, rippling like the bed of a mountain stream. My tongue seemed as thick as a chunkrah’s tongue.

Theirson, Thisi the Fair, and others were looking at me with kind expressions, and talking, but their words boomed and echoed and hurt my ears. I fell full length, and lay there, unable to move. They were all looking down on me with worried, concerned expressions, and Thisi felt my forehead.

“It is the sickness,” she whispered. “Koter Drak — you must fight for your life!”

And then I swung away like a surfer on the bottom of a board with only the deep black-green of nothingness beneath me.

CHAPTER THREE

Thisi the Fair borrows my Savanti sword

Many visions passed before my inward eye as I lay stricken by the hallucination-fever of the sickness. I

saw the smoke and heard the monstrous concussions of the broadsides as I sailed so slowly down on the Franco-Spanish line off Cape Trafalgar; I saw the swirling charge of the cavalry as we held the ridge of Mont Saint Jean; I fought with my clansmen, and swaggered as a bravo-fighter in Zenicce; I battled swifsters of Magdag, and swordships with Viridia the Render laughing; I saw many things and I felt many things.

Through it all I, Dray Prescot, Pur Dray, Krozair of Zy, the Lord of Strombor, sunk so low and helpless, did not for one moment imagine that these old folk had poisoned me. In a way that only hindsight can justify I knew I could trust them.

For three days I lay there caught in that damned soup of fevered visions and for all that time they stayed by me and cared for me. On the morning of the fourth day I opened my eyes and looked through the open door and saw the jade and orange light of the twin suns falling in mingled radiance across the street, and knew I was once more myself, once more in control, once more a man. But I was as weak as an infant.

They were surprised.

“The sickness takes a man or a woman and holds them fast bound for a whole sennight.”

I did not tell them that I had bathed in the sacred pool of the River Zelfh, in unknown Aphrasöe, and was thus assured of a thousand years of life and a natural constitution to throw off wounds and diseases rapidly. I thanked them. I had been a burden to them. I was still very weak, weaker by far than I had been after those horrific experiences crossing the Klackadrin, and for a space all I could do was sit in the suns-shine at the mouth of the hut and rest and recuperate.

I know, now, that my sickness was the result of drinking the canalwater.

Sweet, it was, to be sure, and ever after was to prove so. But, to a man or woman not of the canals, to anyone not of the canalfolk, it was deadly. After the week’s fever-dreams, the victim very often died. That I had not was a tribute to the pool of baptism of the Savanti in Aphrasöe. Three days — half the six that usually constitute a Kregan week, for all that I render it into English as a sennight — was astonishing to them. I just sat in the sun and watched the dust devils on the street and struggled to grow strong.

They had taken my Savanti hunting leathers to have them cleaned and I wore a simple breechclout of the orange cloth. The color came from squeezed berries abounding in the forests. I looked up as Theirson came from the hut with a bowl of bosk and taylyne soup. Just as Tilda the Beautiful had said, here in Vallia they did drink their soup hot. I sipped it gently, grateful for the soothing sensations in my abused guts.

“My sword?”

“It is safely hidden. Should the aragorn ride in and find a weapon—” Theirson’s wrinkled mouth pursed dolefully. “Rest and get well, Drak. Then you may take up the sword again.”

This did not seem good advice to me. About to argue with the old man and if necessary become objectionable until they brought out my sword, I became aware of a hush fallen over the village. Down the street and riding toward me through the streaming jade and crimson light advanced the aragorn.

Theirson let a low moan escape his lips, then his face took on the look of one of those alabaster statues from Tomboram. Still holding the soup bowl he stood, bent over a little, in the doorway of his hut. I

continued to sit.

This was close to eventide now, when the people trudged back from the fields after a full day's work. I had seen them go out and I had seen them return. They were forced to work hard and relentlessly, persevering with the monotonous labors as the twin suns poured down their beams on the backs of their necks and their heads, until the old folk could barely stand to walk back in the evening.

The results of their labors were stacked in the low barns at the end of the village, for harvests here, as is common in much of Kregen, occur when the fruits and the corns and the vegetables are ripe and not as a result of some unvarying round of seasons.

The great thanksgiving time of harvest is understood, however, on Kregen, and these old folk put by to that end. The aragorn rode in. I just sat there, stupefied, weak, watching them as they made their grand gestures, gave their orders, as the produce was brought forth and loaded on the backs of calsanys. I, Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy, just sat.

Whatever of harvest thanksgiving lay in the hearts and minds of these men, it did not touch the people of the village.

I looked at these aragorn.

They rode zorcas. Well they would, being proud and mailed men in their might. These zorcas were fine beasts, with the tall and spindly legs and the single twisted horn that brought back the memories of riding with the wind across the Great Plains of Segesthes. The aragorn had the habit of using the tight rein, so that the twisted horns upreared in a way at once proud and flaunting to observe, and damned uncomfortable for the poor zorcas.

They were men. On Kregen, of course, one habitually identifies species as well as race. Their armor shone resplendently: plate on back and breast and thigh, with thick purple-dyed leather for arm and leg. They wore the typical Vallian hat, with its low crown and wide brim with the dashing upcurled feather, and with those two slots cut in the brim over the forehead. At their saddle bows swung morions. They did not carry lances, and their weapons were rapier and main-gauche, and a sheaf of javelins.

I wanted to get up and challenge them, but lethargy like a spider's web adhering to my arms and legs drew me down.

The aragorn took the produce, hit a couple of old men over the head with their riding crops, stared around arrogantly, and announced they were staying overnight. From their small string of calsanys they produced food and wine of kinds that the villagers had not seen since this blight had been laid on the land. They turfed Theirson and Thisi out of their hut and Vulima and Totor out of theirs, commandeering them. There were six aragorn, with six slaves for servants, and three dancing girls, with golden chains through their nostrils and exotic transparent pantaloons and silver-mesh mantles. There was about these aragorn the simple belief that they were the masters, that what they said was law and must be instantly obeyed. No idea of opposition occurred to them.

I realize I have not given you any description of their faces. I find I approach this with diffidence. Even then, as I sat in the dust, I could see in their faces what so many people have seen in mine. There was the same harsh intolerance, the same fierce and predatory demands of instant obedience, the same intemperate damn-you-to-hell arrogance, that old devil's look I know I assume. And yet I know many women have looked on me with a kindly eye, and I get along with children famously, and I venture to think that if any traces of that show in my face they were absent from the countenances of the aragorn.

“Get this dolt out of the way,” said one, as he swung down from his zorca.

“He is sick, master, badly sick.”

“Then I’ll drive out his disease!” and with that the aragorn put his boot up. He intended to kick me in the face. I moved my head sideways, yet I felt that treacherous lassitude upon me and I was slow. The aragorn’s boot took me in the shoulder and I toppled backward into the dust.

They laughed.

A couple of the villagers scuttled across to help me up and away. I say scuttled advisedly. The villagers bowed, and remained bowed, in the presence of the aragorn.

The absolute terror these men spread about them could be seen in little things. In the way people ran to hold their zorcas’ heads, for instance. The constant trembling in their bodies, their hands shaking, their words disconnected. In the sudden rigidity with which they reacted to the words of the aragorn, so it seemed as though mere words could strike them to stone. The aragorn took whatever they wanted, and destroyed casually and without thinking in their search for hidden food. All valuables had long since vanished.

I thought of my sword, hidden I knew not where, and sweated it out.

That night I heard the shrill laughter, and the clashing of ankle-bells — I have never made up my mind if ankle-bells are the height of refined sexuality or the depths of depravity, or if they merely denote shocking bad taste — and although I could not see these men I could guess the games they were up to, the wine they were drinking, the food they were guzzling.

I still felt weak in the morning.

“Where is my sword, Theirson?”

“No, Drak. No!”

Thisi the Fair moaned. “You will surely be killed.”

“My sword!”

But these old folk possessed courage and tenacity where their friends were concerned. They could do nothing about the aragorn, and so were beaten. But for me, they could save my life. Who am I to say they did not? I was aware then, and subsequently have been more than grateful, that I was privileged to be called their friend.

So I, Dray Prescot, had to watch with bowed head and a face over which I had drawn a corner of an orange cloth as the aragorn, leisurely, insolently, prepared for departure and then rode out. They rode their zorcas well. Easily and lithely in the saddle; tall, bold, strong men, absolute masters, absolutely in command; oh, yes, they bore the outward semblance of warriors. But I knew that the ordinary fighting-men of Kregen among whose number I had been proud to include myself, were as different from these men, these aragorn, as are the zhandils from the leems.

When they had gone I said to Theirson: “Do they often ride in and take everything you have?”

“Whenever they wish. We cannot stop them.”

I noticed that the villagers seemed to be beyond the point at which mere ordinary curses could do anything for them in their mortal anguish against the aragorn. The aragorn were mercenaries, of course, working with the slave-masters. Now they were living in high fettle in various of the castles and fortresses of the island, going out on their raids, drinking and wenching, quarreling, quite happy to live here on the backs and the sweat of those they had not run off into slavery.

“They make sure we have enough on which to survive. That way we can work for them.”

“How long is it to go on for?” said Thisi. Her veined hands trembled. “We must have offended the invisible twins in some way not vouchsafed to us.”

“Not so,” I said. “These are men, and therefore may be killed. I am a man of peace, but now give me my sword.”

They tried to dissuade me. I was arguing with them, most vehemently, when I found myself sitting on the ground. I was weak, still — damned weak! I struggled up, and swayed, and blinked my eyes, and Thisi gave me a cup of water, and I knew I must wait until the marvelous powers of the waters of baptism cleared the poison from my system altogether.

On the sixth day everyone carried out the simple devotions that marked the religious observances of these people, much after the fashion of those I had witnessed in the argenter *Dram Constant*, where the invisible twins were honored and revered as the mystical twinned godhead of all things.

Then, even though the sixth day might reasonably be called a day of rest, the people trudged off to the fields. The work would never wait. I tried to go with them, and fell down, and had to crawl back alone, for they could not be allowed to waste their effort on me, a stubborn onker, when the fields and the incessant work demanded everything they could give. For strong young lads and girls, the agricultural work would have been easy — as it had been in the good old days.

Four days after that I was strong enough to insist on being given my sword and chopping wood. I noticed how I had to make a conscious physical effort to slash through branches that normally I would have cut through with a supple twist of wrist and forearm. But I persevered. The people had told me that the rescued prisoners on the beach were not likely to be interfered with; all that area had been slaved out and the aragorn or the slave-masters no longer went there.

The island, I learned, was called Valka. Valka had been the name taken by an oar-slave who had been a good companion with me in the swordships. The nearest way of explaining his use of the name — for he came from the main island of Vallia — is to suggest that a man from California might choose the name of Tex as an alias.

I donned my Savanti hunting leathers.

There seems little point in belaboring my feelings at this time. You will know something of the kind of man I am; inaction in times of peril is anathema to me. I resent an insult, and if a man seeks to kill me I own to the moral weakness, thoroughly reprehensible, of attempting to kill him first.

I chopped a great deal of wood in the next few days, swinging my sword arm, using my left arm, also, working the sinews and muscles, feeling the jolting power of the sword blows. What Maspero, that

gentle man who had been my tutor, would say, I did not know. He swung a sword, complaining of his own weakness, also. But the swords the Savanti use in their sport deliver a psychic blow that does not kill, does not even harm. This sword had lost that power, assuming it had ever possessed it, and Alex Hunter had been equipped as an ordinary fighting-man of Kregen — with this single exception of the sword.

On a bright morning when a little pink mist lifted from the treetops and birds sang with what I can only describe as a trilling note I told Theirson I must say Remberree.

“For one thing, good Theirson, I am eating far too much.”

“You are always welcome to share what we have, Drak.”

“And for that I thank you. But I ought to return to the beach and tell the people there what has happened.”

“They would be advised—” And then Theirson paused, and looked helpless. Indeed, what to advise those escaped prisoners?

“I will think of something,” I said.

He sighed. “If only the old Strom were here. He was a man! He ruled Valka with a rod of iron, and with justice and mercy. A girl could walk from one end of the island to the other without fear in those days.”

“Why does the Emperor permit these things?”

His distress was obvious. “We do not know. Perhaps the Emperor does not know what goes on in Valka. We are the most cut off of all the Stromnates.”

I didn’t necessarily believe that, but I knew what he meant.

A Strom is the nearest equivalent to a count, and a Kov to a duke; the Strom of Valka had been early killed in opposing the slave-masters and their mercenaries. After that the island had become a mere slave-droving ground. Although, so Theirson told me, in the central massif were many, many young men and women who had escaped from their villages and towns. The chief city of Valka, Valkanium, lay fast held in the clutches of the slavers and the aragorn, the men of prey who feasted on the carcass of the island.

“They guard themselves well behind their iron gates and their tall black towers,” said old Theirson.

Thisi the Fair came hobbling fast along the main street. She panted. Her white hair had fallen free of the wooden pins holding it — for all her silver pins from the Street of the Silversmiths in Vandayha had long since been stolen — and the sunshine glistened off the sweat along her forehead.

“You must give me your sword, Drak!”

“Willingly, Thisi,” I answered in as uncharacteristic a speech as ever I could make. “But give me a good reason.”

She halted before me, twisted her head to look up, and tried to push her hair into place. “Why, I would clean the hilt for you, and, too, I would show it to Tlemi, who would recapture his youth.” She cackled,

and there was strain in her laugh. “He is too old to work, and he lies on his pallet dreaming of the past.”

“The hilt is clean, Thisi.” I drew the sword and held it out to her, hilt first. “But show it to Tlemi, with my blessing, and tell him once a warrior always a warrior.”

“Aye,” she cackled, grasping the hilt and holding it as awkwardly as one can imagine. “I know about warriors, Drak.”

“I will pause a while before going into the fields, Drak, and drink a cup of water with you.”

“That will give me great pleasure, Theirson.”

So we sat in the early sunshine and drank our water and talked of the lack of rain and the crops and the old days in Valka. Truth to tell, I recall, I wanted to learn as much as I could of this island of Valka. This village had been raided often, and the pitiful attempt to hide it away from the main road and canal had been completely unsuccessful. That the roads here were reasonably good was a result of the old Strom’s grandfather, who liked to race zorca chariots, a sport he could not practice on the canals.

Presently Thisi came back. “Tlemi had tears in his eyes,” she said. “The old fool. Over a mere sword!” She looked a great deal calmer.

Thisi leaned over and whispered to her husband.

He started, and looked down the road, and then at me, and back at Thisi. He swallowed. “Here, Drak. Cover yourself with this old cloth—”

But I understood, and I cursed myself for a credulous simpleton.

They cared for me, these old folk, and they did not wish me killed. I had done nothing for them. I had brought merely sickness, and another mouth to feed. More altruistic love for a fellow man is difficult to find.

I stood up.

“I will go to Tlemi’s hut and get my sword, now—”

“It is too late, Drak. Look!”

I looked.

Riding in their pride and their power, the aragorn astride their zorcas moved up the street. The old folk stumbled to their knees as the mercenaries passed. Absolute power they held, absolute control, a will never challenged.

And I, Dray Prescot, stood like a loon in the dust before them, empty-handed.

CHAPTER FOUR

A surprise for the aragorn

Theirson’s hand gripped my ankle and jerked, and stunned by the folly of my own actions, I lost my

balance and tumbled into the dust at his side. He whispered fiercely, in an agony of terror.

“Put your forehead into the dirt, Drak! For the sake of the glorious Opaz himself! Else you are a doomed man —*and we with you.*”

Those last words, alone, could make me bend my stubbornly and stupidly proud neck. I bowed. I cringed. I, Dray Prescot, double-inclined to these crampths of aragorn.

The zorca hooves twinkled past. Following them the calsanys lumbered along, tails flicking. Tethered to the last two calsanys by lengths of rope were two people, a man and a woman. I could see only their naked legs. They stumbled as they were jerked along. The woman fell. Now I could see her. She was young, with long brown hair and a thin but vigorous figure, clad only in a wraparound of the orange Valkan cloth. She was dragged by her bound wrists. An aragorn reined back and beat her with his crop until she rose up silently, and stumbled on, dragged by the calsany.

Theirson’s hand gripped my arm.

Then the party had passed and the aragorn were yelling for the headman and Theirson was rising and shuffling forward, head bent.

“Bibi!” said Thisi. I looked at her. Tears coursed down her cheeks. “Bibi — my granddaughter.”

Many secret societies exist on Kregen, as anywhere else, I suppose. Societies exist devoted to this end and that. On Valka, with the absolute dominance of the slavers and the mercenaries, and the disappearance of so many of the younger people into the central massif, a clandestine organization must grow up to resist. Given the normal strengths and fears of human beings — and of the halflings, too — this is natural and inevitable. Bibi, Thisi’s granddaughter, must have come down with a message from the center. They — she and her companion — had been caught. Now the aragorn wanted to find out why she was visiting here.

I stood up warily, and looked up the street.

Theirson was talking to the aragorn. They looked to be the same six, evidently backtracking because of their captives. Other village people crouched abjectly by their huts. The six slaves stood by the calsanys, and the three dancing girls put their heads out of their preysany-palanquin covers and chattered like parakeets. The palanquins were gorgeously decorated with filigree work, and the poles by which they were slung were lavishly bound with silver wire. The preysanys — a kind of superior calsany — were likewise highly decorated and feathered.

I stood there and I looked down on Thisi.

My voice carried all that harsh, intolerant authority, and I know my face must have glared with that hateful devil’s look.

“Run, Thisi, and bring my sword. Tell Tlemi I have need of it.”

“But, Drak—”

“Run.”

She ran.

In the days immediately after I had been captured and taken as a slave into the marble quarries of Zenicce, coming at a stroke from Zorcander of my clansmen to slave, I fought blindly and obstinately against restraint until beaten into submission. That happened only when I was unconscious. I still react in the same way now, on occasion; but I have tried to school myself. As I stood there looking upon these indifferently cruel and despotic aragorn I kept telling myself to wait. I had to wait for Thisi and my sword. I did stand, and how I did it is a mystery, for I longed above all else to hurl myself forward and fling myself upon these sadistic overlords and tear them from their jeweled saddles.

I was spared the wait.

One aragorn glanced at me. He frowned. He lifted his crop and beckoned.

“Stupid cramph! If you cannot incline before your master I will teach you! You will scream for mercy — but we aragorn no longer know what mercy means.”

At this his companions guffawed.

The orange cloth hurriedly thrown around me still hung from my shoulders, and it was evident that the mercenary had not yet appreciated I was not an oldster like the rest. I shuffled forward. I kept my head lowered.

When I reached the zorca I looked up.

I had put that simpleton’s look on my face. Zair forgive me, but I take a pride in that look, for it makes me look an idiot of idiots, and gives me great and unholy — and very petty, I confess — feelings of gaiety and secret knowledge that I play a prank, that I disguise Dray Prescott.

“You stupid, Doty-rotten cramph! I’ll teach you—”

I looked up at him. His arm was raised to bring the crop down across my face, possibly to blind me, certainly to mark me. His companions laughed.

“Kleesh,” I said.

I prided myself, then, that I spoke so rationally. A kleesh is violently unpleasant, stinking, repulsive; and yet applied to me the name serves only to make me yawn. Applied to most men, I have noticed with sure unconcern, it is a guaranteed explosive firecracker.

His face contorted, he roared and brought the crop down in a violent slashing blow.

I moved in, took his foot from the stirrup, jerked it up, hauled it out — I didn’t care if his leg parted from his hipbone — and tossed him swinging over my shoulder into the dust. I took a pace toward him and brought my foot down on his face. Then, without thinking about it, I ducked.

The flung javelin scraped over my back. It struck the ground with such force that it snapped. I disregarded it. I leaped sideways, turned, surveyed the five remaining mercenaries. One was already in action, gouging in his spurs cruelly, hurtling down on me, his drawn rapier pointed and low, aiming to spit me. I slid off the orange cloth, whirled it once and enveloped that rapier in the folds, and dived to the side.

The others were reacting now. Bibi and her companion, a personable young fellow with a thin face but merry eyes, huddled together, bound and helpless. I shot a look down the road. No sign of Thisi. The aragorn had seen I was unarmed, and they were taking no chances of my reaching their fellow lying in the road with a red pudding for a face. Mercenaries are ever conscious of the value of seizing a weapon from an adversary. They were roaring and yelling all the time, of course, threats and curses and detailings of what they would do to me and the rest of the village. I needed nothing extra to spur me on; had I done so the threats against my friends here would have been a spur and a brand.

Two came at me, with a third cursing and trying to rein his zorca around with them. I had to dodge and duck and weave. They were even taunting me now, cries such as some warriors use, mercenary tricks that, even if they did not realize it, meant they had admitted they were not faced by a helpless old man of the village.

The utter surprise they had, the sheer impossibility of an old man suddenly dragging one of their number from the saddle and breaking his neck, had now passed. But that uncanny business of a helpless victim abruptly turning on them, savagely, had for a mur unnerved them. Now they were upon me again, ready to drive and hunt me, to have sport, to flick and lash with their rapiers, not to kill but to torture.

Forced thus to skip this way and that I worked my way to the side. They reined their beasts around, the spindly legs of the zorcas perfect for this kind of wheeling curveting work. They performed caracoles very well, these aragorn. But I wormed free, turned, leaped, and, as I had done on that beach so long ago in Segesthes, I was upon the haunches of the nearest zorca and with an arm around the neck of its rider was dragging him back. I had to be quick. If I knew these people they'd care nothing for their comrade and would hurl a javelin to kill me, risking his life.

I snapped his backbone and then made a grab for his rapier. But he had twisted in his agony and I missed. I had to let myself go and slide off the zorca. The javelin hissed into the dead man's back.

On the ground I danced, as it seemed, between javelins.

Again I risked a glance down the street — and here came Thisi, hurrying and stumbling. She carried my sword.

The calsanys were uneasy and were milling, the two bound prisoners were being dragged across, and I saw they would stagger between me and Thisi. A zorca rider saw Thisi. He shrilled his anger and drew a javelin from the sheath strapped to his saddle. I saw Bibi open her mouth, but her scream was drowned by the roars from the aragorn. Her companion staggered across and fell against the javelin-man's zorca. The javelin missed. The calsanys barged against Bibi's friend and he fell. The zorcaman reined away, raving, drawing his rapier. Bibi pulled her man into the calsanys. I could leave them, but not for long. The stink of blood and dust stung my nostrils, rank and raw, but they have been familiar smells to me all my life.

I ran toward Thisi.

“Here, Drak! May Opaz have you in his keeping.”

I forced myself to speak. “Thank you, Thisi.”

I took the brand. The hilt had never felt so good in my fist before.

I turned.

There were four of them left, and they were completely incapable for a single moment of understanding defeat. They had cowed these people, enslaved all their young men; their slightest word was law, their littlest whim a command. Here was a man, all but naked, impudently attempting to challenge them. That two of their comrades were dead would mean only an excuse for an orgy of revenge. They had no conception that they would not slay me.

They wore armor and the man on the zorca whose back I had broken had not died of the javelin, for it had failed to penetrate his backplate. I balanced easily, the sword held low, and I laughed at these professional killers.

A shrill screaming that had been fracturing the air all the time gurgled away as I laughed. The three dancing girls, who had so short a time ago been laughing from their preysany-palanquins, had been shrieking and screaming; but when I laughed they stopped, and they remained silent thereafter.

Then, I confess it not without a knowledge of how foolish and inflated it makes me appear, I shook the Savanti sword at them, and I shouted: "Bite on a sword for a change, you cowardly kleeshes who murder old men."

Their rage was a wonderful and edifying sight.

They dug in their spurs and they charged.

I am a clansman, of the Clan of Felschraung, and I have faced the earthshaking charge of a whole hostile clan astride their voves. The zorca is not an animal a clansman uses in the massive barrier-smashing charge.

"Fools!" I said, and set to work.

I here proved, at least to my own satisfaction, that the Savanti sword was, and again, at least in my hand, a better weapon than the rapier. I had no main-gauche. The first man simply tried to spit me through as though I were a target at practice. I flicked his blade aside and as he passed I struck his thigh. The stirrup alone kept his leg from falling off.

The second man, seeing this, attempted to rear his mount back and slash me down the face. The zorca is a nimble animal — perhaps there is no more nimble animal on all Kregen, certainly there is none on this Earth — but I was quicker and slid the blow, reaching up and forward, and so passed my blade through his guts just beneath the corselet rim. I withdrew and flung myself sideways. The next man's blow would have clanged off my helmet comb had I been wearing one.

Mind you, unless you are a superb horseman or zorca-man it is deucedly difficult to fix a man who insists on dodging all around you and intends to unseat you or smash you or in some other unpleasant way do for you first. The third aragorn came out of his stirrups all flailing with my left hand gripping his left boot. He tried to cut down on me, but my blade deflected his blow, and as he struck the ground I sliced the sword down. The way I was feeling must surely be indicated by the fact that his head jumped clean off his shoulders and rolled under the middle preysany-palanquin, whereat its occupant swooned and fell out, a heap of jumbled silks, gold, and bells in the dust.

The fourth aragorn had no intention of quitting, I'll give him that; he was angry, so enraged that he roared in, screaming abuse, swirling his rapier, madly intent on finishing me off. I didn't want to kill this one. Him, I would like to question; but the fool ran himself onto my blade. It went through his throat. By Zair, but he

was a fool!

Mind you, I must take a share of the blame. But, there they were, six dead aragorn littering the dusty street of the village.

Then it began to rain.

If the villagers wanted to take that as an omen, they might. Certainly, the raindrops felt cool and sweet. I walked over to the palanquins. The two petal faces regarded me in horror. They were not particularly pretty girls, but curved and complaisant, as I judged, able to wiggle their hips and rotate their bellies and jangle their bells. I spoke quite pleasantly.

“How do you wish to die? Would you like to be hanged, burned, beheaded? Perhaps you prefer drowning? I am in no hurry. Just make up your minds and then let me know.” They cowered back, shattered, shrunken, unable to implore, seeing in my face only darkness and evil. I swung back. “Oh — there might be a way — but no. I am sure you will wish to die.”

Then I strode off and left them. Bibi and her man were freed. His name was Tom — yes, the same as our Earthly Tom, although not deriving from Thomas — and although thin he was well-muscled and active and a very merry man altogether. He eyed my sword.

“Lahal, Koter Drak,” he said, for Thisi had whispered the name by which they knew me. He shook his head. “I would not have believed it possible had I not seen it with my own eyes.”

“Lahal, Koter Tom of Vulheim,” I said, for that was where he came from, a port town up the coast that was now a mere pile of rubble and burned beams, razed, destroyed, and abandoned.

He looked about, lifted his arms, and let them drop.

Certainly, the situation called for considerable thought.

The dancing girl woke up from her swoon and when she was given the news by her two companions promptly swooned again. The six slaves stood docilely by the calsanys, soothing them. They would be a problem. There were four men and two women, hardy, short-statured folk with thick oily black hair and flattish noses, bought in a market far from Valka, I judged. That made me realize they were probably in a special relationship with the aragorn; slaves, yes, but privileged slaves, doing domestic work and quite unlike the whipped and beaten slaves for which Valka was scoured.

“We had best tie ’em up, Tom,” I said. We had quickly dropped formalities. But the use of *Koter* is obligatory in Vallia unless you know a man well. We felt, Tom and I that we did know each other tolerably well. Time telescopes when you fight together — and his action in spoiling the aim of the javelin man, when he must have thought he would be instantly cut down, was as brave a stroke as any in any being’s book.

“Will you really kill the girls?” Theirson wrinkled his nose up. He eyed me with a look that struck me as altogether too knowing.

They had heard him, for we were using Kregish.

“Certainly,” I said. “The aragorn are evil, and these perfumed dancing girls are likewise evil.” I heard them squeak, and snuffle, and realized they were crying now. That was one crisis over. “Of course,” I

said loudly, taking Theirson by the arm and walking him away. “If they understand just how evil the aragorn are, and are prepared to mend their ways, then perhaps—”

By that time I had lowered my voice and walked sufficiently far off for them not to overhear us.

“I doubt that I could kill them, Theirson. I am a man of peace. I seldom kill in cold blood.”

“Seldom?”

“For my sins.”

“You are a strange man, Drak. Harsh and hard and merciless. Yet there is mercy in you. I will see what we can do with those girls.”

Tom had joined us. He had possessed himself of the leathers of an aragorn, a rapier, and a main-gauche.

“They’ll have to be watched. But they will give us valuable information.” I told Tom about the released prisoners on the beach.

“Panvals?” he said. “They can be useful to us, too.”

The street was cleared, and the bodies stripped and buried. The slaves were placed in a hut, and an old man with a rapier stood guard over them. The largesse on the calsanys was distributed and the calsanys and preysanys themselves herded in with the village animals. We made the place spick and span again. And then we discussed what best to do.

I made my position clear. I would find a boat and go to Vallia. I saw Tom looking at Theirson. Tom would marry Bibi as soon as that could be contrived, and between them they could look forward to no life at all. Unless. . .

No one did any work in the fields that day. That night we ate well and drank wine for the first time in many a long day.

Then we commanded the dancing girls, who were half dead with fright and horrendous expectations, to dance for us. The ordinary dancing girl, such as one finds in taverns and dopa dens and even in higher establishments of pleasure, never appeals greatly to me, almost certainly on account of my experiences with my clansmen where the girls dance gaily and freely and with a fierce joy that finds its greatest expression of art — and where they’d stick you with a terchick if you called them dancing girls. Slavery and dancing are obscene bedfellows.

I had never touched the Triangular Trade, but I knew.

After that I called the three of them over and said: “Have you chosen?”

They fell on their knees, the tears streaming — and, of course, I could not let the cruel farce continue any longer. I told them, simply, that they must henceforth cut themselves off from the aragorn, and help the villagers. Later, when things had worked themselves out, they might be dancing girls again. It was not a satisfactory solution, but I was afire to find a boat and sail to Vallia.

Tom was doubtful I’d find a single boat along the west coast of Valka. When he understood that I had no objections to stealing a boat from the slavers or the mercenaries, and if necessary, bashing in a few

skulls in the process, he said that, yes, there were boats; but the skull bashing would be hectic and heavy.

That suited me only in one way; but Valka, however pleasant an island it really was despite the depredations, could not hold me at all, and if skull bashing was necessary, then skull bash I would. Speed, now I had almost reached my goal, seemed to me the prime requisite. Tom accompanied me back to the beach. The prisoners were astonished to see me. Under the direction of their self-elected leaders, of which Borg was one, they had begun to sketch out a camp for themselves off the beach and on the banks of a little river where we tracked them. They were warned about the water in the canals, whereat Borg laughed hugely, a true canalman.

Tom and I departed, and after some difficulty, discovered a slaver camp where we stole a boat. The skull bashing did not, in the event, prove necessary. Tom waved goodbye. "Remberee, Drak!" and: "Remberee, Tom!"

I hoisted the dipping lug and the little boat curled out across the sea. I felt at last my peculiar destiny was running in ways I could understand when the black clouds gathered and a gale blew with incredible, immediate violence and the waves broke mountainously high; with a sick heart I recognized all the symptoms I had met before. This had happened on the inner sea. The Star Lords were forcing me back. I could not go on. The Star Lords were saying plainly: "You may not go to Vallia! Return to Valka, Dray Prescott, and perform there the work to your hands."

CHAPTER FIVE

The true history of *The Fetching of Drak na Valka*

I would not accept this dictate of the Star Lords.

What did I know of these mysterious and lofty beings then? Practically nothing of value, save their power. They had flung me back and forth between Earth and Kregen like a tennis ball. They could rouse the wind and the sea against me.

The boat grounded and waves sheeted over me, and I stood up and shook my fist at the sky and cursed the Star Lords, horribly and comprehensively. The wind slackened and the stars shone through the cloud wrack.

She of the Veils, the fourth moon of Kregen, drifted like a wan ghost, and against the pallid orb the shape of a giant hunting bird stretched like an accusing brand.

"The Gdoinye!" I yelled up, my head thrown back. "What do I care for you? It is Vallia and Vondium for me," and I finished with a fine rattling series of foul oaths.

The raptor up there, black in the starlight, catching an occasional gleam from She of the Veils, was the messenger and spy of the Star Lords. A giant bird with, I knew, a scarlet coat of feathers and golden feathers about its eyes and throat, it circled above me now in wide planing hunting circles. That raptor had watched over many of the crises of my life on Kregen. Now I picked up a stone from the beach and hurled it aloft. Oh, yes, believe me, I was mad clean through.

And then — then something happened that had never occurred to me before on Kregen and was never likely to occur on Earth.

The Gdoinye folded its wings and stooped. It dropped like a shot from a tower straight toward my head.

I shouted aloud in my glee and hauled out my sword and threw it up, the blade a pinkish-silver brand in the night.

“I’ll tickle your feathers for you, you kleesh of a bird! You won’t spy for the Star Lords when I’ve spit you and roasted you and thrown you to the vosks!”

With a harsh cry the bird spread those gorgeous wings all black in the moonlight and swooped over my head. It circled insolently low above me, contemptuous, out of my reach. At my side swung a main-gauche Tom had insisted I take, and I could have drawn it and hurled it fairly into that scarlet-feathered breast. But I continued to shake my sword and rave at the Gdoinye. Looking back, I know I had forgotten I carried the dagger. My rage was terrible and ludicrous, pathetic.

Then — then the thing happened that stunned my brain.

“Dray Prescott!”

I fell silent, numb, gaping.

The bird — the bird spoke to me!

“Dray Prescott, you are a fool.”

How could I argue that?

“Dray Prescott, we did not bring you to Valka. Had you a grain of common sense you would have understood. Was not the lad Hunter from the Savanti? Were you not brought to aid him?”

My sword felt as heavy as the chest of gold we dragged from Dorval the Render’s tower.

“Vallia!” I shouted up. “I must go to Vondium!”

“Not so, Dray Prescott. You have been selected. Therefore you must.”

“As I did in Magdag? When you dragged me away in the hour of victory?”

“If you presume, you will be put down.”

“Presume! I served you as I thought fit! Star Lords! You are less than rasts that crawl upon a dunghill!”

“We are what we are. The Savanti try to be what they are not. They brought you here untimely.” Then the bird emitted a shrieking squawk that might have been the laughter of the gods, or the gloating of demons. “Your Delia does not miss you, Prescott—”

I interrupted. “In that you lie!”

“Listen, fool. You remember that Delia saw you the very next day after her capture in the Esztercari enclave, yet you had wandered and adventured and swaggered like any ruffler for years?”

Now I understood, or thought I did, and a tide of pure relief flooded me through and through. I had spent years with my clansmen and had been back to Earth, and for Delia it had all been like a single day. I saw the Gdoinye rising higher and I shouted something after it, but it merely screeched an accipiter-like

insult at me, and winged away, vanishing in the moon-drenched shadows.

But — I felt free! I felt released from a bar of constricting steel. I would make my way to Vondium in Vallia and claim my Delia — and only I would suffer the pangs of parting and separation. To me, then, these thoughts came as a great benediction, for I did not care how I suffered so long as not a single hair of the head of my Delia was harmed.

A flutter of white beneath She of the Veils made me turn my head and there flew the white dove of the Savanti. It flew around, and I thought its flight as agitated as ever I had seen it. The white dove spied for the Savanti. I shook my fist at it and shouted: “And what have you to say for yourself?” But the dove merely circled and then flew off, a white fluttering speck, pink-lit, inconclusive under the moons of Kregen.

So it was I think you will understand that I started up the beach with a grim purpose.

Now for Valka!

To explain the high purpose and the desperate resolves of the next six years I would do best to quote you the song made by Erithor of Valkanium; but he was of Valka and composed in the Vallian tongue, the Vallish, and even when translated into Kregish the majesty and power of the words are lost, the alliterations meaningless, the rhythm fractured. To translate further into English, however marvelous a tongue our English language truly is, would be to cripple the beauty and the magic and leave only dry facts. And, in glory and blood and effort and sacrifice, the facts were never dry. There are many kinds of singers in Kregen; call them what you will, bards, skalds, troubadours, minstrels, trouvères, tsloivoidees, and of them all, few were held in higher repute than Erithor of Valkanium.

How we sang in the high hall of the fortress of Esser Rarioch overlooking Valkanium!

This song Erithor made, the song that is still sung and will be sung for as long as there are singers on Kregen, is called *The Fetching of Drak na Valka*. There are wild savage passages full of the purple passions of battle, storm, and onslaught; and there are the longer wailing laments that surge rhythmically into heroic acceptance of the good men dead and gone, good men never forgotten. The song tells of Kylie and Kylon, the famous twins who held the bridge to Ussanore Ovoidach, and Nath of Vandayha, Jeniu and Vokor, Carli and Vomanus, and Yathmin ti Vulheim, whose broken body I clasped in my arms as she died, seeking to stroke the blonde hair from her face where her blood matted and clotted and the shining brown eyes dimmed and dulled.

I can never listen to *The Fetching of Drak na Valka* without a reaction that brands me as a human being, full of folly and sentiment and sadness, and, yes, pride too, nonetheless that pride is bruised and broken, the foolishness of a man who has known good friends and lost them.

The song tells how we roused the island of Valka. How the prisoners huddled shivering on the beach took up arms, and how we marched, and how the aragorn resisted us, and how we routed them, and grew stronger. How the young men and women came down from the central mountains, the Heart Heights of Valka, and took weapons from the slavers and the aragorn and all their mercenaries, for the aragorn brought against us Ochs and Rapas, Fristles and Chuliks. And the singing notes of the harps rise and the drums roar and once again I am transported back to the many battlefields and the stratagems and the night surprises when the seven moons of Kregen shone upon courage and selflessness and high endeavor.

The Fetching of Drak na Valka!

No man knows the profundity of feeling I experience, for my name is indissolubly linked with the island I love, the island of Valka, that was to become a home in which I might find perfect peace and security, happiness and love. But, then, as we first sang the seven hundred and seventy-seven verses of the song, I had only the faintest inkling of what Valka was to become to me in the days ahead.

The song tells of Tom of Vulheim, and Ven Borg nal Ogier, Theirson and Thisi the Fair, and their granddaughter Bibi, old Jeniu, the wise counselor, and his wife, Thuri, who in supporting him supported us all.

And only when Jeniu presented me with the fiat of the whole assembly of Valka, the pitiful remnant of men and women who had formed the assembly in the old Strom's day, led still by Tharu ti Valkanium, was the double meaning of the song's title born in on me.

For we had cleared the island of the aragorn. We had killed until the rivers ran red. We had driven them into the sea and watched as their armored forms toppled from the chalk cliff-tops. We had taken the slavers and sent them packing.

And when more slavers came, seeking to scourge the island again and sweep up more human victims for their vile trade, we had met them with a wall of steel and an invincible purpose. We had organized, for I had put all my own experience in these matters at the disposal of the Valkans, and our Jiktars and Hikdars, our Deldars, had led disciplined formations into action. Once again the island was a fair and clean place in which to live and bring up children. And the word spread and the slavers came no more for, as the song triumphantly proclaims, no longer was Valka a supine carcass rotten for plunder. The slavers, with their patents from the court of Vallia, turned aside from Valka and sought easier conquests.

And then — and then I understood what they all meant by the word “fetching.”

For I had fetched the men and women out of the Heart Heights, and I had fetched them weapons, and organization and the understanding that they could triumph if they willed it. And then they fetched me.

Grim Tharu ti Valkanium, sword-girted, robed in the orange of the high assembly, strode the length of the high hall of the fortress of Esser Rarioch, and inclined to me — whereat, I remember, I was moved to anger, and bade him stand up like the man he was, and never cringe — and, with a smile, he said: “And for you, Drak, Strom na Valka, all men will bow. Aye! And joy in it, for it will show the world what we think of our Strom!”

I was astonished.

But they were serious. Everything had been arranged behind my back. I had known nothing. The song does not tell of these circuitous dealings, the messages, the sacks of golden talens dispatched, the complicated resorts to law, and the quoting of precedents. I was the Strom of Valka. The whole island was my fief. Everything upon it, whether living or dead, whether of man or nature, was mine, inalienably mine.

I tried to refuse, and saw the hurt in their eyes. I sat back in my seat and marveled.

This, I felt sure, was no outcome envisaged by the Star Lords or, given that I had completed what poor Alex Hunter had set out to do, the Savanti, either. But I have remarked before of this strange and frightening charisma I possess, unasked, unsought, that serves me sometimes so well and sometimes so ill. Now I could only stand before them all, and humbly take what they offered.

The rapiers leaped, glittering in the torchlight in that great hall.

“Hai, Jikai! Drak, Strom na Valka! Hai, Jikai!”

And so the seven hundred and seventy-eighth verse was added to the song.

The emblem of Valka is the reflex-compound bow, placed horizontally, half drawn and aimed upward. Vertically upon this is a trident, as though about to be shot from the bow. The Valkans are great fisherfolk. Also, up in the rolling hills and wild crags of the Heart Heights that form the broad central massif of the island, they are proficient bowmen, using not the great longbow of Loh and Erthyrdrin but the shorter, stiffer, compound bow of cunning double-reflex curves, such as is used by my clansmen.

We had driven our arrow storm into the aragorn, and they had shriveled before us. But, once on a time, Tharu ti Valkanium said to me: “We of Valka are great bowmen. Yet the Emperor keeps a personal bodyguard of the Bowmen of Loh. We are just a distant province, rich for plunder, ripe for slaves.”

And I had said to him: “You are great bowmen, still, Tharu; but no longer is Valka a province ripe for plunder!”

