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Fliers of Antares

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A Note on Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott is a man above medium height, with straight brown hair and brown eyes that are level and 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 and educated in the inhumanly harsh conditions of the late eighteenth century navy, 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 under the Suns of Scorpio many times. On that savage and beautiful, marvelous and terrible world he rose to become Zorcander of the Clansmen of Segesthes, and Lord of Strombor in Zenicce, and a member of the mystic and martial Order of Krozairs of Zy.

Against all odds Prescott won his highest desire and in that immortal battle at The Dragon's Bones claimed his Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains, as his own. And Delia claimed him in the face of her father the dread Emperor of Vallia. Amid the rolling thunder of the acclamations of Hai Jikai! Prescott became Prince Majister of Vallia, and wed his Delia, the Princess Majestrix.

Through the agency of the blue radiance sent by the Star Lords, the Summons of the Scorpion, Prescott is plunged headlong into fresh adventures on Kregen. Outwitting the Manhounds of Antares, he rescues Mog, a high priestess, and defeats the Canops who have invaded her country. Forced to fight in the arena of the Jikhorkdun of Huringa he rises to be a hyr-kaidur and at a climactic moment is rescued with Delia by his comrades in a magnificent airboat. Now they are on their way to Migladrin across the Shrouded Sea . . .

*Alan Burt Akers*

CHAPTER ONE

I swim in the Shrouded Sea

“By Vox!” yelled Vangar ti Valkanium above the clamor of the gale. “This would be no time for this flier to break down.”

From the forward starboard varter position I clung to a stanchion with my left hand and peered out and down. The sudden onset of the gale had cast a darkness over the bright day, and the twin Suns of Scorpio were dimmed. Through the drenching lash of rain and the erratic lightning-shot darkness I could see the lacerated surface of the Shrouded Sea. The wind slashed off the tops of the running waves, and the white roar below bellowed and flung wind-tossed spume flat and sheeting.

“This voller was built in Hamal, Vangar,” I yelled back at him. He could barely hear me. “She won’t break down like the rubbish they sell us in Vallia.”

We were both drenched with rain. The decks ran with water which spouted out, foaming, through the scuppers. I had full confidence in the flier, for my men had taken her from a crew of foolish raiders from Hamal, so that they could come to my rescue in the arena of the city of Huringa in Hyrklana; it was now very clear to me that the shipwrights of Hamal applied double standards to their work.

“She flies well, my prince,” shouted Vangar. He felt a particular concern for Delia and me, I well knew, for his appointment as captain of my flier brought him grave responsibilities as well as great joys.

The sea below raged and roared. We were lower than I liked, for we had tried to outrun the gale on our way back to Migladrin to finalize the new arrangements in religious and political matters of that country, and this confounded gale had seized us in its grip as we sped across the Shrouded Sea.

For a moment I lingered. The sea down there aroused strange emotions in me. The Star Lords had prohibited me from shipping in either swifter or swordship; but I admit that, despite the anger of that sea and the fierce and deadly power of wind and water, I stared a little hungrily at the element on which I had lived for so large a part of my life on the planet of my birth, four hundred light-years away.

“Get back to the helm-deldar, Vangar, and lift us. We will have to take our chances with the wind and storm higher up.”

Vangar did not argue but went at once.

To this day I cannot in truth say how it happened. I know the black thought of treachery crossed my mind, for until the conspiracy against the Emperor of Vallia, who was my father-in-law, had been completely crushed, we walked in perilous paths. And his peril also menaced his daughter, who was my wife, the Princess Majestrix Delia, my Delia of Delphond, of the Blue Mountains.

The most probable explanation is that during that brave rescue of me from the arena when the flier was being shot at from all directions, a chunk of rock thrown by a varter had crunched into the stanchion, weakening it.

Now with my weight and the wind and the violent motions of the flier, the stanchion parted.

Instantly I was tumbled headlong into thin air, spinning head over heels, gasping as the wind and rain struck and sent me plunging into that fearsome sea.

I surfaced and dragged in a huge lungful of air; then the waves smashed me over and down and so I began a protracted period of intense struggle to survive. As you know, I am a strong swimmer, and may dive deeply and long, and believe me when I say I needed every ounce of skill and endurance. The flier vanished, whisked away as a clump of thistledown is brushed by the breeze.

I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, battled for my life with the sea — alone.

There are techniques for keeping afloat and I used all my knowledge to remain near the surface and not allow the vicious violence of the sea to weaken and overwhelm me. That I survived is clear in that I am speaking to you on these tapes; but it was a near thing. When I felt myself at last at the end of my strength and saw there low against a level break in the clouds the long line of rocks marking a shore, I knew I had to make a supreme effort. I am not a man who will give in easily. I had been learning caution, and tried to contain that intemperate recklessness that had many times brought me kicks and cuffs, and, may Zair forgive me, so many times failed. But against the insensate violence of the sea I would exert everything of me that is me, that makes me Dray Prescott, and no other in two worlds.

Gradually, with immense effort, I maneuvered myself toward the shore. For a moment or two I thought I would be flung end-over-end onto the black rocks that showed through the gouting spray like decayed teeth; but Zair aided me — for the damned Star Lords would not, and neither would the Savanti — and I felt myself picked up and flung between two jagged rocks and so hurled onto a tiered beach of coarse gray sand. I had to summon up all the reserves of strength I had left to prevent myself from just lying there, prey to the waves, and to force myself to crawl on hands and knees up above the high water mark. Then, between two crumbling rocks, I put my head onto that sand and passed out.

The next thing I recall is being turned over gently and feeling soft hands examining my ribs and arms and legs. I lay still.

A girl's voice, light and clear, said: "He has no broken bones, for which he may praise Mother Shoshash of the Seaweed Hair, when he awakes. Father Shoshash the Stormbrow has not been gentle with him. His ib is knocked fair out of him."

Another girl's voice, a little more giggly, answered. "Come away, Paesi. He looks monstrous ugly. And look at his shoulders!"

"Mmm," said Paesi, in a way I decidedly did not like.

Thinking it expedient to regain consciousness, I let out a few grunts, heaved myself around, and opened my eyes.

Two Lamnias stared down on me. They had run back a few paces, and now stood, poised for instant flight. I have told you that certain races are famed upon Kregen for the beauty of their womenfolk, and the Lamnias, that gentle, shrewd, yellow-furred folk, are blessed with daughters who are as fair in the eyes of other races as any Fristle fifi, or apim girl, or aephar damsel of far Balintol.

The two girls, Paesi and her companion, wore simple short-sleeved white blouses and knee-length skirts of apple-green, and they carried woven wickerwork baskets over their arms. They stood regarding me uncertainly, a monstrous great hairy apim risen from the sea. Shades of Odysseus and Nausicaa! I was as salt grimed and unkempt, clad only in my old scarlet breechclout, as any shipwrecked mariner. But the two Lamnias stood, open-eyed, regarding me, and beneath the white blouses their bosoms rose and fell perhaps a little faster as I slowly stood up, and stretched, and gave thanks to Zair that I still lived.

Lamnias in youth possess that gorgeous lappom-colored dusting of fur upon their bodies that strokes as light as thistledown. Later in life the fur grows thicker and darker but seldom as thick as, for example, the fur of a Fristle. Now the two girls stared at me and the flush of blood beneath the skin showed clearly through that light yellow dusting of fur.

“I mean you no harm,” I said, trying to make my bear-like voice as friendly as possible. But when I spoke they both jumped and took a step back.

After some time I managed to convince them that I was a human being — and by that I mean a human being, as they were; and not merely apim, which they could see — and we set off to walk to their village.

I had no means of knowing where Delia might be now. What I did know, unshakably, was that she would scour the sea until she found me. She knew of my mysterious disappearances, although not the cause of them, and this time the broken stanchion would show all too clearly what had happened. I fancied then, as I went with the two Lamnia girls up past the gorse-like bushes of the shoreline and through broad-leaved sough-wood trees, that very soon the flier would come ghosting in and my friends would yell and bellow for me and a rope ladder would come tumbling down and I would be rescued again.

If I mention, now, that the broken stanchion dumped me headlong into fresh adventures, I must add that the stanchion also contributed much to the destiny of the planet Kregen itself.

The people of the village greeted me kindly. They must have observed the way I was constantly looking up into the sky as Zim and Genodras sailed past scattered clouds, shedding that streaming mingled opaz light, and perhaps they put down those searching looks to guilt against Havil, or to some religious doctrine, or even — and this would be the nature of the Lamnias — to a stiff neck I was trying to ease.

My previous experiences of Lamnias, notably with Dorval Aymlo, the merchant of Ordsmot, had shown me that they were a gentle people, good merchants, shrewd at bargaining, not warriors. The village had a wooden stockade and was tucked neatly into the crook of a river with a bluff to defend it; but it was a poor place for all that, both in military might and in wealth. It was crowded with people all engaged in running about on tasks of the utmost importance to those performing them but incomprehensible to me at the time. I detected a note of competition in the air, and saw young girls dancing and singing in long lines, and young men running races and hurling blunted wooden javelins, throwing weapons quite unlike the formidable stuxes of Havilfar.

The Lammas seated on wooden stools at the entrance to the largest house, a two-story structure festooned with many varieties of flowers, I assumed to be the village council, and the headman, a shrewd and sad-looking fellow called Rorpal of Podia, greeted me with a punctiliousness I found touching.

“Llahal, stranger who has escaped from the house of Shoshash.”

“Llahal, Rorpal of Podia.”

Podia was the name of the village, and it was situated on one of the innumerable islands of the Shrouded Sea. On the other side of the river a steep, cone-shaped volcano emitted a lazy cloud of smoke. Perhaps the Lamnias thought I kept looking at He of the Yrium, the volcano, in my searching looks at the sky. *Yrium* is a word with profound meanings of force, meaning power, either power conveyed by office, or by strength of character, or given to a person in any way that unmistakably blesses — or curses — him with undisputed dominance over his fellows. To dub a natural phenomenon like a volcano as He of the Yrium was to convey in the most pungent way all the awful ferocity and power these people regarded as

residing in the volcano. The Shrouded Sea is plagued with volcanic activity, as well as earth tremors and earthquakes.

“I am Dray Prescot,” I said. Then, I added, “Krozair of Zy,” because at times I am a boaster as well as an intemperate hothead, and I felt secure in the knowledge that they would not understand what I was telling them anyway.

“Llahal, Dray Prescot, Krozair of Zy. You are welcome to Podia. Will you tell us your story?”

I did not smile at this, for that would have been impolite; I simply sat on the wooden bench indicated and, with a glass of fruit juice and a plate of palines at my side, I told them a little. I mentioned the Canops, that fierce, martial race of people who had been driven out of their island home because of its near-destruction by earthquake, and of their settling in Migladrin, but before I had a chance to say that the Miglas, with the help of my friends, had taken back their own country, the Lamnias reacted.

To my surprise they were disappointed that the Canops had left the Shrouded Sea island of Canopdrin.

“They are honest traders,” said Rorpal, rubbing the laypom-colored fur beneath his chin. “Now there is no one to stand against the aragorn of Sorah.”

Well, as you know, I was acquainted with the evil ways of the aragorn. Slave raiders and slave-masters, the aragorn plunder their way to fortune over the agony and the blood of anyone unfortunate enough to be too weak to stand up against them. The valiant people of my island of Valka had driven out the aragorn of Vallia. I was in the midst of a political campaign to drive them out of Vallia altogether. And now, here in the continent of Havilfar, I found aragorn operating in the Shrouded Sea. This was not surprising. Slaves are required. Slaves are always needed. Slave-masters will always find a calling when there are weak people to be enslaved and strong and unscrupulous people to enslave them.

“You fear the aragorn of Sorah?”

“Aye, Horter Prescot. We fear them.”

I sat back and considered. I had chanced here because a weakened stanchion of an airboat had pitched me into the sea. I might have drifted anywhere, or been drowned and forgotten. I had not been sent here by the Star Lords. No blue radiance had enfolded me, no gigantic representation of a scorpion had borne me away to a desperate mission for the Star Lords. No. No, I had no business here. If I occupied myself in every small corner of Havilfar — let alone Kregen — interfering with the ways of life that had gone on for centuries, there would be no end to it. This business was not my business.

All the same, I felt the thrill of blood through my arteries, and the *wordaragorn* — remembering Valka and that great song, “The Fetching of Drak na Valka” — made my hands close as though they held a sword.

I now know I was wrong in shrugging off someone else’s problems. But you must remember that I was young according to Kregen standards, to which I have become adjusted, and I was newly married with baby twins, Drak and Lela. I wanted to go home to Valka and take my Delia in my arms and forget all about Star Lords and slavery and the other pressing problems of Kregen. I was even considering leaving off my search for the Savanti, those mortal but superhuman men of the Swinging City of Aphrasöe.

It is not easy for a fighting-man to reconcile himself to the philosophy that teaches we are all responsible for each other, and that one person’s loss is a loss to all.

So I changed the subject and said: "I see you hold a great festival, Horter Rorpal. Your young men and your young girls compete against each other."

Rorpal's sad face looked sadder than ever and he leaned forward, about to answer me.

An old Lamnia at his side put a hand on Rorpal's arm. This Lamnia's yellow fur showed silver tips, a clear indication of his great age, for I guessed he must be well past a hundred and seventy-five. He shook his head in warning.

Whatever Rorpal had been about to say, that hand on his arm and that shake of the head changed his mind.

"Yes, Horter Prescott." He took a paline and munched it thoughtfully.

I waited politely; but he said nothing more to enlighten me.

Although I wore my scarlet breechclout, cinctured up with a broad leather belt, and a sailor's knife lay scabbarded back of my right hip, I felt naked. On Kregen, that marvelous world that is so heartbreakingly beautiful and so horrendously cruel, a man must carry a weapon if he wishes to remain free in so very many areas of the globe. The unarmed combat disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy could keep me out of much trouble, but I hanker always for the feel of a sword in my fist.

The activities of the youngsters, which could be viewed with ease from this high verandah outside the headman's house, came to a climax with much shouting and hullabalooing, and at last a group of about fifty youths and maidens, their dusting of yellow fur bright in the declining rays of the twin suns, clustered together, entwined with wreaths of flowers. Something of the sadness of Rorpal of Podia must have affected me, for these circlets of flowers could scarcely be wreaths. They must be the victors' crowns.

And yet the flowers, so brilliant, so beautiful, were linked together in long chains, so that the fifty were in very truth entwined about, bound, almost.

Masses of people moved away from the open space, laughing among themselves, and yet their laughter struck chill. I glanced at Rorpal.

He stood up. At his side a young man with as aggressive a cast of feature as any Lamnia might aspire to handed the headman his spear of office. Around the spear had been entwined flowers. Rorpal lifted the spear, and the gathering crowds below fell silent and shuffled into place before the verandah and the group of village elders, leaving the fifty bound in their flower chains some way off, isolated.

Rorpal was about to say something that might explain these proceedings. A woman ran urgently up and past the crowd's outskirts, pushed vigorously past the aggressive youth, who made no real attempt to halt her. She stopped in front of Rorpal. She looked agitated and yet determined, and her face, pleasant and mellow in the Lamnia way, set itself in lines of unfamiliar hardness.

"Rorpal! I call on you — Paesi — she it was — and it is decided that Polosi shall go!" She was stammering so much through her assumed hardness that she made no sense. At least, she made no sense to me. But Rorpal of Podia understood what she wanted.

He struck the butt of the spear on the wooden flooring three times. The silence became absolute, except for the evening breeze in the trees and a few dogs howling from the compound where they had been

herded during the ceremonies. I noticed particularly, from my already vast experience, that no babies were crying.

“Very well, Mother Mala. Paesi it was, we all agree to that, it is attested.”

“It is!”

Rorpal gestured in a way that might have embraced this woman, Mother Mala, the crowds, the fifty youths in their flowery chains, the elders on the verandah — or me — and he banged his spear down again, four times. Abruptly everyone burst into shouts and cheering. But, even then, that cheering struck a somber note, there on the dusty compound of the little village of Podia. I noticed that most of the cheering came from the young men and women mixed in the crowds before the verandah. The fifty bound in flowers remained silent, although everyone looked toward the elders on the verandah.

Then — one of those fifty burst into hysterical shouting. A young man broke the flower chain by a single movement of his hands and ran and ran and so was swept up into the arms of Mother Mala. I saw the girl Paesi, who had found me on the shore, also hugging and kissing both the boy and his mother.

Lamnias passed among the crowds carrying large gourd-shaped vessels of pottery that are sometimes called amphorae, although they are not strictly of that shape or form, for they have a stoppered spout, and their more proper name is holc. They were mounted on wicker carrying baskets upon the men’s backs and it was remarkable with what nicety and skill the men could tilt the holc and direct a stream of wine into an outstretched cup without so much as spilling a drop. Fresh wine in fresh goblets was produced for the elders upon the verandah, and I took the goblet offered me. Rorpal of Podia banged his spear butt again, twice and a third time, and the silence fell.

Rorpal lifted his goblet.

Everyone raised their goblets or cups high into the air.

“Let us drink the parting toast!” called Rorpal. “The toast of da’eslam! The farewell and the greeting! Da’eslam!”

“Da’eslam! Da’eslam!”

We all drank.

Then, as is the way with Lamnias, everything was over and the people shuffled away. I put the goblet down and looked for the fifty — no, the forty-nine — and saw they were gone from their places.

Only the coiled chains of flowers lay there, abandoned, their petals wilting and losing their color.

One function of the meaning of da’eslam, as I knew even then, rather like the vaol-paol, is the end and the beginning, and equally the beginning and the end. But whereas the circle of vaol-paol encompasses all things, da’eslam contains a narrower vision connected almost always with a person’s fate and destiny.

The Lamnias had summed me up shrewdly.

In the last of the light streaming and mingling from the emerald orb of Genodras, which is called Havil in Havilfar, and the ruby orb of Zim, which is called Far in Havilfar, I saw a small group of men walk from the stockade past the last of the houses and so come out onto the open space before the verandah and

the elders and the headman.

I saw their faces, and instinctively my right hand crossed my waist, groping for the hilt of a sword that was not there.

Yes, the Lamnias understood men, even apims, even apims like myself.

The newcomers stood in the opaz radiance, their shadows long upon the packed dust where the feet of the Lamnias had so lately shuffled. I saw those damned faces. Thick black hair, greased and oiled and curled, hung about their evil faces. These beings were not apim. They were of a race of diffs I had not encountered before, and they were beast-men and men-beasts of so forbidding an aspect I truly thought that a Chulik might think twice before offending one of their number.

Low were their brows, low and wide, above flaring nostrils and gape-jawed mouths in which I saw snaggly teeth bared in grins of anticipation. Their eyes were wide spaced, brilliant, yet narrow and cold. These halflings wore armor, scale armor that was as commonplace as any I had seen. They wore close-fitting helmets which I then thought were brass, and only later discovered to be gold over iron. They carried weapons of the fighting-man of Havilfar — thraxter, stux, shield.

Apart from the impression of evil upon their faces, they would not have occasioned in me any further interest outside my usual fascination with the myriads of types and species upon Kregen, but for their tails. I saw at once that these tails were probably their most formidable armament. Long and whiplike, the tails were carried high and arrogantly, curved over the right shoulder. And every tail ended in a razor-sharp curved blade. The glinting light from the twin suns caught the serried blades, upflung on the flaunting tails, and glittered like a field of diamonds.

The faces of diffs are passing strange in the eyes of a man from this Earth. Some are beautiful, some are ugly, some misshapen in our estimation, others quite unremarkable. Yet how difficult it is to say with complete surety that a certain expression upon the face of a man who is not apim — is not a member of Homo sapiens — means exactly what you think it means. I took the gloating faces to portray evil at that moment, and although I was proved right — to my cost! — the assumption was made so rapidly, so much from instinct, that immediately I forced myself to relax and to believe that an alien's face cannot show what a man's face of this Earth would show and necessarily mean the same thing.

Below the scaled corselet each man wore a brilliant scarlet kilt. I stared. I suppose that, too, influenced me, like any onker. The diffs wore the old brave scarlet, the color that had in so many ways become associated so closely with me and mine upon Kregen.

They advanced with a steady step and I saw that they kept in step and to a wedgelike formation. The leader, broad and bulky, wore a multitude of feathers and silks, not on his helmet but about his person. He halted below the verandah and looked up. Once more I had to control myself, to make myself relax. Was I not learning the ways of quietness and peace upon Kregen under Antares?

“Is all ready, Rorpal?”

“All is ready, Notor.”

“Then bring them out, you rast, or I'll sink my stux in your belly.”

I straightened up at these words, for I understood a little of the thinking behind such uncalled-for insult and arrogance. As I straightened, I felt a hazy qualm or dizziness pass, as though my brain had moved



within my skull, fractionally later than I had intended.

So then it was that I understood how easily the Lamnias had read me, how shrewdly they had taken stock of me, and what they had done. I understood now what had transpired here. There was no need for Rorpal of Podia to lean regretfully toward me as I stumbled, and clutched at the railing, and so, stupidly, collapsed to the wooden floor, and for him to say: “We express our deep regret, Horter Prescott. But we are driven by devils. We must send fifty of our youths and our maidens, and the aragorn will welcome you exceedingly in place of Polosi, the son of Mala and sister of Paesi, who found you and so had claim upon you.”

Then Rorpal, who had the good of Podia at heart, called to the aragorn leader: “This apim is a great warrior, a Hyr-paktun. In him you will be well pleased.”

Then the drug in the wine felled me utterly and Notor Zan engulfed me in blackness.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Delia begins a story

It seemed to me that Delia was telling young Dray, the Strom of Balkash, a story. The Strom of Balkash was the son of Seg Segutorio, Kov of Falinur, and Thelda, the Kovneva. Delia sat curled up in a heaping pile of cushions whose glowing silks and embroideries could not compare in any way with the glory that was my Delia. The story was well loved in Vallia, and Delia, herself, enjoyed the retelling of it.

“Under a certain moon,” she began, which is a way of saying *Once upon a time*, “a great and cruel Vad ruled a country and all the people groaned and were unhappy. Now it happened that in that country, at a place where a wooden bridge crossed a stream and silver fishes leaped into your hand, lived a poor man who had a beautiful daughter whose name was Ama of the Shining Hair. It chanced that the great and cruel Vad went a-hunting leem, which had been troubling the ponshos of the people in those parts.”

Something tickled me in the ribs and I stirred and moved and then sank back on my cushions to listen to Delia. As for young Dray, who was Seg Segutorio’s son, his little face was puckered up in absolute concentration and he was holding all his body tightly with expectation and glee at this marvelous story from this marvelous aunt.

“But one of the ponsho farmers was a young man who could talk to his ponsho-trag and who loved nothing better than to sport all day in the fields with his friend, as you would with your friends. Now this ponsho farmer’s name was—”

The nudge in my side was less gentle, far from gentle. It was a positive kick. I rolled over, ready to find out who would thus dare to desecrate the enjoyment of the Prince Majister of Vallia’s entranced absorption in a story told by the Princess Majestrix of Vallia, and a thudding kick bounced off my ribs, and a course and unlovely voice roared in my ear.

“Get up, you rast! Yetch! On your feet!”

I opened my eyes.

An aragorn drew his booted foot back ready to drive it into my ribs again. I rolled away, feeling a terrible pain in my gut, and tried to catch that wicked boot. I could not move my hands.

“Nulsh! On your feet!”

The kick landed. I got my feet under me. The pink-lit shadows of the Kregan night lay between the loom of trees, and I heard the susurrations of the night wind. My hands were bound.

“You cramph,” I said. “I wanted to hear that story.”

My voice slurred horribly and I could feel the solid ground going up and down like the deck of a swordship in a gale off the Hoboling islands.

The aragorn brought his whiplike tail around and laid the flat of the curved blade against my head. That thick skull of mine rang as though all the bells in Beng-Kishi sounded off with maniacs at the clapper ropes.

“Get into line or I’ll flay your hide off!”

He was genuinely annoyed. The pink moonlight from She of the Veils flowed over his gold-on-iron helmet, scaled armor, and brave scarlet kilt. I could see the vague shadows of Lamnias all about and I could hear the harsh orders to move, and so I understood that no great time had elapsed since Notor Zan had taken me entire. The aragorn were taking the young Lamnias selected for them, and, shrewd in their way, the Lamnias of Podia had saved one of themselves and thrown me in as a prize specimen of a slave.

Under the conjoined forces of the tail-blow on the head and the surgings of the solid earth beneath my feet and the rumblings of my gut, I staggered half a dozen paces beneath the trees. They had had the forethought to bind my wrists with thongs and had carried me out and dumped me among the forty-nine sacrifices.

The thongs were not lesten hide.

I broke them with a single savage surge, twisted, got the aragorn around the throat, and, ducking my head beneath his instinctive slash of the tail-blade, started to choke a little respect into him.

I had no desire to kill him. I was still ensnared in the repression of my savage and intemperate nature; but enough was enough. He garbled and choked trying to yell. Others of the slave-masters came running, and so I threw this specimen at them and turned to dash into the moon-shadowed trees. Oh, yes, I was perfectly resigned to leave them unharmed and to run away. I had some of the most important aspects of my life worked out now; as you would say today, I had my priorities almost right.

Delia would not welcome a dead husband lying rotting beneath the mud of some putrid island of the Shrouded Sea.

But these aragorn were cunning in the ways of man-management. Twining iron links whirred through the air and snagged my arms and legs, brought me down with a crash. Once the thongs had proved useless to hold me, they merely clamped chains upon me. I tested the iron. It would take long and long — if ever — for me to break the weakest link.

After that it was a question of being prodded along the track between the trees. The aragorn I had maltreated took some delight in prodding me with his stux. I clashed my chains at him, but he laughed evilly and avoided the swinging bight and struck me again.

“Leave off, you onker, Reterhan!” The leader strode up, and his anger made of his ugly face a devil’s mask very like the face of the Devil of the Ice-Wind who guards the north shore of Gundarlo.

“He attacked me, Notor!”

“When he is sold — when we have golden deldys for him — you may take your own payment, then, Reterhan. Until then, by the Triple Tails of Targ the Untouchable, you will care for the merchandise as you care for your tail!”

“I obey, Notor.” Reterhan shrank back from his lord’s anger.

We marched again through the forest, and I guessed we went to another village of the island where more people would be rounded up. I trudged on under the weight of the iron chains until gradually my senses returned and my gut stopped rumbling. I was now ready to pull a few tails.

“That was nobly done, Horter Prescott.”

The young Lamnia looked like them all, yellow furred, meek in appearance, slightly built. I could barely envisage him hurling javelins so well as to out-throw some of the other Lamnia youths of Podia.

“These aragorn,” I said. “They need to be cleansed.”

“Aye, Horter Prescott. But we of Podia are not destined for that great work. We are too few and too weak.”

The youngster said his name was Fanal and as we walked along he spoke to me softly, and I answered with a guiding grunt or question. I learned more, then, of the tangled politics of the Shrouded Sea, and of how these aragorn of Sorah wreaked their horrors upon the islands. They were of the race of diffs called Katakis, and they held their tails in especial esteem. I was not surprised at that. I saw the fashion of helmet they wore, close-fitting and smooth, without embellishment or ornament. They could whip their tails about over their shoulders and around their heads, lashing forward in lethal sweeps. They would make interesting antagonists. I wondered why I had not encountered any in the Jikhorkdun, the arena, of Huringa; but Fanal explained that the aragorn took good care that they themselves were not sold into slavery and thus avoided the fate of fighting in the arenas of Hyrklana or Hamal.

The Katakis gave most of the islands a bad time. The Canops, of whom I have told you, had forged themselves into a fighting nation of soldiers to resist them. My estimation of the Canops changed once more. And now I understand a little more of the fear-filled lifestyle of the Lamnias of Podia.

Forced to live as slave-fodder, they had worked out a modus vivendi with the Katakis of Sorah, and with their accustomed Lamnia shrewdness had agreed period by period to supply a stipulated number of slaves, both youths and maidens.

The games I had witnessed sorted out the strongest and fittest young men, and the most beautiful and graceful of the young maidens. But then — and I admit I ricked my lips up in what might have passed as the semblance of a grin — the Lamnias sent as slaves to the aragorn their failures, the least agile young men, the least graceful young women. All the winners, the best athletes, the most beautiful girls, were hidden away out of sight. This made so much sense that I marveled it had not occurred with more frequency, given that those willing to take the risks of fooling aragorn must be shrewd and smart and cunning bargainers.

“And what is to become of you, Fanal, once you are a slave?”

“I do not know.” He looked apprehensive, as well he might. “I pray the eye of Lomno-Niar-ton may never close over me, so that I am spared the Jikhorkdun or the Heavenly Mines.”

This Fanal had been a loser, one who had not been able to keep up with his fellows in the races, who had not hurled his javelin as far, had not jumped as agilely, with the consequence unfortunate for him that he had been packed off as slave. I did not envision him coming out well from his experiences as a coy in the arena; as an apprentice he would not, I judged, last long. His reference to the Heavenly Mines I then took to be an oblique way of talking about death. I was wrong in that, as you shall hear, dreadfully wrong, and the word *heavenly* embodied a great deal of that typical Kregan aptitude for mockery and deadly sarcasm.

The gale that had wrought my original destruction had blown itself out and She of the Veils rode free of cloud wrack. The trees swayed gently and the night breeze blew cool. Very soon we were ordered to halt and to wait while the Katakis aragorn went about their business.

“The village of Shinnar,” Fanal told me bitterly. “Ochs live there, gentle enough and not overly bright in matters of trade. They supply fifty young people, as do we, every period.”

Shortly thereafter we marched on, and the slaves were now a hundred in number. The next village yielded up twenty strong Rapas. I felt a mild surprise, for the Rapas are renowned for — apart from their smell, to which I was by now becoming accustomed — their ferocity and viciousness. But the Katakis aragorn stood no nonsense. I sensed that these Rapas did not come with quite the same willingness as the Lamnias and the Ochs. Maybe there was capital to be gained there . . .

One of Kregan’s lesser moons swung low over the trees as we came out onto the shore where the waves glimmered pink in long, surging lines of foam and the wind blew free.

Again I stared with hungry longing upon the waters, for with a vessel under me and goodly spread of canvas I would be as free as the breeze. But now, quite apart from the Star Lords and the Savanti, the Katakis prevented me from taking ship and departing this sorry little island. Its name was Shanpo, and it was one of a multitude of islands in the Lesser Sharangil Archipelago. It seemed to be more obvious now why the Canops had not settled themselves on some other island grouping when their own land of Canopdrin had been so disastrously destroyed. The Katakis were a people either to avoid or to destroy.

“What happens now, Fanal?”

“We will be taken to Sorah — an evil place!” And he shivered — for the night breeze blew a trifle chill, I admit. “From there we will be sold to whoever will pay the Katakis’ price.”

There was the thwarted businessman’s acumen in that.

The stars now showed through the tattered cloud wrack, brilliant constellations that had become familiar to me over the seasons of my life on Kregan. The Zhantil and Sword; the Leem and Shishi; Onglolo; the Headless Risslaca; many more, twinkling away up there with a fine disregard of me and my problems. Of them all, the Zhantil and Sword meant the most, for I was as sure as I could be — and still I am quite certain — that in this fabulous constellation glittered the star that is the sun of my planet of birth, our old Earth.

Perhaps old Sol is not visible at all from Kregan. But I prefer to believe it is, and that it twinkles there at

the tip of the sword in the claws of the Zhantil's right paw.

The Shrouded Sea is named not out of mere fancy, and the horizon mist was enough to blot out a great part of the constellation of the Zhantil and Sword, for it is visible north and south, according to season. And so, looking up, I glimpsed the bulk of an airboat drifting among the stars, a tiny mobile constellation of its own.

Instantly every nerve in my body told me that aloft there, in that veller, flew Delia and my friends. They had to be there! I gazed up and the little grouping of lights swung lower. Others had seen the flier, and with harsh orders the Katakis beat us back to the treeline. I mused on this even as I ran in my chains. So the Katakis were wary enough of fliers to take these precautions!

My immediate reaction of resistance was speedily overcome as the chains were hauled up, I tripped and, helpless, fell off balance, to be dragged through the sand and shells and scrub and gorse into the trees.

With a curse I clawed my way up and stared into the sky.

The flier dropped lower, swinging toward us, so that the lines of her illuminated ports disappeared and only the fore lights showed. She dipped. The breeze had now sunk to a mere whisper in the leaves. I could hear the hoarse breathing of men and women all about me — men and women! — even if I was the only apim there.

“Absolute quiet!” The voice of the Notor cut into the silence, like a risslaca hiss.

At my side I felt Fanal go rigid with fear of the lash.

The flier swung down. I stood up. I shouted.

“Delia! Seg! Inch! Down here! There are foemen—”

That nurdling cramph Reterhan hit me then. He laid the flat of his tail-blade against my head and, although I broke most of its force with my arm, the thing smashed into my temple with force enough to admit the near presence of the Notor Zan and his blackness. I had been so intent on putting a quarterdeck bellow into my voice, as I would hail the fore-top of a squally night, that I had broken one of my own cardinal rules. It nearly broke my arm, too. I went over sideways and lay for a moment on the sandy grass, cursing my own folly.

By the time they dragged me to my feet and the procession of slaves started up again, the flier had gone.

Either she had not been the flier with Delia aboard, or my people had not heard me.

I was as sure as I could be about anything that had she been our flier, my people could not have heard me, for if they had they would have been here by now, with longbows flashing and swords chunking.

For the rest of that miserable night we lay confined in the next fishing village. Its inhabitants had been turned out for us. They were apim, but small and meek; their fishing boats were simple open affairs, the fishing grounds no more than a league offshore, and I felt — with no emotions I could feel ashamed of — that they would have difficulty in actually killing their catch. The Katakis took a few slaves from here, a few of the young girls; the rest were sent to spend the night as best they might on the beach. This, to me, exemplified the aragorn's contempt for them.

The crockery of the villagers was pressed into use and we were fed a thin fish gruel. As you know, I am not enamored of fish, but I forced myself to eat the revolting stuff, for like any sensible fighting-man I eat when I can against the certain privations in store in the future. There were no palines, which was an affront, but we got the word that there might be squishes in the morning — if we behaved ourselves.

The morning came with the twin Suns of Scorpio rising out of the Shrouded Sea wreathed in a flamboyant mantle of green, gold, and orange. We sat upon the packed dirt of the village square, yawning and knuckling our eyes. Everyone was thonged up, one to another; I wore the iron chains. More fish gruel was followed by a muttering clamor among the slaves.

“Where are the squishes? Where is some bread?” The new slaves were distinctly upset and, this early in their slave careers, annoyed. “We cannot live on this fish—”

The Katakis went about with their whips, right merrily, and soon no one was asking where the promised squishes were.

I confess I looked on my fellow prisoners with not a little superiority — foolish, I know, but understandable. They were just beginning the life of slaves. I had been a slave many and many a time, high and low, pampered and flogged, as stolor and as miner. They would find out. Slavery is an evil, and I grew every season more and more sure that the reason I had been brought to Kregen was to stamp out that evil. I was only partly right in that, as you shall hear if these tapes last out . . .

An aragorn ran into the square yelling and waving his arms. Instantly the square was filled with the sounds of blows and yells as the Katakis whipped and bludgeoned the slaves out of sight. A string of calsanys was prodded beneath the long verandah of the headman’s house, and, being calsanys, they did what calsanys always do when upset.

It was now clear with the daylight that there were more Katakis than those who had brought us in, and there were more slaves. This miserable village had been taken over and was being used as an entrepôt for slaves, a barracoon on a grand scale. Katakis armed with crossbows ran across the square. Reterhan came rushing toward us, his tail high, its curved blade glinting in the suns. He carried a long strip of cloth.

In all the hustle and bustle I saw what was being done.

The village was being returned to its original innocent state. Not a Katakis in sight. Not a calsany that would look out of place. Not a weapon. All the fish-gruel bowls were collected and dumped into the nearest hut. Soon — in mere murs only — the village lay under the rising suns looking like just another poverty-stricken fishing village.

I looked up.

A flier cruised into sight.

I recognized her. I had seen her first in the arena of the Jikhorkdun in Huringa, when I had fought the boloth. Her decks were crowded with people. I would have known who those people were anywhere. And I would have known the flags that fluttered from her masts — every flag the scarlet field with the yellow cross. Old Superb! My flag! Oh, yes, my heart leaped when I saw that voller come flying so serenely over the fishing village.

Then Reterhan and a comrade wrapped the length of cloth about my mouth, ramming a chunk of wood

between my lips so that my teeth grated, and knotted it tightly behind my head.

They did not wish to knock me out, for we would be marching soon. I thought that — fool that I was!

“Silence!” The Kataki Notor waved his tail-blade to impress on us the seriousness of the moment. “Absolute silence, all you rasts! I’ll hang and jerk the first of you who cries out!”

I wondered if he would do that, for a slave with crippled arms is scarcely a salable commodity. But it impressed the cowed Lamnias, and Ochs, and Rapas.

Reterhan leered at me, his face filled with an evil I now recognized as being a true reflection of his evil mind.

“Lem rot you, apim! You may watch and suffer, but you cannot cry out!”

Now I understood exactly what ghastly scene was to be enacted here. Lines of Kataki crossbowmen leveled their weapons. They knelt under the cover of houses, in fishing-net sheds, behind walls. They would be invisible from the air. The voller ghosted down, her flags brilliant in the morning suns-glow, and descended to a landing in the village where the hard-packed dust made a descent inviting. Delia, Inch, Seg, and the others were looking for me, and they were searching here.

But when they touched down they would be deluged with a sudden, treacherous sleeting of crossbow bolts. Those who survived would be swept up as slaves. All my friends — so soon to be murdered or enslaved!

And I was bound and helpless in iron chains, gagged so that I could not cry out a warning!

