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Bladesman of Antares

Alan Burt Akers

Mushroom eBooks

Foreword

DRAY PRESCOT

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 English 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. 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. One of their favorite homes is in Valkanium, capital of the island of Valka, of which Prescott is Strom.

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 in the continent of Havilfar. Outwitting the Manhounds of Antares and fighting as a hyr-kaidur in the arena of the Jikhorkdun in Huringa in Hyrklana, he becomes King of Djanduin, idolized by his incredibly ferocious four-armed warrior Djangs. But Hamal, the greatest power in Havilfar, is bent on conquest, and Prescott has slaved in their diabolical Heavenly Mines. Now, his mission is to discover the secrets of the Hamalese airboats for his own people

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*Alan Burt Akers*

## Chapter One

### Into Hamal

All my thoughts centered on Hamal. There, in that progressive and yet violently barbaric country, I felt confident that the secrets of the marvelous airboats of Havilfar were to be discovered. And if I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, did not quickly guide this little flier out of the gale hurling me about the sky like a dead leaf, I was likely to discover the biggest secret in two worlds.

Wind-driven rain razored against my face over the smashed windscreen. Rain soaked my hair and face and stung into my eyes. The little flier stood on her nose, dived, swooped sickeningly, flew upward, spun about like a child's kicked top. I clung on, hoping to Zair the leather straps would stand the strain and not snap, to send me pitching into the hard ground beneath.

The darkness of the darkest of nights hung about me, and yet somewhere high above, the twin suns of Antares were flooding down their rich ruby-and-emerald fires. I dashed water from my face, and cursed, and thrust uselessly at the control levers. The flier did not respond.

This was not the swift racing voller I had taken from Sumbakir, where she had been built. With my natural greed I had left that superb craft back home in Valka and had instead taken an ordinary little Hamalese flier, which had seen much use. My frugality was likely to cost me dear.

With a shocked oath I ripped instinctively at the controls as from the gloom ahead a wide-branched tree whirled toward me. The tree appeared instantaneously from the murk and as suddenly was gone. The craft spun end over end above the tree. I felt the gonging blows of branches as they battered the canvas-skinned wooden frame. A rough-barked branch punched through and beat at my leg before that mad onward movement wrenched the branch free in a weltering sound of ripping canvas.

Everything was streaming water, everything was in violent motion, everything was going up and down; the world spun dizzily about me — that wonderful if terrible world of Kregen, four hundred light-years from the planet of my birth.

In some fashion or other I had to land. More trees flashed past, their gray arms reaching out to destroy my frail craft. I peered ahead, drenched by rain and buffeted by wind, half deafened by the racket.

At any minute I was likely to get myself killed and packed off to the Ice Floes of Sicce. There were certain things I must do before that happened, which, in the ordinary course of events, should happen in a thousand years or so.

“By Zair!” I shouted, and thumped the useless controls. “Go down, you onker!”

End over end the flier whirled from the darkness. Rain fell for a space, and then cleared, and I was blinking in doubled sunshine. A swift look to my rear showed the malevolent stormclouds boiling blackly as they poured over the land, darkening the greens and yellows below. I was low, perilously low. A circling gust had cast me from the main path of the storm. But the controls would not answer and the flier roared on, driven by the breeze, for she was of that build which is susceptible to winds. I looked ahead.

The land spread flat before me, ocher and dun, with scattered clumps of trees, threaded by the sparkle

of narrow watercourses. This was grazing land, I considered, and to confirm that observation I saw herds of animals, running. Far on the horizon lifted a range of mountains, glittering under the opaz fire of the suns. These, if my navigation had been correct, were the Mountains of the West of Hamal. I was heading due south, having come over the sea from Valka and penetrating well into the country down the hook-shaped expanse of water of Skull Bay. I'd never lift over those sharp fangs. This little voller would be driven directly onto the rocks. The gale had let me slip from its clutches, but I was still in danger.

The flier remained now on an even keel, but as the wind pushed her, so she swung and drifted aimlessly. This would not do. I had come to this strange country of Hamal to discover what I needed to know about fliers so that my own country of Vallia might construct reliable models. The irony of the situation was not lost on me. Here I was, scheming to obtain the secrets of the vollers, being thwarted and threatened for my life by the very Opaz-forsaken monstrosity I wished to discover!

The crystalline glitter in the air with its mingling of streaming colors from the twin suns of Antares that, on a fine day, should be bottled up and shipped to Earth to banish all the fug and despondency — and to make the shipper a fortune — darkened again with sudden and ominous power. A swirling arm of the storm, wind-driven, black and boiling, swooped up abaft of me and in seconds I was once again enveloped in gloom.

The flier pitched about, corklike, and I knew that beneath now the keel, now the stem, now the ripped canvas decking, the ground streamed past, ready to shatter both my craft and me. This second tempestuous whirlwind howled past with maniacal force and rushed away ahead, leaving the flier to be sucked along limping in its wake.

The blackness ahead covered the land.

Rain had formed into torrential rivulets that joined and broadened and foamed in cataracts into the narrow streams. I saw herds of animals rushing in frenzy, their long horns an upthrust and savage forest of spears.

The ground rushed up.

I gave a last frantic belting to the control levers. To this day I do not know if my hammering made the difference, whether something freed itself in the mechanism, whether some other movement helped; but, for whatever cause, the nose of the voller lifted. For agonizing seconds I hung, still going down, still aimed to smash headlong into the earth. The stem rose a little more as I bashed the levers again and we were rising, and the ground sped past below, so close I could smell the scent of fresh rain upon dust.

The voller rose and flew straight.

Maybe it was the merciless bashing I gave the controls; I do not think it was from any actions of the Star Lords or the Savanti.

The mountains were now much closer, the storm coalescing into weird black shapes as the clouds roiled against the rock faces. A column of black smoke attracted my attention, and a single look convinced me I was witnessing an all too familiar sight on many parts of Kregen. The world is beautiful and wonderful; it is also dark and terrible, and I have had my fair share of the vaol-paol — the end and the beginning, the light and the dark.

Delia had insisted I pack so much gear aboard the flier that I had teased her I would have no space for myself. And she had replied, unsmiling, that perhaps that would be a better idea than this insane,

impulsive journey to Hamal to discover the secrets of their fliers . . . I took up the spyglass and clapped it to my eye, and with that old familiar, unthinking seaman's instincts swaying the telescope with the swayings of my craft, I spied out the mischief ahead.

Well, it was no business of mine.

That was the first thought that crossed my mind.

Down below, still smoking after the drenching it must have taken from the rain squall, a village burned.

Here in the northwest of Hamal, in this forgotten tongue of land that stretches between the southern end of Skull Bay and the westerly curve of the Mountains of the West, they build villages snugly. The dense tropical jungles lie to the north. Farther south the land is parched. Here is good grazing land. The houses of the village were built with their backs facing outward, in an oval formation. Their front doors opened onto the village square, and the well, and the shade trees, and the busy life of the community. One or two houses were of three stories, higher than the rest. But they were all burning.

As I approached, I judged the walls to be mud brick; the roofs must have been of thatch, or leaves, for they had completely disappeared. Cow dung makes a useful roof. A number of people were running about, and it seemed to me they ran aimlessly.

No business of mine.

Even when the flutsmen rose into view, urging their fluttrells away from the smoke and down onto the frightened people, I still said it was no business of mine.

The flutsmen, as you know, are the mercenaries of the skies; mounted on their flying steeds, they hire themselves out to any who will pay the high cost of their employment. I guessed that this bunch had been hired by aragorn, slave-masters, to round up a fresh batch of slaves.

I do not care for slave-masters.

I have not much time for slavers.

I would, given the circumstances, as lief split an aragorn in half as give him the time of day.

Old customs die hard. Many men professing faith, men of integrity, can make out a good case for slavery. One useful test to put to them is to suggest that they take a turn at slavery themselves, put on the torque, the chains, the thongs, the yoked stick, carry out hard and unrewarding tasks with a beating for wages. I believe they might then suffer a change of heart, that if they were slaves they would see the old custom in a new light.

But . . . this was not my business.

I had not been bidden here by the Star Lords to save anyone from a cruel fate, so I needn't fear their punishment for failing that task — to be thrust back to Earth, four hundred light-years away. I was a free agent. The decisions were mine. In this matter I was not a puppet.

Like old customs, old habits die hard.

I took up the great Lohvian longbow given to me by Seg Segutorio, who had himself built it with loving

care, built it as only a master bowman of Erthydrin can build a longbow. I had practiced with this bow, and I knew her ways. I could split the chunkrah's eye at unbelievable ranges. Each arrow had been manufactured under the intolerant eye of Seg. Each shaft was true, as near the others in weight and balance and size as any skill could make it by hand, without the standardization of mass production. Each shaft was fletched with the brilliant blue feathers of the king korf. Each head was of tempered Kregan steel, for Seg would acknowledge that high-quality steel did, indeed, possess advantages over his well-tried flint. There were heads for different purposes: wide-cutting flesh-slicers, narrow and heavy bone-smashers, thin bodkins for deep penetration, even a few blunted shafts for bird-ratching. I eyed the flutsmen.

So absorbed were they in their evil work they did not see the silent approach of my flier. Their fluttrells curved against the sky, swooping down. Ropes flew, barbed with cunning iron, and snagged screaming fugitives, upending them, dragging them through the dust.

The flutsmen had set the place afire, but the rain squall had swirled upon them, and now they were busy trying to bring their slaving activities back to the order I guessed they usually experienced. The rain had given the village a chance. I frowned. I could see no resistance. With a chance . . . surely there were men below with weapons, men who would fight for their women and children, for their own lives and liberty.

The shafts were set before me, arrayed in their quick-draw sleeves along the rim of the voller.

I took the first shaft between the fingers of my right hand.

This was no business of mine.

I should let the wind drive my craft on, past the burning village, past the flutsmen, past the shrieking people. If I was killed here, what good would that do my Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains? How would that give the protection I owed to my young twins, Drak and Lela? How would my death here bring the prosperity I so urgently desired to my people of Valka and of Strombor, of Djanduin, and of the clansmen of Felschraung and Longuelm?

At last I saw the foolishness of the question, for those wild clansmen are so perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, there on the limitless expanses of the Great Plains of Segesthes, and with Hap Loder to chivy them along when necessary, that I could, and did, Zair forgive me, leave them to their own rascally devices for seasons at a time.

No, with or without the Star Lords, with or without the Savanti, with or without all the duties I owed my people, this petty slaving affray below was no business of mine.

So I took up the first shaft, notched it, drew back the string, and loosed.

The shaft took the nearest flutsmen under the ear.

He pitched from his saddle, hanging from the clerketer, the straps beating in the wind as his mount reared aloft.

The next shaft dispatched a flutsmen whose swung line had barbed a man, who simply sprawled forward, his hands clasped together, his body limp.

Then it was a matter of shooting as fast as I might haul the shafts from their sleeves around the rim of the voller, of drawing the string and of loosing. Shaft after shaft sped; I think only two missed their mark.

Now the slavers could not fail to take notice of me.

Standing braced as I was in the tiny forward compartment, I must have presented a target to them they considered easy, a mere man to be swept away with a swift attack and a shower of stuxes. They hurled their javelins, true enough. But I snatched up a shield and hung it on my left shoulder. This was a trick I had been practicing, to the enormous amusement of Seg and my other friends in Valka, and, I admit, to the worried annoyance of Turko the Shield. Stuxes banged and slithered against the shield. I could still shoot. If a javelin was launched at my right side — and be very sure I kept a sharp lookout to starboard — I could duck or sway away from its flight. Only three times had I to release the string of the longbow and so reach out and pluck the flying javelin from the air. These three went back whence they came, to bury their broad heads deeply into the bodies of their late owners.

Fluttrell wings blattered the air about me. Stuxes flew. Now the enraged flutsmen swooped in, closer and closer, and they tried to stick me with their long lance-swords. The blades sliced and slashed, and chunks of the voller's wooden frame splintered and strips of the canvas cover ripped away.

I let the great Lohvian longbow slide to the deck.

The feel of the longsword in my hands, as always, gave me that uplifting and yet fallible feeling I have so often described. With the naked brand in my fists I prepared to deal blow for blow.

This longsword was a true longsword. It was not a Krozair longsword. But it was as close as I could make it in the smithy at home in the high fortress of Esser Rarioch overlooking Valkanium. Naghan the Gnat, the cunning armorer, and I, with the best swordsmiths I could find, had labored long to produce this weapon. I had debated whether or not to bring that true Krozair longsword with me but — for the same reasons I had brought this inferior flier, the same reason I wore a sober gray shirt and blue trousers over the old scarlet breechclout — I had decided not to bring that marvelous brand with the letters *KRZY* incised on the blade.

Naghan the Gnat had proved a first-class armorer and swordsmith. Together we had folded and refolded the glowing metal, producing that cunning interlay of many thicknesses demanded of a true blade. With varying thicknesses of clay during the annealing process we had developed a diamond-hard cutting edge from the point up both edges, and that more tough and flexible central spine. We had labored amid heat and smoke and sweat to fashion this blade. It was as true a longsword as might be found outside the Eye of the World; but, even so, it still was not a Krozair longsword.

But, here, in an affray with miserable aragorn-hired flutsmen, it would serve to lop a few heads, to dismember, to rip the smoking guts out of these evil slavers.

The feel of the silver-wire-wound hilt was all I needed to go to work.

And then, in that moment when, with the blood singing through my veins and the beginnings of a juicy little encounter shaping up, I fancied I might discommode these crampes, the flier jerked, yawed, flummoxed in the air, and then plunged straight for the ground.

In a matter of moments my flier would smash headlong into the earth and smash me along with it.

Chapter Two

Flutsmen

That abrupt plunge earthward scattered the flying slavers away from the volder. Wings skittered sharply as the flutsmen veered away. One flutsman, however — no doubt seething with anger that with all their vaunted prowess the mercenaries of the air had failed to dispose of a single flier — swooped upon me with a screech. He clearly intended to sink his long-bladed weapon into me before I struck ground.

That suited me perfectly.

The intention suited me; not the execution of that design.

The ground leaped up toward me. The fluttrell barreled over, tasseled flying cloths fluttering, the straps of the clerketer holding the flutsman swinging wildly. The long lance, razor sharp, speared for my body.

Where normally I would have buffeted it away with a swing of my blade, I let my body swing away. I shifted grips on the two-handed hilt of the longsword. With the sword in my left hand I braced, flexed my legs, and leaped.

For a single heartbeat I thought I had missed.

The flyer swooped down on me, the lance lashed past my side, and I sprang upward.

My fingers clenched around the dangling wind-driven straps of the clerketer. I took a firm grasp and hauled up.

The fluttrell felt the extra weight come on, but a fluttrell can carry two as easily as one. His powerful talons opened for a moment where they were tucked up beneath his velvety-green body, and then, click, back they went, and with a strong beat of his beige-white wings he surged aloft.

The flutsman looked down.

He was not a member of Homo sapiens. I had not previously met the particular race of diffs of which he was a member, and there was no time now to concern myself over that. Although I did have some slight interest to see if he would bleed red blood.

I started to hand myself up, straining on the straps.

The fluttrell's large head-vane turned and the flutsman put his own head down in a perfectly instinctive way to avoid the vane, and so I got my feet into the straps and took another purchase for my fist. Again the flutsman looked over the side. From the streamlined helmet covered with velvety-green feathers the flaring, clotted mass of multicolored ribbons flicked and fluttered most bravely.

He had stowed his lance-sword into its bucket and had drawn his thraxter. This was a wise move on his part, for the straight cut-and-thrust sword would be of more use to him now.

I inched up another hold.

Against the wind-stream clatter he shouted down: "Apim! Crawl up to die, rast!"

I am apim, a member of Homo sapiens. A rast, as you know, is a disgusting six-legged rodent infesting dunghills. I have been called a rast many times on Kregen, and no doubt will be so called for a goodly number of times yet; so that the word meant nothing.

Since I didn't know from what race of diffs he owed his parentage, I could not goad him with a racially pointed insult. It is my custom not to tell a foeman what I am going to do unless some good end is served. He was clearly expecting me to lift myself up to get at him, when he would incontinently take a slash at my face, hoping to finish me with one blow.

The longsword in my left fist whirled around, flat against the slipstream. The blow was judged to a nicety. The keen blade sliced his leg, cut through the bone, sliced the flesh on the other side and did not so much as touch a feather of the fluttrell.

The flutsman yelled.

While he was caterwauling away I hefted up again, took my last grip around his waist and, with a thrust from my feet, toppled him over on the opposite side.

He hung dangling, screeching. The thraxter whirled wildly from its thong to his wrist.

I slashed the clerketer and watched the slaver fall to the ground.

At a much later stage of my career they had no need to tell me: "Don't sit and watch your man flame to the ground; keep your head turning! Watch up sun!"

I kept my head turning then as I had learned long ago on Kregen. I clamped my knees to the fluttrell and urged him sideways and aloft, and I kept my head down. The flashing glimpse of mirror-bright steel whickered past as a lance-sword missed.

The longsword glimmered with blood. Without compunction I wiped it on the velvety-green feathers of the flying mount before I thrust it into the scabbard. Delia had supervised the stitching of that scabbard; I would not willingly foul her work with gore.

The situation had now taken a piquant turn.

The fluttrell with that awkward head-vane is not a favorite flying mount, in my view; but I had put my hand to a task and so must go on. The great Lohvian longbow had taken its toll of slavers. The longsword had taken more. Now I went to work with an aerial weapon, the long lance-sword of the flutsmen, so like the toonon of the Ullars of Northern Turismond. We battled there in the sky, and now I made it my business to swoop down low and so chop the flutsmen in the act of barbing potential slaves.