The other favorite weapon of the Valkans is the glaive. I do not mean by glaive a sword, in the archaic meaning of the word, gladius, a sword; but in the meaning in general use of a pole-arm, of the fifteenth century or so. The Valkan glaive is formed of a long narrow head, somewhat more robust than a bayonet, mounted on a shaft about five feet long. From the head along the sides run strengthening pieces of steel that serve also to prevent a slashing sword blow slicing the shaft in two. With the glaive the warriors of Valka go up against rapier men with complete confidence.

So, in the fullness of time I, Dray Prescott, of Earth, became Drak, Strom na Valka.

If there was any regret that my own name had, by a chance, not featured so far in Valka, I had quickly gone along with the name of Drak, for I saw that this might serve me well as a disguise and an alias when I penetrated Vallia. For the name of Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor, would be that of a wanted man there.

Also, through this incident, I had discovered that titles — for what they are worth — were obtainable as much by merit and effort as by birth and heredity in Vallia. Once I had cleared Valka and established myself in fact as the chief of the island, and the whole people concurring, I became a Strom and no one would say me nay. I did discover that a great deal was owed to the panvals I had rescued; for they had joyed in arranging the contracts, bribes, and agreements in Vondium, and in obtaining the Emperor’s great seal and signature — Earthly custom is paralleled in this on Kregen — on the letters patent. The illuminated patent itself was kept safely locked away in the fortress of Esser Rarioch.

Now a Strom, with all the responsibilities of rebuilding the island’s economy and reinforcing her people’s confidence, I plunged headlong into work. Do not think I forgot Delia. More than once I took a boat out toward Vallia, to the west, and invariably the storm clouds gathered and the lightning and thunder roared and crackled menacingly, and the waves sought to smash the boat to fragments.

Valka was a rich province, as I found, and by management I made her richer and more pleasant. Also, storing up credit for the future I had sworn must come, I so arranged matters that the high assembly could function with greater and greater freedom and authority. Tharu ti Valkanium often told me I was placing power into their hands, whereat I would say: “And do you believe I do not trust you, Tharu? And the

elders? After all we have been through together?” And, again, I would say: “One day, Tharu, I must leave Valka, for a space, and go upon a mission that is dear to my heart. When that day comes, I want the island to continue to prosper, and you to remember me, so that when I return — with my bride — the whole future will be bright and glorious.”

“We will not forget, Strom Drak, we will never forget.”

Already, the girls were preparing the elaborate dresses and jewelry and all things needful that the Stromni, my bride, would require. Erithor of Valkanium could not make a song about that triumphal return yet, but he would strum out a merry tune, and hum words beneath his breath. When the girls of the place begged him to continue he would laugh and say: “Not so, you handmaidens of frivolity! I but tune my strings against the day the Stromni comes!”

How could I tell them that this Stromni was a princess, was the Princess Majestrix of all Vallia?

One day, among a group of friends on the terrace of Esser Rarioch with all of Valkanium spread beneath us and the suns of Antares blinding back from spire and tower and gabled roof, and the wide sweep of the bay beyond where the sea sparkled its impossible Kregan blue, I began idly to hum and then sing a few snatches of *The Bowmen of Loh*. There were no ladies present, and we had been drinking the strong red wine of southern Valka, a vintage called Vela’s Tears, after the maiden who features in the music drama *The Fatal Love of Vela na Valka*, a drama which you may imagine is highly popular on Valka itself.

Erithor drew his slender fingers across the strings of his harp with a harsh and jangling discord.

I looked up in surprise. They were all looking at me — Tom, Tharu, Theirson, Logu, and even Borg, who was a Vallian, stared also — and I looked at them in surprise.

Tharu said: “We do not sing that song in Valka, Strom.”

I never apologize. It is a weakness. I said: “The song is mild and harmless, but if I have offended you, my friends—” And then I stopped. We had sung songs together a hundred times more bawdy, and they had not complained.

“The Emperor keeps a personal bodyguard of Bowmen of Loh. Therefore we do not sing that song.”

I nodded. “I see. Rest assured, it shall remain among the great unsung epics.”

At this they all laughed. On Kregen there are many classics that are honored more in the breach than the observance in their rendition, as on Earth. The tension of the moment was broken, but I was displeased. I like that song. It reminds me of Seg Segutorio, and that memory, then, was bittersweet and full of a masochism I relished as a punishment. I was young then, as you know, young and headstrong and foolhardy, although trying to control myself. I could take pride that I had not, back in Theirson’s village, rushed with empty hands on the aragorn. I was learning, slowly. What was more disturbing was the evident antipathy these good people of Valka had for the Emperor’s choice of a personal bodyguard. I welcomed their hatred of the Racter party, who, although never in the open, were the instigators of the slaving raids, for they gained much of their wealth thereby. I did not relish this hatred of my beloved’s father.

For all that I would have to walk in and teach him how to behave to a son-in-law, a prospect full of unpleasantness.

This incident, I believe, finally made me make up my mind to act positively. I had been growing lethargic — oh, not in the amount of work I dispatched each day, but in the attitude I had adopted. I love Valka and I could see all the fantastic promise of the island even then. I had become wrapped up in the place. I saw it as the home to which I would bring Delia of the Blue Mountains in triumph as my bride.

Encar of the Fields came in then with a query about the new acreage of samphron trees we were clearing — from the gnarly-trunked samphron trees we pick glossy purple fruits which the watermills crush into fragrant oil — and after Encar waddled Erdgar, fat and out of breath, with a problem on the supply of shaped and seasoned knees for the new ships he was building down in Valkanium's dockyards.

“Erdgar,” I said. “There is a journey I must make. I shall need your best-found ship. *Rose of Valka*, possibly? And fully-provisioned.”

“*Rose of Valka*,” wheezed Erdgar the Shipwright. He took a glass of wine, sniffing it appreciatively. “Aye, she is fleet and well-found and might venture into the Southern Ocean, if needs be.”

This was a neat way of asking me my destination. The breeze blew on that high terrace of Esser Rarioch and the scent of yellow mushk, clustered with bees in its shelter, smelled very sweet. My friends were relaxing after the day's toil; soon we would go down to the great hall to eat and drink and sing the old songs — and the new, aye, the new! — and life was exceedingly good.

“Zenicce,” I told Erdgar. “I will go to Strombor.”

This, as it seemed to me, was a cunning plan, for I might thus be able to detour the gales that prevented me from reaching Vallia. And I had a hunger to see Strombor again.

“Strombor! The devils of Esztercari drove out the good folk of Strombor! There was a story that they had in their turn been driven out. I pray the invisible twins it is so.”

Tharu drained his glass. “Many of us were born of parents who escaped from Strombor.”

My surprise was complete.

It made sense. Valka lies about a hundred and fifty dwaburs southwest of Zenicce. And the Stromboramin were likely to stick together in the urgency of their departure in the few ships available to them in those days of horror.

While Erdgar the Shipwright wheezed and fussed over *Rose of Valka* I took a journey into the Heart Heights in connection with the construction of a new dam. I found I welcomed these duties of economist, husbandman, canalmaster, and organizer of a province. My party of engineers, secretaries, and supply officers traveled into the interior in a narrow boat. Through lock after lock that had been recently repaired and put back into service we mounted the ladder of water. The weather remained wonderful, the crops were ripening, there was not a slave within sight, and my only regret was that my Delia of Delphond was not at my side to share all these delights with me.

One warm and pinkly-golden evening as the Maiden with the Many Smiles and She of the Veils floated together in the sky I walked for a space on the canal bank, sunk in thought.

The glorious pink and golden evening turned blue with a lambent refulgence of blueness I recognized

with a savage surge of feeling. I looked up. Against the starshot sky with those two moons of Kregen floating so serenely I saw the luminescent blue outline of a gigantic scorpion.

This was the sign! This scorpion with arrogantly upflung tail was the sign that in some way either brought me or indicated I was to be brought to Kregen. I had seen this phantom sky scorpion on Earth. Now I was seeing it on Kregen!

The old familiar blueness enveloped me and I was falling and twisting with the blueness roaring in my head — and I did not struggle, I did not shout my defiance, I merely waited for what the destiny of the scorpion would bring me.

CHAPTER SIX

The scorpion and the glacier

It is not my intention to speak freely or to go into details of my life here on this planet of my birth. Although I usually returned to some crisis or other and I spent some exhilarating years here, to put it mildly, my chief interest and absorbing passions were ever fixed on the planet of Kregen orbiting Antares in the constellation of Scorpio four hundred light-years away.

Often I would stand and gaze into the starry sky, hoping and praying that the lambent-blue form of the ghostly scorpion would once more summon me, naked and unarmed, and pitch me headlong into bloody and violent adventure. The man whose name I do not mention who held my growing fortune in trust for me served me faithfully and well, and his descendants after him. He was always pleased to see me and asked no questions I could not answer. He and his sons knew of this habit of mine of looking up at the stars, but they passed no comment. I know they understood I was not as ordinary mortals.

I found myself in Paris during the July days of 1830.

There was a time loop involved here; I had had the word from the Gdoinye as to that. I did not understand what was involved then; and even today, the mechanics of time distortion remain vague. I had spent more Terrestrial-span years on Kregen than there were between my first arrival there floating down the River Aph to Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, to meet the Savanti in 1805, and 1830.

Caught up in the excitements of the dismissal of Charles X and the installation of Louis Phillipe, I played a part. Only after the seventh of August, however, was I free and able to walk alone by the Seine. The blue lambency caught me up swiftly, and the scorpion drew me willingly across the parsecs, hurtling through the empty dark to resume my destiny upon Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio.

Even before I opened my eyes I knew I landed in a part of Kregen I had never visited before.

The cold cut in like scalping knives.

As usual, I was unarmed, naked, left entirely to my own resources.

I felt free, overjoyed, triumphant, profoundly thankful.

What, I wondered, was the emergency that had brought me back this time?

Whatever it might be I would deal with it as fast as I could and then, ascertaining just where I had been flung on this terrifying if beautiful world of Kregen, make my way to Vallia, march into Vondium, and

confront the Emperor, demand from him his daughter in marriage. Yes, I had hesitated and hung back long enough. Only the gift of a thousand years of life had made what I had done possible. But my patience had run out. By Zim-Zair! No matter if the Emperor was belittled in the eyes of his daughter, and thereby I ran the risk of hurting her feelings — I had absolutely no fears that I would lose her love, as she knew she would never lose mine. I would take that risk and inflict that amount of pain on my beloved, believing sincerely that she would understand I moved not only for my own pleasure and greed and pride, but also for her sake as well.

I opened my eyes.

I shivered.

Snow lay everywhere in a thick, pale pink blanket through which the dark firs thrust like withered fingers of a buried army of crones.

A hundred yards off lay the crumpled shape of an airboat.

My task lay before me.

The wind cut into my naked hide and I knew that if I did not find clothes and food very quickly I could give up all hopes and ideas of finding my Delia again.

The airboat had landed badly and her petal shape had been grotesquely twisted. From the small aft cabin I dragged out four bodies. These men were Vallians. Under the heavy ponsho fleeces they wore the buff coats and the long black boots I knew so well. Selecting the body of the largest, I stripped him and donned his gear. The warmth of the ponsho skin struck in most gratefully and I shivered in reciprocal delight. Now I could attend to the two men still alive. Unconscious, they breathed stertorously; but an examination convinced me they were not seriously injured. These two men, then, were the reason I had been returned to Kregen.

The airboat had crashed through spiky fir trees to come to rest in a V-shaped valley between peaks. Up there the snow and ice glistened uglily. The thought occurred to me that we were stranded in The Stratemsk, a fate of almost certain disaster. The Stratemsk, although not the greatest range of mountains upon Kregen, are so vast, so tall, so hostile, that the imagination shrinks from their contemplation. Downslope a panorama spread out where the valley ended, and between craggy outcrops the snow could not smooth or render less sinister a glacier began, vanishing below cloud. That, then, was our way out.

A cry brought my attention back to the flier. One of the men had crawled to the shattered opening. His face glared out on me more white, more stark, than the snow and the dark fir trees.

“What happened? Where are we? Who are you?” The voice carried that habitual ring of authority, so that I knew I was in the presence of a man accustomed to command, a high dignitary, a man of power.

“You crashed. We are in the mountains. I am Dray Prescott.”

He moved back as I approached, and before I reached the opening the second man crawled out. He was younger, handsome, his brown hair a fairer tint than the normal Vallian, although nowise of that outrageous chestnut glory of my Delia’s hair.

“Dray Prescott?”

The older man pushed through quickly and the younger was, perforce, thrust aside. The elder wriggled as he crawled out onto the snow, and turning his head spoke in a low voice to the younger. He stood up, and swayed, and I was at his side, supporting him.

“You’d best rest easy, dom. You’ve had a tidy whack.”

He drew himself up, although still clutching my arm for support. Blood had dried along the clean-shaven upper edge of his beard, frozen, glittering coldly.

“I am Naghan Furtway, Kov of Falinur, and this is my nephew, Jenbar. You address me as Kov, and my nephew as Tyr. Is that understood?”

I held him and I looked into his eyes. I knew those eyes of old, I had seen their like many times in the faces of men accustomed to absolute power. Corrupt, sadistic, merciless, yes; but the eyes of men accustomed to moving the strings of this world, as they manipulate those of Earth. The friendly name of dom — the nearest equivalent in English is mate, and in American, pal — had affronted him.

It was necessary to put our relationship on its proper footing instantly, and now I cursed that my stay on Earth had loosened my tongue. For these men were Vallians, and I had given them my real name. I should have remained Drak, Strom of Valka. So I simply said: “Very good, Kov. We must collect what things are necessary and travel as far downslope as is possible before nightfall.”

He grunted. “Quite so.” He turned to his nephew. “Jenbar — do you feel fit enough to walk?”

“I do not!” Jenbar spat out, with a curse.

Naghan Furtway, Kov of Falinur, merely looked at the young man, and then pushed past back into the shattered cabin. I had buried the naked body of the man I had stripped, and if Furtway bothered to notice he probably assumed the disappearance had been caused by the unfortunate man being flung out as the flier crashed. He began taking ponsho skins from the dead bodies.

Jenbar studied me.

“Koter Prescott,” he said, at last, and his voice betrayed his weakness. “I ask you to pardon my ill-temper. But I think you will understand it when you see our condition, and good men dead. I thank you for your assistance. I will try to walk bravely.”

I warmed to him then, responding to his frankness. I, too, would have been in a filthy temper had my airboat crashed in these surroundings.

In truth, our surroundings were unpleasant in the extreme, and if we were caught out here by nightfall, desperately dangerous. The airboat might provide some shelter, and I fancied we might manage a fire with tree wood, but I preferred to make the effort to reach lower altitudes before dark.

“Oolie Opaz!” exclaimed Jenbar. “What a miserable business!”

His expression warned me that there might be more than a mere curse in his intentions; for I had once seen the long lines of chanting men and women, garishly clad and strung with blossoms, winding in and out of the streets of Pomdermam, the capital of the nation of Tomboram on the island of Pandahem. “Oolie Opaz! Oolie Opaz! Oolie Opaz!” they would chant, singing and swaying, hour after hour the same

metronomic hypnotic words, swinging up and down the scale, changing key, on and on maddeningly. This hypnotic chanting held power. It sucked a man in, singing, until his eyeballs rolled up and he drifted away to a white and empty state of which philosophers and mystics talk.

I contented myself with a nod to the ponsho fleeces.

“Best to dress yourself warmly, Tyr Jenbar. The way will be long and hard.” Then, because he was young and there was in him a steely inner strength I could perceive, I added: “I know you will march well, but I will be here to help you if necessary.”

He looked downslope. His features hardened and a ridge jumped into life along his jaw, for he was clean-shaven. His face held a strong damn-you-to-hell look, and I guessed that ferocity was not for me, perhaps not even for the fates that had flung him here, but for the hostility of the way we must tread.

He chuckled. “It will be a task for Tyr Nath! But we will win through, Koter Prescott. We of Falinur always win through to our desires in the end!”

“So be it,” I said, and busied myself in making what small preparations we could.

So we set off, the three of us, and, in truth, had I not been with them, hurled there across the gulf of four hundred light-years by the inscrutable purposes of the Star Lords, they would not have survived. I fancied the Star Lords had brought me to Kregen this time, for this business bore all the hallmarks of their handiwork, and not that of the Savanti.

We struggled through waist-high snow, which glittered with the frosting colors of jade and crimson as the twin suns struck through from a sky of purple and indigo. We reached the end of the valley, after many halts, and there stretching below us lay the beginning of the glacier, a tumbled confused mass, with the clouds drifting above it, obscuring the panorama beyond.

I am no man to love fir trees, for they look thin and harsh and dispiriting; I am a man who loves the wide-leaved expansive openhearted trees of the south. Fir trees are valuable for spars, and other artifacts, but here I welcomed their presence as clear proof we were below the tree line. As soon as possible we must reach below the snow-line.

“We will slide,” I said.

They did not argue. They had become stupefied — puggled is the old word for it — and they meekly accepted my dictates. I spread the ponsho fleeces. We lay upon them, belted together, and I pushed off — and we went.

We went!

It was a mad helter-skelter of a ride, a wild swooping rush of icy-cold wind and the hiss of the ice and jouncing bouncing and the desperate booted thrusting to avoid debris and the moraines that built up as side glaciers joined the main stem. Four times I had to haul us painfully to a halt, against the scraped sides, so that we might not crash full tilt into the low pile of rocks. Then we had to slip and slide over the obstacles, find a fresh glide path, and so down once more on the skins and take off with a breathless swooshing. My face was numb. Ice smothered me and I had to brush the crisp glassy crystals from my eyelids. The cold continued to cut intensely, and our very progress intensified its freezing grip.

We had taken rapiers and daggers — for very few men, and they either fools or protected in other

ways, travel Kregen unarmed — and with a dagger in each hand I was in some measure able to control and direct our descent. I thrust the daggers angling downward, and by varying the pressures from side to side could both slow and steer us. But it was exhausting work and I sweated a little, which is excruciatingly unpleasant in such cold temperatures.

We plunged boldly into the clouds.

“Have a care, Koter Prescott!” Furtway’s words were weak. The cold was numbing him through to the marrow. If he was to survive we must get down — and get down fast.

The rate of descent was slowed by the daggers. We left a wide swathe of ice chips spilling across the glacier after us. If we hit a rock now. . .

The clouds thinned, thickened, whereat I thrust hard with the daggers, thinned again and then we were through them and almost on the lip of the glacier.

I lunged sideways, plunging both daggers over onto the right. We swirled in a great fanning of ice chips and for an instant I thought we would skate right off the ponsho fleeces.

“Hold on!” I yelled, and ice cracked and flaked from my mouth.

We held on. Just short of the lip of the glacier, where it calved and in a great crevasse and a white thunder fell a thousand feet, we skidded and slewed into the side. We hit the scored bank of ice and snow, tumbled out, and so lay exhausted.

“Up!” I said.

They moaned.

“Let me lie, rast,” said Naghan Furtway, Kov of Falinur. “I am tired and would like to rest.”

“If you rest here you will never rise again.”

His eyes were closed and so he did not see my face as I leaned over him. I gripped him beneath the shoulders and stood him up, but his legs buckled and he slid down again. I turned to his nephew.

“Up,” I said. “Now is when you must march like a man.”

He groaned and sat up, and tumbled over sideways.

“Life is sweet and there is much to live for,” he said, the gush of white mist spuming from his lips at each word. “Now I know that, but I cannot feel it. I am done for. Leave me, Koter Prescott. It is soft and comfortable and warm here.”

“It’s as cold as the Ice Floes of Sicce,” I said, “which is where you’ll find yourself if you do not brace up.”

I stared at them. If they died I would have failed the Star Lords, and then I would be flung contemptuously back to Earth. I might rot there for years. I could not face that. These men must be saved, so that I might remain on Kregen and seek my lost love and demand her from her all-powerful father.

The task was extraordinarily difficult and painful, but I got Furtway up on my back, bundled with ponsho fleeces, and buckled him in place. I put my left arm around Jenbar and dragged him up, and so, carrying one and dragging the other, I set off.

There was no ice pick, so I could not probe for crevasses. If we fell, we fell. The cold was biting into my brain now; all I could do was put one foot down in front of the other, thankful for the tall Vallian boots. Socks are known on Kregen, but, like the men of the Foreign Legion, most Kregans have no truck with socks. I would have welcomed a good thick warm pair right now.

The memories I have of that nightmare descent grow vague and more vague. I was aware of the green sun Genodras sinking in an eerie smothering of emerald and jade, and then the world turned into blood as the red sun Zim held for a short space the sole domination of the sky. At this time the overlords of Magdag would gather in their colossal buildings and pray to Grodno, the green-sun deity, for protection and grace. Or so the peoples of the Eye of the World believed; I had witnessed the rites held during an eclipse of the green by the red, and I guessed the overlords did not act as the world suspected.

I was no warmer, but the trees were thickening and the snow — the eternal, damned snow — was petering out in drifts and crunching sheets through which I plunged to feel the hard rocklike ground beneath. The Maiden of the Many Smiles floated up into the night sky among the hosts of stars, and two of the smaller moons hurtled low overhead. In their pinkish light I trudged on. I had no conception of time or distance; all I knew was that I must go downhill. There had been a vague glimpse of a vast hilly plain when we quitted the clouds, cloud-bedappled. Now, as I lifted my head to look up and so out over the plain beneath, I saw that dark expanse beneath the moons spattered and dotted by myriads of specks of light.

Nearer, five hundred yards downslope, a light beamed up, warm and friendly and beckoning. I headed for it, fell against the wooden door, and went on hitting the door until it opened.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Naghan Furtway and I play Jikaida

“You are a strange man, Koter Prescott.”

“Many men have said that, Kov Furtway. And it is true.”

We sat around the plain wooden table in the neat cabin and drank the superlative Kregan tea and warmed ourselves by the fire that crackled and sparked in the hearth, while Bibi, the lady of the house, fussed around us, delighted and yet awed at entertaining a real live kov in her house.

“How were you in the mountains, then, Koter Prescott?” asked Jenbar.

“I was lost. Believe me, I was hoping you were going to rescue me.”

They laughed at that.

Warmth, a good sleep, and now a piping hot meal of roast rolled-vosk-loin and a vegetable-pot, together with chunks torn from a long Kregan loaf and that Kregan tea I had sampled with my clansmen, had revived the three of us.

Bibi's husband, Genal, was out chopping more wood. They lived well up here in the mountains, with a great store of food put by in the shed protected from snow-leem and deep-frozen by the weather, and Genal could bring in enough ice to be packed and shipped down to the plain to keep him and Bibi in moderate affluence. Genal the Ice, they called him down there.

"More tea?" fussed Bibi. "It is still fresh, Kov Furtway."

He held out his cup and watched as Bibi filled it and he drank. He did not say thank you. In everyday life he never had to say thank you to anyone, except. . .

"We bring our ice from Drak's Seat," said Jenbar. "By Vox! I've seen enough to last me a lifetime. In Vondium ice is all the rage, but not for me, Oolie Opaz, not for me!"

Vondium!

I was in Vallia. I must be. Vallia . . . *Vallia!*

"Tell me, Tyr Jenbar. Just how far away is Vondium?"

He stretched and yawned and answered offhandedly: "Oh, I don't know. Three hundred dwaburs perhaps, a bit more probably, something like that."

"At least that, Jenbar," said Furtway. "We had crossed most of these accursed Mountains of the North from Evir before we crashed. May the Invisible Twins smite those crampfs of Havilfar!"

I nodded. "One would think they did themselves a grave disservice by selling airboats that fail so often."

Furtway grunted and reached for the palines that Bibi placed in a diced-wood bowl upon the table.

"They are arrogant in their power. Only they, as far as we know, possess the mines. One day, Opaz willing, one day. . ."

Jenbar laughed and took up the palines.

"My uncle has an old dream, Koter Prescott.[\[1\]](#) We of Vallia are proud and strong; we produce all we require and may buy what we will all over the known world. But we cannot make an airboat."

I nodded and the conversation drifted. The impatience to be gone sawed at my nerves. Vondium lay something like fifteen hundred miles due south. I had to get there — and I managed to retain wit enough to understand that through these two, Furtway and Jenbar, I might reach my objective faster than I could by traveling alone. They would provide transport.

Evir, across the mountains to the north, was the most northerly province on the island proper, although, as is common on Kregen, the coastal waters were peppered with small islands. One of those islands — and not so small, at that — was Valka. If I said I was a Strom to these men now, they would not believe. But the name Dray Prescott was likely going to prove a handicap.

The clothes I wore, the black boots on my feet, the rapier and two daggers, were all from the corpse in the airboat. In addition, I had taken his money, as also the money from the others, for old mercenary habits die hard. The Kov and his nephew had not recognized either the clothes or the weapons, for they were of the plain and workmanlike cut common to the middle classes of Vallia. I suppose one might call

that great mass of self-interested, self-centered, and intensely self-loyal people the gentry of Vallia. With this garb I fancied I could fend for myself in somewhat better style than I had when I had at last crossed the Klackadrin and reached Pa Mejab on the eastern coast of Turismond.

In my view neither Furtway nor Jenbar were fit to travel yet, for we were still high in the mountains and the weather was bitterly cold. Since Genal the Ice had told us he would be taking an ice-load down the mountain in three days' time, it was easy enough to persuade them to wait that long. I did not want to wait, but I already knew what Kov Furtway proposed.

Roads are not as good as they might be in Vallia, and no one, as far as I then knew, had shown the interest in zorca chariot racing that had caused the old Strom of Valka to pave a number of his roads across the island. The roads are, however, perfectly capable of speeding zorca couriers along their tracks which would not accept wheeled or sledged traffic. Heavy traffic goes by canal in Vallia. Furtway intended to dispatch a zorca courier from the post town below in a fold of the foothills with a message — and a damned intemperate one it would be, too, I could guess — to his villa in Vondium to send a fresh airboat for him.

On that airboat I intended to enter Vondium.

All the great lords of the provinces of Vallia maintain splendid and sumptuous villas in the capital city, and use them whenever business or pleasure calls them to Vondium. When the lord is not in residence the villa is kept up, if on a reduced scale, for no chatelaine knows from one day to the next if the lord might arrive. And if all is not in apple-pie order and everything ready immediately for comfortable occupation — exit one chatelaine and enter a sufficiently energetic and zealous new one.

So we had three days to kill.

We sang songs and we told stories and we played Jikaida.

Kov Furtway was inordinately fond of Jikaida. This is the board game popular on Kregen involving an elongated form of chessboard — the actual number of squares may vary along with the numbers of men, and the different sizes are dignified by different degrees — which, together with chess, checkers, and Halma-like moves for the men, combine to form an engrossing game of mock war. Genal the Ice and Bibi had a board, for one is usually to be found in every house in Kregen, if sometimes a little rooting about in cupboards is necessary, and we settled down to a tournament. The men were blue and yellow.

“Blue,” said Furtway, not giving me the opportunity to guess his closed fists. “You take the damned blue.”

Jenbar chuckled, but the sound was such as I had heard Thelda utter — or my many friends of Pandahem. “Blue, the color of the Opaz-forsaken Pandaheem cramphs! My uncle, Kr. Prescott, never plays the blue.”

“As you wish.” I thought of that great battle in Magdag. “I, too, have a fondness for the yellow.”

We played. Furtway was skilled, tough, ruthless, unscrupulous when he could thus win a point or a piece. I reacted at first with vigor, and gradually the yellow pushed back the blue along the board, and I was aligning my sights on his left-wing Chuktar, when I paused and considered. I came to the conclusion it might be judicious to let this man win. After all, a board game can be turned into profit and advantage, as I well knew; and there is to some men a superior form of winning in contriving their own defeat. So I fumbled a Deldar's move, and with a flashing smile and a triumphant gesture, Furtway removed my

right-wing Chuktar.

“Your concentration lapsed, Kr. Prescott. Always, at Jikaida, as in life, you must bend your mind to the task in hand.”

“Yes, Kov Furtway. You are right, but I am most anxious to reach Vondium.”

They had, of course, asked me my business in the capital. I had fobbed them off with a casual story of a consignment of cortilindens coming into the port, and turned the conversation, managing to bring up the subject of the Emperor and his wayward daughter. Both men did not attempt to hide their feelings.

“The Emperor is the Emperor, and his will is law. But we sometimes have to take measures for his own good. The Princess Majestrix, now, is willfully disobedient in refusing to marry.”

I saw Jenbar nodding in agreement.

“She is the most beautiful girl in all Vallia — in all the world, I truly believe — and she must marry some day. Happy the man who claims her hand.”

“The man whom the Emperor wishes her to marry,” I said, speaking with care, and yet seeming casual. “He is a good choice?”

“That fool!” cried Furtway. “Why, Vektor of Aduimbrev is totally unsuited, for all that he is wealthy and powerful and has the Emperor’s ear.”

“Vektor is a get onker!” Jenbar spoke with passion. I knew of the passion my Delia could arouse in the hearts of the men in her bodyguard and retinue; I had seen its results aboard the swifter *Sword of Genodras*, and I warmly applauded his defense of my beloved. If there was any degree of this kind of feeling abroad in the country, then perhaps my task in persuading her father the Emperor that I was the one Delia of the Blue Mountains should marry would not be as difficult as I had surmised. But I wanted to know more narrowly where these men stood in the greatest enterprise of my life.

“But the racters, they desire it, do they not?”

Jenbar snorted. Furtway cunningly captured a zorca patrol led by a Hikdar and, with the blue pieces in his hand, stared at me. “The racters run the country, no one can deny that. But in this they are wrong.”

“Yes,” said Jenbar. “But where do you stand in this argument, Kr. Prescott?”

I was merely a Koter, and therefore only a small step up from the great mass of the ordinary folk among whom I truly belong, as I sometimes think; the question, however, was not patronizing, as might be supposed, coming from the nephew of a Kov. Jenbar really wanted to know.

“As for me,” I said, attempting to forestall an imminent attack on my exposed right wing, “I do not think the Princess Majestrix should marry Vektor of Aduimbrev.”

“Ah!” quoth Furtway, and demolished a Jiktar and two Hikdars. “You have lost the game. Place the pieces for another. As for Vektor — when your business with the cortilindens is finished, call at my villa. You will be welcome. You are a man of resource. I can find work for your hands, aye, and your brain.”

“Thank you, Kov Furtway. I shall look forward to that.”

This might be very useful. A man as powerful as a Kov on my side would weigh heavily in the scales. I played considerably better the next game, taking both his wing Chuktars, but eventually letting him push a strong force through the center and so rout me. His passion for the game was unslaked, and I saw how much of his life was reflected in the pieces on the board. Vallia, as I understood it, while being preeminent on the outer oceans, maintained a minuscule army, mainly composed of honor guards and the like, and employed mercenaries whenever land warfare was involved. The interior police, however, and the aragorn, were prominent in the political affairs of the islands.

On the third day a shrill cry brought us to the door and we saw toiling up the slope toward us a shaggy old quoffa dragging a cart on its runners, its wheels removed and slung on the sides. The quoffa looks like a perambulating hearth-rug with bunched shoulders and hindquarters — it has six legs, but the Earthly nomenclature trips from the tongue — and a dogged old head from which the steam blew in great snorts like one of Mr. Stevenson's new engines. The carter was a Relt, at which I was much surprised. But the Relts, those less formidable cousins of the bird-headed Rapas, are often found in employment in many countries. He shouted again and Bibi chuckled and bustled about, for this was her regular delivery of four weeks' supplies. Also, the Relt would take away a heaping load of ice on the downward run, and Genal would give him orders for the number of carts he required for the main delivery.

After a great meal and a single glass of an excellent vintage from Procul, a full and rich red wine, we bade Remberee to Genal the Ice and Bibi. They were given a handful of broad gold talens, with the head of the Emperor on one side and the — smaller — head of Furtway on the reverse, charged with a checkerboard. I considered this carrying a passion for a game to a fault, that it should be the man's emblem and figure on his coinage, but it turned out that the checkerboard was the Falinur insignia. I had privily sorted through the coins I had taken from the dead men and found some with the Emperor on the obverse, and faces and designs I did not recognize on the reverse; these I handed to Genal and Bibi with my sincere thanks.

Then we clambered aboard the cart, warmly wrapped against the chill of the ice blocks, even though Genal had reduced this load on our account to make a space, and off we went.

The sliding descent on the runners was wild enough, but when the Relt replaced the wheels, and off we went again, I felt my opinion change, and knew the wheels were worse. At last the faithful quoffa could be put back into the shafts and we trundled decorously into the large village, almost a small town, nestling in the valley.

Clean through the center of the town ran a broad canal, bridged here and there, but unmistakably the artery of commerce and travel. There were many long narrow boats afloat. The ice went straight aboard one of them, together with ice from other ice-gatherers, and the boat pushed off at once.

"I'd have thought it would melt too soon, aboard a barge," I said.

The Relt rubbed his beak in the habit they have, and said in his squeaky voice: "This is ice for only a few dwaburs south. Ice for farther afield goes by airboat. Look."

We all looked and there was an airboat — drab, gray, battered — rising over the houses and heading south.

"That is for us," said Furtway in the voice of the Kov. We paid the Relt and walked across to the airport. Yes, we could book a passage south, it would cost us the same price as it cost the ice-shippers, and we would have to provide our own food, sleeping equipment, and an indemnity. In case of accident

we must sign away the right of our heirs to claim against the ice-shipping Company of Friends. I was to learn a great deal more of these Companies of Friends which control so much of the trade and industry of Vallia. Both my companions made no bones about signing, so neither did I.

The airboat carried us — not particularly comfortably and in somewhat chilly conditions — a hundred dwaburs south, where we were set down in the bustling market town of Therminsax.

From this place Furtway was able to dispatch a zorca courier — one of the officers charged with maintaining the zorca communications over the island — on payment of a sizable sum and proof that he was who he said he was. This he did by means of his seal-ring. My own seal-ring as Strom of Valka, the ring sent from the Emperor via my panval friends, lay now with my Savanti leathers and my Savanti sword on the towpath back in Valka. Although — surely my friends would have found that little pile of possessions by now. They must have been sorely puzzled wondering where I had gone. Perhaps they thought I had taken that journey I had told them of. If they thought that, they were almost right, but why I should choose to go stark naked must have driven them to their wits' end to find explanations.

While we waited we put up at *The Swordship and Barynth*. I have often noticed how nautical names for pubs are common in inland parts. The inn was comfortable and obliging. Furtway claimed Jenbar to play Jikaida. I went for walks about the town, soaking up the atmosphere, relishing the clean red and white houses, the tidy gardens, the squares and shady colonnades, spending a long time leaning on the canal wall overlooking the towpath and watching the narrow boats as they glided by.

Many of them were hauled by whole gangs and tribes of people, sturdy, open-faced folk in practical outfits, men and women, of breechclouts and short-sleeved tunics, open at the throat. They hauled with a will, and once the narrow boat was under way she could be kept going and on course by just half a dozen girls or lads to pull, and the old skipper to steer. I saw no draft animals, not a single quoffa, and this did not surprise me. There were very few halfings hauling the narrow boats, although I did see a complete outfit of two narrow boats in tandem dragged along by a squealing bunch of Ochs. On the second day I saw a sight that brought me, with my fists clenched, staring painfully at the canal.

A narrow boat approached. She was not gaily painted as were all the others I had seen, decorated with fantastic scenes from myth and legend, from song and story, and with all the flowers of the field — this boat was all a dun gray and she was large and clumsy. But the thing that so disturbed me was her motive power. Along the canal towpath trudged a gang of people, all stark naked, all hairy and dirty, all heaving at the tow rope under the merciless whips of guards.

I stared, hatred welling.

The guards were big fellows, mostly humans, but a Rapa or a Fristle stalked here and there. They whipped their charges on. The narrow boat moved lumpily through the water, heavily laden. I just stood there. The guards were dressed uniformly in buff leather jerkins, wide across the shoulder, and with the tall black Vallian boots. The sleeves of their shirts were banded red and black. I had seen those uniform colors before.

I, myself, wore the buff jerkin, but my sleeves were buff also. I knew that these banded sleeves in their color coding were the signs worn by servitors of great lords or parties; but this red and black, these were the colors of the government, of the Emperor!

I, Dray Prescot, could not just stand there.

But I had to.

For I dared not do as I instinctively desired to do and rush upon these slave-herders and rout them and free their slaves; the trouble that action has caused in the past is beyond calculation.

A girl stumbled and fell and dragged the tow rope down in her despairing clutch. She brought down an old man and one or two others, so telling me how weak they all were. The guards whipped them. But the girl just lay there. Her brown hair drifted out across the muddy tow-path. I saw the rawhide cutting into her. Could I just stand there? This same scene must be reenacted many times every day. One more repetition would make no difference at all.

None.

The girl moaned and tried to shield herself with her spindly arms. She shrieked afresh as the lash bit into her.

No difference.

I had been learning cleverness. I had controlled myself back there in Theirson's village. I had not rushed upon the aragorn until I had a weapon.

I had a weapon now.

But — the trouble this would cause. The Emperor in faraway Vondium, the Kov Furtway here, all my plans, the love I bore my Delia of the Blue Mountains. One young girl being whipped to death was a common enough sight, Zair knew. What had it to do with me?

There was nothing I could do. Nothing.

I jumped the wall and ran down to the towpath. I spoke in a rational and quiet voice, calmly, reasonably.

“To hit her any more will do no good. She cannot rise.”

The guard swung, the whip poised. Four of his fellows turned toward me as the chanks of the inner sea turn toward their prey.

“This is no business of yours, dom. Clear off!”

“But,” I said, “if the girl cannot pull, why beat her?”

“She'll pull.” The guard had fine strong white teeth. He smiled. “She'll pull. Now clear off. This is Emperor's business, as you well know. We are not answerable to you.”

“I think, dom, you are, unless you release her.”

“Release her? You're either a get onker or you're mad! The Emperor's slaves are sequestered property. Clear off, or you'll be in more trouble than you can handle.”

The guard sounded no more truculent than any man interrupted in his work. He spoke as reasonably as I. He could not understand what I was talking about. I tried for the last time.

“Please” — I said *please!* — “do not hit her any more. If you cannot release her give her time to rest.”

Another guard ran up, swearing horribly. He wore a red and black cockade in his broad-brimmed hat, above the feather. The narrow boat had gone on with her momentum and now the tow rope stretched back from the bits on her bows.

“What’s going on here? If you Doty-rotten cramphs can’t keep your rasts of haulers in line I’ll soon Jikaida your backs! I’ll make you yell, by Vomer the Vile!”

“It’s this one here, sir,” said the guard who had been trying to explain to me.

I said, “This girl cannot pull any more. Flogging her will do no good—”

I was interrupted. The guard wore a rapier. He ripped it out. He flourished it in my face. He looked to be in a most apoplectic rage.

“This barge is on the Emperor’s service — as you well know! Take yourself off before it is too late! Jump, rast!”

I knew little of the pecking order in Vallia; that it is complicated is true; I didn’t worry about my lack of knowledge.

“It seems you insist I must make you show mercy,” I said. I started to draw my rapier. I was already working out how not to kill them all, when I heard a man in the towing party yell. “By Vaosh! Behind you, Ven!”

I turned. I was slow. The blow struck behind my ear and I pitched forward, struggling to retain my balance. A black booted foot kicked out. I heard a coarse laugh. “Swim in the canal, cramp!” And then I smashed face-first into blackness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the canals of Vallia

On my back I floated with the mild drift of the current, for here near the inflow of river water, controlled and sluiced, the canal waters possessed a definite movement of their own. The sky above me towered enormously high, palely blue, with the intolerable glare of Antares blinding down and streaming variegated highlights from the tiny waves I made as I floated. I knew what I was doing there. I had been stupid, as usual, and slow, which for a man in my trade is unforgivable. I knew, however, why I had been slow. My aims had been confused; a desire to do what naturally occurred to me to do and my so-clever newfound rationality had played me false. I would far better have simply rushed in swinging as in the old days. Then, instead of me floating in the canal with a muzzy head there would be six bully-boy guards floating there, and with rapier-thrusts through their bellies, like as not.

In the future I wouldn’t be slow, and I’d hit first — as I usually did.

Worry over Delia had fogged my mind. Here I was, actually on the same landmass as her, breathing air that might waft down for her to breathe and so waft back to me. An idiotic notion, but one that suited my idiotic mood.

Through the water toward me the smooth stem of a narrow boat bore on. I saw the gaily painted strakes and the fanciful representations of monsters and flowers, musical instruments, and spreading proudly to

either side of the stem, the lavishly decorated picture of a Talu, one of those eight-armed mythical — as I still thought — dancers of the sloe eyes and the cupid's-bow mouths. I had seen such a Talu carved from the mastodon tusk in that perfumed corridor of a decadent palace, when a slave girl in the gray slave breechclout had dropped and smashed a jar of water. I had cannoned into the statue and toppled with it in my arms, the eight arms a wagonwheel of wanton display about me, the fingertips touching.

I confess I was still thinking about that mastodon-tusk carving as the rope hissed into the water and I was hauled aboard.

The majority of Vallians have been blessed with the kind of strong beaked nose I have myself, and the man who stared down on me now wiped a hand across his powerful nose, and grunted:

“Welcome aboard—”

He did not add the customary Koter, or even dom, or, given the circumstances, Ven. I saw the expression on his face and knew precisely what he was thinking. If you're not a canalman, he was saying, without speaking, then you're a dead man.

“Thank you for pulling me out. It's all right. The water won't harm me.”