### CHAPTER THREE

Of the pulling of a Kataki tail

The flier was in truth a magnificent vessel. She moved with a sure steady grace over the village huts, and her people were hanging overside and staring down, and some of them waving . . .

The iron chains about me bit into my flesh as my muscles bulged. Futile! I tried to gnaw through the wooden chunk in my mouth; but the wood was balass and I merely bit down with teeth-crunching agony. I writhed about in the violence of my movements and the iron chains clanked.

Reterhan looked most evilly upon me, and placed his foot on my neck, and pressed. Sparks darted and flashed before my eyes; but they were clear enough to see the flier turning, the scarlet and yellow flags dropping to their flagstuffs now as way came off. I stared. Then I dragged my gaze away.

The flier had to be warned.

Vangar ti Valkanium, as the flier Hikdar, was bringing her in smoothly and gently, a perfect landing approach. Those people up there would see below them merely a sleepy, poor and innocent fishing village, with precious few people about at this time of morning.

They would not expect serried lines of crossbowmen.

Here in the continent of Havilfar, south of the equator, we were far from our homes in Vallia and Valka.

But Havilfar was accounted the most progressive, the most modern, of the four continents that made up this grouping upon the face of the planet. Around the shores of the Shrouded Sea men had settled here first, long ago, and in the tumbled ruins of long-forgotten empires, in the artificial features of the landscape, in the admixtures of blood within the different species and races, were to be seen clear evidence of that long history of civilization here.

Seg, that wild and reckless bowman of Erthyrdrin, was up there in the flier. He and I had fought our way through the Hostile Territories. He would never in ordinary circumstances be taken unawares in ambush. Likewise Inch, that seven-foot-tall ax-man from Ng'grogro so obsessed with his taboos, and I had battled through adventures. He, too, was a seasoned campaigner.

And — and up there on the high quarterdeck stood Delia, my Delia of Delphond!

At any moment now the voller would touch down. And then the cruel steel-tipped bolts would flash in a raining cloud of destruction.

Reterhan's foot pressed with jovial power upon my neck.

Up in the flier was Korf Aighos, the leader of the rascally but loyal Blue Mountain Boys. Up there was Turko the Shield, that superbly muscled Khamorro of the magical murdering hands; but I felt his great shield would offer some protection, and I prayed Zair he would slap it across before Delia when the bolts whickered in. Tom ti Vulheim and his Valkan Archers were there, ready to be cut down before they could draw bow. Obquam of Tajkent, the flying Strom, would be there, and I longed for his slender powerful form to flash out on his narrow wings to scout this innocent-seeming deathtrap.

Also, up there in the voller, were those new friends who had saved me in the arena by their selfless devotion: Naghan the Gnat, armorer superb; Balass the Hawk, who had earned the distinction of becoming a hyr-kaidur, Tilly, my little golden-furred Fristle fifi; and Oby, that young rascal who had aspired to greatness in the arena, but had had his dreams shattered, to be replaced by a vision of a greater future — and who must, I suspected, figure in the shadowy schemes of the Star Lords.

All of them might in the next few murs be lying dead, pierced through and through with arbalest quarrels. Or they might be staggering up to be chained as was I and be carried off into slavery.

Oh, Delia, my Delia!

I rolled my eyes at the Lamnia youth, Fanal. He saw me looking at him. I could not cry out. But he could. He could warn the airboat. Across my face that old evil look of power and arrogance passed, and my eyes glared with a mad berserker brilliance, so that he flinched away. But he turned his head, and would not look at me, and he did not cry out a warning.

No one would shout voluntarily.

So I must do something horrible.

Reterhan's foot slid from my neck as I squirmed. I got my linked chains up and swung the small bight they had allowed me, and so snared that curved blade mounted at the end of his whiplike tail.

Metal splines ran down from the blade to give stiffening and protection to the end two feet of tail.

The chains snagged beneath the blade where it curved from its socket I rolled and lurched and staggered



up and I pulled.

I pulled Reterhan's tail.

It was not a gentle pull. It was a savage, barbaric sinew-and-muscle-bursting jerk.

Reterhan yelled.

He could not stop himself.

The Katakis opened his mouth and yelled blue bloody murder.

His shout of agony bellowed across the open space.

I was not content.

Circling, I twisted the tail about me and jerked again with utmost vicious force. The Katakis leaped and toppled toward me, and I truly think had he not done so I would have wrenched his tail out all bloody by its roots.

His agonized screaming knifed through the air where the mingled streaming light of the Suns of Scorpio threw twin shadows of the flier across the packed dirt.

The chains so cunningly bighted around by ankles and knees would not allow me to walk, let alone run, and that stumbling circle was the only progress I could make. I fell to the dirt and tried to roll myself like a barrel of cheap dopa out into the cleared area. A warning! My brain blazed with the single desire to warn my comrades in the voller.

The rolling did not get me far, but it saved my life, for two crossbow bolts sizzled into the earth, gouging clods, where I had been.

Covered in sweat and caked dirt I dragged in a lungful of breath and glared at Reterhan, who was crouching up, his left hand clamped bone-white across his mouth, his right hand feeling his injured tail. He was in no position to hit me again for some time.

The flier halted its descent. It hovered a dozen feet above the open space.

The rows of heads that had been showing over the bulwarks had all vanished, and I heaved a great gasp of relief. Those men of mine up there were alerted! They would not know what was going on down here, but now they would not come down meekly to be massacred and enslaved.

I had expected a sheeting storm of crossbow bolts to rise toward the flier, and I was confident enough in her armoring to know it would take more than a hand-held arbalest to drive through. A good-sized varter would be needed, and the Katakis, as far as I knew, did not dispose of vartars here.

But this Katakis Notor was a cunning lord. He also held his men under a strong controlling rein, for he had not given the order to shoot, and so no one loosed.

No one shot at me, either, so I guessed the Notor had a scheme afoot.

I saw him giving swift orders; then he divested himself of his war-gear. Off came the scaled tunic, the

greaves, the close-fitting helmet. His thraxter and stuxes were grasped by an attendant. Two more worked rapidly on his tail and soon they unstrapped that wicked curved blade.

The Notor snatched up a net-needle and its spool of thread from a draping net by a wall. Clad only in his breechclout — that scarlet kilt! — he walked slowly, bent over and shuffling, into the central plaza. He shaded his eyes and looked up.

“You are most welcome, whoever you are!” he called up. “We are but a small village and poor. We have nothing for aragorn to plunder or for slave-masters to covet, for all our strong young men and beautiful girls are gone in the plague.”

Reterhan was still totally absorbed in his concern for his tail, but his comrade stifled a little gust of merriment at his Notor’s words.

I felt the chill of despair.

Vangar ti Valkanium leaned over the quarterdeck rail and bellowed.

“We wish you no harm, old man. The plague, you say?”

“The dropping sickness and the purple buboes. It is a visitation from Chezra-gon-Kranak for our sins, though we know not how we have offended the Great Ones.”

I’ll give this evil Katakis lord his due; he made a convincing liar.

“We will come and assist you, old man,” yelled down Vangar. “We have medicines—”

I was on tenterhooks.

The Notor waved his tail, all innocent and naked as it was.

“I thank you, Notor, but we are few and the sickness passes.”

Some further conception came to me then of the way these Katakis aragorn operated. The Notor could see the crowded decks and the glitter of weapons, he could see the vartars ranked along the broadsides, all fully manned. He could not fail to understand that this flier and these men were a most formidable opposition. All surprise had been lost. A shower of crossbow bolts now would do little damage, and then the vartars would loose and the return arrows would come in . . .

To give him his due, he preferred to go around terrorizing the villages and taking plunder and slaves without trouble. Much though the Katakis liked a fight, they would not fight if the odds were against them. There was no profit in tangling with this powerful adversary — or so I read his thoughts.

“You’re sure you do not require assistance?”

That was Seg Segutorio, leaning over the rail, his black hair brilliant in the sun-glow.

“We do not, Notor.”

An incredibly tall figure with waist-length yellow hair stood beside Seg. Inch lifted his battle-ax.

“You have food? Wine? Can we not help you, old man?”

“I thank you, Notor. But we have what little we need.”

And then Delia stood on the quarterdeck. I could stare up and see her, there, above my head, leaning over the rail, radiant, glorious in her beauty, the true princess of an island empire, and yet, as I well knew, so softly firm and tender and filled with love for me and for our twins.

“Have you seen a man washed up from the sea?” She called down. “A man—” She paused then, and whether it was sob or laugh I did not know. “A strange man with brown hair and brown eyes, with shoulders that — with broad shoulders — a man of power, a man with an aura. Have you seen such a man — who would be very violent, I am afraid, if you or anyone tried to maltreat him.”

“Is this man a Hyr-notor, my lady?”

“Oh, yes, and a great villain besides. He is my husband and I search the Shrouded Sea for him—”

“I have seen no man as you describe, my lady.”

I was writhing in my chains and trying to break the iron links, trying to roll out into the open, trying — oh, trying to send my passionate thoughts winging from my mind into the mind of my beloved as she stood above me, looking down, her lovely face troubled and darkly shadowed by her grief — her grief for me!

Reterhan had assured himself his tail was still attached to him. He stood up in the shadow of the huts and the trees, and he strutted toward me, holding his tail in his left hand.

So close! So near at hand were my friends, just a tiny distance away! That just one of them might see me! I rolled and clashed my chains and Reterhan stood over me, his greave-clad legs wide-spread. He took out his thraxter. If I was to die now, then in what a fashion I was to go! This was no way that my Anglo-Saxon forebears would relish as dying well. I rolled onto my back and glared up murderously. The gag stifled me. I saw Reterhan lift the thraxter and I saw his wrist turn so as to bring the flat alongside my head.

The twin suns of Kregen and the seven moons all spurted up and were gobbled down into the blackness of Notor Zan.

The last thing I saw was the glorious and divine face of my Delia as she stared out, so woefully troubled, over the quarterdeck rail.

If I was to go down into the great darkness and find my way to the Ice Floes of Sicce, then I would take with me that last look of longing that contained all of love. So I fell into the blackness, and the darkness was irradiated for me by Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The ways of the aragorn

I, Dray Prescot, Krozair of Zy and Lord of Strombor — and much else besides — came back to consciousness sluggishly packed among my fellow slaves in an open flier. The stink and the groans and the shrieks were all familiar to me, not from this Earth but from Kregen, and I knew I must endure. I was

still alive, which surprised me only a little, for slaves equate with money. We were worth many golden deldys and silver sinvers almost anywhere in Havilfar.

A dead Och lay at my side, his four little arms shriveled and wrapped around his wasted body.

The flier remained firm and solid in the sky with that peculiar way of a certain kind of voller which travels independently of the wind, and there was no pitching and rolling to add to our discomfort. The flier was of that kind I was to come to know well later, but which until then I had not encountered. She was long and wide in the beam, but shallow, being open and without a deck. A tiny cabin had been perched amidships to house the controls and crew. The slaves lay jammed like logs. They call these barge-like vollers *weyvvers* in Havilfar, and sometimes they refer to them as Quoffas of the Sky. They are designed simply to cram as much cargo as possible into a flat space, without niceties of careful loading in tiers. The slaves were mere lumber.

Fanal lay miserably at my other side.

He would not meet my eye when I stirred.

He understood what I had asked of him, back there in the fishing village, and he had failed. I could not blame him. All men are not built in the same way, and Kregen, let alone the Earth of my birth, would be a strange place if all men were alike. And as for all women . . . !

Presently he said in a whisper, "I am glad you are not dead, Horter Prescott."

"What happened to the flier?"

"The Katak Notor convinced them he was a harmless old fishing man, who needed no assistance with the plague. They flew away."

They flew away.

Well. It was a disappointment, but also it was a relief. I had, in the instant of awakening, been horrified that I would turn and see my people, my Delia, wrapped in chains and thongs and wedged in among the mass of slaves.

"The flier flew well?"

"I have not seen many vollers. She flew low away to the west, as though she were searching for this Hyr-notor — this man with the yrium — of which the lady apim spoke."

He looked at me then, a real Lannia look, shrewd, sizing me up anew.

"You are the man they sought, Horter Prescott?"

"Yes, Horter Fanal. I am the man."

"I think perhaps if the aragorn realize this they will sell you for ransom."

"It would be paid," I said. I did not boast. I knew what I knew. To my shame, I knew that the coffers of Valka and Can-thirda, of Zamra and Delphond and the Blue Mountains, would pour forth gold and jewels and treasures if by those means my Delia could once more clasp me in her arms.

And if they were not enough, then Seg's Falinur and Inch's Black Mountains would bring more gold and jewels. And, if necessary, Delia would go to Strombor, my enclave in Zenicce, aye! and to the Clansmen of Felschraung and Longuelm to take of their treasures for my release.

These thoughts brought me no elation. I knew that the treasure of a country is not bought without sweat and blood and the labors of the working people who are the real originators of wealth. The comfort was that I could perhaps give of myself in after days so that my people, and my friends' people, could quickly recoup their losses and once more live comfortable lives, as I wished.

No mention of ransom was made then or thereafter, and maybe the aragorn of Sorah had no real belief in it, not recking of lands so far away across the equator as Vallia and Valka, of which they had barely heard.

Sorah itself was a large and prosperous island of the Shrouded Sea. Canopdrin lay not too far to the north. The weyver touched down inside the cleared central area of a vast barracoon, and we were herded out and given more revolting fish gruel. Then after washing in water lightly sprinkled with vinegar, our hair was cropped, and, stark naked, we were prodded into lenk-wood cages.

There was much shouting and cursing and belaboring with balass sticks. The Kataki also used their tails upon us most vilely, but in all this brutality they were careful not to mark or cut too severely the merchandise by which they made their evil living.

Rumors swept the barracoon as was to be expected.

A Rapa said positively that he would slit his throat with a sharpened flint before he would go to the Jikhorkdun of Hamal or Hyrklana. He refused to discuss the possibility of being sold into the Heavenly Mines or the pearl fisheries of Tancrophor.

The women were segregated; they would be sorted out into classes so that they might be sold to the best advantage. The men were also sorted, and here I parted with Fanal of Podia. He kept himself cheered by the thought that he might end up as a stylor or perhaps a steward upon an important estate.

The art of reading and writing had once before brought me an easier task among slaves;[1]but here in Havilfar the art was much more common. If I was sent to the Jikhorkdun of Hamal life might be interesting. There are many arenas in the Empire of Hamal, and there is more than one in the realm of Hyrklana. If I was sold as a coy to the Jikhorkdun of Huringa I scarcely relished what Queen Fahia would do. Had I not contemptuously tossed the bloody tail of the silver-collared leem in her face? Had I not shamed her in the arena before all her people, and, at the end, had I not slain the boloth and escaped? Queen Fahia and her neemus would be overjoyed to see me back in the Jikhorkdun.

So it was that as the rumors swept the packed barracoon I determined that I would not be sold back to the amphitheater in Huringa, the capital city of Hyrklana, to be fresh sport for that foolish, fat, and yet nasty little Queen Fahia.

Bunches of slaves were taken out from time to time to be oiled and cleaned up and paraded for prospective buyers.

Sorah is a large island and her slave pens are notorious. The aragorn do a good trade. They charge high prices for their merchandise and traders come from all over Havilfar.

A group of Shaslins was herded out one morning after fish gruel. They were just about the only people there who relished the foul stuff, for the Shaslins are a sea-people; they look not unlike what some wild mating of a human with a seal might produce, with their sleek streamlined heads, their sloping shoulders, and their arms and hands, legs and feet, beautifully adapted for swimming and diving. Their pelts gleamed in the sunlight, for the food was good for them. But they set up a tremendous racket, screaming and shrieking, and had to be dragged out to the waiting fliers of their buyers.

“They have been sold to Tancrophor and will dive until they die in the pearl fisheries.”

The man who spoke to me, a Brokelsh, looked as annoyed as any slave has a right to be. His dark body bristles stiffened.

“But they are a fishing folk,” I said, somewhat unwisely.

“Aye! The Shaslins can swim well. But the devils of Tancrophor drive them to their limits, and they cough blood and their heads split with the ringing of the bells of Beng-Kishi. I am glad I do not go to the pearl fisheries of Tancrophor.”

This Brokelsh was sold with others to a Notor who owned many kools of land in Methydria. Other slaves were sold, and then it was my turn. I spent less than a day in the Sorah barracoon and I took no pride from the price I brought. I had taken one simple precaution during the ritual questioning of my abilities. I lied. I said I knew nothing of swords and battles and fighting, and whether or not the record-keeping Kataki believed me, I do not know. But he sold me to an agent from Hamal buying workers for the Heavenly Mines.

You have probably heard it said more than once that if you can keep your head when others all around you are losing theirs, then maybe you do not fully understand the situation.

There were two brothers, two apims, fine young men with strong shoulders and sinewy backs. When the understanding hit them that they were sold to the Heavenly Mines, they looked into each other's eyes and, with a previous arrangement clearly agreed between them, placed their hands on each other's throats. The two brothers stood there, facing each other, gazing one at the other in brotherly love, and choked each other to death. Guards bustled through with their balass sticks lashing and dragged the two apart. The finger-marks glared lividly upon their throats. One of the brothers was dead. The other was revived, and when he realized what had happened he sat in a ball, his hands over his head, crooning. He had become insane, and if I thought that would disqualify him from laboring in the mines of Hamal I was mistaken. This young man, Agilis, was taken out with the rest of us to the waiting fliers.

Many of us fought. The guards brought their balass sticks down viciously now, now that we were sold. I kept a wary lookout for Reterhan, but I did not see him — luckily for him.

“Treat them carefully, you onkers!” The agent from Hamal, a Rapa, screeched at the Kataki guards, and he tried to protect his merchandise without letting them beat him over the head. I joined in. After all, I knew the outcome of this; the slaves would be battered into submission and be dragged aboard the fliers. But I admit I wanted to get in a few whacks before that.

A surprised Kataki felt his tail pulled, and as he swung toward me, roaring, I took the balass stick away and clouted him over the head with it. Then I jumped into the melee.

Well, foolish as I was then, and stark stupid as I am now if I still recall some pleasure in laying about me at those evil Kataki faces, I feel only a little shame in saying that I enjoyed thwacking that long ebony

stick down and stretching a few of the aragorn senseless.

We fought in a small enclosure at the side of the main barracoon, with a lenk-wood fence beyond. The gates were closed and the fliers from Hamal waited, hovering, to pick us up. The thought of escape flashed across my mind with considerable shock. At once I began to fight in earnest, bashing now with intent and working my way through to the nearest flier. But, as I have said, the Katakis are good man-managers, like so many of the aragorn and slave-masters I have met on Kregen.

At a raucous shout the fliers lifted out of reach, and reinforcements of Katakis pounded into the small enclave. They must have gone through this scene or similar scenes a hundred times. I guessed they did not bother to practice a deception on the slaves and tell them nothing of their destination because they wished to enjoy the sufferings and anticipatory horror of the slaves. I saw at last that any further joyous slashing and bashing would get nowhere and so I tripped a Katakis, kicked him in the belly, hurled his screeching form, and dived into the safe shadows by the lenk fence.

When it was all over I walked out, unruffled.

I, Dray Prescot, had stood calmly and watched a fight going on and made no further effort to interfere — and that, mark you, a fight between slaves and aragorn! Truly, I was either growing old and stupid or old and wise. It is my experience that being a father is a wonderfully sobering device.

I most certainly did not bother to observe the fantamyrth as I stepped aboard the Hamalian slave flier. I fancied I'd let the rasts take whatever sorrow their pantheon of gods and devils might care to hand out.

The flier was a simple, practical, no-nonsense vessel with ample capacity below decks for slaves and with enough armament above decks to repel any expected normal attack by volroks or laccapins or volleem, or any combination of flying mount and rider. I understood that the free-flying brethren of the air, the flutsmen, might well be operating in the vicinity, for there had been unrest around the Shrouded Sea; the flutsmen, the mercenaries of the skies, had been called in by more than one worried ruler.

The slaves slumped down on the low tween-decks, a thoroughly subdued lot. Their terror remained, for they had heard lurid stories of the Heavenly Mines of Hamal, although when I asked more probing questions it soon turned out all the information anyone had was mere hearsay, mere rumor circulating and magnified. There was one very good reason why information of this monstrous kind should be by hearsay only; and this will become all too apparent as I speak to you. So the slaves lay moaning and groaning and nursing their bruises and bumped heads as we flew on north-northeast over the Shrouded Sea.

The flier carried a fair-sized crew of slavers, men of a number of different races. We were given water to drink, chunks of bread — which the first mouthful told me had been baked from dilse, that almost useless yet common cereal — and thin, stringy strips of vosk. Again there were no palines, although there was a small supply of overripe malsidges, those melon-sized, somewhat tart fruits that, at the very least, keep the scurvy off a man. We were thrown sections of the malsidges and we scrabbled for them as they flew among us, and I, at least, sank my teeth into the sharp pulpy flesh with its flushed green color, eating right down to the brown and wrinkled skin.

The journey from the island of Sorah to the Heavenly Mines of Hamal is about three hundred and fifty dwaburs. I calculated roughly that the speed of the voller could not be above ten db — that is, ten dwaburs per bur. So we could expect to reach our destination in something like twenty-four or so Terrestrial hours. I settled down to a patient negation of everything outside me, willing to start more trouble when we reached these notorious mines.

The only incident of any interest occurred after we had crossed the coast up toward Methydria and could see in the far distance on our larboard side the hazy snowglint of a giant range of mountains. Two rofers appeared above us, beating through the air with massive strokes of their enormous wings, their necks outstretched. The flying animals, sailing past, looked calm and majestic, and we could see that each carried seating for a family of Fristles, six or so, with the little ones perched high at junction of neck and body craning over to look at us.

Although the root syllable *flut* does not appear in its name, the rofer is a kind of bird. Not so the tyryvols which, with their riders brandishing welcoming tridents, surrounded us as we settled into a gigantic basin in the foothills. These tyryvols are large flying animals, with whip tails, wicked, intelligent eyes, and bodies clad in flexible scales that evolution has not yet changed into feathers; although their wings — given another few million years or so — will sprout true feathers, I shouldn't wonder. They come in different colorations, although the most favored color chosen by the aerial riders of Hamal is a lustrous mottle of black and ocher, with scarlet claws and bands of multicolored scales around their necks. They impressed me, these tyryvols, who had seen impiters and corths of the Hostile Territories, not to mention fluttrells and mirvols of Havilfar.

Their riders were short squat diffs with thin bandy legs. Their faces reminded me of the Ullars of Ullardrin of Northern Turismond, although there was none of that indigo dyed hair. There was, however, the same savagery about the square clamp of their mouths. At this time they habitually wore black and ocher scaled clothing made from the skins of the tyryvols, and they carried those damnably sharp tridents, and the thin flexible sword of the aerial fighter. These are the Gerawin of Gilarna the Barren in the Empire of Hamal. They proved to be immensely efficient guards and watchdogs over the Heavenly Mines for the Hamalese.

Around us stretched the barrens. The foothills trended up steadily toward the west and northwest. The task of escape from the mines on foot would be a daunting enterprise and one not to be considered without many days' food and water and, inevitably, a weapon of defense against the frightful dangers infesting all such spots.

The Hamalese are an efficient people. The dominant species happens to be apim; but the many species of diffs take a full part in government, industry, commerce, and all the other branches of activity that make up a thriving empire. Hamal was an ambitious and outwardly thrusting empire. They made airboats and sold them to Vallia and Zenicce and other favored customers, although they would not sell to Pandahem or Loh. That efficiency took us in, cleansed and fed us, and let us rest for a space. Then we were issued picks and shovels. An example was made of a Gon who wanted to shave his hair and so made trouble; the cold, calculating discipline administered to him chilled all the slaves' blood, and then that harsh impersonal discipline, that massive adherence to law and order, imposed its full weight on us. We marched down to the mines and went through the artificially illuminated passageways cut in the rock, and so came out to a vast and echoing space in the mountain. Here we set to work to hack the rock away and fill baskets with the broken stuff. The baskets were drawn on a track by calsanys, to the opening where crushers and refiners went to work, powered by the arms and backs of slaves.

That efficiency saw that every slave worked to the uttermost of his strength. Everything was regulated down to the last drop of water. Rock was cut, drawn out, crushed, refined, and parceled up into fliers to be sent somewhere in Hamal of which we had no knowledge then.

The whole process was inhuman.

The last ounce of effort was taken from every slave.



It was possible to survive, for I saw old men still laboring away, although the turnover was rapid, for the labor simply wore a man down until he saw no good reason to go on living. Absolute inhumanity reigned here. Work — slaving work — filled every day. Rest periods were calculated out with a nicety that allowed a man to recuperate just enough energy to return with his shift to work the next time around.

By comparison, the Black Marble Quarries of Zenicce, in which I'd spent some time, seemed to have been run by amateurs.

Order, law, discipline, rule. The lash, starvation, deprivation of water so that thirst tore a man's spirit and made of him a tool in the hands of the Hamalese, all these things conspired together to make of the Heavenly Mines a place that proved Agilis knew what he was doing when he strangled his brother and would have allowed his brother to strangle him in return . . .

So I entered another period of my varied life on Kregen that, even now, fills me with a most profound horror, a revulsion of spirit that brought me face to face with the man I thought I was, the man Dray Prescott, shorn of all titles and petty ranks and symbols. It was just me, Dray Prescott, pitted against inhuman will and discipline.

I knew only one thing.

I would not give in.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Heavenly Mines

Everything had a number.

Every pickax carried its number burned into the haft and punched into the ax. Every shovel carried its number burned and cut. Every drinking bowl. Every spoon. Every eating bowl. A number was branded on the hide of every calsany. Each tunnel, each chamber, each working face, every one possessed its own number.

We slept in rock shelters set against an old and abandoned cut's side. Each rock hut had a number painted above the open door, which was provided with no blanket or hide. We slept on packed earth and each little space had a number scribed in the earth. We each possessed a single thin blanket, and this miserable covering had its number also.

And, as was inevitable, every slave had his own number.

Dray Prescott scarcely existed any longer.

The slave, number 8281, stood in his stead.

The number was branded on my chest and on my back for all to see.

The Hamalese used the common Kregish numbering and in normal times that linear script form is most beautiful. Here they had adopted the square and blocky numerology, so that my chest and back shouted aloud to the indifferent world that I was 8281.

The weird distortion of reality that must take place in surroundings of this nature and under psychological

pressures so matter-of-fact and ingrained caught me up, so that I became completely habituated to think of myself as 8281. Whereas I might have taken violently against the number, instead I embraced it. For the number was me. I was the number. Eight-two-eight-one was Dray Prescott. Eight-two-eight-one existed.

By thus rushing forward and embracing my numerical alter ego I was able to dissociate myself from the almost psychotic anger of some of my fellows, who would not answer to their numbers until beaten, who refused to think of themselves as a number because of the lessening of simple human dignity.

I knew a little about human dignity; but I wished to survive.

I had witnessed the punishment of the Gon who wanted his head to be shaved, as is the fashion of Gons, through what I consider to be a foolish matter of shame over their white hair. He was not thrashed unmercifully, for the Hamalese guards and overseers had nothing written down in their laws and rules about mercy. He was simply punished as the law ordained for refusing to do his quota of work. The summary court which sat on the matter dismissed his reasons as untenable.

He was beaten with the regulation number of strokes each day he refused to work. Everything was carried out with the punctilio and observance of the law that I had seen so many times aboard a King's Ship, when a hand was triced up to the gratings and given a red-checked shirt at the gangway. His crime placed him into most serious jeopardy, so that it was lawful to jikaider him, that is, flog crisscross.

After he had been flogged jikaider for the regulation fifty lashes he would be cut down and then the medical men would see to him, as was required by law. His back would be doctored and the medic would pronounce him unfit to work for the period his back would take to heal. Then, when he refused to work again, he would be jikaidered again.

This went on until he died.

And when he died that long and flowing white hair of the typical Gon glittered silver and brave in the dying light of the suns.

He had been number 8279, and that was how I remembered him.

I lost count of the days, and that alarmed me. But the apathy of work and of numbers held me in a grip I could not break. Fresh fliers brought fresh slaves. A Bleg came into our hut with the numbers 8279 branded on his breast and back over the atrophied carapace, and I shook my head and called him that, although I did not forget the Gon.

The question of what was mined here teased me at the beginning; but gradually I grew indifferent. The mountains existed. We must chop them down and break them up and shovel them into the wicker baskets, they would be carried to the chaldrons, and the calsanys would draw them out to the crushers. The refiners, powered by a sickly green stream flowing over a bluff and falling into a scummy pool, rich in minerals, would do their work; then what was left over would be packed in wooden crates, lined with leather, and loaded aboard fliers. When the quota dropped, the law permitted an increase in working burs. A bur is forty Earth minutes long. It grew so that at the face a bur seemed to stretch to a Terrestrial hour. And still I had no idea what the refined rock was needed for, what the Hamalese, Zair rot 'em, did with it, why they forced this agony on fellow human beings.

The tailings stretched for dwaburs along the base of the foothills, ulm after ulm of them, spreading a powdery and ashlike detritus. What the refiners did, what sort of rock this was, what was taken from it

— all these things I did not know and gradually came not to care about.

Early on I had said to a man, an apim, laboring alongside me, “What do they want the rock for, dom?”

“I do not know,” he had said, bashing his pick so that chips flew. “I only wish I could choke the rasts with it.”

“Amen to that,” I said, striking with my pick.

No one knew.

Every day we labored. There were no rest days.

The knowledge that if I did not escape soon I might forget that escape existed drove me on. While loading the fliers one day — for the Hamalese rotated tasks according to their rules — a man was discovered secreted in one of the leather-lined wooden boxes. Where guards of other peoples perhaps would have had sport with him — for example, taking him aloft so that he thought he was escaping, and then pitching him overboard; or weighing the box and declaring it was short-weight and so pouring rock upon him until he was crushed — the guards at the Heavenly Mines acted strictly according to the law.

The Hamalians — or Hamalese, either term is quite correct — took him in chains to a summary court, where he was found guilty — for he was certainly that, having tried to escape — and sentenced to the prescribed punishment.

There are always sedentary jobs to be done in a mining complex like this, work that can be performed quite well by a man who cannot walk, by a man, say, who has no legs.

They found him that employment. The law had no wish for extra severity and would not take his life. Slaves of quality were hard to come by in great quantity, and would not be wasted, only refuse being sent as victims to the arenas. And only tough fighters would do as coys, apprentice kaidurs.

This man, number 5763, sat all day at his task, his stumps beautifully bandaged. He had shouted that he came from Hyrklana; but that did not help him.

If he tried to escape again, the law would be more severe on him; and, as was written down, at the third attempt would then demand his life.

He would be hanged in the most strict ritual procedure.

I witnessed only two hangings, one for a third-time escape attempt, incredible though that may be, and one for a slave who had struck an overseer.

This slave was a Chulik.

Had he killed the overseer the law admitted that the next of kin, or the dead man’s superior officer failing a next of kin, might stipulate what punishment the murderer would suffer before death.

They were colorful in their thinking in those areas, were the bereaved in Hamal.

And there was no revenge, no bloodthirsty shrilling anger in all this. It was all written down in the laws of the land . . .

A new slave, number 2789 — for they filled up the old roster numbers with new slaves at the Heavenly Mines — said to me, “Eight-two-eight-one! I must escape! I’ll go mad!”

I said to him, “Two-seven-eight-nine. To escape is so difficult it is scarcely worth the attempt. Better for you to go mad.”

Only later, as I sat eating my chunk of bread — made from good corn, for the Hamalese wished to keep up our strength — and coarse pudding of vosk and onion, with a finger over the gregarian at the side of my bowl, was the truth of what I had said borne in on me.

I, Dray Prescott, unwilling to contemplate escape?

Number 8281 knew the truth. Dray Prescott was an empty boaster, a bladder of wind. Eight-two-eight-one knew the truth.

It took me a day to think of the subject again. We were opening up a new seam far down into the guts of the mountain. The rock we wanted held a gray metallic sheen which differentiated it from the yellower rock all around. Yet it held no mineral I could tell. We simply took all the gray rock, irrespective of minor differences. This seam was narrow, and an overseer, a little Och holding with his four limbs a lamp, a wax notepad, a stylus, and a prodding stick, waddled up on his two lower legs to supervise. We were all crouched down, for the roof pressed close, and the oil lamp — it was not samphron-oil — smoked a little. I smelled the lamp; but, also, I smelled another nostril-tickling odor. In that confined space in the grotesque shadows of the lamp, the little Och prodding and writing, a Rapa guard with a spear bending almost double ready to spit the first one of us who did anything against the law — for the law would hold a guard within his rights if he killed protecting a Hamalian — I picked up the unmistakable scent of squishes.

Memories of Inch flashed into my mind, of his insatiable hunger for squish pie, and of the taboos he held in so great honor, and of that limb of Satan, Pando, taunting poor Inch with rich, ripe juicy squish pie.

The Och squeaked and backed away.

“All out!” He shouted so loudly some of the slaves jumped and a trickle of rock slid from the overhang. “All out at once! Guard, prod ’em along, you onker!”

We scuttled out.

We did not go back to that seam again.

Although I can recall that scene in all its clarity now, at the time with the same depressing grayness of days it passed from my mind; the little flicker of the idea of escape guttered like a candle in the opened stern-lantern of a swifter of the Eye of the World.

Number 2789 harked back to the idea of escape himself, and so forced me to contemplate reality. Was not 8281 also Dray Prescott? Was I not Pur Dray, Krozair of Zy? The Lord of Strombor? Prince Majister of Vallia? Kov of this and that, and Strom of Valka? Zorcander? Was I not? No title would help me now, but a Krozair brother is never beaten until he is ceremoniously slipped into the sea over the side of his swifter — if he can be buried decently by his brothers of the Order of Krozairs of Zy instead of dying in some stinking prison or under the longswords of those Grodnim crampfs of Magdag.

Despite all the horrendous difficulties, there had to be a way of escape.

The sheer efficiency of the Hamalese would make any attempt enormously difficult.

Probably escape was impossible. I wondered about it then, and I freely admit it, if it was possible for one man, even a Krozair of Zy, to escape from the Heavenly Mines of Hamal.

But, from somewhere, I found the determination to make that attempt. I did not care how foolhardy it might be. I knew, and I believe I understood at last, that merely staying alive was not enough. My Delia, my Delia of Delphond — who so far had not been called Delia of Strombor, as she had once wished — could not pine for me longer if I was dead than if I remained in these Opaz-forsaken mines.

So the decision was taken.

I would try to escape.

Number and order and law had worn me down. If you have listened to these tapes of my life upon Kregen you will know with what a hearty zest I detest and despise petty authority exercised in heartless and evil ways, without thought for those who are weak and unable to defend themselves.

Discipline is necessary in life — sometimes it is a necessary evil — but excessive discipline is a perversion.

Law dominated the men of Hamal.

I would turn their law against them.

Number 2789 would help. There were others, almost always newly arrived slaves who retained some shred of their old spirit. The Heavenly Mines in their soul-destroying regularity broke spirits as boys break twigs in sport.

I must have a plan ready to broach to the others, and then make it work. I worked out a scheme. Simplicity. Speed and simplicity. The seizure of a flier, for we would never walk out, offered our only chance, and the fliers were always well guarded. Strength. Well, we were strong from our unceasing and strenuous labors and the coarse but filling food.

The plans tumbled into my head and always the glorious face and figure of my Delia smiled at me, and her gorgeous brown hair with those outrageous tints of gold and auburn glinting filled me with uplifting determination. I collected a few loose scraps of jagged rock, for the law proscribed a slave possessing anything that might be used as a weapon when he came off shift, and all the picks and shovels with their numbers were checked into the stores.

In the hut I lay on the earth and drew my blanket about me. I turned over to think and I saw a reddish-brown scorpion scuttle out from a crack in the rock and stare at me, his tail high.

If you have listened to these tapes I believe you may have some faint inkling of my feelings then.

In that reedy scratchy voice I had heard before on the Battlefield of the Crimson Missals, the scorpion spoke to me.

“You get onker, Prescott!”

I knew no one else could hear that voice, or mine, in reply.

“I know.”

“There is no escape from the Heavenly Mines of Hamal.”

“You may be a messenger from the Star Lords, you and the Gdoinye; but I will escape.”

The scorpion waved his tail mockingly. “The Star Lords know you, Dray Prescott; they know you are a fool, a get onker, an onker of onkers. They know many things. They know you are such a stupid onker you might succeed where noone else has succeeded before.”

“Believe it, scorpion.”

“The Star Lords have a use for you, Prescott. A use far from here in space and time.”

Sheer terror hit me then, for if the Star Lords banished me back to Earth, as they could (as they could!), I might never be returned to Kregen beneath Antares. I started up, sweating, prepared to defy the Star Lords and all their superhuman power once again.

But the scorpion was growing, was glowing now with that damnable blue radiance, was bloating into a gigantic blue shape that filled the hut and burst the rock walls and so engulfed the night sky and all the stars and tumbled me headlong into that radiant blue confusion.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Star Lords blunder

Often and often had I cursed that I was merely a puppet, a mere hank of hair and blood and bone, dangling on the strings so callously pulled by the Savanti and the Star Lords. Well, that might be true, in its own way. But as you know I had been developing ways and means of circumventing the Star Lords. Oh, yes, they could still hurl me back four hundred light-years to the planet of my birth, perhaps never again to summon me to Kregen. They could forever sunder me from Delia, the only woman in two worlds that means anything to me — and I say that in due deference and love for all the other women who have been and are my friends. But this construction of artifices had more than once before kept me on Kregen. The Star Lords could be manipulated.