There is a saying on Kregen that a flutsman would not walk across the road to pick up a purse of gold. Of course not; he would fly across, just as a zorcaman would ride across. But, even so, a number of these aragorn-hired mercenaries had landed and leaped off their birds to round up the slaves.

Angling my wind-eater down toward them, and spearing a flutsman as he tried to stop me, I dived on them. There was no subtlety in my handling of the bird; he recognized the hands and knees and feet of a rider who knew what he wanted and knew also unpleasant ways — as well as pleasant ones — of obtaining the desired result. The fluttrell gave no trouble and I was able to wheel and guide him about the sky as though we had been in partnership for seasons of fighting.

The slavers below saw me coming and lifted their weapons.

I guided the wind-eater directly at them, swinging him low, forcing him down. And as I did so I leaned



over and bellowed close alongside his head so that he could hear.

“Tchik!” I yelled at the bird. “Tchik!”

At that command the fluttrell went wild.

Down came his talons that could sink into oak.

Out they stretched, clawing, sharp, ferocious, deadly.

The flutsmen yelled and some scattered, some stood their ground, and these either died under the diabolical claws of the bird or were slashed by the lance-sword. Up and up we swooped at the end of the run. The fluttrell needed no order from me to bank on a wing and come sliding around for another pass.

When a flutsmen gives that dread order to his wind-eater, “Tchik,” the monstrous bird becomes a killer.

The problem, as I knew, is to bring the bird back under control again. Seldom can that be achieved while still in the air. I did not attempt it. I forced the bird down to where a group of flutsmen clustered, caught in the open and unable to run for their own mounts. Flutsmen, caught afoot!

What a moment!

They screeched as those vicious claws sank into their bodies. The lance-sword scythed into them. Back and forth my mount flew, raging, mad with killing frenzy. I kept a sharp eye aloft at the few remaining flutsmen, for I was puzzled by the fact they had not used their crossbows. Truth to tell, I had not seen any crossbows strapped to their saddles. As you know, there are crossbows and crossbows in Havilfar, and flutsmen boast of the quality of theirs. (In later seasons I experienced a whole band of these mercenaries of the skies who refused to use crossbows because they were not of the very finest manufacture. Other flutsmen disown the crossbow because of its difficulty in spanning while airborne, although you who have listened to these tapes [1] will know it is a trick that can be learned speedily enough.)

Around me in the air the flutsmen raged to strike the single blow that would free them from my encumbrance, and thus allow them to get on with their rapacious plundering of human flesh. For the people shrieking in such mortal fear below were apim, were Homo sapiens. While I fought to keep the slavers away I saw something of the victims below, and I formed an idea why they had not fought back. They all seemed to be either old men and young boys, or women and children.

I heard some of them yelling as I swooped over their heads: “Jikai!”

“Hai Jikai!” they were yelling, some in feeble croaks from narrow lips. “Jikai . . .”

In this stupid affray against these devils of slavers that was the first time any idea of calling it a Jikai had crossed my mind. Was it a Jikai? To dub any feat of arms a Jikai meant it was a superb example of honor and glory and nobility, as well as a crafty use of downright cunning where necessary. You will know how I regard the use of the word *Jikai*, and so I decided there, as I swooped and fought, that this might be a little Jikai, a very little one . . .

And so, thus boasting to myself, I came to grief.

A stux transixed the throat of the fluttrell. The broad and heavy head of the flung javelin jutted through,

clotted with blood. The fluttrell would have been hard to manage, anyway, after his ferocious primeval instincts had been allowed full play in tchik, and so that stux was one way of settling the matter.

I half fell, half leaped off, sprawling head over heels onto the dust. There was no time to lie winded.

How different the scene when viewed from the ground than the view aloft!

A pack of people were already chained. Slavers were strutting past them, some flicking whips, some beating them with the flats of their thraxters. The lance-sword was much too unhandy a weapon down here.

I took the longsword into my fists again, and charged.

This time the flutsmen must have decided to get rid of me as the first priority. I had been hampering their operations and they had so far not killed me. They had tipped me out of my voller, they had brought down my wind-eater; now they would cut my legs from under me, and see how I liked that.

A bird with widespread wings dived for me, skimming the ground, his legs tucked up. The flutsmen with slaves to carry back to whatever hell-hole they had oozed from would not risk crying “Tchik!” to their birds. The problems of bringing the fluttrells under control after that ferocious call had clamored bloodily in their pin-brains were too long-winded. This is just another reason why the fluttrell does not appeal overmuch to me, magnificent bird though it is. Some of the other flying animals of Kregen can do a bloody enough job of tchik and still be guided by their riders.

Now I could swat the long tongue of the lance-sword away and fling myself sideways and, leaping up, slice the longsword in a stroke that parted torso and thigh. That is a canny stroke when given to a rider on the ground; it is more difficult and thus more aesthetically satisfying when delivered to a rider flying. Then the swordsman must fling himself, all doubled up, under the flashing wingbeat and time it just right if he does not want his head staved in.

My head remained intact.

Other flutsmen attacked.

They came singly, and then in pairs, and threes.

About this time I knew that eventually one of them must finish me. It was not that I was growing tired — for tiredness is a sin I do not admit into my consciousness — but that the odds were stacked. Amid a welter of flashing steel one blade would slip past as I dealt with another and so drink my life’s blood. The fury in me would have melted the Ice Floes of Sicce.

That I, Dray Prescot, Krozair of Zy, Lord of Strombor, should perish thus miserably!

The battle roared on. Men were yelling. Women were screaming. The flutsmen shouted strange high oaths calling on their gods and saints and devils, and rushed at me, and fell before the level, lethal sweep of my longsword.

But, for all that, a stux grazed across my chest, drawing a line of blood.

That came from leaping away from three stuxes flighted together at my back. Now, had Turko the Shield stood, superb in his muscled strength, in his wonted place at my back, those stuxes would have

been deflected and I would not have turned into the glancing blow from the front. The shield in the volder had gone down with the rest of my belongings. She hadn't smashed up, but in the scant seconds I'd had before tangling with the flyer I'd seen she'd cracked up with due finality.

So the battle roared on. These slavers, from whatever racial stock they came, were scrawny fellows, much addicted to beads and chains and flourishing trinkets of silver and brass. Twice I was able to let slip my hand and so, reaching out, grasp a string of beads, and jerking the fellow in, give him a knee in the groin, and thunk the hilt of the sword down onto his leather-capped head. They didn't get up again, after that treatment.

Still and all, time was running out for me. This wouldn't go on for very much longer.

A few shouted words from a huddled group of slaves — although, truthfully, they weren't slaves yet, nor would be until I was dead — revived me.

“Hai Jikai! Fight, Jikai, fight the evil rasts!”

Well, it seemed that even if these poor people were the old and the young, the women and the children, the sick and the lame, and could not fight in deeds, they could fight with words.

What those oldsters started in catcalling the slavers would have done credit to the flintiest hearted paktun in all Kregen, and a paktun, a mercenary who has gained renown far above the mass of his fellows, knows a juicy vocabulary indeed. I braced myself again and struck and struck. About me whirled the beige-white wings of the fluttrells, feathers flurried in the power of their smiting, bringing thronging memories of other combats against other flying monsters of the skies.

The scene in the dusty outskirts of the burned village, which stood at the head of a valley trending from the foothills, must have made a macabre sight. A lone man, blood splashed, his brown hair wild, the long brand in his fists stained with gore, jumping and dodging, smiting and slashing, always on the move, always striking out with ferocious blows that degutted and decapitated, this man must, I think with no little remorse, have struck terror into the hearts of the bravest of the flutsmen. But, to give them their due, they did not flinch from their assaults.

A line of tethered flyers with their rows of saddles already half full of dazed and unhappy captives waited to the side. These extremely large flying beasts were rofers, able to carry whole families through the upper levels. I maneuvered myself toward them, past chopped slavers who sought to bar my path, and soon came up to the first rofer. He was a docile enough beast and did not try to bite me as I struck down his rider and began to slash the thongs fastening the prisoners. They gaped at me.

“Run!” I bellowed at them as I freed them. “Run and hide, get to safety!”

I had to dodge a flying stux then, and the shaft thudded into the earth.

An oldster with white hair — which meant he was two hundred years old at least — quavered at me as he slid from the high saddle.

“And you, Jikai? And you?”

A javelin hurtled toward the oldster. I took a step and with that old Krozair skill beat the stux away so that it caromed over and flew upward again.

“Never mind me, dom! Run!”

The fugitives could scarcely comprehend what had happened to them. They scrambled down. What with slashing at binding thongs, and beating away javelins, and striking down flutsmen foolish enough to come too close, it was a warm few minutes' work. I bellowed at the people again, yelling at them in fury.

“By Vox! Run, you famblys! Get to safety!”

A fambly is a gentle word for a genial kind of idiot, an affectionate insult. They ran. The oldster lifted his empty hands.

“By Hanitcha the Harrower! Were I but a hundred seasons — no, fifty seasons, by Krun! — younger than I am, I would seize a weapon and join you! Hai Jikai!”

There was no time for heroics.

There was precious little time left for anything.

The very fact that these miserable slavers were bothering to capture old folk meant they were mean souled, and desperate for slave-fodder. Only slavers frantic for the foul substance of their foul trade would trouble to enslave these old folk. There were a number of young mothers there, clutching their babies to their bosoms, and these would fetch a high price on the block.

Fresh blood dripped from me, and now much of that blood was mine.

I missed a stux and a wing of the wicked broad head sliced my left shoulder. I cursed. The oldsters and the youngsters and the mothers were running for the head of the valley where palines grew in luxurious and yet ordered abundance. I could see the gorgeous glow of the yellow berries and I would have given a very great deal indeed to have a mouthful to suck on, there in the heat and dust of the press.

And the press was all against me, all against a lone man. I swirled the longsword and I husbanded my blows, and no longer allowed the blade to strike deeply enough to dispatch my man. I had noticed that the flutsmen's heads had been lopped off as I struck, and I knew that to be the signal that I was consciously exerting too much strength, and thus betraying the growing weakness overtaking me. This could not go on much longer.

Then I saw the final mark of doom.

Over the ordered rows of the yellow-berried paline bushes flew a great crowd of mirvols. The brilliance of the riders' clothing and armor gave me no hope. They swept on effortlessly, their weapons winking on the backs of the flyers, brave in the mingled streaming light of the Suns of Scorpio. They swooped down in a maelstrom of flashing wings to finish me.

I felt a blow sledge across the back of my head. I felt it very briefly. My skull is thick, but the blow felled me. And, as I pitched forward into the blackness of Notor Zan, I had the last thought that, anyway, all this had been no business of mine.

Chapter Three

“That, Notor Prescott, is your problem.”

The wonderful world of Kregen under Antares possesses, besides the twin suns, seven moons. When all of these nine luminous bodies are below the horizon there rises Notor Zan, the Tenth Lord, the Lord of Blackness.

I clawed back out of the star-spangled black cloak of Notor Zan to hear a gruff but firm and kindly voice saying: “So you still live, Jikai. Truly, your gods hold you in high favor.”

Even then I was canny enough, through the clanging resonance of all the bells of Beng-Kishi, that carillon ringing in my skull, to understand that this man was not prepared to commit himself to mentioning any specific god or spirit or guardian. He would no doubt wish me to commit myself first.

My eyes opened and I blinked.

He was not a flutsman.

He was apim, like myself, a tall, well-built, grave man, with eyes that showed a deeper pain, even, than that caused by this attack on his village. For I could now guess what had happened. The maelstrom of mirvols which had swept about me had borne, not reinforcements for the flutsmen, but the returning warriors of the village. And so it proved. I had been dragged out from the corpses, washed, placed in a bed in the chief house, watched over, my head bandaged and my various cuts doctored, and now, here came a fusty little doctor bearing his linen-covered tray of needles.

My host said in his grave way: “Allow Hernli to see to you, Jikai, and then, when you are recovered, it will be my privilege to talk to you.”

I did not reply. The doctor was already sticking his acupuncture needles in me, and twirling them, and with that amazing fluency that never ceases to astonish, he banished my aches and pains. I do not smile easily, but I cracked a grimace for the doctor, at which he started back, and said, “Are you still in pain, Horter? That is strange, for I have found the lines with exactitude—”

“No, Doctor,” I croaked out. “You did fine.”

Then I went to sleep.

When I woke up I lay for a considerable time, content just to lie there and take stock of my surroundings. A makeshift frame roof had been flung over the burned shell of the house. From the few items of furnishings I guessed the houses had been luxurious — truly luxurious — within their mud walls. You can never judge the interior of a house from the exterior, although an approximation can obviously be reached, and I judged these people to be well off, comfortable, living with a high degree of sophistication, basing it on their ancestral riches of vast herds of cattle, the enormous profusion of paline bushes, and — and what? With cattle and with palines a village is rich indeed, and by good business dealings may acquire whatever they need. Certainly, I had seen to it in my redevelopment of Valka after we had banished the aragorn, and in the work in Djanduin after the disastrous civil wars, that building up the cattle herds and planting palines had figured very high up on the list of priorities. And, anyway, these people would keep other animals and grow other crops as well. No, they weren't poor.

When a young girl, rosy with shyness, came for me and I shambled out into the shafting rays of the twin suns and looked about on my way to take the baths of nine — for the complex of the bathhouses down by the stream had not been burned — I saw more of this place.

I will say at once that I liked the spread. In the days that followed as I built back my strength I explored

Paline Valley — for that was the name of the estates — in the company of a man for whom I developed a growing friendship and affection. This was Nulty, a loyal body-servant to the lord here. He was a great shambling fellow, with a shock of hair, bulbous nose, and a pair of sharp eyes, and he came up to the middle of my chest. He was originally a gul — that is, a craftsman and no slave — until he had taken service with the lord here.

We were in Hamal, which is a mighty empire on the southern continent of Havilfar, and these people were all Hamalian — people for whom I had formed an ambivalent attitude.

They professed the state religion of Havil the Green. Still, at this time, Green was anathema to me, although I was, I think truly, learning. There were other religions: the finer and purer religion of Opaz — the great Twinned Invisible Spirit, so predominant in other and nicer parts of Kregen — had a small following in Hamal, generally in secret; and, too, the evil cult of Lem the Silver Leem was edging in with lures of cheap passion, quick wealth and dark arts, ousting devotion to Havil the Green.

Like it or not, religion has a potent power in the material world as well as the world of the spirit.

So I knew I must tread carefully in my dealings with these folk, as I had earlier when I had spent a fruitless sojourn trying to find out what made a voller tick. My own flier was a total wreck. The gear had been taken out and stacked in a room that had been given over for my use.

This meant, of course, that they knew I was not Hamalian. Delia had stowed away much besides food and good clothes — weapons strange in Havilfar. The Lohvian longbow, for one. The longsword for another. Also she had packed four rapiers and four left-hand daggers. Much of my personal gear — the razor, the toiletries, the shoes, the wide Vallian hats — proclaimed me a foreigner.

So: “And, Notor Prescott, are you to visit our capital city of Ruathytu on your travels? I wish you would remain here with us in Paline Valley for a time.”

I was sitting munching on palines, which are superb, and I looked up as the lord entered. I did not stand up. I must have been half mad at the time, what with this and that and the fight, and I must have blurted out my name when they asked me. I have had many names, and so far have told you of only a few of them. Now the lord, whose name was Naghan, sat beside me and took up a handful of palines.

“You are very kind, Notor Naghan. Paline Valley is charming. The coolness of the valley after the veld, the greenness of the trees — and the palines! — all tempt me. But, as I said, I am a traveler.”

“Come, Notor Prescott! You are the Lord of Strombor. We have dealings, here in Hamal, with your great enclave city of Zenicce, far away on the continent of Segesthes. Here we are isolated from the main currents of political life in Hamal. We tend our flocks and grow our crops, and we grow rich, and essentially we must protect ourselves.” He paused then, his grave face growing longer and more savage.

He was thinking that protecting himself came high. He and his fighting-men had been away, flying their mirvols to check a predatory band of the wild men from over the mountains, outside the sway of the Empire of Hamal, when the slavers had struck. The slavers must have been preparing to attack the village and then no doubt had been of two minds when the fighting strength had flown off. To take up the poor residue would not bring much in the way of sales figures, but the catch would be cheaply won. We all knew the decision to which they had come.

This Naghan was a Notor, a lord, and his rank was that of Amak. An Amak is one rank below an Elten, and an Elten is two ranks below a Strom. Although he was of the minor nobility, he was unquestionably a

noble. He had discovered I was Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor, and that placed me at once far higher in this scale of nobilities. I felt obscurely embarrassed about this. As I have said, a lord of one of the enclaves in the city of Zenicce ranks as a king, and is often given the courtesy title of prince. Lords of Zenicce tended to regard other ranks as baubles — and I had more than once affronted my friends by hinting that to a clansman a lord of Zenicce was a poor thing. But, I must be honest, I feel always for my clansmen, for Strombor, for my island of Valka, and for my country of Djanduin a special kind of affection.

I, Dray Prescott, am also a Krozair of Zy.

And if I think back on what I have just said, and realize how many times I say “my” this and “my” that, you will take me for an egomaniac. So it was that I was polite to Amak Naghan, and talked with him, and learned of his estates here in Paline Valley, and of his problems.

Of all these problems, chief above all, was the problem of his son Hamun.