He perked up at that, and smiled.

“You'd best come below. Dry you off.” As I nodded to thank him and bent to descend the short companionway ladder, he whistled. I had lost my hat.

“That's a crack you've had on the back of your head, Ven. Like to have killed a man.”

“I've a tolerably thick skull. Too thick for some folk.”

Someone yelled from up forward and my host halted to yell back. “He's of the canalfolk. He's had a knock, but he'll live.”

In the small but beautifully appointed cabin with everything in its place I sat at the table and drank strong Kregan tea. Made with the canalwater, it tasted somehow as good as any tea I have ever had. “I am Yelker, skipper of the old *Dancing Talu*.” I knew, from my talk with Borg, that he would be Ven Yelker nal Vomansoir, for this was the Vomansoir Cut.

Thinking of Ven Borg made me remember my resolve.

“I am Drak ti Valkanium,” I said. This was true.

“We're headed south so I can't offer to take you back to Therminsax. It is a pleasant town, and we always enjoy our stopovers there. But we are for Vomansoir.”

My clothes were drying, so I sat there with a blanket about me as a girl bustled in, tut-tutted at the way my tunic had been clumsily hung up by Yelker, glanced a quick and intense look in my direction, gathered up my gear, and started up the ladder again. She paused and tossed her heavy brown hair back and stared over her shoulder. She wore an off-the-shoulder white blouse, attractively tailored beneath her bodice, and the movement emphasized her beauty, as she well knew it would. I could guess all too easily why she did not wear one of the tunics or jerkins common to the canalfolk.

“You men can’t look after a thing. I’ll hang these on the line.”

When she had gone with a flash of long bronzed legs, Yelker sighed. “That’s Zyna, my daughter. Her mother didn’t spank her enough when she was young enough for it to be effective.” Then he roared into the speaking tube that led forward, the brass mouthpiece dazzling. “Mother! That girl of yours is showing off again.”

A muffled series of shrieks and squawks spattered from the brass mouthpiece. Yelker shoved the whistle back and sighed.

“I don’t know what good canalfolk are coming to these days.”

“Ven Yelker. Will you take me south with you?” I reached for the lesten-hide bag of money I had taken from the dead men, and realized it was in the pocket of my tunic. “I will be happy to pay you—”

He held up a hand. “Not so, Ven Drak. You are a canalman, and I am a canalman. If one cannot do the other a goodness without seeking reward, then the spirit of the canals is dead.”

“Did you see how I came to be in the canal?”

“I did not. I would not ask, but I own I am curious.”

I told him of the incident. He frowned and bashed a fist down onto the table.

“Pardon me for saying it, Ven Drak. But you are a fool!”

I sat.

“Don’t you have Emperor’s barges on Valka?”

“I have not seen one. We pull our own boats, there.” I had expressed my astonishment to Borg over the non-use of draft animals, and he had simply scratched his head and said that men and women always pulled the boats. How otherwise would they get exercise and build their muscles? Animals, to haul narrow boats! He thought the conceit highly amusing.

“Well, you surprise me. We hate them. They are unfair competition. And the poor devils who are sent to the Emperor’s canal barges — well, just steer clear of them, that’s all. They have absolute priority and right of way on any cut. They force us out into the center and make us drop our tow as they pass. Oh, and they do pass!”

I had seen what I had seen. I could imagine the horror of the haulers, racing to drag their unwieldy barges past the elegant narrow boats of the canalfolk, driven on by the whip and the knout.

“I do not like it, Ven Yelker.”

“Neither do I, Ven Drak. But neither you nor I can do ought about it. And here comes Mother.” I stood up, clutching my blanket, as Sosie descended into the cabin, a plump, smiling, brown-eyed dynamo of a woman. I saw that she kept Yelker in order. I wondered where he hid his booze.

“You’ll need feeding up, young man,” she said, and the sharpness of her tones made me smile — me, Dray Prescott, made me smile — for I detected the warmth and humanity aboard this narrow boat

Dancing Talu. Other members of the family were introduced. There were ten of them, not all blood relations but crew members indentured from other families and other boats. More often than not two or three families crewed a boat. The big thing was to keep moving. Once the initial inertia of the boat had been overcome and she was gliding with that stately smooth passage of a craft on inland waters, the whole gang could cease hauling and leave two or three to keep her moving. Naturally, I took my turns at hauling. We were all busy at locks. Then we would sweat and haul until our muscles cracked and *Dancing Talu* was under way once more. Then young Wil would go haring off to close the paddles down and shut the lock gates, and then come racing back along the towpath to take a wild flying leap onto the deck. If young Wil with his wild mop of hair and his agility had been unable to drink the canalwater he'd have been a dead rascal inside a day.

We were going south!

We were riding the Vomansoir Cut and going south toward Vondium. I knew a man, a Chuktar, the Lord Farris, who came from Vomansoir. I had met him once, briefly, aboard the Vallian Air Service airboat *Lorenztone*. I did not think I would make inquiries and look him up. He knew me as Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor, and the man who aspired to the hand of the Princess Majestrix.

I needed to be a lot closer to Delia than Vomansoir when I revealed my identity.

Vallia is riddled with canals. Traffic flow remained dense and constant. The local authorities of towns maintained the cuts, under the Emperor's personal fiat, and they had put into operation a system of traffic control at intersections. Every lock worked and was efficient, and did not lose too much water. The suns shone, the sky remained clear, I hauled at the tow ropes, operated the locks, fetched and carried, and all the time we rode on southward and I was drawing nearer and nearer to my Delia. I think I achieved a kind of tranquility. I had always underestimated canals, I now realized. Also, I observed the strong fellow-feeling of the canalfolk, and as I absorbed their language and its peculiarities, a task made easy by the potency of the genetically-coded language pill given me in Aphrasöe by Maspero, I reached the understanding that they considered themselves not only a people apart from ordinary Vallians, but a cut above the rest. I was not going to give them an argument on that.

The weather grew warmer as we progressed south, although with the much greater band-spread of temperate climate on Kregen the differences between Vondium, in the south, and Evir, in the north, are nothing like what one would expect on Earth. The Mountains of the North are cruelly cold, as I had discovered.

Winding lazily southward through the center of Vallia flows the Great River, the Mother of Waters, She of Fecundity, which empties into the Sunset Sea where Vondium is situated. Because of the lazy windings of the river, which bears many names along its length, canals sometimes use it when convenient; most often they have been cut by men with a disregard of the river's course. Once we crossed the Great River on a long-striding aqueduct, like twenty Pontcysylltes rolled into one.

Through the low-rolling hills to the south we traveled past tree-hung banks where the mirrored reflections gave a strange duplicating effect of aerial navigation, as though we floated in air. The water changed color occasionally as minerals washed down from the hills; generally it reflected the sky and the clouds, the overhang of trees, the grasses, wild flowers, and rushes of the banks. In a glass it sparkled silvery pure, clean, sweet, refreshing, and — if you were not of canalfolk — deadly.

Between towns the thread of water ran through open country, vast sweeps of moorland, or massy forests, through tangled byways and past the outskirts of magnificent lordly holdings. Sometimes there were no traffic arrangements at crossings, where cut met cut.

Yelker roused himself on an afternoon of lazy sunshine and drifting cloud, and consulting with Rafee, the bulky-shouldered man who acted as his second-in-command, shouted an order to 'vast heaving. He jumped lithely to the bank and with Rafee strode ahead to where the canal curved beyond a clump of missals, leaning over the placid water. Only one other boat was in sight, a red and green craft that had been gently following us for the last day or so.

“What is it?” I said to Zyna.

She tossed her brown hair back and said: “The Ogier Cut. It crosses here.”

“Oh,” I said, thinking of Borg.

The deep, quietly green-breathing heart of the country surrounded us. The green of the banks reflected in a double bar along the edges of the canal, the placid water pent between, dimpled occasionally by the plop of a fish, the high arch of the sky, the faint refreshing breeze, all added up to create images of perfect peace and quietude. I jumped to the bank.

“I will come with you, Drak.”

“With pleasure, Zyna.”

We walked up the bank together, the towpath, as is usual, wide enough for three people abreast. Just past the clump of missals there was a winding-hole where boats might turn. A little beyond that the canal widened again and I saw the Ogier Cut coming in from the east and west. At this watery crossroads stood Yelker and Rafee, and they were frowning at the long procession of boats on the Ogier, streaming past at right angles to the Vomansoir.

“This will take time, Yelker,” Rafee was saying.

I had picked a spike of grass and I was chewing this as I walked up. Yelker turned at sound of our footsteps.

“Time, Drak,” he said. “And time is money. They will never pause to let us through.”

“I don't see why not.” I walked up to the ridge of the bank and looked east. The boats continued pulling steadily toward us for as far as I could see until the canal curved, a distance I estimated as three-fifths of a dwabur. “There are a lot of them. This, as Rafee says, will take time.”

“We must then go back to the boat and brew up and wait.”

“Why? Surely they can hold up just long enough for us to slip through?”

“There are no canal wardens out here. It is every man for himself.”

About to ask him — almost tauntingly — what of the vaunted comradeship of the canalfolk, I stopped. They had accepted me as a canalman who had, sorrowfully enough, become mixed up with ordinary Vallians. I must be of the canals, for I could drink the water. But I must not show too much ignorance.

“I will take a little stroll,” I said. And then as Zyna perked up, smiling, I added swiftly: “Alone.”

Dancing Talu carried hoffiburs from Therminsax and if they did not reach Vomansoir in good time they would go rotten. Any delay was to be avoided. We could be stuck here for the rest of the day. From Vomansoir the boat would take lissium ore back to Therminsax, a busy and lucrative trade.

As I walked slowly along I could just see a shining sheet of water dim and vast along the eastern horizon, and knew this to be one of the many great lakes that make the interior of Vallia so pleasant a place. The procession of boats on the Ogier Cut passed endlessly. The haulers walked carelessly enough across the wooden bridges built over the Vomansoir Cut. Other bridges, of a distinctively different pattern, crossed the Ogier north-south. I walked along the western bridge and stood leaning on the parapet, chewing my grass stem.

The scrape of a bare foot on the bridge made me turn.

Zyna walked up, boldly enough, although there was a little diffidence she hid admirably. She smiled at me. Over her shoulder I could see the red and green boat had pulled in astern of *Dancing Talu*, and her people and ours were clumped on the bank, talking and gesticulating.

“You should not send me away, Drak.” She pouted at me, and the glance from her man-killing eyes would have done the business for any young buck of the canals.

“Nevertheless, Zyna, go back to your father and tell him to unmoor and begin hauling. The other boat also. They must be ready to shoot through the Ogier the moment a gap appears.”

“But—?”

“Do as I say, young Zyna, or by Vaosh, I’ll tan your bottom!”

“You wouldn’t dare!” she flashed back. And then — she giggled. I thought of Viridia the Render, and I sighed, and surmised that my handling of girls is calculated to make them exceedingly wroth with me.

“I guarantee, young woman, that if you believe you would enjoy that, you are wrong. I have a hard and horrifically horny hand.”

Whereat she giggled again. I pushed up from the bridge parapet and took out my grass stem and threw it on the gray barges of the Emperor with their arrogant right-of-planks and advanced toward her — and she ran off, shrieking with merriment.

It was precisely at crossing places like this that the gray barges of the Emperor with their arrogant right-of-way held an advantage. They would simply haul straight on. The stentor braced in the bows would lift his triply-spiraled brass trumpet, maneuvering it up and around, with his arm thrust through the spiral, the blaring trumpet mouth high and blasting forward, and peal the shrill commanding notes that would make all canalfolk hauling give way before the Emperor’s barge.

Those long low gray barges flew the flag of Vallia, the vivid yellow saltire on the red ground.

As I stared back down the towpath I saw Zyna reach the knot of folk clustered where the stem and the stern of the two narrow boats nuzzled. Faces turned to look up at me and I waved. It had not occurred to me to consider that Yelker would not instantly do as I had said, and I felt a twinge of astonishment as he and Rafee and a few others together with men and women of the red and green boat started off along the towpath toward me. Truly, the habits of a Strom, a Zorcander, a lord, do not wash with canalfolk!

“What is all this about, Ven Drak? By Vaosh, if we move into the Ogier our tows will be cut swifter than the throats of a litter of leems!”

“Maybe not so, Yelker, maybe not.”

“You have a plan?”

I hadn't thought of any plan. “No. No, I'm just going down there and ask the first haulers I come to, to hold up for us.”

They gaped at me.

A man with a black spade beard, the skipper of *Pride of Vomansoir*, guffawed. “Ho! You'll find yourself in Gurush's Bottomless Marshes if you try that, Ven Drak!”

“Why?”

But, of course, the reason was obvious. No hauler is going to ease his boat back to a stop if he can avoid it; the effort of overcoming inertia to begin movement again is the toughest chore of the canalfolk, in and out of locks.

I said, “They will do as I request.”

Yelker said, “I am a man of peace, Drak. You possess a rapier, and we do not see many of those on the cuts. But your rapier is aboard, and I will not let you get it.”

He didn't know the risks he ran by telling me I could not do something, but I had no desire to use an edged and pointed weapon in this fracas. All I knew was that time was running out and I must press on to Vondium and Delia, and a line of narrow boats prevented me.

“Then, so am I. But, nevertheless, Yelker, get ready.”

And I turned away from him and walked down the bridge and so on the Ogier Cut.

CHAPTER NINE

The headless zorcamen

Narrow boats keep to the left riding the Vallian cuts and so by walking down from the western bridge I could walk back eastward along the southern bank of the Ogier Cut. Past me went the stream of boats. Their haulers looked up and some smiled, others nodded, one or two called out a casual “Llahal, Ven,” to which I replied in as casual a fashion.

Six young folk on a rope passed, four jolly laughing girls and two young lads who seemed mightily bashful as they saw me watching them. I let them go. All along the placid deep-green water approaching me the boats swam smoothly on. They differed in a subtle fashion from those riding the Vomansoir Cut, but they were narrow boats, gaily decorated, brilliantly painted, their high central ridgepoles draped with multicolored canvas concealing the loads beneath. Now walked steadily a man and wife, robust, fresh-faced, firmly-muscled. I nodded to them as I climbed up the wooden bridge, giving them all the room they needed as they dragged the tow rope across the bridge railing. The wood was smooth and so highly polished by the passage of countless ropes that it shone blindingly in the light from Zim and

Genodras. It took, on busy bridges, a surprisingly short time for the wood to wear away and become unsafe and so have to be replaced by the wardens.

I descended the other side of the southern bridge over the Vomansoir Cut. I let two barges go past, hauled by four men apiece, agile as they flexed out the tow ropes as they ascended the bridge. I walked on. Now I had to believe that Yelker would do as I had said. His argument had been surprising; I had to remind myself I was simply an ordinary mortal here, no longer a Strom. Ahead of me the narrow boats stretched out of sight, a moving, gliding patchwork of color along the glinting waters of the canal.

There are in any society men who for whatever obscure reasons of psychology desire to shine, to be noticed, to do things with an air that will draw the attention of everyone exclusively to them. We all know people like that. I had never been like that, but had found that simply by doing what I felt I had been impelled to do I had gained many of the results of a greater striving. Sometimes a man, to show his strength and prowess, would haul a narrow boat alone. The average rate was around a third of a dwabur a bur and by traveling at night the boats could cover sixteen dwaburs in a day. I was looking at this one man who wished to show off.

He came striding on, head down, muscles bared to the air with his jerkin unlaced and open over his chest. He was a fine-looking man, with plenty of manly hair on that chest, and a well-proportioned head with fiercely jutting beard and arrogant moustaches. He carried the tow rope over his left shoulder so that he could lay his weight against it to control his boat. I judged that, indeed, she was his, for after the fashion of many of the canalfolk he wore adornments of gold and silver about him, golden earrings and golden bands around his arms, and these were of a fine quality.

The sound of the boat's passage in that rhythmical series of gurglings and plashings swelled as he drew nearer. I could see no one on the deck of his boat, which was a large specimen of canal craft, a good hundred and fifty feet long in Terrestrial measurements. A brute to handle in a congested way, as I well knew.

I approached.

"You look as though you could do with some help over the bridge, Ven."

He looked up, not having heard my approach.

"I do not think so, Ven."

"Oh, I am sure you do."

I fell in at his side and walked pace for pace. Ahead of us the bridges grew nearer, and the Vomansoir Cut.

"I am Kutven Ban nal Ogier, and by your clothes you are not a canalman, by Vaosh! I need no help. Or do you wish to drink canalwater?"

A Kutven was a high-ranking man among the Vens. The canalfolk had many degrees, of course, and among them there was the Lord High Kov, and the Lord High Strom, and so on down to the ordinary Kutvens and Vens. I made myself laugh.

"Oh, come now, Kutven Ban! Of course you need help to climb that bridge." I put a hand on the rope.

I was keenly aware of the ludicrous situation. Here was I ready to brawl with a fellow canalman over rights of way, and yet all my thoughts were centered on the Princess Majestrix of this land. Truly, I relished the irony. "Take your hand off that rope. By Gurush of the Bottomless Marsh! Do you hear me, leepitix?"

"I hear, Ven, and I am not amused. I do not like being called a leepitix." A leepitix is a twelve-legged reptilian wriggler about a foot long who infests the canals and has a nasty bite. They can be frightened off by splashing. "Clear off!"

He let go the rope with his left hand and struck out. I ducked, tripped him up, yanked the rope in hard. It came with the peculiar soggy resistance and welling movement typical of a boat in narrow waters.

"I'm only trying to help you, Ven!"

He yelled and tried to stand up, whereat I cast a bight of the rope about his ankles and so pitched him over again.

"Look out!" I yelled. I jumped up and down and waved my arms at the boat which now headed majestically into the bank. "Look out, Ven! You'll have her aground!"

He was shrieking and raving by this time. A head popped up over the hatchway coaming of his boat. Yells floated up. The stem grounded about a yard out, and the stern began to swing. The cut, here, just after the winding-hole farther back, narrowed so as to present the shortest distance for the canal architects to bridge. The boat's stern drifted across and grounded on the far bank. Now people were yelling and running from all directions, it seemed, and I heard a series of splashes as people dived in to swim to the bank as the quickest way ashore. I yelled at a crone with gray hair who ran shrieking with her frying pan held aloft.

"Kutven Ban tangled himself up in the rope. Quick! We must help."

Other voices joined in a chorus of disbelief. I was making a great play of unwrapping the rope from Ban. He tried to hit me and I put my foot on his head, purely by accident, and he gobbled into the muddy grass of the towpath.

"Help us!" I shouted.

The crone started to hit me with the frying pan.

I ducked and Ban struggled up, foaming, and I gave the end of the rope a kick and it slid into the water like an eel. A big fellow with a red jerkin and silver earrings ran up. Two or three boys joined in and a couple of girls danced about. Other people formed a ring.

Ban was purple.

"He tangled in the tow rope and fell over," I shouted. I spread my hands. "Look at the following boats."

The fellow in the red jerkin spun around as though I had kicked him in his breechclout.

"Oh, by the mighty Vaosh himself!" he moaned.

Men and women were tumbling out of the boats to get onto the bank, where the haulers were laying

back and being dragged on squeaking heels along the path. The next boat homed in on the boat wedged diagonally across the cut and bumped in a great groaning of wood. The following boats began to pile up. I looked around. Now boats were filling the cut in a series of zigzags and presenting a scene of utter confusion.

I looked around with a certain satisfaction on my handiwork.

Then I looked the other way and saw *Dancing Talu* and *Pride of Vomansoir* gliding across the empty stretch, and the other boats on the Ogier Cut calmly receding into the distance.

Ban glared up, spitting mud, struggling to rise.

“You really should be more careful,” I said.

I could not immediately run off and jump aboard Yelker’s boat. There might be reprisals. So I started in on a fresh series of explanations for the benefit of fresh arrivals.

“Poor Kutven Ban!” and: “Ban shouldn’t do it all himself.”

I looked at Ban. He shook his broad shoulders and cocked his fists, spat mud, bristled, and started for me.

I said, “It is better that it was an accident, Ban. I do not think I wish to hurt you, but if it is necessary, I will.”

He roared, threw back his head to glare in hatred at me — he looked in my face. He stopped. He hesitated. His right foot scraped the towpath. He lowered his fists.

“Maybe, at that, ‘twas an accident.”

“By Vaosh, Ban,” I said. “You’re a man after my own heart.”

The clustered ring of people quite clearly were prepared to take their cue from the Kutven. He suddenly began roaring and raving to such effect that the ring burst asunder, and men and women, boys and girls, flew to their boats and a gang tailed onto the tow ropes of Kutven Ban’s boat and began to drag her parallel to the banks once more. I shouted in a very genial way, “Remberree!” and walked off.

Dancing Talu pushed on southerly and I hauled with a will, but I was not so prideful or so foolish as to wish to show off and haul by myself, although capable of it, and I noticed that Zyna would very often be there with me, hauling with her slender firmly-rounded body thrusting into the rope. In the normal course of events life on the cuts is leisurely, but now, because the cargo of hoffiburs might go rotten on Yelker, he maintained a good pace and by nightfall we had left *Pride of Vomansoir* well behind. We pushed on, the leading hauler with a lantern balanced in a lantern-hat, an arrangement of cradles and slings strapped onto the head and around the chin, angled back so that the lantern swung horizontally, although the hauler’s head inclined down with the strain of pulling.

It was the next night we saw the headless zorcamen.

Yelker ran up onto the forepeak of the boat and yelled, and Zyna let out a shriek of pure fear.

“Get back on board!” roared Yelker. “Let the rope go!”

Zyna clasped my arm. Her fingers shook.

“Drak! Drak! The headless zorcamen!”

I slipped the rope off my shoulders, got a grip on Zyna, and plunged bodily into the water. A few quick overarm thrusts with my free hand and I could heft her clinging body up with my other hand to the waiting grip of Yelker and Rafee. I followed them up. I stood on the narrow catwalk around the sheeted cargo space, dripping water, and stared narrowly into the blackness.

My eyes adjusted quickly — and then I saw them.

A long line of cowed and cloaked figures they were, as I thought, dark against the sky where four moons floated. Then a closer inspection revealed that, indeed, the cowls were merely hunched shoulders, the cloaks trailing, and that the zorcamen rode headless across the moors.

“Rubbish!” I said. “By Zim-Zair, a trick, a cheap trick.”

“Of course, Drak. They are men like you or me, dressed up to look horrific. But many men still believe them to be supernatural apparitions.”

I had had experience of headless horsemen, and the headless coachman, for in the land of my youth smuggling was a fine art.

“What purpose do they serve, then, Yelker? And why do we stop?”

“They are dangerous men. Those they do not frighten off, they kill.”

“Are we to stop, then, because of buffoons like that?”

“It is wise. So long as they believe they terrorize the district, we are safe. If they detected resistance, disbelief carried to action, they would strike us mercilessly.” He coughed, and added: “And there are Mother and Zyna, Sisi, and the girls to consider.”

“Yes,” I said. After a pause, when I had sufficiently controlled myself, I said: “Who are these kleeshes?”

“They ride the moors. Hereabouts is all the domain of Faygar, the Strom of Vorgan. He is a known racter. But he owns allegiance to the Kov of Vomansoir.”

“So?”

“So the racters must show their strength in some way when all the usual ways are denied them.”

There were twenty of them, riding head to tail, a long serpentine line of hunched shapes against the moons. They looked eerie and menacing, completely horrifying to an untutored mind.

“By Zair!” I said. “I have a mind to take my sword and teach them a lesson. And, come to that, I could use a zorca.”

Yelker passed no comment on my vainglorious boasting. He said: “You would leave us, Drak?”

My thoughts were turned to Vondium and Delia of the Blue Mountains. I had no wish to appear ungrateful to Yelker or his family aboard *Dancing Talu*. But I could not but speak the truth.

“I would be in Vondium as fast as the fleetest airboat could take me, Yelker!”

He sighed. “We shall lose you at Vomansoir, then. I value your presence aboard mightily. We would have lost much time crossing the Ogier Cut. By Vaosh, I would not have believed it!”

Rafee let out a cackle.

The zorcamen rode on, and their leader trended over the dark horizon, and so they vanished, one by one. Racters they were, out to terrorize the people of the district, to extort, to maim, and to kill. Well, they meant nothing to me. I had let my chance go. To the Ice Floes of Sicce with them all!

After a space we resumed our hauling, but Zyna remained aboard the boat.

I had detected in my actions since this arrival on Kregen a change of attitude, a laxness, a half-heartedness, a kind of softness most displeasing to me. I could guess why this was. You who have listened to my story will know that I tend to think like a civilized man, and to consider all the angles of a problem, and then to act like a savage barbarian, and jump in with my sword in my fist. Much of that must come from my Earthly ancestry mingled with the years I spent among my clansmen, fighting my way up to be Zorcander and Vovedeer. And, too, I am not a twentieth-century man, despite my veneer of the ways of speech and the automated culture of these times. I come from a lusty, brawling, robust age, when a belaying pin or a sailor’s knife settled an argument. I am not your ordinary hero of polite fictions, such as are still to be found in the scented courtly poems of Loh or of Vallia itself.

But, equally, I am not your simpleminded if quick-witted barbarian, like my good friend Wulk of the northern hills.

I had become soft and vacillating and slow. And I knew why this was. Despite all my protestations that I would go to Vallia and there confront Delia’s father, this dread Emperor, I had quailed from the task. I thought Delia understood my reasons, I fancied she saw that I had no wish to tear down the image she held of her father, all the love and affection built up through childhood and girlhood, all that warm close family kinship to be torn asunder, broken, destroyed, by a rough uncouth clansman not even from her own world!

As the twins circled through the night sky of Kregen, forever orbiting each other, I hauled the tow rope and I faced my problem. I had to go on. My feet had been set on this path by the Star Lords themselves. I must go to Vondium and stalk into the Emperor’s palace and there, before the world, claim my Delia.

I must!

There must be no more shilly-shallying. I made up my mind, then, in the puny pride of my heart, vaingloriously boasting to myself and to the moons and the stars, that I would fulfill whatever of destiny had called me to this strange and terrifying planet.

I can look back now at myself as I was then so long ago, and smile. But I can truly say that no thought of the actual power and might and majesty of Delia’s father the Emperor entered my mind. He was just a man. He could be made to do what I wanted him to do. It was on Delia, and on Delia’s feelings, that all my thoughts centered. This I swear.

We saw no more headless zorcamen and two days of hard pulling with many locks to bite into the actual distance traversed of our eighty-lock-miles-a-day travel, we came down into Vomansoir.

I had expected just another town, perhaps a city, something like Therminsax. What I saw enchanted me. Vallia is full of strange and exotic places and out-of-the-way retreats. Vomansoir straddled the Great River and six canals joined here in a wide stretch of hectically busy waterways. We trudged in and got our berthing ticket and tied up at the hoffiburs wharf run by a Company of Friends with whom Yelker usually dealt.

Every canal ran in through a series of lock flights, for Vomansoir is situated in a great natural bowl. As we descended we could see the surrounding slopes terraced and cultivated so that not a square inch of space was wasted. Colors rioted everywhere. Trees and bushes and flowers all blended into an enormous patchwork quilt of dizzying splendor. The river, She of Fecundity, ran in and out of the bowl through colossal canyons. Along the banks were moored vessels of surprising size. Beyond them the quays hummed with throngs of people busy about the everyday tasks of living. Zorca chariots clattered and whirred here and there, quoffas dragged carts of humbler duties, men and women rode saddle zorcas, and I saw again the half-voves I had last seen in Zenicce. Vallia, however, has no voves in the natural state, although there are small herds here and there bred up by men.

Everything was magnificent. The women wore flowing free gowns of myriads of colors; the men in their Vallian gear were not content thus to be left in the shade and their wide-shouldered tunics and jerkins were also brilliantly colored. I saw many of the men working on the quays and at the warehouses, as in the factories and the streets that dealt in various items of merchandise, wore the shirts with the banded sleeves, and while many of these banded colors were gray and yellow, the colors of Vomansoir, there were many also of other colors, sometimes three colors banded together. The red and black of the guards were in evidence, and I saw, with a bunching of my jaw muscles, gangs of slave haulers at work. Also, I saw men with black and white sleeves.

“Racters,” said Yelker, when I questioned him. “You are cut off in Valka, Drak, to be sure. By Vaosh, but they flaunt their superiority!”

I witnessed a clash between men of a racter employer and men wearing white and green banded arms over the priority of unloading a narrow boat. They fought with cudgels. They struck each other doughty blows. Yelker put his hand on my shoulder.

“Let them be, Drak, my friend. I am a man of peace, and you, I know, are a man of violence. But they go their ways—”

I was profoundly shocked.

“I, too, am a man of peace, Yelker! How can you call me a man of violence?” I considered. “I only tripped Kutven Ban!”

Rafee let rip with his coarse cackle at this. I could see their point. But I was annoyed. I am never violent — at least, not stupidly so, not unthinkingly, not when it will hurt people for whom I cherish affection. At least, so I hope.

I turned to collect my gear from the cabin I had used, up in the bows. “At least,” I said over my shoulder, “I never hit an old man or an old woman for fun.”

Then I stopped. “Well, Yelker — and you, too, you grinning onker, Rafee — if I am violent it would be

because I saw someone doing just that! I'd be inclined to hit him and thus attempt to show him the error of his ways." Like, I thought with some remorse, I had shown that argenter captain in Pa Mejab the error of his ways for slapping young Pando.

I bid them all Remberree and took myself off. They were sorry to see me go. I hoped they'd get back through the Ogier Cut without bother this time, although the lissium ore did not share the same urgency as the hoffiburs.

Finding a posting station was not easy, for I had made up my mind to continue by zorca. I did not have the price of an airboat ticket, assuming I could find a Company of Friends operating an airline here. The oldster with the stubbly chin scratched that stubble, and spat in the straw, and sized me up. My beard had been trimmed neatly. But folk in Vomansoir were clean-shaven as a rule.

"You must be in a mighty hurry, dom."

"I am. The zorca will be safe, for I am accustomed to riding them. Here." I held out coins with the portrait of the man I wished to see. "What will it cost?"

Strange words, those, for Dray Prescott on Kregen!

In the event I hired a zorca and left a whacking deposit as a guarantee of my honesty. Vallia has a functioning banking system, as must any country which trades at such a high intensity, and I could collect the deposit when the zorca was either returned or unsaddled at the Vondium stables. I bought some food, and with a few silver coins left clanking rather dismally in the lesten-hide bag, I set off.

Vallian roads are foul. They are better now, but I speak of the time when I rode south through the sun-drenched land seeking an interview with my prospective father-in-law. The zorca made good time, considering, and I wended my way south through towns and cities, crossing the canals, watching the lazy progress of the narrow boats, spurring on harshly when I saw a gang of hauler slaves dragging an Emperor's barge, giving a quick sailor eye to the boats sailing on the Mother of Waters. I passed huge cornfields that took a day to traverse, immense dark forests, where twice I fought off footpads. This made me frown, for I had taken Vallia to be civilized. I would not allow myself to become fatigued. The zorca held up wonderfully well, and I fancy he recognized he had a zorcaman on his back.

The twin Suns of Scorpio chased in jade and crimson across the sky each day, the nightly procession of moons cast down their pinkish light, and I hurried on.

I reached Vondium.

I will say nothing of that altogether marvelous place now, and, truth to tell, at the time I scarcely heeded all its marvels. It was all too easy for me to hear the news. It was the subject of conversation in all the myriads of pleasant open-air restaurants along the quays beside the canals and waterways.

"The Emperor? Oh, that naughty daughter of his! He is not in Vondium. He has gone to Delphond to teach her a lesson!"

CHAPTER TEN

From Delphond to the Blue Mountains

Delphond is a delightful, charming, cozy land of small fields and secluded hamlets, of winding brooks and

gentle undulations of ground clad in the brilliant green of Kregan grass speckled with the prodigious abundance of Kregan flowers. It is a warm land, a soft and safe country, a place for lazy retirement and idle amusements, happy and carefree and going the old ways of its people. Tucked away in a southern bend of the coastline of the main island of Vallia, it receives all the benefit of the Zim Stream, that warm current sweeping up through the Cyphren Sea from the unknown southwestern oceans. From Delphond comes the finest vintage claret in all Kregan, or so I believe. Also there are apples, pears, gregarians, and squishes, and the people there rear a kind of ponsho whose fleece, besides being as soft and silky as any in two worlds, provides chops and shoulders and legs of a succulence not to be believed until eaten, fresh, crisp, and savory, with liberal helpings of mint sauce and with the small round yellow momolams, a tuber that Zair put on Kregan in holy wedlock with roast ponsho.

Also in Delphond are fat cattle, very like our Earthly bulls and cows, and the cream they make there . . . it is of a triple consistency, rich and thick and fit for Opaz himself.

Such a meal I ate in a pleasant rafted alehouse, with the twin suns slanting in at the open window and the bees busy about the mauve and white loomin flowers in a pottery jar of Pandahem ware on the windowsill. The good-natured innkeeper's wife bustled, bringing me her best, and I ate well, for the journey had been swift and eating of secondary importance. My booted feet stuck out across the polished sturm-wood floor and in other circumstances I would have been content. I munched a handful of palines after the meal was finished, considering.

In my lesten-hide bag there now reposed but three copper obs . . . I had squandered all my slender resources on this last meal. The people of Delphond are jolly, given to laughter, happy, tucked away in their corner of Vallia, secure in the knowledge that they own fealty to Delia of Delphond as their suzerain, than whom there is no more fair or perfect a girl in all their world — and, as I know, in two worlds.

But I was not pleased.

The Emperor had indeed visited Delphond and been received with the pomp and ceremony fitting to his exalted majesty. He had come by water, as was fitting, in a long train of narrow boats, traveling with a full thousand of his personal bodyguard, the Bowmen of Loh, and with many retainers, servitors, and slaves. Delia, like myself, recognizes that in certain circumstances slaves can be economical, but that in many areas of the economy they are not; effective or otherwise, slaves are not for Delia of Delphond. There had been trouble when she had emancipated the whole of Delphond, as soon as the gift of the estate had been received from her grandmother, as there had been trouble of a different kind when she had emancipated the slaves of the Blue Mountains. Now the country was in apple-pie order. The colors worn banded on the shirt sleeves of Delia's retainers were lavender and laypom — the laypom is a fruit rather like a peach but of a pale subtle yellow color, delicate and exquisite — and her servitors moved with the springy step and open shoulders and frank faces of free men and women.

But this could not charm me now, for the Emperor had not found Delia in Delphond. She had gone, and so he had followed her, I was told, to the Blue Mountains.

The Emperor could simply wave a hand and the haulers would take up their ropes and away would glide his whole caravan. I must fend for myself. Well, I had done that often enough before, and was like to do it often enough again. So with a good meal of the products of Delphond inside me I stirred up my faithful zorca and set off westward for the Blue Mountains.

There was in the character of the folk of Delphond a gentleness and a happy laughter, too, that I knew would serve Delia well in times of peace. I had grave doubts that I could raise an army here that would fight. In that, as you will hear, I did the Delphondi an injustice. But then, in my black, dispirited mood, I

canceled them from my evil calculations. Even so, I could understand that I had no right to bring war and bloodshed to this pleasant estate, that I would truly be the evil man I know myself to be if I forced these gentle folk to take up the sword, and carried fire and slaughter through their comfortable country.

Delia had told me that Delphond, willed to her by her grandmother, was a tiny estate. It took me two full days to reach the western border from the port city of Delphond. Truly, the ideas of size of the Kregan people, with the much greater landmass of the planet, are of a different scale from those of Earth. Even their methods of travel have no significant influence on their conceptions of distance, for whereas the canal boats travel so leisurely, the fliers cover vast distances very rapidly.

Astride my zorca I bid Remberree to Delphond, which her people call Delphond the Blessed, and rode on into Thadelm, the neighboring country, owing allegiance to Vad Selnix. That land shared much of Delphond's rural beauty on its southeastern borders, but gradually changed in character as I wended northwestward, until the land sprawled gray and featureless beneath the glare of the suns, a wild expanse of moorland and rolling downland. A Vad is one of the intermediate ranks between a Kov and a Strom. I rode on and passed a pleasant "Llahal" with the few people I saw. I was able to catch a few rabbits — very much like Terrestrial rabbits, a meat of which I am not over-fond — and the ever-present palines worked their usual magic.

If necessary, I would beg.

By this time you must realize that I didn't care what I did just so long as I reached my Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia of Delphond.

By this means and that, and, I am relieved to be able to say, without doing anything of which I was truly ashamed, I traversed the country in a northwesterly direction, passing through Stromnates and Kovnates and Vadvars, and through a number of wide estates, as big as states in themselves, owned by the Emperor. When the mountains began to loft on the horizon I knew I was approaching my goal. I had sold one of the daggers, but I kept the rapier and remaining main-gauche, for I felt I might have need of them above the usual need a man has for weapons on Kregen. I fell in with a caravan of calsanys, with preysany-litters, and with a guard of zorcamen. The servants wore shirts with sleeves banded in bold and black.

A zorcaman wearing a close-fitting helmet of iron, with a nasal and a high flaunting plume of gold and black feathers, hauled across my path. He had no lance. His quiver of javelins was unstrapped and he balanced one of the long casting shafts in his right hand as he eyed me.

I said, as civilly as I could: "Llahal."

"Llahal," he replied. Then: "Who are you and whence do you travel?"

I knew what to say.

"I am Drak ti Valkanium, and I go to High Zorcady in the Blue Mountains."

"Your business?"

He was a big fellow, and beyond him the rest of his company jogged along escorting the caravan. There were fifty of them, a sizable little squadron, and judging from the bulging sacks and panniers of the calsanys, they were extremely careful with what they carried. They were not a mere merchant's caravan, like that of Naghan the Paunch on far Turismond — or even of Xoltemb, in Segesthes, as far in the

opposite direction.

“Who are you?”

The lifted javelin quivered. “I am asking the questions, dom.”

“By what right?”

His laugh was intended to be scornful, but I detected a note of uncertainty.

“You travel alone, Kr. Drak. I am Hikdar Stovang, and I travel on the business of the Kov of Aduimbrev. We are about to enter the Blue Mountains, and I want no secret enemy at my back.”

“You are one of Vektor of Aduimbrev’s men!” I relished this. “That is good. If you will, I would like to travel with you. I, too, have no wish for unseen enemies at my back through the Blue Mountains.”

He spat. He had shown his authority, had sized me up as a simple Koter, a gentleman, and was prepared now to let me join his caravan. “The Blue Mountains,” he said. “When the Kov marries the Princess Majestrix I hope to Opaz I am not stuck out here on duty. The place is a death trap.”

I was fascinatedly interested, but my questions must be of such a kind, and in such an order, as not to arouse his suspicions. We turned our zorcas together and rode knee to knee. He sheathed the javelin. He was a soldier, doing a job, and not much caring for it.

The retainers of Vektor were heartily sick of the whole business. The quicker their master married the Princess Majestrix and had a brood of children to carry on the imperial line, the better. Then perhaps they could all return to their old ways and all this chasing about, first here, then there, seeking to make Delia of the Blue Mountains make up her mind, could finish. “I’ve saddle sores on my saddle sores, Kr. Drak!” declared Hikdar Stovang. “By Vox, I’m black and blue where I sit down.”

I smothered my chuckle. I can always react like a normal man where my Delia is concerned. She had been leading them a dance. Impudently refusing to marry the man of her father’s choice, then arrogantly refusing to marry at all, she had held them all off, going from one of her estates to another, staying with friends — I felt my senses quicken at that — she had kept them all at bay ever since her mysterious arrival back in Vallia.

“But all the nonsense is going to stop, now, Kr. Drak. We carry the wedding gifts. The Emperor is in High Zorcady. The Princess Majestrix is there, also. So is Kov Vektor.” Hikdar Stovang sounded like a man well-pleased that a difficult and unpleasant job is finished. “Where the Emperor is, then that is where the wedding will take place. And right glad, to the glory of the Invisible Twins, am I that it will soon be over.”

Aduimbrev lay to the north midlands, and Stovang couldn’t wait to return home. The Vomansoir Cut had not gone through Vektor’s Kovnate, and I guessed we had flown over it in the ice airboat. Now I set my face forward. Oh, yes, I relished the irony of thus riding in with the very wedding gifts of my rival, but that rival held all the aces.

A few canals have been cut through the Blue Mountains, and one, the Quanscott Cut, is carried through the longest tunnel in Vallia, driven through the heart of the Blue Mountains to the coastal strip on the west where stands Quanscott, the major port on that stretch of coast. But the Emperor would be riding up to High Zorcady astride a zorca, unless he chose to ride like old women, monks, or children, and saddle a

preysany.

I knew that here, all around me in the rolling wild country leading up to the Blue Mountains, roamed thousands, possibly millions, of zorcas. This was zorca country. The frowning citadel and the town that had grown up on the granite crags around it in sight and sound of rushing waterfalls was aptly named High Zorcady. On most days clouds drift around the highest towers. From the ramparts on a clear day you can look out and see so vast an expanse of country that the very coil of the world seems to lie beneath your feet.

We had some way to go yet before we reached that high and inaccessible place, full of crags and water-thunder, drifting with clouds and the wide-winged crested-korf. That night we camped in a hollow by a stream and I was able to appease my hunger with hot vosk and taylyne soup. I noticed that double guards were set. Stovang was jumpy. He had been carrying this treasure of wedding gifts all around Vallia, it seemed, in futile chase of Delia, on the run from her father's marriage plans, but I knew that he was not apprehensive on account of the gifts.