But this time the transition came with blinding suddenness. I yelled out, once again, in my own old intemperate bellow: “I will not return to Earth!*I will stay on Kregen!*”

I swear I heard a ghostly chuckle, and a voice that was in all probability in my head and not gusting from the blue radiance surrounding me, as I thought, say: “You get onker, Prescott! You would stay on Kregen even in the Heavenly Mines!”

“I would escape even where they say escape is impossible!”

“Maybe you would, Prescott, you wild leem. Maybe you would. But there is work under your hands, work for the Everoinye. And, Dray Prescott, you fail at your peril!”

I opened my eyes and the blue radiance fell away.

Above me blazed the twin Suns of Scorpio.

And — the red sun preceded the green across the sky!

Immediately I knew I was caught once more in a time loop cast by the Star Lords. Once again I had been thrown into the past. I could take great comfort from that, for my Delia was not waiting for me now in trembling apprehension, and whatever I had to do here — wherever here was — could be done and I might then rejoin my beloved and she would not have spent a single extra day in sorrow over my fate. Also, I knew, and the knowledge brought a shivery feeling of insecurity over me, that somewhere on the face of Kregen, I, Dray Prescott, was at this very minute fighting or drinking, slave or free, struggling on or living it up in luxury. At this very minute somewhere over the horizon a Dray Prescott that was me was walking and talking, fighting, and, perhaps, loving, and I own I found it all most weird, to be sure.

Then — why then the obvious thought occurred. If I was back to certain times past, there might *betwo* Dray Prescots battling on the surface of Kregen!

In Valka I had been thrown into a time loop.

I could be in the Hostile Territories right now, fighting on in our long journey with Seg, Thelda, and glorious Delia at my side; and at the same time I could be in Valka, fighting to free my island from the aragorn — and, at the same time, here I was, naked and weaponless as usual, ready to undertake some great new task.

I shivered a little at the power of the Star Lords.

I, Dray Prescott, who called them onkers and rasts and cramphs!

From my experiences in the Heavenly Mines I had emerged in reasonable condition, completely hairless, for the Hamalians with their rigid adherence to the rules shaved the slaves once a sennight, and without the brands on chest and back. I had to acknowledge that forethought to the Star Lords, although as I knew my dip in the Pool of Baptism in the River Zelfh of Aphrasöe as well as giving me a thousand years of life and phenomenal powers of recuperation also enabled my skin to slough off brand marks. Sometimes, as when I had been a hauler for the Emperor's barges, that had not been too comfortable an attribute.

Unlike most of my previous transitions to various unfriendly locations of Kregen, this time I had not landed slap bang in the midst of danger, action, and headlong adventure.

Around the Heavenly Mines stretched the Barrens, a deadly waste of desert and near-desert. All food had had to be imported. I stood up slowly, taking stock of my situation. Around me now extended broad fields, heavy with corn, with brilliant flowers blooming in the hedgerows alongside narrow lanes. A house or two showed red-tiled gables, and smoke drifted lazily from tall twisted chimneys. A flock of birds — ordinary Earth-like birds — swooped and squawked about a clump of trees remarkably like elms. Had the two brilliant suns of Antares not blazed down from the sky above I might have thought myself back at home, in a rich and golden autumn with all the goodness of the harvest to be gathered in.

This situation, then, was like no other that had confronted me on arrival on Kregen.

I could see at once the dangers here, the difficulties. Perhaps, if the truth was told, more danger for me existed in this apparently peaceful scene than in the damned Heavenly Mines of Hamal.

Did I tread the soil of Havilfar? Had I been taken back to Vallia, or to Turismond? Segesthes, perhaps? Or, a continent I had touched only at the tip of Erthyrdrin, Loh? The thought crossed my mind that I might have been deposited in one of the remaining three continents; but I had no information of value on them, and no one of the people of this grouping knew much of them; they were foreign and strange beyond the understanding of ordinary men and women.

A mirvoller flew out from the trees and passed across the sky and, without having to think, I took cover in a hedge. The mirvol flew effortlessly, and I caught the wink of weapons from its rider. The flyer passed out of sight.

As far as I knew mirvols were found only in Havilfar. So I felt reasonably sure I was still in Havilfar. If this was a game the Star Lords were playing with me, I knew only too well it was a deadly game, and failure would result in death or a fate worse than death, if you will pardon the expression, in my return to Earth.

Perhaps, the treacherous whisper crossed my mind, perhaps I was still in the rock hut of the Heavenly Mines, and I had imagined I had seen and spoken with the scorpion, and all this was pure hallucination.

A quoffa cart rumbled along the road, and the apim sitting in the front with a straw in his mouth and a wide hat pulled low over his forehead looked real enough. Naked as I was, I must accost him. He wore a shirt and trousers, a fashion quite often seen on Kregen, and I would face some quizzing, I felt sure. But it had to be done.

The white dust of the road puffed under the six pads of the quoffa, and his huge, patient, wise old face cheered me as I stepped out. This was a crossroads. A tall tree stood in one corner of the cross, and a blackened *thing* hung from a branch, chained and gruesome. I perked up. Directly across the angle of the road stood an inn, whose white walls and red roof leaned lazily against the sunlight, the windows winking in the sun. A table and a bench stood outside. I fancied I might find information there, if I could not stand a drink and a piece of vosk pie.

The red roof of the inn was new, for the tiles were unpitted and still full of color, but the far end gable roof showed older tiles, darkened and cracked here and there.

This was a mystery, this whole occurrence, so unlike anything that had happened before. The peacefulness of the scene, the calmness of the surroundings, even the *thing* in the gibbet to indicate that law was upheld and troubles past, all drew together to make me believe that *something* strange was happening.

I stepped out and opened my mouth to shout to the apim in the quoffa cart — and a blue radiance swept about me and a violent wind seemed to whirl me head over heels. I was still standing upright and on the same spot, but my impressions whirled chaotically. I saw the quoffa cart spin around, the tree bend and sway, the fields ripple and run as though a great and silent wind scored them flat.

I struggled to draw breath in that glowing azure radiance.

I gasped.

The quoffa cart had gone. The tree had changed, for its foliage was now of early season, and not of autumn. And the inn! Its roof was now old all over, darkened cracked tiles where before had been new tiles. The fields had shrunk, for instead of ripe and golden grain they now showed the beginning shoots of



new garden growths.

The Star Lords sent their blue radiance about me and I felt myself falling; I thought in my terror that I had failed to accomplish what I had been sent here to do. And I knew the Everoinye would punish failure with instant dismissal. I was on my way back to Earth!

“No!” I screamed out. This was not fair! This was to set a task without clue, without sign, without hope.

Then I could scream no more. For the solid ground returned once more under my feet, the old inn, the new shoots in the fields, the burgeoning tree, all flashed again before my eyes.

But now there was a change, a drastic change.

The inn was on fire. Flames shot from the roof, cracking and tumbling the tiles away as beams fell. The windows glowed with the violence of the fire within. All about me rose that horrid screeching of men locked in mortal combat.

I had no time to thank Zair. For this — this horror, this screaming and screeching, this clang of iron weapons on armor, this noise of battle — this scene was my scene, may Zair forgive me. Now I knew I was where I must be in order to fulfill my destiny on the world four hundred light-years from the world of my birth.

Diff's were attacking the inn.

They pranced about it, shooting quarrels into the fire through the smashed windows, running and laughing and cutting down other diff's who struggled to break a way through that iron ring. Any thought that I might be hurling myself into the fight on the wrong side had to be dispelled. The Star Lords had tested me in that way before; I had been tested through my own stiff-necked pride, and had hitherto had the good fortune to pick the right side. Now I felt that the devils so wantonly attacking the inn must be my adversaries. Those within might have been a coven or a gathering of criminals, but I doubted it. As I had struck when I had taken Sosie na Arkasson from her tree of suffering, so I struck now.

I ran into the fray.

The diff's pranced and screeched, but I was able to trip one in half-armor and gaudy orange robes, to thump him as he went down, and so possess myself of a thraxter.

Is it a sin to confess, as I do, that the feeling of a sword-hilt once more in my fist uplifted me, gave me a thrilling sense of completeness? This proves without the shadow of a doubt that I am an incomplete man, a shadow man, a weakling, dependent on the shallow symbol of a sword for my moral and spiritual sustenance. Oh, yes, all that — but on Kregen a sword means life to its owner.

Or, as is the way of two worlds, death . . .

My prowess as a fighting-man gives me pleasure only when that skill may be used to ends which are in themselves worthy. The protection of the weak has seemed to me to be such a worthy end. But the judgment of worthiness remains with me, alone, and therefore in the eyes of everyone else must be suspect.

I saw these four-armed diff's attacking the blazing inn. I heard the shrieks and yells from within, and witnessed other four-armed diff's attempting to break out, and being shot down as they ran and stumbled;

so it seemed right to me that I should assist those trapped in the inn.

All these thoughts of a schoolboy philosophy flashed through my mind in the moment that I scooped the thraxter, blocked a blow from a yelling halfling who tried to decapitate me, and thrust him through above his lorica. I turned swiftly, ducking my head so that a crossbow bolt flicked by above, and leaped for the clump who were attempting to smash down the door, almost enveloped in a blaze of sparks and flame. They had a tree trunk and they ran and swung with great and agile viciousness. These four-armed halflings were superb fighting-men.

The lenken door groaned back from bronze hinges. Then I was into the battering-ram group, laying about me, and catching them completely unawares. They dropped the log. They carried thraxters in their right upper hands; but their other three hands had been occupied with the log, and it seems to me now that small fact perhaps saved my life. They were fantastic fighters. I had to skip and jump, to parry and block more than I could hack and thrust. But they went down, first one and then two, and two more as I caught the knack.

Others came running, holding shields balanced high on their two left arms.

The streaming light of the twin Suns of Scorpio poured down on the scene and the blaze of the burning inn shed a ghastly wavering light into that sunshine. There would be no quick and easy escape into the shadows. As I fought I took stock of these four-armed diffs.

“He is only apim, by Zodjuin of the Rainbow!” A magnificent halfling yelled his anger that his men were being thus thwarted. He wore an iron-banded lorica that had been let out to its full extent, and a pair of gray trousers, with a broad, orange cummerbund wrapped around his waist, and a swirling orange and blue cloak fastened by jeweled golden brooches. He wore no helmet and his coppery hair gleamed in the light, cut into a helmet-shape itself, with a fillet of silver confining the curls across his forehead. He waved his thraxter with his upper right hand and hurled a stux with his lower right. He threw the stux with great skill and precision. I slipped it and cut down a diff who attempted to run me through. Things were becoming more interesting by the mur, by Zair!

A man I had chopped at and who had slid his thraxter across barely in time, so that instead of having his head laid open had been merely slashed down his face, yelled back hoarsely.

“He may only be apim, Kov Nath, but he fights like a devil of the Yawfi Suth!”

“Stick him, you yetches, and have done!” This Kov Nath whirled his sword at me, commanding, demanding. “We must break in and make sure Ortyg Fellin Coper is truly dead. His men will be here soon! Hurry, you rasts, hurry!”

A blazing mass tumbled from the roof then, falling from the porch, and we all skipped aside. Kov Nath yelled savage commands. His men closed in. There were something like twenty of them, and I knew this was no longer a pleasant muscle-exercising afternoon’s romp. Twenty diffs with four arms each meant something more than eighty to two, for the combinations offered by the four-armed configuration are interesting and deadly. So I fought and leaped and jumped and kept the door.

Stuxes hissed past me, and those I did not snatch from the air and return from whence they came in best Krozair tradition thunked splinteringly into the lenken door. How much longer could this go on? My thraxter gleamed a foul and bitter red, now, with the blood of these diffs. They did not seem to reck the consequences of attack; they bore in vengefully, and only by the utmost exertions could I stop the final lethal thrust.

A crossbow bolt tore into my side. I ignored that. Kov Nath, raging, rushed forward. He had snatched up a shield and grasped it in his two larboard hands, while his two starboard fists wrapped around a sword that was, I swear, longer than those great Swords of War of the Blue Mountains in distant Vallia.

A window broke outward and a four-armed diff sprang out, wielding a sword, cursing, followed by two more. They charged into the attackers. All three of them were smoldering, their cloaks and trousers smoking.

“Now by the blood of Holy Djan-kadjiryon!” yelled Kov Nath. “You will all die!”

He charged.

Even in the shock of the engagement I thought he would do better to grip that unwieldy longsword in his two upper fists, or his two lower, so as to get the triangular leverage so important in two-handed play. But he was skilled and quick and vicious, and I skipped and parried and gonged my thraxter uselessly on his shield. He tended to keep the shield covering him and did not use it, as I taught my men, to thrust out and so use as an offensive weapon in its own right.

He, like them all, had taken no notice of my appearance. I had two arms only, and was therefore apim. My nakedness, my shaved head, my hairless body, appeared to them as merely a part of the custom of my people. We circled, and against my will I was forced from the door.

I leaped in with a fierce and savage lunge, ducked, felt that damned great sword go whistling over my head, and tried to stick him through the thigh. But the shield rim clanked across, and that rim was bound in iron, not brass.

“By Zodjuin of the Rainbow! You fight like a leem!”

I did not waste breath answering but got myself back to the splintered door and held him off yet again. I had to allow my fighting instincts full play. There had to be a way of beating him. While he leaped and sprang so agilely before me and I ducked and weaved in my turn his men would not chance a stux throw or the loosing of a bolt. This gave me heart.

The three men who, on fire, had charged into the fight were fully occupied. They were yelling and screeching strange oaths at one another, calling on outlandish gods and devils, and the way these four-armed diffs fought filled me with admiration. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation and wherever on Havilfar I might be, I had landed in a country of warriors, by Vox!

Kov Nath drew back a space, and I saw a face at the window at my side. At first I imagined a monstrous mouse-face looked at me. There were brilliant dark eyes, a trembling tender nose above wide white whiskers, and a small mouth which showed small even teeth in evident terror at the fire-filled scene outside. A scarlet velvet cap with a jaunty white feather stuck lopsidedly in it covered this diff's head. He squeaked.

“May all the Warrior Gods of Djanduin aid you now, apim!”

So now I knew where I was. And, as before, the very sound of that name, Djanduin, struck a responsive chord in me. I had experienced the same uncomprehending but thrilling spark of uplift when I had first heard the name Strombor and the name Valka. And now — Djanduin!

Perhaps all that has happened in the intervening years has given me a false hindsight; perhaps the names of Strombor and Valka and Djanduin and — but they must wait for now — ring and thunder in my head so much, enough to echo back over the years. All I know is that as the mouse-faced little diff yelled at me, the name Djanduin struck shrewdly. These four-armed diffs were Djangs. I had used their national weapon, the djangir, on a notable occasion in the arena of Huringa.

A crossbow bolt shattered into the window frame and the little diff jumped, squealing.

“Get your head down, onker!” I roared at him, and with the thraxter belted a stux out of the air. The keen iron point would have pierced him just where his whiskers joined beneath the quivering nose and above the trembling mouth.

“Mother Diocaster!” he yelped, and vanished.

The fire-fanned flames lay their burning hair across the inn and more of the roof fell in; but I was heartened to note that the splintered lenken door and the smashed window with the crossbow bolt embedded in the frame lay upwind. Here was a tiny portion of hope for the cause in which I fought. That I had no idea what that cause was all about added a spice I — thinking of the Star Lords — did not relish.

The far end of the inn was now doomed. I continued to fight, keeping a circle about the door, and with an evil cunning drawing Djangs in for combat so that they would screen me with their own bodies from their comrades' shooting.

Kov Nath, with his smooth helmet-head of coppery hair, tried again to get at me with that confounded great sword of his and I had to leap and then bend double to avoid the crunching back-handed swing. I circled him to his left, flickering the thraxter in and out like the tongue of a risslaca of the Ocher Limits, and then darting back and trying to cut him up in his right side. But those two damned right arms of his kept whacking the great sword about so that I had to take it on my blade and let a supple wrist twist slide it free. When, with the fighting-man's instinctive attack following defense, my blade merely scraped across his shield I grew hopping mad.

“Sink me!” I burst out. “You're a bonny fighter, Kov Nath!”

“Aye, apim,” he said merrily, and came at me again. “And I'll split your head on my sword to prove it.”

We clashed and banged and every now and then I had to jerk away and flick my thraxter up to swat a quarrel off or snatch at a flying stux. It seemed to me then that this could not go on much longer. I did not take a stux cleanly with my left hand and the broad iron blade scored up my forearm, at which I let out a curse.

“By the Black Chunkrah, Kov Nath! Let you and me settle this between ourselves, like true Horters.”

He laughed.

“I am no Horter, apim. I am Nath Jagdur, the Kov of Hyr Khor!”

That betrayed him. For although I am not a gentleman, and do not pretend to be, having seen too much of their nasty ways, I do know that the Horters of Havilfar and the Koters of Vallia and all the other gentlemen of Kregen consider themselves Opaz-elect. Any noble considers himself a gentleman, by birth and right, except in those cases or men who — like myself — fought and struggled to become Notors

from lowly origins, and then they are nobles by right only. But, such is the custom of Kregen, birth means far less than achievement in the eyes of most peoples.

As we thus struggled before the lenken door of the blazing inn a Djang screeched and ran out from the streaming smoke.

“Kov Nath! They come! They come!”

Kov Nath went mad. His great sword whirled into a silvery-blue blur, for he had not tasted blood with it as yet. He bellowed his anger.

“By Zoduin of the Stormclouds! I’ll spit you yet, yetch!”

His face congested with blood. Apart from his four arms he looked exactly like an apim, and his face was darkly handsome, with bright merry eyes, a thin black moustache, and a chin that jutted with a dark bristle to show he had not shaved that morning. He bore down on me again even as his men yelled and began to decamp.

“Rast!” he yelled at me, and spittle flew. “I’ll degut, debrain, dissect you, you two-armed weakling!”

“By Vox!” I ducked a swing and surged up to him and so took his throat into my left hand and dragged his handsome head forward. I glared into his congested face. “You’ll know you’ve met me, Kov Jagdur the Boaster!” And I slashed the thraxter down. The blow would have finished any ordinary man. But this Kov Nath Jagdur was a Djang. He had four arms. The shield came around and caught me in the side, just beneath the ribs, and I grunted and let him go, and he brought the great sword around and down to finish me.

I rolled away and my thraxter came up just in time and slid that long wicked blade. The steel bit into the turf.

A crossbow bolt went *whirr-chunk* against the great blade. The double hilt was violently wrenched from Kov Nath’s fists. The sword spun across the turf.

He roared and straightened up and another bolt hummed past his ear.

From the smoke more Djangs appeared, running and loosing crossbows, holding their shields high, their thraxters low. At their belts swung djangirs.

“Now by all the devils in a Herrelldrin hell!” bellowed Kov Nath.

He hesitated — he stood there, balanced, ready to lunge one way for his sword and the other in flight. A bolt pranged glancingly from his lorica, and that decided him; with a final blood-curdling curse he ran around the far end of the inn. Moments later the thud of animal hooves sounded and the band of rogues burst into view, racing with straining necks and heads low, riding fast away along the white dusty road.

I looked up into the point of a stux.

The Djang holding the stux looked as though he would like nothing better than to thrust down.

Just as I was about to teach him the error of his ways in thus treating a Krozair of Zy, four arms or no four damned arms, the little diff with the mouse-face came running out of the inn, squeaking. His whiskers

were all a-twitch as he pushed the stux aside and dropped on a knee at my side.

“Apim! You still live! Now may Mother Diocaster be praised!”

I did not fail to notice the offhanded way this little fellow thrust the stux aside, nor the way the Djang soldiery stiffened up at sight of him. These were signs I recognized.

He was most solicitous.

“You are hurt, sir, you are hurt. You bleed!” He leaped up and tore into the gathered newcomers. “Deldar! Take this Horter into the unburned room and care for him. Bandages, water, needles, palines.” He swung about. “Sinkie! Sinkie! I am coming, my love! It is all right now, the Opaz-forgotten leemsheads are gone! You may come out from under the table now.”

I had to let myself be hoisted up to keep a smile off my face. Lord knew, I needed a smile then!

As we went into the unburned end of the inn I observed how the Djangs were going about dousing the flames, working with a swift eager efficiency that heartened me. Hauling water from the well in the rear courtyard, they had the fire under control very soon. Truth to tell there was little left of that end of the roof. The little fellow pranced at my side very solicitously.

“I have the honor to present myself to you, sir. I am Ortyg Fellin Coper, Pallan of the Highways.”

He looked at me expectantly, his bright eyes alert, his whiskers quivering. He wore rich robes of a dark blue material liberally splattered with gems and silver lace. His scarlet velvet hat with its white feather looked now a sumptuous part of his costume. He wore no weapons, apart from a small silver secretarial knife in a silver sheath at his belt.

All naked and bloody as I was — although a cloak had been flung across me as I was half-carried in — I pondered what answer to make. This, I thought, must be the man the Star Lords had sent me here to rescue. I had done that, for if I had not stood before the door and prevented the leemsheads from getting at him before his bodyguard came up he would have been a dead man. If I was, as I sincerely believed, in my own past, then perhaps I was not Strom of Valka yet; certainly I was not the Prince Majister of Vallia.

“I am Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor, Pallan.”

“Well, you are right well and heartily met, as Mother Diocaster is my witness!”

He introduced his wife, a charming little lady whose whiskers added, if anything, to her coy beauty. Her clothes, too, although simple were richly jeweled. I could not fail to notice the affection between these two, and, also, the affection and respect accorded them both by the tough warrior Djangs. O. Fellin Coper handled them with the casual unthinking courtesy of a man habituated to absolute authority tempered with concern for those that fate had put into his hands. Also in the unburned room were two other mouse-faced diffs like himself, lesser in rank and importance but still treated with grave gruff respect by the Djangs, and a Djang woman, very much pregnant and very near her time, as I judged.

She lay on a pallet, pale-faced, her long fair hair damp, her face streaked with sweat. She was still beautiful, despite the difficulty of the birth. Three Djang women were attending her but there was no doctor with acupuncture needles in attendance. This did not seem right to me and so I mentioned it to O. Fellin Coper. His gerbil-like head twisted.

“You are quite right, Notor Prescott. But when Mother Diocaster calls forth the babe at the appointed hour — why, then, the babe has to come whatever the circumstances.”

A great bustle began as preparations were made for the Pallan to leave the inn. The pregnant Djang woman was not of his party. Her husband had been burned in the fighting and had died. For a moment I pondered, and then Ortyg Coper called to me from his decorated carriage which his men had brought up.

“I am returning to Djanguraj, Notor Prescott, and if the city was your destination before you fell among these leemsheads, I would be most honored — my wife and I would be most honored — if you would deign to take advantage of our carriage for the journey.”

It was nicely said, and it explained why no one had commented on my nakedness. They assumed I had been set on and was fighting the leemsheads to get my clothes and money back. To dispose of another problem here and now, they also took me for a member of the Martial Monks of Djanduin, which would explain my hairlessness.

My wounds had been seen to, and I was busy as any old mercenary would be. The dead Djangs yielded clothes, weapons, and money. I rifled the dead men with as much compunction as I would sweep the table of breadcrumbs. A paktun is a paktun, when all is said and done.

So it was that when I walked toward Ortyg Coper’s carriage at the far end of the yard I was suitably clad in a pair of gray trousers with an orange cummerbund and a white shirt. A lorica was collapsed and slung over my shoulder. In a pouch lay enough shivers and obs to last, and there were three golden deldys. No one, I thought, had seen that quick rifling of the dead. For weapons I took a thraxter, a pair of stuxes, a djangir and a shield, which I draped about myself. At the last moment I picked up Kov Nath’s enormous sword, and so stepped into Ortyg Fellin Coper’s elegant carriage for Djanguraj.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Pallan O. Fellin Coper of Djanduin

“We do not see many apims in Djanduin, Notor Prescott. Nor many other diffis, come to that.” Ortyg Coper glanced at me obliquely as the carriage rolled along the road and left a wide swath of white dust in its wake. His bodyguard rode up front and well astern. I had noticed they rode totrixes, the awkward six-legged riding animal of Havilfar, and carried long slender lances upright in boots attached to their stirrup irons. “So,” went on Coper, looking out of the window at the passing fields of corn and marspear and crops I did not recognize, “it seems you are the Lord of Strombor and so therefore cannot be a Martial Monk of Djanduin.”

“I lay no claim to being a Martial Monk, Pallan Coper.”

The dangers here were obvious. This man was a Pallan, a chief minister of state, and, as he had told me, one charged with the upkeep of the highways. He held a very real power. To judge by other parts of Kregen I knew he would think nothing of having me thrown into a dungeon if it suited him or his master the king, and the fact that I had saved him from the swords of Kov Nath’s leemsheads would mean nothing. So I had to tread warily, for all that he seemed a pleasant enough little fellow.

He brushed his whiskers in a finicky fashion.

“Tell me of Strombor, Notor.”

Had I been a man given to empty gestures I might have smiled then, for this was so clearly a cunning opening ploy in a conversation designed to trap me into giving away my secrets. No further mention of my nakedness — its fact lay there between us — but it was: “Tell me of Strombor.”

I considered. If this past was far enough back he would not have heard of Strombor, for that enclave had been taken over by the Esztercaris in distant Zenicce. Had he heard of Zenicce? Had he heard of Segesthes?

“You know the continent of Segesthes, Pallan? The great enclave city of Zenicce?”

He inclined his head.

“Indeed. We have records in our libraries.”

I said easily, “Strombor is an enclave in Zenicce,” and then I went on matter-of-factly. “I, naturally, consider Strombor the most beautiful and the best, even if not the greatest; but we are a rich people and I am fortunate to be their prince.”

His wife, Sinkie, fluttered up at this, but Coper gave me a sly sideways look and said: “You saved my life, Notor Prescott, and for this I am in your debt. I shall not forget. But there will be those in Djanguraj who will — ah — wonder what a noble prince of a great house of Zenicce is doing, wandering naked and hairless in Djanduin, so far from home.”

Well, you couldn't say fairer than that.

“How are arguments that touch a man's honor settled in Djanduin, Pallan Coper?”

“With the sword.”

“That will be quite suitable.”

He chuckled then, this little mousy fellow, and stroked his whiskers in high good humor.

“You are apim, Notor Prescott! You have, like me, but two arms. How do you think to face a Djang champion, who has four arms?”

About to say, “I had thought you had witnessed that,” I paused. To make that remark would be boorish, despite its other and intended meaning.

So I said something about fighting as Zair willed (he like most Kregans accepted strange gods, devils, and saints without turning a hair) and so we rolled on for a space in silence.

I found that to suggest I had been shipwrecked, an obvious stratagem, would not work, as the inn and crossroads were dwaburs from the sea. I told a part of the truth, and said I had tumbled off a voller. Like the Horter he was, he did not refer to it again.

In the southwest corner of Havilfar the sea surges in a cleft that, looking at the map, reminds me of the Bristol Channel, except, of course, that the scales are vastly greater, for Havilfar is a broad continent. The northern promontory sweeps out boldly south of Loh, with a ruggedly indented coastline and a wide



and sheltering band of islands, some quite large, running off the northwestern shore. At the tip of the channel is sited the town of Pellow in Herrelldrin. Sometimes the smot<sup>[2]</sup> of Pellow is referred to as standing in a bay, but the bay shape begins farther out, below the Yawfi Suth. The Yawfi Suth is a frightful area of bog and fen, of marsh and quagmire, penned between a tonguelike intrusion of the sea to the north, and treacherous ground to the south, alongside the channel. Here, also, is the Wendwath, that vast, misty lake of magic and superstition, and, too, of a strange, haunting golden beauty when the twin suns slant through the mists upon the water. They call the Wendwath the Lake of Dreaming Maidens.

The promontory that extends westward south of the channel — that same Tarnish Channel — curves southward to the southernmost land of Havilfar: Thothangir. Off the jagged and wind-eroded cliffs there lies the Rapa island that had once been the home of Rapechak, the Rapa with whom Turko the Shield and I, with those two silly girls Quaesa and Saenda, had escaped from Mungul Sidrath. Rapechak had not surfaced in our sight above the waters of the River Magan. It hurt me still to recall that, but I did not believe he was truly dead.

But we were in the northern promontory, near its far western extremity, rolling along toward Djanguraj, the capital of Djanduin, which is situated at the head of a wide, island-protected bay notched into the southwestern corner, above the Tarnish Channel.

To the west, as far as man could know, stretched the Ocean of Doubt.

So I was in the southwest of Havilfar. Now I had to prove myself acceptable to the Djangs, and I had to see about organizing transport back home to Valka.

Then I froze.

I knew the Star Lords would never let me leave here until time had once more caught up with the present I had left at the Heavenly Mines. I had had experience of their ways before. A great storm would arise, supernatural lightning and thunder would bar my path, as rashoons had done on the Eye of the World, as gales and typhoons had penned me in Valka, as I had been prevented from leaving Huringa in Hyrklana.

It was no use cursing and crying and calling out against the injustice of it all. Where I was I must stay until the time was up, until once more the green sun preceded the red across the sky — and I knew where else on Kregen I would be when that happened! I took the only comfort I could from the fact that Delia would not share this enforced and lonely exile. To her, when I returned — for *I would return!* — it would seem I had but minutes before tumbled out of the volder.

*This would be.*

How I was to make the Star Lords keep their part of the bargain I did not know. I had only the haziest idea what their plans were, but I suspected they wished me to do something drastic about the omnipresent slavery of Kregen. Very well, while I sweated out my sentence in this prison of time I would amuse myself. I would take what satisfaction I could get from upsetting as many unpleasant people as I could. I would do the aragorns' business for them, if any came my way, or I would dot a few eyes for the flutsmen, or show the crampchs of Gorgrendrin the error of their ways.

By Zim-Zair!

I would!

But — how long? How long?

On the thought I cocked my head out of the carriage window and, shading my eyes as best I could, squinted up to get an idea of how far apart were Zim and Genodras. They looked a long way, a damned long way, apart. I remembered how in the warrens of Magdag and in the Emerald Eye Palace — which was the second best palace in all Magdag — I had waited and watched for the red sun to eclipse the green. When it had happened I had not been in either the warrens or the palace; and then — as you must guess — I felt that old life surge back. What were we all doing now, Zolta and Nath, my two oar-comrades, my two wonderful rogues of Sanurkazz?

If you think in those first few moments of understanding I grew overly maudlin, you are probably right. But I missed Nath and Zolta, oh, how I missed them!

And Mayfwy, the widow of my oar-comrade Zorg. And Pur Zenkiren. The inner sea knew little of the outer oceans and cared less. Would that I were there now, if I could not be in Valka!

“You look troubled, Notor Prescott.”

“I was thinking of old times, and that ill becomes a man, as I know to my cost.”

Sinkie, the Pallan Coper’s wife, gave a little cry.

“Oh, my dear Notor Prescott! Pray, do not alarm me so! You looked so stern and — and — oh!” And she buried her quivering little nose in her lace handkerchief that had come all the long way from Dap-Tentyrasmot across the Shrouded Sea.

We trundled on and the conversation came back to normal patterns. As is my usual custom I will tell you the details of this land of Djanduin — and fascinating they were, at least to me — as and when they are relevant to my story.

The Djangs with their four arms, powerful bodies, and great muscular agility were superb fighters, and they were conscious of their good fortune. Their land of Djanduin was walled off in the southwestern promontory of Havilfar by first the Yawfi Suth and the Wendwath and second by a dangerous and difficult range of mountains barring the path of an invader. But the Djangs had not won their independence lightly. Constantly over the seasons the Gorgrens mounted invasions. Gorgrendrin, the land of the Gorgrens, stretched inland from the head of the Tarnish Channel. The Gorgrens had carved themselves fresh living space and captured many slaves from the lands and free cities of the area. The smot of Pellow, in Herrelldrin, lay under their heel.

Turko the Shield, my Khamorro comrade, came from Herrelldrin, and now I understood fully, for he had always been reticent, that the Gorgrens had indeed enslaved Pellow. The Khamorros had developed their syple disciplines of unarmed combat because they were, in truth, not allowed weapons.

And the Gorgrens sought always to march into Djanduin and serve the Djangs as they had served the people of Herrelldrin.

Trouble, it seems, is endemic in any culture where peoples fret and struggle and seek to expand their frontiers.

The only problem with the Djangs was — and here Pallan O. Fellin Coper exercised exquisite tact as he sought to explain to me in a way that would not demean the Djangs in my eyes — that they were, in very

truth, exceptionally fine soldiers, but they were seldom entrusted with high command. To be brutally frank about it, the Djangs were bonny fighters in the blood and press of the field, but were not overly bright when it came to the higher command. Tactics — yes, they were superb. Strategy — no. They were duffers.

“Up to Jiktat rank, and you will scarcely find a better soldier. But give a Djang a brigade and he sweats and groans and worries, and wants to go up to the front line to see how his men are getting on every bur instead of thinking and planning what they ought to do. There are Djang Chuktars; very few.”

“And you, Pallan Coper?”

“Oh, I am a civilian administrator. I deal with the roads.” At that moment the carriage gave an almighty jolt and pitched and swung on its simple leaf springs so that we were rattled about like a Bantinko dancer’s peas in his gourd.

“Now may Djan rot the road!” burst out Coper and immediately turned in alarmed contrition to his wife, who let out a little shriek and waved her perfumed handkerchief.

When I discovered she was horrified at his outburst and not the shuddering of the carriage I felt my lips rick up. These two were likely to make me laugh before I realized!

When all was settled Coper explained that his own people handled all the affairs that demanded planning and higher administration for the Djangs. He called himself a Djang, too. He was an Obdjang, that is, a First Djang. He told me frankly that although his race of diffs were clearly not the same as the Djang diffs, no one had any memory of when their partnership had begun, and no records existed in their libraries. Always, so Coper said, the Djangs had fought and the Obdjangs had directed. Each respected the other. Each knew they could do nothing without the other.

“Except—” And here Coper looked as troubled as I had seen him so far. I chanced a guess.

“This Kov Nath Jagdur na Hyr Khor,” I said. “The leader of the leemsheads. He would prefer to lead instead of being led.”

Coper nodded rather forlornly and his whiskers drooped. “That is so, Notor Prescott. You are quick.”

“You have to be quick to stay alive on Kregen.”

“Those yetches of Gorgrens are quick, also. We have certain intelligence that they plan a new campaign — and that will play merry hell with my roads — and I am summoned to the palace. The king will need counsel. Chuktat Naghan Stolin Rumferling will be there, I am glad to say. He is a good friend and a great warrior. My part will be a civilian’s, which pleases me, also.”

“Yes, Ortyg.” His wife spoke up. “Better for you to be a civilian and let the soldiers and the warriors fight. Chuktat Naghan is a very great warrior indeed.”

“He knows the approaches the Gorgrens will probably take. You see, Notor Prescott, our frontier is protected by the Yawfi Suth and the Wendwath; but there are ways through and between these natural obstacles and an army must be so positioned as to cover all eventualities.”

“You have to outguess your opponent,” I said. “Yes, I know.”

I had done a deal of campaigning with my fierce clansmen on the Great Plains of Segesthes. That time we had burned our foemen's wagons in the Pass of Trampled Leaves had been a great bluff and counter-bluff. They, too, had had an alternative set of routes, and Hap Loder and I had guessed right. Perhaps, the thought occurs, if we had not had the skill and generalship to pick the right answer, I would not be here now. My bones might be moldering away on the plains, my blood and flesh long since gone to feed the grasses grazed upon by the chunkrah.

Coper glanced at me and I saw the quick intelligence on his gerbil-like face.

"I know you are a great fighter, Notor Prescott, although I do not think you would have lasted much longer against the leemsheads — and I compliment you, sir, I compliment you — but may I take it you also have knowledge of the art of strategy? Of generalship? Of the maneuvering of armies?"

Somehow, whether from my need to be independent and free or from a resentment of being pushed, I said, "Oh, as to that, Pallan Coper, I have been a fighting-man for a long time. I am content to leave the higher command in the hands of those who believe they are masters at that game."

He sank back in his seat. He rubbed his whiskers and pulled his scarlet hat over one ear, and so we fell into a silence that, at least for me, came with unwelcome desolation. I had the uncomfortable feeling that there was more to O. Fellin Coper.

Over the rumble of the carriage wheels we did not hear the beat of wings, and an escort Djang thrust his head through the window as the carriage shuddered to a halt.

"Well, Deldar Pocer! What is it, what is it?"

"A messenger from Chuktar Stolin Rumferling, Pallan."

The door was opened and, fussing and complaining of delays, Coper and his wife alighted. The other carriage with its Obdjang attendants pulled up also and the escort sat their totrixes with the blind indifference of the soldier wanting to get back to barracks and the local inn. A fluttelepper curved through the air in a barrage of swift wing-beats to land beside the road. The rider, a young and athletic Djang wearing flying leathers of orange and gray, leaped off. A long flexible staff whipped aft of his saddle and flew a multicolored flag with many tails. This, I guessed, was a badge and the reason the guard Deldar had known the messenger came from Chuktar Rumferling.

Using a steel key strung on a golden chain around his neck, Coper unlocked the flat balass box the messenger proffered. He took out a narrow strip of paper and broke the seal with a practiced flick of his left thumb. He unfolded the paper and read. His whiskers quivered and then stood out, stiff and rigid.

He crumpled the paper in his small hand.

"Very good, merker. A verbal reply. 'Returning in all haste.' Now get airborne."

"My wings are yours to command," said the merker in the rote fashion of the messenger and leaped aboard his fluttelepper and took off immediately. Coper ushered us back into the carriage and squeaked up very hotly at Deldar Pocer.

"We must hurry, good Pocer! Great things are afoot in Djanguraj. I expect us to reach the city by sunset."

“By sunset, Pallan. Very good, Pallan.”

Sinkie fluttered at her businesslike husband.

“Oh, Ortyg! Whatever can be the matter?”

Coper shot that shrewd look at me and then leaned forward and patted his wife’s knee.