The lad was effeminate. Well, here on Earth that is no great matter. It is something a father can learn to understand. But on Kregen, that world of which I then knew so little and even today know barely much more, there are very few places where an effeminate lad, son to a noble, can hope to survive. Here right on the border of Hamal, with the Mountains of the West hard up southerly of the estates, was no place for a lad who could not wield a sword and stride a mirvol and fly to face the enemies who would take from him his birthright. There are many customs and laws on Kregen regarding inheritance. It is not necessarily lawful for a son to succeed his father in all his titles and estates; they have to be fought for. By these means new men and women are continually pushing up from below, but the laws of inheritance check what might become a situation of complete anarchy. If a man simply cut down Amak Naghan he would not automatically become Amak in his turn. Kregen is far more subtle in her ways than that.

So Hamun ran a serious risk.

“In the capital, Ruathytu,” I had said, once, “wouldn’t he find people like himself? It is a civilized, policed, orderly city. The laws of Hamal—”

“The laws! Aye, the laws are strict in Hamal, Notor Prescott. Exceedingly strict. But I would not send Hamun there.”

I knew — better than Naghan — the strictness of the laws of Hamal. He had not labored in the Heavenly Mines with a number branded on him. I had. I knew about the Hamalians and their lawful ways.

“But, Notor Naghan,” I said, controlling a surge of desire to clear out at once, “Ruathytu is renowned for its graces, its architecture, its baths, its aqueducts, its sports, all things to make life for a lad like Hamun—”

“Do you think, Notor Prescott, I would allow my acquaintances in the city to know I fathered a son like Hamun?” His face was graven now in lines of pride and fury and shame. “I have the honor of my family close to my heart. We have the honor of being *aham* family — we place *theham* before our family name. No, Notor Prescott! I, Naghan ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley, will not be shamed before the empire by my son!”

There was nothing to say to such granite conviction, such iron will. He was demanding from his son that which the boy could not give him. It was rotting away the life of Amak Naghan.

At last came the day when I firmly resolved to leave. Delia had placed plenty of money in the flier. She had had the forethought to make most of it up from Havilfarese currency, fat golden deldys, shining silver sinvers, and a lesten-hide bag of bronze obs. To make the appearance of a traveler more effective she had thrown in a few coins of Pandahem and Murn-Chem and Balintol. Coins, gold especially, find their way all over Kregen from the mints of their making, and merchants have little scales set up to check weights; a cunning merchant can tell the value of a gold coin and its percentage of impurities and alloys to perfection. Of course, the word for carats in Kregish is not carats.

So it was that there was money for me to buy a mirvol.

Naghan ham Farthytu drew himself up with a grave and haughty look. Like many people out here in the frontier sections he often wore a long white robe, comfortably slit for arms, girded with a golden tasseled cord. His jeweled curved dagger depended from gold chains. His scarlet slippers were studded with gems, embroidered with gold lace. Around his neck a chain of beads blazed with the richness of gold and the scarlet of scarron — that incredibly beautiful gemstone of so fine and fierce a scarlet that is prized above diamonds.

“I do not wish to believe, Notor Prescott, that you insult me with intention.”

I took his point.

The upshot was that because I had fought for Paline Valley they conceived themselves in my debt. Besides giving me a mirvol, the finest flying specimen they had, they heaped gifts upon me that further embarrassed me.

I stood by the mirvol. He was a fine flying wonder, and no mistake. Beside him the pile of my belongings stretched lengthways and broadways and high. As I stood there, Hamun ham Farthytu, with his mincing walk, came up with a small carved set of miniature pieces for Jikaida, the board game that is so much a way of life in many parts of Kregen.

“My village owes you a great deal, Notor Prescott.”

I stared at the pile.

“And how, good Hamun, am I to load all this mishmash onto the back of this single mirvol, and find a space myself?”

Hamun was not like his father. Had I been speaking to Naghan I would never have said that, for I knew Naghan’s reply, as mine would have been in like circumstances, would be a quick: “You shall have as many flying steeds as you require to carry you and your belongings safely.”

“That, Notor Prescott, is your problem,” Hamun said.

In all probability he would have made a good monk, or a stylor, or an actor — although you have to be tough to be an actor in some of the more ferocious Kregan plays — but he was an Amak’s son and therefore he was destined to fight his way to his own nobility.

Now I discarded everything that was not essential. On Kregen that meant everything except weapons and a little food and money.



“Remberree, Notor Prescott!” they called after me as I mounted into the air. “Remberree!”

“Remberree, Paline Valley!” I shouted back.

The wide wings of my mirvol carried me high into the air bound for Ruathytu, capital of Hamal, shining and resplendent under the Suns of Scorpio.

## Chapter Four

### Hamun ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley

Strange are the ways of the Star Lords, as I have many times found out to my cost. Strange, too, are the ways of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, those mortal but superhuman men and women of the Swinging City, where I had bathed in the sacred Pool of Baptism of the River Zelph and so secured a thousand years of life and bounding good health. But, strange, too, are the ways of pure ordinary fate.

Simple, disinterested fate for once took a hand in creating conditions that afterward would profoundly affect my life on Kregen.

Chance alone made me realize as I winged through the level air that the hilts of four rapiers were revealed as the slipstream threw back the flap of cloth in which they were wrapped. Delia had placed in the voller four rapiers and four main-gauches. I had promised to give Nulty a rapier and left-hand dagger. He had expressed interest in them, saying that rapier-and-dagger fighting was all the rage among the bloods in Ruathytu, so he had heard, and he had a mind to see what all the fashionable fuss was about. So — how could it be I carried four sets?

Nulty deserved to have my promise to him honored.

With a half-reluctant pull on the guiding reins I wheeled the mirvol in the sky and winged back toward Paline Valley.

If you have listened to these tapes of my life on Kregen you will already have guessed what chance had let me in for. Kregen is a world that demands the utmost from a man or a woman. Half measures will bring only catastrophe. I knew that when the slavers had attacked, a messenger had somehow scrambled off astride a volclepper, one of those small and exceedingly fast flying animals of Havilfar, and had succeeded in reaching Amak Naghan ham Farthytu as he was marshaling his warriors. Their return had saved their village and saved my life.

But the wild men from over the mountain had not thrown away the chance thus vouchsafed them.

They had visited Paline Valley.

They had destroyed, they had wasted, they had not cared to take prisoners for slaves; preferring to slay, they had obliterated that smiling valley. I came in on the tail end of the fight and was able to speed the wild men on their way with biting shafts. A slight struggle followed as I mopped up a party assaulting the Amak’s house which, burned and crumbling, still held men and women who resisted.

In a wild skirling of blades, I went through the wild men, smelling their stink, seeing their knotted braids of black and greasy hair, sundering their shields, lopping heads, degutting. It was all a dreadful reprise. But, this time, there was a still more dreadful difference.

When the last of the wild men made his decision to stay and be killed or take flight and save his skin, I turned to the barricaded door and bellowed in a cracking voice: “They are gone! Open up! It’s me, Dray Prescott.”

The door did not open.

I heard a thin and scratchy voice — Amak Naghan’s voice.

“We are all — sore wounded — Notor. Near to death. We — cannot — open the door.”

The last of the wild men had gone and I felt they wouldn’t stop running until they were safe beyond the mountains. I looked around. A fallen beam made a handy battering ram.

“Stand clear of the door!”

“We — cannot stand—”

Smash went the beam at the door. The sturdy oak creaked. Lenk wood, it was, bound and barred with iron. Smash went the beam. These people had been good to me and I felt a cherishing affection for them. Now they were all slain. The door went in with a splintering ripping and I plunged through.

They must have crawled here after fighting hard and long and, covered in wounds, barred the door and sunk down to rally for the final attack. Nulty lay to one side, unconscious, breathing like a blown stallion, his body a shiny mass of blood. Other men and women were there, all wounded. In a corner lay a pile of bodies. To one side lay the corpse of Hamun ham Farthytu, the Amak’s son.

I bent to Naghan.

“It is finished, Dray Prescott. All done.”

“No, Naghan.” There was a pitcher of water, and I moistened his lips. He tried to drink, but only choked and coughed. His wounds were dreadful. “No, Naghan, my friend. You will recover. Paline Valley will bloom again.”

“We saw you fighting — through the chink in the door — we saw you. You are a great Jikai, Notor Prescott. But it is all finished. The honor of the family of ham Farthytu no longer matters.”

“Oh yes it does!” I said to him sharply. I thought he was dying, and no man should die without some hope. “You leave a great name, a name of which to be proud.”

My Anglo-Saxon forebears would have understood that, to die well and leave a good name.

His head rolled restlessly from side to side. I do not think he was in pain; that had numbed in these final moments.

“Our name will be forgotten, Dray! Obliterated! For my son is dead.”

There can be few words in any human tongue more dreadful than those: *My son is dead*.

Before I could answer, Naghan went on: “He did not die well. He ran and hid. The wild men found him. They mocked him. They — they had sport — with him. I died, then, I think, before I bit the sword.”

“Rest easy, Naghan—”

“I shall never rest, Dray, in this world or on the Ice Floes of Sicce.”

So, there, in that shambles, chance played a card that put the idea into my head. It existed, of itself, full-grown like Athena in less than a heartbeat.

Naghan ham Farthytu was dying. His thoughts clouded. His stern grave face slackened, and spittle and blood ran from the corner of his mouth. He started to choke and I eased him. He was no longer truly of the world of Kregen.

I said: “Naghan ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley.” I spoke with formality and he responded to my tone. “If you will it so, your name will not be forgotten. It will be regarded with the honor and respect it is due.”

He was dying. But he was past my foolish notion of going to Ruathytu and there erecting a monument to him and his family, a noble marble cenotaph in the Palace of Names. His bloodied hand lifted and grasped my sleeve. I bent closer. He rasped out the words, now, spitting blood, struggling to force his dying body to obey the commands of a brain abruptly clear and utterly determined.

So, I truly think, chance brought me to that spot, and to the last words of a dying noble, and chance made me anticipate what he would say, what he would ask, even as I discarded the notion of erecting that monument in the Palace of Names as the only thing I might do for this man.

“Dray Prescott! You are a man of honor, a Jikai. It is my dying wish you take upon yourself the name of ham Farthytu! I would think well if the empire saw in you and your prowess the name of ham Farthytu.”

I hesitated. Stealing names can be habit-forming.

But Naghan gripped my arm, and his lined face implored me. He whispered weakly now, obsessed with his idea and his wishes, quite unable to see past his own desires to the problems attendant on the other side of the question. This was a thing he would never have asked of me in life. In death he had a privilege.

“You will do this for me, a dying man, Dray Prescott?”

Still I hesitated.

Then: “Yes, Naghan. I will.”

His sigh started deeply and finished in a choked fit of bloody coughing. But he would not let me go. His grip tightened feverishly. We must have made a macabre pair, blood everywhere, dead men and women scattered about, and, at his feet, the dead and dishonored body of his son.

“Dray — Dray — promise me, promise me by your god, you will take the name of ham Farthytu—”

How cheap to have betrayed him! To have promised by Havil the Green! He would have believed — and I would be just as foresworn when I broke the oath.

“By Opaz, Naghan, I will use the name in Hamal. I will go to Ruathytu and there I shall be Naghan ham Farthytu.”

“No! No!” He tried to shake me, and his hand merely fluttered. “No, Dray! My son! *My son!*”

And then I saw what he truly wished.

I thought of my own father, and of the scorpion that killed him. I marveled. And then I thought of my little Drak — and I understood.

“Very well, Naghan. I will take the name in Hamal of Hamun ham Farthytu.”

“Yes, yes, Dray.” He was going. “You will be Amak. Amak Hamun. I wish — wish it so . . .”

I stayed with him until he died.

When he gave the last death rattle, a sound I have heard many and many a time, I stretched, for I had held him at the last to ease him, and Nulty from behind my shoulder said: “He was a good man, Notor Hamun.”

I looked at Nulty.

His broad-barreled body with its glossy covering of blood made a ghastly sight.

“I thought you were dying, Nulty.”

“No, Notor Hamun. This blood is from the wild men, may Hanitcha harrow them to hell! I had a crack on the head, I think.”

“You called me Notor Hamun.”

“I heard what the Amak said.” Then, because Nulty was no slave but a free servitor, he could add: “I wish you well, Amak. Havil the Green could not have chosen better.”

If he could read my mind on what I thought of Havil the Green he’d change his tune!

So . . . while I spent my spying expedition in Hamal I was to be Hamun ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley.

The incentive to carry on my work had received an enormous boost. Over the matter of names I have always been choosy. A name is a precious commodity; abstract, it yet holds a potent sway, and in many minds of Kregen, no less than minds of Earth, is regarded as a solid and material object, a thing to be grasped and, once grasped, to give power. To those who wish for success, the remembrance and the efficient handling of names are essential.

We went outside and, in truth, Paline Valley was a sorry place. Nulty and I spent only the briefest of spells in cleaning ourselves, not sparing the time to take the baths of nine, then we set to the mournful burying. When all was done we rested and ate and drank, and, then, just sat.

Nulty, a blocky man of great strength both of body and of mind, had the pragmatic Kregen way of regarding disaster and death. He was not in shock. At least, I did not think he was.

He surprised me, at first, when he spoke his mind; but on reflection what he said made the soundest

common sense.

“Now you are Amak Hamun, and I am the only survivor here, and it is fitting I should tender you my allegiance. I had been charged with the old Amak’s son . . . to no avail.” He hesitated.

“You do not have to excuse him to me, Nulty.”

“It is not that, Notor. The old Amak is dead. Amak Naghan is dead. But there is now a new Amak, Hamun, Naghan’s son.”

“That is not true,” I said. I sighed. “But that is the way Naghan wished it to be.”

Nulty fingered his thraxter, that straight sword of Havilfarese fighting-men, where he had cleaned it with spittle and brick dust. His words were meaningful.

“Amak Naghan desired that his son should bring honor to his name. I follow his son, now, and I pledge my sword to the same high purpose. Amak Hamun, Naghan’s son, will bring honor.”

I took his point. I was in no frame of mind to argue with him. So I said: “Very well, Nulty. You may come with me to Ruathytu.”

“Yes, master,” was all he said. It was sufficient.

## Chapter Five

### Birth of a yokel at the shrine of Beng Salter

In the full determination to discover the secrets of the fliers of Hamal I made no urgent rush to the capital city. Nulty and I took our time. We had three mirvols between us, one the magnificent animal presented to me by Amak Naghan, the other two lesser beasts rounded up by Nulty after the raid, all that were left of the remudas perching on the mirvol towers up by the highest slopes of Paline Valley.

There was no rush because it was necessary for me to learn as much as I could of the country. We swung slowly southward and eastward, for the capital, Ruathytu, is situated at the junction of the River Mak, the Black River, with the larger River Havilthytus, some sixty dwaburs inland from the eastern coastline. We had, according to Nulty, about two hundred and sixty dwaburs to go to the city in a direct line — as the fluttrell wings, in Hamalese vernacular. This 1,300 miles or so we greatly lengthened by making detours and visiting many of the towns and cities en route, and of generally, in Nulty’s case, getting over the shock of seeing his home so brutally destroyed. He had had no wife or children, desiring none; all he had cared for had been the old Amak and, as I knew, his son, Hamun. So we wandered along our way, and we had a few fine adventures, too, which I will not mention now but many of which would undoubtedly form vastly exciting stories in their own right.

Again I was reminded how strange are the ways of chance.

Because it was the fashion out on the frontier territories to wear a white robe, cinctured in with a tasseled cord, I had tried the fashion and found it convenient. The hem of the robe came down to just above my knees. Nulty, whose own robe was more in the nature of a smock, insisted I wear the gold-and-scarron chain of beads we had with reverence taken from Naghan. The scarrons blazed a true and brilliant scarlet. Because I have a fondness for the old brave color, as you know, I was persuaded to wear them, and the curved gold-and-jeweled dagger, and the gold-and-scarlet slippers. To Nulty this

attire was proper for an Amak.

To me, it was light and comfortable, for, remember, on much the same latitudes far to the west lie the great deserts of Loh. Loh as a continent of mystery possessed great fascination for me. One day, Zair willing, I would go there and discover if all that men whispered about those secret walled gardens, and those girls with the veils, and all the other mysteries of Loh were really true.

Nulty didn't care much for Lohvians. And he did not care much for the Pandaheem, either, the people of that large island off the northeast coast of Loh, and just over the equator northwest of Havilfar.

The chance of my attire came one day when, along with a party of pilgrims, we flew out to visit a shrine reputed to possess quite remarkable healing properties, through the magical powers of the bones of a Beng buried there. A Beng is, to give a near approximation, a Kregan saint. Nulty wanted to know if this notoriously powerful Beng Salter's bones would cure a pain in his left hand, where the fingers, from time to time, abruptly cramped and the palm of his hand contracted, so that he had to bash it against a wall to flatten it out.

We landed by the simple marble shrine before the cleft in the rock, where a waterfall tinkled. Water is precious in these latitudes of Hamal. The grove was a pleasant and sweet-smelling place, and the aura of peace came fresh and comforting, so that no one objected when the guardians insisted we remove all weapons before entering.

Normally, of course, no one would voluntarily relinquish his sword on Kregen. But here, with the benign, smooth-faced guardians in their long robes, and the holy softness and tranquility of the scene, no one objected. There were about a dozen of us as we went into the shrine, carefully observing the fantamyrh as we did so. Inside the place was cool with shadow, somnolent, tranquil, and I felt that faith would have a chance, here, to work its wonders.