The Blue Mountains, it seemed, were notorious.

According to Hikdar Stovang, bandits and robbers and assassins lived in every cave and crevice of the rocks.

I could see I was welcome as an extra sword. Fifty zorca riders had not been considered too many guards. Among the zorca riders in the service of Vektor and wearing his colors and insignia — a butterfly on gold and black — were halfling mercenaries, Rapas, Fristles, a couple of Chuliks. They appeared a reasonably disciplined and efficient bunch, but I slept with a hand on my rapier hilt, and with a lifetime's experience I slept ready to leap up in an instant. This knack of sleeping soundly and yet with the ability to react to the noise that threatens usually serves me well, for it has been learned in the harsh life of seafaring, or adventuring on Kregen; it is not a gift of cloistered universities.

Among the zorca riders were two Womoxes. Although outwardly as composed and drilled as their companions, they exhibited to me clear signs of a much greater degree of agitation. I had fought Viridia's Womoxes, and found them formidable opponents, their stumpy horns mounted on their foreheads able to jab at an enemy's eyes with terrifying power. Now they made no pretense at sleep. They stayed on guard all night, alert, their weapons drawn, waiting.

The next day as we jogged northwestward Hikdar Stovang, who had taken to me as a new companion able to enliven the journey with new stories, enlightened me, although without realizing he did so. The island of the Womoxes lay directly westward of Vallia, with the inevitable cluttering of smaller islands and islets between, and the port serving the Blue Mountains, Quanscott, lay on the same parallel of latitude as the chief easternmost port of Womox. Before Vallia had achieved hegemony and then consolidation of all the different peoples that now formed part of the empire, clearly there had been long and bitter racial enmity between the Womoxes and the people of the Blue Mountains. They were all of one nation now, under one emperor, but the old antipathies persisted here, at least.

We rode on. Vektor's men lived well, and they did not grudge me my share of food. We were made welcome at a couple of towns, where there was an influx of people foreign to these parts; then, as we penetrated higher and higher into the Blue Mountains and by following narrow tracks winding beside gorges where streams splashed and roared a thousand feet below, we knew we had left not only the plains and foothills behind but the attitudes of mind to be found there. We stayed a night at a small mountain village where the atmosphere of hostility could be cut with a terchick. We pushed on. Here local politics, local grudges, and local vendettas were carried to extremes.

“We’re all one people under the Emperor, aren’t we?” complained Stovang. “If this is the family my master the Kov is marrying into, Opaz help him, by Vox!”

I was puzzled. The antagonism of the inhabitants of the Blue Mountains was a tangible onslaught on a man’s feelings; we were interlopers, unwanted, detested. Clannish feelings ran high here. Were the Blue Mountain people, as Stovang insisted, just a rabble gang of thieves and cutthroats?

What a contrast to Delphond!

Very often now, during the day, as we progressed laboriously along a narrow ledge, or negotiated a track perched between heaven and hell, we heard a long ululating call, echoing and rebounding from crag to crag. The high notes pealed in the clean chill air. The mountains rang with the gong-notes.

“We’re under observation, Opaz rot ’em,” grunted Stovang. We edged our zorcas along with care, and the animals put their dainty hooves down with a precision that showed they fully understood the situation. Highly intelligent, are zorcas.

This difficult path wended higher and higher, traversing a rampart wall of mountains. The peaks soared to either hand, their lower slopes falling away into gorge and crevasse, and so down and along and out to the foothills. Trees of all the mountain varieties grew here, and flowers of fragile beauty, and we saw mountain ponshos leaping like impiters from crag to crag. The peaks carried mantles of ice and snow. The snow-line lay high above us still, and the weather held none of that frigid bite of the Mountains of the North where I had met and rescued Furtway and his nephew Jenbar. I was grateful for that.

Once we had penetrated the rampart barrier, which curved in a gigantic oval, we could descend the other side and so ride out onto the great central plateau within the Blue Mountains. But, as Stovang said with as much pleasure as he could derive from the situation, we were not traveling that far. High Zorcady had been built on its serried peaks where the pass reached its highest point. Cupped by mountains, shielded by clouds, walled by crags, High Zorcady frowned down from the mist.

It was at that point, as we paused in a narrow defile to glare up at High Zorcady, eerie, pointed, and leering above us, that the Blue Mountain Boys jumped us.

All was instant confusion. The mercenaries drew their rapiers, some hurled javelins, their zorcas wheeling and colliding. I saw stones hurtling to smash against close-fitting helmets or thump against gold and black chests. I saw men in shaggy ponsho skins leaping from the rocks to lay their cudgels against skulls. I saw the frantic pandemonium of the fight, then I was down, and a man lifted a rock high over his head, straddled above me, laughing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I meet the Blue Mountain Boys and the shorgortz

I reached up and took the rock away from his brown fingers and he had to let it go or his fingers would have snapped. I threw the rock away. I took his wrists in my left hand, his throat in my right, and I squeezed — a little, not much, just enough to let him know who was master here.

“I could kill you now, dom. But I will not. I am not one of Kov Vektor’s men. You should have seen that from my clothes.”

He glared at me, his eyes bulging out, a bright and brilliant blue. That was interesting; nearly all Vallians have bright brown eyes, and brown hair, and some of them have the luck to have that outrageous blend of chestnut that so glorifies the hair of Delia of the Blue Mountains.

I released my grip a little and he choked and coughed.

A quick glance around confirmed that all the zorcamen were down. I saw one Womox with a broken horn and blood oozing from a smashed skull. The other I could not see, nor did I ever again see that particular Womox. A Chulik was backed against a rock, his rapier slashing desperately at the cudgels of the ring of Blue Mountain Boys. I looked for Stovang, but could not pick him out. The defile looked a mess, with calsanys and preysanys milling, zorcas standing with drooping reins, the bodies of unconscious men sprawled everywhere.

“Listen, dom. You have a leader. Tell me his name — quick!”

No thought of treachery occurred to him; he told me what, in other circumstances, could not have been dragged from him by torture.

“Korf Aighos!”

I nodded, satisfied. The man was named for the powerful iridescent blue bird of the mountains, a nickname, as one might say “Eagle Jack.” The man tried to work his throat, and gulped. And I was satisfied he was cowed — how little I knew of the Blue Mountain Boys, how proud of them I am!

“Get up, dom. Shout for Korf Aighos. I would like to have words with him.”

The man rose, dragging his ponsho skin about him. He wore decent leathers beneath and his body was of the whipcord toughness required of a mountaineer. His face, brown and lined, glanced back at me with a return of his natural arrogance.

“Shout, dom,” I said.

He shouted.

There was a stir in the Blue Mountain Boys, and a man strode toward me. At first glance I knew I could do business with this man. He walked with a swinging alert gait, half arrogant, half cautious, that marks a man ready for what the world may bring him. He carried a sword, short and heavy, more of a large knife than a shortsword, and its tip shone clean and unbloodied. He was not overlarge, but his chest was massive and his arms roped with muscle. His eyes, too, were blue.

“What is this—” he began.

I chopped his words off brutally.

“Aighos! If you look you will see I am not Vektor’s man!”

“By Vox! You speak out of turn, cramph! You must be a rast of Vektor’s, or else why are you here?”

A little rascally fellow with snaggly teeth and shaggy ponsho fleeces flapping about his narrow shanks trotted up. He carried a cudgel almost as long as himself. He had but one eye.

“Stick him, Korf Aighos!” he cackled, waving the bludgeon. “Stick him and take the treasure—”

“Still your tongue, Ob-eye!” Aighos glared. “I will say who is to be stuck and who not. As for the treasure, throw it into the river for all I care.”

One or two of the ruffians, forming a watchful circle about me, started at this. Ob-eye yelped as though hurt.

“But the treasure! Stick him, I say!”

“I will stick you, by Vox, you ob-eyed rast! You know the orders of my Lady of Strombor! No killing!”

I really felt those solid mountains lurch under me. My Lady of Strombor! I, Dray Prescott, was the Lord of Strombor! There were only two ladies of Strombor in all Kregen — and one, Great-Aunt Shusha, was still there, as far as I knew, still in Strombor in Zenicce. So — so Aighos could only be speaking of *my* Lady of Strombor, my Delia!

No real recollection remains of how I covered the intervening space, but I was gripping Korf Aighos by the scruff of the neck, and twisting him up to me, and glaring down into his face. He glared back — and that dark, betraying shadow passed over his eyes.

“What is this of my Lady of Strombor! Speak, and quickly, or I’ll snap your neck like a rotten pitcher!”

He struggled, and a hand was laid on my shoulder preparatory to my being whirled about and struck. I back-heeled and a man screeched. I lifted Aighos, beating away his fists, for he had dropped his long knife, and I swung him about and I shouted at these Blue Mountain Boys.

“Listen to me, you creeping mountain crampths! I mean you no harm. I visit your country and am set upon! If this rast is your leader then let him speak, or by Zim-Zair, he’s a dead man!”

I saw Korf Aighos’ eyes flick toward me, and, suddenly, he went limp in my fist.

“I will speak. But first, tell me who you are — and, for the sake of Opaz himself, put me down!”

I set him on his feet.

“I am Drak ti Valkanium,” I said — and then wondered if that had been the best thing to say. But habit had become ingrained.

He glanced at me, sidelong. He shook his head. “Now, by the Invisible Twins, I wonder!”

“Tell me of my Lady of Strombor!”

At this, as though abruptly recollecting himself and where he was, his face took on an expression of alarm immediately succeeded by grim determination.

He glanced around. He said, in a whisper, “If I tell you that, Tyr Drak, the Opaz-forsaken guards of Vektor will hear. Then we shall have to kill them all. My Lady of Strombor has expressly forbidden killing, although—” Here he spread his hands and glanced around, not, I fancy, with any too-guilty a feeling. He finished: “Sometimes the knife or the rock are the only solution.”

A pragmatist, Korf Aighos. We withdrew into a cleft in the rocks, and he eyed me so narrowly that I tensed up ready to beat him in whatever scheme he was brewing. Instead, and again the rocks of the solid mountains lurched, he said: “You called yourself Drak ti Valkanium. I gave you the honorable title of Tyr because you are clearly so. But I think if I called you another name you would answer.”

I looked at him. I know that old devil’s look flashed evilly from my face, for he swallowed, and hurried on.

“Pur Dray, Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor, Zorcander of the Clan of Felschraung — I know I am not wrong!”

“Yes,” I said, shattered.

“The Princess said you would come. Long and long has she waited. By stratagem after stratagem has she fended them off. Her father, the Emperor, may Opaz have him in his keeping, and that perfumed idiot Vektor — and there are others. Welcome and thrice welcome, my Lord of Strombor, to the Blue Mountains!”

“Well, sink me!” I exclaimed.

Korf Aighos rattled on, his face eager, his whole bearing animated and intense. “The Princess uses her name as the Lady of Strombor as a disguise. She trusts me.” He spoke that proudly, and I could not condemn him for that. “This idea was hers. If there are no wedding presents, there can be no wedding. She it was, the dear daring Princess, who discovered the real treasure was coming in this caravan the hard and little-used way, and the great parade of servants and slaves and guards along the Quanscott Cut was the fake treasure!”

“That sounds like Delia’s style.”

“Every man of the Blue Mountains would die for her! And of them all, the Blue Mountain Boys are her most devoted and loyal subjects.”

I had to rise to this occasion. Implicitly, in all Aighos said, there was the fact that if he agreed with Delia that she would not marry Vektor, then he must agree to her marrying me. I had to show some fire, some spirit, act a part as the great man.

“I would thank you, Korf Aighos, for your love and loyalty. I agree that we should not kill Vektor’s guards. But, my friend, I do not think you should hurl the loot into the river.”

“No?” He sounded doubtful, at which I took heart.

“Carefully spread out and spent, it would bring in much for the people of the Blue Mountains.”

“Loot!”

Had I gone too far? Was he an honest man in the sense that he wouldn’t accept loot when it came his way? Was this stealing in the accepted sense of the word? I was sailing near the wind, even by Kregan standards which are notoriously laxer than Earth’s. Perhaps—

I said quickly, “But as we are all honest men, then the treasure must be gathered together and returned to Vektor when the Princess Majestrix and I are married.”

“Amen to that, my lord.” Then he screwed up his blue eyes, and said, with a chuckle: “And I will take counsel on the question of the treasure. We are great bandits in the Blue Mountains!”

They are great ruffians, the Blue Mountain Boys.

The missing Womox had leaped voluntarily to his death, rushing back down the track out of the defile and so over a precipice. The other, the one with the broken tusk, sat crouched in mortal terror of the Blue Mountain men. I had seen the Womoxes in action, aboard Viridia the Render’s swordship; now I saw how a member of that savage and sullen race was terrified in his turn.

And yet — my Delia was the princess of this cutthroat bunch!

Aighos bustled about superintending the tying of the guards’ wrists. They would be set stumbling up the track the remainder of the distance to High Zorcady in the mist. The calsanys loaded with the treasure were prodded away down the track. I looked up and saw a line of airboats appear over a nearby crag. They followed in line astern formation as neat as a ruled line on a score, sailing through the upper levels. They did not see us, down among the rocks, and so serenely flew on. I could guess why the treasure had not been brought in by flier; no one was going to trust an airboat with all this treasure among these hostile crags. The thought drew from me a gesture of respect for the men of the Vallian Air Service.

Hikdar Stovang stumbled up, blood on his face, his helmet gone, his bright gold and black butterfly insignia ripped and stained.

“Traitor!” he yelled at me as I stood with Aighos. “I trusted you, you Opaz-forsaken cramp! Drak ti Valkanium! I shall remember that!”

Ob-eye swung his cudgel and slanted his one eye at Aighos, but the korf of the mountains laughed and said: “Let the braggart go!”

His men respected Aighos, that was very plain, and even Ob-eye, inclined to rumbustiousness, stayed in line, and with them all accepted me as Drak, a friend of Aighos. The korf considered it best for the time being to conceal my identity from everyone, with the exception of himself. I saw, with an amusement tinged with a wry affection for this korf of the mountains, this bandit, that he relished this knowledge, this secret he shared with a princess and a lord.

From the zorcas Aighos selected the finest specimen, that ridden by Hikdar Stovang. I remounted my own animal. The other Blue Mountain Boys selected zorcas and preysanys, and in a straggly procession we wended down away from High Zorcady.

I looked back. High Zorcady! There was a ring about that, a fineness, a sense of high yearning. The grim rearing pile spearing up into the clouds, its towers ringed with mist, the crested-korfs wheeling past its battlemented walls, all made a reality out of a fantasy of imagination. I knew I was sorry not to have visited High Zorcady.

The plan was to get me in, or to get Delia out, and once we had met, to make further plans. I did not care which, just so long as I could hold my Delia in my arms again.

“Pur Dray,” said Aighos, and then coughed and fiddled with his reins and berated the poor zorca between his knees. “Kr. Drak! We shall find hospitality at my cousin’s village. You rode past it and never saw it, so well are the houses hidden.”

He spoke the truth. The walls and buildings constructed of the rock against which they stood remained extraordinarily difficult to detect. We drank strong Kregan tea and ate a specialty of the mountains, ponsho rolled in hibisum flour and baked slowly — baked for three whole days — and then drenched in a taylyne sauce and simmered for another day. By the time the meat reaches your lips it melts like the sweetest honey. Superb! We also, being good Vallians, drank a great deal of wine of various vintages. The messenger had been sent, a lithe young girl of the mountains, striding with her skirts tucked up, springing boldly over frightening chasms, carrying laundry. The laundry would get her past the guards, and once inside she was known to friends, who would conduct her directly to Delia. Perforce, I waited.

We had been quartered in the largest house, a two-story structure whose roof of sharply-angled slates would have towered over the other buildings but for the cunning use of overhanging rock-shelves. Each slate had to be fixed in place with severity; where torrents could wash over the rocks and sweep everything away the roofs had to be steep. There could be none of the shallow roofs of the valleys where the slates could lie and slumber without fear of slipping off.

I sat in a carved black-wood chair that must have been all of two hundred years old, and talked with the men. I had a strange peace, a tranquility, a sense of time standing still. So near I was to Delia that all my recent frantic scurryings appeared ludicrous. I had merely to sit here, eat and drink and talk, and she would appear in the doorway, radiant, glorious, alive!

In the corner stood a two-handed sword, fully seven feet long, of that peculiar kind used on Earth around the sixteenth century. Contrary to popular belief, these enormously long swords of war were used in combat, and not merely for color guards of honor or as symbols, but the man to wield them must be a man indeed. This one had a leather-wrapped grip, wide quillons, and also a wrapping of velvet around the blade before the quillons. The cotton would have come from Donengil and the silk, probably, from Loh. To protect the hand when grasping this shortening-section a pair of semi-quillons had been neatly set into the metal. The thing looked clean, without rust, but a casual test with my thumb showed it to be blunt.

“The great sword of war of the Blue Mountains,” said Korf Aighos. He half laughed, half sighed. “They are out of fashion now. There was a time when men raced through the ravines wielding the swords of war and none could stand against them.”

These men had never seen a Krozair longsword. Beside this enormous brute a Krozair two-hander was a subtle instrument. I had the sudden craving to feel a real Krozair longsword in my fists again.

The feeling made me realize why Aighos had recognized me. He had heard me use a Krozair oath — “By Zim-Zair!” — and no doubt Delia herself had let the resounding words fall from her lips, also, from time to time. She was fully entitled to do so.

A fracas started in the narrow walk and we went out, laughing and joking, carrying blackjacks of wine, expecting to see sport. A man raced past, screaming, his hair streaming, his face sweating, the eyes like livid coals.

“The shorgortz! The shorgortz!”

A woman screamed and snatched up her child and ran inside, slamming her lenken door. Aighos dropped his blackjack and the rich dark wine spread across the stones.

“The shorgortz,” I said. “Tell me, Korf, what is that?”

‘Truly you are not yet of the Blue Mountains, Kr. Drak!’

“Bring fire!” a man yelled.

“Shelter within doors and pray!”

“Fire!”

“If you light torches,” I said, at once adjusting to the peril, “you will tell the guards where we are.”

“Better the Emperor’s aragorn, or the mercenaries, than the shorgortz!”

So it was that serious, then. . .

I couldn’t have them running about with torches alarming the neighborhood and alerting the men brought back by Hikdar Stovang. And, far more importantly, if there was some monster out there in the mountains, my Delia was coming . . . I did not hesitate. I went back into the house, snatched up the great sword of war, brushed past its protesting owner, and strode out into the street. Men were milling. I shouted loudly, stilling them by my anger.

“Tell me, you Blue Mountain Boys! Where is this Zair-forsaken shorgortz?”

They babbled. A hundred paces along the track from the village. Along the track my Delia must walk.

I ran.

I thought of the Ullgishoa and Umgar Stro. Then I had fought only with my chains and had not until later grasped the great Krozair longsword Pur Zenkiren had given me in Pattelonia. Now I held what was little more than a bar of steel. Mind you, I had bested four Womoxes with a length of lumber aboard Viridia’s swordship . . . It had seemed to me that a great bashing, cutting instrument of some length would be the best weapon here, better, at any rate, than an ordinary rapier.

I saw the shorgortz.

The thing was immense, nauseating, powerful, and altogether repulsive. I did not hesitate in my headlong dash but went on, at top speed, hurling myself forward, the huge sword of war held high and cocked over my right shoulder.

The shorgortz was a reptile. It was not a risslaca, those dinosaurs of Kregen; it had twelve legs, bent and crooked, so that it walked with the body slung between. Its body was squamous, the scales rimmed with a crimson iridescence, their centers green-black. Its four eyes kept up a rapid blinking. Its tendrils groped forward, writhing, seeking, snatching at anything that ran, to snatch and grip and force the prey into the convulsively chewing parallel jaws that stretched back to the rear of its hideous head. It was of the size of, for example, a double-decker bus, and it stank. It reeked with its own effluvia and the rotting stench of its victims.

The sword of war slashed down.

The blade struck the thing cleanly over the head — and bounced!

The damn thing was as blunt as a lead razor.

I struck again and again and then had to skip back as a tendril writhed out toward me. My blows had no apparent effect on the shorgortz. No doubt it was merely fulfilling its destiny. No doubt it was acting as its nature impelled it. But I knew that my Delia would come walking lightly down this track and if this obscene thing was alive to meet her . . . I would not think of that.

This time I did what I should have done at first. I ran in, thrusting, to plunge the sword of war into the top right-hand eye. Thick ichor pulsed forth, gagging with the smell of vomit.

The thing lashed its tail with tremendous force from side to side, splitting and pulverizing the rocks< I leaped, thrust again, and now the lower right-hand eye burst.

I dodged back. A tendril lapped my body and I had to let go the sword of war with my left hand, draw my dagger and cut through. The keen steel bit. Maybe the sword of war had been a mistake? I needed a weapon that would bite!

The shrieks and hissings of the reptile screeched higher. I kept the dagger in my left hand, the curved steel guard shielding, and began a systematic slashing away of the groping tendrils. Twice the massive tail arched over at me and smashed brutishly along the ground where I stood the instant before I leaped aside. I stuck the dagger into it, but it did no good. Thrusting the dagger between my teeth, dribbling and drooling the foul-tasting blood smearing it, I took the sword of war into my fists again. This time I slashed and hacked and thrust, blotted out the lower left eye. But the thing kept jerking back, protecting its last remaining orb, and I kept thrusting and missing. And now it began to clutch out at me with its forelegs. Wickedly sharp talons raked past me. I felt my leather tunic rip and a white-hot pain scored my side.

I kept on. I had to. My body was smothered with the ichor. Steam rose in the light of the mingled rays of the twin suns. I leaped and struck — I slipped and a foreleg darted for me. Only the reflex of muscles long trained and hardened barred the sword up, a barrier of steel, to chop off the blow. I felt the vibrations hammer through my hands.

On my feet, I leaped, aiming for the remaining eye. The head twisted, reared, the fanged mouth opened — I hauled back.

In blind anger I hurled the two-handed sword down. I hauled out the rapier. I launched myself at the beast.

Two, three, four thrusts at the eye, and all parried or blocked. I brought the rapier down in a swooshing cut and the sharp steel scythed into scale. Again and again I cut, but I could see, clearly and with growing desperation, that the rapier lacked the bulk, for all that the rapier is a cutting weapon, to slice through the armored scale. The bulk inched ponderously forward on the ten legs to the rear. The shorgortz was hesitant to push on. It must recognize that it faced some being not prepared to submit to being snatched up and stuffed down the fanged mouth.

Those fangs opened and closed, chewing angrily.

The thing was no more angry than me.

I leaped again, tried for the eye, missed, slashed down furiously, and the rapier pinged and broke across.

I threw the hilt at the eye.

It caromed off the snout.

Beneath the thing's foreclaws lay the sword of war.

I took the dagger out of my mouth and plunged it deeply between two claws. The leg wrenched back, taking the dagger with it. I seized the great sword.

A mere lump of steel. Blunt as a boxer's chin. I took a breath. I could feel the foul gunk all over me. I poised.

Then I leaped.

The point of the sword of war penetrated the left upper eye. It burst in a showering of liquid. I slipped, fell, rolled, saw a flailing claw descending on me, and rolled on.

The talons hit the rock at my side, gouting up dust.

I leaped up and with a last and desperate thrust got the sword through the broken lower left eye. This time I did not pull it out. I leaned on it and thrust as hard as my muscles could push. I sweated and panted and thrust, my feet swinging off the ground as the beast reared. It was shrieking and I was yelling. It roared in its last agony, and I roared in my agony that it would not die before my Delia passed by.

I felt the foreleg brush past me, felt the talons rip my tunic back. I felt, again, that white-hot line of acid scorch down my back.

My fingers slipped from the greasy hilt.

I toppled back.

The rocks came up, hard; but they did not knock me out, and I was able to claw up, ready to fight the thing with my bare hands if necessary.

I recall little after that.

I did hear a man shout, dimly and far off, "Hai! Jikai!"

But that held no meaning.

The thing was down, was gushing blood everywhere. I staggered back, bruised, cut, exhausted, empty-handed. Men surrounded me. I heard the clang of weapons. I heard a yelling, wrapped in the fog of nonunderstanding.

Then, sharp and clear, like a lance-thrust, words shocked out at me.

"That's Drak ti Valkanium! Take the rast! The traitor will die, slowly. Take him and bind him with iron chains!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Chained before the Emperor of Vallia

They took me and bound me with iron chains, and our sorry coffle wended painfully down the mountain trails to the plains and so to the canal.

I knew what was in store. I suppose, given that all things come to all men in the fullness of time, I had always known I would become a slave hauler and haul an Emperor's barge. This was fitting. This was the circle of vaol-paol complete.

The difference was that I and my comrades captured by mercenaries in the employ of the Emperor were noted brigands, outlaws, who had robbed the caravan of the Kov Vektor. The wedding gifts were lost and could not be found. I had no idea where they were, and — with a heartfelt relief that had nothing to do with the fact that I would not suffer — I learned that we would not be put to the question. Torture is commonplace in some areas of Kregen; it had been outlawed centuries ago in Vallia. The Emperor's authority was autocratic, although some men did not obey him, but he could not flout the rules of civilized behavior in this. We were being taken to Vondium to answer for our crimes before a properly constituted court. I say being taken — we were in the chained gangs of haulers who walked all the way there on bleeding feet.

With the vanishment of the wedding gifts, the Princess Majestrix could only refuse the wedding itself. No one could fault her in that. Presents must be exchanged on both sides. It was a civilized custom. There was no dowry and nothing from the other side; there was no buying of a wife and nothing on the other side. There was an exchange.

We were treated abominably enough on that journey. We hauled the barges at a fast rate, fairly running under the lash and the knout. We slept on a barge reserved for the purpose, and it stank of stale sweat, urine, and fear. All day and all night we kept up that steady progress, passing narrow boat after narrow boat on the way. The stentor with his curled-spiral trumpet sounded the warning of our coming long and loud before us, and the tows went splash, splash, splash, into the cut, and the narrow boat skippers poled out to the center to leave a clear right of way.

We were not just ordinary slave haulers; we were going to a just trial and then an execution, or a lifetime as haulers. I felt that most of my hauling comrades would welcome the first.

I will not dwell on that time of hauling. My hair and beard, which had grown unattended during my travels across Vallia in search of Delia, grew luxuriantly, like bushes, untidy, knotted, filthy, covering my face. The lacerations from the shorgortz's talons suppurated, and I knew that if I had not taken that bath of baptism in the sacred pool of the River Zelfh, I would have been a dead man. The whips of the slave-masters and guards wealed me so that I was truly jikaidered. Sores covered my feet. The disgusting rag that had once been a gray slave breechclout around my loins stank and crawled with vermin. I tried to wash it and was flogged for my pains. Fresh water was provided for those people who could not drink the canalwater, and dry biscuits, with a minced stew of vosk and ponsho leavings. Each day we had a handful of palines, and I believe these alone kept people alive and going, and, in many cases, controlled the degree of their insanity.

The branding with the Emperor's mark on our right shoulders we all underwent did not unduly worry me, for I knew that a brand would, on me, slowly thin and vanish as subcutaneous and cutaneous cells rebuilt themselves. The painful part came in that I had to be rebranded. The scar tissue on a normal human skin usually remained permanently; but I knew there were many skills on Kregen. I had seen how a brand might be removed in Zenicce. But I annoyed the slave-masters, and they kept an eye on me, and lashed their whips and their knouts with special viciousness in my direction.

I was, all in all, during that passage, down in spirit.

The talons of the shorgortz must have exuded a poison, or a toxic fluid in the effluvia in which I had been drenched had penetrated my skin like an acid, for the wounds refused to heal. The guards took a perverse delight in laying their whips accurately across the old cuts. I was jikaidered well and truly. Jikaida is played on a checkered board; my hide was crisscrossed with the checkers of the lash.

As I hauled and tugged at the harsh tow rope I did not think even the archangel Gabriel would recognize me. I was in far worse condition than ever I had been as an oar-slave in the swifterns of Magdag. Zorg, my old oar-comrade, now dead, or Nath and Zolta, my two rascals, could never have seen in this hairy, stinking, lashed specimen the man Dray Prescott they had known.

Of the country through which we passed I was aware only of the towpath. We slaves, in a ragged bunch roughly three abreast, clawed onto our leashes, knotted and spliced to the main tow rope, and pulled, heads down. I saw the muddy track beneath my feet. Also, occasionally, and with a relief that broke the monotony, I saw lock gates and the smooth wooden beams that had to be opened and closed. I was never allowed what would have been the pleasant diversion of turning the paddle handles. That was reserved for the favored of the slaves, girls usually, whom the guards pampered.

Somewhere, in this despairing mass of humanity like a clogging mass of insects at the end of a jam-sticky knife, trudged Korf Aighos. I did not even know how many of us had been captured, although the how of it was easy enough. The laundry girl had been captured, and the noise of my battle with that confounded shorgortz had drawn the guards like a magnet.

I couldn't feel enmity for Hikdar Stovang. But although I had borne him no malice, he had believed the worst of me, and here I was, hauling for the Emperor.

We were riding the various canals on our way back southeastward to Vondium. I hardly cared. We must have ridden the Vindelka Cut, for Vindelka lies immediately to the northwest of Vondium. Often as I trod after my fellow haulers I walked a sea of muddy blood.

Some damned alchemy of that reptilian monster's foul acid-dripping ichor refused to let my body heal up. My mind was cloudy for much of that passage. Sores covered me. The daily lashings merely kept my body bloody. I still had strength, and could march; those of the ordinary haulers who fell were left to die, if they were dying, or had their throats cut if they feigned death after repeated floggings. Those of the haulers facing court hearings were flogged every now and then and given a ride, and flogged again, so that they preferred to haul rather than face the incessant extra floggings.

If you think I came to hate these slave-guards — you are right.

The red and black bands on their sleeves burned into my brain.

But I said I would not dwell on this unhappy period of my life. I would prefer to forget it, although I do not believe I ever will.

At last we came to the flight of locks leading to the inner network of waterways of Vondium. We locked through and finally came to a long low stone warehouse where more guards waited for us.

The regular haulers were taken away to their barracks. We criminals were rounded up, loaded with chains — whereat many a man screamed as the harsh iron bit into his open wounds — and dragged off.

All I could see was the stone beneath my feet. The guards were mere blurs of dark crimson in the corner of my eyes. I heard them whistling as they strode along — a tune I knew, surely — *The Bowmen of Loh*. That did not belong to any part of my life now; that came from a distant and dimly-remembered time when I was fit and well, with clean clothes on my back, a full belly, laughter and wine, kind faces about me . . . I trudged and stumbled on over the stones, done for.

Down dank stairways we went, into dark dungeons where the leepitix darted and scabbled, where the rats gnawed dead men's bones, where the vermin clustered in the corners waiting for fresh meat. We were chained to the wall.

I slumped down. I did not think I could raise a little finger to bash a guard, as I would customarily have struck with my fists until either the guards were dead or I was out like a light. I tried to rest and sleep, but phantasms thronged my brain, and I moaned. Chains rattled and clanked dismally. We were not fed. Guards came for us, men wearing the red and black, and we were hauled out. We were starving, for we had not eaten for two days. There were ten of us, I saw, ten starved lean scarecrows, all hairy, filthy, and covered in sores. We were moaning as we were dragged along, our chains rattling on the stones.

Up we were dragged, half throttled in the chains. Up and up. We were in the Emperor's palace in Vondium. We were pulled out onto a wide and shining floor. Sunshine lanced down, emerald and crimson. There was a great throng of people, courtiers, guards, Air Servicemen, women gorgeous in fine clothes. All was a dazzlement to me. I could barely stand. I was weak, I tottered and fell, and a boot kicked me up. Korf Aighos fell and was dragged. I fell and was dragged. We left a bloody trail across that shining floor.

I looked up. All distorted, on its side, a throne soared, it seemed to the ceiling, that shattered the light into a myriad shards like diamonds. A figure sat on the throne, a blaze of gold and crimson. A second throne stood at the side, gorgeous, splendid, not of the world I inhabited.

I was aware of the hum of conversation, and stray words spouted up, like black ice breaking free of the pack. We were the assassins, the murderers, the bandits, who stole and raped and killed.

The guards moved back. A wedge of dark crimson gave a backdrop to the thrones. I saw the white blurs of many faces. Jewels winked into my brain like fire and ice. I was down, done for, finished.

A voice boomed close.

“Here, my lord Emperor, are the malefactors for your justice!”

No trial, then—

I tried to stand up. I, Dray Prescot, wouldn't show these scum anything other than defiance, contempt; I tried to stand up, my chains dragging me down. I staggered. I fell. The hard polished floor came up cruelly. I lay, drugged with fatigue. Hunger was no longer noticeable, except that I couldn't stand up and call these people and this Emperor a pack of kleeshes.

Of what use any further struggle? I had failed. I had failed to do what I had so vaingloriously boasted. I had said I would stride before the Emperor and demand from him the hand of his daughter Delia in marriage.

And here I was, before the Emperor, swathed in chains like a wild beast, bearing the scars of floggings,

the red blood running from open sores, covered in vermin, filthy, with my hair stinking in my own nostrils, bathed in repulsiveness.

Oh, Dray Prescott, how are the mighty fallen!

I heard a cry and then a shout of horror.

I struggled to stand up and could not.

They would take me out now and cut off my head.

I heard a rustling, and then a great soughing sobbing from a thousand throats around the enormous throne room. I felt that rustling close. I felt a breath of wind and then I smelled a clean, sweet, fresh scent — I felt warm soft arms go around me, all white and rosy, naked, taking me up as I was, as I was in my filth and degradation, clasping me to her breast.

“Oh, my Dray! My Dray! I have found you at last!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“The man who kills Dray Prescott I’ll have burned alive!”

My Delia!

Some resource then, some last vestige of — not pride — love, some last remnant of love for my Delia forced me up onto my knees. She held me close and she was sobbing in a way that gave me a deep hatred for anyone or anything who could make her thus break her heart — and knowing that person was me. I stood up. She would not let me go.

“Dray! Oh, Dray, I have been frantic! Dray!”

“Delia,” I managed to say. The throne room whirled about my head. I staggered dizzily, and she held me, her dear body firm against me. “I love you, my Delia. I shall never stop loving you.”

She kept sobbing my name, over and over, and hugging and clasping me to her. I could see very little. Hands drew us apart. Soft, anxious, gentle hands of court ladies, noblewomen, tugging my Delia away. And harsh, fierce, cruel hands of slave-masters and guards dragging me away, with a blow from a whip-handle across the face to speed my going.

Delia screamed.

I struggled.

I do not know where the strength came from.

I took the whip-handle between my teeth and I jerked. I brought my head back and snapped it forward and the lash whistled. I forced myself to see, forcing my eyes to open and to tell me what was going on.

A blow smashed against the back of my head and I staggered forward. I spun clumsily. I reached up against all that dead weight of iron, took the whip from my mouth, and brought the handle down across the fellow’s face. He toppled back spouting blood, shrieking. I lashed the whip at the guards, and one

was caught around the neck. I dragged him toward me, broke his neck, and threw him aside. I was ready to do this as often as was required.

I heard a shrill scream — and recognized Delia’s voice, the voice of the Majestrix. The first time I had ever heard her use her voice like that: “Do not kill him!*The man who kills Dray Prescott I’ll have burned alive!*”

“Daughter, daughter!” The testy voice — the Emperor!

I flung back my head.

“I am Dray Prescott! I claim your daughter Delia!*She is mine!* Before all the world, she is mine!”

The guards pounced then, and I smashed and slashed them back. I yelled again, shouting into that golden haze.

“She is mine —*and I am hers!* There is nothing you can do, Emperor,*nothing!*”

A guard coiled his lash across the blood-fouled shining floor and tripped me. I bent, dragged the lash in, and before he could let go I kneed him, and then brought my fists down on his neck. His head hung strangely before he pitched to the floor.

I knew Delia was struggling in the hands of the nobles, who would be outraged at her behavior. I caught another guard and dispatched him. I felt nothing. I was a shining figure molded from blood. The Emperor was cursing; I could tell his voice and would not forget it.

“Take him away! Guards! Take him away and execute him. Now!*Now!*”

“You will gain nothing by my death, Emperor! I will win; my Delia will win; you can only lose!*Fool!* Think of the daughter you love! Think of Delia!”

“*Take him away!*”

I do not know how many guards leaped on me. The whip was smashed from my grasp. It seemed a hundred hands gripped me. I was twisted over, picked up like a rolled carpet. My head lolled. But I could see the shining golden haze where stood the father of Delia, and I shouted, high and strong and with great venom: “You fool, Emperor!*You have lost!*”

The grim words followed me as I left that throne room.

“Take off his head — now!”

To relate what I have is to make me sweat and throb and relive once again all the passions, the desires, the despairs of my youth. How my love for Delia shone upon all — and how her love for me transcended everything! Had any two lovers in two worlds ever loved as we did? I do not know: all I know is the depth and passion and greatness of our love; and I tend to think not.

Out of the throne room hurried the knot of guards. I was surrounded by a wall of dark crimson, a wall moving and flowing with powerful legs clad in dark scarlet. These were not the slave-guards, nor yet the aragorn, nor yet the warders with their red and black sleeves.

Some red roaring feelings were surging back now. I was aware of the infernal aches of my body. Well, my head would soon leap from that abused body and I could rest. My Delia — oh, how I would miss my Delia!

I could look up at groined ceilings. Around corners we went, along corridors. How many carrying me? Six? I heard a curse, and then another. We had reached a small antechamber; in the ceiling an octagon of light cast down the colors of the Suns of Scorpio. A man beside me coughed. They dropped me. I fell to the floor and rolled. My head rang, but I got to my hands, and tried to get my feet under me.

A man shrieked: “What are you doing —*aaagh!*”

I forced my eyes to take in what they saw, and transfer that information to my brain. I saw five dead men, all clad in the dark crimson. I saw a sixth with a bloody rapier in one hand and a bloody main-gauche in the other. He advanced on me and I thought this was the end. And—

“By the Veiled Froyvil, Dray! They were good men, all, and I slew them!”

My brain reeled.

I knew that voice.

I knew — I knew!

But — it could not be.

It was impossible.

I was dead already and treading the path toward the Ice Floes of Sicce.

The impossible voice spoke again.

“By all the shattered targes in Mount Hlabro, Dray! Perk up, my old dom!”

I shook my head. My hands trembled. I could see them, there before me, on the floor, shaking and beating against the marble where a trickle of blood flowed from a corpse slain by a corpse.

I lifted my head. I looked up. I whispered.

“Seg?”

“In the name of all the windy heights of Erthyrdrin, Dray! Get up, dom, and let us get out of here before the Froyvil-forsaken cramphs come arunning.”

“Seg.”

“Well, who else—” Then that old familiar voice, that well-loved voice, altered. Seg — for it was he, it was Seg Segutorio — came to me, knelt, and put a hand under my chin, and lifted. He looked into my face, and I smiled.

“Dray! You’re in a bad way!”

“No, Seg. No — for you are alive, and I have mourned you long and long. Oh — Seg!”

He picked me up then, hoisting me high to his chest, and he carried me out and away, through corridors that led from and to I knew not where in that great palace of the Emperor of Vallia. Presently he brought me to a small space where he lay me on a trundle bed; there he carried water, bathed me, and ministered to my wounds.

“Seg—” I reached a trembling hand up and grasped his forearm. “Thelda?”

He smiled and continued bathing my wounds. “She is a proud mother now, Dray. A fine boy.” Then a look of furtiveness crossed his face, and I could guess, and I said feebly: “He has my blessing. I will bring the Yerthyr shoot—”

“You’re the same Dray, my old dom! The same Dray Prescott!”

“But—” I said. I still could not believe. Out there in the Hostile Territories when the army of Queen Lilah of Hiclantung had been defeated by the Harfnars of Cherwangtung, Seg, Thelda, and I had raced with the remnants of Hwang’s proud regiment, and I had seen what I had seen. “You went down, Seg. Thelda and you. The nactrices boiled over you like chanks in a bloody sea.”

“True. By the Veiled Froyvil, but they were a ferocious bunch! I slew them until I could slay no more, and their corpses heaped above us. They left us to chase you. I thought you dead, then, Dray.”

“But—”

He smiled and tilted a glass cup to my lips. It held water of an iciness I usually find disagreeable, but now it tasted like the best Zond wine.

“I heard what happened with you and Delia. You did not think, after you were missing from *Lorenztone*, that she would calmly fly off and leave, did you?”

I looked at him.

“Little you know Delia of Delphond, Dray Prescott, if you think that! Chuktar Farris of Vomansoir was ordered — and I can imagine your Delia telling him! — to return and search for you. They did not find you. They found Thelda and me.”

“Thank God for that,” I said. I said “thank God”; I did not say “thank Zair”, or Opaz, or the Invisible Twins, or Pandrite, or use any of the colorful expressions of Kregen.

“So we came back to Vallia and I do not like to think what Delia went through then. Thelda and I were married—”

“And you have a son called Dray.”

He started to look uncomfortable, then the old fey wildness broke through, and he glared at me. “Of course! What better name in all the world is there? Tell me that, you stubborn old onker!”

“And how did you come to be here?”

“Why, I am a bowman, or had you forgotten? I am a private Koter in the personal bodyguard of the

Emperor, the crimson Bowmen of Loh—”

I tried to sing a certain stanza of that song, and although my voice cracked and wheezed like a leaky set of bagpipes, Seg got the message. The stanza is a particularly mocking one. It is often omitted. Seg threw back his head and laughed.