“This is terrible news, Sinkie, and you must be brave. I will tell you now, for Notor Prescott is not of Djanduin and is not concerned with our affairs, for all that he is a guest and will be made truly welcome in our house.”

“Of course, Ortyg! Notor Prescott saved us from those horrible leemsheads and I am very fond of him. But, my dear, the news . . . ?”

The news was, in truth, enough to shake any Pallan of the kingdom. “The king and queen have been assassinated. Chuktar Naghan has certain news of the Gorgrens’ invasion. The two terrible events are linked. Now, Sinkie! You must be brave. We will win through, in the end, as we have always done before.”

“Oh, the poor dear king! And the queen—” Sinkie burst into tears that shook her little body. She looked absolutely woebegone, with the tears dripping from the ends of her drooping whiskers.

Coper looked at me meaningfully.

“You are our honored guest, Notor Prescott. I can judge a man, even if he is apim, and I know you to be a Horter and a Notor. You will not divulge any of this until it is generally known?”

“You may rely on me, Pallan Coper. And, as you say, this is not my business. I have no wish to become involved.” I had just been brought from the horror of the Heavenly Mines, and had fought damned hard, and I meant what I said. In my prison of time I intended to live it up and have a good time — nothing more.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

In Djanguraj

I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, fell into low ways and low company.

I make no excuses.

The taverns I explored, the dopa dens, the theaters, the fighting arenas (Djanduin is mightily contemptuous of the Jikhorkduns of Hamal and Hyrklana and instead flocks to see real fighting by professionals that almost invariably results in no one dying at all), the dancing girls I gawped at, the zorca races and the sleeth races, the dicing, the gambling, the drinking! Money came in, for I have skills at certain of the hairier games of Kregen, and I never went hungry or thirsty — or, at least, not often.

Pallan Coper and his charming wife Sinkie had shown me tremendous hospitality and they had been horrified by my antics and pleaded with me to give up such a terrible life. But they would not hear a word spoken against me.

And the cause of all this wanton debauchery?

As I have told you, calendars and dates are highly individual idiosyncrasies on Kregen, and every people and every race and every country keep some kind of time in their own way, and to the Ice Floes of Sicce with everyone else's.

By the expenditure of a great deal of time and effort and by constant application at the observatory of the Todalpheme of Djanduin — a small and humble group compared with other Todalpheme I have known — I calculated out dates. The Todalpheme are those austere and dedicated men whose charge it is to work out the tides of Kregen, and give timely warning. So I worked on my figures and when I had finished I stared in appalled horror at the final figure, under which I scrawled a great slashing red line.

Ten years.

Ten Terrestrial years, it was going to take, for the present in which I now lived to catch up with the time I had left the Heavenly Mines.

I did not go mad; after all, this was a mere matter of waiting, and patience is a virtue, even for me, sinner that I am. And I would wait in as much comfort and pleasure as I could contrive. My only true comfort was that Delia would not know of my durance, and her sufferings could, if I ranked my Deldars correctly, be curtailed or obviated altogether.

So I plunged into the heady nightlife of Djanguraj and found most of the strong young men gone off to war, and their womenfolk moping after them, and war and talk of war filling everyone's horizons. This suited me ill.

Chuktar N. Stolin Rumferling had gone off to war.

Seeing him briefly before he flew off I was struck by the cunning way nature can produce entirely different end products from the same original material. Imagine a meek and mild little clerk, with contact lenses and a sinus drip, hunched over a computer in a glass-walled office in a great city of Earth, weak-chested, scrawny-armed, flabby where it would do the most harm, prim and precise — there, to slander him, you have a defamatory picture of O. Fellin Coper. Imagine a fullback, bulky, powerful, superbly muscled, charging head-down into a mess of footballers in his way, chunking them aside with massive energy — there you have a not unflattering picture of Chuktar N. Stolin Rumferling. They are both men. They both come from the same stock. But what a difference between them!

"This will be a bloody business, Notor Prescott." Rumferling spoke in a gruff way that told me he was perfectly capable of cowing the roistering, rough-and-tough barbaric Djangs he would command. "Those crampfs of Gorgrens must be taught a lesson, once and for all."

"They will return and return, Naghan," squeaked Coper. "We all know that, Djan rot 'em!"

There was no gentle Sinkie present to protest his language.

So the fighting-men went off to war and I frolicked about town, enjoying what I could of the fleshpots.

Ten years! Ten long damned years!

I witnessed the new king's coronation. It was a rushed affair, with a hushed and spartan wartime atmosphere. This king was a nonentity, the old king's nephew by marriage, and he would not, I fancied,

last long in some places of Kregen I had been — Sanurkazz or Magdag, for example, or Vallia herself.

He did not last.

A palace revolution was the first upheaval and that placed another nephew on the throne. He was strong, but a fool. He was murdered after a season and the Chuktar of the palace crowned himself as king. He lasted until the next Chuktar of the palace bribed enough of the king's personal bodyguard and overthrew him. His body was dragged through a pool of fighting fish, something like piranha, and the new king was crowned.

All this time I caroused and drank and sang and watched the dancing girls — for they were dancing girls, unlike those fine free girls of my clansmen who danced for us beneath the moons of Kregen — and they were very skilled in the arts of the dance. Their four arms weaved arabesques of beauty, and their oiled bodies and gleaming masses of silver bangles and golden bells, of waving fans and swirling silks, charmed me even as they bored me.

I would have none of them.

Ten godforsaken years!

My Delia — I had to get the disaster that had overtaken me in proportion. My overriding duty lay to Delia, and through her to Vallia, and to my people of Valka because I was their Strom. Also I owed a duty to Strombor and my clansmen of the Great Plains. But Gloag in Strombor and Hap Loder with the clans did everything right, as I well knew, and my duty was fully and freely carried out by them. Delia — I had to think of other things. Like the teasing arguments we indulged in so often over the merits and demerits of the wonderful zorcas of her Blue Mountains' blue-grass grazing estates as against the fabulous zorcas of my clansmen.

So with some of my ill-gotten winnings I went to the zorcadrome to buy myself the best zorca I could.

The zorcas of Djanduin are fine animals. But then, it is difficult to find a zorca that is not a fine animal, for of all the animals of Kregen, I believe, it is the zorca who most nobly fulfills its ancestral breeding. This is not to gainsay the superb quality of the vove, that fearsome steed of the Great Plains. But voves — real voves — are found only there in the natural state, while zorcas are found in many areas of Kregen.

Passing the totrixdrome — as you know I have never been fond of the sectrix, the natrix, or the totrix, or of any other of the *trix* family — and hurrying on with Khobo the So chattering away in my ear as he guided me through the throngs of people who seem forever to wander and push and shout through the markets of two worlds, we came out to a wide dusty space fenced in with lenken rails. A pair of zorcas were racing up toward us, having completed a circuit of the oval, and they were neck and neck. Even at speed like that a clansman can point a zorca, and the faults of both these were at once apparent. But a fat cortilinden merchant, sweating happily as he paid out golden deldys, bought them for his son, who looked as though a quick belt on the backside would suit him better than a zorca saddle. They were Lamnias, and so the merchant should have known better.

“Rubbish!” Khobo whispered in my ear. He was a jaunty rogue, a carousing companion I had rescued from a brawl and who had stuck to me since. “I know old Planath the Zorca. He will not cheat me.”

I grimaced at the name of Planath's, for although it is common on Kregen for the occupation to decide the label — and very colorful that is, to be sure — there were places I knew where to be called anything at all to do with zorcas meant much effort and sweat, not a little blood, and general approbation from

one's peers. As for that genial rascal Khobo, he was called *the So* for obvious reasons. He'd been in the army and as a young man had had his upper left arm lopped off. *Asso* is Kregish for *three*, thus Khobo was *the So*.

As I casually inspected the zorcas on display — for some reason I have always disliked the use of the word horseflesh for horses and zorcaflesh for zorcas — I was vividly reminded of what my father used to tell me as he doctored up a lame horse, or patted a strong chestnut neck, his eyes filled with the love of horses. It was with a nostalgic thought or two that I came at last to a magnificent pair held by two Djang grooms of Planath the Zorca's establishment.

"Wonderful animals, Notor, wonderful!" Planath babbled on, but cunningly. "See their quarters, their fetlocks, see their teeth—" At this, like two rat-traps, the lads opened up the zorcas' mouths. "Both are guaranteed perfect! Never, I swear by Holy Djan Himself, have there been two such zorcas as these."

Khobo rolled spittle around his mouth and spat into the dust. He laid a finger on the soft nose of the larboard one.

I shook my head.

"This one, I think, Khobo."

At this everyone began to wrangle, thoroughly enjoying themselves in the dust and the summer suns-shine, having supple Djangi girls bring them beaker after beaker of that sherbet drink called *parclear* that tickles the nose and is a sovereign thirst-quencher. Khobo, I knew, had not spotted that tiny divergence in the shoulder blades of the zorca he chose so confidently. That one was a splendid snow-white and, indeed, was a magnificent animal. But the one I wanted, and would give no reason for so doing beyond a stubborn foolishness, was the one a clansman would have selected, for all that he was a dusty shabby gray color. But I liked the look of him, the bright light of intelligence in his eyes.

"So you rush upon disaster, good Notor! Well, I can say no more!" And Khobo the So threw up his three hands in despair. "Choose this Dust Pounder, Notor, and have done, then."

So, astride Dust Pounder, thrilling again to the feel of a blood zorca between my knees, I rode back to the tavern at which for the moment I stayed. This was *The Paline and Queng*, run by a fat and happy Obdjang who knew exactly where every last ob came from and went to, and who made the best *vosk* pie in all Djanguraj. I downed some of his better wine, a clear yellow vintage from east, beyond the Mountains of Mirth, and bade Khobo sup up, and roared out that now I would challenge all comers in the zorca races.

This, as you will see, was a highly cunning way for a Krozair of Zy to earn his daily bread. But as I have said, I felt bitter and betrayed and desolated, in those early days in Djanduin.

Well, I will not weary you with a recital of my daily doings, as those doings wearied me. Suffice it to say that I raced Dust Pounder, and we won handsome sums of golden *deldys*; and I made the acquaintance of my Lady Lara Kholin Domon, who herself raced zorcas and who, perhaps, felt annoyance that she had lost, and who yet concealed that annoyance because she fancied some affection for me. The Lady Lara — oh, yes, she was a girl with fire and spirit, who rode like the east wind over the Sunset Sea. Yet she had a humility that was totally amused each time some proud Djang buck proposed to her. Her middle name — Kholin — proclaimed to all Djanduin that she came of a most powerful and wealthy *tan* — or House or clan or tribe — of Djanguraj. The Fellins and the Stolins were not in the same class as the Kholins.



We raced our zorcas against each other, and old Dust Pounder carried me to victory, for I would not shame her by pulling on his rein and so allowing her a hollow victory.

Her wild coppery hair blazed under the suns as we rode, her lithe and lissome form, clad in gray leathers, bent urgently over the neck of her zorca, whispering in his ear, entreating, pleading, urging, commanding him to run faster, faster, faster! Fast enough, at any rate, to beat Dust Pounder. But Dust Pounder had an aversion to running with another zorca's hindquarters in his view.

Her four supple arms, rounded and aglow with beauty, could not aid her once she mounted a zorca. But when she wrestled with me, stripped, I found her a most slippery customer. We wrestled for our own private amusement — not as we raced, as professionals for gain — and I could not bring myself to use the disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy upon her and so hurl her flat upon her back, panting, and place my foot upon her neck. She did this to me, though, many times, laughing down on me, her eyes dancing with mischief, her vibrant form outlined above me, her coppery hair in disarray, superb.

“Now, Dray Prescott, who says four arms are not better than two!”

“I won't argue, Lara. But for the sweet sake of Djan Himself, take your foot off my windpipe so I can breathe!”

They knew of the Khamorros of Herrelldrin here, of course, being not all that far distant from Pellow, and their own Martial Monks were reputed masters of bloodless combat as well as more serious work with pointed and edged weapons. My hair was growing back and I was shaving, as I sometimes did, leaving my arrogant old brown moustache to thrust its way up from my lip. I wondered what Turko the Shield would make of my thus throwing a combat with a four-armed girl — and so cursed and groaned as again the realization of ten infernal years to serve in my prison of time brought me back to reality.

So the time passed in Djanguraj, capital of Djanduin.

Chuktar Rumferling had guessed right about the attack route of the Gorgrens. I knew there would be more of sagacity and experience than sheer guesswork in this decision as to which pass to throw most of his weight. The first of this fresh invasion from Gorgrendrin was hurled back. I stood silently in the crowded streets to watch the wounded come in. On that day the new king was fished from the river, its yellow mud disturbed by his finery and his jewels, and a new king installed himself.

The main strength of the army lay carefully positioned along the frontier under the cover of the Yawfi Suth and the Wendwath; those left at home in Djanguraj struggled to keep the country on its feet.

This period proved near-disastrous to the Djangs. Before the troubles there had been three kings who had ruled for over a hundred years each, and before that there had never been this weakening rapid succession. Djang and Obdjang had ascended the throne in the sacred court of the warrior gods at the center of the Palace of Illustrious Ornament. No continuity could be achieved, it seemed, and even the expedient of the Obdjangs and Djangs failed in allowing a diff of another species to ascend the throne. A Rapa, a Chulik, and a Bleg succeeded one another with the rapidity of utter ruin.

I saw Coper when the Bleg was cut down from the rafters of his own country house, and the Pallan of the Highways looked exhausted, shrunken. Sinkie was lying down.

“It is good to see you, Notor Prescott. These are evil days in Djanduin.”

Rather too carelessly, I said, “The army will have to return to set a strong king upon the throne. You, my dear Pallan, or Chuktar Rumferling, or one of your friends who see eye to eye with you.”

At this Sinkie sat bolt upright with a shriek.

“Notor Prescott! I consider you a good and valued friend! But to speak thus! Would you condemn my poor dear husband to a terrible fate — do you want his blood to stain the faerling throne?”

“Of course not, Lady Sinkie, as well you know. But there must be a man of courage and strength and sound common sense. The markets complain of the prices of food. Ships from countries overseas do not wish to trade because we cannot guarantee either their safety or payment. Why, I can only make a living by winning in the zorca races—”

“We have heard, Notor Prescott.”

They were a straitlaced pair, these two, and yet I liked them much. We talked more and I believe it was then that Pallan Coper began to come around to the dreadful idea that perhaps Naghan Rumferling, or one of their circle, would have to chance his life as king. I was shown out by their personal servant, Dolar, a massive Djang of ferocious appearance and childlike mind, a man of enormous courage and strength and utmost loyalty. He had been the first of those Djangs who, on fire, had leaped from the burning inn to fight the leemsheads.

Back at *The Paline and Queng* I made a frugal supper of bread — not done in the bols fashion, I may say — butter a little too long out of the icebox, and a ponsho chop that had seen better days. I had the money to buy better provender; the troubles had dried up markets and the country folk were frugally storing food against worse days to come. The whole countryside was in unrest, for the leemsheads now openly waylaid and slew any Obdjang they could find. If the Kov of Hyr Khor thought he would frighten Djangs like Chuktar Rumferling by these tactics, he was well out in his calculations. But Sinkie and Ortyg Coper were two worried Obdjangs.

At one time ships from Ng’grogga used to call regularly at Djanguraj. The first time I had seen one of the tall, fair-haired Ng’grogans I had jumped forward with joy, expecting to find Inch; and then sober sense returned. Here in Djanguraj we were a mere three hundred or so dwaburs almost due south from Ng’grogga. But the ships, simple single-decked brig-rigged craft, seldom reached in past the pharos of Port Djanguraj now.

The days of my enforced imprisonment limped past. And each day it seemed to me the state of the country worsened. If the army suffered a reverse now, Djan Himself knew what would happen. The Lady Lara Kholin Domon still wrestled me and one day, so occupied was I with my miserable thoughts, I forgot what I was doing, and caught two of her wrists. I twisted and pulled and sent her flying beautifully through the air to land with an almighty thump upon the mat. Three of her hands punched down to spring her back to her feet while the fourth rubbed her bottom, and then I was on her and tying her in knots and pressed my foot on her windpipe.

She glared up in a fury, and so, remembering, I let my foot slip and then she was on me like a leem and belted me down until I yelled quarter.

Even the zorca races were poorly attended, the lavish hippodrome, which they call *merezo* on Kregen, sparsely filled and the bets poor.

Lara had introduced me to her cousin, Felder Kholin Mindner, who was a Jiktar of the aerial forces and

therefore as highly placed as a Djang had any right to expect in the military services. He had been wounded in an affray and was home convalescing. What he told me of the army convinced me that if the emergency at home was not speedily ended, then the army would simply march on the capital and compel some sense into the politicians. What that would do as regards the Gorgrendrin situation was not something any Djang would wish to contemplate.

There were few fliers in Djanduin, but the Djanduin Air Service, being manned by Djangs, was as smart and efficient as any other. Felder Kholin Minder was a Jiktat of the flyers, riding a saddle-bird peculiar to Djanduin, called a flutduin, a powerful bird with wide yellow wings and a vicious, deadly black beak. We discussed the military situation; but he burst out with the usual realistic Djang observation: "May all the devils in a Herrelldrin hell take me if I understand strategy, Notor Prescott! How Chuktat Naghan does it I'll never know. But he peers down at his maps and he measures up with his ruler, and walks his dividers across, and then he thinks, and then, by Djan! we're all flying off helter-skelter and, as neat as you like, there are the Opaz-forsaken rasts of Gorgrens all lined up ready for us to belt into! I tell you, Notor Prescott, these Obdjangs are powerful clever fellows!"

"Both races of Djanduin get along well," I said. "I feel it a great shame that the country suffers so. If you Djangs accept the Obdjangs, as they accept you—"

"Absolutely right, Notor Prescott! We do and they do!"

"—then it seems that Kov Nath Jagdur is a mischievous man."

"I'd like to see him in the Ice Floes of Sicce!"

The use of the name Djang for either of the two peoples is quite correct; the little gerbil-faced fellows are often called Obdjangs. Very seldom are the four-armed warriors called Dwardjangs, which is a name to which they are entitled.

Eventually I came to find out why I had not come across a crossbow when I had rifled through the dead outside the inn on the occasion I had arrived in Djanduin. The Djangs use the curved compound reflex bow, a very similar weapon to those used by my clansmen and by my archers of Valka. The crossbow is a weapon they manufacture; not well, and they generally import examples for their crossbow regiments. So an arbalest is one of the first weapons a Djang soldier will snatch up on the scene of battle.

We went swimming in a scented indoor pool and Lara's parents joined us, laughing and splashing. I was invited to stay for supper, an invitation I accepted with alacrity, for although I had a sufficiency of money I had no influence, and the Kholins had both, and so could secure supplies.

We were halfway through an extremely fine meal, although Lara's father, Vad Larghos, would keep apologizing for the meanness of his table, and her mother, a woman still beautiful with her coppery hair bound with silver moon-bloom petals, kept throwing him reproachful glances as though the emergency and lack of the usual abundance of food were all his fault, when the majordomo announced a messenger.

"For the Notor Prescott, Lord of Strombor!" he boomed out.

Dolar stumbled in. His gray trousers, his dark blue cloak, the shirt visible beneath his lorica, were hideously splashed with blood. He looked exhausted. We all leaped up and I pressed a golden cup of wine into his hands. He drank like a leem.

"The Pallan!" he cried out, when he could get his breath. Then, remembering his manners, he said:

“Lahal, Notor Prescott. The master and mistress! They send for you. Chuktar Naghan Rumferling is dead, assassinated, and they need all loyal help.”

## CHAPTER NINE

“You hairy graint, Dray Prescott!”

Wild alarums and excursions and mad dashes through the night sky of Kregen, well, they have been a pretty constant part of my life on that beautiful yet terrible world. The Maiden with the Many Smiles floated high above us as we saddled up, strapping the clerketers tightly over our flying silks and leathers, and sent the flutduins lunging into the air.

Chuktar Naghan Rumferling, who was now dead, had been visiting a base camp at Cafresmot, halfway to the Mountains of Mirth. Pallan Coper and his wife had visited him there; I wondered, as I stretched forward along the neck of the giant flying bird and battled through the rushing air, if that visit had to do with a kingly crown and throne.

Pink moonlight washed over the steadily beating wings of the flutduins, and their sharp black beaks jutted forth ready, it seemed, to impale any obstruction. We flew on, with a steady remorseless wing-beat to lull us into a false sense of security. Wounded though he was, although much recovered, Felder Mindner had insisted on coming with us. Lara, too, had borne down all opposition, and her father, the Vad, had thereupon announced that he valued Naghan Rumferling highly, and the Pallan Coper, also, and would come with us, Nundji take him if he didn't!

Dolar, the faithful servant to Coper, in his turn had insisted on rousing the other loyal friends he had been bidden to summon. Much of the blood spattering him, dried and caked as it was from his flight from the Mountains of Mirth, was not his own. He had merely said, “They would have prevented me leaving, Vad,” when Vad Larghos questioned him.

Truly, the Djangs have thews of iron and a simplistic view of life!

So we knew there were others in the sky this night, outward bound for the base camp of the army of the east.

If the Gorgrens got wind of this night's doings, and decided to attack, who would there be capable of reading their plans and scheming to defeat them? So many of the Obdjangs had been slaughtered by this maniac, Kov Nath Jagdur, that the High Command was decidedly thin on the ground — or in the air.

Cafresmot stood a good long way from the fighting front, the Mountains of Mirth rise something like halfway between the Yawfi Suth and Djanguraj and have in the past proved the final insurmountable obstacle to armies invading from the east. That is why they are called what they are. How many and many a time, so I had been told with a chuckle, had proud and confident armies burst through one of the tortuous routes around the Yawfi Suth or the Wendwath and marched through Eastern Djanduin, full of hopes of easy conquest and glory now they had broken into the country. And then, they had seen rising before them the sharp and narrow peaks of a mountain range that extended north and south and curved in a bow that faced them. Not overly grand or full of hauteur, the Mountains of Mirth, standing no comparison whatsoever with The Stratemsk, and yet many and many a time they halted enemy invasions in relatively poor country, and turned them back. The shock had proved disastrous to many armies, not least the Gorgrens on the single long-ago occasion when they had managed to reach the mountains; and the men of Djanduin had roared their merriment.

Truly, they were the Mountains of Mirth!

From Djanguraj to the outermost western limits of the Yawfi Suth is about a hundred and seventy dwaburs. So this night we had to fly approximately fifty dwaburs, for the Mountains of Mirth stand roughly a hundred dwaburs from the capital, roughly seventy from the Yawfi Suth.

The firm steady beat of the flutduin I rode impressed me. I have ridden impiters, corths, fluttrells, mirvols, and many other of the marvelous saddle-flyers of Kregen, and it is difficult to choose the absolute best, for all have their good points as well as their weaknesses. We passed over the sleeping countryside and as She of the Veils rose before us and we blustered on against the rushing wind, the night filled with the pinkish moons-radiance. We followed the pink-glimmering reflections of the River of Wraiths. This river rises in the Mountains of Mirth and curving boldly southward flows westward through Djanduin and so to the Bay of Djanguraj where the Tarnish Channel meets the Ocean of Doubt. On that river stands Djanguraj, and also Cafresmot, our destination. Up and down, rising and falling with the long smooth wing-beats, we hurtled on through the level air and all about us fell the pink moons-light.

This part of Djanduin is rich in agriculture and husbandry, and we passed over the wide fields and the farms and the carefully tended grazing, and presently we saw beneath us the darker splotches of shadow against the pink glimmer, and so knew we had reached Cafresmot. The town is small but active, with a good cattle and ponsho market and with a thriving trade in corn and other staples. Felder Mindner, who knew the area well, had received directions from Dolar, and we swung a little north and swooped down toward a lightless ranch house set among missals. The night wind rustled the branches as Felder Mindner dropped his flutduin beyond the trees and we settled to the earth screened from the house by the missals.

Cautiously we crept along a track rutted by cart wheels and pocked by the hooves of calsanys. No one spoke. We were aware of the need of surprise, and I was quite content to let this Jiktar Mindner lead, for he seemed to know his business. Also, and the real reason, was that I recognized I was here only as a friend of Coper's. Dolar had been to other houses in Djanguraj and aroused friends of the Pallan. Chuktar Naghan, visiting here, had been met by Pallan Coper, but had been treacherously slain by disaffected members of an army unit stationed here, well back from the front. If Kov Nath had instigated this murder, and we had yet to prove that, he had struck a shrewd blow. It would have been useless for Dolar to have flown eastward to summon assistance from the army of the east, for, as he had told us, Coper suspected treason among them. If an army mutiny was to be added to the troubles of Djanduin I could see little hope for the country.

This troubled me as I crept forward through the pink radiance from the moons, my sword in my fist.

A Horter of Havilfar will carry his thraxter with him as a mere matter of dress; but I had taken nothing else in the way of weapons to what should have been a pleasant evening of swimming and feasting with the Demons, and so they had lent me a soldier's gear. The thraxter gleamed silvery pink. The shield I held high on my left shoulder. At my waist swung a djangir. Some of Vad Larghos' men carried crossbows, the others the compound reflex bow. We padded on like a wild hunting pack of drangs, scenting our quarry.

No lights, no sounds, came from the ranch house.

We passed the corrals on our left and heard the sleeping snorts of joats and the restless snuffling of totrixes. Mindner waited for us to come up and he spoke in a whisper to Vad Larghos and me.

"I fear we are too late, Vad. If the Pallan was not dead there would be sounds of fighting—"

“If you are right, Felder—” Vad Larghos took a shuddering breath. “If you are right, my boy, we must take our revenge upon these mad leem!”

As you know I am not a man much concerned with revenge. Justice — of a suitable kind — usually satisfies me. But I own I shared a little of the Vad’s anger. Punishment must be seen to be inflicted, for the country was falling to pieces and good men were dead.

We crept on and reached the final packed-earth space before the row of tall windows fronting the house. I looked carefully in the streaming moonlight and could see no sign of movement.

The Vad waved his men to left and right and, their bows nocked, they spread out.

Lara stood close to me, breathing in quick excited gasps, her face pale in the moon-glow. I put my hand on her left upper arm, and pressed, and she turned quickly to me and would have spoken, but I took my hand and the thraxter away swiftly and touched the hilt to my lips. I was indicating silence upon her; I think, now, she understood that little gesture differently.

Those around me were aware of the tense and jumpy business this was. At any moment a storm of arrows and bolts might spurt from those dark windows and cut us down. Someone had to go up to the front door and find out the truth of the situation.

Why I did what I did, I think, is easy to explain. Such boredom, such bitterness, such hellish misery had been my portion ever since I had been parted from Delia that a kind of fey recklessness had overtaken me. As I marched up to the door with my shield high and thraxter low I knew — *Iknew* — the ranch house would be deserted when I broke in.

I am not given to having my nerves racked by the various frightful experiences that befall me from time to time and which make life on Kregen so fascinating. If a bolt flicked toward me I would take it on my shield. I wanted to know what had become of Coper and Sinkie. I marched up to the door and kicked it in and smashed my way inside.

The darkness was partitioned by the long angular parallelograms of pink moonlight from the windows, paired from She of the Veils and the Maiden with the Many Smiles, softer and stronger, as one is the fourth and the other the first moon of Kregen. I padded in, vicious and ready for instant combat.

The house was empty.

Mindner followed me in and then the Vad and Lara and we searched, and gradually, with the lighting of torches and the shouting and running of feet, we made a nice little hullabaloo, as the Vad’s men turned the house upside down.

“You take great chances, Notor Prescott,” said Jiktar Mindner. He flexed his four arms meaningfully.

“Perhaps. Where will the rasts have taken the Pallan and the Lady Sinkie?”

“We must find them!” exclaimed Lara. “Poor Sinkie! Think what may be happening to her!”

“I fear they must all be dead, daughter,” said her father, the Vad, somewhat gruffly.

“If they are, Vad,” I said, in my old surly way, “I will not believe it until I see them lying before me — dead.”

“Oh!” said Lara, and she put her sword down as though suddenly aware of what it was.

“Jiktar!” I said and I saw them all jerk up at my tone. I had spoken as I would have spoken to a Jiktar of the army of Vallia or Valka, or a wild clansman who had not jumped immediately when I asked a question.

“I think—” Mindner began, a little hazily.

“By Vox! Spit it out!”

“If, as Dolar said, this terrible thing was done by the local army unit, they might have gone back to their barracks.”

“Are the Dwadjangs then so envious of the Obdjangs?” As he opened his mouth to make some sort of answer I chopped him off. “No matter. I know what I know of the Djangs. We fly at once to the barracks. Jiktar Mindner! You lead!”

“Yes, Notor Prescott.”

And so once more we mounted our flyers and took the wide-winged wind-eaters into the night sky of Kregen.

As we hurtled through the rushing air I considered how strange it was that these big rough fighting-men, the Djangs, so desperately needed someone to tell them what to do in moments like this. In a battle or an affray Mindner would never have been at a loss. If I say that the Djangs fight in such wise as to turn even Chuliks a little more yellowly pale than usual, I do not exaggerate. But they need leaders!

They would have all gone flying off to the barracks, whooping, to plunge down into as bloody an affray as you could wish; I had had to tell Mindner to detail a man to stay at the deserted ranch house to warn the following flights.

Yet this was only a tactical move, nothing clever in it, and I suspected there were as many degrees of intuitive intelligence as well as learned skill among the Djangs as among any other diffs. A number of the young fighting-men of Djanduin would go off to become mercenaries; but the vast majority stayed at home to work the soil and serve as soldiers in their own army, constantly menaced by the Gorgrens. Therefore the formidable fighting shape of the four-armed Djang was seldom encountered in the empires and kingdoms and free cities of Kregen. Djanduin is a rich kingdom, and yet it holds itself aloof from the rest of Havilfar, secure behind its treacherous bogs of the Yawfi Suth, the mysterious waters of the Wendwath, and the serried peaks of the Mountains of Mirth.

There was action aplenty at the barracks.

We saw the lights flaring and heard the yelling and shouting, whoops of ferocious merriment, the discordant clanging and banging of gongs and punklingings and drums, and the wailing of flutes, the brazen notes of razzorns and trumpets.

We touched down out of sight and Mindner looked over a screen of thorn-ivy bushes forming a kind of natural boma around the barrack area, and he looked as delighted, as fierce, as obsessively pleased, as any fighting-man has any right to be casting his avaricious gaze on his foemen.

“They are Dwadjangs of North Djanduin, very fine doughty warriors, and I have no doubt that the madman Nath Jagdur has besotted their minds with evil promises.”

If it came to a fight between Djangs, as I knew, they’d fight, by Zair, they’d fight!

I wished to avoid bloodshed. Oh, I was bitter and savage enough in my self-misery not to care who got themselves killed; but I suppose the devil was working his dark and devious plans in me even then.

We could see Coper and Sinkie, with other Obdjangs and a few Dwadjangs who must have remained loyal to them, sitting in a corner of the compound, the light from the two moons bright upon them. They had been bound with thongs. They looked dejected and frightened, as they had every right to be. And yet I saw Coper leaning toward his wife, and the way her little body jerked upright, her whiskers quivering, and I could guess with what sweet and reasonable fire he was putting courage back into her. He was a fine man, Pallan O. Fellin Coper!

The noise came from a drunken band of soldiery who had broken out the musical instruments; each man with a piece that would make a noise was making a noise, and each man was playing a different tune from his neighbor. Other men sang and laughed and jumped, and continually they drank deeply of the liquor that poured from great barrels turned on their sides and wedged up on trestles. I sniffed. Dopa. Well, no wonder they were making this racket. Dopa is a fiendish drink guaranteed to make the coolest headed man fighting drunk in a second, if he takes it neat. The dopa dens usually water or soft-drink their dopa in the ratio of ten to one.

“Drunk!” said Vad Larghos, with great distaste.

“I think, Vad, that Kov Nath Jagdur has made them drunk, for otherwise it is doubtful, even though they are Northern Djangs, that they would do what they have done.” Mindner looked a little sick, as he looked on this betrayal of the army in which he served.

“They may be too drunk to notice us,” I said. I merely tested the wind as I spoke, for I was forming theories about the Djang fighting-man.

“The hulus!” said Mindner. “They’re drunk enough to tangle with a leem. They’ll see us.”

There had to be a way around this. There were ten in the party of captives, and at least a hundred drunks cavorting about. Mindner had called them hulus. Well, here on Earth we apply insulting names, in amused despair, to idiots who are doing something wrong that we know, in normal circumstances, they would not do. It is all in the tone of voice, as when you call a man a bastard or a ratbag you can mean many different things. On Kregen one such term is hulu. And it summed up these onker-rasts perfectly, for they were more villainous at the moment than a simple stupid onker, and yet not quite as outrightly villainous as rasts.

I said to Mindner, “You will, on my signal, keep them occupied here. I am going to get them out with the flutduins.” He started to huff up at this, but I was brutal with him. “Don’t get yourself killed, Jiktar. And keep an eye open for the Lady Lara and her father. If you have to run away — aye! — run away from them, then run. Just give me a few murs in there, that is all.”

He managed to get out, “I shall accompany you, Notor Pres—”

“Do not be a nurdling onker! You keep those hulus occupied in there, and, by the Black Chunkrah, they won’t know a thing has hit ’em.”



I gave him no time to argue. Back into that moon-spattered night I went, and the Lady Lara pattered along with me, and I turned my look on her, and I knew — Zair forgive me! — what my face looked like then. “Go back, Lara, and keep out of the way. If you do not, I shall tan you so that you won’t sit a zorca for a sennight!”

“You hairy graint, Dray Prescott!”

And then I — Dray Prescott — chuckled. It was not in me to laugh, not then. “I have been called a hairy graint before, Lara, many and many a time — to my eternal joy!”

“Oh — you!” she said, and swung about and marched back to the distraction party outside the boma.

Managing the flutduins was not as difficult as I had expected, and they followed me into the air on leading lines, a smoothly rhythmical flight that slotted them into a pattern that economically took up the minimum space their wide yellow wings required. We passed over the boma and that was the signal Mindner awaited. As I went streaking over the packed earth I twisted to look at Mindner and his party. They were putting up a brave show, loosing arrows, yelling and shrieking, and they’d thought to twist up quick torches from clumps of grass which they tossed cunningly down just the other side of the boma. These served before they burned out to illuminate the boma and the drunken soldiery and, by contrast, to drown the pink light of the two moons and throw Coper and the captives into shadow.

The flutduins were birds that could not be easily hidden. I had no stupid ideas that I would not be seen. But the Vad’s marksmen were aware of the importance of Coper. So many Obdjangs had been killed that the Pallan of the Highways was now a most exalted personage. Vad Larghos’ men would shoot, and they would shoot to kill.

The flutduins landed and I was off the back of my bird and at Coper and Sinkie with a hunting knife. Their thongs sliced free.

“Oh! Notor Prescott!”

“Up, Ortyg!” I yelled, as Sinkie, calling on her husband Ortyg, fainted into his arms. “Grab Sinkie and get on a flutduin! *Move!*”

Savage slashes that, I confess, drew blood, released the other captives and I herded them onto the remaining birds. The flutduins rose into the sky. A crossbow bolt sheared past my arm and vanished into the shadows. I whirled. Half a dozen drunken soldiers were staring at me, and shouting and gesticulating. One of them was trying to wind his arbalest, but the ratchet kept slipping and he kept falling over his own feet. Another drew his thraxter, waving wildly, and charged.

I knew what they would have done to Coper and Sinkie when Kov Nath Jagdur arrived, and so I could resign myself to cutting this hulu down. He fell without a screech. The flutduins were aloft now, their yellow wings powerful in the pink moons-shine. I jumped for my bird, the last remaining one, and took off without strapping myself up in the clerketer. I found the ready bow and I drew and loosed six deadly shafts before we rose past the boma, and six of those less drunk than their fellows, who were trying to shoot up, fell, screeching.

Out over the boma we whirled and a darkness descended as the crude torches flared and died. Then eyes adjusted and I was seeing my comrades rushing for the flutduins and mounting up. Each bird can carry three people, at push of pike, and we were not overloaded as we winged off into the Kregan night.

No surprise at all, none whatsoever, that the Lady Lara contrived to leap up before me and let me grasp her around the waist as the flutduin belabored the air. She leaned back and her coppery hair brushed my cheeks.

“I declare, Notor Prescott! Hai Jikai!”

We flew off, and, I think, perhaps that had been a good Jikai. Not a High Jikai. But, still, a Jikai to remember.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Khokkak the Meddler and the King of Djanduin

They say the devil finds work for idle hands.

Well, there are many devils of many different shades of devilry on Kregen, as there are parts of that profoundly mysterious planet where devils are accounted of no value at all; and I suppose the devil who got into me was most likely to be Khokkak the Meddler.

I do not think it could have been Sly the Ambitious, or Gleen the Envious. No, on reflection, some few aspects of Hoko the Amusingly Malicious must have helped along the general devilry of Khokkak the Meddler.

At any event, what with my own desperate boredom and savage misery, and the way the country was going, and the stupid succession of stupid kings, and what was happening to fine people like Coper and Sinkie, for something to do I decided I would become king of Djanduin.

This was a consciously mischievous decision.

As you will know, among my clansmen my success there had been entirely because I would not allow myself to be killed, when, in truth, I had no great reason to live, and through the accumulation of obi and a growing respect, culminating in the selection by the elders and the election of myself as leader, subsequently Zorcander. And in Zenicce no one had been more surprised than I had been myself when Great-Aunt Shusha — who was not my great-aunt — had bestowed on me the House of Strombor. And in Valka, I had fought, I and my men, for the island, and they had petitioned behind my back with the Emperor to make me their Strom. As for being Prince Majister of Vallia, that meant nothing. Delia, as the Princess Majestrix, had been the prize not only for me, but I as her prize.