The ritual was gone through by those who had come here with intent. We as mere onlookers watched. I hoped Nulty would find his cure.

The feeling of peace came to me, I remember with perfect clarity, with a benediction. This, in truth, was as life should be lived. Life was not always a mad business of rushing and pushing about, of flashing swords and flying bolts, with blood and death as permanent companions. I felt this pleasant relaxed emotion so strongly that I was perfectly well aware I was weaponless, and I did not mind.

As we watched, those who had earnestly besought the dead saint to cure them rose and shuffled back, and already one or two were disappointed, one or two beginning to rub feeling back into a hand or limb they had thought paralyzed.

Nulty was working the fingers of his left hand, but he had not suffered an attack for some time, and so there was no real way of checking the efficacy of the Beng's bones.

A man — he was apim — dressed very beautifully in dandy clothes jostled me as I turned for the exit.

This fellow wore a blue shirt whose front foamed in a veritable avalanche of lace. His waist was nipped in by a massively wound cummerbund of bright green, and his gray trousers were strapped beneath his shoes. Over his right shoulder ran a brilliantly embroidered baldric. The scabbard was empty. These things I noticed about him, as well as the interesting fact that his face was far too apoplectic a red for his own good, his blue eyes protruded in an altogether repugnant way, his dark hair was cut too short for good taste, and his whole demeanor suggested a man of viciously quick temper.

He gave me no time either to curse him out of my way or to apologize. I scarcely think I would have done the latter, and the former accorded ill with my euphoric, benign state of mind.

“Onker!” he bellowed. “Get out of my way, you rast!”

And, incontinently, his right hand whipped across his body and groped for the hilt of the sword that was not there.

I did not move.

“Cramph!” he said. He was panting, and into those protuberant blue eyes flushed a betraying bloodshot glare. “Stupid clumsy yetch!” And then he realized he was not grasping the hilt of his thraxter. Other people stopped to look. The fellow saw I had not moved. He brayed his contempt. “Ninny! Nulsh! You are a nothing! I can see from your clothes that you are no fighting-man! A warrior takes up arms—”

Soft-spoken guardians appeared, their robes rustling. I let them hustle me away, for I did not wish to kill the fool in these hallowed precincts.

When we were outside I retrieved my weapons.

Nulty came up, rubbing his hand, frowning.

“Tell me, Nulty; who was that cramph who insulted me?”

“I do not know, master. But he has departed. He and his retinue left in a fast voller.” And Nulty snickered, flexing his fingers. “You’ll never catch him on the back of a mirvol.”

Something of the tranquility of that place clung to me still, for I answered, and I admit with astonishment even as I spoke: “Let him go, Nulty. If he crosses my path again I’ll settle accounts then. Now I need a good long drink, and a full plate of cold vosk and a few loloo’s eggs — with a salad.”

Later we discovered the man’s name was Strom Hormish, from a town called Rivensmot in a small kingdom of the Empire of Hamal. I brushed the pesky idiot from my mind. I had cold vosk and loloo’s eggs to deal with, and although I did not care to spend the required amount to buy a flagon of wine of Jholaix, we drank a rather good local vintage that commended itself to us against parched throats.

Nulty was beginning to get the hang of some of my idiosyncrasies.

“That idiot Strom Hormish took you for a spineless weakling, master. You did not immediately reach for your sword, as a fighting-man would do instinctively.”

“Am I not then a fighting-man, good Nulty?”

He made a comical face. “That is not what I mean, Notor.”

“I know. But — what did he mean about these clothes?”

Here Nulty’s face registered further aggravation.

“I am told that the — would you call them sophisticated? — people of the cities laugh at our clothes.”

He went on to wax enthusiastic over the white gown, cut to tunic length, as I wore it. He mentioned the different styles, and the embroideries, and all these names had meaning, but I will not weary you with them now. “So, because of your clothes, he thought you—”

“A yokel!” I brayed out, enraged.

“Aye, master.”

And then — I swear it as Zair is my witness! — once again chance threw an idea into my blockheaded skull. Through two chances I had a scheme. I wore clothes that dubbed me a yokel, a simpleton from the sticks. And I had not betrayed the hallmark of the warrior.

From these two things I could construct a device that should serve me in good stead in Ruathytu, and, into the bargain, afford me some considerable amusement.

Truth to tell, I needed a good laugh about then.

As you know, I, Dray Prescot, do not laugh easily. But I had been living in Valka with Delia, and we had the twins to occupy us, and what with this and what with that, I had been laughing so that the laugh lines had managed to find a lodgment in my grim, ugly old face. Seg and Inch had been there too after we had returned from Migladrin. For the various reasons of state, of politics, of economy, they had had to return to their Kovnates, and so, as was my wish, I had come to Hamal alone.[\[2\]](#)

So I nodded and said very seriously to Nulty: “Very well. I shall wear the clothes of a yokel and a simpleton. And I shall watch my sword hand with great attention. And you, good Nulty, brag no more of our fighting prowess, and give no one any idea that Hamun ham Farthytu is familiar with a sword.”

“Yes, master, as you command,” said Nulty. But I could see he was much put out by having the cool and comfortable clothes of his home regarded so contemptuously. A yokel. Well, so be it. I could play the part, and I fancied I could carry off the simpleton part of it with far too uneasy an ease . . .

We flew on apace toward Ruathytu, the capital, and I own to the traveler’s curiosity to see places of which he had heard much. I will not weary you with all the strange creatures and peoples and customs I encountered en route; suffice it to say that whenever it is essential for you to know, then I will talk of these things. There came a day when, with Stormclouds darkening the sky and the first heavy spatters of rain smoking into the dust, we alighted at an inn in some half-forgotten little town in the center of Hamal. We were within the boundaries of the Kovnate of Waarom, for, as I have mentioned, the Empire of Hamal is made up of a number of kingdoms and Kovnates owing allegiance to the Emperor of Hamal. Waarom was a dusty, idle, listless place, populated by peoples of a number of different racial stocks, and I believe the chief industry was ponsho farming, with a little surface mining here and there. Nulty and I needed fresh leather bottles of wine and provisions of various kinds, and so we were not too particular.

Outside the inn on perching towers the various flyers huddled up against the rain with flurried feathers, their backs turned to the wind, shaking membranous wings.

“Look at them, master!” said Nulty, giving his mirvol a slap to send him scuttling up onto a vacant perch. “This is a miserable dump, and no place for an Amak.”

“Miserable or not, Nulty, it is a roof over our heads.” I sent my first-class mirvol up onto his perch on the tower. “Although I could wish for a covering for our mounts. A poor place, indeed, this” — and I turned to look at the sign swinging over the amphora placed at the door — “this *Crippled Chavonth*.”



When we approached the entrance I ducked my head, for the doorway was made deliberately low with a massive oak beam, and went inside followed by Nulty.

The floor was sanded, the tables and settles of cheap purple wood, the pine already splitting, the goblets of inferior pot-clay and crude as to shape. The wine was just drinkable; the ponsho chops, though, were tender enough, cooked by a smudge-cheeked girl in a flour-and-blood-stained apron. Nulty and I ate and drank in a companionable silence, while the other travelers in the room, apim, like ourselves, with only a few diffs to enliven the scene, talked in low voices. More than once I saw a pair of eyes lift to stare at the low ceiling.

This inn was strictly a place to take a meal, to buy provisions, and to leave. *The Crippled Chavonth*. Kregans have a delight in names. The local ponsho farmers, we learned, caring for their flocks, produced an animal with surprisingly high-quality fleece, and the chavonth, that powerful six-legged hunting cat with fur of blue, gray, and black arranged in a hexagonal pattern, has a partiality to fat ponshos. The local infestation of these predators had come about through an airboat crash. The voller had been bringing in prize specimens of chavonths for the Arena in Ruathytu, and after their liberation they had bred and increased and had come finally to terrorize the countryside here in this dusty little town of Urigal in the half-forgotten Kovnate of Waarom.

The ponsho farmers in this duchy of Waarom must have given uncomfortable little grimaces when they looked up at the sign of *The Crippled Chavonth*, no doubt wishing it to be so in fact.

Peoples and animals are spread bewilderingly over the surface of Kregen, it often seems scattered at random, with only the haziest controlling influence of local evolution to be discerned. Much of this scattering of races and species, I believe, is due directly to the influence of the Star Lords; but quite a bit results from accidents like the one that brought hunting chavonths here to Waarom.

The light coming through the low windows darkened and turned a deep umber. For a time, as the storm thrashed past overhead and the rain lashed down, the light vanished, and the pot-man brought out a few earthenware lamps. We finished our meal and then bought provisions to carry us through for the remainder of our journey. The storm grumbled and banged, but slowly the light came back and the lamps were extinguished. This was not one of the seasonal monsoon areas of Kregen; this rain was welcome in so dusty a Kovnate. The lingering after-rain smell carried overtones of quenched thirsty earth and green growths.

The landlord was not immediately available for us to pay the reckoning. Heavy thumps sounded from the room overhead, and then doors banged, and footsteps clumped down an outside stairway, and loud voices lifted outside. There was a confusion of shouting, laughter, and that particular kind of freewheeling, innocuous oaths that some men adopt in the presence of ladies.

“Fetch the mirvols, Nulty.”

“Yes, Notor.”

Nulty went outside — he did not have to duck his head — and I strolled after, expecting to find the landlord dealing with his important guests, who had been decently housed in the private upstairs room and served personally.

The twin suns streamed down welcome rays, and the air sparkled with brilliance.

The pot-man dodged after me. He did not dare to touch my elbow to halt me.

“I will take the reckoning, Notor.”

This suited me, and I paid him, using a few sinvers from the vosk-skin bag at my waist, for I had not as yet adopted the Hamalese custom of wearing an arm-purse.

“Thank you, Notor, may Havil the Green smile upon you, Notor, Remberee,” the pot-man rattled off in a monotone.

I stepped outside the paved area before the door. Over at the perching tower flyers were being brought down and there was a flourishing of cleaning cloths as their feathers and hides and scales — for the different species — were dried after the rain and polished and made presentable for the great lady and her retinue who waited with growing impatience.

I looked at the arrogant, brilliant group of people.

They were apims.

The men were hard featured, fair of hair, thick of jaw, clad in flying leathers adorned with much jewelry and gold lace. Their weapons were those of Havilfar. The girl who was the center of this brilliant group appeared to me, grown somewhat cynical in the ways of the mundane world, I fear, as completely out of place in that company. Her bright fair hair gleamed in the lights of Antares. Her small face, pert, with rosebud mouth, pale blue eyes, and a creamy-white complexion, seemed to me that of a child let loose in a world she did not comprehend. She was beautiful, in a china doll way, someone you might admire from a distance but scarcely wish to touch.

She wore the pleated and flared skirt adopted by young girls of Hamal. It reached down halfway to her knees and glowed more with brilliants and stitchings of precious metals than with its original pale blue color. Her white shirt, also, overflowed with cascades of frills and lace. Over the shirt she wore a bolero of magenta. Flung back from her shoulders her short flying cape hung now demurely, folds of fluttrell-green. Astride her bird that cape would sweep back most proudly.

Then all my attention was taken by the birds the handlers were bringing from the perching tower. Nulty was being forced to wait before he could fetch our mirvols. I saw these white-feathered birds and I marveled. I had not seen their like before in Hamal.

All of pure white were these birds. Large, they were, powerful, streamlined in body, and with wide pinions that could sustain them and their riders in level flight for dwabur after dwabur over the world of Kregen. All of pure white save for their legs and beaks, which were scarlet, are the streamlined bodies and the quadruple-wings of these magnificent saddle-birds. These are the famed zhyans, and in money value alone one zhyan is worth ten good-quality fluttrells. So I looked with the keen interest of the flyer as the zhyans were brought down, dried and cleaned and polished, and I saw the huge birds were in a vicious temper.

As well they might be, considering they are basically aquatic birds, with a great love for lakes. These zhyans had been called on to fly over dry dusty Waarom. The rain had given them a memory, a remembered longing for wide expanses of water. In bodily form the zhyan is not unlike a Terrestrial swan, although the feet bear taloned extensions, very fierce. And the beak, although of the wide and flattened variety of swimming birds, has a swanlike knob much enlarged into near raptor-like proportions, with a vicious, down-curved, meat-tearing hook. These very large saddle-birds of Kregen must, by the

very laws of nature, have bodies of lesser proportionate bulk than their smaller Earthly counterparts. Their size lies in their length and in their wingspread.

Nulty stood at the side, fuming, waiting to get at our mirvols, as the zhyans were brought down. One zhyan struck with a hiss at his handler. The man, a gul in a brown smock, staggered back, yelling, his arm slashed.

One of the brilliant gallants, hitching his sword out of the way, strode across, bellowing. A kind of order was produced, and the swaggering group mounted up. I watched as they did so, noting the birds, looking at them rather than the aristocratic onkers mounting up.

The zhyan is noted for its short temper. That is, perhaps, the greatest failing of the magnificent bird. Conscious of his own superiority, the zhyan does not like to be hustled. Maybe, had that girl out there been Delia, and I in command, I would not have allowed her to mount her saddle-bird. Oh, she would have flashed those gorgeous brown eyes of hers at me, and called me a fussy old hairy graint; and, I like to think, she would have mastered the zhyan with all that consummate skill of hers.

But this girl was no Delia.

I, Dray Prescott, am an onker, a get-onker! What girl in two worlds can ever match Delia, save my Delia of Delphond!

Almost in the saddle, the girl moved with a clumsy lurch that snapped the self-control of the zhyan. It lashed ferociously at the two handlers, first left, then right, cutting them with that deadly razored beak, stretching them senseless upon the muddy ground. It fluttered its two pairs of wings, a massive and — even in the abrupt horror of the moment — a beautiful movement. The girl pitched off. She screamed. She tumbled in the useless flailing straps of the clerketer, twisted and fell beneath the hooked beak of the zhyan.

The bird's bright intelligent eyes told me that he would take his revenge for past insults now.

Well, it was no business of mine.

The men were yelling and one jumped forward, a flying-stick uplifted. Flying-sticks are the invention of any of a hundred foul devils of Kregen. I never used one. If a flying mount needed a lesson, as they sometimes did, in obedience, there were other and less unpleasant ways than to thrash the poor beast.

This man was caught across the face by the slashing hooked beak. He had no time to scream. He spun about and bright blood spouted from his ruined face.

Uproar burst about the perching tower. Men were yelling, women screaming, and the mud churned as the zhyan clamped his massive claws down. The girl dangling beneath him encumbered him. In the next second he would either rip her slender body to pieces with his claws, or tear her head from her shoulders with his beak. The pandemonium grew — and yet after the awful finish of the one who tried, no one else showed the determination to rush in to help.

Still, it was no business of mine . . .

I ran forward.

“Help! Help me!” the girl screamed.

She dangled there, half upside down, her brave clothes spattered with mud gobbets thrown up by the claws of the maddened bird. His beak flashed toward me, hissing.

Dodging that lethal beak on its long serpentine neck was something like slipping an arrow or a spear. I checked in my rush, so that the beak struck where I would have been. I thumped my fist against the side of his head, feeling the solid thunking sledge of the blow. I grabbed the girl. She was incoherent with fear now, a gibbering shrieking bundle. My sailor's knife whipped from the sheath over my right hip and slashed through the tangling lines of the clerketer. I kicked the zhyan in the belly, and kicked again. If he took off now we were done for.

He hissed. I crooked the girl in my left arm. If I had to kill this beautiful white bird, I would have to do so; I would prefer to let him live to recover from his fit of bad temper. There was no way past his beak. He curved his head down on that long neck, beneath his body, and darted at me again. The girl hampered me, but I flashed the knife at his beak, and chipped the side, and he hissed, and withdrew.

With a savage lunge — and savagery was needed here to spring us clear — I went out from under the bird, rolling head over heels, clasping the girl, feeling her heart beat in panic against mine, her fair hair clouded about my face.

Hands grabbed me and pulled the girl away.

“We've got her, dom!”

I let her go, heaving up on a knee, ready to flash the knife before me and so keep off that wickedly darting beak.

There was no need.

That gorgeous bird, that scarlet-billed, scarlet-clawed, pure white zhyan, lay jerking in the last throes of death.

Crossbow bolts showed uglily in his feathers, studding his white breast obscenely, with red blood befouling all that beauty. He hissed, and shuddered, and died.

I stood up.

The girl had fainted. Her women were caring for her.

The men with the crossbows were stowing their weapons away alongside their saddlebows. The fine-clothed gallants were shouting and gesticulating. The landlord was wringing his hands. The scene sickened me.

Here came Nulty with the mirvols.

“Mount up, Nulty. Let us drive into the clean air, away from this — this—”

“Yes, master,” said Nulty.

We took off astride our mirvols, and soared up into the clean air of Kregen.

## Chapter Six

### Concerning seven obs and a duel

Ruathytu, the capital city of the Empire of Hamal, was a place where, if you were reasonably wealthy, you might enjoy a sumptuous time. Of course, if you happen to be wealthy in almost any place and at almost any time you may enjoy a sumptuous time, so you may think it unnecessary for me to call your attention to the matter. The truth was, in Ruathytu at that time, I came across an altogether too familiar and horrible phenomenon of our Earth that, until then, I had not encountered on Kregen.

In Sanurkazz, in Magdag, in Vondium, in Zenicce, all wonderful cities of Kregen, there were lords with incredible wealth; their retainers and followers, who were sufficiently provided for; and fat shopkeepers, innkeepers, and the superior craftsmen; then there were slaves.