“Now, by Vox! I can live again, Dray Prescott!”

After that a confusion set in, and I was aware of shadows moving, and then of a woman sobbing and crying and laughing and holding me in her arms, whereat I grunted and pretended to be much more soggy than I was. Poor Thelda! She meant so well, with her pushy ways, and her constant exhibited concern for everyone’s welfare. But, as I was to discover, she had changed enormously from the plump sweaty earnest girl who had marched with us across the Hostile Territories and tried to suborn me away from Delia on the orders of the racters.

I did say, itching an old sore: “Where are the fallimy flowers for my poultice, Thelda?”

At this she burst into a torrent of tears, all wet and sticky. I heard Seg chuckle, and Thelda went away, crying. Seg bent over me. “You must rest now, Dray. A doctor is coming. Then we will get you out of the palace.”

I opened my mouth to say what I so desperately longed to ask. Then I shut my mouth. I was well enough aware of the situation and what had happened. I dare not ask for Delia. I knew people were risking their lives on my behalf. Seg was a private Koter in the Emperor’s bodyguard, a crimson Bowman of Loh, and thus had been able to dispose of the men carrying me out to execution. They had been his own comrades; he had slain them for me. I felt the shame of that, the fierce leap of pride, and the dark agony of remorse, but it was done, and, in truth, for my Delia’s sake I would wade through oceans of blood, as I have said. I am not a nice man.

“Don’t take chances, Seg. Clear up all traces. For your sake, and Thelda’s — and little Dray’s.”

“Do not fret, Dray. Erthyr the Bow is with me now.”

At this I felt more reassurance, for Seg seldom called on the name of that puissant and powerful spirit, the supreme being of Erthyrdrin; that he felt like that, and I knew it was a genuine emotion, proved he was satisfied.

Later I discovered more of the reasons for that satisfaction. But, even now, Delia will toss her head, grow very hoity-toity, and refuse to discuss just what was contrived. I know a body was found and substituted for me, and a convincing explanation put forward for the absence of five bowmen, four private Koters, and a Jiktat. At dead of night, with only two smaller moons hurtling low across the sky, I was conveyed out of the palace and secreted in a hidden room built into the attic of a lopsided house leaning crazily at the end of a maze of alleyways well away from the canals. The Presidio, the high council answerable only to the Emperor, confirmed his haughty actions in condemning me to instant execution. Korf Aighos and the other eight Blue Mountain Boys were put on trial. I asked about them, and Seg nodded, his face alive with all the old fey qualities, the strengths, the joyousness, the sheer love of life of his character. His black hair and blue eyes looked dearly familiar to me.

“They have been found guilty — as they were, Froyvil knows — but Delia knows your feelings, she’s known you long enough to read you like an illuminated scroll of my childhood, and we have plans to rescue them.”

And, in due course of time, they were rescued and secreted in another safe house in Vondium.

The doctor came. A dried-up little stick of a man with tallow-yellow hair and a wispy moustache, he was competent enough. His first action was to snap the locks and open his velvet-lined sturm-wood case of acupuncture needles. His name was Nath the Needle. Doctor Nath the Needle. Well, there are many Naths in Kregen.

“I don’t know how you survived, my lord,” he said, sniffing. He wore a somber dark-brown suit of clothes, a decrepit old cloak, and a hat in which the two slots over the eyes had worn into a gaping hole, like two gun-ports smashed into one by a thirty-two-pounder roundshot. “The infection from a shorgortz is generally reckoned to result in a terminal disease. But, there, medicine is improving every day in Vallia, and no doubt the Blue Mountain men have acquired an immunity unknown to us. I must look into it, indeed, I must.” He babbled on like this, but he gave me some foul-tasting gunk, and, indeed, I began to mend very quickly.

Delia, of course, was kept under strict surveillance.

I had an idea.

She would seek to find a way to throw off her servitors and guards and visit me, but danger lay there, for all she was the Princess Majestrix. Seg told me that as far as he could tell the Emperor cherished a very real affection for his daughter, but that his ideas on the majesty and aura of an emperor kept interfering with that ideal. He was determined she should marry. She was his only child, and his doctors had told him he could have no more. I had never heard Delia mention her mother, and I assumed she was dead. Now, after Delia’s displays of temper, as the court gossip went, she was to be held on a very tight rein until the Kov Vektor provided a fresh king’s ransom in wedding presents.

I told Seg what I required. He looked at me, chuckled, then laughed, and finally he roared with good humor. Feeling fitter than I had in weeks, I was duly shaved, and new clean clothes were brought in for me to put on. I stared into a mirror of real glass that was the proud possession of Paline Panifer, the girl Seg had found to care for me and the room. Paline is a common name for a young girl on Kregen, like Cherry on Earth, and she was fresh-complexioned, dark-eyed, a little solemn and overawed in my presence, but she cooked a truly delightful squish pie and she could make Kregan tea properly. Also she did the laundry with an amazingly tiny amount of soap.

“A boat is due tomorrow, Dray,” Seg told me. I stood up. I felt good.

“Tomorrow, then, Seg.”

He didn’t bother to wish me luck. I believe he thought I didn’t need it. Both of us thought the other returned from the Ice Floes of Sicce; and after that — who needed luck?

The next morning, early, I put on my new gear. The buff leather tunic fitted well, and the buff shirt was clean and starched. The hat was gray with a fine curly set of feathers in red and white, the colors that servitors of Valka wore on their sleeves. The tall black boots shone with Paline’s ministrations. I buckled on the belt with the rapier and main-gauche Seg had brought. As always, I sheathed a knife back of my right hip. Swathed in a voluminous gray cloak I went with Paline from that maze of alleys and out toward the canals and quays. The tang of fresh air braced me up. The twin Suns of Scorpio flamed overhead. All the bustle and uproar of a great metropolis flowed about me. The lesten-hide bag given me by Seg, who had had it from the hand of Delia, hung heavily inside my shirt. I looked up and there rose the forest of

masts. I felt my pulses quicken. The Star Lords had forbidden me to venture on the sea for a space, but they could not prevent my quick interest in all I saw and in the sealore I absorbed, it seemed, through my pores.

I have spoken of the great galleons of Vallia. Now I could see them. The ship from Valka lay warped alongside the quay, and men were busily engaged in discharging her. Her captain gaped at me as though I had risen from the dead. I recognized him — as he did me.

“Captain Korer!” I said, shaking his hand. “I trust you are well?”

“My lord Strom!” he gasped.

He told me all the news of Valka and I drank it up, every word, for I love my island of Valka. The land prospered. We remained at peace. Trade thrived. Babies were being born at a rate that ensured the depredations of the slavers would soon be obliterated. All my old friends still lived and were happy; and yet all mourned my departure. I sensed the truth in this. Captain Korer was, in the cant phrase, a bluff old sea dog. He would not dissimulate to me, his Strom — or so I fancied.

“Your crew? They are trustworthy?”

“Every man and boy, Strom!”

“Good. Then I took passage with you and am just arrived.”

“I understand.”

After that it was easy to arrange. With a small guard of marines from the ship, and presents bought with Delia’s money — presents that would not betray their origin — carried by smartly-clad men wearing the red and white banded shirtsleeves, we went up to the palace. Gold bought us a way in. Once again I found myself in that immense throne room, under the blaze of gold and jewels. But this time I walked with cracking heels on that shining floor, with a sword at my side, and with my own men carrying gifts for the Emperor.

“Drak, Strom of Valka!”

The Emperor received me kindly, his chamberlain, with fresh gold to jingle, having smoothed the way. The Emperor — how to describe him? He had sired the most beautiful girl in two worlds. He was strong and passionate, fiery-eyed, dominating, accustomed to command — aye, and cruel and ruthless, too, when he had to be. I knew.

“I have a gift for the Princess Majestrix, Majister.”

He grunted. He thought I wanted favors from him over the rights of Valka. “You will get no favors from that young lady, Strom Drak.”

I rubbed my clean-shaven and shining chin. I felt that Paline had dosed me too liberally with scents and perfumes.

“As to that, Majister, I must, at the very least, pay my respects to the Princess Majestrix. Of favors I ask none.”

“That makes a refreshing change.” He stood up, at which there followed a great swirl of activity of protocol and bowing and sorting out of places. “I’ll come with you, for, by Vox, I’ve little enough to please me these days.”

In the guard of honor marched private Koter Segutorio.

We went through brilliant corridors hung with tapestries of such beauty and value that I could not refrain from looking at them. Past precious objects from all the known world we walked, and came to a marble stair, and then a door studded with gold bosses in the forms of zhantil-heads. Everywhere everything was of absolute luxury and refinement. And I wanted to drag my Delia away from all this! How I presumed!

Thick soft carpets from Walfarg beneath our feet, silks from Loh, the scent of spices from Askinard, all the wealth of a world spread out, as we went into the apartments of the Princess Majestrix. Here water tinkled coolly from fountains; brilliant birds fluttered and cooed; the very air breathed a soft and fragrant welcome. I was enchanted. Music wafted soothingly from a silver screen beyond which musicians played. I put my left hand on my rapier hilt and I gripped hard.

The Emperor strode on and we followed, his guards, my men with presents, courtiers, and attendants, and me, the Strom of Valka.

Delia had been sitting playing the harp. I didn’t know she could play the harp. Handmaidens bowed low before the Emperor. Everyone moved with smooth court ritual into their appointed places, forming a ring around the central figures of the Emperor and his daughter. She looked up from the pile of cushions, and handmaidens, all superbly dressed in sumptuous gowns, took the harp away. Here there was nothing of the naked pearl-strung slave girls of other palaces I had visited.

These magnificent chambers were merely the outer portion of her apartments, to which a visiting nobleman might fittingly be brought. Farther into the recesses of the palace would lie her private apartments. The thought of their beauty and evidences of sensibility dizzied me.

She said: “I am glad you visit me, Father. We do not talk often enough.”

“You know the subject on which I wish to speak, daughter. But not now. We have a visitor who brings fine gifts, and also, as I judge a man, knowing something of his history, a man who is not seeking self-advancement.” He glanced at me. “I am aware of what you have done in Valka, Strom Drak. The racters must look elsewhere for slaves now.”

I could see he welcomed that.

“My daughter,” he said, and the icy mask of polite formality descended on him, “this is Drak, Strom of Valka.”

Delia looked up at me. I stood there, clean-shaven, dressed up in my fine new clothes, trying to make my lips form into something that might pass as a smile, looking down on her as if nothing in the world lay between us.

“The Princess Majestrix of Vallia.”

I performed a full incline. It was the perfectly proper thing to do, if somewhat florid, but I wanted to carry off the part. “Your most humble and devoted servant, my Princess,” I said.

“You are most welcome, Strom,” said Delia, Princess Majestrix.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Of presents and whispers

When I had been thrown down before her, with iron chains dragging on me, all bloody and foul and filthy, hairy and horrible, my Delia had recognized me instantly and flown to my side.

Now I stood before her, clean and shining and fresh, and she greeted me merely with, “You are most welcome, Strom,” in the cold and distant words of formal politeness.

Had she not recognized me? What a comment on the experiences through which we had gone together!

The ritual of greetings and introductions over — I had noticed how the universal formal “Llahal” was used here — we could lapse into more relaxed conversation. Light wine and miscils, which are those tiny fragile cakes that melt on the tongue, were brought, and the presents were looked at. In truth, they had looked fine enough when bought, and although mightily lessened by these gorgeous surroundings, they were still presentable. I had tried for quality and not quantity.

I stood politely talking to Delia and the Emperor, and we exchanged pleasantries. He was interested in Valka, and I was able to assure him that all went well there, and that he himself had personally the loyalty of every man of Valka.

This seemed to me a sensible attitude.

How true it was remained to be seen.

I thought to copper-bottom my bet.

“These are, of course, only small items I could bring myself. I have surprises from Valka that should please Your Majesty mightily.”

He made himself look pleased. He had a lot of the strengths of Delia about him, her same clear brown eyes, but his hair, still abundant, contained none of those glorious chestnut tints. They must come from her mother. His face was furrowed with lines I could recognize, scars of experience put there by ruling a vast island empire. Then I realized why he was taking this interest in me, an obscure Strom from a province many dwaburs away. He needed friends. He was desperately in need of allies against the racters, and the panvals, who were against the racters rather than for the Emperor, and a mysterious third party one heard whispers of.

He was a tragically lonely figure.

He had also ordered my head cut off.

It was worthwhile not forgetting that.

I said, “Has there been any news of Tharu of Vindelka?”

“How strange you ask that, Strom Drak! Vomanus of Vindelka has searched long and in vain — the world is strange and marvelous beyond the confines of Vallia — and he has been much in our thoughts

lately.” And here the Emperor glanced at Delia.

She said, “Vomanus is the heir and he searches for Tharu with a devotion I find commendable.”

Point taken.

We talked on in general terms, and then Delia said, with a cool effrontery that amused me, “I had heard the Strom of Valka was a hairy man, very violent, who raped a tower of the maidens dedicated to the Maiden of the Many Smiles.” She shot a look directly at me. “You do not look like that, Strom.”

“That is not my idea of recreation.” I had heard the calumny, put about by the racters. “The truth is that a certain Foke the Ob-handed did that foul deed. It happened on a tiny islet on the eastern coast of Valka. I was in the Heart Heights at the time. Foke has not been caught. When he is I shall string him as high as the topmost stone of that tower of the maidens.”

The Emperor nodded, clucking his tongue.

“And very proper, too.” He looked about, his eyes gleaming white, a sudden and revealing gesture from an Emperor. “He belongs to the racters, does he not?”

“He does, Majister.”

“The racters.” He did not say any more. Poor devil — here was I, Dray Prescott, feeling sorry for this dread Emperor!

Delia said, “We had no warning of your coming to Vondium, Strom Drak.”

“I had business here, Princess.”

“Did you know Drak was the name of my grandfather when he ascended the throne?”

I inclined my head. “I have always taken great pride in that, Princess. I feel that our destinies are linked.”

If she could play this game, then so could I!

“Really!” She tinkled her laughter, so gay, so forced, so artificial. “I heard once — a story, a silly trifle — of a man called the Kov of Delphond. His name, so men said, was Drak.” She laughed again, gesturing negligently with her arm. How I longed to take that rounded glowing arm and haul her to me and plant an enormous kiss on those luscious lips! “Delphond is a sweet place, very dear to me. If that man had been caught, assuming him to have existed, I would have asked you, Drak, Strom of Valka, to hoist him up to the topmost stone of the tower along with Foke the Ob-handed.”

The Emperor threw his daughter a puzzled glance. He reached out his hand to the empty air and immediately a handmaid placed a goblet in his fingers. He had no fear of poison, I judged, and recollected that poison is used so rarely on Vallia that when it is, it is marked and noted and remembered.

He moved away, talking to the Chuktar of his guard. The courtiers moved with him, always at their respectful distance, and only Delia’s handmaids were left with us. I had no idea how proper was my conduct in not moving with the Emperor.

“I ought to go, Princess, with the Emperor your father.”

“That is all right, Strom, in private. Our protocol is not overpowering. Come, sit with me.”

I looked at the Emperor in the instant that he turned to look back at me, his head half bent. He nodded. I bowed deeply. Then I turned around and sat down next to the Princess Majestrix. She waved her hand and the handmaidens seemed to become insubstantial wraiths.

She laughed aloud delightfully — and quite artificially to me, who had heard her laughing as we strode along through the Hostile Territories on our bare feet — and said: “Indeed, Strom, Valka sounds a most outlandish place. Tell me of it.”

Then, leaning forward a little, she said in a voice that snickered in like a rapier between the ribs: “You great onker-headed idiot, Dray Prescott! What happens if the real Strom of Valka walks in?”

I couldn't stop myself.

I lay back on the silken cushions with their gold and silver embroidery and I laughed. I laughed fit to bust a gut.

The Emperor swung around. All conversation ceased. I was the focus of all eyes, staring at me, uncertain — scared!

I stood up and controlled myself.

I inclined to the Emperor.

“The Princess Majestrix is a worthy daughter to a great father,” I said. I meant at least half of that. “She has the gift of arousing the best in any man, Your Majesty. I did not mean to offend anyone here.”

He nodded, looking a little — puzzled, I thought. He turned away and went on with his conversation with the Chuktar, and I flopped back next to Delia.

“You glorious girl,” I said, changing what I had been about to say to a cliché no one could take amiss. “I am the true Strom.”

“You mean — no, Dray, my darling! You can't be!”

And then I remembered what the Gdoinye, speaking to me for the very first time on Kregen, had said. There was a time loop here. I knew that Delia would have heard gossip and news of this ferocious Strom of Valka, and of how he had cleared out the slavers and aragorn from his island, and received his patent of nobility — and all this would have been happening before she parted with me in the Hostile Territories. I had been on Kregen in two different places at the same time!

No wonder the Star Lords sometimes barred me off from travel!

My explanation was fragmentary and in a low voice. To have to sit here on silken cushions next to my Delia, so close to my own sweet Delia of the Blue Mountains, and be unable so much as to touch her! I knew that a single contact with her would result in my being run outside and at the best having my head parted from my body — and more likely having my body torn apart by red-hot irons. The Princess Majestrix was sacrosanct.

As she should be, of course.

The situation was idiotic, ludicrous, and fraught with terrible danger.

Both of us wanted to gasp out our love for each other, to clasp each other in our arms, to tell all our news, and gaze deeply into the other's eyes in absolute joy and wonder; yet we must sit here, so prim and precise, under the watchful eyes of the guards and the courtiers. I knew there were many eyes of spies there, people working for the racters, for the panvals, men and women working for all the different parties and lords each of whom wanted his own advantage from the Emperor. Drak, Strom of Valka, was a marked man henceforth.

That wouldn't worry me.

I started to tell her that she must run away with me, at once, back to Valka and then, probably, to Strombor.

“Yes! Oh, yes, Dray, my darling!”

No hesitation, no regrets for leaving the sumptuousness all about her, no thoughts of her life here in Vallia as the Princess Majestrix. If the Strom of Valka kidnapped her, then his head would be forfeit and never more would she be able to return to her home. Strombor, then . . . But — no slightest hesitation. She agreed willingly, joyfully, eagerly. Oh, yes, there is no woman in two worlds like Delia of the Blue Mountains!

Everything within the palace of Vondium was — and still is — conducted with order and dignity. I felt the sense of impressiveness, even then, when my every thought was of abducting the Princess out of that palace.

We spent what really amounted to only a few murs together before that audience was over and I had to take my leave of the Princess Majestrix and return with the Emperor to the throne room. He had taken a shine to me. Later we took a meal together in a private apartment with a number of the high men of the realm. These men were strangers to me then, but how well I know them now! Some as good and loyal friends, others as bitter and deadly enemies. As they stride onto the stage of my story I will introduce them to you. But, as always, following my plan, I will speak only of people and places and things as they impacted on me at the time, when I met them, even though I knew of them before that.

The first of these to whom you should be introduced called on me the very next day at my new lodgings. He was Nath Larghos, the Trylon of the Black Mountains. A Trylon is a rank intermediate between a Vad and a Strom. The Black Mountains extend northward of the Blue Mountains and, although neither so lofty nor extensive, are composed of a black basaltic rock rich in minerals. Eastward the Trylonate runs into farming and agricultural products.

Trylon Larghos came unannounced into the sunny upper chamber of *The Rose of Valka* where I sat at breakfast. The comfortable inn and posting house was run by Young Bargom, the son of Old Bargom, who had fled from Valka in the bad days. Naturally, he had changed the name of the inn to remind them of happier times back in Valka, their homeland.

“Strom Drak?” said Trylon Larghos, coming forward into the patch of mingled sunlight by the windows. I did not rise. I was in the act of placing rich yellow butter upon a chunk torn from a crisp Kregan loaf, and that is an important operation. I did look up. I saw Larghos then, and I can see him in my mind's eye

now. A big man running to fat, but with the muscles still supple and bulging on his arms and across his shoulders. He wore a Vallian tunic of leather, but instead of the decent buff, the leather had been dyed in a pattern of black and white. His sword hilt glittered with gems. His face, bearded and bewhiskered, contained a pair of close-set shrewd eyes, and his mouth was a rat-trap if ever I saw one. A man of whom to be wary. I summed him up instantly; dangerous, like a leem.

Before I could answer he went on: “You astonish me, my dear Strom, that you are not occupying your villa here in Vondium.”

“The place has been deserted for many seasons.”

“So? I am sorry to hear it. I was pleased to make your acquaintance yesterday, with the Emperor. He seemed to find you genial company.”

The Emperor had been laughing a lot more, I recalled, when I took my leave. I did not offer Larghos a seat, but he sat down anyway. Maybe he thought that being a Trylon gave him the edge over a Strom.

There had certainly been no desire in my actions or stories to charm the Emperor — quite the reverse — but from the Trylon’s expression he was clearly accusing me of toadying to the Emperor. I wanted to correct that impression.

“Many men have done so. And many others have not.”

“I trust, by Opaz, that we shall get along together, Strom.”

Whatever he was after, he would get from me only what I chose to give. However, there seemed no point in antagonizing him just yet, despite that I didn’t like the look of him.

“Have you breakfasted, Trylon? Would you care to join me?”

He waved the suggestion away with a very white and plump beringed hand. I fancied, though, he could use a rapier.

“Thank you. I have. We are up early in Vondium.”

“Do you then not often visit the Black Mountains?”

If that was a nasty remark he didn’t react. “When I have to. The black rocks offend me. My life is here, in the capital, where politics are!”

We talked for a space until I had breakfasted and then he joined me in a cup of Kregan tea. He worked his way around to the purpose of his visit. He was a racter. The white and black would have told me that. I was an unknown. Oh, yes, he had heard of the panvals and what had happened in Valka, but that was in the past. Now we must face the new realities. The Emperor must have an heir who is not a willful girl; the racter candidate must be the one.

“And who is that, Trylon Larghos?”

He studied me a moment. I had sidestepped his more direct questions, but I had appeared to satisfy him that if the racters could offer me more than the panvals, then I was their man.

“Kov Vektor of Aduimbrev is the Emperor’s choice,” he said. He spoke with care.

He wore leathers dyed black and white. He was a racter and flaunted that. The racters were a party, composed of many people from all walks of life — except, I thought with bitterness, those who walked the canal towpaths. They were a power in the Presidio. They had the strength to banish panvals on trumped-up charges, but there were still many panvals who wore the green and white colors. A man might choose to flaunt his color allegiance, as Larghos did. Or, as Pallan Eling, the minister responsible for the canals, did, wear merely a small black and white ribbon tucked into a buttonhole. I guessed Larghos’ servitors would wear sleeves banded black and white, and the colors of the Black Mountain — appropriately enough black and purple — would appear elsewhere on their jerkins.

The older a lineage the less colors in the insignia, in general. Some men, like Tobi ti Chelmsturm, with five colors to their name very often preferred the dignity of using merely two colors for their men, and these would be colors of their party. Humans and halfings, we share the same failings.

I said, “I do not support Vektor in this.”

“Good. He is a weakling, a sop. You can smell him coming a dwabur downwind, like a woman’s hairdresser.”

“You have a candidate for the Princess Majestrix? Who is that, Trylon?”

He made up his mind. When he spoke the name I felt the blood rise and sing in my head.

“Vomanus of Vindelka.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ill news of Vomanus of Vindelka

I felt outraged, betrayed, soiled.

I spoke before I thought.

“I understood that Vomanus was — ineligible to marry the Princess!”

He stared at me narrowly, and lowered his cup. “Now where would you have heard that?”

Collecting my thoughts, I said, stumbling and bluffing my way through: “I am not certain — it seems it was a drunken evening, somewhere, men talking and boasting. But, clearly, it cannot be true.”

He leaned back, sizing me up afresh, but he neither confirmed nor denied what I had suggested.

Back there in hated Magdag where I had intrigued and fought for my slaves and workers I had last seen Vomanus. I had sent him with a message to Delia. He had always treated me as a comrade, and although he was a young man whom I delighted to call “my lad,” there had been a mystery about him. He had said, once: “Just take it from me, Drak, my friend, Kovs are Kovs and Kovs to me.” No, he could never voluntarily seek Delia’s hand in marriage, not when he knew the passion that flames between the Princess and me. Then — he must consider me dead! Yes, that could be the only explanation.

And then, of course, I felt the guilt and the remorse — emotions I always try to quell out of perversity —

when I remembered how finely he had always supported me. And all the time he had loved Delia himself!

Trylon Larghos said, “Young Vomanus was willed the estates and lands of Vindelka. The Emperor approves. As to what happened to Tharu, out there in the wilds of the inner sea, who knows? Who cares?” He was too sophisticated a man to say, as many would, of the inner sea: “wherever that is.” He knew well enough where it was, although he’d never travel that great distance all his life. “Tharu was an Emperor’s man. He was a great power behind the throne. Now he is gone, Vomanus is one of us.”

I felt the sadness and the sorrow, but if young Vomanus really loved Delia, then he would use whatever levers came to his hand. He would move heaven and hell, in Kregan terms, to win her. I could not blame him. What would he say when he learned I was still alive!

I decided to test that. Speaking casually enough, my cup at a jaunty angle, I said: “What of this hairy madman I have heard of — this wild clansman—”

“Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor?” Larghos laughed, and his laugh was most evil. “Whether the Princess loved him or not does not matter. Prescott is dead. And the devil can go to the Ice Floes of Sicce with my boot in his rear. He has caused far too much trouble. But now the time is ripe for the racters, for Vomanus, for me — and for you, too, Strom Drak!”

Just then Young Bargom trundled in with fresh tea. He said in his blunt Valkan way: “There is a Koter below, asking for you, my lord Strom. He does not give a name.” Bargom glanced at Larghos. “He wears green and white, my lord Strom.”

“A rast of a panval!” exclaimed Larghos. He had half drawn his rapier before he recollected himself. “If I can force an argument on him as I leave I’ll do so, and spit his guts! Aye, by Vox! And laugh as I do it!”

He took his leave, promising to speak with me again, and he was well pleased with his morning’s work. When he had gone Young Bargom shook his head and leaned out of the window.

“Hai! A racter is on his way out! I don’t want trouble in my inn — hey, you there!”

He turned back to face me. “Your pardon, my lord Strom, but Trylon Larghos is a noted duelist. He says he’ll spit this onker’s guts, he’ll spit them, mark my words, my lord Strom.”

Suddenly it was borne in on me — what the blue blazing hell was I doing fiddling about with politics in Vondium? I had agreed to abduct my Delia, we would fly together to Valka, to Strombor — we would finish with Vallia and begin a new life, together.

Whoever the panval was, he took the threat seriously, for he did not show up. Bargom busied himself clearing away the breakfast things. He liked to talk.

“They say the headless zorcamen have been seen, my lord Strom. They were riding within sight of Vondium last night.” He shivered. “They mean ill, mark my words, my lord Strom.”

“You believe in them, Bargom?”

He straightened up, the tray balanced easily on one hand. “Of course, my lord Strom! They are evil, supernatural! They set fire to buildings, they abduct people — and a two-headed chunkrah was born only last week. Mark my words, my lord Strom, evil days are coming to Vondium!”

Ghosts and black towers and bats and apparitions, all these things, then, were believed in by Bargom. How many others in Vondium believed? If they were racters dressed up, why were they doing these things here, where the racters were all-powerful? Again I thought of this mysterious third party, but Bargom, who had heard whispers of them in his pot room, knew nothing solid about them.

They were called the third party, not because there were only three parties, but somehow people realized that they must rank as a force at least equal with the failing panvals, and possibly with the racters. The other parties — generally owning allegiance to territory as well as belief — were too small to be counted.

Just to the northeast of Vondium rises the strange height known as Drak's Seat. The two main peaks, when viewed from the center of Vondium, look uncannily like a great throne, lowering over the city. Drak's Seat. Snow and ice are found there — as Jenbar had told me — which last longer in good condition than a man might believe, when packed in the Kregan way in sawdust of sturm-wood. I detest ice in drinks, for together with worry it is a prime source of ulcers. And no truly civilized man relishes having the taste of a fine vintage destroyed by great chunks of frozen water floating in his glass.

Young Bargom chattered on telling me the gossip of Vondium. His life was here, now; with a wife from the city, and children, and his father's bones buried in the Opaz-sacred cemetery a dwabur beyond the eastern gate, he had nothing to draw him back to Valka. His talk told me much, and I saw how useful he could be to me. *The Rose of Valka* was situated on the eastern bank of the Great Northern Cut, a respectable house to which Koters could bring their ladies in complete confidence of a pleasant evening. He loved to chatter, and this talk sparked up confidences from his guests, particularly when their bellies were filled with selections from Young Bargom's cellars.

Of the third party he could tell me only that men whispered behind their hands that dual allegiances were involved. The great nobles were all playing for themselves. The Emperor sought for allies and friends. Evil days were coming to Vondium. The headless zorcamen were one symbol of that, a presentiment and a sign of terror.

Why should Nath Larghos, a Trylon with power that placed him extremely high in the councils of the racters, seek out a lowly Strom and attempt to win him over?

My own plans must come first. There was much to do. An airboat, it seemed to me, was the obvious choice; indeed, the only choice. Once I had abducted Delia we would have no peace until we reached Strombor in Zenicce.

Even then the Emperor might fit out a mighty expedition and dispatch his powerful fleet with thousands of mercenaries to bring his daughter back. I did not fancy myself in the part of Paris, and Delia could occasion the launch of many more than a thousand ships, aye, and fliers, too, for I knew without question she was far more beautiful and passionate and willful than Helen could ever have been. But I would not bring upon Strombor the fate of Troy; the Emperor and his Vallians would never be the Greeks in this tragedy. If necessary Delia and I would fly to Sanurkazz and go to Felteraz, where I knew how welcome we would be. Mayfwy would welcome us. That was certain. If the Emperor followed us there through all the long and perilous dangers, then where would we go?

I jumped up and overset the teapot.

"Goddamnit to hell!" I said. I would make a start, and go with my Delia to the ends of this strange world of Kregen, and let the fates play with their silken strands as they would.

Young Bargom came in somewhat rapidly, to investigate the overset teapot I thought. But in his hand he held a heavy knife, not quite a shortsword, something like a cleaver — a weapon he could with perfect truth say he had picked up from his kitchen — and his face held a down-drawn, savage look that surprised me. He saw me standing there, composed, he saw the teapot, and he didn't know where to put the knife.

“The teapot thought itself a flier, Bargom,” I said. Then, “What troubled you?”

He blurted it out: “I thought some Vox-spawned rast had crept in here, my lord Strom, to do you a mischief.”

The incident passed. But it added up. Bargom said there were many expatriate Valkans living in Vondium. They were anxiously desirous of paying their respects to their Strom. They had heard what had been done on Valka and many of their friends had left to return home. Many of those still remaining intended to return. Meanwhile, here in the city was their Strom, the man who had cleansed their home and made of it a place worthy to be lived in again, a place of which to be proud.

With a callous cynicism and a calculating appraisal of the advantages I could wring, I saw these people. They came in, in ones or twos, sometimes a family, and they brought little gifts, tokens of their esteem. All went on about how Valka was no longer merely a slave-province, of which there were more than two or three, and the letters they had had telling them of the great things being done there. Some of the women even kissed my hand. I began to feel the greatest cheat and impostor in all of Kregen. I have said I love the island of Valka. This is true. I believe in that upper room of the inn *The Rose of Valka*, I came to feel completely the same about the people.

One young lad there was, tall, strong, upright, with the glowing features of hero-worship about him I found most distasteful, whose name was Vangar ti Valkanium, told me he was a Deldar in the Vallian Air Service. He had come in mufti, the buff tunic and the wide-brimmed hat with the red and white colors in feathers and in a great cockade over his left shoulder. I told Vangar ti Valkanium something of my admiration for the Air Service people, and we talked very pleasantly. When he left I knew that I would feel a pang at abandoning my island of Valka.

But I would abandon any and everything in two worlds for the sake of my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains.

Sitting at the black-wood table in the window I felt a softly caressing touch stroke feather-light across the nape of my neck. It was there and gone in an instant. I took no notice. In the window on its own special pedestal stood a flick-flick. The plant has many names on Kregen, and as an example of the closeness of the Vallish to the Kregish, the fly-catcher is fleck-fleck in the Vallish and flick-flick in the Kregish. Its six-foot-long tendrils uncoil like steel springs, their honey-dew stickiness certain death for flies. The flowers are cone-shaped trumpets of a pale and subtle peach color, and they gobble flies like a starving elephant stuffing down buns. Most homes like to have a flick-flick, usually near the kitchen. Flies, as I have said, get everywhere.

The break made me stand up and stretch and look out of the window. Across the patio, with its tables and chairs and Young Bargom's clientele drinking happily, the canal ran along between meticulously upkept banks. And a great straggly gang of haulers passed, their gray slave breech-clouts filthy, the whip marks jikaidering their backs, bloody and filthy, hauling a huge gray barge with a cargo that brought the gunwales down to within a knuckle of the water.

I frowned.

Delia detested slavery as much as I did.

I had thought I had been brought to Kregen to help stamp out slavery. My own plans called for the fulfillment of my own selfish ends. To hell with the Star Lords and the Savanti! Delia was all I cared about.

Many times, as you have heard, I had been deflected from my intentions. Now, again, I was prevented from putting our plans into operation that day, as I had wished, by the distraught arrival of Kta. Angia.^[2] A plump, homey, beeswax kind of woman, she sobbed out her story. Her son was a proud and headstrong youth, but they were in debt, for he was a cabinet-maker and had had words with his employer and could not find fresh work. He would not ask friends of the Valkans here in Vondium for help. And now he had been dragged off to the bagnios. She was desperate. Could I help?

The story is quickly told. Quickly — in that I went with her to the bagnios and found her son, Anko the Chisel, and paid off his debt, and in the process being arrogant and insulting to the guards with their red and black sleeves. But not so quickly — in my discovery of the bagnios themselves. I have seen many slave barracks, and barracoons and bagnios, and those of Vallia were no worse than many. Here criminals, debtors, hostages, prisoners, those who had forfeited their liberty in any way, were kept for dispersal among the slave farms, or the haulers, or the mines, or in any of the many places that slaves were employed. We took Anko the Chisel out of that place and his mother, Kta. Angia, fell on her knees before me, whereat I felt all the nausea of myself rising, and I bid her get up and take her son home, and start again in the search for work.

The point I had had thrust upon me I did not want to face, would not face, refused even to countenance.

Delia. That thought alone was all that mattered.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A certain Bowman of Loh comments on the Archers of Valka

That evening everyone crowded in and *The Rose of Valka* rocked with the roistering songs of Kregen. And, chief among these, sung for all its seven hundred and seventy-eight stanzas, was *The Fetching of Drak na Valka*.

Among the Valkan revelers, dressed like them in the flaunting red and white, sat Seg Segutorio. I had told him, swiftly, not to start singing *The Bowmen of Loh*.

“I’ll fight any man who denies me!” he had started to roar out and I had hustled him away up the black-wood stair to my upper chamber.

“By Zim-Zair, you onker-headed bowman!” I exclaimed. He calmed down and then, with that strong streak of practicality that runs intertwined with the feyness of the men of the mountains and valleys of Erthyrdrin, he nodded, understanding. “Although, Dray, you know that there is no better bow than the longbow. All these made-up sinew and bone and horn bows, curved like a pregnant duck; they are as toys beside the longbow.”

“True, true. But — watch it!”

“All is ready. By the Veiled Froyvil, but Delia is a true princess! She has made the arrangements for the

airboat. Thelda and I and little Dray are ready. We can—”

I felt shock.

“You — you wish to come, too, Seg?”

He looked at me as though I had slapped him around the face.

“Of course.” His bright blue eyes glittered on me in the soft radiance of the samphron oil lamp. “You want me to, don’t you, my old dom?”

I managed to say, “I couldn’t get along without you,” and turned away so that he should not see my face.

The noise from below was reaching fantastic proportions and we went down and took up the wine — it was the best of Jholaix, precious and rare and saved for super-special occasions — and joined in the singing. Vangar ti Valkanium sang. Anko the Chisel sang. Everyone sang. We sang of Valka. A lithe and lissome girl, very beautiful, with a heart-shaped face and a figure to stir men to immediate action, recited some of the more sublime passages from *The Fatal Love of Vela na Valka* and we all joined in the choruses. Then, for the third time, we roared out all the seven hundred and seventy-eight stanzas of the song commemorating my fetching of Valka out of the shadows and of the Valkans fetching me to be their Strom.

It takes a long time to sing seven hundred or so stanzas and when, at last, we threw the shutters back it was high noon outside in Vondium. Deldar Vangar had a mad scramble to get back to report for duty. He spoke of a visit the Emperor was paying to Vindelka, northwest of the city. No one took much notice, the fumes of wine coiling in our brains. Seg had left early, saying that as a private Koter he had duties to perform he dare not let lapse now, so close to the time for our departure. He had mentioned Vindelka, too.

We had, in the Kregan idiom, a zhantil to saddle, and we all had our secret parts to perform.

To clear my head, after I had shaved that harsh chin of mine, I took a stroll along the quays and watched all the busy loading and unloading of the great galleons of Vallia. Produce from all over the known world flowed into Vondium, and the products of Vallia flowed out. Gulls wheeled overhead, shrieking. The twin suns shone gloriously. The air held that bracing tang of the sea. But — the Star Lords had expressly forbidden me to sail the seas of Kregen for a space. How I longed, then, to take my Delia up onto the deck of a great galleon and sail with her over the rim of the world!

When I returned to *The Rose of Valka* a sedan chair such as are commonly seen all over the city stood at the door. The two men who bore it were slaves, although decently clad in dark brown shifts, with a lotus-flower emblazoned on breast and back. With them were four soldiers and a Hikdar, wide of shoulder and lean of waist, their raffish hats sporting feathers of yellow and green, with a double red stripe slashed athwart their brightness. I went in, and Young Bargom presented a lady whose face was covered with a deep violet veil. My first glance convinced me this could not be Delia in disguise, and the leap of my heart stilled.

Bargom withdrew and the lady lifted her veil. She was young, pretty, but with a pallid squarish face in which the brown eyes held none of the luster and sparkle to which I was accustomed.

“I am Pela, my lord Strom, handmaid to the Kovneva Katrin. I am bid to tell you that the Kovneva must

see you immediately.”

“Yes? Do you know why, Pela?”

“No, my lord Strom. Only that it is urgent, very urgent.”

“I do not know the Kovneva Katrin. Tell me of her.”

“But, my lord Strom!” Her eyes opened wide and for all their dullness they expressed astonishment. “She is a great and powerful lady. Since the Kov died she has refused to marry. Now she is a devoted attendant upon the Princess Majestrix.”

So that was it, I said to myself. I yelled for Bargom and between us we made me look presentable, with a buff jerkinlike tunic with wide winged shoulders which left the white silk shirt sleeves visible. I buckled on the rapier and main-gauche and took up the hat with the red and white feathers. Down the black-wood stairs I went, following Pela, who got into the sedan chair very quickly. The bearers lifted their poles, the Hikdar gave me a sketchy salute, rapped out his orders, and we started for the palace.

The effects of a rollicking night coupled with the fresh air left me feeling alert and breezy, although with the edges of fatigue beginning to creep along my bones. We climbed up through the crowded streets and along wide boulevards where the quoffa carts trundled and the zorca chariots whickered their tall wheels. There were fewer airboats than usual wheeling over the city today. The birds sensed this, and they swooped and gyrated against the twin suns.

Around to the western face of the palace we went beneath the frowning walls where the mercenary guards paced. In through a square opening, faced with marble and gold, and so up again along courtyards and colonnades, and into the rear of the apartments reserved for the Princess. In a small square room, with a lamp burning in the center which cast weird gleams upon the friezes of mythical beasts and birds, the sedan chair was placed down and Pela alighted. The Hikdar saluted and marched his men out.

Pela said, “Wait here, my lord Strom.”

As soon as she had gone I loosened my rapier in its scabbard and looked about. There were but two doors, and Pela had left through the opposite one. When its sturm-wood panels bearing plaques of beaten silver opened and a woman walked in, attended only by Pela, I relaxed a little.

“Strom Drak, of Valka?”

“Yes.”

“I am the Kovneva Katrin Rashumin of Rahartdrin and you address me as my lady Kovneva.”

I said, “I haven’t come here to play games. What do you want of me?”

She flinched back. My words were tantamount to my striking her across the face. I heard Pela gasp. If there was trouble for my Delia there was no time for protocol and fine manners. I took a step forward, fears for Delia uppermost in my mind. I stuck my face at this haughty Kovneva.

“Well?”

She put her hands to her breast. She wore a long silvery gown that fell to the marble floor, and was held over her shoulders by a mass of jewels. Her dark hair was coiffed and curled and smothered with a net of glittering gems. As for her face — it was hard in outline, of undoubted beauty, with fine dark eyes and a mouth rather too thin for my taste. She reminded me, as a candle reminds one of a samphron oil lamp, of Queen Lilah, that proud and sensuous Queen of Paul.

She managed to speak. “I will have you flogged! I will have you torn asunder! To speak to me, the Kovneva, this way! You are a fool, a rast, a cramph, a—”

I took her left wrist into my hand and lifted it before our faces. I glared down into her eyes. Her face altered in contour, changing, going slack, the soggy droop she would never admit appearing beneath her chin. I knew my face wore that old corrosive look of pure domination and harsh authority that, in other circumstances, I have so despaired of. Here it broke this woman’s resistance down in a way that, however unpleasant it might have been, was desperately essential.