So I had not gone out of my way to grasp for ranks and titles and honors. I had with some calculation accepted Can-thirda and Zamra, but they were political acquisitions, with an eye to the future.

Here, in Djanduin, with much inner amusement, I took a calm decision. I, Dray Prescott, would make myself King of Djanduin.

It would not be easy. That was all to the good. I had what was left of ten years to do it in, and the harder it was the more amusement I would have.

Oh, do not think I did not falter on occasion as the years wore on, when I saw fine young men, superb fighting Djangs, dying on some stupid battlefield, or in some affray that went awry; but I took the weakling's comfort in the knowledge that had I not struggled to put the country in order those fine young

men would have died, anyway, and many more with them. When Nath Wonlin Sundermair was assassinated as he waited in my tent for me — while I was out repairing a varter that had been damaged by a chunk of rock thrown by the enemy artillery — do not think I was unmoved. N. Wonlin Sundermair had fought them and shouted for aid, and my guards had come running, too late. The assassins were caught. A military court sat, and adjudged, and they were hanged, all six of them, hanged and left to rot.

The fateful charisma that envelops me whether I will it or not worked for me in Djanduin. Many men, and not only Djangs, but Lamnias and Fristles and Brokelsh and others of the marvelous diffs of Kregen, had reached a dead end in their hopes for Djanduin. The leemsheads were now so bold in their raids that only strongly escorted parties of non-Djangs might venture out onto the white dusty roads, or take cautiously to the air astride their flutduins.

The onslaught of the Gorgrens had, at last and following on the death of Chuktar Naghan Rumferling, burst through a pathway of the Yawfi Suth, and a clever feint southward toward the Wendwath had sent the bulk of the Djanduin army rushing southward. The Gorgrens surged through the land of East Djanduin to reach the Mountains of Mirth. Here they were stopped, not by the army but by those old allies of Djanduin, the Mountains of Mirth and the desolate country at their feet to the east.

You will recall that great period when the events chronicled in the song “The Fetching of Drak na Valka” were being enacted. Somehow, during this time when I struggled with only two hands to hold Djanduin together and to defeat the Gorgrens, I could take no high joy from the enterprise. No song, I thought, would be composed by the skalds of Djanduin to commemorate these wild and skirling events.

Well, I was wrong in that, as you shall hear.

One day when the little band I had gathered together — old soldiers, young men out for adventure, rascals like Khobo the So, one or two diffs from overseas who thought I looked a likely prospect for future plunder — came down into a hollow among tuffa trees and found the remnants of an army unit shattered and burned, I met Kytun Kholin Dom. We had a smart set-to with the Gorgrens — nasty brutes — before they were seen off, and I took pleasure from the way this tall and agile young Djang fought. He roared his joy as my men came running down swiftly into the hollow between the tuffa trees, and his thraxter twinkled merrily in and out, and his shield rang with return blows.

“You are welcome, Dray Prescott!” he yelled at me, and dispatched his man and swung to engage the next. “Lara has told me what a great shaggy graint you are! But, Lahal! You are right welcome!”

“Lahal, Kytun Dom,” I shouted, and ran to stand with him back to back and so beat off the last of the Gorgrens. Truly, he is a man among men, Kytun!

We had incredible adventures together and he became a good comrade to whom I could confide much of my story. We understood each other. He was a Dwadjang, and therefore as bonny a fighter as there is on Kregen, and I was apim, and therefore as canny as an Obdjang. We formed a great team.

The years went by and the kings came and went and the Gorgrens moldered sullenly to the east of the Mountains of Mirth. On the day they made their final massive attempt to break through they also did something they had not attempted before, according to Kytun, through all of recorded history.

We were riding our flutduins toward the mountains followed by the advanced aerial wing of our army — oh, yes, by this time we had our own army, and efficient and formidable it was, too — when the merker reached us. We alighted at once.

“I find it impossible to believe, Dray,” said Kytun. His coppery hair blazed in the emerald and ruby lights from Antares. His tough, bluffly handsome face with the amber eyes twisted up in deep reflection as he twisted the signal paper. “The Gorgrens, may Djan rot ’em! Sailing across the sea to attack us!”

“The Gorgrens hate the sea, Notor,” said old Panjit, the Obdjang Chuktar who had thrown in his lot with us, at Pallan Coper’s urgent suggestion. “They have no navy, no marine. They are a nomad people above themselves with pride and greed who wish to sweep us up into their jaws, as they have done Tarnish and Sava.”

“I agree, Panjit,” said Kytun. “But the signal says their ships are landing men in the Bay of Djanguraj, at the mouth of the River of Wraiths.”

“Then the capital is immediately threatened.” Panjit gave his fine white whiskers a polishing rub. “We cannot be in two places at once. The army of the east must hold the Mountains of Mirth — but they are too weak, as we well know.” He looked at me a moment, wanting me to say something; but I remained silent. Finally he said, “The reserve army should be called out, of course. But they will never stand if the invasion is so close to Djanguraj.” Again he rubbed his whiskers. “We will have to return.”

Kytun looked at me.

Our officers had gathered, standing in the relaxed yet alert postures of the fighting-man. And very romantic and barbaric they looked, with their flying leathers covered in flying silks and furs, their jewels and their ornaments, their weapons gleaming, the feathers nodding from their helmets. I took heart from their firm bronzed faces, the light of determination in their eyes. The Djangs are a warrior people. They would need all their devotion to me, all their belief in an apim’s powers of strategy, for them to follow me now and trust my word.

I said, “We go on to the Mountains of Mirth.”

There was a silence.

I can see them now in my mind’s eye, as I sit talking into this microphone, here on the world of my birth. Oh, they are a bonny lot, the fighting-men of Djanduin! The brilliant colors of their decorations, their silver and gold sword-mountings, the jewels studding their harness, the meticulously executed designs upon their shields, all the affected trappings a fighting-man acquires during his years of service giving them this wonderful pagan, barbaric look tempered by the discipline of a professional army. The flutduin men are addicted to the pelisse and sabretache and look like savage editions of hussars. Their national weapon, the djangir, is worn by every soldier — aye! — and he knows how to use it to devastating advantage.

The silence hung.

Slowly I turned and glowered on them, one by one. The streaming opaz light from Zim and Genodras flooded down in brilliance all about us upon that windy plain, and the feathers and silks and scarves rustled and fluttered. With a steady slogging tramp of metal-studded sandals the infantry were marching up, as I glared around on my knot of high officers. The joat-mounted cavalry trotted by, every lance aligned, the colors flying.

I waited for one of them to break the silence, but all, every one, lowered his eyelids as my gaze fell upon him. I glared with special ferocity upon Felder Mindner, for he was my Jiktat of flutduins, and he looked away, and slapped his sabretache against his leg, and fidgeted; but he did not speak.

“By Zim-Zair!” I burst out, at last, forced by their sullen silence to speak against my will. “Must I explain everything!”

Kytun — that same K. Kholin Dom, who was a Kov and a good comrade — at last lifted his head, the coppery hair flying, and he said, “Dray — Notor Prescott, Lord of Strombor! We have followed you faithfully and well, in good times and in bad. But now that Djanguraj is attacked from the sea we—”

I would not let him continue. I did not wish him to utter words he would afterward regret.

“Yes! You have vowed to follow me, and I seek nothing from any of you, except the saving of the country!”

This was a lie. Thankfully, it was the last lie I had need of telling my men, my wonderful men, of Djanduin.

And, do not misunderstand me, for there were many girls who marched and rode and flew with us, glorious girls with coppery hair and tawny skins and flashing eyes, girls whose four arms were as deft with sword and djangir as any man’s. Girls who, into the bargain, had other, gentler skills.

“You have sworn to serve me as I serve you in freeing our country from the devil Gorgrens and the devil leems-heads! Together, Obdjang, Dwadjang, apim, diff, we will cleanse Djanduin and found for ourselves a new, clean, brave country where our children may live in peace!”

Around us now the army gathered, *my* army, the force I had built up and trained and given spirit, all so that Khokkak the Meddler might glee within my skull.

In the sound of stamping hooves, the snorts of joats, the rustling of flutduin wings, the clink of armor and weapons, that silence came back. It hung there between us like a rashoon of the inner sea, stark and dark and brutal.

I glared at Felder; he is a fine fellow but a blockhead. I glared at the Obdjang Chuktar Panjit, and he rubbed his whiskers and looked away.

Again I looked around the circle of my officers, my trusted comrades, and again they looked away.

And then Kytun stepped forward. He dragged out — not his thraxter but his djangir. He lifted it high.

“I trust Notor Prescott! I believe in him! I, for one, will fly to the Mountains of Mirth and there thrash the Gorgrens, once and for all!” He swung the broad short blade about his head. “Who will follow me and ride with Notor Prescott?”

The spell was broken, the dam breached. The djangirs flashed out, a forest of blades, and they cried, every one, that they would follow me. For, by Djan, was I not Notor Prescott, the man who had sworn he would put their poor abused country back on its feet again?

I stood, looking on them as they shouted and cheered and pledged themselves again, as the great cry was taken up by the massed men beyond, as infantry and cavalry and artillery and flyers all caught the fever, the understanding that this was a new and bright beginning, a fresh compact between themselves and me. And I looked and saw what I had wrought.

In that moment, I now see, I drove Khokkak the Meddler from my brain.

In that moment there on the wind-blowing plain with the acclamations and the pledges of my men ringing in my ears, I sloughed off at last my willful foolishness, my malicious antics. I had decided to become King of Djanduin because I had been bored, on a whim, as something to do to amuse me. Now I saw something I should have seen from the very beginning: that I had been meddling in the affairs of men and women, men and women whose own lives were profoundly affected by my petty games.

Never again with the men of Djanduin could I act the games-master. The country needed a strong hand at the helm. If I could become King of Djanduin, I would do so. Not, this time, just for amusement and to see if I could do it in the time allowed me, but so as to fulfill all the glib pledges I had made, so as really to make of the country a fine and wonderful place in which to live — as we had in Valka!

So we rode and flew and marched to the Mountains of Mirth, and we caught the Gorgrens as they tried to debouch from a high pass. The battle was long and weary, but in the end we overcame and routed them and sent them packing back to East Djanduin. When we had overcome our internal problems and gathered our strength we in our turn would descend from the Mountains of Mirth and drive the cramps of Gorgrens right out of Djanduin and back over their own borders.

As you know the colors of Djanduin are orange and gray. I had not bothered overmuch about banners and flags, apart from ensuring that every unit flew its identifying guidon or standard. But just before the battle in the high pass of the Mountains of Mirth, in the pass known as the Jaws of Nundji, I had made a flag. I told the women who stitched it that it was to be a large flag, and a noble one, with a heavy gold-bullion fringe, and with golden ropes and tassels, and to the men who turned the staff I told them I wanted a djangir blade mounted atop, proudly, as was fitting.

So, when we fought the Gorgrens in the pass of the Jaws of Nundji, and routed them utterly, my old flag flew over my men. That old flag with its yellow cross on the scarlet field floated high as we charged down. Truly, with Old Superb to fight under, I was totally committed. No longer was I merely playing a political and military game, so as to see if I might make myself king within a stipulated time.

Now, I did not care if I became king or not. Now I decided that Djanduin came first . . .

You may laugh and mock and call me a sentimental fool. For, of course, you might say, these Djangs were a leaderless bunch, naturally they would accept my decision. But they were hotheaded fighting-men, and they believed their homes were in danger, behind their backs, with their enemies creeping upon their wives and children from the sea. Had you been there on that windswept plain, under the streaming brilliance of the Suns of Scorpio, I do not think you would have dubbed me either an onker or sentimental.

When we were taking an enforced rest after the battle, seeing to our wounded and counting the cost, and I sat in a miserable little tent of hides and pored over the map, in the light of a samphron-oil lamp we had captured from the Gorgrens, the merker came.

His flutclepper was exhausted. These fast racing birds are built for speed and speed and more speed. He had reached us from Djanduin in record time.

After the Llahals had been made and he had gulped a goblet of wine, he said, “I see my message of warning is not necessary.”

“Tell us, man!” Kytun spat out wrathfully, as befitted a Kov kept waiting, although he was a

good-hearted fellow as I well know.

“As to that,” I said, “the merker will say that the ships were a feint, that they carried straw dummies, that only a small force landed, and straightaway took themselves off when once they had aroused the neighborhood and news had been carried to Djanguraj in all haste, as they could see.”

The merker gaped at me.

Then Kytun let out a great bellow of laughter.

“By Zoduin of the Silver Stux! Is that the way of it?”

“Aye, Kov,” said the messenger. He licked his bearded lips where the wine glittered in the lamplight. “It is as the Notor says. The reserve army marched out, and the Gorgrens had gone.” He looked at me. “By your leave, Notor, there is more.”

I nodded.

“The ships were provided by the leemshead Kov Nath Jagdur. The plan was his. A Gorgren was taken prisoner, and he talked freely.”

“By Djan!” said Kytun, leaping up and fairly rocking the tent with the violence of his anger. “One day I will take that false Kov’s head from his shoulders.”

“The king has sent messengers to the army of the east, to warn them; they began their westward march as soon as news was brought them that the Gorgrens had invaded by sea, difficult though it be to believe such a thing.”

“Difficult to believe the Gorgrens would sail the sea, merker, or difficult to believe Chuktar Rogan Kolanier — who is a Zan-Chuktar — would believe it and take his army of the east to the west?”

Kytun chortled at this, and my other officers crowded into the little tent gave vent to their amusement in various picturesque ways. The merker was not discomposed. His light colored eyes remained fastened on me. In his life, I suppose, he was accustomed to delivering messages that would evoke all manner of violent responses in their recipients.

“I think, Notor, both.”

I looked at him.

“Your name, merker?”

“If it please you, Notor, I am called Chan of the Wings.”

I nodded to him. I knew a messenger did not receive the appellation *of the Wings* lightly.

“The Pallan Coper sent you, I know. Therefore you must be a good man. Is there any other news?”

He had no need to hesitate. “Whatever was the news before, Notor, your victory here today will change everything. Now, perhaps, the food will flow more freely.” Then, with a great deal of meaning, he added, “The king will be pleased.”

Kytun said, somewhat coarsely, “And the king had better think what best to be done about Chuktar Kolanier! He was completely caught by the wiles of those Opaz-forsaken Gorgrens.”

“Like Marshal Grouchy,” I said, but softly, for they could not understand that reference.

Then, with a simple directness that took the wind out of my sails, for one, the merker Chan of the Wings, committed himself — and others, besides.

“I am privy to many secrets, Notor. I and my fellow merkers — and we are a not insignificant khand — have been saved from despair by you and your army and your determination to save the country. These things we know, for we carry them. We are sworn to secrecy, but we know.” *Bykhand* he meant the merker’s guild, or caste, or brotherhood. They were small in number but, by reason of their calling, influential. A good merker is a great jewel in any man’s retinue. “We declare for you, Notor Prescott, as king. Take the throne, and we are with you.”

A murmur broke out from my officers. This, as far as they were concerned, was the first anyone had said of Notor Prescott, the Lord of Strombor — who was apim! — ascending the faerling throne in the sacred court of the warrior gods.

I sensed the hand of Pallan Coper in this. The old fox! He wanted someone he could trust on the throne, but he sure as the hot springs in the ice floes wasn’t going to sit on that hot seat himself!

It was left to Kytun to spring up, waving wildly, and knock the tent completely over so that his bellow rang out between the mountains, echoing back and forth: “Aye! Notor Prescott, Lord of Strombor! *King of Djanduin!*”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kytun Kholin Dorn

There is little left to tell of that first sojourn of mine in the beautiful, wild and headstrong land of Djanduin. Beautiful — for we would look upon the Mountains of Mirth as their narrow peaks pierced the blue Kregan sky and the snow dazzle would glitter like all the diamonds and sapphires in creation; we could turn and look over the vast expanse of West Djanduin with its fields and forests, its meadows and farms, and we felt the ache in the heart that afflicts a man when he looks upon beauty. Wild — for leem prowled in the uncultivated areas, and great gales would blow up the Tarnish Channel and everyone would shutter their windows and pray the roof tiles stayed on. Headstrong — why, yes, for my Dwadjangs proved irresistible in battle, given a fair chance, and the sight of them surging into battle with their four arms going filled me always with a shivery sense of awe.

The Gorgrens remained for a time in occupation of East Djanduin.

The army of the east, hearing of my own army’s success, and knowing that the eastern front was for the moment secure, continued on to the capital. Here, before the current king could make a move to discipline him, Chuktar Rogan Kolanier, who was of the Porlin tan, or House, set his men upon the king’s bodyguard and burst into the palace. No one ever did know what happened to that king; but Chuktar R. Porlin Kolanier sat himself on the faerling throne in the sacred court of the warrior gods, and was duly crowned.

You may imagine the indignation of my men.



“The impious yetch!” Kytun bellowed, furious, his face an interesting scarlet, his eyes fairly snapping as he strode up waving the merker’s signal. We were camped at the base of the mountains, covering three exits, and our flyer scouts patrolled ceaselessly. “I’ll have to take his head from his shoulders, Dray! That is crystal clear.”

The merker had this time flown here in a flier, and the voller, a lean stripped one-man craft, openly flew the flag of the Pallan Coper. Coper was no longer Pallan of the Highways. Because he had remained alive when so many of his Obdjang colleagues had been murdered he had found himself pressed upward in the civil service beneath the various kings, and he was now Pallan of the Vollers.

“When you quiet down, Kytun, we must make sure the Gorgrens have really withdrawn from the Valley of the Bantings, for if they have it means they—”

“Dray! Dray! Didn’t you hear what I said?”

I looked up and although I do not smile easily I managed to crack out a millimeter of lip movement for Kytun, a great fighter and a good comrade.

“I heard, Kytun. There is a saying: ‘Give a man full armor and two shields to ride a fluttclepper.’ This Chuktar Kolanier will not last.”

He glowered down, sullen with his concern for my dignity. “Agreed, Dray, agreed. But we should march for Djanguraj and place you on the faerling throne!”

I stood up. “Perhaps, Kytun, I would prefer to see you seated there.”

Kytun threw back his head and bellowed with laughter, his good humor restored. “Me! The Kov of Uttar Djombey? Why, I have no desire to sit on the throne. It needs an Obdjang or an apim. You, Dray Prescott, you!”

We sent back a noncommittal reply by the merker and his flier shot away, traveling fast and low as a flyer came in from the scouts to report the Valley of the Bantings clear.

I set about rearranging our dispositions. Truth to tell, I was merely marking time, giving this new King Kolanier enough rope to hang himself. I knew — or thought I did — that Ortyg Coper would send me the word when it was time to move.

The banting, by the way, is a cheeky little rock-bird of brilliant coloration, not unlike the English chaffinch in a superficial way; their nests high along the rocky clefts grow greater each season and they fill the valley with their darting wings. They live on lizards and insects and are regarded with great affection by the Djangs.

My own messengers were out in force, and with the Kholin tan solidly behind me, and with the obvious scarcity of Obdjangs either capable or willing to take the throne, I felt it to be a mere matter of waiting until the right time and then of striking hard and surely. I had no wish to gain the throne in the same stupid way of those onkers who would, when I succeeded, become my predecessors, and then of having someone else rise up behind my back. Also, I admit, the whole country was sick and tired of this nonsense. They needed a person at the helm who would direct and control, fairly and justly, giving aid to the weak and yet not penalizing too unfairly the strong and clever, so that the wheels of industry and commerce, of religion and order, might continue to turn.

I, Dray Prescot, had set out to take the throne because I had nothing better to do. Now that I had had my eyes opened by the sheer loyalty, the dependence of my men, I hesitated. What right had I to aspire to another country's throne? Would I do any better for them than any of the other idiots who had grabbed the crown from greed? Perhaps I might; as you know I had had considerable success in Valka, and the Clans of Felschraung and Longuelm had prospered. But — and it was a big but — had all the joy gone from the scheme? Because I might now take the throne, had all the contest gone from the exercise?

With all the force of a millstone running downhill events had taken charge.

I discovered that the Kov of Hyr Khor, this Nath Jagdur, had once been of the Djjin tan. When he had been declared leemshead, an outlaw, his tan had rejected him. He had made short work of them, and now he alone remained of the tan, with the exception of a young, crippled girl who had sought protection in North Djanduin with the Bolin tan, and who was now, therefore, behind the enemy lines, in an area dominated by the Gorgrens.

Day by day secret messages of support flowed in. Coper was now working urgently. The treasury was bankrupt. The soldiers received no pay. No ships called. The harvest had been good but the farmers, true to their canny nature, hid most of their produce and sold only a tithe of it in the markets. There were riots in the city. The new king, this Kolanier, caroused in the palace, and sent his men out into the countryside to burn barns and seize hidden food. This food was then brought back to the city and distributed only to those in favor with the king. That meant his army and their dependents. Coper wrote that he felt disaster of a colossal scale could not now be prevented unless I struck soon.

So I had to make up my mind.

I prevaricated.

Oh, yes, I was very far from the Dray Prescot who once would hurl himself unthinkingly into the leem's jaws. Now I pondered long and deeply, and, if I say that in the end I made up my mind to do as Coper and Kytun and our other friends begged me to do, and if that sounds megalomaniac to you, I can ask only for understanding. I am conscious always of that old saw about absolute power corrupting absolutely. I had held power in my hands. If I was corrupt I could blame only myself. That I did not think myself corrupt meant merely that, perhaps, I did not grasp the truth. But, also, I doubt if any of you would care to stand up and say to me, face to face, what you might murmur behind my back.

Is that megalomania?

I try always to treat a man fairly, to give him his just deserts, and to seek for mercy if he is evil, and to heap overpraise on him if he is meritorious.

These are a weakling's ways, I know.

On the day appointed we marched for Djanguraj.

We made a magnificent spectacle.

The flutduins beat the sky with their yellow wings, their sharp black beaks pointed on toward success. The infantry marched in their regulation formations, pastang by pastang, regiment by regiment. The artillery trundled on, drawn by sleek teams of quoffas or calsanys. The joats of the cavalry jingled as they

trotted on over the white roads. And, over all the host, which had swollen day by day with fresh and eager men anxious to have an end of the troubles, there floated my old scarlet and yellow flag, Old Superb.

A flier reached us from Coper. The merker was that same Chan of the Wings, whom I had grown to trust.

“Lahal, Notor Prescott — soon to be King of Djanduin!”

“Lahal, Chan of the Wings.”

He told me the news even as he handed me the balass box.

“The King, this Kolanier, is dead. The Kov of Hyr Khor, Nath Jagdur, sits on the faerling throne!”

My first thought was one of relief.

I might not need, after all, to march in and fight and place the crown upon my head.

Then — to my surprise — Kytun burst out laughing. He roared. “By Nundji! So the cramph has done it at last!”

The explanation was simple. All the time I had been building my strength, Kov Nath had been doing the same. He had recruited leemsheads, outlaws, wild savages from the distant western islands surrounding Uttar Djombey, criminals, and those who believed he could bring the country out of its troubles. He had bribed Kolanier’s guards and subverted his army, that had once been the army of the east. Now, truly, Kov Nath thought he had succeeded. He sat on the throne and his word was law.

But — no more food came into the city, and starvation now stalked the streets of Djanguraj.

Now I saw very clearly, with an appalled vision that summed up that dreadful charisma I possess, that this was no time for my personal relief. Now *I had* to make myself king and save the country of Djanduin.

Megalomania?

We marched for Djanguraj and the faerling throne.

My men and women of the army called me the apim with the yrium.

They had lived so long on promises: promises that they would be paid, their dependents cared for. They had subsisted at times on roots and berries and water from the streams. Some country folk had assisted us, but I had hanged a party of infantry who had burned a farmhouse in search of hidden food. I had issued notes, promissory notes, and very few had ever believed they would be honored.

What right had I to hang men, even if they were soldiers caught looting and raping and burning? In truth, I had not passed sentence, for the court did that; but the court knew my views and they worked to rules and regulations I had set down for all to read who could. For those who could not read a stylor had been appointed to read out to every unit the standing orders under which my army marched into a campaign.

“In Hamal,” said Kytun, perplexed at my discomposure over the hangings. “The law gives the next of kin the right to select tortures for the condemned before they are executed.”

“I know,” I said. There had been a husband, distraught, howling his grief as he mourned over the ruptured bodies of his wife and three daughters. “I know.”

Kytun’s Kovnate island of Uttar Djombey lay at the extreme southwestern tip of Havilfar. Hamal extended over the whole northeastern corner of the continent. Yet word of the laws of Hamal penetrated even to Uttar Djombey.

Also, Kytun told me as we had fought and campaigned together, his island of Uttar Djombey, which lay off the west coast of Djanduin, as you know, was flanked on the north by an island of equal size. At the west ends the two islands were not above two ulms apart. They trended north and south as they extended eastward so that a large, sheltered sheet of water lay between them. This second island was the home of Kov Nath Jagdur. This was the island of Hyr Khor.

“And a worse nulsh for a neighbor no man could have!”

Judge, then, my mental state when I replied, “You will have a bad neighbor for not very much longer now, Kytun!”

So many of the troubles of the country could be laid directly at Kov Nath Jagdur’s door. Through his barbaric assassination of Obdjangs he had stripped the country of those who could guide it and keep it on a safe and level course. My first task, after securing the food supply, must be to strengthen the civil service and bolster the courage of the Obdjangs. Many had left the country, as Coper had told me. This gave me a measure of the Pallan of the Vollers. He had courage, to stay on. I thought of Sinkie, and I determined that nothing could harm them.

If I do not dwell on those last days of the troubles it is, I suppose, because good men fought one another, and died, and as the streaming opaz light of Zim and Genodras drenched the battling armies in color and warmth and light, so the thraxters and the stuxes and the djangirs sucked the life from them and stained the dust with blood.

Old Superb flew over my victorious army.

Truth to tell, the battle was not much of a fight, from a strategic point of view, although there were one or two tactical moves I rather liked, for as soon as the way of it was clearly seen Kov Nath Jagdur’s men began to desert him and to come over to our side. I had to use them, of course, but with all of human frailty in me I knew I would never fully trust them, which is a great pity.

Being a bit of a maniac still, and seeing this battle as the outcome of a foolish whim made manifest in destiny, I had dived into the battle myself. The great and impossibly long sword I had taken from Kov Nath at our first encounter at the inn had given me ideas. Without Naghan the Gnat I had done the work myself, with the assistance of a young armorer, Wil of the Bellows, who was handy with a tempering hammer.

At least, memory of our days spent in the smithy around the forge as, stripped to the waist, our bodies running with sweat, our muscles bulging, drinking huge drafts of a much-watered weak wine, we worked the metal in cunning fashion, yes, at least, those memories recur with pleasure.

I took off enough of the blade to bring what was left to the length of the blade of a Krozair longsword. We were scrupulously careful not to impair the temper, for the steel was of fine meld, springy, strong, capable of taking a sharp edge. I rebuilt the handle, and gave it that subtle two-handed Krozair grip. I

bound it with silver wire we took from the shattered effects of a Gorgren supply column, looted and burned in the hills. The overly ornate and clumsy quillons were cut back by a fine craftsman, for they had been built snugly into the blade and handle, and I rewound the velvet before them, thinking it a flamboyant touch, but, possibly, a useful one, and I left the lugs before the velvet, for obvious reasons. So it was with a sword not properly a Krozair longsword, and yet with a weapon that had much of the superb quality of that magnificent brand, that I went into action.

As to the balance, Wil of the Bellows and I spent a long time getting the pommel weight just right. The blade balanced perfectly.

Wil had shaken his head, at the beginning, and said, “The great swords of the islands of Djanduin are notorious, Notor. You are cutting this one down—”

“Aye, young Wil. And for a reason.”

But he, like them all here, had never heard of the inner sea, the Eye of the World, and a Krozair of Zy meant nothing to them. Well, in various actions, they saw what a Krozair longsword might do in the hands of a Krozair brother skilled in these matters.

“By Zoduin of the Rainbow, Dray!” yelled Kytun as we pressed the remnants of Kov Nath’s army back past the canal of fresh water, over the arcaded bridge, and into the Palazzo of the Four Winds. “You fight almost as well as a normal man with four arms!”

It was an old jest.

Djanguraj is a sprawling, arcaded, windy city with much granite and brick and little marble. The merezo — where the zorca and sleeth race — is one of the finer buildings. The palace contains many courtyards and inner ways, with the sacred court of the warrior gods placed centrally. To reach it we encircled the entire area and with flutduin flyers on patrol and the fliers available also helping to cover escape by air, we pressed on to the central sacred court.

Ortyg Coper had joined us, and he wore armor and carried thraxter, shield, and djangir, but he was not at home in a warrior’s garb, and I detailed sturdy Nath ti Jondaria, a Djang who understood that an order from me was to be obeyed until death without a thought or a question in that craggy skull of his, to look out for Coper and to guard him from his own excitement and unskilled desire to be a man among men.

Now we came up against wildly vicious Djangs armed with the great sword of the islands of Djanduin. They were Nath Jagdur’s personal bodyguard, men recruited from his own island of Hyr Khor. Against them, and with an unholy zest that infuriated all present, went the great swordsmen from Kytun’s island of Uttar Djombey. There was work to be done here for the future.

A merker alighted in a rush of flutclepper wings and I had to draw back from the forefront of the battle at this vital moment of conquest to deal with problems of handling the city. There were orders to give, and decisions to make, all the pressing demands on a commander in battle that, in truth, were my proper role instead of bashing on with my longsword. I sent a scrabble of merkers into the air and racing on zorcas among the arcaded avenues of the city so as to make absolutely sure of every point within Djanguraj.

Coper had done his work well. Despite my proud boasts I could never have kept the city once I had taken it without his work. The fruits of those labors now bore sweet fruit. The people appeared

everywhere, shouting for Notor Prescott, and great crowds surged up the avenues, waving flags of orange and gray, and there were many who waved small copies of Old Superb in their violent excitement.

Coper was hauled out of the line by the scruff of his neck and Nath ti Jondaria, a bluff fellow with a moustache wider than his ears, grinned hugely as he dumped Ortyg Coper down. They are good friends in nature's way, are Obdjang and Dwadjang, but the four-armed Djangs love to exhibit their strengths to the gerbil-faced Obdjangs. We are all human.

“Here, Notor, is the Pallan as you ordered!”

“Thank you, Nath. If you wish to carve yourself some fun in the battle—”

But he was off, running and waving his sword above his head, screeching with sheer joy at being alive.

“Now, Ortyg, we must plan the food supplies. That is the most important item in our plans. The people shout for us now, and for that I thank you with all my heart, but they will change their tune if we cannot feed them.”

Ortyg Coper squirmed inside his uncomfortable armor.

“You speak the truth, Dray. And, as Mother Diocaster is my witness, I was never cut out to be a warrior. Now, as to food, there are caches we have uncovered here and there—” And so we went at it, with maps and lists and sending off of merkers with orders to the detachments of the army. Quoffa carts were collected by the hundred, and calsanys with panniers ready prepared. Djanguraj would not starve if I could help it.

The noise of battle sensibly diminished. Coper and his stylors and I worked on in a feverish bustle, for we knew we must instantly show the people that we were not as other conquerors had been, and that we really meant what we said about the welfare of the Djangs of Djanduin.

Presently Chan of the Wings appeared. He was walking. His leather flying gear showed a streak of blood, and he held his djangir in his hand. When he advanced to stand before me at the long tables set up in the court of the Stux of Zodjuin, he looked not so much tired as regretful and resentful of his errand. This was most unlike a merker.

“Well, Chan of the Wings,” I said, scribbling notes at the foot of a distribution list — that was for palines, I noticed, having asked to inspect the paline supply position personally — and looking up sharply. “You have a message?”

“Aye, Notor Prescott, whom henceforth men will hail as King of Djanduin. The last remnants of the leemsheads are barricaded within the sacred court. Kov Kytun Kholin Dom pens them there. And the Opaz-forsaken rast of a Kov Nath Jagdur has sent a message—”

Instantly my mind flew back seven years, to the moment when I had appeared by the Star Lords' command in Djanduin, beside the burning inn. And I could hear myself shouting, so as to give a little breathing space, throw a little bafflement into the picture, half-taunting this Nath Jagdur, Kov of Hyr Khor. His men had been hurling stuxes at me, and loosing when they could, and he had been trying to get at me with that damned great sword which now swung at my side. I remembered letting him have a curse and an offer.

“By the Black Chunkrah, Kov Nath! Let you and me settle this between ourselves, like true Horters.”

And he had laughed and said he was no Horter.

Neither am I, when it comes down to it. If I had to cut him up or stick him I would do so, fairly or foully.

“I am coming, Chan of the Wings,” I said, and rose and clapped my left hand to that great sword of the island of Djanduin that I had cut down into an imitation longsword of the Eye of the World. I strode off toward the sacred court of the warrior gods.

Chan shook his head.

“You seem ever able, Notor, to read a man’s mind.”

How easy to have said, in the old harsh way, “Believe it!”

But that would have been cheap.

Kytun met me, blood-spattered, angry, alive with his deep humor and his fighting blood aroused and baffled.

“By the blood of Holy Djan-kadjiryon!” he bellowed. “The yetch challenges you, Dray! He challenges you to single combat!”

“He but takes up a challenge issued seven years ago, Kytun.” I spoke mildly. I had no wish, now, to fight this wild leem of a rebellious Kov who had made himself king; but I would so do. I would do so for the sake of this new country of mine. For, make no mistake, Djanduin had become a country I counted and honored.

Coper had also pushed up with us, and now he squeaked his own outrage.

“If he kills you, Dray, if he does — why — it is all for nothing, for he will be the rightful king still—”

“I do not think Djanduin would care for that.”

“No — we would have to kill him then, ourselves. And the country—” Kytun flicked blood-drops from his sword. “By Djan! This is a sorry business. The challenge should never have been allowed!”

“But it has been, good Kytun, and I accept. Is all prepared?”

“Aye, Dray. It will be as the old laws prescribe. Man against man, and no other man will raise his hand to help either, no matter what the outcome.”

So I walked forward between the arcades with the sculptured and painted friezes — fine work but nothing to compare with what I had seen elsewhere on Kregen. Fresh torches were brought and they cast their flickering erratic light down into the sacred court of the warrior gods. Kov Nath sat on the faerling throne. He looked as I had last seen him, save that his once-smooth helmet of copper hair had now grown long and was disarranged. Many dead Djangs lay about the court. I marked them. The night was very dark, and the stars sparkled down with unwonted brilliance.

“Bring torches!” bellowed Kytun.

I went with my people in a kind of procession into the sacred court; the thought occurred to me then: almost as though we marched ceremoniously into the Jikhorkdun where we would perform our bloody rituals.

Still more torches were brought. Their golden light streaked upon the chemzite carvings of the walls, upon the mosaics of the floor, now dabbled in blood, upon the gold and silver and ivory of the faerling throne, and upon the huge and solidly gem-plated hood which rose, high and domed and arching, above. Like a hollow benediction of gold and jewels the sacred hood of the faerling throne rose over the throne itself, both protecting and threatening. As Kov Nath stood up to reveal himself, clad only in a scarlet breechclout, I loosened my longsword and drew it forth.

Kov Nath stepped down the six golden steps and trod upon the mosaic floor. His four hands were empty.

Thinking it a useful ploy to be seen not to have the advantage of armor I started to strip it off, and Wil of the Bellows was there, unstrapping and carefully removing all the dinted pieces from my body. He took my sword. I held out my hand for the weapon.

An old Dwadjang came forward with a wide and shallow balass box. Wil clung on to my sword, his eyes wide and fear filled upon me. The old Djang opened the box. Inside were ranked eight djangirs. The short broad blades of the double-edged swords glittered in the torchlight.

“This is by the customs of the ancients of Djanduin!” he cried out in a reedy voice. “The challenge has been made and accepted. It is man against man and the prize is the crown and the faerling throne!”

In the rustling silence the spit and crackle of the torches sounded loud and ominous. I stood, all manner of thoughts rushing and colliding in my head.

“Come, cramp, the rast men call Notor Prescott! Select your weapons!”

Slowly I drew out two djangirs.

Kov Nath Jagdur laughed with immense scorn. He plunged his four hands in and withdrew four djangirs.

This was the way of it, then! This was the ancient custom! In Djanduin the Djangs fight duels and ritual battles with their national weapon, the djangir.

We faced each other. Two men, alike in so many ways, for had Kov Nath not possessed an extra pair of arms he would have been apim. And — because of a little fad, a weakness, of mine which made me don my old scarlet breechclout on the morning of battle — we both stood naked but for a scarlet loincloth.

He fell into a fighting crouch and then surged up, laughing, gleeful, swinging his arms.

I stand as though mesmerized at those four whirling djangirs.

So he faced me, at the end, Nath Jagdur, Kov of Hyr Khor, who was once of the Djin tan. The torchlight threw two stars of mocking gold into his eyes, and his four arms wove a flickering silver net before my eyes. He leaped for me, and in his four hands the whirling blades swung into a lethal wheel of deadly steel!



## CHAPTER TWELVE

The fight in the sacred court of the warrior gods

The marvelous world of Kregen is blessed with two suns and seven moons. Usually at night a combination of moons sends down their streaming pinkish rays, sometimes golden, sometimes jade, as seasons change and the mists rise. Sometimes there falls a night in which no moons are visible. There are two suns and seven moons, and each has many names, and the tenth is called Notor Zan, the Tenth Lord, the Lord of Blackness.

The Djangs are ferocious warriors.

Had I my trusted longsword — or a thraxter and shield — or a rapier and main-gauche — for it might perhaps have been too much to ask that I gripped the superb Savanti sword I had left with Delia — I would have gone up against Kov Nath with greater confidence.

As it was, we fought with his national weapon, and he had four arms and he was possessed of great skill. He leaped for me and his arms wove a deadly net of steel. I backed away nimbly, leaping dead bodies, for the court had not been cleared of the corpses. He roared and charged.