In Ruathytu there were guls running the gamut from master artisans to laborers only a step removed from slavery. Beneath the skilled guls a great mass of poverty-stricken free men existed in Hamal. They were free, and they took a pitiful pride in that, but they were poor and in an ill season they would die of starvation or disease, and few of them could afford a doctor, even of the faith-healing sort.

Slaves performed most of the truly unpleasant tasks, of course, as was common on Kregen; but many and many a free man or woman desperate for food would labor alongside the slaves.

So it was that as Nulty and I stabled our mirvols in a public perching tower where they would be under cover, and took our first sight of the city, I was struck by the marked divergence of fortunes here, many races intermingled in every walk of life holding their own converse rank by rank, and each section sundered from the next by iron barriers of wealth.

This may seem so common a fact of life on two worlds as not to merit comment; but my experiences of Kregen had shown me that a man might progress on that marvelous and yet terrifying world: progress materially and spiritually, gaining not only wealth but prestige and affection and a place in life that did not necessarily put down another fellow being. The slaves made this easier, of course, and I do not seek to deny that unpalatable fact. However, it does not deflect me from the perhaps impossible task of erasing slavery altogether within a foreseeable time. The clums of Hamal were not slaves; no man might enslave them without just cause or rivet an iron collar about their necks; the clums were free men and women. That they did not have the slaves' advantages of a place to sleep and food from masters with their welfare at heart made no difference to them. Better a clum than a slave!

Human beings of any race were constantly needed to feed the insatiable demands of the Arena. The clums would volunteer for the Jikhorkdun only in extremis. Willing hands were constantly needed to keep running the many ever-flowing, artful fountains; clums would do this work for a pittance. They would do whatever they had to, to survive; but, all the time, they were clums, free and not slave.

One of the ever-present dreams of a clum was to gain wealth and skills enough to become a gul.

Nulty, once a gul and now a faithful servitor to a noble, turned up his nose at the city.

“The place stinks, master.”

I knew what he meant.

“It smells pleasant enough, Nulty, with all the fountains and the armies of cleaners. There are flowers and

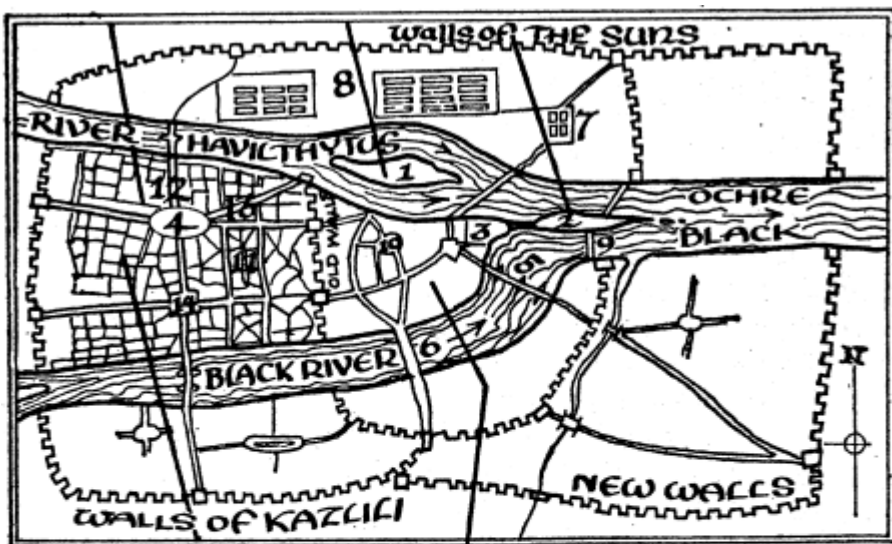
fragrant bushes everywhere, and the white walls are scrubbed each day—”

“That, Notor, was not what I meant.”

We found a comfortable inn catering to the more permanent kind of lodger. The inn was called *The Thraxter and Voller*, a clean house with a clientele composed mainly of high-ranking Horters, Tyrs, and Kyrs, people of the same rank as myself in my guise as Amak Hamun, an Elten or two, and a Strom who made no secret of his higher rank and so was condescending or contemptuous to the rest. I steered clear of him. A Strom is more like an Earthly count than an earl. I have always felt earls far superior to counts.

For the first few days I felt my way around the city, learning. The city proper is situated in the fork between the two rivers, but the environs spread around for some distance, traversed by wide avenues along which the young bloods would race their saddle animals. Aqueducts bring in plentiful supplies of a crystal water from surrounding hills. The climate is equable. There is a considerable waterborne traffic down to the sea, and also inland along both rivers. I had taken a trip on one of the three-decked flat-bottomed boats on the Black River from Dovad to Hemlad. I had not cared to retrace my steps when with Ilter and Avec I had wandered Central Hamal in areas southerly of the Black River. [3]

Once I had a firm impression of the city, once I felt I knew my way about, I would start inquiries concerning the vollers.



**RUATHYTU, Capital city of Hamal**

- |                                                   |                          |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Palace of Hammabi al Lamma                     |                          |
| 2. Castle of Hanitcha the Harrower: The Hanitchik |                          |
| 3. Great Temple of Havil the Green                |                          |
| 4. The Jokhorkdun                                 |                          |
| 5. Bridge of One Thousand Vosks                   | 10. Kyro of the Vadvars  |
| 6. Bridge of Sicce                                | 11. Merezo               |
| 7. Zhyan's Pinions                                | 12. Arrow of Hork        |
| 8. Soldiers' quarters                             | 13. Boulevard of Victory |
| 9. The Blind Wall                                 | 14. Kyro of the Horters  |

No sense of impending doom darkened those early days in Ruathytu, and I admit, not without a proper sense of shame, that the sight of beggars, and of poor ragged starving people, came to seem to me merely an unsavory part of the city's life, quite distinct from me, completely unnatural on Kregen and yet something I was forced to accept here. The depth of my purse as Amak of Paline Valley would have clothed and fed a derisory percentage of those in need. I had given alms in such a fashion as to raise the supercilious eyebrows of the Strom lodging at *The Thraxter and Voller*. Then I reconsidered. I took a

common course of action — or non-action. I did not give away my goods to the poor, I did not even tear my cloak in half. I had given a very great deal, and then I considered what I was doing. If I had nothing, how could I prosecute the designs that had brought me here? The greater plans I had were a part and parcel of a grand design that would free not only the slaves but also these clums.

So I had to harden my heart.

If you think that was an easy task, then I think you have not read me right . . .

Like any fashionable gentleman of Hamal I walked abroad with my thraxter belted to my waist. The other non-Havilfarese weapons were safely stored away with our other belongings, under my bed. I looked a perfect Horter of Hamal — if I say a perfect gent, you will understand. I continued to wear the short white tunic with the embroideries, the gold-and-scarron beads, and I practiced smoothing out that old devil look on my face.

Nulty would say to me, “You feel sick, master?”

And I would growl back, “No, you mutinous fambly! Can’t a man put on a pleasant expression for a change?”

“Oh, Notor,” he would say, “was that what it was?”

Still, I persisted.

I was put to a stringent test.

*The Thraxter and Vollerstood* in a quiet street beneath the upflung face of one of the sheared-off hills between the two rivers. Higher terraced houses were bowered above the inn in bushes and vines and flowers. The street was lined with high-class shops, although not of the very highest class, which were to be found within a smaller enclave at the very point of the V-junction of the rivers. It was not unusual to see clums crossing the end of the street where a main thoroughfare crossed on the northwest axis of the city, halting, and turning, and venturing a little way down our street, their hands open and cupped.

Shopkeepers would send out assistants to beat them off.

I saw a young girl of no more than five or six, dressed in a single filthy garment, ragged and falling to pieces, pulling her brother who might have been a year older in a little wooden cart on wooden wheels. He had no legs, and his body was wizened and lopsided. He drooled.

“Spare an ob, master,” the little girl was saying, as she pulled her brother along.

What good was an ob, one of those universal bronze coins, to her?

To give her a silver sinver, or a golden deldy, would have been foolish.

I turned out my vosk-skin bag and found seven obs. Seven. The Kregish word for seven, as you know, is shebov.

“Here,” I said. The correct word to use in addressing her completely escaped me. “Here. Here are shebov obs.”

She looked frightened.

“I only asked for one, lord.”

“Take the seven, and hide all but one. Go on.”

“Yes, lord.”

She took the money and I turned away, for the sight was beyond my bearing, when a Rapa, his fierce birdlike beaked face furious, rushed from a shop doorway. He brandished a broom. He wore shopkeeper’s clothes, and an apron spotted with preserves and jam and marmalade.

“Get away, vermin! Clear off or I’ll beat you.”

The girl cowered back, then tried to run, and so, stumbling, tripped over her brother’s cart.

The Rapa started to bring his broom, a sturdy implement, down on her prostrate form. A crowd had gathered. I stepped forward and caught the broom. I did not break it, either in my hands or over the Rapa’s head.

“Let her get up and go in peace, dom,” I said.

He started to yell at me, saw my clothes and the jewels, saw the thraxter at my side, and so, suddenly bowing and rubbing his hands together, he backed away.

“Certainly, Notor, as you command. A mere nothing — a clum where she should not be.” Then, because he knew I was in the wrong, he plucked up courage to say: “My broom, Notor?”

I threw it at him, not hard.

A coarse laugh spurted at my back.

I turned around slowly.

The Strom from *The Thraxter and Voller* stood, eyeing me in great derision, laughing, taking a bellyful of delight from my antics.

“By Krun!” he bellowed. “A dirty little clum-lover!”

The Horters and Horteras in the crowd laughed at this.

They were all well-dressed, fashionable, well-off Hamalians, although not the racy, sporty set of the sacred triangle by the two rivers. Now they jibed at one of their own wealth and class going out of his way to assist a clum.

I did not say anything.

I put that idiotic smooth bland look on my ugly face and, I suppose, it succeeded only in infuriating the Strom further.

“You idiotic cramp!” he shouted. He waved his fist at me. “You encourage these vermin into our



streets! They bring filth and disease with them! If you love clums so much, take your precious perfumed self down to their hovels.”

This, I could bear.

I turned to walk away.

A woman in the crowd, vastly excited by the spectacle, shouted: “Is that all you can do, coward? Stinking clum-lovers!”

Again, I would take no notice. I would not jeopardize my mission for the sake of these fools.

The Strom laid an elegant hand on my shoulder. He pulled me around to face him. He was a big, limber man, well set up. He carried his thraxter swung low on workmanlike lockets. His dress was gray, foppish, but practical when it came to leaving his sword arm free.

“Coward!” he shouted full in my face. His breath was unpleasant. “Rast! You do not walk away when the Strom of Hyr Rothy speaks to you!”

I said, “I have nothing to say to you.”

Looking back, I recall that scene vividly, and also I experience again my shame: my shame at not holding steadfast to my purpose but, instead, of allowing the ordinary, arrogant, intemperate Dray Prescott, who is — alas! — perhaps the only real Dray Prescott, to overwhelm this new meek and mild image I had sought so hard to attain.

“Well, *I* have something to say to *you*, you insolent rast!” He shook me. “I am Lart ham Thordan, the Strom of Hyr Rothy. You do not turn your back on me, yetch! I have seen you, Amak, and I know what sort of repulsive vermin you are! You will crawl to me, and beg my forgiveness! You will—”

At that point I leaned on my arm. My arm pushed forward my hand. My hand happened, for some reason, to be doubled up into something you might call a fist if you were uncharitable. The leaning arm and fist somehow found their way to this Strom’s belly. It was not a hard lean.

He choked a little, and his eyes filled with water. He had a naturally high color — these people so often do — and his apim face turned deeper red and the veins on his forehead glowed like coiled serpents.

I walked away.

I was followed by boos and yells and catcalls.

Well, as Nulty said, reproachfully: “You broke your own promise, Notor!”

“Aye, Nulty, I did.” I threw the thraxter on the bed in my room and stretched. “I think I know what the rast will do now.”

“He is a Strom. You are an Amak. He will consider his dignity so soiled he—”

“Confound these stupid ranks!” I bellowed, “I don’t give a lead ob for them!”

He looked at me with what I took to be a reproachful glare, and I knew he was thinking of the old

Amak. A loyal man, Nulty.

“For shebov obs, Notor,” he said.

“I know!”

“He will challenge you.”

The laws in Hamal are strict and multipurpose and, as in so many countries where the wealthy also flaunt their power, blatantly favor the moneyed of the land. Dueling is still a recognized social phenomenon, although hedged about with regulations, and in all due formality a challenge would be presented from Strom Lart which I must answer.

“He will challenge you, Notor, and you must answer. How will you maintain your deception then?”

“I do not think that possible.”

I’d humbled myself and then, when the first real test came along, I’d failed. Ignominiously failed.

To my surprise Nulty brightened up remarkably. He started singing that old risqué song about Fanli the Fristle fifi and her regiment of admirers. I looked at him. He caught my eye, and stopped singing, and then with a dirty chuckle said: “I shall be heartily glad to see you acting the real part of the Amak of Paline Valley!”

By his lights, it was clear, I had not been truly honoring my promise to Amak Naghan. I had tried to explain, but full explanations were impossible. A few tentative inquiries had shown me that to discover the secrets of the vollers I must penetrate not just into the buildings where they were manufactured here in Ruathytu — for I guessed they would be little different, if on a larger scale, from the works at Sumbakir — but past them and into the inner secret places where the silver boxes which gave lift and propulsion to the fliers were filled. This, as you will hear, was only half the truth.

The challenge was brought by an Elten and a Kyr, both very stiff and formal, and I agreed to fight Strom Lart on a morning two days later in a hall of his choosing. These occasions often attracted visitors, and the owner of the hall would charge admission to defray the expenses of rental.

The Elten said, “Amak Hamun. My principal directs me to inquire if you have knowledge of the rapier and the left-hand dagger. He is desirous of sharpening his skill.”

“Is he aping the ways of the young bloods, then, Elten? Is the Havilfarese thraxter no longer good enough for him, then?”

“Fashions in these things change, Amak. The nobility has taken up the rapier with great enthusiasm. It is fashionable. If you have no knowledge of rapier work—”

“I care not what weapons the fool chooses—”

“Amak!”

“Go back and tell the onker I’ll kill him even if he chooses wooden spoons.”

“Brave words!” The Elten spoke with a pronounced sneer. He did not look at my face, and I made a

great effort to smooth out that old devil's expression I knew must be disfiguring my features. When he did look at me he saw a man who, in his eyes, was a weakling trying to bluster. "I think, Amak Hamun, you will be very sorry you crossed words and swords with Strom Lart."

Because of this stupid quarrel I had to cancel a planned expedition to the small coastal town of Denrette, which stands where the River Havilthytus empties into the Ocean of Clouds. The river mouth opens out to the sea just to the south of the island of Arnor. At Denrette lived the TodalpHEME who calculated the tides and the movements of the great waters.

Nulty said, "You will not travel now, Notor?"

"No, Nulty, may Havil the Green twist the eyeballs in the sockets of this onker Strom Lart. No, I will not travel now."

Truth to tell, much of that old urgency to go and find out from these TodalpHEME — who might be the very ones I needed to talk to — just what they knew of the Savanti and the Swinging City of Aphrasöe had left me. I would find out one day. Right now my life on Kregen had taken turns that would have astounded me in those days when my main desire on the planet was to find my way back to the Swinging City of Aphrasöe and the Savanti . . .

The day of the duel arrived and Nulty saw to it that I had a fine breakfast of fried vosk-rashers and loloo's eggs and after the last of the superb Kregen bread — done in a Hamalese fashion quite pleasant — smeared with honey had been eaten, a delicate china cup of Kregen tea and then a silver dish of palines to munch finished the meal. He checked my clothes. I had chosen to appear in very rich, sober style, with a subdued flash of ruby in place of the scarlet. I belted on my thraxter, and the straight sword of Havilfar seemed to me the proper instrument with which to show a Hamalese Strom the error of his ways. We stowed all our gear away safely, paid the lodging bill, and then went down to the hall of duels.

The scene presented itself at once as macabre and exciting.

The seats surrounding the flat central space were filled with citizens. The betting was light. Everyone gave the Strom every chance. This was more in the nature of an exhibition than a duel, and many of the bets were on just how the Strom would humiliate me before the final stroke.

The due ceremonies went ahead. Judges and referees were appointed and a doctor was in attendance. So far everything went along coldly and with formality. The Hamalese system of dueling bears some resemblance to encounters here on Earth, with the system of seconds standing in for the principal if he is absent. Since I had no seconds, and no one volunteered, and Nulty was only a servitor, the Strom waived some of the protocol. Instead, he sent the Elten across with a rapier and dagger, with the injunction that he, as the party to choose weapons, chose these. Since it was clear I did not possess rapier or dagger I might be allowed the loan of these.

Well, the fool would find out soon enough the truth. I have already told you of my beliefs in this vexed question of sword-fighting. One day, I think, I will meet a man who is better than I am. Or, perhaps, a woman. Then I shall face the greatest fight of all. Each time I fight I am aware that this may be the last time. I am not so egomaniacal as to imagine I am the best swordsman of two worlds. Besides egomania and megalomania, that would be plain sinful pride and stupid into the bargain. This Strom Lart looked strong and quick and clever; he might best me.

Expectancy caught up everyone. The crowd grew impatient. The high-ceiled hall rang with muted echoes. Lart glanced across at me, and flicked his rapier about as though he knew how to use it.

I heard men talking in the nearest seats, saying that I was doomed, that the Strom would cut me up into fancy shaped pieces and feed me to the dogs.