“The Emperor,” she whispered. “He has gone to Vindelka. The Princess Majestrix flies with him. I am—” She swallowed. “I am bid by the Princess on behalf of the Emperor to command you to join them.”

I let her wrist go and she rubbed it with her other hand, staring at me the while with a look that should have blasted me on the spot. I nodded.

“Very well, Kovneva. Let us go, in the name of Opaz!”

Pela’s eyes were as round as palines.

“And,” I said in that harsh and hateful voice, “you will receive from me all the deference that is your due. Next time don’t shilly-shally when there are messages from the Emperor.”

“I shall remember this—”

“That is good. Make sure you remember well.”

From this unedifying scene of my bullying a silly woman I took no pleasure, particularly after I had, as I considered, been groveling before the Emperor. But all my fears for Delia had leaped into my mind, and almost I had said “messages from the Princess.” Only a last-minute flash of common sense had made me change that to “Emperor.”

Of course, all the plans were changed. Delia must have managed to remind her father of the Strom of Valka, and arranged for my presence at Vindelka. That she had chosen this woman, this Kovneva Katrin, to bring the message must surely mean she held her in some esteem, even if she didn’t trust Katrin Rashumin. Rahartdrin — that is, the land of Rahart — is a large island off the southwestern tip of Vallia, south of the straits between Womox and the Blue Mountains. All these places I was hearing about now have since come to mean a great deal to me, and to become very familiar, as you shall hear. I was slowly learning my way around Vallia, the land of my Princess.

Rahartdrin is about five times as extensive as Valka. She was a Kovneva and I was a Strom. No wonder she balked at my cavalier treatment of her!

Muffled in cloaks, we went out swiftly and boarded the waiting airboat, and I wondered just what rapier to grind Katrin Rashumin had in all this. She was more than a mere messenger. How much of the

Emperor's trust did she have? And, far more importantly, how loyal was she to Delia?

The airboat was of the usual pattern, petal-shaped, about fifty feet long, with a sumptuously appointed cabin taking up the aft third of the length. Atop this was a sun-deck. I noticed that while the usual flag of Vallia — the yellow saltire on the red ground — flew from the stern, Katrin's own flag — the lotus in yellow and green picked out in red — flew from a staff in the prow. Evidently, this was her own personal airboat.

The luxury of the cabin confirmed this, for it was furnished in a sybaritic and yet realistic way very much of a piece with her character. I threw my cloak onto a chaise longue and looked about for a drink. The airboat bore on through the levels toward Vindelka. The crew wore the yellow and green striped sleeves, with twin slashes of red through the yellow, and they looked competent enough. Although, no one could feel absolutely secure aboard an airboat; I recalled what Naghan Furtway, Kov of Falinur, had had to say about the rasts of Havilfar. Pela brought wine then, a good vintage, and I settled down to what I considered would be the monotony of the aerial voyage.

As soon as the wine was served, Katrin drove Pela out in an abrupt and yet not unkind way, to go and sit in the sun-shine on the forward deck, and then locked the door. I did not think I was going to try to escape from an airboat a thousand feet in the air.

"You know how the racters have forced the Presidio to tax Valka more heavily than is just?" she began without preamble.

"I know, Kovneva."

"This is why you are in Vondium?"

"Yes." It was as good an excuse as any. I felt the Emperor had sized me up — whether I liked the man or detested him I still didn't know — and he had not mentioned the tax situation. I thought then that if it had been my daughter claiming the horrible object that had been Dray Prescott in his chains and filth, I might have reacted as he had done.

"And you are not prepared to do anything about it?"

"Just what had you in mind?"

The very word tax is obscene, of course, to those who pay. To those who collect for causes their honor tells them are just, the word means different things. But then, any taxman believes his cause is just. My people of Valka paid heavy taxes, unjustly heavy, as I had discovered since reaching Vondium. My selfish desires about Delia had driven the matter from my head. Now this woman was obviously seeking allies against the racters.

"Valka is a rich island. Richer, I venture to suggest, than Rahartdrin."

She flared up at this. But then she nodded, and bit her lip.

"Since my husband, the Kov, died, things have gone to wrack and ruin."

"You need a man, Katrin."

Of course, I shouldn't have said that.

And, indeed, it wasn't necessarily true. I make no claims for the superiority of men in managing estates, and I know my Delia could manage Delphond like a dream. The Blue Mountains tended to be left in the capable hands of her elders in High Zorcady. But this Katrin Rashumin, Kovneva of Rahartdrin, took my words and read into them what my ugly face and foul manners had kindled in her, and thus confirmed that belief in her mind. She did, in sober truth, need a man.

She drank more wine. Then she unclasped her silvery robe and let it fall to the floor. She moved toward me, and threw her round arms about my neck. "Drak, Drak — you would be a Kov!" as though that must clinch the argument.

As gently as I could I detached her fingers from me. Her silvery robe lay strewn about the deck. Her jeweled hair had fallen into a great loose mass, and a fortune rolled about on the priceless carpets of Walfarg weave.

"I am a man, Katrin; not Strom or Kov or Prince have any meaning for me." I did not say that being a Krozair of Zy held meaning. She would not have understood. "You must find a man more complaisant to your desires."

She rested a while then, drinking wine, the slanting mingled rays of Zim and Genodras playing over her body. She would resume the fight shortly, I knew. No wonder she had locked the door. But I was learning all the time. I would be a Kov if I married her. I had become a Strom in all legality because I had won the position, and none could say me nay. How these nobles of Vallia had schemed and bribed and fought their way to power! And how they must be ever ready to fend off the plunderers forever following them! What a man could make of himself, what he could hold, that he was, in Vallia.

Of course, like any system of its kind, once you were in power, in the saddle, wielding the whip, you tended to build up reserves to keep you in power.

"No," I said. "No, Katrin. I will be your friend, if you wish that, and perhaps take a lash and an accounting book into the island of Rahart. More than that I cannot be."

"I have never met a man like you! In a few short burs I knew. Time has no meaning in affairs of the heart. The moment you spoke to me, so rudely, so intemperately, I knew you were the man! I felt myself turn to jelly—"

I didn't laugh, but it deserved it. Poor soul! But for her, it was all deadly serious.

"I will strike a bargain with you, Katrin. I will be your good friend. I will ride into Rahartdrin and see what is going wrong. And you, in your turn, wipe your face, put on your robe, and tidy your hair — and then help and support me with the Emperor."

If she rebelled at that, put on her icy hauteur and allowed her hatred to spew forth — well and good. I just wanted to know where we stood. But she was prepared to accept that heavy-handed patronizing attitude — for all that I meant sincerely what I said, it was still insufferably obnoxious — and she did as she was bid, and once more turned from a passionate sobbing submissive woman into a regal and distant Kovneva.

A call came down the tube. The border of Vindelka had long been passed and now we were heading in for a landing at Delka Ob. This was the capital of Vindelka, where Tharu and now Vomanus lorded it over fat realms. At Delka Dwa, right over on the northwestern border, lay a frontier town against the

poor lands stretching away up there, lands over which I had trudged hauling the Emperor's barge.

There were few lakes in that area, the ground was thin and sorry, and the wind scoured the landscape into wild and fantastic shapes. Only a few leem-hunters and madmen looking for gold and jewels found much in these badlands over which to feel satisfaction. The River of Shining Spears which ran from the Blue Mountains into the Great River skirted south of these badlands. They were called the Ocher Limits.

Beyond them and sharing them as a common frontier, seldom visited, lay the Kovnate of Falinur.

Katrin and I went out on deck as the airboat slanted down for a landing. Away across to the west where the twin suns sank in a jumbled blaze of emerald and orange the sky was a mass of glorious color. Fierce black twisted, violent spirals of cloud coiled up, with the beams of the suns striking through and the glow extending far across the horizon.

"We made our landing just in time, my lady Kovneva," said the airboat captain. He looked ill at ease.

Katrin didn't bother to reply. We all stood there, watching that violence and glory in the sky to the west.

Delka Ob was a pleasant enough place, situated at the crossing of two canals, with much greenery, shade trees, and the soothing sounds of water tinkling from fountains and waterfalls created in the gardens of the houses. There was the usual labor section; but here, too, the houses looked neat and clean and the people moved with that alertness and firmness of tread I always welcome, for it means the taint of slavery is not embedded in their bones.

Without question, the Kovneva ordered her palanquin out from the flier's hold and gave instructions to be taken directly to the palace. This was the palace of Vomanus of Vindelka. Now it hosted the Emperor and the Princess Majestrix. Pela was carried in her sedan chair; I walked with the guards.

The suns were declining now, the air growing cooler. Our way from the landing field took us across one of the many bridges over a canal and here I heard the familiar hateful trilling of an Emperor's stentor, and looking over the bridge parapet down onto the towpath I saw the sorry procession of dun gray barges. The haulers were being flogged into a shambling run, for the guards were impatient. I guessed these barges were carrying supplies, furniture, clothes, all the habitual magnificences of the Emperor, to the palace of Delka Ob, and had been dispatched some time ago, when this visit had been arranged, timed to reach the city for the Emperor's arrival. This was so.

They had been held up — a canal had burst its banks and the work of reconstruction had chopped all the leeway out of the schedule. The chamberlain in charge of those barges was no doubt trembling in his boots. I saw the savage way the whips rose and fell, the way the knouts smashed down on the heads and backs of the haulers. The red and black arms rose and fell remorselessly. A girl collapsed and was immediately cut out from her leash and pushed aside. She would be dealt with later.

"Hurry, Strom Drak!" called Katrin, putting her head out between the curtains of her palanquin. "Just a moment, Kovneva," I said. I turned to go. I had seen enough. I turned to go and saw at the head of the struggling knot of figures of the next barge in line a tall man leaning into the rope and hauling and hauling. I stopped turning to go. I swung back, very sharply.

I knew that I grew perilously close to callousness over the Emperor's slaves. A single man, Strom or not, could not affect that issue at a blow; abolition would take time and immense effort over many years. But, that being so, I must do what appeared to me the right thing to do. Nepotism, if correctly used, can be a worthwhile tool, as witness Nelson and Collingwood, among others. So, feeling shame that I could

do nothing for those other poor struggling devils, I ran quickly down off the bridge and onto the towpath.

A guard brought his lash down again and again onto the thin naked back of the tall man, striking with a passion of ferocity unwholesome to witness.

“Get on, you stinking cramph! Get on, you kleesh.”

The next act of mine was all over before I had fairly realized it had begun. I struck the guard full on the jaw. He dropped, senseless. Other guards had seen. They came running, up. I looked at the tall man. Seven feet tall, he was, extraordinarily thin of arm and leg, but with a bunching of muscles there that showed the lean sinewy strength of him. From his head a long silky mass of yellow hair fell to his waist. Now that hair was filthy and befouled. And he'd been uncovered when the Maiden of the Many Smiles floated alone in the sky!

“What in the name of Opaz do you think you're doing, rast?”

The guards hesitated for a moment, as I did not draw but faced them. I glared at them and I know they saw the hatred in my face.

“If you do not instantly release this man, your barges will foul and choke the cut. The Emperor will not like that.”

“Who in the name of Opaz are you to—” I drew the rapier. I drew slowly. “I am Drak, the Strom of Valka.” All the time the haulers had been blindly hauling on, and I had backed to pace them. “I can kill you all, and will do so with pleasure. Release that man. I am seeing the Emperor now; I have been summoned to talk with him.” They stared at me, their faces lumps in that eerie streaming light.

I jumped back and with a single blow sliced through the tow rope. The leading man, that incredibly tall and thin man with the silky mane of yellow hair, lurched forward. Relieved of the horrendous weight of the barge he hauled forward at nothing and collapsed into the bloody froth of the towpath.

A guard — he was a Deldar — yelled his anger and charged full on me, his rapier held correctly for an instant thrust.

I met him, twisted, and sank my blade in his belly. I withdrew. “If any more of you want the same, come on!”

The thin man rolled over. He lay on his back, looking up, and I saw his face go through a whole spectrum of expressions, from dumb animal wonder to a glorious sunrise of hope.

“I am Drak, Strom of Valka!” I shouted.

Katrin's voice lifted from the bridge. “What is going on, Strom Drak? The Emperor is waiting to speak with you!”

The guards checked at this. They looked at their comrade, coughing his guts out. They looked at my rapier. They looked — and longest — at my face.

“I will pay the necessary fees, indemnities, but this man is manumitted as of this moment,” I said. I turned and looked down. “I am Drak,” I said again, hammering it home. “I shall find you a long-hafted ax, for I think that will please you. Now, by Ngrangi the all-powerful, get up and let us go to the Emperor.”

“With all my heart!” said Inch.

“And don’t think of working off your taboos until I can find you a suitable place in which to do so.”

“I don’t believe, Dray — Drak. But I must. Now all praise to Ngrangi!” Inch of Ng’grogga leaped up, his long arms and legs pinwheels against the sunset’s glow. He looked wonderful in that moment. Inch — old Inch, of Ng’grogga, my good comrade in many a fight, many a carouse.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Inch flies to High Zorcady

The Emperor and Delia, with their courtiers, nobles, retainers, and guards, had not stayed at Delka Ob but had flown immediately to Delka Dwa. I fumed at this news in a way I believe you will understand. Prepared instantly to take to the air again I was met by the captain of Katrin’s airboat. His air of uneasiness persisted. This, I quickly discovered, was caused by the sunset and the storm out there to the west.

Even as we spoke, myself intemperately, the captain apologetically and half dead with fright, and Katrin soothingly, the outriders of the wind swooped howling over the rooftops of the city. The palace shook under the hammer-blows of the elements. Much damage was caused in the city that night; it was clear we could not fly in this weather. The rain sluiced down and the gutters ran red. The town lay smothered in the ocher and brick-red dust swept up from the Ocher Limits and blown hurtling across the land, leaving a trail of blood.

I cursed.

“The storm will blow itself out in a day, two at most,” Katrin said. “No zorca will get you there quicker if you start now — and travel in this is well-nigh impossible. My flier will span the distance rapidly as soon as the storm drops.”

With that, perforce, I had to be content.

How the fates and the elements conspired to cheat me of what I most desired in two worlds!

In an inner chamber I set about putting Inch back together again. With all the solemnity which the occasion required he set about purging himself of all his broken taboos. The process took time. He stood on his head for burs at a time. He sat on his haunches and howled like a ponsho-trag. A fire was laid and he solemnly jumped in and out of it. He performed some amazing acts which left me either stupefied with wonder or helpless with laughter — me, Dray Prescott. By the time he had finished the night had passed, I had slept, and Inch could be kitted out and tell me all his news.

My first words were: “What of Tilda and Pando?”

Inch sat and ate crisp fluffy Kregan bread and honey, and wondered aloud if he should take another dish of lig eggs. The lig egg comes in various shapes and sizes, of which the one with the points at each end and the fat round body between is perhaps the most popular. A few of those and a layer of grilled vosk rashers provided a breakfast fit for an emperor.

“Pando needs your horny hand on his rear,” said Inch. “Tilda is more beautiful than ever, a true

Kovneva. Tomboram thrives, but Pando will have to take over as king before he grows much older. He needs responsibility to hold him down. He's like a nit in a ponsho skin."

I nodded. These were problems I had not forgotten. "And you?"

He made a face and drank wine, a whole glass, down in one swallow.

"That Ngrangi-forsaken canalwater! All the haulers who were not canalfolk were scared to death of it."

"So they should be. What of yourself?"

"The argenter was taken by a swordship. The swordship was taken by a Vallian. I was simply packed off along with the rest of the prisoners; they laughed at my suggestion of a ransom."

"The Vallians would. They are an exceedingly proud and rich people. They covet slaves, for they do not have the numbers that other countries possess."

"However that may be, I hauled barges for this rast of an Emperor."

"To whose presence we go as soon as the storm drops."

Inch, of course, was staggered to find me here. He wanted to know how I had left the inner room of the palace of King Nemo in Pomdermam. I could not tell him that in that triumphant moment of victory, with the renders shouting "Jikai! Dray Prescott! Jikai," I had seen the scorpion scuttle, and had looked up and seen that greater scorpion blue and dazzling, and so had been hurled back across four hundred light-years to the planet of my birth. So I made up a story that explained it, and he, knowing of my desire to go to Vallia, understood what he chose to understand. He was loyal, was Inch of Ng'grogga, a good comrade.

A couple of Katrin's seamstresses ran up a buff Vallian tunic for Inch, extraordinarily long as to body and sleeves, and although they did it rapidly the stitching was of far finer quality than my own. Katrin, like a true Kovneva, employed only the best, and took them with her on her travels. A pair of tall black boots and a rakish hat with the two slots and a mass of red and white feathers made Inch look something like a Valkan. He found an ax, long-hafted and keen-bitted. Fit, clothed, fed, Inch was ready to march and fight at my side as we had before.

I own I felt him a great comfort to me.

Seg Segutorio had gone with the Bowmen of Loh with the Emperor. I knew he and Inch would get along together — by Zair! They would! Or I would know the reason why!

The wind blew savagely from the west for all of three days, and at times must have gusted up to a hundred miles an hour. There were many slates and tiles strewing the flags of the city. I prowled, restless as a caged leem. Katrin wanted to talk about the problems of her Kovnate of Rahartdrin, but I was in no mood for that, and kept out of her way. Most of the time I spent drinking and talking with Inch.

On the morning of the fourth day Katrin's captain reported the weather fit for us to fly. The wind had veered and dropped and the clouds were piling back into the sky from which the twin suns put in a watery appearance. We went to the airboat, climbed aboard, and took flight for Delka Dwa. I was not in a happy mood. For some reason I did not wish to fathom I felt cut off, isolated, marooned from events.

I had made up my mind what I was going to do, and the elements were merely holding me back. They could not change my mind.

I would fly to Delka Dwa, take Delia and whoever she wanted to accompany her aboard this airboat. Seg would join us. I would place my hands on this calgary of a captain's throat and he would fly Katrin's airboat to Vondium. We would pick up Thelda and little Dray, and then we would take flight for Strombor.

Yes. That was the plan. Simple, direct, and brutal.

The plan did not work out like that. You must remember that Kregen is not Earth. Oh, yes, most of its geography, customs, and people are like some of those of the Earth; but much there is strange and awe-inspiring and as different from Earth as an Eskimo is different from an Amazonian Indian.

We slanted down to a landing where green fields of cabbage ended, their rows wide-spread beneath the suns. On the other side of the landing field rose the craggy pile of Delka Dwa, a dun-colored mass of stone, roofed with pointed witches hats, moated, a triple-gate opened ready to receive us. I had the impression the gates would be slammed shut the instant we were inside over the drawbridge. Across the town hung shadows of high clouds. Beyond lay a rising stretch of land, mostly of a yellow dust-rock in which the glimpses of gray-green vegetation served only to emphasize the barrenness of that land, the emptiness of it, as it rose and became drier and gradually turned into the true Ocher Limits.

All was in turmoil.

The blood was still being scrubbed from the cobbles and the flagstones, scraped from the walls, washed from the costly tapestries and carpets.

The bodies had been collected and lay in rows beneath the walls, hurriedly wrapped in makeshift shrouds fashioned from sheeting.

Delka Dwa had been attacked four days ago, just before the great storm. Savage men and beast-men wearing colors of green and purple, their badge a hangman's noose, had ravaged the place searching for the Emperor.

I forced myself to hold on to my sanity.

Pallan Eling, with a bloody bandage around his head, lay in a long chair, and his scrawny frame shook. I asked him the questions torturing me.

"I do not know where the Princess is, Strom," he said. His voice quavered. I thought he shook no more than did I. "Now we know the colors and the badge of the third party! By Vox, I hope their bones rot and slime on the Ice Floes of Sicce."

In the corridors bowmen lay mingled with mercenaries, all wounded, all the Emperor's men who had fought. They had been overwhelmed.

A Hikdar told me, a Hikdar with a broken left arm strapped across his chest and acupuncture needles in him, dulling the pain. At his side lay his great longbow.

"Pallan Eling should go back to caring for the canals," the Hikdar said. "And leave fighting to warriors."

“Yes,” I said, in a voice I did not recognize. “What happened?”

I was aware of Inch busily taking in what had happened and talking to the survivors. The Hikdar’s head lolled.

“I was told to wait here. As soon as we arrived from Delka Ob the Emperor must have heard news, for he took to the air again at once. Half his force he took with him. We who stayed here received the attack designed to kill him. That is sure.”

The real fear took me then and gripped my guts with a pain that made me cry out and rush upon the shrunken form of the Pallan Eling, the man responsible for canals. His face looked like an old potato left out in the sun for a week. He whimpered when I gripped him.

“You must tell me, Pallan Eling. Where is the Princess Majestrix?”

He cried out, and gazed on the scene about him as though reliving the scenes of horror. Then he closed his eyes and a shudder racked through his body. “Gone.” He moaned, barely audible, and his old lips fluttered. “They came wearing the white and black, and said they were my friends, and asked for the Emperor — and I told them! I told them!”

“What did you tell them, old man?”

“Vomanus of Vindelka, it was; he knew. He warned the Emperor! They fled to The Dragon’s Bones. There, Vomanus said, they would be safe.” Eling abruptly sat up, gripped what was left of his hair, and tore at it like a madman. “And I told them where Vomanus had gone!”

I tried to calm myself, to think clearly, and, Zair knows, that was nigh impossible with the blood roaring in my head.

“And the Princess? Where is she?”

“She took an airboat with the others — with the Emperor—”

“*Inch!*” I bellowed.

He came running, swinging his ax.

“We go to The Dragon’s Bones.”

“Aye, Drak. Where may that be, then?”

I stared at him like a loon. I had no idea.

A Chulik sat with his back against a wall. One eye had been gouged out and the tusk on that side broken off. His chest was broken and a girl was trying clumsily to ease his pain. He stared up at me with that stoic calmness the Chuliks boast against pain. “The Dragon’s Bones,” he said, in a whisper. He wore sleeves of white and ocher, so he was of Vindelka.

I bent down. “By Likshu the Treacherous! Tell me where lies The Dragon’s Bones, Chulik.”

“Into the Ocher Limits — northwest — twenty, twenty-five dwaburs, more. There are bones there,

millions of bones.”

A Chuktar whose once-brilliant uniform was now mere rags, bloody and ripped, leaned up on an arm and coughed out: “There is no hope for the Emperor now. The third party has suborned good men. We stayed loyal to the Emperor, and this is our thanks. There is no one in the whole of Vallia who will fight for him now.”

“No, no!” shrieked the Pallan Eling, and then he looked around furtively. “But it is true. I should have joined Trylon Larghos! I was asked — I was asked! All have turned against the Emperor!” He rocked to and fro in his agony. “Why did I not do so? My loyalty has destroyed me!”

Well, the whole sorry story was out in the open now.

And yet Vomanus had warned the Emperor, and they had fled. Yet Vomanus was Trylon Larghos’ candidate for Delia’s hand! There was treachery and double-treachery here.

The confounded roaring and shrieking persisted in my head. I couldn’t think straight. Trylon Larghos. Building his third party, double-dealing the racters — I felt a jolt of surprise. If Vomanus had found out about that, and realized his hopes for Delia as the candidate of the racters meant nothing, he would have turned against the men of the white and black. He had warned the Emperor, but his motives may simply have been pure self-interest. But — Vomanus? I had to get to The Dragon’s Bones and confront him — and Trylon Larghos.

I snatched up the Bowman’s great longbow, and half a dozen filled quivers. They told the story. The third party had come in the guise of racters, as friends, and then had struck with steel; the crimson Bowmen of Loh had gone down with their bows unstrung, the arrows still snugged in their quivers.

I took Katrin’s airboat captain’s neck between my fingers.

“You will take us instantly to The Dragon’s Bones.”

He cringed. He had no time to argue, to say a word. He was run outside, and I shouted at the men standing limply by the drawbridge in the gatehouse in such a way that the drawbridge smoked down, and bounced, spouting dust. Inch and I ran across with the flier captain propelled before us. Katrin’s despairing cry followed.

“Strom Drak! You would not leave me?”

“Where I must go there is no place for you, Katrin! I will try to send your airboat back for you.” I gave the captain a buffet to make him run faster. “You might get it back if you’re lucky.”

The captain yelped at this. I kicked him aboard his craft and he fell onto the deck. Rearing up, he saw my face and so gave his orders in a scared husky croak to his crew. We took to the air.

“Captain,” I said. “I do not know your name. But you will obey me in all things. Is that understood?”

“Yes, my lord Strom. I am Hikdar Arkhebi. I will do as you order.”

“Get us to The Dragon’s Bones as though your life depended on it — for, believe you me, it does.”

He took himself off to oversee his steersman, down in the engine compartment where were situated the

two silver boxes which, with my limited knowledge then, I understood to control height, speed, and direction of the flier.

Inch said, “The raiders got in treacherously by wearing white and black. The Bowmen were very bitter about that.”

“I just hope Seg is all right.”

“From what you tell me of Seg, I think he can take care of himself.”

Delia.

If she had been harmed — I did not relish that swift flight across the Ocher Limits to The Dragon’s Bones. I couldn’t remain still. I paced up and down the sundeck, flicking my rapier this way and that, aching, shivering, shrunken. Black thoughts flitted like evil bats through my brain.

The barren wastes, rugged and harsh, fled past beneath. The hot wind scorched into my face and stung my eyes. I could not descend into that sumptuous cabin where the Kovneva Katrin had besought me. I stayed on the sun-deck and Inch kept everyone away, and, up there, alone, I suffered through that blistering journey.

Inch had never met Delia. I know, now, that he came to a full understanding of what she meant to me.

Away ahead I saw the yellow-umber landscape with its dry gulches and its powdery screes lifting to a serrated ridge, saw-toothed, jagged. Across this we flew, and I was very conscious how this evil land fitted my mood. Beyond, in a depression, lay a fumarole. We flew over it and then another. This whole area looked much as the surface of Earth’s moon looks, with volcano detritus and lava scattered everywhere, crater colliding and blending with crater. The glare of the twin suns beat back dazzlingly.

There was no need for Inch to stand upon any rung of the ladder to lift his head to the sundeck level. He shouted back: “Strom Drak! We approach The Dragon’s Bones.”

“Come up here, Inch.”

He shambled up onto the sundeck and stood, braced against the slipstream, regarding me.

“They said, back there in Delka Dwa, that there was no one in all Vallia who would fight for the Emperor.”

“Aye,” said Inch, who had been a barge hauler.

“That may be true. I do not know and, truth to tell, do not much care. But there are men willing to fight for the Princess Majestrix.”

Inch looked at me. “Now I know,” he said. “I can feel a little sorrow for Tilda the Beautiful — and, by Ngrangi, for Viridia the Render, also.”

“You,” I said to Inch, and I spoke as reasonably as I could, and Inch, because he was my comrade, understood and remained patient and calm under the bitter lash of my voice. “Inch, go to the Blue Mountains. Go to High Zorcady. Ask for Korf Aighos, for I think he will have returned by now, recovered. If he has not, there will be other men willing to fight — aye, and die — for their Princess.

Gather what men you can, in fliers, and bring them back here.”

“But,” said Inch, “this Hikdar Arkhebi — you remember our Arkhebi who took Strom Erclan’s place? — he can take a message.” Inch’s eyebrows drew down. “I would rather fight at your side.”

“And dearly would I have you there, Inch, you long warrior, but” — and here I rolled out a foul Makki-Grodno oath — “I don’t trust him. Only you will carry the words to make them believe. Only Korf Aighos knows I am Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy.”

Even Inch did not fully comprehend what that meant. No one could, who had not sailed the inner sea, the Eye of the World.

Inch grumbled a great deal and swung his ax about and looked every inch of his seven feet a disgruntled man, but in the end I persuaded him. I had to. The Delphondi for all their loyalty were useless — as I then thought — and only the Blue Mountain Boys and all the other bandits, reavers, and moss troopers of the Blue Mountains could offer help.

I placed the point of my rapier against Hikdar Arkhebi’s throat. It was a cheap gesture, theatrical, but I had summed up the man.

“You will fly directly to High Zorcady, Hikdar Arkhebi. Maybe, if you succeed, you will take the first step on the ladder leading to Jiktar. If you fail, you won’t be a Deldar — you’ll be a corpse, swinging rotting in a gibbet!”

“Yes, my lord Strom!” he gasped out, his lips ashen.

“And Inch, here, who is to be addressed as Tyr Inch, has my permission — no! by the Black Chunkrah! my orders — to degut you the instant you try to betray me. Is that clear?”

He gobbled it out. “Yes, my lord Strom!”

They landed me short of my target, which appeared to be a crater filled with bones, and Arkhebi took the airboat in a wide circle around The Dragon’s Bones, and so on over the horizon to the west.

I stepped out smartly, for I was anxious to get where I was going. I wanted to speak with Trylon Nath Larghos of the Black Mountains. If he died, that would be his misfortune. I was approaching where my Delia was in deadly danger, and nothing could be allowed to stand in the way of her safety.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

With Trylon Larghos at The Dragon’s Bones

“So you did receive the message I left at *The Rose of Valka*,” said Nath Larghos. “But why are you afoot? What took you so long?”

He eyed me strangely. I had myself under control. The Emperor, Delia, and their men were shut up in the mass of ruins at the center of the crater. Various roads led in and out scraped in the rock and dust, with the enormous bones dragged aside. They were risslaca bones, mainly, although there were some from mammals of a later time, all fossilized, a veritable treasure for paleontologists. I forced myself to act normally. Just for the moment, Delia’s danger lay in abeyance.

“That Opaz-rotten storm,” I grunted. “The airboat failed. One day, by Vox, we must teach those crampfs of Havilfar a lesson.”

“Agreed, Strom Drak.” He led me off to a cluster of tents. “Come, sit and drink wine and refresh yourself. You need a shave, if you will pardon the liberty of my mentioning it.”

“Mayhap,” I said, “I will grow a beard, Trylon.”

The Circadian rhythms of my Earth ancestry adapted well to the longer day-and-night cycle of Kregen, and I had quickly adjusted — and, if the truth be told — with some relish, to the idea that a day demanded not four square meals but at the least six and preferably seven or eight.

We sat and drank wine — a fine vintage of Procul, rich and fortifying — and I knew that before I did what I screamed and hungered to do and rushed into the ruins to clasp Delia in my arms, I must find out everything I could of these third party members and their plans.

They had infiltrated all the other parties, the racters in particular, and built up a powerful and secret force. The headless zorcamen were their messengers, able to travel through the country where eyes would have followed the movements of any man wearing whatever colors. They had built up a network, and I heard news that struck me with a powerful horror. Trylon Larghos — of the Black Mountains! — had set his own followers in motion against the men of the Blue Mountains.

“Those bandits who forever raid us would have tried to protect the Princess, their liege lord; as it is, they are out of the reckoning.”

I sat there, drinking stupid wine, and I trembled. And I had sent Inch there — I had sent him to his death!

Larghos went on to tell me how he had so arranged matters that one Kovnate, or any other great estate, had been set to put out of the issue the one most convenient. Neighbor had been set against neighbor. He rolled out the names with a kind of lip-licking glee. “Delphond, of course, means nothing in these affairs.”

“No,” I said, trying to speak normally. “They are a peaceful, luxury-loving lot down there.”

“So, Strom Drak. I am glad you have brought Valka in on the right side. I had bargained for that; I think I would not have enjoyed settling the Qua’voils against you.”

I stared at him, trying to mask my hatred. He would have loved doing that. The Qua’voils occupy the southeastern lobe of the large island to the west of Valka, and they are halflings, sharing the attributes of — as the best way of so describing them — porcupines with those of men. They were — and here the old bitter jest turned sour in my mind — a thorn in the flesh of Valka.

The large island to the west of Valka is called Canthirda. In the past it has been the scene of many bloody battles as Vallia, the main island, separated from Canthirda by a wide channel, sought to bring a single government over the whole archipelago. Many races had settled there and many species. The Qua’voils were always causing trouble. To the north of them the Emperor had settled in new lands a dependency of Relts, those more gentle cousins of the Rapas. The Valkas got on well with them, and it was to their land that Tom of Vulheim had advised me to go when I had sought to escape from Valka and reach Vallia, only to be halted by the express commands of the Star Lords in lightning and thunder. Now Larghos was speaking of fresh foulness.

“Those stupid bird-brained Relts! Now, Strom Drak, you must send orders to your warriors to join with the Qua’voils and march against the Relts. We will take over all of Canthirda and run it as it is meant to be run.” He chuckled. “A Relt can haul a barge as well as anyone else, I fancy.”

I managed to get out: “They remained loyal to the Emperor, Trylon?”

“More fool them. So did the Pallan Eling. I fancy he wishes he had joined us. The leader has already appointed another man as Pallan of Canals.”

Not knowing what Larghos had put in the letter, save that it must have summoned me to join the revolt, I could not inquire after this leader. I had thought Trylon Larghos that man. He was looking pleased, so I ventured to congratulate him on being appointed the Pallan of Canals.

“You are right Strom Drak. . . The Pallans who will run the Presidio under the leader are all chosen. I feel that you will soon rise to office, should you wish to do so.”

“That day may come, Trylon Larghos.”

The attack on the tumbled mass of ruins was not being prosecuted with much zeal. I heard that a couple of hundred or so Bowmen of Loh, with other mercenaries, were shut up with the Emperor. They had bloodily repulsed the first impulsive attack. Now Larghos was waiting for the arrival of the leader with reinforcements. I talked more, seeming affable — and wanting to drive my dagger into this man’s guts — and I learned.

He commented on the longbow, and I said I found it useful, although I would not care to shoot against a crimson Bowman. I knew that Seg Segutorio, the best bowman that Erthydrin — and therefore Loh — had produced, had shot against me, and although he had won, it had been by a whisker.

I had to learn the plans.

Drinking wine made Larghos boastful. “What are these talked-of Lohvian bowmen? Merely archers. They caught us in the open, unprepared, but the next time — why, the leader is bringing with him five hundred Undurkers. The crimson Bowmen have idled away their time, living in luxury provided by the Emperor, living on money extorted from us! The Undurkers can outshoot the Lohvians, by Vomer the Vile!”

I did not believe that, and I had experience to go on; but, certainly, the compound bows of the Undurkers were powerful and their reputation ferocious. I felt more and more fidgety, sitting here, drinking and talking; but for the moment Delia was safe and I was doing more valuable work here than blindly rushing into the ruins.

I walked about the third party’s camp, after a while, and Larghos gave me a great green and purple favor to wear in my hat. I saw the men they had, the mercenaries, men who would remain loyal while they were paid and their duty unfinished. Tents had been set up. There was no siege equipment of any kind that I could see. The leader might bring some, went the word. The suns would soon decline in the west. I felt I had learned all that was useful. The next big attack would go in through an archway of bones, through the gigantic skeletons of monstrous dinosaurs dead a million years or more. I looked out from the jump-off point and marked the way to go.

I had asked Larghos about Vomanus, his candidate.

“Vomanus! If I see him I shall slay him. He must have guessed he was being used merely as a front. Once the Emperor was out of his palace we had him at our mercy. Vomanus agreed to invite him to Vindelka. He trusted Vomanus, for the sake of Tharu, when he would not have trusted one of us. Vomanus warned the Emperor, but they fled here. That old fool Pallan Eling told us. He was glad to tell us.”

He looked sharply at me. I nodded.

“So,” he went on. “As soon as the Emperor is dead, the leader will take over. His candidate will wed the Princess. Then we can all count the loot.”

I fiddled with the crimson Bowman’s shooting glove I had taken from him. I use a bracer and a shooting glove when they are available; like any Bowman of Loh I can shoot without them if I have to. It is a knack.

All across to the east stretched the badlands of the Ocher Limits. Oh, they were nowise as strange and fearful as the Owlrah Waste over which I had tramped leaving the Hostile Territories. And they did not compare with the Klackadrin, that frightful place of hallucinations and the risslaca riding risslaca, the Phokaym. The Klackadrin is a great rift in the planet’s crust, gaseous, poisonous, fatal. The Ocher Limits were merely badlands. But that meant I wouldn’t walk out without plentiful supplies and much water.

A shout went up and we turned our backs on the twin suns as they obliterated in weird runnelings of jade and crimson, and stared up to see a fleet of fliers swinging in over the Ocher Limits. Bright pinpricks of light against the swathing darkness dropping down, they circled once. Then with a neat precision that, once again, made me give that mental nod of admiration for flier pilots, they settled onto the ocher sands.

Five hundred archers from the islands of Undurkor!

With them were many other mercenaries, men willing to fight for pay. Well, I had been a mercenary in my time, aye, and was to be again, as you will hear. Fristles, Ochs, Rapas, Brokelsh, Womoxes, and men, they crowded from the fliers, laughing and exchanging rough jokes with comrades from bygone campaigns they recognized in the crowd waiting to greet them. Among them the yellow skins and shaven heads of the Chuliks stood out, grim and menacing and altogether malefic.

I went with Trylon Larghos. I stood in the last of the mingled opaz light falling about the animated scene to greet this leader who would kill the Emperor and take his place, who would marry his own candidate to the Princess Majestrix.

With the feeling that it was my duty to count heads and to appraise potential in fighting, I studied the new arrivals.

Of the halfings I knew — and some were there I do not mention, for I had not run across them in such a way as to merit detailed descriptions yet to you in these tapes — I was sure enough that I knew their capabilities.

The Undurkers I knew, for they came from a string of islands situated in that enormous bay pent between the giant peninsula of South Segesthes and the smaller boot-shaped promontory to the west that separates Zenicce from Port Paros. We saw them often in Zenicce, and they had even made the attempt at a few settlements in Segesthes itself. But they seldom ventured onto the Great Plains. I rather fancied my wild clansmen would be a trifle too tough for them there.

Their conversation was loud and confident, brash, I thought. They carried their bows already strung and in fancifully decorated bow-sheathes slung under their left arms on straps, making a saltire shape with their arrow quivers. The bows themselves were very much like those of my clansmen, curved, compound, reflex, fabricated from horn, bone, and wood, with brilliant silver fittings. Lovers of ostentation to an extreme degree, are the Undurkers. Their faces always remind me of the snooty, supercilious, offended faces of borzois. Except for their eyes, which are mounted higher up for the essential binocular vision required, they do look like borzois — and that higher mounting for the eyes adds, if anything, to their expression of continual superiority.

They formed their camp a little apart from the rest of the brawling throng, where already, I guessed, some old scores were being paid off. A mercenary makes enemies as he goes through life. A young Strom with Larghos' party laughed nervously, and fingered his rapier hilt. An older Vad, with a beard far too long for current fashions, boomed a laugh and clapped the young Strom on the back, and bade him bear up and face the future, when the Emperor was dead, and men could plunge their hands to the elbows in rich red gold.

These Undurkers wore coiled artificial headdresses of hair plaited and colored from which rose their squarish helmets. Their clothes, of good Lohvian silks and Segesthan hides, were studded with bits of metal and base gems; their Jiktars would wear real gems. Their feet were hidden in heavy boots, and I knew why; the hands of the Undurkers are hands that would not look amiss hanging on the wrists of a man, but in their paws they betray their canine origin. They are, as the Gons are ashamed of their manes of white hair, ashamed of their hind-paws, and always wear heavy concealing boots. That was their business. I wanted a glimpse of the leader — and then nothing would stop me from heading through the piles of bones to the ruins in the center and all that waited there.

Food, drink, and fuel had been brought in and the camp fires blazed into the night sky, obliterating the last lingering ruby drops scattered across the western horizon as Zim sank in the wake of Genodras. I saw Berran the Vadvar of Rifuji, a lean dyspeptic man with a nervous tic about his left eye, laughing and jesting, and marked him, for his Jiktars were leading his men against Vomansoir to keep them out of play. Over most of Vallia that might have any hand in this business the third party had cast the web of their intrigues so that here, in isolation, the Emperor might be murdered and the new leader proclaimed. This was more than a palace revolution; this work would drench the empire in blood and overturn old dynasties, set men's thoughts and actions into new paths that might last a thousand years.

Around the campfires I took a heaping handful of roast vosk. I was not too proud to eat with these men, for all that I might be slaying them before the Maiden of the Many Smiles had crossed the heavens. I shoved the six quivers of arrows away on the strap holding them together; I kept my eye on them.

"Hai, Strom Drak!" said Larghos, very merry, quaffing his wine, his eyes beads of glitter in the firelight. He swaggered over with a bunch of men of whom I knew some, and whom I knew I would make myself acquainted better later on. "The leader is busy, there is much to do, but he will see you when he can spare the time."

I swallowed vosk and nodded.

The thought came to me then that it might be accounted a great deed — as true Jikai — if when we met I plunged my rapier through the body of this leader.

Even today, I cannot say if I would have done that deed or not.

The leader stood by a great fire, half turned from me, talking to a group of the nobles of the third party

caught up in his schemes. With them stood the Chuktar of the Undurkers. At the leader's side stood a younger man, laughing and full of merriment. This was the third party's candidate for the hand of the Princess Majestrix, through whose marriage the leader would seek to legitimize his claim to the throne. Larghos led me forward.

"Here is Berran, Vadvar of Rifuji," said Larghos. "And here also is Drak, Strom of Valka."

We went forward into the firelight.

The leader turned, a goblet of wine in his hand.

I saw him.

It was Naghan Furtway, Kov of Falinur.

At his side, laughing and jesting, stood his nephew, Jenbar.

I froze, for a stupid moment held in a stasis of self-contempt. These were the two I had rescued from the Mountains of the North at the instance of the Star Lords. I had saved their lives so that they might destroy mine and the girl's I loved.