“Stand and fight, you nulsh! By Zoduin of the Storm-clouds! Act like a man, even if you are only apim!”

There had to be a way of taking him. He would not be decoyed so easily as to stumble over a dead man. Djangs are warriors born. I circled, for we were pent between the mystic friezes of the sacred court of the warrior gods, and men clustered in the arcades, watching us by the light of torches.

On those walls frowned down the carved representations of warrior gods, the pantheon of Djanduin. High over the rest rose a giant stele with symbols incised upon it describing the creation of Djanduin out of the primitive miasmas of the Ocean of Doubt. Djan had called forth the land and the land had risen and, lo! that land was Djanduin, blessed among the lands of the world.

Kov Nath flickered his three djangirs most expertly while he kept his left lower blade down and limp, as though out of the play. I might not have four arms, but I recognized the symptom of the ploy he was trying there. As I circled he rushed me in an attempt to finish the thing quickly. I took two djangirs upon my own and skipped aside as the third sliced down past my thigh and only just managed to interpose a hurriedly snatched blade between that last, treacherous, left low blade and my belly. He roared, and stood back, the sweat starting out all over his body.

“Hai! For a cripple you fight passing well!”

I did not reply. Along the walls the sacred carvings seemed to flicker in the torchlight and to march, writhing across the stone. They appeared to me to be marching around, up there, along the friezes, and to be looking down on us as we fought for the faerling throne.

Asshurphaz, Djondalar, Rig, Zoduin, perhaps the most favored by warriors of the warrior gods, Djan-kadjiryon. All of them were armed, armored, crested, their diamond and ruby eyes gleaming down in the torchlight, and they writhed and rippled there upon the solid stone walls. Nundji was there, escorted by wild leems, railing against the warriors who had jailed him in a leem-hell. Over on the far side the draperies of Mother Diocaster seemed to surge as the torchlight shimmered across the pale alabaster surfaces. The shadows moved.

Kov Nath leaped again and his blades wove a deceptive circle of sparks. I ducked and slid sideways and tried to stick him in the belly. Two djangirs came down with a firm finality and halted my blade, and only a savage kick and lunge saved a third from going through my shoulder.

Those watchful Djangs kept a strict silence at first. But as we leaped and lunged across the mosaics of the floor, hurdling dead bodies, slipping and recovering in the pools of spilled blood, so the fire got to those wild warriors and they began to yell. There were fierce shouts of encouragement for Kov Nath from those of his men who had remained here, until the challenge and acceptance had been confirmed. My men yelled, too. The torches waved in the wide space, curling the streaming golden hair against the darkness of Notor Zan. I knew I was likely to go down into Notor Zan's paunch, and wake up in the Ice Floes of Sicce, if I did not speedily devise a system for sticking a man with four arms who knew how to handle four deadly djangirs with consummate skill.

“You are no Djang, rast; but stand and fight like a man, by Zodjuin of the Glittering Stux!”

As Kov Nath spoke, I leaped with a great fury and so took him high on the upper left shoulder. The morphology of the Djangs is remarkable, for their doubled shoulder blades constructed rather like sliding doors give equal power — well, almost equal power — to their upper and lower arms, and their muscles rope like steel across their backs. I sliced some flesh and the blood spouted. A hoarse shout rose from the assembled warriors and then, out of nowhere, I felt a keen blade slice down my side. I swiveled and lurched away and I felt the blood running down my side; but I did not put a hand to it. There was no time.

Kov Nath bored in, his four blades wheeling with as much ferocity as when we had begun.

“You are a dead nulsh now, Notor Prescott!”

I had discarded the idea of throwing a djangir. I could have done so — as could he — but I think we both realized we had the skill to slip a blade. But the hurling of a djangir was something he could afford better than could I, for he had four.

“Prepare to meet your pagan gods!” he bellowed again, and charged, and the four blades sang and whistled about me. I thought of nothing much thereafter, except a memory of three things — of Zair, of dealing with the savage beasts of Kregen, and of Delia.

I concentrated on cutting him up piece by piece. I would not be clever, or go for the big one. As I had the shorgortz and the Ullgishoa and the boloth, three out of many memorable combats, I would deal with this wild leemshead piecemeal.

He was very quick and very clever and he bored in without allowing me a moment's respite, now that he thought he had me and I was done for. I let him come in and so twisted and leaped far to the side, away from the point of his attack. As I leaped both my djangirs came down onto his upper right arm. I hacked with tremendous force, and, together, the blades struck, cutting and shattering the arm so that the white bone showed bloodily through the skin.

Immediate yells broke out from all around the sacred court. Kov Nath staggered back, looking stupidly at the ruin of his arm. His fingers could no longer hold the djangir and they opened, and the blade — it had some of my blood upon it — slid jangling to the floor.

I did not give him time to recover from the shock.

I came in low, almost bent double, surged up, and hacked across his lower left forearm, taking off the wrist, the hand, and the djangir in a splashing gout of blood.

The Djangs have an astounding agility and an almost superhuman strength. Shock and amazement shattered Kov Nath, but he came back at me with fearful courage and ferocity. I had to hack and slash and slice and fend him off, but, all blood-smearred with his two ruined arms flailing, like some ghastly monster from the deepest hells of Kregen, he pursued me. I backed up and turned and waited. Then, as he lunged with a fearful scream to sink the djangirs in my throat, and I fronted him and smashed them aside, I saw the first faint crack in his psychology, the first chink in his armor of courage.

But he would not give in as easily as that. The stump of his left lower arm battered my body, bruising me around the ribs. I swung away, and as he bellowed and charged to follow I let him have a Krozair of Zy foot-kick. I missed the target, but he screamed and backed away, and I slashed — rather foolishly — at his throat, for I wanted to finish this ghastly business quickly now. His return sliced down my arm, drawing blood and making me grip the djangir tightly, for I thought I'd lost control of my arm then.

He saw that, and the chink in his armor closed. He stood for a moment glaring, his chest heaving, blood and sweat rivering down his magnificent body.

“By Zodjuin of the Stormclouds! You will die now, apim!”

I felt that I might usefully add an observation to the so far one-sided conversation.

I said, “By Vox, you nurdling onker! You have but two hands now! You are less than an apim now! And, by Zim-Zair, you will be less than a dead apim before a mur or two!”

He flinched back.

Oh, yes, he was magnificent, even pathetically smothered with blood, with his two useless arms dangling. But the two he had left still clutched sharp steel, and he made a final enormous effort to bear me down with him. He jumped and roared and the two djangirs lanced for me, one to the eyes, the other to the belly.

I parried them both.

He knew then, did Kov Nath Jagdur, that this was his end.

For, marvelous fighter that he was, he recognized that I had not instantly followed the parries with attack. I had held back, poised to destroy him at my pleasure. He saw all that.

He was too fine a fighter not to recognize the truth. He had tried all his tricks, and they had failed him. He knew that I had not riposted through fear of closing with him; he understood I had him at my mercy now, for I had read all his cunning and skill and bested them.

It was in my mind not to kill this man, for I valued him as a fighter and as a man, even if he was a wild leemshead who had brought near-destruction to the country I loved.

“Kov Nath!” I called to him. “I am minded to spare you your life, if you will—”

“No bargain, rast! The Kov of Hyr Khor does not bargain with rasts of apims!”

“It is your own blood.”

I spoke as mildly as I could, but he flinched back, seeing that old devil look upon my face. Brutality and war wreak a fearful havoc upon a man.

“Aye, my own blood! And I would shed it all again to rid my country of Obdjang and apim!”

“In that you are an onker, Kov Nath.”

“I am the King of Djanduin, cramp!”

“You were, for a short space only. But you brought the country to ruin. I would rather not have your blood on my hands — or any more than there already is.” At this I heard the roar of coarse and appreciative laughter from those watching. The Kregan often has a bloody line in jests.

He was bleeding profusely now, and he dropped one of the djangirs to grip the shattered arm. He felt it with great and ghastly disbelief. He glared at me, his coppery hair wild about his face, the silver fillet long since lost.

“What bargain do you offer me — the Kov of Hyr Khor?”

There appeared no strangeness in that the two of us, who were in the midst of so violent a combat, could talk thus.

“If I am to be King of Djanduin, as men say I am, for the good of the country, I would not relish a wild leemshead within the realm.”

“That would not be wise, I promise you.”

“So you would find a new home, somewhere in Havilfar.”

“That I could never do, Notor Prescott.”

I did not fail to perceive his change of tone.

I decided to press a trifle. “You are a dead man if we fight again. I can slap you, my two arms against your two. But I see in you some good you cannot see in yourself. Kregan would do ill to lose too many men like you, leemshead though you are.”

A growl ran around the packed men watching. I wondered what their reactions truly were, and then forced them out of my mind. Slaying for the sake of slaying is a pastime for the perverted, for the insane, for the kleeshes of two worlds.

He rallied. His blood dropped ever more rapidly upon the mosaics, making their colors blot with a more dreadful stain.

“And if I leave Djanduin, what is to become of my people of Hyr Khor?”

“They will be treated with honor. Hyr Khor is a part of Djanduin. If I am to be king I will not permit one part of Djanduin to set itself above another part.”

There might be explanations due to Kytun; he would get them.

Kov Nath sagged back. How near death he was without treatment we did not know, but he would not leave here until he had given his word.

He knew that. That subtle chink in his psychological armor, opened when he recognized he had met a man who could best him — and that man an apim! — widened more as he saw a way out. He forced himself to stand upright, panting now, the blood running, the sweat sparkling redly upon him. He threw the last djangir upon the floor.

“I accept! If I am to leave Djanduin, then it is to you, Dray Prescott, Lord of Strombor, that I pass on the Kovnate of Hyr Khor! To you I bestow Hyr Khor!”

This was perfectly legal, although I fancied the little crippled girl with the Bolinas would have to be seriously consulted. But, too, I saw his cunning ruse. He would hand me his Kovnate of Hyr Khor and with it, he surmised, the enmity of his people, who would seek to revenge him upon me.

I was prepared to accept anything to get this great gory, sweaty man out of here as safely as might be.

“I accept, Nath Jagdur. I take upon myself the title of Kov of Hyr Khor and release you from that burden. Now, I will see to your wounds, and bind you up, and care for you—”

My men were lax.

I do not blame them, for the drama had been compelling, there in the torchlight of the sacred court of the warrior gods, as the warrior gods themselves seemed to parade around the friezes above us. Out of the torchlights flew a stux. I had sensed its flight instantly, like any Krozair brother, and could do nothing.

Straight for the heart of Nath Jagdur, who had been Kov of Hyr Khor and King of Djanduin, flew the stux. The spear penetrated and such was its force it staggered him back and threw him to the ground.

He had time to look up at me, his handsome face drawn with the bitter knowledge of failure. The blood gushed from his mouth and he died.

I heard a chunking meaty *thwunk* from the side, and knew the man who had thrown the stux was dead, also.

Kytun said, “It was that Nundji-lover Cleitar! He could not believe his master had done what he had done. Truly, loyalty and revenge are entwined plants.”

After that Coper’s people could organize everything. I have learned to live with and to defeat fatigue for long periods, and, truly, I believe, my immersion in the sacred Pool of Baptism in far Aphasoe confers on me the ability to stay awake and alert long after other people have fallen in stupor. But the tiredness would not be denied now. My wounds were bound up, the court was cleared, the mosaics scrubbed and washed. All through that night of Notor Zan we worked on, and men stumbled away, to collapse with exhaustion, as we started to put Djanduin back on its feet. It had taken me seven years since I had come here. Well, there were three more to go in this enforced prison of time before I would be free.

In those three years we accomplished much. I ordered the coronation to be a serious affair, swiftly done and yet seen to be done. Food was unearthed from its caches. We were blessed by good harvests, in the due time of harvesting for every crop, rotation by rotation. Gradually in the first two years we hauled

Djanduin back. Then the army mobilized and we marched up against the Gorgrens. By moves that outfoxed that unpleasant people we swarmed down out of the Mountains of Mirth, defeated three separate armies in three separate battles, and drove the Gorgrens clear back to the Yawfi Suth and the Wendwath. We did not really care if they were sucked down by the bog and quagmires, or if they succumbed to the wiles of the Maidens of the Dreaming Lake, just so long as they left the soil of Djanduin. Once we were back where the frontiers had for so long been placed I was content to halt. We might gather our strength, plan, and arise to strike into Gorgrendrin itself, but that must come later.

I hankered after releasing Herrelldrin from the yoke of the Gorgrens. Turko the Shield would welcome that, for he had spoken so little of his home, out of shame, as I believed. There was no doubt but that the Djangs would follow. For one thing they loved a fight and wished to teach the Gorgrens a sorely needed lesson; and, two, by this time they regarded me as a king who could do no wrong, and would have followed me to the Ice Floes of Sicce if need be. The only pleasure I could take from that was that the country was recovering, people could look up and laugh again, the good days were returning.

As for the Lady Lara, I had with great cunning avoided whatever she might have thought, and the issue was now clearly joined between Felder Mindner and Kytun Dom.

I visited the Kovnate so uncannily thrust upon me by a bleeding man near to death, and found it to be rugged and wild as to country, and even more rugged and wild as to people. Kytun had clapped me on the back and roared out that — by Zoduin of the Glittering Stux — he had a good neighbor now!

I agreed with him, for I meant to make this gift of a Kovnate into a place to be proud of; but that, too, had to take its turn in the round of days.

On Hyr Khor I was taken to see a marvel of the island, a marvel, indeed, of all of Djanduin, and whose fame had spread eastward to the Shrouded Sea.

This marvel was the Kharoi Stones.

An enormous area covered with the time-shattered wreck of an ancient city, stones tumbled in indescribable confusion, columns, shafts, arcades, walls, towers, hanging gardens now slithered into pyramids to dwarf those of Egypt, channels cumbered with chipped marbles and vast tessellated areas, all smothered with vegetation and the home for wild beasts of many descriptions, this, then, was the eerie place called the Kharoi Stones. I have seen Karnak, and Angkor Wat, and other famed relics of the past on our own Earth, and I have seen other of the ancient monuments of the Sunset People on Kregen; the Kharoi Stones holds a mystery and a deep secret all its own. At this time, as you know, I had not seen the Dam of Days, which controls the tides through the western end of the Grand Canal of the Eye of the World. But I walked among the tumbled masses of the Kharoi Stones and I marveled.

Everywhere was to be seen, sculpted boldly in relief or in the round, the magnificent representation of the Ombor, the mythical flying monster of immense size and fiery heart, who dying is yet reborn, whose breath scorches cities, whose tears water the oceans, whose hearts beat for all humankind, and, as I knew, for whom my enclave in Zenicce had been named.

Coupled with this plethora of ornamentation was the symbol of the double-ax — not the Minoan double-ax but an ax double-bitted yet narrow of blade, eminently suitable for the sweeping blow and the lethal chop from the saddle of a vove.

You may well believe I promised myself much future exploration of the Kharoi Stones.

On a day in Djanguraj after I had been up all night by the light of four of the moons, reading reports, dictating answers and orders to my stylors, planning for the well-being of the country, I met for breakfast by prearrangement with Ortyg Coper and Kytun Dom.

We sat drinking that glorious Kregan tea and eating crisp vosk rashers, and eggs, and finishing with palines from a silver dish. Food, transport, law, education, security, all were now practically back to normal in Djanduin, and I had but a single sennight left of my prison sentence. The Todalpheme had been explicit, and my own calculations confirmed their findings.

Now I said to Ortyg Coper, “Is the realm faring well, Ortyg?”

And he said, “The realm is doing well, Majister, and will do better than it has ever done in the next two years.”

“By Djan!” said Kytun in his fierce way. “That is so!”

“I find it extraordinarily strange,” said Coper. “I was attacked as often as other Obdjangs by the leemsheads led by Nath Jagdur, and yet my life was spared. Soldiers could never find him or his leemsheads after the attacks; but I did not die. Others of my friends died.”

We were silent for a space, remembering. The Obdjangs had been returning to Djanduin and the country really was set fine. Prosperity was just around the corner.

“There was a reason, Ortyg.” I looked at him as I spoke.

He munched a paline. “I am alive — Sinkie and I live.”

“Yes, Ortyg. And I will tell you why. But, first, let me ask you, Kytun, once more, the question — would you become king of Djanduin?”

He didn’t even think. “Not I, by Djan!”

“Would you loyally support Ortyg if he were king?”

Before Kytun could begin to reply Ortyg had reared up, agitatedly brushing his whiskers.

“Now, wait a minute! Here — my dear Majister — I mean — hold on!”

I tried to keep my face composed; it was a struggle.

“I am going on a journey. I cannot avoid it, nor do I wish to do so. I want the country to prosper and to remain fruitful and peaceful. The young men get enough fighting in the eternal games, and the merezo has been enlarged for even bigger and better zorca races. There is nothing now for which I am needed. You, Ortyg, are the next king of Djanduin, and Kytun will give you all his loyal help, as he does us both.”

Kytun spat out a mouthful of palines, which is a terrible waste.

“You do not have to go, really, Dray! You are King! By Zodjuin of the Rainbow! You can’t desert us!”

I sighed. “I feared you would regard this as desertion. But it is a task laid on me. I must go. Ortyg will be—”

“No, Majister.” Ortyg Coper stood up, and abruptly he was formal and deadly serious. “No, Majister. I will not be king. But I will stand as regent for the throne.”

And with that I had to be content. I would return here, I promised that; but as to when . . . That, in truth, partly lay in the inscrutable hands of the Star Lords. Had they two hands apiece, I wondered, or four?

Ortyg Coper was fully invested as regent, and Kytun was the first to lift his djangir in loyalty. I was as satisfied as I am ever satisfied about anything, that I had done all that I could do. Everyone knew I was taking a journey laid upon me, and the news traveled that the task was a reward given to me by the Glorious Djan Himself, He whose figure was not to be sculptured upon stone along with the warrior gods of Djanduin. As far as mortal mind and hand could contrive, I left the kingdom of Djanduin, of which I was sovereign, in good heart and good hands, and looking forward to golden days.

The airboat I had bought and had provisioned was a small two-place flier. Over in my island of Hyr Khor I had found a strange and scarcely self-comprehending willingness to help. As their new Kov I was both suspect and welcome, for the old Kov, besides being a violent man, much given to breaking heads, had been impious and a leemshead, and a ravisher of the young girls of the island. I convinced the people of Hyr Khor that although I was no angel, and no simpleton, either, I was prepared to let them make their own lives, saving that they must always remain friends with the people of Uttar Djombey. There was some grumbling, I have no doubt, but on the surface the scheme worked well. So it was to Hyr Khor I went for a last farewell and to collect my flier.

My plan was simple. I would fly from Djanduin, across Gorgrendrin, over the back hills of Migla, and out over the Shrouded Sea to the place where I had last seen Delia. I fancied the Star Lords would permit this.

It was with a light heart I called Remberee to the people of Hyr Khor. They waved their great swords of the islands, and I took off into the morning suns-light.

“Remberee!”

“Remberee, Kov Dray Prescott, King of Djanduin!”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The scorpion

The little flier lanced through the bright clean air of Kregen.

There is a coolness and sweetness about the air of these latitudes of Kregen. Because of that extraordinary width of the temperate zones of Kregen beneath Antares the climate as far south as Djanduin is perfectly suitable for comfortable living, not as hot as, for instance, northern Havilfar, by any means, but nowhere near as cold as the gray waters south of Thothangir. Between the Yawfi Suth and the Wendwath and the back mountains of Migla there lies a broad tract of country, sometimes fertile, sometimes less so, seldom truly inhospitable. The western areas are the ancestral homes of the peoples of Herrelldrin and Sava. The Gorgrens in their aimless meanderings over the vast inner plains had come down to the west and had occupied Sava and Herrelldrin and Tarnish, which lies to the south of the Tarnish Channel. Between the somewhat undefined eastern limits of the Gorgrens' lands and the back hills of Migla lies the country of Yanthur.



It was over this area, in a place where spiny hills made of the landscape a miniature tree bark in appearance, that the flier chose to go wrong.

I cursed.

I was well used to airboats breaking down in Vallia and Zenicce; I had formed the opinion that they were built with some kind of weakness which was obviated in those models built for sale in Havilfar. This was a voller purchased from a Hamalian yard and delivered to express orders of the King of Djanduin. For this airboat to go wrong boded ill for someone.

And that someone was likely to be me.

I touched down in a lonely valley where a narrow fast-running stream poured in a silvery tinkle over sandstone rocks, and where violet and yellow flowers clustered. The lower slopes of the hills on every side were covered with trees, and their crests, too, were tree covered. The voller touched down and skidded wildly across rock and grass and ended up embedded in the low-sweeping branches of the tamiyan trees. The shaking released a cloud of yellow petals that pirouetted in the air and spread, shining in the suns.

I just sat there for a moment, and thought of the journey ahead of me. Until I reached a place where I could hire or buy fresh transport, I must perforce walk. I had walked before to reach Delia; I would do so again.

A laccapin, one of those monstrous flying reptiles of Havilfar, cruised by high above, its tail extended well aft and looking barbed and angry. I was about to climb down from the flier by way of the tamiyan branches, keeping my eyes open for any unwelcome beasts, when I saw the gorgeous gold and scarlet bird come flying into my view, just beyond the edge of the tree branches.

All the time of my enforced exile in Djanduin I had not seen the Gdoinye, the magnificent scarlet-and-golden-feathered hunting bird of the Star Lords. The remarkable bird is the spy and messenger of the Everoinye, and I know that great things are afoot when it heaves in sight.

It perched on a branch and squawked at me.

I rubbed my hand over my chin. This was a period, in Djanduin, when I had shaved carefully, leaving only my fierce old moustache.

I smelled trouble.

“What do you want, bird of ill omen?”

“An onker, Dray Prescott! As ever was!” the bird shrieked in jovial abuse at me.

I prepared to argue my case to the Star Lords through the bird’s mediation. “I do not seek to break your interdiction upon me,” I said. I spoke firmly, as though I meant business, which I did, Zair knows. “I shall meet my comrades in the voller after they have searched for me, and they will suspect nothing, for this voller will be sunk in the Shrouded Sea.” Then I cracked a fist against the wooden-framed hull. “If, that is, I can get the Makki-Grodno beast to working again.”

The Gdoinye cackled.

“An onker, Dray Prescott! There is work for you to do—”

I froze.

“No,” I said. I spoke calmly. Remember, I had been a king for three Terrestrial years. “No, I cannot work for you until I have seen my friends again.”

“You dare not argue with the Star Lords, Dray Prescott.”

“I think I shall.”

The scarlet and gold raptor ruffled up its feathers and dug its vicious claws into the tamiyan bark.

“To refuse would bring down great wrath on your head.”

I had a bow in the voller, along with food and supplies and other weapons. Now I lifted the bow, and with a practiced jerk strung it, for it was the familiar compound reflex bow, and nocked an arrow. I aimed the steel head of the arrow at the Gdoinye.

“Once, a man called Xoltemb, a caravan master, said he might cut down any man who raised a shaft against you.”

“Onker.”

“If I loose, would the arrow slay you, Gdoinye, or would it merely pass through air? Are you real?”

“There is work for your hands in a place to which you would wish to go. This voller you bought — and others — do you remember Tyr Nath Kynam ti Hippax?”

“I remember,” I growled, for the memory was still sore in me. Tyr Nath Kynam had been a valued member of the Djangs who had been rebuilding the country. Coper, who as Pallan of the Vollers, had bought the flier, had been pleased he had secured a brand-new specimen for Nath Kynam, and although it was of the minor sort, it was new and smart. Nath Kynam was short and squat and a dynamo of a man, always working at top speed, always ready to talk energetically, and a good friend. Yet he had personal problems, and was always anxious to have acupuncture needles in him, soothing and calming his restless energy.

Well, the brand-new flier had failed him, or his heart had burst the bonds of mere flesh. He had crashed and been killed. Yes, I would not forget Tyr Nath Kynam ti Hippax.

“I remember Nath Kynam. And Tyr Man Dorga ti Palding, who would have saved him if he could. I do not need you, bird of ill omen, to remind me of my good fortune in true friends on Kregen; so what is this to the Star Lords?”

“A year, Dray Prescott, onker of onkers. A single year is all the Everoinye require of you.”

If I knew what the raptor meant I would not allow that awful knowledge to crowd into my brain.

“The Star Lords are so far above you, Dray Prescott, as you perhaps may be above a nit on a calsaney. But they have been watching you with an interest you may — or may not — warrant. Beware lest you be cast forth!”

Almost, I let the arrow loose.

But I held it fast and shouted, “By Makki-Grodno’s diseased left armpit! Tell me straight, you nurdling yetch!”

“A year, Prescott.” The bird stretched those gorgeous pinions wide and with a spring he was airborne. “A single year. Then you may — for a space only — imagine yourself a free man.” Then, with what I can only describe as a derisive howl, the raptor winged away into the blue, a scarlet and golden splash of color that rose and darkened into a black blot and so vanished in the suns-glow.

I lowered the bow.

Damned uppity bird!

Sinkie had cried when I bid her and her husband, Ortyg Coper, who was now Regent for the King of Djanduin, Remberree.

Yet she could have no knowledge of what dangers and what terrors I would face upon the beautiful hostile face of Kregen.

No manifestation of a blue scorpion arose before my eyes, no blue radiance engulfed me to suck me into emptiness. Remember, it was a full ten years since I had last experienced the summons of the scorpion. Then the Star Lords had clearly missed their target in time, although they had found it in space, for they had dumped me down by the inn and the crossroads *after* the time I should have been there. We had heard that one of the leemsheads had been hung up in chains on the tree; so all was explained about what I had seen — the repaired roof, the different season. But perhaps the Star Lords were waiting for my violent protestations, which they assumed I must make with such vehement anger. Perhaps if they transmitted me during my burst of rage they were, in some way unknown to me, dislocated in their calculations.

Certainly, I had defeated their purposes before this.

Could it be that a mere mortal man might thwart the Everoinye not merely in an underhand way, as I had done, but in a straight contest of wills? I thought it hardly likely.

“Why do you wait, you puissant Star Lords?” I bellowed out, there beneath the tamiyan trees, perched so ridiculously in my broken-down voller in the land of Yanthur. “Where is your powerful and venomous blue scorpion?”

I thought then to look to see if by chance the white dove of the Savanti might not be circling overhead, watching me, and watching the Gdoinye of the Star Lords, too.

But I saw nothing of the white dove of the Savanti.

This was becoming ludicrous. I had been learning a little of the fliers and their idiosyncrasies. Ever since the time Delia had told me to move the silver boxes so as to bring our runaway flier to the plains of Segesthes I had been fascinated by all vollers. I held the Air Service of Vallia in great esteem. So I thought it prudent before I girded myself up for a long trek to see if I might not be able to fiddle about with the cantankerous voller and get it into the air again.

I stood up in the small two-place flier and rested my hands on the wooden-framed hull. It was a shallow, petal-shaped craft, with a small windshield and a pit filled with flying furs and silks. I was putting my leg over the side to crawl out on a branch of the tamiyan trees, when the blueness came down with such speed and force that I gasped. I felt a giant rushing wind and I struggled for breath. I shouted something, anything, I know not what, and went pitching out and down.

One thing I recall; I hit my head on something extraordinarily hard. So it was that with the bells of Beng-Kishi ringing in my skull and the hovering presence of Notor Zan about me that I was pitched headlong into the next adventurous task I must fulfill for the Star Lords.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Muruaa speaks

Stark naked, weaponless, and with a thump on the head that left me dizzy and half senseless, I struggled to open my eyes to find out where on Kregen I had been flung.

I could hear shrieking and screaming.

That was normal enough.

Also I could hear a strange hissing sizzling, as though a thousand giant vosk steaks fried upon Notor Kanli's forge.

That was odd.

Someone crashed into me and knocked me flat.

The air was warm — very warm. Even as I scabbled around with those damned bells of Beng-Kishi clamoring in my skull the heat increased with throat-drying speed. I managed to get an eye unglued and peered about on a scene of terror and panic. The rumblings of hell shook the ground. Sulfur stank.

An exquisite girl with long lithe legs ran toward me, screaming. Her clothes were on fire. Her hair blazed terribly. She was apim; soon she would be a burned corpse.

I jumped for her, knocked her down, smashed at the burning clothes, ripping off the coarse gray dress, smothering the blazing hair. She screamed and screamed.

Around me people were running and screaming. Some were on fire. Some had pitchers of water which were soon expended. They ran from a village of mud huts with wooden roofs, and the roofs blazed to the sky. I followed the streaked tracks of the smoke and looked into the sky.

Up there, towering over the world, poured the mouth of hell.

Fire. Fire and flame. Fire and destruction. Burning and smoking and roaring, the volcano pumped out its fiery breath and its destructive vomit and smothered the village in terror and horror. Huge, that volcano, towering, high, and cone-sided, and the lava ran down swiftly in glowing orange and red spuming gouts over everything in its path.

Evilly swirling in wide writhing tentacles from a violent smoky orange through a snarling ruby-red to a pure fiery white, the lava raged downslope and through the village. The heat grew. The noise battered as

the lava poured and slipped over the steep edge of an embankment to fall into the blue and placid waters of a lake. Trees burned before they fell to be consumed utterly. The waters roiled near the shore and the waves spread out in wide ripples so that the placid surface grew congested and turbulent in a wide and swiftly growing circle.

Terraces of neat agriculture had been hacked in alternating wide and narrow steps down the flanks of the low surrounding hills. But the monster of fire poured down over everything, and a village was dying and a people was being destroyed — and, as usual, Dray Prescott was there, naked and disoriented, expected to select the right person to save.

The girl was burned, but she was still alive and she would live.

I bent to her.

“Muruaa!” she moaned. “Muruaa!”

“On your feet, girl, and run! Past the slide and into the lake! *Move!*”

She saw my face and she flinched, all burned and naked and in pain. But she staggered to her feet and ran off. I had taken stock of the situation as I saw it. The village was doomed. But below, down the steep slope, lay a sizable town, neatly mud walled and wooden roofed, in a cleft between the low, terraced hills. I could look down and see the peaked roofs of sturm-wood, and the mud-brick walls, the enclosures, and the little backyard chimneys smoking with preparations for one of the many daytime meals of Kregen. The suns were rising in the sky, and they blazed through a crown of smoke. The land lay lit in ghastly orange and lurid vermilion from the fires of the volcano.

The fugitives from the outlying village vanished below. Some staggered, burned; others crawled; but one or two young men lifted the old folk, and in a bunch they disappeared below the brick-wall of a terrace. The girl whose clothes I had wrenched off and whose blazing hair I had put out ran with them. I stood alone.

If I refused to imperil my life? It was the Earth of my birth for me, then, and no mistake.

So, like the puppet I swore I would someday cease from being, I ran. One day, please Zair, I would cut the strings that held me puppet-slave to the Everoinye.

As I ran I studied the landscape. There is much to be learned from the landscape of a people. Here there was no wide aa. I know that is the volcanologists' term. Also I have walked over the uneven lumpy lava fields below Etna, which the locals call sciara, and shuddered at what they hide. But here the ground was fertile and the crops grew lushly, vine and gregarian, paline and many another luxurious plant of Kregen. So the last eruption must have occurred more than, say, a hundred years ago. These people might not know what to do — or what to try to do.

Down in the town the panic was atrocious. Men and women ran from their houses with bundles wobbling on their heads. Calsanys were being prodded along with sticks. Babies were crying. Girls were carrying out cloths with bits of household furniture sticking out, candlesticks, frying pans, grinders, samphron-oil lamps, anything they had thought to snatch up in their panic.

Sulfur and brimstone choked in the air. The congested rumblings and explosions of the volcano battered at reason.

I grabbed a young man whose face showed stark fear. He was babbling incoherently, so I kicked him away and grabbed another man who swung at me, uglily, a stux thrusting forward. He bore a vosk-hide satchel over his shoulder and nothing else, and I suspected he had seized his chance to loot a neighbor's house.

"Listen, dom, and I will not kill you," I told him.

He reacted stupidly. He tried to stick me with the spear.

I took it away from him and poked the point into his sweating belly.

"Who is the chief man of the town, dom? Tell me his name and where I may hope to find him, or your tripes will spill into the road."

He yelled, but he gabbled out what I wanted to know.

"Lart Lykon, the Elten! But he has fled—"

I shook him.

"Toward the jetties — a boat — for the sake of Kuerden the Merciless!"

I threw him from me. Useless to work on these people one at a time. Whatever the Star Lords were up to here, I scarcely thought it had been the saving of that first girl upon the higher slopes where the lava ran and would have engulfed her if she had not burned to death first. Everything was happening with enormous speed. I burst through a packed rabble wailing and clamoring at the jetty. A few boats lay there, small open double-ended craft, and a number had already pushed off. It was perfectly clear that the boats could not carry all the people of the town. It was equally and horribly clear that the lava pouring down so swiftly toward them would fill the narrow valley in which the town huddled, fill the green slot and cover the houses, rise up the terraced hills, pouring all the time through and over the town and into the lake. To jump into the water and swim would help only if one could outrace the lava. This is what many were doing; but soon the water grew too hot for them, so that they boiled.

I found Lart Lykon, the Elten. He was a large, raw-boned man with a hectoring voice, hooded eyes, a massive beard, and golden rings about his fingers and bracelets upon his arms. He wore only a gray shirt and a pair of blue trousers. I took him by the shoulder as he pushed a woman aside and went to step into a boat. He had guards, tough men with stuxes who shouted at me to let the Elten alone, and who thrust at me. I took the first stux and hit the fellow over the head with it. Ash was now falling, raining down in white-hot droplets that stung as they hit flesh. People were screaming everywhere. Yet we were penned into this tiny space of the jetties between the lake-wall and the town.

"Elten," I said, shouting into his ear. "By all you hold holy, you will not run away. There is a way to defeat Muruaa!"

"It cannot be done," he gasped, his eyes rolling. "Muruaa will eat us all, burn us alive!"

Another guard, panicking, tried to thrust his stux into my back, so that I was forced to turn, my left hand grasping the Elten by the shoulder, and take the stux away from the guard. He looked a mean, low-browed fellow — well, maybe I do him an injustice — but I thrust back hard intending to frighten him away. But the press of people forced him on to the stux. He writhed like a fish on a harpoon, and lurched away.

I turned my face on the other guards.

They were relatively primitive people, at least in their relationship with authority. They understood what my face told them long before they heard what I bellowed out.

I lifted my voice and I shouted.

“Listen to me! It is useless to run away. You must do what I say, at once, for if you do not, then you will all be killed, and I along with you.”

I dragged up the Elten of the town, and hung him up in the air so that his heels dangled.

“Your Elten will confirm what I say! You must go up past the flanks of the lava flow, behind the houses, along the terraces, back above the town, below the village. You must carry cloths, wetted, over your heads. You must take picks and shovels, and you will do as I bid you. If you do not you will all surely be killed!”

There followed a wild argument; but I held the stux against the side of Lart Lykon, the Elten, and I pressed the cruel and broad head into the swell of his belly. “Tell them to obey, Lykon, or your tripes spill into the dirt!”

He squeaked and then managed a shout as I set him back on his feet.

“Do as this wild leem says! There is a chance! I know, for in my grandfather’s time Muruaa showed his anger and the people placated him by sacrifice—”

“You great nurdling onker!” I roared. I shook him so that he rattled internally.

“You will dig a gap in the side of the flow, where it has cooled a little. It will be hard. But if you do it the fire will flow a new way — the way you must know — over the cliff and into the lake beyond the village.”

Uproar, chaos, confusion, but out of them I hammered away at the people. I shook Lart Lykon and brandished the stux at some of his guards who attempted to launch a boat and sail away. When they would not stop I hurled the stux and wounded their Deldar; that brought the others directly back up onto the jetty. I seized another stux from the guard’s stuxcal and I waved it.

“Forward! Up the slope! Muruaa is merely a pit of fire! And are we not men and women? Dig!Dig! Trap Muruaa’s vile vomit in the lake!”

The conceit caught them. Anyway, they knew they could not escape. Volcanoes have this nasty habit of forming basins, such as the one in which the town had been slotted, by the collapse of part of the surrounding land in ancient, prehistoric eruptions, and then of filling the basin in the subsequent eruptions. The lake had flowed in to fill any hope of escape: the water boiled near the shore as the stream of lava poured over the town and plunged into the water.

So we snatched up cloths and hides and I organized a water-carrying chain. We went back up the slope, around the fiery lava flow, and we ventured near the outer cooler edges. We dug. We sweated. We were burned. We died, some of us, who were not nimble enough, or who could not stand the heat. But we chopped a gap in the edge of the flow and, not suddenly, but quickly enough to make us skip out

of the way, a fresh tentacle of flaming lava broke through, and swung toward the lake on its new course. The flow would not stop in its destructive travel over the town, but enough would now be channeled away so that the slot would not fill. We could find a safe if hot refuge on the higher terraces.

The big man with the tawny mane of hair and the whip-marks on his back who had shouted, first, that he would come with me up the mountain of fire, bellowed now that he would go up higher and break a fresh gap.

“If you desire, Avec,” I said. “But the heat up there is worse even than here.”

“I care nothing for these crampths of Orlush. I wish only to spite that yetch Elten Lart.”

Out of spite, then, he went up the mountain. I went up with him because I was not absolutely sure I had done all I could do to save the people of this town of Orlush. I had no idea where we were on Kregen. The Star Lords had given me the task of saving someone — perhaps the whole damned town — and until I was satisfied that I had done that, I could not rest.

We were followed by an intrepid band of young men — and some not so young — and we went at the lava flow again. This time the work was immensely more difficult; but we persevered.