Opening off the main hall of challenge were a number of smaller rooms, for dressing, for religious observances. A plan occurred to me whereby I might get out of this with a whole skin, not slay the Strom (for this was a duel to the death), and at the same time preserve my image as a weakling and no true fighting-man.

“I will spend a few murs in seeking the assistance of Havil the Green,” I said. That was obscenity to me, then, enough to make me wince. Of all the multiplicity of gods and godlings on Kregen, only Zair and Opaz had made any real impact on me, and, then, mainly for their parallels to my own inner beliefs. Havil the Green could go stew in his own juice for all I cared.

Perhaps, to be fair, I should add Djan to that short list of Kregan gods; for Djan was dear to my people of Djanduin. As for the beliefs of my wild clansmen of the Great Plains of Segesthes — that crazy harum-scarum bunch is enough to drive the bravest of men to the nearest dopa bottle. This list, I hasten to add, refers to my religious evolution on Kregen up to this time. Krun, of whom I have not spoken, was to come.

“Very well.” Strom Lart’s acquiescence was relayed to me by the Elten. “But, for the sake of Havil, do not take long.”

There were two meanings to that. I frowned. Then I took myself off, out of the central space, between the seating, and so through a short corridor to the room which had been furnished in green, with all necessary things provided, as a shrine to Havil the Green. The state religion of Hamal was safe, at the least, if nothing else.

Fully intending to spend a few moments in mock prayer and then return to disarm in some clumsy fashion and wound sufficient to halt the bout, I turned into the shrine. So fast, it came! So rapidly and without the slightest warning! No giant scarlet-and-golden-feathered bird of prey swooped over me. No slow growth of a blue radiance appeared to suck me down into emptiness.

I saw the scuttling form of a reddish-brown scorpion.

It stood with its arrogant tail upflung, perched on the very nose of the statue of Havil the Green with its encrustations of precious stones. Samphron-oil lamps cast gleams that broke and splintered from the brilliance of diamond and emerald and many another gem. The idiot face of Havil the Green stared down on me, and squatting on that Rapa-beaked nose of his — a scorpion! The wagon-wheel of eight arms stretched from the statue. Its face showed that admixture of racial traits, a morphology that, at least in this ten-foot-tall statue, betrayed only idiocy to my intolerant eyes. This statue was insignificant compared with that enormous and truly gorgeous statue of Havil the Green which Delia and I had encountered in the fortress of Hakal in Huringa in Hyrklana. That statue had seen us beset by neemus, those black-furred cats of vicious temper and sadistic power.

Far rather would I have faced a dozen deadly black neemus than that single solitary scorpion!

So fast it was. One moment I saw the scorpion, the next the reddish-brown form vanished and the world turned a radiant blue.

In my helpless falling I had time for one thought, one thought only, as I was pitched out of Kregen and

back to Earth.

*Delia!*

## Chapter Seven

The Scorpion brings travels and discoveries

There was no sense in it!

No sense at all. That Opaz-forsaken cramp of a scorpion! One day I'd put my foot on the foul red-and-brown thing and twist and crush and so squash the thing flat! So help me!

Even as I raged thus to myself, and looked about the planet of my birth again, I knew the day would never dawn. I thought so then. I am not so sure now. If I did smash my foot down on the scorpion, and so deal with it in such wise as would kill a normal scorpion, would this messenger of the Star Lords die? If I loosed a shaft at the scarlet-and-gold raptor, would that superb bird die?

I did not know . . . I do not know . . . All I knew then was that for some reason I had been flung back to Earth.

Oh, yes, I landed in a peck of trouble and sorted it out, and then haunted the night beaches, forever looking up toward that glinting spark of light upflung so arrogantly in the tail of the constellation of Scorpio. Up there, on a planet circling that twin star, four hundred light-years away, rested all I wanted in two worlds. Call me selfish, if you will. I do not care. Take the Prince Majisters, the Kovs, the Stroms, all the gaudy panoply of rank and wealth and privilege I had earned there on that perilous and profitable world of Kregen — take them all away. I hungered only for Delia, for my Delia and our twins, Drak and Lela.

A ghost of remorse would overtake me as I considered my friends there: Seg Segutorio, Inch of Ng'grogga, Hap Loder, Prince Varden Wanek, Gloag, Turko the Shield, Kytun Kholin Dom, my friends of Valka and Djanduin, and Korf Aighos, and even Nulty; and there was my stepbrother-in-law, Vomanus of Vindelka, who wanted, I knew, to be a good friend and yet whose reckless ways took him off to the far corners of Kregen where he might swing a rapier with that raffish carelessness of his. Oh, yes, remorse would overtake me as I realized I would forgo all their friendship if I might once more clasp in my arms my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains.

And, hungering as I did, could I ever forget that I, Dray Prescot, was also a Krozair of Zy?

The days on Earth passed in gray despair. I had cleared up the trouble here. (I will concern myself in these tapes mainly with what transpired in my career on Kregen, except when something I believe will interest you occurred to match). Then partly to give myself something to do, thereby driving away the insanity that threatened, and partly because I was genuinely interested in finding out what I could of the Savanti, I set out on a little detective work.

The Star Lords, the Everoinye, seemed to me to be above inquiry.

The Savanti, those mortal but superhuman men and women of Aphrasöe the Swinging City, seemed subject to investigation.

I went hunting Alex Hunter.

Rather, since he was dead on a Valkan beach on far Kregen, decently buried by me with two prayers said over him, it was his memory I hunted, what there was to know about him in the minds of those who had known him.

Money matters were carried on for me by the descendants of that man, whose name I will not mention, whom I had met on the field of Waterloo. I was now remarkably rich. It meant nothing, of course; it still means nothing compared to the greater glory of Kregen. But my Earthly wealth gave me the means to carry out my search.

The trail began in Paris and took me to New York. After a month of inquiries, of checking public records, of following up leads in school and college and U.S. Army records, I felt I had indeed discovered the Alex Hunter who had been employed by the Savanti in their crusade to cleanse the world of Kregen.

As a grim old Army major said: "He was posted missing, Mr. Prescott. There was Indian trouble. There always is. But we had high hopes of the boy. You say you knew him?"

I dissimulated; but the picture became clearer. Alex Hunter had been a young shavetail whose career seemed marked for high command. Eager, alert, efficient, he had made a first-class officer. I remembered his fair hair, those keen blue eyes, the supple strength of him. How he had been recruited by the Savanti na Aphrasöe, I did not know. But he had been taken to Kregen, and no doubt had passed his test down the River Aph with flying colors, as I remembered, as I remembered! Then the Savanti had appointed him a tutor, given him a genetic language pill, trained him in the martial arts. They had no doubt explained to him in full their plans for Kregen, plans at which I could only guess, for the Savanti had booted me out of the paradise that was Aphrasöe, the Swinging City.

What I did know without doubt was that Alex Hunter had appeared on a beach in Valka, charged by the Savanti to rescue a shipwrecked party of political prisoners from their guards. He had been doing well. He had fought gallantly; as he had said of my fighting, so I could say of his, that he had fought merrily. But his lack of experience had betrayed him. A cruel javelin had smashed its steel head through his body.

Either the Savanti themselves, employing me out of desperation, or the Star Lords with their infinitely more devious ways, had flung me onto that beach to save the situation. I had done so. And I had won my island of Valka. But the strangeness of walking a New York street, and of seeing all the wonders of mid-century America growing before my eyes, made me ponder long and long the reasons that most surely existed for all that the Star Lords did.

The Savanti, I felt sure, wished to make Kregen a civilized world. This is a laudable object.

Just what the Star Lords wanted, I did not know. But it was clear their plans were long-term. The people I rescued from death at the behest of the Star Lords would be growing up now, and their fates must influence the fate of the world.

Here, on this Earth, how many people who vanished had been taken to Kregen by the Savanti to join their great crusade?

And I, Dray Prescott, had been found wanting and had been kicked out.

Thoughts such as that would send the claws of madness striking through to me. Was I to remain for the

next thousand years, left here to rot on Earth, to destroy myself in futility on the world of my birth?

I left the Western frontier, where I had felt strangely at home in the harsh conditions so similar to many of the Kregen frontiers, and I took a southeasterly swing and was in Virginia when the blue radiance took me — blessedly — back to Kregen.

Opening my eyes, I saw that I was naked. That was normal. I think the Star Lords knew of that tickling feeling I had that I would think the less of them if they provided me with a handy sword, or shield, or helmet, when they brought me to Kregen to untangle the latest problem hurled at me.

The problem I had to sort out this time was so absurdly simple that I was sure the situation had been contrived by the Star Lords merely to bring me once more to Kregen. Maybe, I thought, as I stood up and stretched in the glorious mingled opaline light, maybe they required me to be here on Kregen. Certainly, facing a little four-armed Och, for all that he carried the small round shield of the Och, and a spear, and a thraxter belted to his waist, was not of the order of problems I had previously encountered.

The Och was a slaver and he was driving a heavily chained coffle of Djan girls to the beach where a low two-masted vessel waited. Now the Djangs are an especial joy to me, as you know. They are apim, just like Homo sapiens, but they have four arms apiece. They are the most ferocious fighters. Their girls are exceptionally beautiful. They are much prized. They do not travel very far from their own country of Djanduin, which is situated in the southwest of Havilfar.

I am the King of Djanduin.

The ten girls would have given the Och guards a nasty time if they came too close, and the Ochs were driving them along well out of arms' reach. I thumped the nearest Och over the head. An Och has six limbs, the central pair used indiscriminately as either arms or legs; a lemon-shaped head with puffy jaws and lolling chops; and he is not above four feet tall. Agile, determined fellows, Ochs are cunning and dirty fighters, and used over many parts of Kregen as mercenaries — although, to their constant annoyance, they are not ranked in the top class. Consequently, they may be hired more cheaply. I had had experience of Ochs. The second one flew at me now and I slid his spear and thumped him, too. I picked up his spear, flung it at the third Och. The fourth and fifth hurled their spears and then rushed with their thraxters low, their little shields low, and daggers in their middle limbs' dual-purpose hands.

I swirled a trifle with the dead Och's thraxter, caught their blades, swirled some more, and then — flick! flick! they were down and I could run across to the girls.

One of them, whose name I afterward discovered was Rena, recognized me. She yelled. Her shout was one of absolute joy.

“It is the King! It is Notor Prescott, the King of Djanduin!”

Seldom have I had a homecoming to Kregen like that!

The chains could be unlocked with keys taken from the Ochs. Rena said: “Those other Djan-forsaken Ochs will be upon us.” She snatched up a thraxter. “By mother Diocaster! Let us serve them finely chopped into a Herrelldrin hell!”

“Are there other slaves already aboard, Rena?”

“Aye, Majister.”

“Then we must free them, also.” I had to speak cleverly. “Where is your home, Rena?” I could not ask with cunning if she expected help, and thus gather some idea of where we were, for she might think I was reluctant to fight without the promise of help. I know, now, that my people of Djanduin would not think that of me; but in those days I was a new king in Djanduin.

Before she could answer, another girl, brandishing a spear, shrieked: “The rasts of Ochs! They run to attack!”

So we went to. Of that smart little fight I need only say that two of the girls were lightly scratched; none was, thanks to Djan the All-Glorious, killed.

We went down to the ship and released the prisoners there and as we all came up onto the beach, rejoicing (and I had flung a scrap of orange cloth about me to hide my nakedness), a skein of flutduins, those special and superb flying birds of Djanduin, soared over us and we were surrounded by a patrol of Djang warriors. We were on the north coast of Djanduin, and the water to the north was the Lohvian Sea. No one was at all surprised that the king had turned up to rescue his people from the slaving Ochs who had slipped in to raid by night, and were about to push off for their foul nests on the Lohvian shoreline across the sea.

Amid great rejoicings and much singing and laughing and drinking of toasts, the freed people were conveyed back to their village. I promised to have money and supplies and food sent down to restore the place after the attack. Then, surrounded by Djang warriors, astride our flutduins, we flew for the capital city of Djanguraj.

Kytun Kholin Dom, that true friend and mighty warrior, greeted me with quick and affectionate happiness. He grasped my single apim right hand in his two djang right hands, and with his upper left hand he clapped me on the shoulder, and with his lower left he punched me in the stomach with the abandon of reunion. I punched him back, for these things mean much, and then turned to see the Pallan Ortyg Coper hustling in, his gerbil-like face twitching, squeaking his excitement.

“We saw you off in the voller, Dray,” he said. “And, now, here you are back again! Lahal and Lahal! Welcome indeed!”

Before I had time to greet him I was engulfed by a squeaking and crying mass and there was Sinkie, Ortyg’s little wife, kissing and sobbing and vowing that, by all the flowers of Djanduin, she was the happiest woman alive to see me again.

Well, you can imagine, we had a reunion, and my friends who were in the capital came hurrying into the palace and that night we enjoyed a sumptuous feast. The country prospered. Wise government by my regent, the Pallan O. Fellin Coper, backed by firm and fair authority of K. Kholin Dorn, ensured that the ravages of the civil wars were being repaired. After my sojourn on Earth, to come back to Kregen in such style as this! It all seemed too marvelously perfect for me — except that Delia was not at my side. The desire to see her again overpowered me. But there was work still to be done in Djanduin. And as I was so relatively near to Migladrin, I could fly there and see if our work was bearing good fruits. So, in due order, these three things were done by me . . .

The news of Kregen rushed upon me in a great nostalgic flood of remembrances. But there were new and uneasy signs abroad. I was told that the supply of vollers had dried up. Hamal refused to sell any further examples of fliers to anyone. Hyrklana, that island realm which was the second chief supplier of fliers, was now able to see profit in selling to Hamal, its deadly rival. I wondered what Queen Fahia of



Hyrklana was about, selling to her enemies, but guessed she needed every last ob she could scrape up for the glory of her Arena in Huringa.

All the rumors, the uneasy speculations, had their center of origin in Hamal.

As Kytun said, drinking in his luxuriant way: “Those crampths of Hamal are at the bottom of it, Dray! They are power-mad. With all their laws you’d think they’d have more sense.”

“It is true,” said Ortyg, brushing his beautiful white whiskers. “Their path of conquest seems to be ordained to them by their Havil the Green. They are spreading south of the River Os—”

“Oh, Ortyg, dear, they have been doing that for seasons!”

“Yes, wife, yes. But they are now striking west over the mountains — and Zodjuin the Stux knows what they’ll find there — and also are attacking South Pandahem.”

These things I knew.

But then, very gravely, Kytun said: “They have taken most of South Pandahem. That is the last information.” Pandahem, the large island northwest of the continent of Havilfar, is split into north and south by mountains. I sat up as Kytun went on: “They are now invading Yumapan, in the far west of Pandahem. It is certain they will swing north into Lome—”

“Iyam lies east of Lome,” I said. “And then Menaham — The Bloody Menahem! — and if I know them and their rulers they’ll seek to conclude an alliance.” I frowned. I knew these countries, and I knew that to the east of Menaham lay the country of Tomboram. The damned Hamalians could bring in troops by sea or air to hit Tomboram from the east as their victorious armies, with The Bloody Menahem as allies, swept in from the west. Well, all that would take time. I had my job to do in Hamal, which was now of even greater importance.

I knew people of Tomboram. I knew Pando, the boy Kov of Bormark, and his mother, Tilda the Beautiful, Tilda of the Many Veils. I would not stand idly by if they were attacked.[\[4\]](#)

So, and not without a sense of desolation at what evils the price of friendship in high places can bring to the simplest soldier, I made cunning question of my Djang friends. Would they fight the Hamalians if I were to ask it, fight them on behalf of a boy Kov and his mother in far Pandahem? It was obscene of me to suggest this; and yet I knew with a heavy heart there would be much fighting before Kregen was made a world where a mother need not fear for her daughter, a father not fear for his son, where the slavers and the power maniacs had been banished. In this, no concern for the requirements of the Star Lords or the Savanti swayed me; this was necessary if those parts of Kregen I loved were not to be overrun and enslaved.

For North Pandahem lies perilously close to Vallia.

Vallia and Pandahem were enemies, through forces which were as much ironically stupid as through any other rational reason, for their maritime and colonial and economic rivalries could be adjusted given compassion and tolerance, and even though I was Prince Majister of Vallia, still I would fight for Pandahem against an outside invader. This might bring the two islands closer together in concern. I would like that. The Hamalians would not sell vollers to Pandahem. Was that because they wished to keep from them this means of aerial warfare, and, thus weakened, be easy meat for invasion and conquest? But then — Hamal was now refusing to sell Vollers to Vallia, a traditional market.

This, surely, was the preliminary to attack!

“You look thoughtful, Dray,” said my chief minister and now my regent, Pallan O. Fellin Coper. “Djangs are a bloodthirsty lot, as you know. I am a civilian and I—”

“Aye, Ortyg!” said Kytun, lifting his flagon. “You leave the fighting to us! And very sensible that is, to be sure. Dray,” he said, and he quaffed and set the emptied goblet down. “Djangs survive only by fighting well. If you have enemies we will fight them — aye! Even beyond the Ice Floes of Sicce!”

“Good Kytun, I don’t think we need to go there, just yet.”

I had discovered what I had already known to be true. These fearsome Djangs would fight for me, if they clearly saw my cause was just. I had little doubt that could be made plain. Deliberately, I steered the conversation away.