Jenbar stopped laughing.

"Who?" he said. He peered closer.

"Berran, Vadvar—" began Larghos.

"No. The other."

"Drak, Strom of Valka."

"No, by Vox!" said Jenbar. His laughter returned, bright and evil in the firelight. His uncle looked at me. Kov Furtway stared at me — and I knew his thoughts, as those of his nephew's, went back with mine to those icy slopes and snowy mountains. They had known and had planned all this, then, and how they must have mocked their secret knowledge of me, then!

Furtway said, "We were surprised and disappointed when you disappeared from Therminsax. We would have taken you to Vondium, as you wished."

"Aye, by Vox!" said Jenbar, chuckling. "And the Emperor would have been mightily pleased to receive you."

"As, indeed, he did receive you." Furtway's smile altered in character. "Although how in the name of the Invisible Twins you escaped him I do not know."

"What?" said Trylon Larghos. "What are you saying, Kov?"

"Why, Nath Largos, do you not know who this man is, the man you call Drak, Strom of Valka?"

Larghos saw the evil undercurrents running here, and he stammered, and was silent. His fear of this leader, who was Kov Furtway of Falinur, was very great.

I poised. *Flight!* I, Dray Prescot, the Lord of Strombar, Krozair of Zy, must run from my foemen! Well, I had done that before, not often, and would do so again; now I must live to reach my Delia, stand by her side, and defy the might of Vallia arrayed against us.

“Chuktar Uncar,” said Furtway. “Feather me this fool with arrows! Pull him down as the trags pull down a leem!”

The Undurker unshipped his bow. Larghos was babbling. Jenbar was laughing.

“That man, you fools,” shouted Furtway, “is Dray Prescot! That wild clansman, the Lord of Strombor! Slay him!”

I swung about and ran from the firelight and into the avenue of dinosaur bones. And as I ran the whispering rain of arrows whistled about me and clanged from those millennia-old bones in a sleeting shower of death.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“ . . . fit to be called Prince Majister of Vallia.”

The very tangle and interlacing tapestry of bones over and under which I leaped and dived saved me. One arrow only nicked me, a slicing shear through the leather over my left shoulder; a scratch, nothing. I dodged and ducked as best I could. These ancient bones, fossilized over the millennia and then cast adrift once again on the desiccated surface of the secret crater where these great beasts had trekked to die, surrounded me and in a weird and ghoulish way afforded me protection.

The arrows sleeted about the iron-hard bones. I heard their chiming, like the bells of the damned, and I ran and leaped. One chance alone was left me now. A roaring bellow of rage pursued me. Kov Furtway had let loose his mercenaries, and the Undurkers, their proud supercilious noses high, were after me.

I remember as I ran, hurdling risslaca vertebrae and all the scattered skeletons of giants of the past, that I had a most uncharitable thought about these halflings from Undurkor. Their long noses meant they could not turn their heads when loosing, otherwise the strings would have given them bloody stripes down those snouts. They used a short compound bow, and they must draw it as far as they might, to the chest, the lip, the nose. It is from the long throw of the great longbow that all its awful power is obtained, that long energy-storing thrust that gives range and penetration, when the shorter flatter staccato of the small bow slaps out jerkily.

Mind you — if an Undurker arrow skewered me now it would be just as painful as a cloth-yard shaft.

The moons of Kregen floated past above and the shadows shifted strangely among that fossilized forest of bones. The hard clatter of booted feet pursued me. I ran. I dodged. There was no time for that old Krozair trick I so joyed in employing, of turning about and swatting the arrows away with my sword, something after the style of a flick-flick gobbling up flies on the wing.

“I’ll marmelize you!” a voice screeched at my back.

I ignored that kind of drivel.

I kept my bowstave horizontal so as not to foul the arching rib cages. Had my bow been strung — for

like any frugal Bowman I kept the stave unstrung when possible — I'd have risked a turn and a shot. But I kept on. Inky shadows barring the path succeeded by patches of pink moonlight passed, and I raced on. The avenue twisted and turned where bones too large and heavy to lift from the way imposed a turning. These serpentine windings saved me. I roared out into a cleared area. In a great circle the bones enclosed this area like a fence of fossils. In the center rose the tumbled pile of ruins. I made out three corners of a tower, shafting up like a rotten tooth. Masses of rock lay strewn haphazardly. A few lights glimmered. I had to cross this open space somehow.

Head down I started off at a tremendous pace, my Earthly muscles gaining full effect from Kregen's gravity, knowing I had at best but a few murs before the first of my pursuers appeared at the mouth of the tunnel-like avenue through the bones.

As I went I shouted. I used up breath to bellow a warning of my approach.

"Friend!" I roared. "I'm Strom Drak! Let me in!"

A long arrow skeeted past my head. I let out a blistering Makki-Grodno oath and lifted my voice, as on this Earth I had hailed the foretop in a gale, and told them what I thought of a Vox-spawned Opaz-forgotten cramp of a Bowman who tried to spit a comrade.

With all the hullabaloo I very nearly miscalculated and left my first dodging weaving too late. I slanted my run and then zigzagged back, and six arrows clumped against the rock, to carom ahead. Three of them snapped across, whereat I took note and would have smiled, were I given to that kind of facial contortion in interesting moments like this.

"Undurkers!" I screeched. "Feather a few rasts for me!"

I was almost there, now, in the shadow cast by one moon. Over my head rustled the near-silent covey of long arrows. I dodged again and then dived into the sprawled mass of ruins with the shrieks of skewered halflings in my ears.

I rolled over and jumped up. "By Vox! That sounds better for a fighting-man to hear!"

Seg said, "You took a chance, dom. I only just managed to knock Hakli's bow up in time."

"I knew you must have done so, Seg. Since when does a Bowman of Loh miss a running target coming straight for him!"

The dark crimson shape at Seg's side chuckled. "Aye, Seg Segutorio. This Drak of whom you spoke is indeed a man."

In the moonshot darkness a line of bowmen sank down into their places in the shelter of rocks and tumbled slabs of masonry. Hakli, his fire-red hair a weird color under the moons, chuckled again, and took up his station. "The cramps have crept back among the bones, where they belong."

"They'll be out again, Hakli," I said. "They have archers of Undurkor with them now."

"Children with toddlers' bows, by Hlo-Hli! Flint fodder!"

I turned to Seg. "The Princess Majestrix, Seg. Where is she?"

Seg looked at me. I saw the lines on his face in the streaming pink moonshine.

“Delia? She is not with us.”

Once again that frightful sensation of the solid ground beneath my feet turning and plummeting sickeningly seized me. I gripped Seg’s arm. We moved away, into the shadows.

“What do you mean, she is not with you? She left in an airboat when these kleeshes attacked Delta Dwa. She must be here!”

“No, Dray. She did not come with us. I was aboard the flier in which the Emperor fled. She did not land here.”

There had been confusion when the Emperor, warned by Vomanus, had fled for safety to these ruins in The Dragon’s Bones. Vomanus liked to come here to study the old remains; it was a hobby. There had been worse confusion when the courtiers, retainers, and guards had landed here, a chaos made worse by the great storm that had swept up the airboats like idle leaves upon a river and swept them into shattered destruction against the massive array of bones. Seg could have been mistaken.

“We’re short on food and water, Dray. There have been a few attacks, not many, and we held them off without trouble. But the men may not fight if they are not fed.”

“They have Undurkers with them out there now, Seg. If the crimson Bowmen of Loh do not fight, the Emperor is a dead man.” I looked into the ruins. “I will seek him out now. Delia *must* be here. If she is not — he may know where she is.”

Seg, looking at my face in the shadows, coughed, and said: “Remember, my old sea-leem. He is the Emperor. He is surrounded still by his men.”

“I know, Seg. But I have come here to find Delia—” I told him, then, that I had sent Inch to what might be his death.

Seg said, “From what you tell me of Inch, Dray, he will fight his way out of anything.”

I warmed at that. Seg’s tour of sentry duty being finished he accompanied me as I went to find the Emperor. On all sides among the ruins the mercenaries were camped, and they appeared to be a sullen, dispirited lot. I could imagine the frightful problems they were revolving in their minds. A mercenary fights for pay and will remain loyal, but if you do not pay him, if you do not feed him and give him wine . . .

“Welcome, Strom Drak!” The Emperor held out his hand and we gripped in the Vallian way. He looked exhausted, with the betraying dark smudges beneath his eyes, his cheeks sunken. But there remained about him the same indomitable iron determination that kept his place as Emperor; this man would never give in until they shoveled earth down onto him. Perhaps that was where we differed, for I would not give in until I had clawed my way up and thrown down those hurling the dirt on me. “You are right welcome, Strom Drak. It is good to find loyal men still in Vallia.”

The silly old fool! He thought I had fought my way here to rescue him, or to help him in his defense! Idiot! Onker! Calsany!

“Where is the Princess Majestrix, Majister?”

“I do not know.” He made a flat, dismissive gesture. “At least, she is not trapped here with us. But, soon, my loyal subjects will arrive, as you have, Strom Drak, and will destroy utterly those treacherous rasts led by the Trylon Larghos, may Vox tear his guts out with white-hot pincers.”

“But, Majister,” I said. “The Princess Delia — she must—” I swallowed. I shook and couldn’t stop myself. The Emperor looked coldly at me, for no stranger, no man not of the family, unless given permission, may call the Princess Majestrix anything other than that. Her name, like her person, is sacred. “She was in an airboat — the storm — those mad leem out there . . .”

Pallan Rodway, the minister in charge of the Treasury, took my arm and tried to wheel me away from the Emperor. I would not be maneuvered. I glared at them, at this Emperor and the few loyal nobles and Pallans remaining to him as we stood in that shattered tower surrounded by ruins.

“Where is she!” I yelled it; it was a demand. “The Princess Majestrix!”

The Emperor returned my glare with all the apoplectic fury of complete authority. I saw that malignant glitter in his eyes and I know my eyes returned the same ugly, evil, hateful, utterly damn-you-to-hell look. What might have happened then I do not know — and didn’t care, by Zim-Zair, then! — but the moment was broken by two almost simultaneous events.

A voice spoke, a voice I knew: “Well met, Drak! Come and drink wine with me, for there is much to tell.”

I said, “Your words to me, Vomanus, were: ‘I will do as you ask.’ Do you remember?”

He came forward into the torchlight. “I remember.” He looked just the same, handsome, careless, above the petty run of party politics, and yet. . .

And then a Chulik mercenary let out a tremendous bellow.

“The cramphs! They attack! The Undurkers! They come!”

I unslung the great Lohvian longbow and with the smooth practiced forward jerk, strung it. I looked at Seg and at Vomanus. Here one was a mere private Koter in the Emperor’s bodyguard, the other a lord of a province; to me they were comrades both. We went to the perimeter of the ruins and we vied one bowman with another, in our picking off of the supercilious Undurkers as they strove to outshoot us. Nothing on Kregen, as I understood it then, outshoots the Lohvian longbow. The warriors of Kov Furtway, attacking, were feathered into heaps and piles as they sought to rush from the ruins under the cover of their own arrow shower. Oh, we took casualties. But we held that attack and hurled it back; at only one point did it come to handblows, and then our Chuliks with their chilling ferocity smashed the first wave, and the second recoiled and ran.

The metal-adorned backs of the mercenaries vanished into the fossilized forest of bones. Our wounded were cared for. The fourth moon, She of the Veils, cast down her pinkish light and picked out in a roseate glow the glimmer of weapons, the gleam from an eye-socket, the black sheen of blood, and the harsh rock and dust, the ring of bones, the ruins, the desolation.

Vomanus cornered me where a dead Rapa still clutched his sword, his bird-beak embedded in the dust, the Undurker arrow protruding through his neck.

“Dray! I never thought to see you alive again!”

We talked. Much of our conversation dealt with what I have already related to you. I found my surmise was true. He had allowed himself to become the candidate so as to discover the secret intentions of the Emperor's enemies. His warning had been almost too late. "And now we are done for, anyway, I think, Dray. We have had bonny times, but they are over."

From the corner of my eye I was aware of the dark crimson shape, hovering. I said, "Vomanus, tell me true — you have no desires to marry Delia? You continue to support me?"

"Of course! Need you ask? I have spoken with Delia, and no woman loved a man as she loves you." He chuckled, an incongruous sound in those surroundings. "Although why so ugly a looking devil as you should manage it when all the chivalry of Vallia have been spurned — Vox take it! But you are the man, Dray Prescott!"

I heard Seg gasp.

"Come here, Seg!"

These two, Vomanus of Vindelka and Seg Segutorio, stared at each other, and I recognized the amusement in me at their instinctive sizing up, their flash of temperament. I told them both a little of the fuller story, and finished: "So we three are dedicated to the service of Delia of Delphond. Very good. Very fine. But where, by the Black Chunkrah, is she?"

All that was certain was — she was not trapped with her father in the tumbled ruins at the center of The Dragon's Bones.

Naturally, I immediately took stock of the situation with the single obsessive desire to get out. I could make a run for it, and once inside the tangle of bones, no man or beast-man would catch me. Covering that open space would be the tricky part, for I would be shot at by Undurkers in front and by Lohvian Bowmen from the rear. Of the two I gave the Lohvians the best bet on feathering me.

"Sink me!" I burst out, and the other two looked at me strangely. I knew I must appear a black-hearted devil to them, a harsh, intolerant — and intolerable — man who demanded instant obedience. But other thoughts occurred to me. This man we defended was Delia's father. That he was the Emperor meant nothing in my book. But if I left now, and Furtway succeeded in murdering Delia's father in cold blood — what would she think? What would she think of *me*? I would be the man who had run away and left her father to die a miserable death.

Hell's bells and buckets of blood!

I was in a cleft stick and it was damned uncomfortable.

Furtway flung his men in again, and this time they surged up to our parapet of stones. We had a few brisk moments when the swords rang and slithered, and men screeched with steel skewering their bellies. Then the third party mercenaries broke and we spitted them all the way back to the bone ramparts.

Seg said, "I'm down to a dozen shafts."

"Here, take these quivers." I handed them out, sharing among the crimson Bowmen. They had lost all their Jiktars, their Chuktar was Opaz knew where, only three Deldars remained, and one badly wounded and dying Hikdar. Of the intermediate ranks, as you know, a man is called simply by the last and

identifying portion of his full rank. Various organizations place varying numbers of degrees in each rank. The highest ranking of the three Deldars was a So-Deldar — that is, the third degree of Deldar — and he had seven more to go before he became a Hikdar. They were good men. But, as is my custom, I had been active in the fighting, shouting intemperate and callous orders in my brutal and domineering way, and they had listened to me, instinctively understanding that, for all my sins and ugly face, I was a leader, and they obeyed.

The Emperor came up and said abruptly, “Strom Drak. I have noticed how you fight, and I am pleased. Of the other matter we will talk by and by—”

I interrupted him. If you cannot imagine the full depth of my agony for Delia, the feelings of screaming madness possessing me, I can understand that. It has been given only to few men to grasp what I suffered then, and I would not wish that pain on anyone. So it was I interrupted the Emperor, and walked away, saying over my shoulder: “I will fight for you, Majister — aye, and slay those rasts for you! — but afterward we will talk, you and I.”

Pallan Rodway, a Vadvar, the High Kov of Erstveheim, two Stroms, and all the other nobles gasped their outrage. I was aware of Vomanus talking hurriedly with the Emperor; but another attack came in then and we were busily occupied in hurling the mercenaries back. But our numbers were thinning. I heard a Rapa grumbling that he had a throat drier than the Ocher Limits themselves. I gripped him by his clumsy throat, glared madly into his birdlike eyes, and I screamed at him that he’d be a dead Rapa before he drank again if he didn’t get back into the fight.

The Emperor watched all this. I was sane enough to realize that he was cunning enough to use men when it suited him; he had seen me fighting and wouldn’t arrest me — or make the attempt, Zair rot him! — while I was useful to him. That’s how he had remained Emperor so long. I caught a whiff of perfume, a sweet, gagging stench, completely out of place in those surroundings. Across the clearing raced foemen to attack us. I looked quickly down and there, wedged into a crevice between rocks, crouched a man. He was sumptuously dressed, with a great deal of lace, silk, and golden ornaments. He wore a rapier. He smelled like a barber’s shop. I caught him by the collar and hauled him out.

“Get up and fight, you cramph!”

“No! No — I am no fighting-man!”

Once a Kregan reaches maturity he appears to age very little until the last years of his life, perhaps a few white hairs when he is a hundred and fifty or so; but I fancied this man was considerably older than my comrades. I kicked him.

“You fight, dom! You fight for your Emperor!”

An Undurker arrow whistled between us and clanged against the rock. He screeched. His face was covered in sweat. It sheened under She of the Veils like pink icing.

“Fight, cramph!”

He staggered up then, his face contorted into a look compounded of fear and hatred, pride and anger. For a second I thought he would take his place in the line of men and halflings now furiously battling with the waves of attackers as they sought to smash past the pitiful barrier of rocks. Then he crumpled and twisted away. In the wash of light I saw the colors, made meaningless by the pink moons’ light, but the emblem was unmistakable. It was a great butterfly so I knew those colors were gold and black.

“I do not want to die!” he moaned now, all the hatred and anger gone, and the pride slipping until only fear was left.

“We’ve all got to die some time, you calsanys! Better in a great fight than rotten with disease in a bed! Draw your sword! Fight!”

Some of the last vestiges of habitual unthinking pride clung to him and he looked up at me, a white face, delicate, weak, foolish. “Do you not know who I am, kleesh! I am Vektor, Kov of Aduimbrev! I do not take orders from a mere Strom.”

I looked at him, and the Emperor moved his hand. Pallan Rodway and the High Kov of Erstveheim, two old men and therefore not required in the fighting line, lifted Vektor by the armpits and took him away. I glared sullenly at the Emperor.

“That is Vektor of Aduimbrev! That is the thing you wish to marry your daughter!”

And then I laughed. I roared out a great coarse insulting gutter-bred laugh.

“You thought to rule him when he was married, keep him from getting in your hair! I despise you, Emperor Majister! You sought to soil your daughter by marrying her to a thing like that to serve your own dark and evil ways.” And then, because a wash of Chuliks poured in over the wall, such as it was, I pushed him aside. “Get yourself under cover or you will be killed.”

An Undurker arrow arched in over the ruins and dropped full for the Emperor’s chest. My rapier nicked out, cleanly as we Krozairs of Zy know how, and chopped the arrow away.

“Go on, you old fool Majister!” I roared. “I’ve a battle to fight and you’re getting under my feet!”

The Emperor stared at me with eyes in which an agony had been born. Vomanus ran up. His sword dripped blood.

“They’re through on the other side!”

“Thank the Emperor for that and the onker Vektor. They detained me when I should have been fighting. Get everyone back to the central tower, Vomanus. *Move!*”

He ran off and then the smash of Chuliks reached me and I had to skip and jump, slash and thrust, very busily for a space. I left the Chuliks stretched upon the dusty rocks and ran back. I could see the heads of the Bowmen of Loh in the ruined tower, but they were not loosing their deadly shafts.

We had expended all our arrows.

The smaller arrows of the Undurkers were not of great use, but some of the Bowmen, who boasted they could loose a leg of ponsho and hit the chunkrah’s eye, let fly and brought down their men. Inside the tower I paused to take stock.

We had lost a lot of men. We were down to twenty-four Bowmen, and sixteen halfling mercenaries. Out there, Furtway, although he had lost large numbers, must still have three or four hundred to hurl against us. And without arrows we were in parlous state.

“Rocks!” I roared. “We will throw rocks down on them and break their skulls!”

“Aye!” shouted Seg Segutorio. “They haven’t a chance!”

The men reacted to that. Now they had faced the reality of the situation they knew they must fight on. One reality was, of course, that they had seen me thrust a Fristle through the body when he had attempted to run out toward our foemen, his hands empty and high over his head. That had not been murder. That had been execution of a traitor. I hated it, but it was done in the heat of battle, when the blood sang, when that dreadful and despised red curtain of which I have spoken drops before the eyes, and a man who is a man must struggle to reach past it. The other reality was less starkly brutal; much more of the mores of Kregen. They would earn their pay, these hireling soldiers. They had no complaints now about food and drink, for they sensed they might not live long enough to want.

The Emperor approached me again. “Strom Drak, I would like to speak with you—”

“Not now, Majister. I’m busy. If you’ve a problem, see Vomanus, or Seg Segutorio.”

I spun away and roared vilely at two Chuliks who, in their eagerness to procure rocks for skull-crushing, were prizing loose a stone that would have brought down the upper corner ruins. As we sorted out that, I looked over the jagged masonry wall and saw quite clearly the quick energetic figures of Furtway’s men advancing. So Zim and Genodras had risen. So it was daylight.

“All the better for us to see them!” I roared. “They’ll be sorry they messed with us!”

We met the enemy as they advanced with a shower of rocks. Men fell, to join the piles of other bodies feathered with the long Lohvian arrows. But they pressed on. I looked for Furtway, Jenbar, and Larghos.

Some new dynamic had been injected into the attack. They came on with a firm tread, ignoring their casualties, and so burst into the foot of the tower. I had ordered everyone aloft on the single rickety platform remaining. From this we hurled down rocks. Arrows sought us. Every now and then a Bowman or a halfling would clutch himself, looking stupidly at the arrow in him, and then pitch forward to crash to the stones beneath. Around then I realized — and despaired as far as ever I allow myself to despair — that the men with me believed all was lost. They did not think we would live through this.

The Emperor with his nobles had been perched right at the top in the highest of the three angled corners remaining. I prowled the canted platform below, urging my men to conserve their rocks and to hurl only when a foeman attempted too boldly to climb. I had brought us into an impasse. This was not my way of fighting. I couldn’t get at those rasts down there.

There were few enough of us left now for a breakout to be a possibility. It was our only chance to save the Emperor and his men. I had to make that attempt to save him now. For my Delia’s sake.

I went up and told him.

He looked at me, and a look on his face I could not fathom made me return it with as ugly a glare as any I have bestowed on an unfortunate in my life.

“We stand a good chance now, Majister, and we will leave no one behind except the wounded who cannot run. And,” I added bitterly, “they are mostly below, poor devils, well on their way to the Ice Floes of Sicce.”

The Emperor said, "You are a wild and strange man, Drak. I thought this even when I heard of your exploits on Valka, when I signed your patent of nobility." He pulled and pushed a ring on his middle left finger. "Well, Strom Drak. If you save me alive from here, I will do more than make you a Strom, or a Vad, or a Kov. You will be fit to be called Prince Majister of Vallia."

"You'll have to tie up your garments," I said. "And take a good grip on my tunic, and belt. If you let go I can't save you. I shall need both hands for climbing."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes. No time now. Titles mean nothing to me. Your life, Majister, means only something you wouldn't understand."

Vomanus came over and reported a stir below. I looked down.

Trylon Larghos was there, full of life and good cheer, beaming up, confident of victory.

"Let me speak to the Emperor!"

I hurled a rock at him and, stupidly, missed, for he jumped aside. The rock splintered and a chip struck him in the eye, and screeching and spouting blood over his hands as he clasped his face, he collapsed. I went up again.

"Now is the time, Majister." He was ready. Vomanus and Seg assisted the other old men. We went to the back of the tower and squeezed through the lower windows. Opposite us the forest of petrified bones glittered in the mingled opaz light. We began that climb down the walls. The Emperor hung on my back a dead weight. I watched a Fristle let go and scream his way to the ground, landing in a red puddle, and I cursed the fool for betraying what we were doing.

We slid, slipped, and scraped our way down. In the song that has been made of the fight at The Dragon's Bones, the tempo becomes mocking here, talking of the loss of skin, the sweat in our eyes, the ripped fingernails, and the blood-streaks down the ruined walls. But that is the Kregan way. They often mock where their emotions run deep.

We reached the floor of the clearing and at once we started for the bones opposite.

I thought we would make it.

"Go on, Majister! I will take the rear — just in case."

They ran on, a clump of old men, halflings, and Bowmen. I found Seg at my side, and Vomanus at the other. All our weapons were caked with blood. I spoke viciously.

"Go on, you two! Stick with the Emperor."

Vomanus said, "You have been giving us orders very freely, Dray. Now, I think, we will disobey you."

Seg said, "You go with the Emperor, Dray, if you like."

Comrades.

We would do it. We were almost there.

A great swirling flood of mercenaries burst around the shattered corner of the tower and raced across the dust toward us. Many races and species were there, all thirsting for our blood. I could hear their shrill shrieks of triumph.

“Run, Majister!” I roared. “Run, by Vox, run for the sake of your daughter.”

He half turned to look back, and I waved my rapier at him and yelled: “I didn’t come here to rescue you! But you’re rescued now! Get in among the bones and you’re safe! *Run!*”

Then we three, Seg, Vomanus, and I, turned to face the death running so swiftly upon us.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Delia

A great song has been made of the fight at The Dragon’s Bones, but I will not give you its title. It runs to a mere seventy-eight stanzas, but every one is turned and polished like a gemstone, and when I hear it the blood thumps and thrills through my veins. Perhaps, at least to me, there is no finer passage than that which follows. But I, speaking in English, can only tell you in my plain sailorman’s prose what happened. You must dream of the wonder-images, the defeat and triumph, the despair and hope, the smell of blood and sweat, the slick taste of dust, the feel of a rapier hilt hard in the fingers, the main-gauche gripped in the left fist; hear the devilish shrieks and yells of the wounded and maimed, the screams of the dying. You must blend all this into a mighty uproar in the brain.

We fought.

Vomanus was a fine rapier man, as I knew. Seg Segutorio was the finest archer in two worlds. Yet we would not have lasted more than a few murs, but for the wonder.

How to tell you of that moment?

We heard yells, surprised shouts, and the press upon us slackened. We could gulp for air, wipe the sweat from our foreheads, and look about. We were all wounded, but we lived. We looked about, we looked up — oh, the wonder, the wonder of it!

The sky filled with airboats.

They slanted down from the east, so that I guessed Inch must have swung his fleet from the Blue Mountains around. And in that I was wrong. Gloriously wrong!

The fliers landed in the clearing and men poured out.

Such men!

I didn’t believe it then. I just stood there, my mouth open, my rapier and dagger hanging limply, and any onker of a rast could have run me through as I gaped.

The very first man to hit the dusty rock of the clearing wore russet leathers, tasseled and fringed, with cunning pieces of armor strapped where they would protect the most. He wore a helmet, but I knew his

hair was fair and bleached by the Suns of Antares. He swung an ax, double-bitted and daggered with six niches of flat-bladed steel. Belted at his side swung a great broadsword and a deadly shortsword. Over his back he carried, ready strung, a short reflex compound bow.

Hap Loder!

Running swiftly with him was a ferocious being all dun-colored hide and bristly bullet-head, massive shoulders, and short sinewy legs, clad in as brilliant a scarlet breech-clout as you will find on Kregen. He wore parts of armor, too, and carried a rapier and main-gauche. I smiled, guessing he had been taking lessons.

Gloag!

With these two ran a young man clad all in powder blue, with an elegant and handsome appearance, his bronzed face keen and his black eyes alert. He wore cropped hair beneath his steel cap. He handled his rapier and main-gauche with superb authority, a true bravo-fighter of Zenicce.

Varden! Prince Varden Wanek of the House of Eward!

Following on rushed a great crowd of men clad in the russet leathers of my clansmen, the brave scarlet of Strombor, the powder blue of Eward — and there were even a few bravos wearing the silver and black of the Reinmans, and the crimson and gold of the Wickens.

I saw those old familiar faces — Loku, Rov Kovno, Ark Atvar, fierce merciless clansmen sworn in obi brotherhood to me. And — and by Diproo the Nimble-fingered! There ran Nath the Thief, dressed up in clansmen's russets and the scarlet of Strombor, with an empty lesten-hide bag flapping at his side ready to be filled with the loot his nimble fingers could close on!

How I stared!

My men — my ferocious Clansmen of Felschraung with their horrendous axes and broadswords, and my bravo-fighters of Strombor! I had not seen them for long and long; but they had not forgotten me, for as they smashed like a solid wall of iron and steel into the panic-stricken mob of Furtway's mercenaries, they were yelling and roaring it out: "Hai! Jikai! Dray Prescott! Jikai!"

My clansmen roared in a deep rolling thunder of noise: "Hai! Zorcander! Hai! Vovedeer!" With the last they exaggerated, as they always did.

My men of Strombor roared in a high fierce screeching: "Hai! Strombor! Strombor!"

Furtway's men had little chance — hell! — they had no chance at all!

My clansmen, the most ferocious and brave warriors in all Kregen, simply smashed over the rapiers and daggers like a single wave blots out a fragile bridge. A few Undurkers let fly with their arrows, and from the rear ranks of the clansmen rose a sheeting storm from the cruel reflex bone and horn bows, and the Undurkers fled. They had recognized clansmen, and however impossible it was for clansmen to be here in the heart of Vallia — they were here, in iron and steel and blood!

The axes rose and fell. The great broadswords scythed. The shortswords stabbed, in and out, very deadly.

Then Vomanus, who had been staring with the eyes goggling in his head, shouted and pointed.

A second aerial armada settled down in the space cleared of dinosaur bones. The first man out was Inch, waving his huge Saxon-pattern ax, roaring into action to chop at an angle into the crazed mob of Furtway's mercenaries. I did not see the Kov Furtway, or his nephew Jenbar, or the wounded Trylon Larghos, but word was brought to me they had managed to escape. And I was willing they should go, for the score between us lay on a personal basis. Much more important, though, was the fact that the Star Lords wanted Furtway alive for their own schemes. I had been prepared to balk them and see the man slain for what he had tried to do, but I own I felt a certain relief, a cowardly relief, if you will, that the Star Lords would not have reason to toss me back to Earth.

Following Inch and his Saxon ax raced Korf Aighos at the head of the Blue Mountain Boys. I saw the way many swung the great sword of war of the Blue Mountains, even Ob-eye, and the flash and glitter from sharp-honed edges before they stained a more sinister hue.

After that it was all over. Then — I did shout.

“Majister! You may come out of the bones, now. You are safe.”

He crawled out. He tried to arrange his robes, but they were torn and bedraggled. The sacred emblem strung around his neck winked blindingly in a flash of gold as he lifted his head. He did not look frightened, of that he cannot stand accused. But there was about him an air of shrunken pride and tawdry magnificence, the arrogance shredded away to a reality he had never had to face before. He walked slowly toward me followed by his retinue of old men. Among them I could not see Kov Vektor.

And then, for me at least, came the greatest wonder of all.

My men had fashioned a litter of dinosaur bones and over it flung a great scarlet silk, very grand in the suns-light. Golden cushions bestrewed the scarlet silk. They had lifted the litter high, proudly. Reclining there, warm and vibrant and altogether magnificent against the gold and scarlet, holding in her left hand the staff of Old Superb, my old flag with the yellow cross on the red field —*Delia!*

They carried her, those men of mine, they carried her proudly as befitted a princess. And no princess in two worlds ever had so proud or gallant a party so to carry her. My men! They carried my Princess in triumph before me, and over all waved the old flag of mine, Old Superb, as men called that flag, waving in the streaming mingled light from the twin Suns of Scorpio.

I heard Vomanus smother an exclamation. Then he and Seg were running, and in a twinkling they, too, were carrying that precious burden high before the Emperor of Vallia.

That Emperor, that proud man, looked at me most uncertainly.

“They shout a name, I think,” he said. “Do you not hear the name they shout, Strom Drak?”

“Oh, aye, Majister, I hear.” I would not take my eyes off my Delia to stare at him.

His voice reached me, whispering. “I am the Emperor, the Emperor of Vallia, the greatest power in Kregen.” He might believe that; I did not, not when Havilfar provided airboats and those mysterious ships raided up from the southern oceans. “I keep my word,” said Delia's father. “And, in truth, I believed myself already dead, and the promise of no great value.”

Delia was smiling at me. I stared back, entranced.

“What promise was that?”

“I said that if you rescued me I would make you Prince Majister, Strom Drak.”

“Oh, yes, I remember.” I lifted my voice. I shouted to my men as they drew near bearing the dear form of my Princess. “Hai! Jikai!” And I hailed them, High Jikai, every one, by name.

The High Jikai is not lightly given on Kregen.

It came to me then in those tumultuous moments that nothing is purely perfect. There were two more faces I would fain have seen in that throng bearing so high and proudly my Delia, my Delia of Delphond. I would dearly have loved to see Nath and Zolta, my two oar-comrades, from far Sanurkazz. But that could not be, and I doubted not but that the Star Lords by their prior designs had thwarted that accomplishment, which would have been very great and wonderful indeed.

The dinosaur-bone litter lowered. Then I saw how my Delia was dressed as the great yellow and red flag lofted away. She wore the scarlet breechclout of Strombor. And over her shoulders gleamed those magnificent silky white ling furs I had won for her on the Plains of Segesthes. Lithely, her long lissome legs very wonderful to behold, she stepped down from the litter and ran to me.

My Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains! She ran to me and threw herself into my arms and she was laughing, sobbing, and crying my name, over and over.

“Hush, hush, my darling,” I said. “And tell me how you did it.”

It was superbly simple. Her airboat had been driven by that westerly gale and sent wildly toward the east, so that any hopes of her summoning rescue from the Blue Mountains had vanished. So — she had flown on to Strombor! And in their regular visits during the season Hap Loder and my Clansmen of Felschraung and Longuelm had been there, also. They had scoured the whole of Zenicce for airboats, and by gold and thievery — and here Nath the Thief hopped about from leg to leg in his excitement — they had drummed up the great armada, and had flown here as though all the glaciers of the Ice Floes of Sicce were calving around their necks. They hadn’t bothered overmuch with food or drink, so as to cram every last fighting-man in, and now they were about to raid the rebels’ camp. “And, Dray, my puissant Lord of Strombor, I have been paying regular visits to Zenicce season by season. Great-Aunt Shusha and all the others send you their love.”

“Sink me!” I said, laughing. “I have a managng female to contend with!” And I hugged her close.

My men swaggered around us, for they knew the great Jikai they had performed, and as the song whose title I will not tell you says, great was the performance thereof.

Then I stood her off from me and said: “Your father—”

“I will treat him gently, Dray.”

And I had feared and hesitated all this time!

We stood before the Emperor of Vallia in his ragged robes, and at my back bristled the weapons and the colors of my men, victorious in battle. I said softly, “Kiss him, Delia, embrace him.”

She did so. And, watching them, I saw the real affection there. Delia looked back at me from the crook of her father's arm.

"I heard a name, Strom Drak — Strom of Valka — a name . . ." the Emperor said.

"Aye," I said. "You ordered my head chopped off. Do you think that a great jest now, Majister?"

He licked his lips. I believe that many men there expected me to order his head off, on the instant. That would have been the justice Kregen understands. Crude, violent; something I, not only for my own sins but for the purposes of the Savanti, wished to change.

He walked with his daughter toward me. He slid a great ring from his finger. He held it out. His hand did not tremble.

"By this ring you are now legally and heritably Prince of Vallia, Drak—"

And Delia said with her brilliant laugh: "Call him by his name, Father dear. For this is Pur Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy, Lord of Strombor, Zorcander of Felschraung and Longuelm, Strom of Valka — and what else besides I shouldn't wonder. And, my father, know also that he is the man I shall marry, no matter if the whole of Kregen, let alone Vallia, stands in the way!"

She had placed Krozair of Zy in the prime position. I know my Delia understood.

"I am plain Dray Prescott," I said. I took Delia's hand. "And this is the woman who is my wife. We belong to each other."

He braced up. He was, after all, the Emperor.

"Dray Prescott. Dray. You are, as far as I and Vallia are concerned, Prince Majister Dray. And" — he swallowed and his hand closed on the sacred emblem strung on a golden chain about his neck — "and you have my blessing, both of you."

The hullabaloo racketed skyward, enormous, booming, uproarious. "Hai! Jikai!" The swords flashed skyward, glittering, shining, a forest of flashing blades. "Hai, Dray Prescott, Prince Majister of Vallia!"

Yes, they know how to do things with style in Kregen.

The sacred ring, emblem of the Majister, flashed and scintillated on my finger. I detest rings; this would go with the ring of Valka, safely sealed away to perform its duties on the days set apart. I held my Delia and I could not let her go.

Quietly, I spoke to the Emperor. "The third party has set Vallians against Vallians. But now that you are safe we can set about repairing the damage. I think Kov Furtway and Jenbar, no less than Trylon Larghos and the others, will fly for safety overseas. We can put Vallia back to rights."

And, I promised myself, with Delia's help we'd eradicate the obscenity of slavery from the place. That would take time. But we would do it. Had that been the reason for the Star Lords' manipulations of me?

I looked up, but I could see neither the scarlet and golden raptor of the Star Lords, nor the white dove of the Savanti. They would make further appearances, this I knew, during my life on Kregen. The Savanti

might have thrown me out of paradise, and I would now prosecute diligent inquiries to find the scarlet-roped TodalpHEME who might show me the way back to Aphrasöe; they had also thrown me upon the mercy of the Star Lords. For how long would I remain a Prince of Vallia at the side of my Princess?

I held her close. The wedding ceremony would be performed very soon. Korf Aighos whispered to me, and I laughed, and said to Delia: "Certain friends of ours discovered a king's ransom in wedding presents hidden in a gorge in the Blue Mountains. They think it proper they should be given to you, my Princess."

We felt a stroke of sadness that Vektor, Kov of Aduimbrev, had died of heart failure occasioned through fear as he ran for the palisade of bones; but death is cheap on Kregen, and life is for the living. Those wedding presents were fit for a princess, so a princess should receive them.

There was great feasting and great drinking beneath the Suns of Scorpio. Then we all took the airboats and flew for Vondium. I stood very close to Delia. How to believe that, at last, we had won each other? I was hers as much as she was mine. She looked up into my eyes and searched my ugly old face, and she sighed, and snuggled closer to me.

From the airboat floated the flags of Vallia and Prescott; the yellow saltire on the red ground, and the yellow cross on the red ground, and I saw what must be done with those.

"Are you content, Dray, my darling?"

"With you by my side, how could I not be?"

"With all these old comrades, Hap Loder, Gloag, Prince Varden, with Inch and dear Seg and all the others, I believe you think of your two rascals, Nath and Zolta."

Delia had never met those two unlikely specimens, but she understood. "Aye," I said. "And of Zorg, who is dead."

"Do not speak of death, Dray, not now! Now we have everything to live for! All of Vallia!"

"Yes." I hugged her and then said, "You did not mention Vomanus."

"No?" She looked around. "There should be no secrets between us. But this is a high state secret, so mind it! I think you believed Vomanus would marry me, was a rival, as those fool racters thought—"

"Well, woman?"

She chuckled, a silver tinkle of merriment against the swift passage of the flier.

"Vomanus is the son of my mother, before she married my father. He is my half-brother."

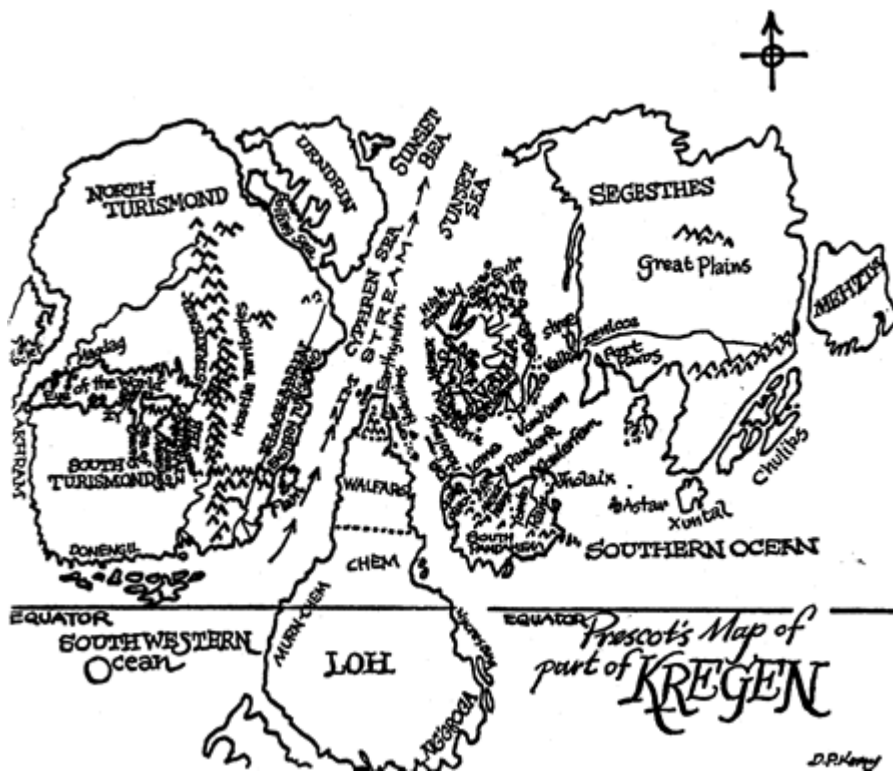
"No wonder," was all I could say. "He said Kofs were Kofs and Kofs to him!"

She laughed again, and so we stood there, together, with my fighting-men at my back, sailing under the twin yellow and red flags, as we sailed beneath the twin Suns of Scorpio casting down their mingled opaz radiance, sailing for Vondium and marriage and happiness.

I, Dray Prescott, of Earth, had found my home.