When even I was satisfied, and I had struck blow for blow with Avec, driving great swathing layers of flaming lava away to open a new breach and we were all burned and blistered, I shouted halt. Avec dragged a blackened arm across his sweat-grimed forehead, and he smiled at me.

“I do not know who you are, dom; but you are a man!”

“A man like yourself, Avec. I am Dray Prescott.”

“And I am Avec Brand, Notor of nothing, Elten of emptiness, Strom of onkers.”

“Aye, Avec!” shouted a sinewy young man whose strength as he slewed burning lava had surprised me. “Aye, by Havil the Green! You are Kov of hulus, also!”

“And you, Ilter Monicep, are the Vad of boasters!”

There and then, these two, they would have set to and knocked each other about — there, after the exertions they had so desperately made to save the town.

One thing said had chilled me.

Havil the Green!

Well — I was still in Havilfar.

But — the Green! It was long and long since I had fought so bitterly for Zairians against Grodnims. Long and long since I had sailed the Eye of the World in my fleet swifter *Zorg*. Yet, still, even after all these seasons when I had talked and befriended and grown accustomed to the Green — even then, to my shame, the old starchy pride of a Krozair of Zy stiffened me up at the hated name of the Green.

“There is a great statue of Havil the Green in Huringa,” I said.



Avec looked at me as though I had made some fatuous remark about the time of day.

“I have heard of Huringa — have I not, you onker, Ilter?”

“Huringa?” said Ilter Monicep. We walked down the cut steps in the terrace walls, ready to help up to the higher sanctuary those who needed help. “Huringa? I believe old Naghan the Calsany once said it was a great city in Hyrklana. It was Hyrklana — I think?”

“Yes, Ilter. In Hyrklana.”

So that told me that wherever I was, I was not in Hyrklana. It also told me clearly that wherever I was, was firmly in the backwoods. These were simple country people farming the terraced fields pent between the hills and the lake and the volcano. I wanted to know where I was. A year, the Gdoinye had said. I knew, because for the moment the action was over and I had not been caught up in a blue radiance and whirled back to Earth, that I had done what the Star Lords in their beatific wisdom had sent me here to do.

“I am a stranger here,” I began.

Avec laughed, and then winced as burned skin caught him at the edge of his mouth.

“We know you are a stranger. Where you came from only Opaz the Vile himself may know. We know everyone in Orlush.”

“Aye, Avec,” mocked Ilter. “And everyone in Orlush knows you!”

Again I felt a shock of premonitory — what? Not fear, not horror, unease perhaps. Anger certainly.

Opaz — the *Vile*?

Opaz, the invisible embodiment of the dual-spirit, the Invisible Twins, the great and good Opaz? Opaz made manifest by the visible presence of the suns Zim and Genodras the heavens above in Kregen — the suns which in Havilfar are called Far and Havil.

I couldn't stop myself. I was exhausted — as were we all — and I was in a foul temper as may be imagined. I had been a king, and now I was a mere puppet dancing to the tune played by superbeings who refused to treat me seriously.

“Where are we, by the diseased and stinking right eyeball of Makki-Grodno?”

They stared at me, both of them, shaken by my tone.

When they saw my face glowering upon them, they were more mightily shaken still.

Then Avec, with something of a bluster in his voice and manner, said, “Why, in Orlush, of course.”

Ilter Monicep regarded me with his dark eyes half veiled, and a pucker to his lips. He had recovered from that instinctive panic, that insubstantial terror, that seems to grip people when I glare at them with purpose. He spoke softly, and yet with meaning.

“You are in Orlush, as this great fambly Avec has said. And Orlush lies in the kingdom of Pwentel, and

Pwentel has the great and glorious honor of being part of the Empire of Hamal.” He chuckled harshly. Then he said bitterly, “Not a large or important part, for King Rorton Turmeyr whom men call the Splendid, is a frightened king. And Orlush, as you see, is not a great and famous town, for our Elten, Lart Lykon, is a corrupt bladder of vileness.”

“You have said it, Ilter, although I shall beat you for calling me a fambly, you clever onker!”

While I digested this information the people of the town secured themselves on the highest terraces, clustering near the irrigation trenches which poured downslope from tier to tier. There are many degrees in the various peerages of Kregen, and I have not detailed them to you except when necessary. Suffice it to say that an Elten is two ranks lower in the hierarchy than a Strom. And I was in Hamal!

Something of what the Gdoinye had said made sense now.

Food had been saved from the disaster and we could eat the portion of the crop that was already ripe. All the rest of the day and the next night we huddled as Muruaa spouted into the air and poured his molten fury down the slopes. In the evening of the third day the fires slackened. Toward the decline of the twin suns — Zim now followed Genodras below the horizon — and with She of the Veils floating smokily between the stars, we saw a cavalcade drop down swiftly through the last level rays of emerald and ruby. It came to rest on the broadest and driest of the terraces encircling a low hill.

Surrounding a large and ornately decorated voller flew a squadron of mirvols, their riders flamboyant with flying silks and furs, with slanted weapons and the glitter of gems and steel.

“That will be Strom Nopac, come to find out what has happened,” said Ilter Monicep. From his tone it was perfectly clear he had as little love for Strom Nopac as he had for Elten Lart.

“Who’d be a Notor?” Avec offered as his contribution to the philosophy of the evening. “It’d worry a man’s guts out.”

We were eating palines, and precious little else we had had, too, and we leaned in the last of the twin suns’ glow, resting our elbows on a brick wall and looking down the slopes in the gathering dusk. Men moved urgently about down there, and Elten Lart would no doubt be pushing as hard as he could for help and relief in the disaster. The town showed like a patchwork of roofs protruding from the cooling lava.

Soldiers were climbing the stairs cut in the terrace walls. Zim and Genodras winked from the armor and the weapons.

“I just hope they’ve brought food,” said Ilter, and he belched with a hungry hollow sound.

I remembered the whip-marks upon Avec’s broad back, lash-stripes that were newly healed. Avec pushed up from the wall and flexed his arms and then rubbed his hair and nose. “They’ll put me back in the Opaz-rotten cells,” he said. He sighed. “Well, it was a rouser to be out, if for such a short time.”

“They’ll flog you again, Avec,” said Ilter.

“Ah!” Avec spoke with a crowing kind of pleasure. “But they can’t jikaider me! The law doesn’t allow that to an Elten, by Krun!”

The soldiers approached.

In the last of the light they looked bulky, powerful, wearing uniforms which to me smacked of the overly ostentatious. I had been in Hamal before, at the Heavenly Mines, and I had no love for the Hamalese — although, Zair knew, Avec and Ilter were shaping up as interesting companions for a fight.

I readied myself in case Avec would put up a fight; but he held his wrists out, together, crossed, and said, “Here I am, boys. Anybody got a bottle of dopa handy?”

One of the soldiers laughed and a Deldar put his hand on Avec’s shoulder. “You are Avec Brand the Niltch? You will come with us.” Before the Deldar had finished speaking a voice lifted farther back in the shadows beyond the group of soldiers.

“There he is! There is the cramp who wounded two of my guards! Seize him, instantly!”

Ilter Monicep swung before me, so that his body blocked off my instinctive reaction to belt the first soldier over the head with his own stux. The soldiers closed in, their spears pointing for me, dead in the fading light.

Monicep whispered, swiftly, frantically: “You resist, they’ll kill us all!”

Helpless, I was taken, my hands bound. With stuxes prodding my back I was marched down the terraces and flung like a sack of refuse into the bottom of the voller.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### Of Avec, Ilter, and ripe fruit

Avec Brand, also, was flung down with me. He was a Niltch. At the time I had no idea what that could be.

The bottom of the voller did not smell as pleasantly as I suspected a voller should smell, although for a man like myself who knows what an eighteenth-century seventy-four’s bilges smelled like after eighteen months on blockade, smells are usually merely information clusters. This voller had been carrying gregarians, squishes, and malsidges. I saw no reason, now, to wait before freeing myself.

“Avec!” I said, not loudly, but not whispering, either. “Is your crime so serious?”

I wanted to know if he was just a petty criminal who was always in trouble, or if he had just done one thing wrong.

“Serious?” He chuckled, there, tied up in the malodorous hold of the voller. “Had I not left to go to Sumbakir I would have challenged him earlier, for although I am not a Horter neither am I a slave! Elten Lart is corrupt. I told the cramp what I thought of him, then I threw slursh at him — slursh with best red honey stirred in, too!”

Slursh is a remarkably fine porridge, which may be cooked in a number of different ways according to taste, and is so common on Kregen that if I have not mentioned it previously it is surely for that reason. Slursh and red honey, now — superb.

“Slursh wouldn’t hurt him, Avec. Not enough to flog you—”

“I did not trouble to take it out of the pot, Dray.”

“Ah!”

“The pot was that cheeky shishi Sosie’s, a brave iron pot exceedingly thick and heavy, with the story of Kov Logan na Hirrume and the two Fristle fifis molded around the rim.”

“What will they do to you?”

“For thumping a Notor? The Jikhorkdun, for sure. The Strom has jurisdiction, I think. The law is very strict. That rast Lart Lykon must bow to the Strom, as he bows to the king.”

“You do not appear to me to be worried, Avec.”

“No. Ilter Monicep is a clever lad, schooled, and no more of a fambly than I am. He will get me out. He is my sister’s son.”

“I had thought, Avec, I might break out soon.” I did not wish to enter the Hamalian Jikhorkdun. I moved my wrists and the thongs burst. “About — now.”

He could barely see me in the reflected glow of oil lamps shining through the hatchway from the deck above. “You have freed yourself of your bonds? By Krun! That is a deed!”

I reached over in the dimness, found his wrists, said, “Hold steady if they cut, Avec,” and jerked his thongs apart.

He rubbed his wrists for a few murs in thoughtful silence. Then he belched. Then he said, “I have read you, Dray, I have read you. You are a paktun. A Hyr-paktun, in all probability.”

I have been called a paktun before and, by Zair, I supposed I was and am. A paktun is a name given only to a mercenary who has achieved considerable fame — or notoriety. I would not lie.

“If you think that, Avec, I shall not quarrel with you. Shall we go up?”

“Aye — with all my heart.”

We crawled up the ladder cautiously and came out onto the lower deck. Above us the upper deck showed a rectangle of night sky. We crept up there and Avec put the watch to sleep, and we slunk down off the voller. Avec padded ahead of me in the pink-lit darkness. I heard his voice, and an exclamation. From the trees of this terrace two figures tangled together, flailing. Then—

“By Havil the Green, you fambly! You make more noise than a pair of calsanys!”

“Onker! Can’t you look where you’re going!”

I sighed. I had a right pair here — and, instantly, flooding me with nostalgia, warm and wonderful memories of Nath and Zolta, my own two oar-comrades, my two favorite rogues, leaped into my mind.

There was no love of Hamal in my heart. But although these two, Avec and Ilter, might be of Hamal, I did not care about that impediment in them.

I said, "If you shout a little louder you might wake the guards. I don't think they can hear you — yet."

They came closer, dark shadows between the pink shafts of moonshine beneath the trees.

Ilter said, "You are something of a wild leem, Dray Prescott. Avec tells me you burst your bonds, and his. They are regulation thongs, manufactured by the government, to government regulations. It is a marvel."

I almost said, "They were not lesten hide." But I did not. Hostages are given to fortune all too often for my taste. I would not add to the blabbermouths of Kregen.

We had found odd scraps of clothing after we had diverted some of Muruaa's lava, and the night was warm enough, up here in Hamal, although in the Hamalian deserts of the altiplano one finds freezing temperatures almost every night. We walked on in the pink darkness, arguing about what we should do. Rather, they argued, and I listened until we reached the soldiers and their mirvol lines.

Then I said, "I am not of Orlush. I shall take a mirvol and fly out."

They stopped whispering, and turned on me together, saying, "Where will you fly to?" and "I am with you!"

"I welcome you, Avec. I know not, Ilter. Where the flyer takes me, I think."

"He'll take you straight back to the Strom's stables."

"I do not think I would like that."

Avec said, "I left Orlush many seasons ago, and did well. I return for a visit, to see the onkerish son of my dead sister, and Yurncra the Mischievous clutches me in his talons so that the cramph Lart has me flogged and now the Strom will sentence me to the Jikhorkdun. I shall not return to Orlush again."

What Ilter's plans were we never did discover, for we never did ask him. At that moment from beyond the encampment among the trees a soldier appeared bearing a torch which scattered its light upon us. He shouted.

He recognized both Avec and Ilter, for he called their names before my flung stone knocked him down.

Ilter said, "It seems, Uncle, I shall have to accompany you, and that is a fate no well-deserving young man deserves."

The shout would arouse the sleeping camp. We made great speed to select three fine mirvols with full saddlebags still attached, and to release the restraining ropes and hobbles of the others and to beat them into the air. We took off in a veritable welter of wings.

All that night we flew north and east.

The capital of Hamal, Ruathytu, situated on the River Havilthytus lies almost midway between the northern coast and the southern border of the country bounded by the large and impressive River Os, often called He of the Commendable Countenance. Ruathytu is an inland city, situated approximately sixty dwaburs from the eastern coastline. It stands at the junction of the River Mak, known as the Black River, with the River Havilthytus. It was this latter river we followed now, winging through the

pink-strewn darkness and seeing the moon's reflection upon the dark and gleaming waters. The Black River is well named, for when it discharges its inky waters into the Havilthytus they run side by side for a surprising number of dwaburs before at last they mingle and merge.

Ilter waved his arm and pointed down. We let our mirvols plane through the sky and came to ground on a yellow bluff above the Black River. Above us two of the lesser moons of Kregen hurtled past, always in a hurry.

"I do not wish to travel all the way to Ruathytu," said Avec, his Kregish thickening a trifle more with the local accent. "But I wish to escape those crampths on our necks, now we have started. What in Kaerlan the Merciful's name do you want, Ilter?"

"I thought you intended to fly to Ruathytu, the way you were going, by Krun! Had you done so, better to call on Kuerden the Merciless than Kaerlan the Merciful, my onkerish uncle."

"I'll strap you across my knee, nephew! By Krun, I'll—"

I said, "You may fight all you wish. Just give me some idea of a suitable place to find rest and food and I will leave you."

They glared at each other, chests heaving, faces angry and puffed, hands half raised. I was interested to notice that they did not clench their fists or adopt an unarmed-combat discipline posture. They were like two bantam cocks.

"Rest? Food?" Ilter slowly let his hands drop and looked at me. "Where I want to go, of course, is to Dovad, if only this onkerish fambly uncle of mine will allow."

"You ingrate! That your father, my dear sister's husband, is dead! I come to visit you, dwabur after dwabur—"

"My crystal is shattered, oh nit of Nathian girth!"[\[4\]](#)

They really would have gone at each other then, but I stirred my mirvol, and in a fluster of wing-beats shouted down at them, "Where is Dovad, then, dom?"

Ilter leaped into his saddle with such force he almost missed and went slithering over the far side. He caught the pommel and wrenched himself back.

"I'll fly with you, by Krun, and leave this onker to simmer in his own droppings."

"By Krun!" howled Avec. He sprawled up into his saddle somehow, pommel and cantle at the wrong ends, so that he had to fling himself around and grab the flying reins, for the mirvol took an extreme distaste to these antics. The mirvol lowered his head, and his neck, and flicked his wings. Long before Avec could grab on to anything that was fastened, off he spun, up into the air, head over heels, and down on the flat of his broad back.

He yelled.

I was no longer amused. I had seen his back.

I quieted my mirvol and kicked him to close his wings, then hopped off to get to Avec, who lay winded,

Ilter's mirvol had responded faster, and when I reached Avec his nephew was already there, bending over him, lifting his head. I saw Ilter's face.

"I'm all right, Ilter, lad. The beasts aren't trained like they used to be."

"I know, Uncle. Lie still for a moment while I—" and Ilter stopped talking and began to feel his uncle's body. He looked up. "Nothing broken."

"Help me up, lad, for it fair thwacked me, like the kick of a calsany."

Avec had made no outcry. I did not wish to shame him by inquiring about his back, for a man of Kregen is touchy about pain and punishment — stupidly so, sometimes.

We took to the air once again and flew steadily on downstream along the course of the Black River.

Dovad turned out to be a sizable town, located where the river broadened into a lake before plunging on and through a low range of hills, scantily clad with brush and gorse, for they were rocky and looked of fairly recent origin, being sharp-peaked. I saw the way the river plunged over a smooth bulbous edge of land to fall beyond, the white smother of the foot of the falls out of view as we landed.

It seemed sensible to us to remove all signs that these mirvols were military beasts, although the brands on their leathery skins would not easily come out, for obvious reasons. In the end Avec said, "The trouble they will bring is not worth their sale price."

"I agree," said Ilter.

So we took the silks and furs and Avec was about to give his mount a blow to send him into the air when I stopped him.

"Let us take the saddles, if they are not marked, and sell them, and say our flyers perished of a disease."

Ilter said, "The saddles are marked."

"Everything is marked in Hamal, it seems."

We drove the mirvols into the air and soon lost them under the declining rays of She of the Veils as they flew back to Strom Nopac's aerial stables.

Although I had clothes, of a sort, and flying silks and furs to sling over my shoulder, I was still weaponless. It seemed most strange to me that I should walk the face of Kregen without a sword strapped to my side, and yet the very law of this country of Hamal offered a kind of surrogate guarantee of safety. I would find a weapon soon, that I knew.

"We have not come far from Orlush," said Ilter as we waited for the dawn. "They will think to look farther afield than this. And Dovad is a fine large town — almost a smot. I think we would do well to think of new names for ourselves, and after a few days they will forget about us, and we can move on."

"Will they forget, them and their laws?" I said.

Ilter laughed. "Hamal is a large empire. There are many kingdoms and Kovnates. Why, I am told it is four hundred twenty dwaburs from the north coast to He of the Commendable Countenance. If such a

distance can be imagined.”

Avec scoffed at his nephew. “You know a great deal for a village smith, nephew! Did Nelda the Cane then thwack some learning into your thick skull?”

“Into the other end, Avec, which is more than she ever did for you! And, further, to display my knowledge, earned by much standing up when I could not sit, the empire is three hundred or more dwaburs from the east coast to the Mountains of the West, which have too many names for any one man to remember.”

“Aye — and very few men have seen them, by Krun!”

I knew from what Queen Fahia of Hyrklana had told me that the Emperor of Hamal was extending his powers over these distant mountains, and south of the River Os, and, also, that the maniac was trying to invade South Pandahem — all at the same time. With the scale of these operations demanding such enormous resources and manpower, I fancied that Ilter had the right of it. In the event he was proved right. We spent a few days in Dovad using the money from one of the saddlebags, and bought ourselves new outfits, very tasteful, too. When we took the boat down the Black River we felt in our bones we were as free as flutcleppers.

As Avec said, “The guard who shouted had his money in his saddlebag so he could keep an eye on it during watch. He did us a good turn, after all.”

I doubted this, knowing, probably, a little more about soldiers than Avec, despite that they were his countrymen. The money was neatly pouched in mashcera and I felt it would more likely be true to say it was Strom Nopac’s, under guard.

We took a boat below the falls and the captain, a cheerful Amith, delighted in keeping his crew hard at it to beat the record for downstream journeys set up only a season ago by a great rival. The boats on the Black River are usually flat-bottomed, wide, with puntlike bows, and three decks. They are brightly painted and kept in tip-top condition. Downstream the Amiths swear they are faster than a hack flyer, although this is generally conceded as just another of the Amith’s genial boasts.

Strange folk, the Amith, with the hindquarters and rear body of a totrix, and with an apim’s torso and arms rising from the junction of what appear to be two entirely different bodies. What was originally the center pair of legs of the totrix have become what appear to be the lower limbs of an apim. The males are usually black-bearded, and they look undeniably impressive. Many of the females have masses of curly golden hair, which gives them an oddly coquettish air, most strange, as I have said. And when I say strange, I have in mind that Kregen is peopled by many strange races, of which the diffs called Amith are a proud and delightful example. There is a legend which has received wide credence that the Amiths were the original inhabitants of Hamal.

What with the money and what with my two companions, I spent a most agreeable time roaming around central Hamal. The country is undeniably big. It has a larger population per area than many other places — by contrast Segesthes is practically deserted — and I believe all three of us found in this wandering a kind of release from normal cares. For we all knew we would have to get back to work one day.

The year to which I had been sentenced by the Star Lords slowly crept by. Ilter would find himself a job as a smith and do very well. Avec would go back to being a Niltch.

He said to me one day as we waited to board one of the wheeled vehicles plying for public hire in the



main street of Hemlad, a fair-sized town out toward the east of Dovad, “You and Ilter should come with me, Dray. I’ve had myself a holiday that that cramp of an Elten Lart Lykon ruined. I’ve enjoyed myself, by Krun! But I must get back to work. That onker Naghan needs me at his side.”

I was not interested in working for a living if I had money in my pocket. Oh, yes, I’d work, and work like a slave, if I had to. I’d do anything at all — for certain reasons that you know. So I said as the carriage halted before the little crowd waiting to board, “What do you do, anyway, Avec? You never talk about it.”

The carriage — usually they have four central wheels, and like the chaldrons of the Heavenly Mines they run on tracks let into the road — lurched ahead. I sat on a wooden-strip seat as Avec paid the fare. He stumbled across a woman with a shopping basket filled with plump ripe shonages, gloriously red, luscious, making my mouth water, and Avec mumbled some apology and flopped into the seat next to me.

The woman glared at him and then solicitously at her shonages; I didn’t blame her. We were going to meet Ilter and the first thing I promised myself was to buy a shonage and sink my teeth into it. I remembered them from Huringa.

“What do I do, dom?” Avec chuckled and cocked one leg over the other and so kicked the shonage basket again. The woman tsk-tsked and glared; but Avec bestowed upon her so sweet and gallant a smile that she was forced to lower her eyelids.

I wondered if Avec in his bumbling way had overdone it. In a country so ridden with laws as Hamal the woman might easily stop the carriage and call the Amith drawing it to come and sort out this yetch who kept insulting her and damaging her fruit.

I was interested in knowing what Avec did, for he had never mentioned it, and I suppose I was assumed to understand what Niltch meant.

Avec struggled in his seat to get a wad of cham from his arm-purse. Avec was a great cham-chewer. He was also leaning over toward me as he tried to flick the purse-lid open, but the pesky thing had stuck. His legs were kicking about dangerously.

“I don’t mind telling you, dom,” he said, and his voice sank. We had forced ourselves not to use each other’s names in public, just in case. “But, you know the way the government and the Emperor regard this matter. I’m not a skilled man, as Havil the Green is my witness, although I would wish to be. Now, young Ilter is now.” He swore a little more loudly then, and wrestled with the purse. We both hoped no one would have overheard his careless use of the name. The woman was trying to move her basket away, and a shonage looked about to slide off at any minute. I was looking at the shonage, and thinking my tangled thoughts about emperors and their laws and how poor folk could not afford to ride in a voller and sail through the air, and so avoid knocking into old ladies and damaging prime shonages.

Avec rambled on, under his breath, leaning over more and more, struggling with the arm-purse.

“We are all vowed to secrecy, of course. Penalty death. Oh, yes — death! But I will tell you what I can, and hope you will come with me to Sumbakir, and I’ll put in a word for you. We’ll be safer there, too, for the guards are fierce, by Krun!”

The woman rescued her shonage. I let my breath out. Avec ripped furiously at his arm-purse. He also spoke softly to me as the purse-lid came free.

“You must know, dom, what I do, from what I have already told you, and my name, and where I work.”

His thick arm jerked with the violence with which he dragged the purse open, the elbow driving toward me as he told me.

“I build vollers, dom.”

My surprise was complete. I could not stop the instinctive start of shock. Avec’s solid elbow hit me as I jumped and my body lunged forward in exact time to a corner-turning lurch of the carriage. It threw me forward putting my face and shoulders slap-bang squash into the woman’s basket of ripe shonages.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Vollers of Sumbakir

At this time Sumbakir and the vollar yards were organized on military lines; instead of foremen and gang-leaders and time-keepers and floor-managers there were Deldars and Hikdars and Jiktars to run the shops. I fitted in well enough with Avec the Niltch to guide me, and Ilter Monicep as a smith was quickly at home in the smithy where the angle irons, brackets, and control rods were produced. Slaves, of course, swarmed everywhere. They wore the common gray slave breechclout, and they did the hard and onerous tasks set them by the slave-masters, who took their orders from the Deldars of Slaves.

Truly, I would not have welcomed such a life. But I think you will fully understand my motives. For most of my life on Kregen I had been cursed by the dark knowledge that at any time a flier might break down and so precipitate me — and those dear to me — into danger. The people of Vallia and Zenicce and Balintol and many other of the places where Hamalian and Hyrklanian vollers were sold lived with this knowledge. A vollar was not to be trusted. Yet I knew that within the bounds of Havilfar itself — certainly in Hamal and Hyrklana — airboats were perfectly sound.

The desire to uncover the secret, perhaps to take away with me the knowledge of the construction of vollers, fired me to a determination that made me do things I detested. Even if this meant I would miss the date on which I could fly back to the Shrouded Sea and pick up my life again with Delia and my friends, even this I would do to secure the secret knowledge.

I have some skills as a carpenter and can turn my hand to that trade when necessary, as a ship’s officer of a wooden navy must be able to, if he is a tarpaulin lieutenant without prospects. Learning my way about the yards took little time after our arrival, and Deldar Naghan the Triangle took to me, with Avec’s coarse comments to spur him on.[\[5\]](#)

The long open sheds resounded with the blows of ax and adz, the *chirr-chirr* of saws, the sliding hiss of planes and the sharp staccato cracks of hammers. I’ll admit they built well. The wooden frames were fashioned from seasoned wood, and the Kregans know what there is to know about seasoning and steam bending as about compass timbers. Sometimes the coverings were mere canvas and hide, at others sliced planks produced with extraordinary skill by slaves trained from birth to the work. The timbers were beautifully jointed and glued. As well they were on occasion pinned. Over at Conelawlad, so Naghan the Triangle told me, they built their frames from metal. Ilter said he would stick by that family of an uncle of his, for the nurdling onker would as well cut his thumbs off as saw a straight line.

We were a harum-scarum bunch, as I see now, looking back. Under the harsh laws of Hamal we still

found time to skylark. The lot of the slaves was far less enviable. They were guarded by the prowling black-and-white-striped forms of the werstings. These four-legged hunting dogs are extraordinarily vicious, and when they draw their lips back from their fangs it is time either to face front with a weapon or to run. But, running, you would be brought down in an instant. The wersting packs kept the slaves under guard, and the guards kept intruders out, and in Sumbakir there in south-central Hamal we built fliers.

Looking at the black and white stripes of the werstings reminded me of Jumnee of Nycresand, that Hikdar of a wersting pack, and on the morning the Kov of Apulad paid us his customary once-a-sennight-visit, I thought of Jumnee and wondered what he was doing now.

This morning the Kov was in a foul temper. This was quite normal. Only once had I seen him come in smiling, and that morning the rumor was that one of the Emperor's daughters had had a miscarriage.

"I run Sumbakir for the glory of the Emperor!" This Ormol ham Feoste, the Kov of Apulad, was fond of declaiming.

He stalked into our shed and everyone straightened up from their tasks and bent their heads, even me, Dray Prescott who was called Chaadur. The four guls the Kov had had whipped last week were back to work, and we all knew that the Kov was out to find fault. Any one of us might find the thongs around his wrists and his shirt stripped down his back, and the Deldar of the Lash laying on.

Ormol ham Feoste stalked between the lines of petal-shaped vollers, for we were working on an order that called for simple four-place fliers at the time. He ran his hand down the wood to test its smoothness, then he would wrench away at joints hoping they would come apart in his hands.

As usual, I did not look at his wife. The Kovneva, however, as usual, looked at me.

The silly woman wore her fine sensil veil swathed across her face so that her large dark eyes could look boldly upon whatever and whoever she wished. Her gown, a gaudy combination of emerald and ruby and diamond stripes sewn against a white soft material spun from the wool of the Methydrian ponsho, clung to her body as she moved. This was scarcely the dress a Hortera would wear to visit a workshop. The custom of elderly Earthwomen never to wear silk out of doors is a strange custom not followed upon Kregen; but this dress was too flamboyant by half.

In her arms she carried a wersting pup. The thing grew bigger week by week, and now the Lady Esme, Kovneva of Apulad, held a thin golden chain in her dainty hand, a chain that fastened to a gem-studded golden collar around the pup's neck.

We were all standing there, and many of the guls were trembling in a thinly controlled way that indicated they were almost beyond control. We were all wondering what the Kov would find fault with this week, for we knew that find fault he would. We stood there, hating the cramph, for in a very real and meaningful way he was the chief blot upon the landscape.

Ormol ham Feoste, Kov of Apulad, broke the joint that young Lenki had just made.

I saw Lenki sway and his hands wring together behind his back. The Kov turned to him quite slowly, and the Kov's face bore a look that chilled the human soul in Lenki.

"You call yourself a gul, rast," said the Kov in a quiet and deadly way. "No Horter would demean himself with you. A slave could do better work than you. And yet I, the Kov, must spend my time seeing

you do work for which you are paid well — golden deldys the empire could use better elsewhere.”

Lenki had sense enough not to reply.

The Kov gestured to his guards. They were apim, heavy-set fellows in half-armor and close-fitting helmets with the bright plumes of the arbora flaunting from their crests. They were soldiers, as their insignia showed, for it was the habit of the Hamalian government to post regiments from one part of the empire to duty in another and remote part. They seized Lenki.

He yelled, then, a thin shriek of abject fear.

“The joint broke, rast!” The Kov was enjoying this.

There was no excuse. The joint should not have broken, even in the thick and sweating hands of the Kov. We looked after Lenki as he was dragged out, screaming.

Esme, Kovneva of Apulad, lingered as her husband strutted on. She eyed me. I could see the red smudge of her mouth beneath the veil. Her body thrust boldly forward as she snuggled the wersting pup against her bosom. The golden chain jingled.

“Should I ask the Kov to break your joint, Chaadur?”

I said, “Your gracious eminence must do as she pleases. The joint will not break to a bungling clasp.”

She flushed.

She had said to me, the week before last, “I am the Kovneva, Chaadur. You would do well not to forget that.”

She walked on, swinging her hips. She had taken many lovers from the strong young men working here, soldier, guard, Horter, gul, slave. It was rumored she preferred slaves, for their mouths might be stoppered with least inconvenience.

When the inspection was finished the Kov strode to the wide double-doors which stood open so that the radiance of Far and Havil might strike through. He paused and shouted at us.

“You must work harder! By Hanitcha the Harrower! The Emperor demands more fliers. You will build them, or as Malahak is my witness, it will be the Jikhorkdun for you!”

He strode away, the thraxter swinging at his side, his guards at his heels. Following them strolled Esme, insolent in her power and beauty, with her two maids.

Avec rumbled an oath and said, “The Emperor will have that rast of a Kov in the Jikhorkdun if we do not work!”

Avec had no real idea of what a strike was; one day the minds of the guls might veer to the concept. The guls have no power, no privileges, no ranks. They are free men, not slaves, children of free parents, and they are not Horters, not gentlemen. They are not working people of the tradesmen class nor yet are they of the class of which stylors form the bulk. They are craftsmen, masters at their trades, and without them Kregen — aye, and the Earth — would tumble into ruin.

Soon after that the petal-shaped four-place flier I was helping to build was framed out and her canvas covering sewn on. With Avec and old Ob-eye I helped trundle her out of the double doors and across the yard into the fitting shed.

This was a place I needed to know more about. Here was where the controls and the silver boxes were fitted. The boxes were made up from tin. In a black-walled room at one end of the shed the tin boxes went in with their lids neatly laid beside them, for they were all handmade, and one lid might not fit a different box. They came out from the black-walled room with their lids fastened down and soldered. At the opposite end of the fitting shed stood the red-walled room. The tin boxes went in here just as they did into the black-walled room and came out exactly the same, filled and with the lids soldered. With great care the guls then took a tin from the red room and a tin from the black room and slotted them into the grooves made for them in the voller. Then the controls could be fitted.

As usual, a guard — he was a Rhaclaw — herded us out as soon as we had pushed our flier into the fitting shed. We wet our lips, but the next mealtime lay a few burs ahead yet, and took ourselves off to the stores to draw fresh timber and so begin the construction of the next voller.

Ilter had told me that the silver boxes were made up from sheets of metal beaten to an extraordinary thinness and then passed through a bath of molten tin. Iron or copper, he said, he supposed, were the favorite metals. I was far more interested about what was inside the tins. Those silver boxes intrigued me. The Emperor of Vallia had once ordered a silver box broken open so as to discover the secret of the fliers. In one tin they had found fine grit and sand and earth, packed in tightly to the lid. The other tin had been empty.

That had been some time ago, and the flier had, of course, been ruined. Despite my suggestion that I would pay to open a flier's silver boxes, the Emperor, Delia's father, had told me that he would not permit it. He knew, he said, what was in the silver boxes: dirt and air. With that I had been content at the time; now I was actually standing in the very place where fliers were made, where the silver boxes were filled!

Let the devils of a Herrelldrin hell take me if I didn't find out the answers now!

Around at the far end of the fitting shed, where I made it my business to wander as though merely dawdling, I had seen piles of dirt and gravel and sand. As unlikely as it had sounded, the Emperor's story must be true — not that I doubted his word in a matter like this even if, and despite my Delia, I would not trust him wholeheartedly.

Dirt and air?

There was a mystery here, by Vox!

On the night I decided it was worth the risk of breaking out of our barracks by the back way and sneaking over to the fitting shed I made a few suitable precautions and then prepared to burglarize a window from the inside. Just as I put the blade of a chisel to the window a knock rattled the door of my cubicle, for the barracks, as I have said, were subdivided into single cubicles. I cursed and slid the chisel up the sleeve of my shirt and flopped onto the three-legged stool by the bed, and bellowed grumpily, "Come in, come in!"

If my plans worked as I envisaged I wanted no one knowing I had broken out and gone prowling. The front door was open, and anyone could go out and come in, but I did not want to be noticed.

It was Ilter. He carried a Jikaida board under his arm and a sturm-wood box of pieces. I dissembled. I owed him a game for I had beaten him soundly the previous evening, and he wanted revenge. We set up the board in deadly silence and ranked our Deldars and set to work. Although he was a fine player and my mind was not fully occupied with the game, I managed to hold him to a Pyrrhic victory. He grimaced and shuffled the pieces up, folding the board. "Next time, Chaadur, I will smite you, hip and thigh!"

When he left the suns were completely gone from the sky and the Maiden with the Many Smiles floated above serenely. I did not bother with the cheap oil lamp in my room but again laid the chisel against the window. I was not too concerned over the delay. Now was probably a better time, anyway.

The door opened swiftly, so swiftly that I only just had time to slide the chisel into my shirtsleeve.

Hikdar Covell ti Heltonlad, as thin faced and hollow eyed as ever, with that suspicious beaky nose of his poking where it was not wanted, pushed that very selfsame nose into my room. He wore his uniform, and his thraxter was drawn. He looked as though he barely repressed an explosion of resentment and malice.

"Are you washed, gul? Are you clean?"

He poked his damned thraxter at me, rather as a schoolmaster pokes little boys with his cane.

I did not take it away from him and clout him over the ears with the flat.

Outside in the corridor shapes moved, and I heard the chink of a sword-blade against a lorica, and so I knew Hikdar Covell had not come alone.

He did not wait for me to answer.

"Up! Up with you, rast! Come with me!" He swirled his short cape, checkered green and black with the gold lace and bullion tassels, swung his sword up over his right shoulder, and pranced out. I heard him complaining to his men. "This place smells like a dopa den of Lower Ruathytu! Drag him out if he does not come—"

I stepped into the corridor.

Six soldiers closed around me.

"Smartly, now," rapped Hikdar Covell. "Here—" and a Deldar at his Hikdar's sword clapped a foul black bag over my head. I let them do all this to me. I let them put my head in a black bag and grab me by the elbows and guide me out of the barracks and into the night. I knew where I was being taken. I knew what their errand was. Also, I knew what I wanted to do. I would make a fine dovetail joint of those two wantings that no cramph of a Kov could break.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Concerning the silver chains of Kovneva Esme

I could hear the shrill ululating call of the night straerlker as we walked past the end of the barrack block and up the winding stone-flagged path to the Kov's villa. The night straerlker, unlike its cousin of the daytime, hunts night-flying insects, whereas the day variant hunts in rocky clefts for scurrying arachnids. The black bag over my head smelled of a scent not unlike chypre, heavy, cloying. That was the favorite scent of Esme, Kovneva of Apulad.

Tripping over a step quite deliberately to let them know I was helpless and had no idea where I was being taken, I took stock of our progress. Up the long flight of steps to the villa, past the guardhouse, around to the side where I heard the soft night breeze rustle in the yellow musk and I smelled its sweet perfume. That recalled Valka to me, and the high fortress of Esser Rarioch. Then I was pushed roughly through a narrow door for those shoulders of mine brushed against each jamb. Up a long carpeted stair. Then a wait before a door, and the faint sound of a girl's laugh, and a door closing, and then the rustle of soft clothes, and the rough hand on my arm relaxing, and a smaller, softer hand, urging me forward. The door clashed at my back, a harsh sound in what I guessed must be a scented, soft and downy bower. I heard the harsh breathing of a man near my right shoulder, and the creak of his harness as he breathed, and I smelled oiled leather and steel, and so knew a guard stood over the doorway, ready to kill if the Kovneva so ordered.

There was mystery and a haunting terror lurking below the threshold here, if I allowed. A normal man might be forgiven if he trembled at what awaited him. I did not tremble; but I admit I wondered if I had been so clever in allowing myself to be brought here. I had thought it a capital scheme, to further my plans. Now, the doubt occurred. Maybe I should have bashed Hikdar Covell and taken his thraxter, and cut up the guards, and gone my own headstrong way.