In the high-arched banqueting hall of my Palace of Illustrious Ornament in sprawling, arcaded, windy Djanguraj, the noise of laughter and singing brought aching memories of nights of carousing in the high fortress of Esser Rarioch overlooking Valkanium. It brought memories of those luminous nights with my clansmen on the Great Plains of Segesthes under the seven moons of Kregen. And, too, and with an especially keen nostalgia, it brought flooding back vivid memories of roistering away in Sanurkazz on the inner sea with my two favorite rascals, my two oar comrades, Nath and Zolta.

Ah! Time is a relentless monster that devours us all.

And sometimes the thought of a thousand years is insupportable to me, and then I think of Delia, and I know the thousand years will be all too short . . .

So I turned the conversation and I talked of affording better protection to our northern shore against slaving raids from Loh. I had at that time never been to Loh save for a short stop at Seg’s country, Erthydrin, when I had thought him dead . . . I would go there, one day.

“We are still a long way from the kind of land we would like to see,” O. Fellin Coper said, and we plunged into discussions of ways and means and where the money was coming from and all the problems of managing a country.

Oh, yes, I acted the part of the King of Djanduin, and, as is the way of these things, acting was not necessary. At this time on Kregen the lands of Strombor, Valka, and Djanduin meant most to me, for the peoples of those lands looked to me not only as their leader and the man who would guide them and devote his life to them, but mostly, I like to think, because they regarded me as their friend. I do not make friends easily. I had been blessed and doubly blessed on Kregen with true friends . . . I had also picked up a few enemies on the way. A goodly number of those were dead, and of those who remained there were some who were to do me great mischief, as you shall hear . . .

Because I was the King of Djanduin there was no difficulty in finding me a flier in which to travel to Migladrin. Any guilt I might have felt about depriving my country — a country, remember, of which I was a relatively new king — of a precious voller was more than overcome by the attitude of the Pallan of the Vollers, who would have taken amiss a decision to fly to Migladrin astride a flutduin. The Pallan of the Flyers — an office created by me to foster the breeding of first-class strains of birds — kicked a trifle; but he could see that long journeys went faster with vollers than with flyers. I sorted out a few last-minute problems and took my leave. At the last moment it was decided that a small group of Djangs, of both

racial stocks, would accompany me to establish friendly relations with the Miglas. This suited me very well. I was now consciously beginning that wide-ranging system of establishing friendly relations between the various countries of this continental grouping. Of this I will have much more to say later. For now I flew to Migladrin, saw old Mog — called Mog the Mighty — and met my friends there again. Then, leaving the Djangs to diplomacy, I took off for Valka.

All this high-level politicking was intensely interesting, but I hungered to hold Delia in my arms again.

In Valka I was greeted like some hero returning home, which embarrassed me mightily. After the junketings, which, you may well imagine, went on for a long time and embraced a continual round of banquets and feasts and entertainments, I had to confess to Delia, rather miserably, that I had failed.

“You see, Delia. It is even more important, now that Hamal refuses to sell us fliers, that we must learn to build our own.”

We were sitting on our favorite terrace high in the fortress of Esser Rarioch overlooking Valkanium and the sweep of the bay. Drak and Lela were safely sleeping after all the excitement of seeing their father — and did they chatter and jump up and down! The streaming mingled light of the twin suns, Zim and Genodras, fell about us in the early evening. Soon it would be night, one of those sweet soft nights of Kregen when the moon-blooms open their petals and drink the moons-light, and the sky is filled with the pink radiance of the moons. I sipped a fine Jholaix, a wine with few equals.

“But, dear heart,” said Delia, her sweet face troubled, “is it ethical to steal this secret from the Hamalians?”

I knew what she meant.

I tried to explain.

“In the normal way, no, of course not. But think how Hamal has behaved. Not only do they charge inflated prices for vollers — and remember, I have seen them built and built them with my own hands! — and refuse all service, they deliberately manufacture them with built-in faults. I am now absolutely convinced of this.”

“But, Dray, that is—”

“I know, Delia. But it is so. And we all know the fine men and women who have been killed in faulty fliers. This is murder. We owe it to the memory of the dead and to the well-being of the living to make sure a voller is safe in the air.”

“This all sounds high and mighty, you great shaggy graint! But the fact remains. You are stealing a secret from another country so that you will not have to buy their goods.”

My Delia, my Delia of Delphond, has a confoundedly cutting way with her at times! She put her pretty rosy finger right on the central core, on a fact that had troubled me. I tried in my gruff way to explain that, as far as I could see, the Hamalians had forfeited all rights to their own secrets, through their despicable use of them. “If they treated us fairly, there would be no need to steal the secret. They are a nasty lot, anyway — well, most of them — and they have done me mischief and will seek to do so again.”

“I know, Dray, you do not seek to justify your actions by talking of revenge.” Delia spoke with just enough hesitancy to make me sit up and take notice. She is the most beautiful woman in two worlds. She

is also shrewd, clear-sighted, realistic — and maddeningly romantic, too! — and clever enough to tie in knots the smartest politicians and lawyers of those same two worlds.

“Revenge is for the softheaded, Delia,” I said. I drank some wine to break up my words. “Oh, I know I’ve thumped a few heads when I was annoyed—”

“I believe you have.”

“Yes, well. This is taken by me to be a matter of state. If Hamal attacks us — as I believe it will — we must have vollers to defend ourselves. I can find vollers only in Hamal.” She sat there, looking at me, her glorious brown hair with those dazzling auburn highlights catching the last of Zim as the red sun sank in swirls and floods of orange-and-crimson fire. She wore a simple sleeveless gown of white sensil, soft and clinging, without any jewels save a tiny brooch I had given her pinned to the left shoulder. That brooch blazed now in the fiery light with brilliant orange, yellow, and blue gems in the hubless spoked wheel within the circle.

“And, you great onker,” she said, her face radiant, “what of your fat friend, Queen Fahia of Hyrklana?”

I laughed.

I roared with joy.

“She’d feed me to her pet neemus, and those black-souled cats would chomp me with great delight. No, if I am to discover high state secrets — and those damned silver boxes are just that — I need freedom of movement. As Amak Hamun ham Farthytu, I can move around Hamal.”

“We might consider,” she said, putting her head on one side, “whether it might be an idea to import the rank of Amak into Vallia. I will talk to Father. It would reward many good men and their wives.”

“It’s a thought, Delia. An Amak’s holdings need be only an estate, not a village, even. Something a little grander than a Tyr, which is really a title only.”

So we talked on in that glorious evening as the suns sank and the Twins, the two second moons of Kregen eternally orbiting each other, rolled by above our heads casting down their gold-pink light. We had much to say to each other. But, true to my determination to do all I could for my island of Valka, the following days saw my preparations being finalized. I would use the flier from Djanduin. Once again Delia made up gear for my travel. I kissed her and held her close, I kissed the twins, Drak and Lela, and then I stepped aboard the voller, observing the fantamyrrh, and as I rose into the clear air I shouted down.

“Remberree, my Delia!”

“Remberree, Dray, and mind you come back in one piece!”

## Chapter Eight

Trylon Rees of the Golden Wind — lion-man

To fly off and leave my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains! Just to sail away like that, leaving my Delia with all her beauty and love and sound common sense and untold flights of romantic happiness! What a fool I was! What an onker, what a get-onker! I turned the flier around over the sea westward of the island of Astar, isolate and remote, and swung back. What were state secrets and high

politics compared with Delia — Delia, Princess Majestrix of Vallia!

Away over on my larboard lay the island of Pandahem, where Pando was no doubt attempting to shore up his Kovnate against his foes, and Tilda, Tilda of the Many Veils, was trying to support him and fighting against taking too much drink. I must visit them soon. But the Opaz-forsaken rasts of Hamal were attacking northward over the mountains in Pandahem, and soon they would conquer North Pandahem as they had subdued the South. Then it would be Vallia's turn. How could I take my people of Djanduin, my people of Valka, up against the Hamalians without a strong air service? Oh, yes, the Vallian Air Service was strong and devoted and would fight. But I had seen the sky ships of the Hamalians. Against them the poor fliers the Hamalians sold to other countries would stand no chance. Against them flutduins would hurl themselves in vain. And Vallia, that great island of which the smaller island of Valka was a Stromnate, possessed no aerial cavalry at all.

No.

No, I could not selfishly return to Delia and let the world of Kregen go hang. I must turn this pitiful little voller about, and head south again, flying over the Southern Ocean to the continent of Havilfar, and to Hamal.

It was a doom laid upon me.

Because I had no heart to fly near the devastated ruins of Paline Valley, this time I took the little flier in over the northern coast of Hamal close by the town of Eomlad to the east of Skull Bay. Below lay thick impenetrable jungles and the heat persisted. Eomlad was situated inland on the banks of a wide sluggish river and as I passed I saw smoke and flames rising in the sultry air. Shades of that earlier visit!

This was, again, no business of mine. This time, I, Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy, forced my voller on and left the burning town. I had business in Ruathytu.

Every instinct in me warred together. I wished to go to Eomlad and help. I knew that time was running out for my mission to be of use. Hamal's attacks on Pandahem, leading to an invasion of Vallia, would not cease because I went to a burning town to see what help I might render. Anyway, the fighting was over. I had seen the swarms of sky ships departing. What had been going on there I did not know; I would discover all that concerned me at the capital, Ruathytu.

The burning and sack of Eomlad, a famous occasion, was a symptom of a great event that directly assisted me, as you will hear. I flew on, filled with the urgency of my quest, determined this time to allow no obstacles to stop me, obstacles like, for instance, a red-faced onker of a Strom with a grudge.

Well, men grow corn for Zair to sickle, as they say in the Eye of the World.

From Eomlad, the capital, Ruathytu, lies due southeast a distance just over two hundred dwaburs.

With the shining level spear of the River Havilthytus in view along the southern horizon and with a luxuriantly growing farming area below, with small tributaries flowing south into the Havilthytus, their banks dotted with the white-walled, flat-roofed houses of villages, the confounded voller gave up on me. With some exertion and a masterful display of the aerial skill taught me by Delia, I brought the flier to earth with a bone-shaking jerk. I had plowed a nasty-looking furrow through a field of rich crops, and I knew the farmer would not be pleased.

I need not have worried about that poor devil of a farmer.

Even as I jumped from my ruined craft I saw evil tongues of flame burst from his flat roof, shimmering palely in the glow of Zim and Genodras, the two suns that are called Far and Havil in Havilfar, and greasy smoke broke away in puffs downwind.

So familiar are scenes like this in my homecoming to Kregen I had to remember that I was here because I had willed it, and not through the summons of the Scorpion. I ran toward the burning farmhouse.

For my playacting part as Hamun ham Farhytu, Amak of Paline Valley, I wore a crisp new white tunic run up for me by Delia's sewing maidens. A rather handsome bead necklace of gold and rubies hung around my neck, borrowed from Delia's gem casket. But, because I had taken my leave in Valka, I wore belted to my waist a rapier and a left-hand dagger, the Jiktar and the Hikdar. As I ran I saw men fighting, and women running, and I heard the bestial sound of combat.

Why I embroiled myself in a single burning farmhouse when I had flown past a burning city I leave to others to explain; my flier had broken down here and so here was where action lay. The situation had to be sized up. I dare not plunge in on the wrong side; my mission in Hamal meant too much for silly mistakes like that.

There was, to my mind at least, no question which side to take.

The flutsmen were going about their work with dreadful efficiency.

These mercenaries of the skies are a fascinating phenomenon of Havilfar. If you pay them they will fight for you. This is true of the many various sorts of mercenaries on Kregen, yes; but the flutsmen consider themselves a cut above every other kind of fighting-man — and in this, as I had shown and was to show with greater severity, they were wrong.

Most of them were off their fluttrells, the birds chained down out of the way of the fighting, and the riders were shooting with crossbows at anyone who tried to break out of the flames.

Familiar scenes! Horrible scenes! I had no business here and should get my tail out of it as quickly as possible; but, like the onker I am, I jumped in, flickering my rapier and main-gauche. Three flutsmen went down, narrow-bladed steel thrust through their midribs, before any of them were aware of me. Cutting down the odds is one way of staying ahead. Three of them wielding thraxters came at me: Rapier and main-gauche against thraxter . . . Well, the thraxter is a vertical-bladed weapon, and the rapier a horizontal-bladed weapon. The left-hand dagger gave me an advantage, but two of the flutsmen carried shields. It was warm work. I skipped and jumped, and braced away the seeking blades with my left-hand dagger while the rapier slid in, smooth, low, deadly, and so whipped out, glistening with blood. The fight did not last long.

A crowd of flutsmen took the sky amid a rustling of wings. I was alone. This meant that succor for the farm was at hand — or so I thought. I walked across to the door, which was just slaking into gray-and-black ash where the different woods had burned away. I could see no one alive.

Inside the house lay a charred mass of burned bodies, most unpleasant, and I backed out. The suns still shone. The breeze blew. The smell of the crops reached in over that charnel-house stink. I went around the corner of the building to the stables, for youngsters often hide there during raids, and at first could see no one. I wiped my weapons on a piece of cloth hanging from a nail in a beam. There were no animals in the stables. The smell of urine and dung and straw hung rich and earthy on the air, and the flat evil taste of charred wood drifted from the husk of the house.

A pile of straw moved. A hand showed and, even as I watched, the hand gripped my ankle. I saw the straw slide away and I was staring down into the face of a Rapa, his fierce beaked birdlike face bloody and gashed, one eye missing, and in the remaining eye a dying glare of mad, vengeful terror.

He gobbled at me, and blood ran greasily.

“Yetch! Nulsh! By Rhapaporgolam the Reaper of Souls! You will die!”

“Steady, dom!” I spoke with some acerbity. “I’m on your side.”

He did not hear me. His grip was just tight enough for me to have to kick harder to free myself than I would wish to kick a dying man. The Rapa’s wounds were very terrible, and he lurched from his hiding place, the straw falling away and glistening red with blood. I forced myself to remain upright, but I was not going to allow him, dying or not, to continue to grip my ankle. He was trying to trip me, and his strength would not have matched a woflo’s.

Like a stupid onker, I stood there with a dying man hanging on to my ankle and feebly trying to pitch me over. I heard two voices, two short sentences, the second following hard on the heels of the first: “Hai Jikai! For the Emperor!” And then: “*Your back, dom! Look out!*”

Then someone hit me under the ear. He hit hard enough for me to go headfirst over the prostrate Rapa, to break his grip on my ankle, to send me pitching into the bloody straw. I spat mouthfuls out, and in my head those famous old bells of Beng-Kishi rang and rang and dizzied me.

Blearily I looked out on the stables.

The wounded Rapa was now dead. Another Rapa, dressed in blood-smeared half-armor, was also dead, his head near severed.

I blinked, I swallowed. Then I put a probing finger very gingerly to the tender spot under my ear, and I winced.

“He didn’t pay quite enough for your passage to the Ice Floes of Sicce, dom! Or else you have a skull as thick as a vosk’s!” said that second voice.

“As stupid as a vosk’s,” I said, staring blearily up at the man who boomed in so jovial and stentorian a voice, the man who had shouted to warn me, the man who had dispatched this poor pair of Rapas.

He was not apim. He wore bronze lorica and helmet, with workmanlike straps of plain leather. He held a thraxter, shining with blood, in the professional grip of the fighting-man. In his helmet feathers glowed, brave feathers of purple and gold. He wore greaves, and they were gilded and shining. His face showed the glorious golden mane, now mostly confined beneath the helmet, and the equally glorious golden beard under his chin, of the Numim. He was not apim, like me. As I have promised you, I introduce types of people on Kregen when they impinge on my story. I had met Numims many times: they had served with Viridia the Render; they had marched under my flag, Old Superb, many times; I had fought with them and against them. The nearest approximation to their faces I can give you is to liken them to a human lion. If I refer to Numims as lion-men, you will understand why.

Now this Numim yelled at me as he put down a hand and hauled me to my feet.

“I can see by your clothes you are no fighting-man, dom!” He took in my rapier. “And I see you have taken up this fancy notion of the young bloods. Rapiers and daggers, they’re all the rage with the young aristos in Ruathytu these days!”

He pulled me up and I winced as pain flowed over my scalp. I brushed bloody straw away, and so the Numim must have taken flutsmen blood upon my white tunic for Rapa blood from the straw. Many races do not have red blood on Kregen, but red is the color mostly seen on battlefields.

“You did well, dom!” the lion-man roared again. He was in high good humor. Truth to tell, I seldom knew when he was not in high good humor. “We cleaned out this rast’s nest of emperor’s men; cleared them out with fire!”

“The Rapa shouted for the emperor,” I said, cautiously.

A thought occurred to him, and he drew himself up. “Llahal and Llahal,” he said, with the double-L sound that is the greeting for strangers upon Kregen. “Your name?”

I knew he was an important personage, from the ornamentation of his dress and the jewels in the hilt of the thraxter. As part of my plan I would humor him.

“Hamun ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley. Llahal.”

“I am Rees ham Harshur, Trylon of the Golden Wind.”

So we made pappattu.

“You are fit enough to move, Amak Hamun?”

“I can move. But my voller cannot.”

He laughed. The Trylon of the Golden Wind was seldom able to pass a bur without breaking into great gusty laughter.

“The flutsmen are as always anxious to earn their hire. You must accept my hospitality. I return to the city now that our work here is done. I was checking its thoroughness when I came across you. You are keen, I will say that, Amak; but not overly skilled, by Krun!” He was laughing away now. “To be caught and held by the foot by a stinking dying Rapa while another clouts you over the head! That is a story! You were fortunate he hit you with nothing worse than a wooden beam.”

“Yes,” I said.