A Note on Prescott's Map of Part of Kregen

The map of a part of Kregen, that cruel and beautiful planet four hundred light-years away under the Suns of Scorpio, appearing in this volume, number five, of the Saga of Prescott of Antares, presents a new and strange turn of events in the fascinating story of Dray Prescott. The paper appears to be a completely ordinary white bond, the outlines are drawn with a blue felt-nibbed pen, apparently freehand, and names and features are inserted in pencil. There is a red-lined border, and towns and cities are indicated by small red dots.



Various distances and bearings Prescott has mentioned from time to time in his story are now supported by this map, and we are now able to grasp more fully at an understanding of the topography of this savage world and where his adventures have taken him. In the bottom right-hand corner appear the letters *D. P. Krzy* faintly written in pencil in an old-fashioned script.

Dray Prescott is a man above medium height, with straight brown hair and brown eyes that are level and oddly dominating. His shoulders are immensely wide and there is about him an abrasive honesty, and a fearless courage. He moves like a great hunting cat, quiet and deadly. Born in 1775, he presents a picture of himself that, the more we learn of him, grows no less enigmatic.

Through the machinations of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, mortal but superhuman men dedicated to the aid of humanity, and of the Star Lords, he has been taken to Kregen many times. In his early years he rose to become Zorcander among the Clansmen of Segesthes, and Lord of Strombor in Zenicce, and then a member of the mystic and martial Order of Krozairs of Zy. During this period he was guided by the single purpose of making his way to Vallia and there claiming his beloved, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains. Able to afford assistance to Pando, boy Kov of Bormark in Pandahem, Prescott was abruptly flung back to Earth in the moment of triumph. He passes over that stay on Earth with a few brief sentences and welcomes wholeheartedly the summons of the Scorpion once more. His thoughts are clearly fixed on Kregen, that savage and beautiful, marvelous and terrible world of headlong adventure.

He takes up the story when he is once more summoned to plunge at once into new and chilling danger, and that is where *Prince of Scorpio* begins.

This volume, *Prince of Scorpio*, then, brings to a satisfying conclusion the story contained in the first five books of the Saga of Prescott of Antares. The forthcoming volume, tentatively entitled *Manhounds of Antares*, begins a new cycle. I have taken the liberty of calling the first five books “The Delian Cycle,” and with the next volume we are launched on “The Havilfar Cycle.”

I have worked up a glossary which, through the kindness of the Publisher, Donald A. Wollheim, who suggested it, is appended to this volume. This should prove of great value to all those who have — as I have myself — followed with such thrilling fascination the Saga of Prescott of Antares.

Alan Burt Akers

A Glossary of Persons, Places, and Things in the Saga of Prescott of Antares

References to the previous Scorpio books are given as:

TT: Transit to Scorpio

SU: The Suns of Scorpio

WA: Warrior of Scorpio

SS: Swordships of Scorpio

A

Aduimbrev: A province of Vallia, of which Vektor was Kov.

Aighos: A chieftain of the Blue Mountain Boys, nicknamed Korf.

Akhram: A castle and observatory at the eastern end of the Grand Canal in which the Todalpheme of Akhram carry on their work.

Angia, Kotera: Mother of Anko the Chisel.

Anko the Chisel: Cabinet-maker rescued from the bagnio in Vondium.

Aph, River: Great river down which Prescott sailed on his first visit to Kregen (TT).

Aphrasöe: The Swinging City. Built among giant plant-forms in a lake on the River Aph and inhabited by the Savanti (TT).

aragorn: Mercenary reavers and slavers.

Archbold: A leader of any of the Orders of Chivalry dedicated to Zair.

argenter: An oceangoing ship of Pandahem, broad and comfortable.

Arkasson: A city in the Hostile Territories.

Arkhebi, Hikdar: Captain of Katrin Rashumin's airboat.

Armipand: One of the devils in the pantheon of Pandahem.

Askinard: A land famed for its spices.

Atvar, Ark: A Jiktar of the Clan of Felschraung (TT).

B

balass: A wood similar to ebony, from which is made the balass stick, the title of authority of the petty overseers of the workers of Magdag.

Bargom: Young Bargom, son of Old Bargom, a Valkan, proprietor of *The Rose of Valka*, an inn and posting house in Vondium.

barynth: A large monster of great sinuousness and length, a hideous head, and four forward-grasping limbs.

beng: A saint.

benga: A female saint.

Benga Deste: Hot springs and a place of pilgrimage in West Segesthes.

Beng-Kishi: These famous bells are said to ring in the skull of anyone hit on the head. This happens frequently on Kregen.

Berran: The Vadvar of Rifuji, an estate in Vallia.

Black Chunkrah, By the: A clansman's oath.

Black Mountains: A range of lesser heights extending northward from the Blue Mountains.

bloin: A cultivated crop plant with a tall brittle green stem from which the fruits hang like golden bells.

Bloody Menahem, The: Name given by the Tomboramin to their neighbors of Menaham on Pandahem.

Blue Mountain Boys: Ruffians, bandits, mountain men, dedicated to Delia, the Princess Majestrix.

Blue Mountains: A small though lofty amphitheater-shaped mass of mountains in Western Vallia. The foothills and plain forming part of the province are famous for zorcamen and zorca-breeding. Delia's inheritance.

bokkertu: Legal business.

Bold: A Krozair Brother, generally one serving permanently in any of the fortresses of the Orders.

Borg, Ven, nal Ogier: A canalman of Vallia.

Bormark: A Kovnate on the western border of Tomboram.

bosk: A smaller form of vosk, a specialty of Valka.

Bowmen of Loh, The: A notorious song.

box: Small spined animal of the Segesthan plains.

Brokelsh: A squat-bodied people with much black bristle body hair. bur: The Kregan hour, approximately forty Terrestrial minutes.

C

calsany: A beast of burden.

Can-thirda: Large island to the east of Vallia.

Canticles of the Rose City, The: A myth-cycle at least three thousand years old concerning a half-legendary, half-historical man-god named Drak.

Careless Repose: Renders' hideout in the Hoboling Islands.

cham: A juicy rubbery fruit much chewed by workers.

chanks: Sharks of the inner sea.

Chem: The central tropical rain forests of Loh.

chemzite: A precious stone of great value.

Chersonang: A city of the Hostile Territories in opposition to Hiclantung.

Cherwangtung: Area of the Hostile Territories from which nocturnal primitives raid.

Chuktar: Commander of ten thousand. Military ranks have become nonspecific on Kregen now and do not denote the actual number of men commanded. There are many and various subdivisions of the four main ranks.

Chuliks: An extremely fierce and manlike race of people with oily yellow skin, the head shaved so as to leave a long pigtail, two three-inch-long tusks thrusting upward from the corners of the cruel mouth, and round black eyes. The training of the males from birth is designed to produce high-quality mercenary soldiers; they are employed all over Kregen and they generally command higher fees than other races.

chunkrah: A very large cattle animal, deep-chested, horned, fierce, with a russet coat, the mainstay of the clansmen of Segesthes.

clerketer: Leather harness attaching the rider to impiters or corths or other flying birds or animals of Turismond.

Company of Friends: Organizations of nobles and businessmen for trade in Vallia.

corth: Large saddle bird, splendidly marked in a variety of colors.

cramph: Term of abuse.

crested-korf: Large iridescent-blue-feathered bird of the Blue Mountains.

crofermen: Men-beasts — savage, untamed, cruel, and suspicious — inhabiting the outer portions of The Stratemsk.

Cyphren Sea: The sea separating Turismond from Loh.

D

Dam of Days: Colossal dam controlling the tides through the strait connecting the Eye of the World with the outer ocean.

Dancing Talu: A narrow boat owned by Ven Yelker nal Ogier.

Dean, Geoffrey: Recipient of *The Tapes from Africa* from Dan Fraser, passing them on to A.B.A.

Deldar: Commander of ten. The petty officers in charge of the drum, whips, and helm aboard ship commonly hold this rank.

Delia: Princess Majestrix of Vallia, Delia of the Blue Mountains, Delia of Delphond.

Delian Cycle, The: The first five books of the Saga of Prescott of Antares.

Delka Dwa: A one-time fortress town of Vindelka on the border of the Ocher Limits.

Delka Ob: Capital of the Kovnate province of Vindelka in Vallia.

Delphond: A province of Vallia situated on the southern coast, a rich, lazy, carefree, happy land. Dedicated to Delia.

dhem: Silver coin of Pandahem.

Diproo the Nimble-fingered, By: A thieves' oath.

dom: Kregish equivalent of English "mate" or American "pal."

Donengil: Coastal lands and islands of South Turismond.

dopa: A fiendish drink guaranteed to make a man fighting drunk.

Doty: Name of a personage or spirit used in invective by the aragorn and slave-masters of Vallia.

Dragon's Bones, The: A giant crater in the Ocher Limits filled with fossilized risslaca and mammal bones where Prescott was created Prince Majister of Vallia.

Drak: Name used on occasion by Dray Prescott.

Drak's Seat: Mountain peak in the form of a throne to the northeast of Vondium.

drin: Suffix in Kregish denoting "land."

dromviler: Vessel of the inner sea propelled partly by sail and partly by oar, used mainly by the Sorzarts.

dwa: Two.

dwabur: Measurement of length, approximately five miles.

dwbrs: Abbreviation of dwaburs.

E

Eling, Pallan: Minister (Secretary) of State of Vallia responsible for the canals.

Empire of Loh: More properly, the Empire of Walfarg. Empire carved out by Walfarg taking in all of Loh, Pandahem, Eastern Turismond, the Hoboling Islands, and other areas. Now completely fallen, although there are traces left in various countries — roads, religions, culture, fashions.

Encar of the Fields: Elder, appointed by Prescott, responsible for agriculture in Valka.

Erdgar the Shipwright: Elder, appointed by Prescott, responsible for dockyards and shipping in Valka.

Erithor of Valkanium: A bard and song-maker of Valka held in high renown throughout Vallia.

Erthydrin: Land of mountains and valleys in the northernmost tip of Loh, famed for its Bowmen, the finest of Loh. Birthplace of Seg Segutorio.

Erthyr the Bow: The Supreme Being of Erthydrin.

Erstveheim, High Kov of: Councillor of the Presidio of Vallia.

Esser Rarioch: The high fortress overlooking Valkanium.

Esztercari: A noble house of Zenicce. Cydones was Prince of the House of Esztercari during Prescott's sojourn there (TT).

Everoinye: The Star Lords.

Evir: Northernmost province of Vallia.

Eward: A noble house of Zenicce. Wanek was Prince of the House of Eward during Prescott's sojourn there (TT).

Eye of the World: The inner sea of the continent of Turismond.

F

Falinur: A Kovnate province of Vallia.

fallimy: A little blue flower made into a paste to scour cisterns clean. Applied as a poultice to Prescott's chest by Thelda (WA).

Farris, Lord of Vomansoir: A Chuktar in the Vallian Air Service.

Fatal Love of Vela na Valka, The: A music drama known over most of Kregen.

Faygar, Strom of Vorgan: A member of the Racter party, owing allegiance to the Kov of Vomansoir. In his Stromnate Prescott first saw the headless zorcamen.

Felschraung: A clan of nomads roving the Great Plains of Segesthes. Prescott took obi of them and rose to be Zorcander (TT).

Felteraz: A harbor, town, fortress, and estate a few dwaburs east of Sanurkazz. A spot of exceptional beauty. Home of Mayfwy.

Fetching of Drak na Valka, The: Songmade by Erithor of Valkanium commemorating Prescott's fetching freedom to Valka, by fetching the people to resist, and of their fetching of him, as Drak, to be their Strom. Runs to seven hundred and seventy-eight stanzas.

Flahi: An island group off the coast of Eastern Turismond.

Flahians: People of remarkable physical structure living on Flahi.

flick-flick: A plant with orange cone-shaped flowers and six-foot-long tendrils expert at fly-catching; kept in Kregan houses and kitchens for that purpose.

Foke the Ob-handed: A render who perpetrated atrocities in Valka.

Forpacheng: A treacherous councillor of Hiclantung who sold out to Umgar Stro (WA).

Fraser, Dan: In West Africa he afforded Prescott the opportunity to tell his story, resulting in *The Tapes from Africa*.

Fristle: Furred and bewhiskered cat-people, fierce and treacherous, often employed as mercenaries. Their racial weapon is the scimitar.

Furtway, Naghan, Kov of Falinur: A great lord of Vallia, rescued by Prescott from the Mountains of the North on orders from the Star Lords.

Fwymay: Daughter of Zorg and Mayfwy of Felteraz.

G

Gansk: A city of the northern shore of the inner sea.

Gdoinye: A giant scarlet and gold raptor, messenger and spy of the Star Lords.

Genal the Ice: An iceman of the Mountains of the North.

Genodras: The green sun of Antares.

Glittering Caves: Quarries and catacombs in jeweled mountains just outside Arkasson (SS).

Gloag: A Mehzta, slave of the Esztercaris, freed by Prescott to become a good comrade (TT).

Glycas: A prince of Magdag (SU).

Goforeng: A fortress city of the green north coast of the inner sea.

Golda: A great lady of Aphrasöe (TT).

Gons: A race who, ashamed of their white hair, habitually shave their heads bald.

Grace of Grodno: A swifter of Magdag (SU).

graint: A stubborn beast resembling a bear, but with eight legs and crocodile-like jaws extending for over eighteen inches.

Grakki-Grodno: Magdaggian sky-god of draft beasts.

Grand Archbold: Spiritual and temporal head of the Krozairs of Zy.

Grand Canal: Five miles wide, connects the inner sea with the outer oceans.

Great Northern Cut: A main canal of Vallia beginning in Vondium.

Great River: The major river of Vallia, winding from the Mountains of the North to the south coast where stands Vondium. Also known as Mother of Waters, and She of Fecundity.

green sun: Besides Genodras it has many thousands of names; Kokimur, Ry-ufraison, He of the Green Spear, Havil, are four.

gregarians: A Kregan fruit.

grint: A small creature like a six-legged opossum of the Owlrah Waste.

Grodno: The green-sun deity.

Grodno-Gasta: A blasphemously insulting epithet used against the people of Grodno.

grundal: Rock-ape of the inner sea, with six spiderish limbs and a gray pelt; large mouth closing in folds of flesh, opening to a round, and armed with concentric rows of needlelike teeth. Vicious, cowardly, and deadly when hunting in packs.

Gurush of the Bottomless Marsh, By: A canalman's oath.

Gyphimedes: The immortal mistress of the beloved of Grodno.

H

halflings: General term for the beast-men, man-beasts of Kregen.

Hall na Priags: A sacred chamber within one of the colossal megaliths of Magdag (SU).

Happy Swinging: Parting salutation in Aphasöe.

Harfnars: Half-men of Chersonang, with flat noses across their faces wide as their lips, brilliant lemur-like eyes, squared-off chins and foreheads. Hereditary foemen of Hiclantung, they are well-armed and armored after the decadent fashion of Loh.

Havilfar: A continent of Kregen.

Havilfar Cycle, The: The second cycle in the Saga of Prescott of Antares.

Havilfarese: The people of any nation of Havilfar.

Heart Heights: Mountains and massif central in the center of Valka.

hibisum flour: Used in the Blue Mountains for baking ponsho tender.

Hiclantung: A city of the Hostile Territories ruled by Queen Lilah.

High Zorcady: Capital of the province of the Blue Mountains in Vallia.

Hikdar: Commander of a hundred.

Hlabro, Mount: A peak in Erthydrin.

Hlo-Hli: A spirit of Loh, appealed to and sworn by.

Hobolings: A race very squat of body and long of arm and leg, excellent topmen, inhabitants of the Hoboling Islands.

Hoboling Islands: Chain of islands stretching from Erthydrin to Northwest Pandahem off the northeast coast of Loh.

Hostile Territories: Area of central East Turismond between The Stratemsk and the Klackadrin, cut off from the outside world since the collapse of the Empire of Loh.

Hrunchuk: Idol in the temple gardens across the forbidden canal in Zenicce. Has three enormously valuable eyes.

humespack: Cloth used for clothing.

Hunter, Alex: Earthman sent by the Savanti on a mission to Valka.

Hurtado, Don, de Oquendo: Spaniard who taught Prescott rapier fighting.

I

ib: Spirit of the dead.

Ice Floes of Sicce: One of the versions of a Kregen hell.

impiter: Gigantic coal-black flying animal of Turismond, the mainstay of various races' aerial cavalry, as a saddle animal.

Inch: From Ng'grogga. Seven feet tall, extraordinarily thin, with long fair hair. Wields an ax of the Saxon pattern. Obsessed with his taboos. A good comrade to Prescott.

Invisible Twins: see Opaz.

Isteria: Small island a comfortable day's pull from Sanurkazz.

J

Jenbar, Tyr: Nephew to Naghan Furtway, Kov of Falinur.

Jeniu: Old panval shipwrecked in Valka on the way to Penal islands.

Jholaix: Nation in the northeast of Pandahem famed for her wines.

Jikai!: A word of complex meaning; used in different forms means: "Kill!" "Warrior." "A noble feat of arms." "Bravo!" Many other related concepts to do with honor, pride, and warrior-status.

Jikaida: A board game combining chess, checkers, and Halma-like moves on a checkerboard of a rectangular shape: a war-game.

jikaider: To flog crisscross.

Jiktar: Commander of a thousand.

K

kalasbrune: A building material of great value.

king korf: Larger than the crested-korf; found in Erthyrdrin; its feathers are prized for fletching.

Klackadrin: A long narrow fault in the crust of Kregen running from the Boiling Sea in the north to the Lesser Stratemsk in the south of Eastern Turismond. Gives off hallucinogenic gases.

kleesh: Violently unpleasant, repulsive, stinking — an insult.

knuckle: Approximately 4.2 inches.

Kodifex: Leader of the Assembly in Zenicce, elected from among the Princes and the chiefs of the Houses of Zenicce.

Korer, Captain: Captain of a Valkan galleon.

Koter: A Vallian gentleman. Kr. is the abbreviation.

Kotera: A Vallian lady. Kta. is the abbreviated form.

Kothmir: Once a part of the Empire of Loh.

Kov: Title of Kregan nobility, approximating to “Duke.”

Kovneva: Duchess.

Kovnate: An estate or province of a Kov.

Kovno, Rov: A Jiktar of the clan of Longuelm (TT).

Kregen: Planet circling Antares. Kregan is the adjective. Kregish is the language in universal use. There are many local tongues.

Krozair: Member of an Order dedicated to Zair.

Krz. Abbreviation for Krozair.

Krzy. Abbreviation for the Krozairs of Zy.

Kutven: Leader of the Vens of the canalfolk.

L

Lahal: Universal greeting for friend or acquaintance.

Larghos, Nath, Trylon of the Black Mountains: A Vallian nobleman.

Lashenda: Once a part of the Empire of Loh.

laypom: Fruit like a peach of a pale subtle yellow color, exquisite.

leem: A feral beast found in one form or another over most of Kregen. Eight-legged, it is furred, feline, and vicious, with a wedge-shaped head armed with fangs that can strike through oak. It is weasel-shaped but leopard-sized. Its paws can smash a man’s head. There are various forms, as sea-leem, snow-leem, marsh-leem, desert-leem, and mountain-leem, each suitably camouflaged.

leepitix: A reptilian twelve-legged wriggler about a foot long infesting the canals. Has a nasty bite but can be frightened off by splashing.

lenk: A very hard wood similar to oak.

Lesser Stratemsk: Spur of The Stratemsk running due east to the coast of Eastern Turismond opposite Flahi.

lesten: A high-class hide used for belts, moneybags, etc.

Likshu the Treacherous: A Chulik divine spirit appealed to and sworn by.

Lilac Bird: Swifter commanded by Pur Zenkiren (SU).

Lilah: Queen of Hiclantung (WA).

ling: Animal as large as a collie dog, with six legs, and claws it can extend to four inches in length and open a rip in chunkrah bide. Lives among the bushes and rocks of the small prairie of Segesthes. Possesses a magnificent lightweight, long and silky white fur.

Llahal: Universal greeting for stranger.

Loder, Hap: Was Jiktat of the Clan of Felschraung when he gave obi to Prescott. Appointed Zorcander in Prescott's absence but remains intensely loyal and devoted to Prescott. A good comrade (TT).

Loguetter cheese: A first-quality cheese.

Loh: A continent of Kregen.

Loku: A Hikdar of the Clan of Felschraung (TT).

Lome: A nation in the northwest of Pandahem.

longsword, the Krozair: A perfectly balanced two-handed longsword with wide-spaced handgrips, able to be used one-handed, subject of rigorous and demanding training and mystical exercises. A terrible weapon of destruction.

Longuelm: A clan of the Great Plains of Segesthes, allied with the Clan of Felschraung under Prescott as Zorcander.

loomins: Mauve and white flowers.

Lord of Strombor: Dray Prescott.

Lorenztone: A Vallian Air Service flier.

lupu: A trance state induced by the Wizards of Loh.

lurfings: Low-bellied, lean-flanked, gray-furred scavengers of the plains with probing snout-like faces.

Lu-si-Yuong: A Wizard of Loh (WA).

M

ma faril: Translates out as "my dear."

magbird: Black carrion-eating bird of Magdag.

Magdag: Chief city of Grodno on the northern shore of the inner sea.

Maiden with the Many Smiles: The largest of Kregen's seven moons.

main-gauche: The left-handed dagger is often called the Hikdar.

Makki-Grodno: The base for a large and colorful variety of obscene oaths used by the followers of *Zair*.

Makku-Grodno: An evil spirit of Magdag.

Malar Marshes: Marshy area of Erthyrdrin.

Marble Quarries of Zenicce: It was in the infamous Black Marble Quarries that Prescott labored as a slave (TT).

Marlimor: A reasonably civilized city famed for beautiful legends.

Marshes of Buranaccl: Swampy area to the north of the Hostile Territories.

Marsilus, Marker: Son of the Kov of Bormark, husband of Tilda and father of Pando. Died as a soldier in East Turismond.

Marsilus, Murlock: Nephew of the Kov of Bormark, usurped the Kovnate.

mashcera: Material used for awnings.

Maspero: A citizen of Aphasöe, one of the Savanti, Prescott's Tutor (TT).

Mayfwy: Widow of Zorg. Lively and beautiful, the great lady of Felteraz (SU).

Mazak, Pur, Lord of Frentozz: A Krozair of Zy and swifter captain (WA).

Mehzta: One of the Nine Islands. Lies off the east coast of Segesthes.

Mehztas: A race of very strong people with bristle bullet-heads, heavy muscles, thick dun-colored hides, and short sinewy legs. Inhabitants of Mehzta.

Memis: A province of Tomboram.

Men of the Sunrise: An ancient people of whom now only their monuments remain, constructors of the Dam of Days and the Grand Canal. Also referred to as the Men of the Sunset.

Menaham: Nation of central North Pandahem.

miscils: Tiny, fragile cakes that melt on the tongue.

missal: A tree with white and pink blossoms.

momolams: Small round yellow tubers eaten with roast ponsho.

moon-blooms: Flowers with a double ring of petals, both opening during the day, and the outer at night when moons are in the sky.

moons: Kregen has seven moons. The largest, the Maiden with the Many Smiles, is almost twice the size of Earth's moon. The next two, the twins, revolve around each other. The fourth is She of the Veils. The three smallest moons hurtle rapidly across the sky close to the surface of Kregen.

morfangs: Monsters of the Hostile Territories, squat, ovoid, with two arched coat-hanger-like shoulders

each sprouting five long whip-like tendrils, which, if cut off, grow into new monsters. Quasi-intelligent, quick, treacherous, and incredibly strong.

Mother Zinzu the Blessed, By: A favorite oath of the drinking classes of Sanurkazz.

Mountains of the North: The mountain range in the north of Vallia from which flows the Great River and much of the canal headwaters.

muldavy: Small boat of the inner sea, generally clinker-built and with a dipping lug.

mur: The Kregan minute, fifty to a bur.

Murn-Chem: An area of western Loh.

muschafs: Cultivated bushes yielding crops.

mushk: A scented yellow plant used as a windbreak, attractive to bees.

N

na: "Of." Usually used to denote a person's land or province of origin. Sometimes rendered *asnal*.

natrix: Close cousin of the sectrix.

Naghan the Paunch: An overseer of caravan guards between Pa Mejab and Pa Weinob (SS).

Natema: The Princess Natema Cydones of the Noble House of Esztercari of Zenicce. Married Prince Varden Wanek (TT).

Nath: Sometimes Nath of Sanurkazz, sometimes Nath ti Zullia, from his birthplace. Oar-comrade to Prescott, Zorg, and Zolta. Son of an illiterate ponscho farmer. Big, a drinking man, intensely loyal to Prescott. Eventually a member of the Zimen.

Nath the Needle, Doctor: Gave medical attention to Prescott in Vondium.

Nath the Thief: Assisted the clansmen in Zenicce (TT).

nathium: Precious metal used in trinkets and objects of art.

Nemo: King of Tomboram (SS).

Nemo Zhantil Faril Opaz: A King's Swordship of Tomboram (SS).

Ng'grog: Land in the southeast of Loh.

Ngrangi: Spirit of Ng'grog appealed to and sworn by.

Nicomeyn, Pallan: Councillor of State to King Nemo (SS).

Nycresand: Islands off the east coast of Loh.

O

oars: Silver and copper coins of Magdag.

ob: One.

Ob-eye: A Blue Mountain Boy.

obi: Among the clansmen it is given and taken, at first meeting, with or without combat as necessary, to determine social order. Carries implications of responsibility for the taker as obligations of the giver. Less violent systems occur elsewhere on Kregen.

obs: Copper coins. In Pandahem, eighty obs to a dhem.

Ocher Limits: Badlands northwest of Vindelka.

Ochs: A halfling people not above four feet tall, with six limbs, the central pair used indiscriminately as legs or arms. Lemon-shaped heads with puffy jaws and lolling chops. Found as mercenaries over most of Kregen.

Ogier Cut: An east-west canal system in Vallia.

Old Superb: Nickname given to Prescott's personal flag.

onker: Term of abuse.

Oolie Opaz: Words of a continuous hypnotic chant.

Opaz: Name given to the dual-spirit, the Invisible Twins, who are visibly represented in the sky by Zim and Genodras.

Overlords: The Overlords of Magdag, masters of the north shore of the inner sea (SU).

Owlarh Waste: Eastern section of the Hostile Territories leading to the Klackadrin.

P

paline: Yellow cherry-like fruit with the taste of old port grows almost everywhere on Kregen. Sovereign cure for hangovers.

Pallan: Equates with Councillor, Minister, or Secretary of State.

Pa Mejab: Colonial port city of Tomboram in Eastern Turismond.

Pandahem: One of the Nine Islands, off the east coast of Loh. People known as Pandaheem.

Panderk: Bay and Islands of North Pandahem.

Pandrite: A beneficent spirit of Pandahem.

Pando: Son of Tilda the Beautiful, inheritor of title of Kov of Bormark (SS).

Panifer, Paline: Young servant girl in Vondium.

Panvals: Vallian political party opposed to racters.

papishin: Leaves used as roof-coverings.

pappattu: Introduction.

Pass of Trampled Leaves: In Segesthes where Prescott's clansmen fired the wagons of their foemen (TT).

Pattelonia: Chief city of Proconia.

Pa Weinob: Frontier town of Tomboram in Eastern Turismond.

Pela: Lady-in-waiting to Katrin Rashumin.

Perithia: An area inland at the eastern end of the inner sea.

Phokaym: Intelligent and cruel reptilian race of risslaca ancestry inhabiting area to the immediate west of the Klackadrin.

Plains of Mist: Happy Hunting Grounds of the clansmen.

Plicla: Rapa city of the Hostile Territories.

Pomdermam: Capital of Tomboram.

ponsho: Domesticated animal providing meat and wool.

ponsho-trag: A Kregan sheep dog.

Ponthieu: A House of Zenicce.

Pool of Baptism: On the River Zelph in Aphrasöe.

Port Marsilus: Port of Bormark.

Port Paros: Small port in Segesthes southeast of Zenicce.

Port Tavetus: Colonial city of Vallia in Eastern Turismond.

Pracek, Prince: Of Ponthieu, presumed to the hand of Delia (TT).

Presidio: Government of Vallia under the Emperor.

preysany: A superior calsany used as a saddle animal.

Proconia: Land at the eastern end of the inner sea with people distinct from the north and south shore peoples.

Procul: A wine rich and dark red.

Prophet: Inspirational leader in the warrens of Magdag (TT).

Pugnarses: Overseer of the balass in the warrens of Magdag (TT).

Pur: Not a rank or a title (although apparently used as such), a badge of chivalry and honor, a pledge that the holder is a true Krozair. Prefixed to the holder's name, as: *Pur Dray*.

Q

Quanscott: Port of the Blue Mountains on the west coast of Vallia.

Queens of Pain: Infamous rulers of Loh.

Quest of Tyr Nath, The: Arollicking tale of mythical adventure at least two thousand years old and known all over Kregen.

R

racter: Member of the most powerful political party in Vallia.

Rahartdrin: Island and Kovnate off the southwest coast of Vallia.

Rapa: Gray vulturine-headed halflings living over most of Kregen as slaves, workers, or mercenary guards, or in their own cities.

rapier: Often called the Jiktar. "A rapier to sharpen" equates with "an ax to grind."

rark: Powerful hunting dog of Segesthes.

rashoon: Sudden and violent local gale on the inner sea.

Rashumin, Katrin: Kovneva of Rahartdrin.

rast: A disgusting six-legged rodent infesting dunghills.

Red Brethren of Lizz: A Fighting Order of Sanurkazz, devoted to Zair.

Relts: More gentle cousins of the Rapas.

Remberee: Universal salutation on parting.

Render: Pirate.

risslaca: Dinosaur.

River of Shining Spears: Flows from the Blue Mountains into the Great River.

Rodway, Pallan: In charge of the Treasury of Vallia.

Rojica Passage: Channel between Vallia and Can-thirda.

Rose of Valka, The: An inn and posting house in Vondium.

S

sah-lah: Cultivated bush with pink and white sweet blossoms.

San: An ancient title for master, dominie, sage.

samphron: Cultivated bush, the fruits yielding oil.

Sanurkazz: Chief city of the men of Zair.

Savanti: Mortal but superhuman people of Aphrasöe.

Sea-Barynth: Huge serpentine monster with oval body, long dorsal fin, an immense head, and fang-filled mouth above two paddle-fins.

Sea of Marshes: Southerly extension of the inner sea past Sanurkazz.

Sea of Swords: Smaller extension of the inner sea past Zy.

sectrix: Six-legged saddle animal, blunt-headed, wicked-eyed, pricked of ear, slate-blue hide covered with scanty coarse hair.

Segesthes: A continent of Kregen.

Segutorio, Seg: Bowman of Loh from Erthydrin. Ran away to be a mercenary. Intensely loyal to Prescott and a good comrade.

Selnix: Vad of Thadelm.

Shallan: Prescott's agent in Sanurkazz (SU/WA).

Shattered targes in Mount Hlabro, By all the: An Erthyr oath.

She of the Veils: Fourth moon of Kregen.

shorgortz: Giant reptilian monster with four eyes, in the Blue Mountains.

Shusha, Great-Aunt: The Lady of Strombor, married into the Ewards, from whom Prescott received Strombor.

shush-chiff: Sarong-like garment worn by girls on holiday.

silver trumpets of Loh: Famed trumpets that led on the armies of Walfarg.

So: Three.

Sooten and her Twelve Sutors: Theatrical tragedy well known on Kregen.

Sorzarts: Lizard-men of a group of islands in northeastern inner sea.

Sosie: Wife of Ven Yelker nal Vomansoir, a canalwoman.

Sosie na Arkasson: Young lady rescued by Prescott in the Hostile Territories (SS).

Spitz: A Bowman of Loh (SS).

squishes: Tiny and delicious fruit.

Star Lords: The Everoinye.

Stentors: 1. Chunkrah-horn blowers in swifters; 2. Spiral-brass-horn blowers in Emperor's canal boats.

Storr, Mount: Vineyards near Hiclantung.

Stovang, Hikdar: Vektor's officer in charge of wedding presents.

Stratensk, The: Enormous mountain chain of Turismond.

Strigicaw: Powerful fast-running, six-legged carnivore, with striped foreparts and double-spotted rear, in red and brown.

Strigicaw: A zenzile swordship commanded by Prescott for Viridia (SS).

Strom: Title of Kregen nobility approximating to "count."

Strombor: A noble House of Zenicce.

Strye: Island northwest of Zenicce which provides cheap grass for mastodons.

sturm: Wood of many uses on Kregen.

Stylor: Name given to Prescott in the warrens of Magdag (SU).

Sunset Sea: Ocean stretching between Segesthes and Turismond.

Susheeng: Princess of Magdag (SU).

swifter: Multi-banked galley of the inner sea.

swingers: Platforms attached to plant tendrils used for transportation in Aphrasöe.

Swinging City: Aphrasöe.

Sword of Genodras: Magdagian swifter captured by Prescott and Seg (WA).

swordship: Single-banked, broadside-armed galleass of the outer oceans.

Swordship and Barynth, The: An inn of Therminsax.

T

talens: Gold coins of Vallia.

Talu: Eight-armed dancer (possibly mythical).

Ta'temsk: Guardian spirit of the inner sea.

taylynes: Pea-sized scarlet and orange vegetables. Good with vosk.

terchick: Throwing-knife, often called the Deldar.

Thadelm: A province of Vallia northwest of Delphond.

Tharu of Vindelka: Kov sent by Delia to find Prescott on inner sea (SU).

Tharu ti Valkanium: Leader of the high assembly of Valka.

Theirson: Koter of Valka who helped Prescott during his canal sickness.

Thelda: Lady-in-waiting to Delia (WA).

Therminsax: Market town of central north Vallia.

Thisi the Fair: Wife to Theirson.

thorn-ivy: Unpleasant sharp-spined bush.

thyrrix: Nimble mountain-animal of Erthydrin.

ti: "Of." Usually used to denote a person's town or city of origin.

tikos: Little green and brown lizards.

Tilda: Mother of Pando. A famous theatrical entertainer, known as Tilda the Beautiful or Tilda of the Many Veils (SS).

TodalpHEME: Astronomers and mathematicians.

Tom of Vulheim: Young Koter of Valka.

Tomboram: Nation of eastern North Pandahem.

toonon: Shortsword mounted on bamboo shaft, aerial weapon of Ullars.

Tremzo: A city of Zair.

Trylon: Title of Kregan nobility intermediate between Vad and Strom.

tuffa: A thin willowy tree.

Turismond: A continent of Kregen.

Tyr: Title equivalent to "Sir."

U

Ullardrin: Land of Northern Turismond.

Ullars: Barbarians from Ullardrin, with narrow-set eyes, square clamped mouths, blunt heads, hair dyed indigo. Whole tribes habitually travel by air astride saddle impiters.

Ullgishoa: Horrific monster belonging to Ullars (WA).

Umgar Stro: Leader of Ullars (WA).

Undurkers: Supercilious race of canine-headed halfling archers.

Undurkor: Group of islands of southwest coast of Segesthes.

Upalion: A rich estate of Proconia. The Lady Pulvia and her son were rescued by Prescott on orders from the Star Lords (WA).

V

Vad: Title of Kregen nobility intermediate between Kov and Trylon.

Valka: Island off the east coast of Can-thirda off Vallia.

Valkanium: Capital city of Valka.

Vallia: One of the Nine Islands situated between Segesthes and Loh.

Vandayha: City of Valka famed for its silversmiths.

Vangar ti Valkanium: A Deldar in the Vallian Air Service.

Vanki, Naghan: Lord of an island off Vallia.

Vaosh: Patron spirit of the canalfolk.

varter: Flat-trajectory ballista throwing rocks and darts.

Veiled Froyvil: Spirit appealed to and sworn by, of Erthyrdrin.

Vela's Tears: Strong red wine of southern Valka.

Vektor, Kov of Aduimbrev: Selected by the Emperor to marry Delia.

Ven: Courtesy title of canalmen. Feminine is Vena.

Venus: Swordship of Viridia's render maidens (SS).

Viktrik: A clan of the Great Plains of Segesthes.

vilmy: Blue flower with silver heart-shape on each petal; the paste makes a soothing ointment.

Vindelka: Province and Kovnate northwest of Vondium.

Violet offal of the snow-blind feister-feelt, By the: An Ullar oath.

Viridia the Render: A lady pirate of the Hoboling Islands (SS).

Vomansoir: Province and Kovnate of central Vallia.

Vomanus: Became Kov of Vindelka. Good comrade to Prescott (SU).

Vomer the Vile, By: Oath of the slave-masters of Vallia.

Vondium: Capital of Vallia.

voryasen: A risslaca, part crocodile, part tylosaurus.

Vorgan: A Stromnate owning allegiance to the Kov of Vomansoir.

vosk: A fat pig-like six-legged animal with a smooth oily skin of a whitish-yellow, with atrophied tusks, standing six feet at the shoulder. A beast of burden; more often a food animal.

vosk-skulls, or vosk-helmets: The workers and slaves of the warrens of Magdag trained up by Prescott into a phalanx received either of these names because they wore thick vosk skulls as helmets.

vove: Large and exceptionally ferocious eight-legged saddle-animal of the Great Plains of Segesthes, equipped with fangs and horns, russet-colored. Smaller and without the fangs and horns is called a half-vove.

Vovedeer: Leader of clans in Segesthes.

Vox, By: A Vallian oath.

Vulheim: Port city of western Valka.

W

Walfarg: Nation of Loh, now sunk in apathy, once the center of a great empire.

Wanek, Prince Varden: Of the House of Eward. A good comrade to Prescott

Wardens: Provided by all the Houses of Zenicce for police work and seaward defense.

wersting: A vicious black and white striped four-legged hunting dog.

Wickens: A House of Zenicce.

Wil: Young boy of *Dancing Talu*.

Wizards of Loh: Sorcerers and magicians of great and apparently supernatural powers.

Wloclef: Large island off the west coast of Turismond, famed for its thick-fleeced curly-ponshos.

woflo: Small animal fond of cheese.

Womox: An island off the west coast of Vallia.

Womoxes: A strong, bull-necked people who carry their heads forward with two stumpy but formidable horns on their foreheads. Fierce, independent, not overly original.

Wulk: A barbarian of the northern hills, a friend to Prescott.

Wyndhai: An area of The Stratemsk, home of yellow eagles.

X

xi: Iridescent-scaled winged lizards of humid jungle-valleys of The Stratemsk.

Xoltemb: A caravan-master of Segesthes from Xuntal (TT).

Xuntal: An island off the southern promontory of Segesthes.

Y

Yelker, Ven, nal Vomansoir: A canalman, owner of the *Dancing Talu*.

Yerthyr: Very dark-green poisonous tree of Erthydrin from which are cut the finest-quality longbow staves.

yulshi: A draft bird of the Hostile Territories. Plural: yuelshi.

Yumapan: Nation of the west coast of Pandahem.

Z

Zair: The red-sun deity.

Zamu: A city dedicated to Zair, base of the Krozairs of Zamu.

Zantristar the Merciful, By: A Sanurkazzian oath.

Zazz, Pur: Grand Archbold of the Krozairs of Zy (SU).

Zelph, River: Joins the River Aph at Aphrasöe.

Zenicce: Great enclave city of a million souls on west coast of Segesthes.

Zenkiren, Pur: Krozair of Zy, Grand Archbold elect (SU/WA).

zhantil: A magnificent wild animal larger than a leem, massively built in the foreparts, banded in tiger-stripes of umber and ruby, with a rich golden mane.

zhantil to saddle, a: A secret and difficult purpose.

Zim: The red sun of Antares. Has many other names.

Zimen: Lay brothers of the Krozairs of Zy.

Zim Stream: Warm water flowing northward through the Cyphren Sea.

Zim-Zair, By: A Krozair oath.

zizils: Giant flying animals of The Stratemsk.

Zo, King: King of Sanurkazz (SU).

Zolta: Oar-comrade to Prescott, Zorg, and Nath. Took the apostis seat. Gives no details of his history, is a man for the ladies. Eventually a member of the Zimen.

Zond: Produces the finest wine of the southern shore of the inner sea.

Zora: Name usually given by Prescott to swifterns he commanded.

zorca: Swift riding animal, short-coupled, four extremely long and thin legs, hoofed. A single curled horn rises from its forehead.

Zorcander: Leader of clans.

Zorg: Son of Zorg and Mayfwy (SU).

Zorg of Felteraz: Oar-comrade of Prescott, Zolta, and Nath. Krozair of Zy. Died under the lash on the slave-benches of the Magdaggian swifter *Grace of Grodno*.

Zulfria: A city of the southern shore of the inner sea.

Zullia: Village to the south of Sanurkazz devoted to ponsho fanning. Birthplace of Nath, oar-comrade to Prescott.

Zy: Island formed from an extinct volcano, in the mouth of the Sea of Swords. Headquarters of the Krozairs of Zy.

Zyna: Daughter of Ven Yelker and Vena Sosie, of the *Dancing Talu*.

About the author

Alan Burt Akers is a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer. Bulmer has published over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction.

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at www.mushroom-ebooks.com

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Notes

[1]Elsewhere Prescott says that *Koter* is usually abbreviated to *Kr*, as is “Mister” on Earth abbreviated to “Mr.” Also, he says that *Krozair* is often abbreviated to *Krz*. The Kregans, like the ancient Romans and modern men, are fond of abbreviations. *A.B.A.*

[2]*Kta.*, *Kotera*, the female equivalent of *Koter* , of *Kr*. *A.B.A.*