But, as you know, I was trying to be clever . . .

The girl pulling me forward halted and again I heard that soft silver jingling. I had an idea what that was, and if my idea was right I would be less than polite to the Kovneva . . .

I heard a slithery sound that told me a screen had been pulled across. Probably it was sturm-wood cunningly pierced into a grille, or fabricated from ivory from Chem. I heard a low laugh, and then a hand whipped the black bag away and I had to shut my eyes against the glare of soft samphron-oil lamps.

The Kovneva's voice said, "A great shaggy graint! Yes, Merle, I shall enjoy taming this one!"

"Indeed, yes, my lady," responded a young voice, and yet the voice, although bright, held a note of dullness and despair.

Sound of a slap and a muffled shriek, and then I opened my eyes and I could see again.

I'll give her this, Esme, Kovneva of Apulad; she tried to make of her private bower as sophisticated and luxurious a shrine to love as she imagined the empress' in far Ruathytu's must be. She was a Kovneva, and therefore a very great lady; but her husband the Kov had been personally charged by the Emperor with vollen production at Sumbakir, and that meant a dreadful provincial prison sentence for Esme. If I had had any feelings of sympathy for her they hardened as her maidservant, a young apim girl, put a hand to her cheek, which flamed scarlet and angry. Bright tears stood in the eyes of the girl, and her bosom moved beneath the scrap of peach-colored silk which the Kovneva allowed her as her only clothing.

"You need not stand looking like a fambly, Chaadur! You onker! Sit on this cushion and drink this wine."

I sat. The room had been festooned with draping silks and tapestries embroidered with various scenes from the more amorous of the legends of Kregen. I saw many that depicted stories I knew, others that at the time I did not know. Samphron-oil lamps stood upon balass-wood tables. Gilt chairs stood against the walls. The sofa upon which Esme reclined rested on six feet sculpted to look like the pads and claws of zhantils. I thought they might be solid gold and then noticed a claw knocked off and the sturm-wood

showing through the gilt. Provincial, provincial . . .

Another slave, a black girl probably from Xuntal, stood waving an exotic fan of whistling-faerling feathers to keep the air moving and sweet. If there were windows in the room they had been closed and shuttered and concealed by the draperies. Rugs upon the floor were strewn here and there; they were not of Walfarg weave.

A third slave girl brought in the wine. She was a Fristle, a superb little fifi, and I thought of Tilly, my little Fristle fifi of the Jikhorkdun of Huringa, who now waited with Delia and my friends in the airboat — to which I would return, by Zair, to which I would return.

The Fristle girl slave poured the wine. The goblet was glass, of a pale cream color, and twisted in the stem, and of a flat shape. I do not care for twisted glass stems, and I prefer a wineglass — given that one must use different shapes for each different wine or liquor — of a more rotund appearance.

But all these things meant little besides the debased appearance of the three slave girls. They did not wear the gray slave breechclouts. I had heard of this manner of collaring and chaining slaves, girl slaves, the manner known as *nohnam*. They wore scanty silk garments, pale green, peach, lake-blue. Around their necks, their wrists, their ankles, were fastened bands of silver — the collars were high, causing the girls to lift their heads when they wished to let their chins sink in misery. I doubted if the metal was really silver. From the collar ran chains to the wrists and to the ankles, and from ankles to wrists ran more chains, caught up beneath the girls' bodies. As they moved the chains swung.

During my time at the Jikhorkdun in Hyrklana I had heard men talking of taking a delight in chaining and collaring their girl slaves in *nohnam*. They seemed to think that by debasing a girl they exalted themselves.

Merle, the slave whom Esme had slapped — for no reason apart from the enjoyment of administering the punishment — moved near me as I made no attempt to drink the wine the Fristle girl had poured. I looked at Merle's neck, and wrists, and ankles.

The sores on her wrists and ankles were bad enough, some scabbed over and broken again. She had stuffed a few pitiful scraps of cloth down to try to prevent the chafing. But the sores around her neck were nothing short of disgusting. The collar's friction, which is unavoidable in a metal collar in *nohnam*, had rubbed the skin away in wide areas, and the scabs had formed, and had been knocked off, and the blood and pus dribbled down. Esme saw my look and belted Merle across her backside with the flexible length of tuffa tree handy, as she spoke most viciously to her.

“Wash your neck, you filthy rast!”

“Yes'm, my Lady,” said Merle, and scuttled with jangling chains to a screen across one corner. I heard the sound of splashing water.

The black girl's scabs were not so bad, but she suffered, too. As for the Fristle, her fine and delightfully snuggly fur had been worn away where the fake silver of the *nohnam* chafed, and the skin showed, red and raw and bleeding.

“These girls are useless, Chaadur! Now when we return to the capital I shall buy slaves who understand the refinements of good breeding and fine manners.”

I still had not spoken.



Esme went on talking.

“You are just a gul, Chaadur, at the moment. You are little better than a slave. Now I want you to take the baths of nine — we have a reasonable establishment here, as you will discover — and then I think you and I may talk to our mutual advantage. I can assure you of rapid promotion. I can get you what you desire most in all Havilfar. The Empire of Hamal can be yours for the taking.” Then she checked herself, and laughed, and sipped her wine, with the color flooding her cheek. She had overstepped herself. “I mean, of course, that in Hamal under the Emperor’s wise and benign rule you may make your fortune. You can be a Horter, a Notor — there is no reason why you may not be a Kov yourself, one day.”

Still I did not say anything but sat on the cushion, which was lumpy and was clearly not stuffed with fine quality feathers. I looked calmly at her, and her slaves, and her tatty little bower.

When I think of the women I have met on Kregen — and only those few whom I had up until now met — who cherished notions not far removed from this Kovneva Esme! The Princess Susheeng, the Princess Natema, Queen Lilah, Kovneva Katrin Rashumin, Queen Fahia, Viridia the Render, oh, yes, and the others, as you know — and do not associate Mayfwy with them — or, come to that, Natema, who was married to my comrade Prince Varden Wanek. When I imagined what they would think of me now I smiled.

I, Dray Prescott, smiled reflectively there in the soft glow from the samphron-oil lamps.

This Esme, this Kovneva, smiled back uncertainly.

“Yes, you see, Chaadur? All you must do is obey me in all things. You can give me so much—” Her moist red lips parted hungrily.

Merle came back. The washing had been painful.

“Why do you not speak, Chaadur?” Then Esme put down my silence to what must have been a not uncommon reaction of a slave, a gul, to this soft blaze of luxury and refinement as they would see it. “This is nothing, Chaadur, to what may be yours in the future if you will but obey me!”

So I said, “It seems to me to be nothing now.” I sipped the wine. “And your wine is a dreadful vintage.” I poured it upon one of the rugs, a brash affair with a Chunkrah and a Fristle that is not worth commenting on.

“You!” She didn’t believe this.

I said, “If you have the key to these girls’ chains I will have it and take the chains off. You are a rast and a cramph for chaining them up.”

She gaped at me.

Merle and the Fristle fifi gazed at me as though I were mad. I own I am a bit of a maniac; but that is me, Dray Prescott. I wondered what to do with these three slave girls once I had taken the degrading nohnam from them, so that they would not have to sit and stand in that disgusting slavish posture of humiliation. Some people really think girls are not part of the human race!

The black girl put out her hands, as far as the chains would allow, and she said, “I give you the Jikai, dom; but I fear, by Xurrhuk of the Curved Sword, you are a dead apim.”

I stood up. "Give me the key, Esme."

She was a Kovneva. She called out, "Bagor! Here! Kill!"

The sliding door slid aside with a screech. The guard appeared, craggy, bulky, clad in armor, ferociously lusting after letting blood. At his appearance all three slave girls screamed and drew back in such a pitiful way that I knew instantly this Bagor had been mistreating them abominably.

"Kill the rast, Bagor!" screamed Esme.

"You," said this Bagor. His bulk was mostly muscle, but there was fat there, too, as I had judged by his breathing when he stood by the outer door. "Outside! The Kovneva will not be pleased for your blood to stain her carpets."

The girls screamed again.

I am not given to talking when action is imminent, but I wanted to give some heart to these three pitiful slave girls, and so I boasted. How my tough warriors of Valka, or my clansmen, or, even, my fighters of Djanduin would have stared at me then. I dared not think what my Krozair brothers would say.

So I said, "I do not care about splattering the cramp of a Kovneva's carpets with your blood, Bagor!"

And I leaped for him, poor onker, and took his thraxter away and cut his legs from under him. He fell asprawl in blood across the tatty carpets. I thunked the hilt down on his head to put him to sleep.

The Kovneva Esme could not speak. She sat there on her couch, her legs drawn up, her gown bedraggled with blood that had splashed it. She looked at me with horrified eyes and she tried to speak, but her fingers dug clawlike into her throat so that she could not utter a word.

I went over to her and ripped the dress about until I found the key. Then I unlocked the fetters and the manacles and took the collars from their necks. I am not a vengeful man. But I did something then, I, perhaps, should not have done.

When I had finished, there lay Esme, the Kovneva of Apulad, collared and chained in nohnam, degraded in her own bower.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### Dirt and air

Although Esme appeared paralyzed and unable to cry out, lying there on her blood-spattered carpets with the collar and chains and manacles of nohnam upon her, the previous screaming must soon bring guards. They would not be big, bloated hunks of female-tamers like Bagor. And Bagor was an honorable name in most parts of Kregen.

I picked up the curved dagger he wore in a cheap brass scabbard and held it in my left hand. The thraxter in my right, my old shirt and ragged pair of trousers cut off at the knees, and I was as fully armed and accoutered as I could be, for Bagor carried no shield for this duty of chastising female slaves in chains and of cutting down slaves or guls if they displeased his mistress. What of the laws of Hamal here?

As I did this, Merle snatched up the thin tuffa rod and started hitting Esme. She swung wildly, her body heaving with each blow, her gasps sounding painfully loud. The black girl, Xasha, laughed. I took Merle's arm.

"Do you wish to remain here, Merle?"

She looked at me with deep shock in her eyes, very pitiful to see. She drew in a deep breath and threw the switch away.

"I cannot remain here, Jikai, and live!"

"That is true," said Xasha. "And if we do not leave at once the guards will take us all. Then, after the beatings it will be the Jikhorkdun for us all."

I moved to the door. I heard a soft click from the direction of the couch, and turning to call the girls, I saw the Fristle, Floy, take a long thin dagger from the tray which had slid out from its concealment in the side of the sofa. She lifted the dagger high and the samphron-oil lamps gleamed off the blade and sparkled off the gems set in the hilt.

With a triumphant shriek the Fristle girl buried the dagger in Esme's throat.

Esme choked, coughed, vomited blood, kicked her legs, and then rolled slowly over onto her face.

There was nothing anyone could do for her.

Floy, the Fristle girl, stood, her legs apart, her diaphanous scrap of silk quivering with her own excited body-movements. She whispered, to herself, really, unaware for the moment of any other person.

"Hai," she whispered. "Hai, Jikai!"

Not unmoved, I turned away and with a harsh and intemperate gesture and a few uncouth words bade the girls follow me.

Xasha said, "We would do well to take what jewels and money we can carry, dom. Also, we will need clothes."

I nodded. "Very well. I will stand by the door."

Still panting, her bosom in tumult, Floy circled the contorted body of the Kovneva. She spat upon the corpse. She would have stuck the dagger again and again into that hated form; but I held the dagger and the blood dripped, drop by drop, upon the carpet.

We collected jewels, mostly from the dead person of the Kovneva, and the girls threw clothes about themselves, breechclouts of silk, mashcere blouses, and long cloaks of checkered green and crimson and blue. Out of a habit that I would not break if I could I seized up a scarlet length and wound it around my middle. Bagor's belt held it up, and his scabbard of risslaca scale would be useful if there was climbing to be done.

"This way," said Merle.

We went out past the sliding screen — which was of ivory not from Chem, but from the northern jungles

of Havilfar, as one might notice from the whiter color and coarser texture — and down the passageways up which I had been brought, and down to the outer door. Here Merle paused, her finger to her lips in the dwindling light of the Maiden with the Many Smiles. Soon the Twins, the two second moons of Kregen eternally orbiting each other, would be up and throwing down enough light by which to see comfortably. Merle beckoned and we hurried from the door, which we closed, and down a shadowed arcaded way to the first garden of the pools.

“The stables are beyond the Pagoda of the Green Smile,” she whispered. “Can you ride a saddle-flyer?”

“Yes.”

“So can we all. It is something our mistress thought proper in her girl slaves, her Chail Sheom.” She spoke with a bitter savagery, a masochistic anger. The Chail Sheom is the name on Kregen given to these beautiful girl slaves who wear fine silks and pearls and who minister intimately to their mistresses.

“You shall be free, Merle,” I said. “You and Xasha and Floy.”

We crept toward the aerial stables. Before we crossed the second garden of the pools where the intricately pierced stonework of the Pagoda of the Green Smile stood against the rising of the Twins, we could hear the birds. They rustled and stirred and fluttered their wings. We approached cautiously.

At the barred gate the guards, sleepy, not caring to catch this boring duty, talking desultorily between them, had no notion of our presence. They still could not have known what it was that sent Notor Zan’s cavernous paunch encircling them in darkness. I did not kill them. I stepped over their unconscious bodies and called the girls. They ran up, lissome forms in the moons-light.

“You have homes to go to? Places where you will be safe?”

They were surprised, and even though they were still in shock, they were dismayed that I meant what I did.

“You will not desert us now, Jikai?”

Shouts resounded and torches flared in the gardens, beyond the pools, toward the villa.

“If you fly now they will never find you. Go. I have tasks I must do here before I may leave.”

Floy in her drugged way said, “If you plan to kill the Kov I will stand with you. Give me back the dagger.”

“I do not wish to kill the Kov. He is an onker and a rast. But I have more important work to do.” I pushed the gate open and started to untether the nearest fluttrell. He banged his wings and pretended he was asleep; but I woke him up smartly enough and with a whimper he was dragged out.

“Chaadur,” said Merle, again. “Will you not fly with us?”

I brought out two more fluttrells before I answered.

“You must fly fast and far, Merle. If you are sure you know where you may go, I will trust in that. And you, Floy, for you are of Havilfar, also, I think.” I turned to the beautiful black girl. “But you, Xasha, are from Xuntal, I believe. Where will you fly?”

Her cool appraising eyes rested on me. She put out a finger and touched my upper arm. "I have friends beyond the Mountains of the West, where I lived as a small girl. I shall fly there."

"And I to Hyrklana," said Merle, "for I do not think I can live more in Hamal."

The shouts and the torches passed away beyond the Pagoda of the Green Smile. In a few more murs the searchers would reach the aerial stables. "Floy?" I said.

The Fristle fifi smiled lazily. "Ifilion," she said. "Which is yet a kingdom with its own soul."

Where the River Os marking the southern boundary of Hamal proper bifurcates, so that one arm runs around toward the north and the other arm runs around toward the south, the land between the arms right up to the sea has over the centuries been extended outward in a smooth rounded promontory which faces northwestern Hyrklana. This is the land of Ifilion. Its kingdom has remained independent, and there are whispers that sorcery and magic account for this integrity in the face of Hamalian aggrandizement and empire-building.

"Ifilion is small," I said. "You will do it much honor."

The girls mounted up. They saw I meant what I said. I clapped the birds on their tails and stood back. As they rose into the night sky with that streaming pink moons-shine gleaming upon their pinions, I thought I heard three separate words ghost down from the wind-rush. "Remberree," and, "Remberree," and, yet again for the last time, "Remberree."

"Remberree," I said, but I spoke to myself.

Already I crouched and ran into the shadows beyond the aerial stable wall. Guards were running and torches flared and the shouts were strong and confident now.

"The stables! The cramphs make for the stables!"

The wing-beats of the three fluttrells dwindled and died. The guards burst out past the Pagoda of the Green Smile.

"They fly! See —*they fly!*"

A Hikdar ran up, waving his thraxter, untidy in shadowed pink light.

"After them, you onkers! Mount up and fly!"

In the shadows I gripped the hilt of Bagor's thraxter and I cursed.

Women! Forever talking! And now they had talked so long and so late they had allowed the guards to see them winging away.

Silly girls! Stupid onkerish women!

I had a task to do here for Vallia and for Valka. No longer, if I was successful, would our Air Service have to make do with fractious fliers that broke down at the most inconvenient moments. No longer would I tremble every time Delia or the twins took to the air in a voller. No, by Vox! My job was here,

to break into the fitting shed, to find out everything hidden there, everything there was to know about how to build fliers.

And then I must hurry back to the Shrouded Sea and meet the airboat with my friends and clasp Delia in my arms again. That was my duty. But I am grown soft and a weakling, even on Kregen, which is death to weaklings.

Holding the thraxter easily I stepped out into the moons-light and I shouted, high and hard, at the running guards.

“Hold! The first man to try to enter the stables is a dead man! This I promise you, by Havil the Green, whose name be eternally damned!”

Well, it created a stir. I’ll say that.

At the time I did not like the Hamalese, as you know. I had not forgotten the way, through their laws, they had tortured young Doyden, and then hanged him, or their underhanded tricks, their dishonest dealings in fliers. They had tried to kill me many times, and failed, and I wanted to be gone from here. [\[6\]](#)

They had not been kind to me in the Heavenly Mines, either.

The guards took little stock of a lone man, armed with a thraxter, without a shield. They charged, a bunch of them, hotly, furiously, instantly. Their very reaction betrayed them.

As they converged on me over the trimmed grass of the garden of the pools outside the aerial stables I slipped into a fighting crouch. That crouch was a little exaggerated, for I wished to fool them. The first, the fleetest, simply held his shield before him and thrust with his thraxter. I slid the blow, pulled the shield down, and stabbed him in the throat over the top band of his lorica. He fell away, choking, splattering gouts of blood, dark in the moons-light.

The next two came in together and I ran at them, leaped between them and chopped the right one’s face off, landed, sprang back, and without compunction sliced the other’s neck beneath the back helmet rim.

A stux flew past. I deflected a second stux with the thraxter. I dodged about. If I was badly wounded now I’d be done for, for they’d swamp me with numbers.

The stars twinkled above, and the twin moons shone down, in their three-quarter phase so that they shed light enough. I ducked and weaved and shifted, to seize a stux with my left hand as it whistled past and so return it. The Hikdar bellowed. I had not thrown wildly.

“By Krun!” yelled a soldier. “The cramph is a devil!”

“Stand back and shoot him down, comrades!” advised another. This being sound advice the soldiers moved back and I saw men trotting up with crossbows. Time had passed, enough time, I hoped, to give the three girls the opportunity to lose their pursuers in the wide wastes of the night sky of Kregen.

The shadows on the far side of the stables looked inviting. I did not wait but ran instantly for them. As I vanished into the shadows of the trees so the first bolts whickered about my heels. Running away might become addictive. But I had work to do . . .

If any of those thickheaded guards wondered why I had not myself taken to the air they perhaps

believed I did not have the skill or knack of riding a saddle-flyer. Most Havilfarese peoples can fly a bird or a flying animal. But they also employ guards and buy slaves from countries where flying on the back of a monstrous bird smacks of the devil himself.

I ran. They might think of a number of places where I might go. I did not think they would guess I would make for the fitting shed. Whatever story they had pieced together, they would know from Hikdar Covell that it was the gul Chaadur who had caused this trouble, slain the Kovneva, and was now on the run from justice and the laws of Hamal.

The parking areas for fliers which regularly brought in supplies and stores had to be given a wide berth. Most of our food and timber came by quoffa cart, but the fliers which brought in specialized equipment for the yards lay neatly parked and it would be childish to suppose they would not be regarded as my target. So I avoided their dark bulks as they lay, neatly aligned, in their parks.

Guards paced before them, weapons glinting.

Then I heard the first fierce howls.

I knew.

Werstings!

They would pick up my scent at the stables. That was certain sure. The black-and-white-striped devilish forms would come bounding through the pink moons-light, tongues lolling, eyes bright, panting in their eagerness to sink their fangs into me. They were friendly enough to a friend; to the quarry they were death.

Well, I had escaped from the Manhounds of Faol. They were a scary enough bunch, Zair knows. So I ran on swiftly through the shadows and skirted the parked fliers and the cargo carts. Slaves did all this manual labor of unloading and loading and carting. I knew little of it, here in Sumbakir. The fitting shed lifted against the star glitter.

Already the ridge showed a pink icing as the Twins rose higher in the sky. Soon their light would flood down and the shadows would lessen. And shadows were my best friends this night.

The guard had been alerted. The Hamalese with their laws are assured that their lower officers obey their orders and post their sentries, and I have noticed that guards are a mark of a lawful country as well as a lawless; whether one influences the other is hard to say. He peered about, and I caught the gleam of his eyes beneath the rim of his helmet. His thraxter lay in its scabbard. His shield hung over his left shoulder and he grasped his stux as though ready to slay the ghastly minions of Hanitcha the Harrower in the next moment.

Well, he did not have phantom devils of the imagination to face. He faced me, although he did not realize it, Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy.

I treated him gently. A distracting noise, a quiet leap, and he fell unconscious at my feet. I dragged him in through the double-doors and shut them as quietly as I could. High grilled and fretted skylights in the roof admitted a faint pink glow, enough to make my way between the dark bulks of the waiting fliers. I felt the ghostly atmosphere of this place. Soon with the morning suns the workers would open the doors and begin their daily labors; for the moment the whole space lay silent and deserted and strange.

In the black-walled room I found benches strewn with soldering apparatus, with the fires banked and aglow, piles of empty tins with their lids, and piles of dirt — sand, gravel, grit. I sifted it in my fingers. This was packed tightly into the tins and the lids were fastened. Where from this common dirt could come the magical lifting power of the voller?

I suppose, in all honesty, you who listen to these tapes spinning through the heads must have already guessed. And I too, I confess, shared a premonitory breeze of understanding, and with understanding — rejection.

For — how could it be?

Fliers of the deep-hold, square build called binhoys in Hamal arrived here regularly. The bottom doors were opened and the dirt poured out to form the jealously guarded piles. I had seen binhoys like these flying from the Heavenly Mines. They had been loaded with the broken, crushed, and refined rock the poor devils of slaves had dug from the mountain quarries. As I sifted the dirt in my fingers I think I understood that this dirt had been mixed with the refined rock from the Heavenly Mines; I understood but I did not believe.

Just to make sure I slid the chisel down from my sleeve and forced open the lid of a freshly soldered tin. It was as I expected filled with the dirt from the piles about me; but, also, there glittered among the grit and sand and dirt the tiny chips of rock that, I was sure, had come from the Heavenly Mines.

The shadows seemed to move as I padded out of the black-walled room and crossed the fitting shed and entered the red-walled room. Here, except for the absence of the piles of dirt, the scene was the same as the one I had left. This time when I opened a box it was empty. Delia's father knew this. He had not lied. I opened another and then another. All were empty. A small door opened off the red-walled room and I pushed it open and went into the storeroom beyond. The entire space was filled with pottery amphorae, large jars with their pointed ends sunk into the earth. They were stoppered and waxed and sealed and secured with wires.

I smashed the thraxter against one rotund jar and the amphora collapsed and fell in shards. It was empty. But — *it couldn't* be empty! No one was going to go to all the trouble of so securely sealing and wiring the stoppers on empty jars!

A faint sickly sweet odor tasted foul on my tongue, as though some careless onker had left a slice of malsidge to go rotten in the room. I looked about, and there was nothing more I could do. Silver boxes of dirt and silver boxes of air!

Dirt and air!

About to curse a foul Makki-Grodno oath I halted, my hand reaching for my thraxter hilt.

A sound, a slithery, scratchy, furtive sound from the closed double-doors brought me out into the shadows of the shed between the benches. At first I thought the sentry was recovering his senses, although I had thought he would remain unconscious longer than this, for I know to a nicety the value of my blows. Again that scratching and then the left-hand leaf of the doors groaned against its hinges — and I knew.

They can make the most devilish row when they are hunting, the werstings, ululating and shrieking and pounding down the trail after their prey. They can also move silently and swiftly and seize their quarry without warning. The nurdling cramphs almost had me.



The door eased back and the low lean shape of a wersting padded in. His head was down, his ears erect, his tail a bar like a sword. He saw me, standing there in the light from the moons, and he halted, and his companion of the pair sidled in through the half-open door.

Even then, in that moment, I noticed how two instinctive reactions battled to find first expression. Both werstings had found their quarry and now they wished to fling back their heads and howl their success to the night air, and so summon their hunting companions and their masters the Deldars of the Wersting Pack. The other instinct, the one that overcame them, was to put their heads down even lower, bare their fangs, and let their hackles bristle. Yellowy-white those fangs, cruel and sharp. Red the mouth and purplish-red the tongue. Greenish-yellow the eyes, with black pupils rounded and concentrated into complete attention upon me.

Perhaps those two werstings recognized more in me than a soldier of Hamal ever could.

I gave them no chance. Vicious, deadly, cunning, feral, are werstings. A man does ill to run from them. Without a sound I leaped full at them with the brand in my fist upraised.

They reacted with breathy snarls, lifting so as to slash me with their claws as well as attempt to hamstring me and then seize me by the throat. The thraxter slashed into the neck of the right-hand one, a controlled stroke. I followed on without a pause, ducking and avoiding the second's lunge. Now he was howling, shrill ululations that would bring the guards running. I flicked the thraxter at him and he avoided it and sprang. I barely managed to dive flat and roll over and kick him mercilessly in the belly as he flew past. We both sprang up to renew the attack, but I was that fraction faster, and I buried the thraxter in his muscular chest as he scrabbled for me. I had to thrust with massive force to penetrate the plate of gristle beneath the skin; but, shrieking and foaming and attempting to claw at the blade, he died.

I dragged the thraxter free, one foot on the black-and-white-striped corpse. I ran for the double-doors, closed them with a thump, and slotted the thick lenken beam into place in its iron staples. Now let a wersting try to sneak in!

Fresh yells broke from outside. They quieted and I heard a voice, a harsh, intemperate, hectoring voice, the foul-mouthed bellowing voice of Ormol ham Feoste, Kov of Apulad.

“You, Chaadur! We know you are in there! Come out quietly, you kleesh, and obey the law! Or, by Hanitcha the Harrower, we’ll break in and tear the beating heart out of you and feed it to the werstings!”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### A promise of Jikai

I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, had failed.

Failed miserably. Failed utterly.

The armed guards and soldiers of Kov Ormol surrounded the shed. The ferocious snarls and howls of the werstings resounded through the pink-lit gloom and I could hear their claws scrabbling at the doors. The Kov and his men were convinced they had me trapped in here, and they would no doubt seek to keep the werstings away from my throat so that their famous laws of Hamal could pronounce upon me. What did the law prescribe for the murder of a Kovneva?

Maybe the Jikhorkdun would be too merciful.

I was absolutely certain that Kov Ormol would go to the full rigors the law allowed in his punishment of me before I was hanged.

All this meant nothing.

All I could think of was that I had failed. I knew no more of the secrets of the fliers than when I flew one over Valka and the damned thing broke down.

There had to be some answer, somewhere . . .

Like a maniac I began to overturn amphorae, smash at silver boxes, run through the shed slicing and slashing with the thraxter, turn over the piles of dirt, slewing it about as we had slewed the fiery vomit of Muruaa. But nothing more was vouchsafed me in understanding of the ways of a voller.

So sure I had been that I would discover the secret here! Deldar Naghan the Triangle had told me that here in Sumbakir we built only small vollers, two- and four-place fliers, sometimes a six-place job for a special order. Over in Conelawlad, he said, they built larger vessels. The Air Service had their ships built in a number of yards, some near Ruathytu, the capital itself, some near Hollalalad, others at Malathytu. Maybe, there, I would find the answers I sought . . .

“Come out, you Kovneva-murdering rast! Come out so that I may plunge my hands into your guts and rip out your evil stinking heart!”

I didn't bother to reply.

If the answer was not here, then here was no place for me.

I thought of Avec Brand the Niltch, and of Ilter Monicep, and I knew I would miss them in the future. They were a right pair, and no mistake. Even though they were Hamalese and swore by Havil the Green, and called Opaz vile, they had been good friends. Now, I must bid them a farewell they would never hear.

The double-doors shuddered as a beam thumped against them. Those doors would stand considerable maltreatment before they would give. There would be time.

“By Hanitcha the Harrower! You yetch, Chaadur! As Malahak is my witness I will hang you by the heels over a slow fire and watch your eyeballs sizzle! You nulsh! Rast! I will carve you into strips for the werstings!”

Still I did not reply. The door shivered and a panel smashed through.

The snarls and howls of the werstings now concentrated into one area, off to one side of the door, and I guessed the Deldars had leashed them up. The Kov wanted to get his own hands on me. The werstings had done their work well. Now in the business of tearing me to shreds the Kov would take over.

The werstings were snapping and screeching in a frenzied way. Kov Ormol yelled viciously. “By Hanitcha the Harrower! Keep those nurdling werstings quiet! I want the nulsh to know what I shall do to him.”

The werstings quieted down. I pulled the glowing ashes from a fire where the soldering equipment lay on the benches, and blew upon it, and fed it shavings from the grooves cut for the silver boxes in the flier's control apparatus, which looks not unlike a series of wheels a spider might construct, pivoted and swiveled. In fanning a little blaze, I built the fire. The yells outside, the thumpings on the door, all added a macabre note of chaos to the orderliness within.

I took the fire and spread it in the bottom sections of smashed amphorae like scoops. When the preparations were ready I stood back and surveyed the pink-lit gloom of the place with the red glowing eyes of the fire-crocks positioned by the fliers.

Where could the answer I so eagerly sought be hidden?

There was nothing here. I had to steel myself to that. The door splintered and the holding beam groaned and sagged. A few more murs and it would give. The doors would swing open and the Kov and his soldiers would rush in.

A fight would be a diversion. I had more important tasks to do. I knew from my private calendar that I had a few days left, and that was all, to the time of my disappearance from the voller over the Shrouded Sea.

The flier I had selected, a fast two-place craft with the lean and rakish lines of a racer that had been built, as we knew, to the special orders of a famous voller-racer in Ruathytu, lifted me easily to the roof. I eased in the down-dropping flap of the skylight and its sturm-wood lattice fell free, allowing a flood of pink light from the Twins to illuminate in fuzzy rose and wavering black the interior of the shed. I dropped to the floor again and hopped out of the flier, ran swiftly around the shed tipping the fire-filled amphorae crocks over. Some smoldered; one or two caught at the canvas or hide of the coverings and burst instantly into flames. Back in the two-place voller I rose into the air as the door at last caved in, with a smash, and soldiers leaped into the shed.

They did not see me at first. They saw the flames.

“Fire! Fire!”

After that they would be busy for a while. I shot through the opened skylight and set the controls for up and forward, and raced away into the night.

It had been so easy. If I felt regret, that was as natural as the regret I felt over my failure. And, I was to meet the Kov of Apulad, Ormol ham Feoste, again, as you shall hear . . .

The Star Lords had given me a year as a second prison sentence on top of the first. I had served my time — eleven years which had taken the space of ten. Now I was free! I was racing through the pink-lit night sky of Kregen for the Shrouded Sea and the airboat and my friends — and Delia!

If they pursued me I did not know then. The racer was swift, a fine craft; I was confident it would have won many important trophy challenges in the fliers' races of Ruathytu. Now, she carried me fast and far toward the southwest, over the River Os, broad and calm far below, over the settled and industrious lands beyond, past the areas in turmoil where the legions of Hamal sought to extend their empire's sway. On and on I flew, and into the daylight, and with a pause to hunt up a little food in one of the pockets of wild country found in even the most densely developed countryside of Kregen, I flashed over Methydia and so came at last to the shores of the Shrouded Sea.

All my regrets were put behind me. To the Ice Floes of Sicce with concerns over vollers for the moment! Ahead, only a day in the future, lay all I cared for or wanted in two worlds. I looked down at the pile of silver boxes I had brought, carefully separated – those from the red-walled room at one end of the voller, those from the black-walled room at the other. I would get around to those in the fullness of time.

No stormclouds, no lightnings, no supernatural phenomena prevented me carrying out my designs. The Star Lords had no objections to my rejoining Delia just after I had tumbled out of the voller in the storm, instead of waiting until I had been transported from the Heavenly Mines. Perhaps the Star Lords were, at least, taking notice of me as a human being and not as a mere puppet to obey their august wills. I did not know. I do know that I rode the little voller high above the Shrouded Sea and watched the storm bursting and roiling far out across the waters, and the feeling I had, that in the storm an airboat flew, with me aboard, chilled and exhilarated me.

Surely, the Star Lords could see that I could be trusted not to do a foolish thing? I would not seek out of overweening pride or curiosity to investigate the storm, to see if I might in fact see myself. I would see only my damn fool self smash the stanchion and tumble overboard, like a veritable coy!

With that seaman's instinct reinforced by my years of wandering the Great Plains of Segesthes I found the island of Shanpo in the Lesser Sharangil Archipelago, the islands black formless splotches against the pink glitter of the water. I swung down. Below me the Katakis were at their evil trade, the aragorn and the slave-masters arrogant in their vileness. Well, their day would come.

With the dawn I took the racer on to the far side of the island. I knew exactly what was going on in that small fishing village on the other shore, right at this minute, right now . . .

The slaves were rubbing their eyes, I among them, and cursing at the poor quality of the food, and being beaten. An aragorn would be running into the square and yelling and the Katakis would be beating the slaves into cover, and the fishing village would be in the process of being made to look innocent as the airboat flying Old Superb cruised into view.

All that was happening, over the hill, even now, as I waited . . . I felt my breathing quicken and I cursed and I spoke aloud, wrathfully, to myself.

“By the diseased intestines of Makki-Grodno, you great nurdling onker! Calm down!”

With what emotions I lifted the little racing voller into the morning air and guided her up past the trees and held her there and then — oh, yes! And then—!

That magnificent flier flew into sight, over the trees, picking up speed, heading to make another desperate search for the husband of the Princess Majestrix of Vallia. The flags of scarlet and yellow flew proudly from every staff. I stared up and I swallowed.

“By Zim-Zair!” I said.

I sent the racer up in a swirl of power and the levers were hard over and she fairly stormed through the air. I roared up to the big voller and circled her. I dived beneath her keel and rose on the other side and so turned and planed back, an Immelman of perfect execution, and dived down over the decks. Everyone had turned out. A packed forest of faces stared up at me from the decks. Arms waved, scarves fluttered. I looked over the side.

Yes! Yes — there stood Delia, one hand lifted to her forehead to shield the glow of Zim and Genodras. And — she recognized me! She waved — she waved fiercely, joyfully, triumphantly!

I slammed the little racer for the airboat's deck, for she would fit neatly enough in the broad space, and I landed her and stepped out. With a rib-crunching tackle, Delia clasped me to her and I held her and we stood and stood, fast locked in each other's arms.

“Dray! Dray!” she said at last, drawing back. “We've been looking all over! We've been frantic. And the little voller? And your clothes? And — and—”

They were all there, crowding around, shouting and laughing and welcoming me back. Seg Segutorio, Inch, Turko the Shield, Korf Aighos, Tom ti Vulheim, Naghan the Gnat, Balass the Hawk, and Tilly and Oby — all of them, jumping up and down and trying to get at me, and Delia holding me, holding me! Obquam of Tajkent, the flying Strom, circled around in his excitement — he, so grave and reserved. They made such a racket I could not make myself heard. I held up my left hand, for my right clasped my Delia to me.

They fell silent.

“Dray!” said Delia. “You great shaggy graint! You must tell us all about it — but first, you need a bath. And then we will have tea. And then we can continue on to Migladrin—”

So now they had to know, this early, this brutally.

“A bath and tea,” I said. “Oh, my Delia, my Princess Majestrix!” I shouted. Then, loudly, for all to hear “You must go on to Migladrin and do what is necessary there. As for me, my duty to Valka and Vallia now lies elsewhere.”

They hung on my words. Delia looked up at me, half frowning. “Now where are you flying off to, Dray Prescott?”

“I have unfinished business in Hamal. I must go to Hamal.”

Their reaction should not have surprised me, but it did.

Instantly, all of them, were yelling it out: “Hamal! Hamal! We will go with you to Hamal!”

“Even to the Heavenly Mines?”

“Aye, Dray Prescott, Prince Majister! Even to the Heavenly Mines!”

This was nonsense, of course — but glorious nonsense!

There were things to be done, important things upon Kregen, for the good of Vallia and Valka and Migladrin and for the wishes of the Star Lords. I held Delia close.

“And will you, Dray, really venture to the Heavenly Mines?”

“Aye, for it will be a kind of Jikai.”

“Then you will not leave me. I shall, of course, come with you.”

I laughed — I, Dray Prescott, laughed.

“As to that, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, we shall see what we shall see!”

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](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com)

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Notes

[1]As a staylor in the warrens of Magdag. See *The Suns of Scorpio*. A.B.A.

[2]Town.

[3]Flier and flyer. Dray Prescott has made it clear early on by spelling out the two words that by *flier* he means a voller or airboat. By *flyer* he means a man or woman who fly any one of the marvelous winged creatures of Kregen. Also, by *saddle-flyer* he means the bird or animal itself. A.B.A.

[4]The nit of Earth is the egg of the louse, whereas on Kregen the word *nit is* clearly applied to the louse itself. This is interesting — and the reference to *Nathian* here, clearly, is to Tyr Nath, the Kregen Hercules. A.B.A.

[5]One of those annoying gaps in the record of the Tapes from Rio de Janeiro occurs immediately after Prescott tells us that he was pitched into the basket of shonages. We have lost all details of his journey to and arrival in Sumbakir, and of the official attitude to him and Avec and Ilter. As, also, excruciatingly, we have lost what happened immediately after he took his fruit-stained face out of the shonages. A.B.A.

[6] This is lost. *A.B.A.*