We went out into the sun-shine to his voller. A Trylon is the next rank of nobility above a Strom. He was an important man. These Numims are a boisterous crowd, and they do not share that strong attribute of Earthly lions — they are not lazy. Trylon Rees was a bundle of energy.

“I had best fetch my things from my—” I began.

He waved a gauntleted hand most airily.

“Leave them, Amak Hamun. We will send a voller from the city to collect yours and bring it in. Climb aboard.”



Observing the fantamyrrh, for I did not wish to offend this lion-man, I stepped aboard his flier. She was a nice handy craft, with a smart Hikdar as captain, and a crew who wore the purple-and-gold favors in colored feathers and in scarves around their waists and shoulders. We went into the cabin and the voller lifted off for Ruathytu.

What Trylon Rees told me as we lolled in the cabin, drinking wine, a nice light pale yellow vintage from Barrath, interested me mightily. The emperor had been overthrown. Now Hamal was ruled by Queen Thyllis, who would soon be proclaimed empress. She was the old emperor's niece, and she was, by the Trylon's account, a remarkable woman. Any hopes I had that the outward expansion of Hamal's frontiers and the consequent eternal wars would now cease were crushed as Rees said: "The old emperor was past it. He was leading us to disaster. Now that we have cleared him and his followers away — you had a hand in that, Amak, and therefore you have our thanks — we can get on with the job of prosecuting the war as it should be fought." He shook that massively maned head. "Although I like a good fight, man to man, I am not overly fond of war."

"You share my sentiments, Trylon."

"What! You relish a fight — ah! I see." He winked at me. "You would be a young blood and ruffle it with the best in the sacred quarter of Ruathytu. Well, we shall see what we shall see." He poured more wine. "But as to this Krun-forsaken war — if only the rasts of Pandahem would leave us alone, we would not be under the necessity of fighting them."

"Do the Pandaheem then war on us?"

I'll admit now, that I slid in that word "us" very smartly indeed, getting my tongue around it and so squashing the "you" I had been about to say.

"You know they do, Amak!"

It was no part of my plans to fall out with a powerful man who could materially assist me to betray his own country.

"Of course. I was just wondering if, perhaps, the empire is not too far stretched—"

"Ah!" He leaned forward. "There you touch upon the nub of the question. We are stretched, but the empire is strong. There are thousands of clums available to fill the ranks of the army. And we can call on the guls, if need be. And we have wealth enough to hire mercenaries from overseas. We shall fight on the three present fronts — aye! And if necessary we can open more fronts to destroy our foes!"

You can't really argue coherently against a belief like that. You have to show a fellow the error of his ways. One way of showing him would be to provide Vallia with a strong and *reliable* air service.

So I nodded and said words to the effect that the new queen would bring good fortune to the empire.

He looked at me with those great golden eyes of his very shrewd upon me. He sipped wine, and, deliberately, put the goblet down. "I've taken a fancy to you, young Hamun," he said. There was no incongruousness in the statement to him. He was a good foot taller than I was, broad, bulky, and powerful. He was just leaving youth behind and entering into the full power of his prime. He was also very rich, and a Trylon. So he tended to treat me with a proprietorial air that, you may imagine, irked me. However, I dissimulated, for I had need of this Numim in my murky plans.

I, Dray Prescott, patronized by a Numim Trylon!

He went on, speaking carefully: “This new queen of ours we’ve just put on the throne. We’ve done the best for Hamal. But, young Hamun, you take the advice of a man who knows a thing or two. Look out for her. Steer clear of her. She eats young ones like you before breakfast.”

I did not press him on the point. This new Queen Thyllis of Hamal did not figure in my plans.

So began a phase of my life in Havilfar that amuses me each time I recall it. Had Trylon Rees of the Golden Wind not turned up I would have found another high-ranking personage to vouch for me. I needed to get near those in power. I knew that the secret of the silver boxes would give me control of the manufacture of vollers. And, remembering my doing in Magdag, when I had lived the life of ease in the Emerald Eye Palace during the day, and had slipped out to the warrens for nefarious schemes by night, I fancied I knew a trick or two that would do nicely for these arrogant lords of Hamal.

## Chapter Nine

“We’ll make a Bladesman of you yet!”

“No, no, no, Hamun! Your body behind the line! The arm straight before you lunge!” Rees flicked his rebated point away from my chest where his stop thrust would, had the point been sharp, have skewered me. He laughed even as he looked crestfallen. “I swear by Havil the Green — and no man should have to do that, by Krun! — you grow worse every day instead of better!”

He stripped the mask from his massive lion-face and hurled it at one of his slaves. The light from the southerly-aspect windows lay cool and shadowless within the salles d’armes. I stripped my mask off in turn. Had I pretended too far? Had I been too clumsy for belief? It is a sobering task to have to fight, even in practice, with a man and allow his point to reach in past your guard and thunk against your chest. It gave me a shivery queasy feeling, I can tell you.

“We’ll make a Bladesman of you, yet, Hamun!” boomed Trylon Rees. “Ho there, you rascals. Wine!”

His slaves bounded up with wine and clean cloths and sponges dipped in aromatic oils to cleanse him.

From his seat under the windows Nath Tolfeyr laughed. “You’ll never make a Bladesman of friend Hamun!” Nath Tolfeyr was an indolent-seeming youth, with long arms and legs, an apim, and very skilled with the rapier and main-gauche. He wore gaudy clothes, all frills and bows and lace, and a hard-brimmed hat with a square outline and round upon the head . . . very Spanish. “Never, I swear by Le — by Krun! — never while there are two suns in the sky.”

I did not miss the hesitation as Nath Tolfeyr changed the god he would swear by, as I had not missed that betraying hesitation before, and I filed it away. Tolfeyr was one of many young men who had taken up with extraordinary excitement and energy the exercise of rapier play. The thraxter as the chief sword of Havilfar had developed from its own origins; now these sporting young men felt they needed a new pastime. Duels were common. Ruffling the streets, bravo-fighting, riots, all these things flourished in the sacred quarter of Ruathytu. I had been inducted into this magic circle as the friend of Trylon Rees, a great brawler, and everyone recognized me as his protégé. In addition, when my flier had been brought in and I had been found rooms in the fashionable inn patronized by Rees, and I was able, unostentatiously, to show I had money and was wealthy enough to ride and shoot and play and ruffle with them, they accepted me. But as to my prowess with weapons, they laughed and jested and, probably but for the

protection of Trylon Rees, would have sought to amuse themselves by cutting up my hide. I was properly contemptuous of the lot of them. For one thing, with their famous empire at war on three fronts, what were they doing at home?

Their lives consisted in the main of drinking, gambling, racing, wenching, and fighting. Some of these occupations may be pleasant, too many and too often and the pace destroys, the sport palls, the fun goes out of it all. These young men kept up their facade of great and luxurious amusement and smothered most effectively the boredom from which their kind suffer as an epidemic. The infection brushed me, but I had work to do and so was inoculated.

There were certain taverns they would frequent at certain times. There were various unpleasant forms of animal combat. There was the Jikhorkdun, the great Arena of Ruathytu; I went there with a professional interest, as you may well imagine. The shouts of “Kaidur! Kaidur!” as a kaidur performed well stirred the sluggish blood and brought phantasmal memories rushing in of the Arena in Huringa in Hyrklana. This Arena in Ruathytu in Hamal was much grander and larger — and messier.

I saw the new queen there, this Queen Thyllis. Very smug and supercilious, she looked, and very beautiful, with more than a hint of cruelty in her lips; her tongue caught between sharp white teeth as the swords went in and the bright blood spurted. She had many slave girls in chains. She had male slaves, also, in chains. Everyone yelled when she appeared, standing up and giving the Hamalese salute, and again when she left, surrounded by her retinue. I did not see the sleek, shining forms of coal-black neemus, those gorgeous and lethal hunting cats that surrounded Queen Fahia of Hyrklana on similar occasions.

This Queen Thyllis was named for a goddess in an ancient myth. Thyllis the Munificent had been born to a god and a goddess and had been locked into a lenken chest, bound with iron, and nine bronze locks. She had been cast into the deepest depths of the Ocean of Clouds, but instead of drowning had been suckled by the green-and-turquoise deep-sea-god. She had grown into the most beautiful woman beneath the sea — and whatever race happened to be telling this story, then she was of their race, also (unlike many legends and myths which have identifiable central figures). And then, Under a Certain Moon, Thyllis the Munificent had broken the nine bronze locks and sundered the iron bands, and her dazzling beauty brought the whales to fawn upon her, and to give her assistance to the surface, where she waded ashore. She took the sword of the swordfish with her, for he, poor beast, perished of love, and she walked into the palace of her father and mother, the god and goddess, and she did to them what they had done to her. She did this with the help of the whales and the sword of the swordfish and a colony of local godlings, who lived on a nearby hill and who hated the god and goddess, her mother and father, because they would not let them play upon the hill near the palace.

Well, no one knows the names of the goddess Thyllis’ parents to this day, for they are banished. This Queen Thyllis was inordinately proud of the story and her name, foolish woman; and even at the distance in the Arena between our respective seats, I could see Trylon Rees was quite correct to warn anyone to give her a wide berth.

One night, after a day when everyone had been sated by a particularly horrific bloodletting in the Arena, and when the largest moon of Kregen, the Maiden with the Many Smiles, was already setting, and the fourth moon, She of the Veils, had not yet risen, with the Twins, the two second moons, not due to rise until later still, I prepared myself in my private room in the inn . . .

After the Jikhorkdun I had been beset by the very question that had kept me on tenterhooks, and for which I am sure you have been waiting.

In the long corridor beneath the private seating we strolled along, Rees and Nath and the others, gorgeously attired in our foppish clothes, our rapiers and daggers swinging from baldrics or belts in exaggerated display, the scent bottles to our noses. Oh, we must have made a pretty picture! A smiling ruffler stepped to my side, his rapier hung ridiculously low, and his boots of a fashion that amused me so that I had to look away or burst a vein.

“Amak, Hamun ham Farthytu?”

Remember, I told myself, remember you are a weakling and a bit of a fool, you onker!

“Why, yes, I have that honor. To whom do I have the honor of speaking without a Llahal between us?” That made no impression on him at all. “The same Amak of Paline Valley whoran *away from a challenge?*”

“What’s that?” boomed Rees, immensely huge, towering, swinging back from talking to Strom Dolan, a fussy Bladesman with exaggerated ideas of his own importance. “A challenge? Running away?”

“But yes, Trylon,” smirked the fellow. “The story is true. It was all over town—”

Trylon Rees started to rumble, deep in his throat. I had to get in here, and quick!

“Why, as to that,” I said in my best foppish offhand manner, “I was taken ill just before a challenge with Strom Lart ham Thordan” — I chanced my arm — “a very peculiar fellow.” A few snickering laughs rose at that, so I had guessed right, and I pressed on: “I was out of town for some time and, really, I haven’t got around to seeing the tiresome fellow again. If he’s still around.”

The sneering one was clearly taken aback, particularly as Rees said in his best lion voice: “Well, if this Strom wants to make something of it, let him see me! I’ll fry his ears in a pan for him, if he’s a mind to!”

All our cronies laughed, and the sneering fellow took himself off, much discomfited. There were gangs, and clans, and clubs, and enclaves of friends in this sacred quarter of Ruathytu, and one would stand by one’s associates. I breathed again . . .

So, then, just as I was making my preparations for the night’s work, a loud rapping on the door heralded the entrance of Trylon Rees. He bore a bottle of wine.

“And tell me about this cramp of a Strom, Hamun, you cunning rascal! Taken sick just before a duel! Hey!”

We cracked the bottle and I told him a story and he laughed and promised he would stand as my second if Strom Lart persisted in the challenge, and he added: “And then, Hamun my boy, get sick again. Then I’ll deal with the rast!”

“That is most kind of you, my dear Rees.”

“Kind? Kind nothing! I’ll stick him and joy in the doing of it, by Krun!”

We proved the bottle honest — that is, we emptied it and so checked its measure — and then Rees rolled off, roaring a song about a lion-gal and her proclivities, and I could get on with my mission. The interruption had made me late. I had to reach the factory called the Blind Wall over on the far side of the Black River, down in a heavily guarded quarter, where, I had been informed in idle conversation, “. . .

the jolly old guls who can be trusted filled up the voller what's-its, don't you know, old son.”

The incredible idea had occurred to me that these rich idle layabouts had no more idea than I how a flier worked. If they needed service, they told their slaves to take the voller to the repair shops, where guls would do the work. Only guls who had proved completely trustworthy were employed on the work. The state kept voller production, as one of their infernal laws, very much under their thumb.

The decision not to fly was an easy one to make. I had to keep to the shadows, slink from cover to cover, make sure I was not seen. With a thrill I believe you may try to imagine, I belted up soft hunting leathers about me, drew the gleaming gold buckle tight, brought the broad leather belt around my waist, and cinctured it home. I strapped on a fine rapier given me by Delia, and a main-gauche. Over my right hip I carried a trusty old sailor's knife. Also, as a little swank, I suppose, I carried a sheaf of terchicks over my shoulder. The terchick, the throwing knife of my plainsmen, could well be even quicker and more deadly this night than a Lohvian longbow — although I wouldn't let Seg hear me say that.

I took no shield. The dark russet-brown of the hunting leathers brought back memories of hunting in Aphrasöe and I sighed. As always, I vowed that when the current excitement was over, I would go and seek out the Todalpheme of Hamal and find out directions to the Swinging City.

As a final gesture to the fates, I glued a beard onto my smooth-shaven chin. This beard was made up — so Delia had told me with much laughter — from hairs I had myself sprouted and she had cut off. She had saved them and worked them up into a neat daggerlike beard, and used cunning silk bases to hold them in position. When I looked at myself in a tall pier mirror, I looked much as I had appeared out on the trail.

Over all I swirled a great dark gray cloak and then I padded out. If mere costume could get me past the guards, I was in and among the silver boxes already.

My soft leather hunting boots made no sound. I walked steadily across the Bridge of One Thousand Vosks over the Black River. Here lay rows of dark houses, suburbs where the guls lived.

This kind of dark desperate errand struck me as very different from previous occasions when I had been about nefarious business on Kregen. Far sooner would I be back in Valka with Delia and the twins. But what I did now I did from the duty I conceived I owed my people of Valka, and to Vallia, also. In addition it was terribly clear that the Hamalians were conquest-bent, desirous of creating a huge empire, perhaps one to rival the old and half-remembered Empire of Loh. That meant the Miglas would suffer. That meant Djanduin would be overrun. That meant I had to do my utmost to put together some kind of alliance against Hamal, and equip the fighting forces with vollers that would not constantly break down.

The darkness between moons was not that of Notor Zan, for one of the lesser moons of Kregen hurtled across the night sky.

Keeping to the shadows and creeping stealthily along the dark streets I avoided detection, a sly furtive creature indeed. Few people were about, for the guls were working long hours and they needed their sleep. The gates of the Blind Wall were patrolled by watchful Rapa guards, mercenaries who would not hesitate to kill to fulfill the terms of their hiring contracts. The strict laws of Hamal ensured the Rapas would carry out their guard duties with the same faithfulness to orders as a soldier of Hamal.

Slinking along in the shadows, which lay so thick the small fleeting dot of light of the lesser moon merely served to heighten the intervening darkness, I made my way around the circuit of the walls. The Black River washed the northern face of the building and here I found the only place I thought might afford me

ingress. Water plants grew along the wall, their hair-fine roots clinging to narrow cracks in the masonry. Up these vines I went, testing each handhold, my legs kicking free. I can move silently when necessary, an art learned even before I spent those educational seasons with my clansmen, and the parapet felt hard under my hands as I looked down from the summit of the wall. Darkness, silence, mystery, lay below.

It did not take me long to find steps down from the parapet and a path across to the likeliest-looking building. The wooden door was padlocked; but with a muffling fold of my cloak and a savage wrench with the knife, the padlock snapped. I eased inside.

Well, I will not weary you with a recital of my disappointment. And yet — what else was there, truly, to find? Here lay the piles of boxes, some filled, some waiting to be filled. Piles of minerals, earth, and sand lay neatly ranked, the scoops and shovels — and every one with a stamped number! — regimented in their racks. I sifted the earth through my fingers, barely able to see. I had brought a globe of fireglass containing fire, with a wood-and-metal carrying box with shutters. I chanced opening one of the shutters and the firelight within flashed upon the piles of earth, on the ranked rows of silver boxes. I felt anger, and crushed it down.

With two silver boxes in a voller, you could fly.

By bringing the boxes closer together or moving them farther apart, and by changing their attitude, you could control a flier, make it rise or fall, move faster or slower.

I knew what the silver boxes contained.

Earth and air.

Air and earth.

I looked around. Dirt and air! How could they be the secret I sought?

This shed contained silver boxes for the mineral half of the controls. The next shed contained silver boxes that were empty of all but air. The faint smell of tainted malsidges, a fruit of which I am fond, made me wrinkle up my nostrils. Well, I did not think they crushed up malsidges and somehow conveyed the smell into the boxes. But they might. Then I forced myself to realize this was in reality a reconnaissance mission. I was establishing parameters of action here in Ruathytu. Soon, by listening to my rich acquaintances during the day, and following up the clues by night, I would work nearer to a solution of the mystery.

Besides being a world of great beauty, Kregen is also a world of great and sudden violence, and there was no anticlimax to this night's work. Or, rather, the true anticlimax of my failed mission was masked by a flurry of action as four Rapa guards, carrying flaring torches, burst into the shed as I bent over an opened silver box.

The sight of them in the torchlight with their ferocious beaked faces, the war-feathers flaunting from their helmets, and the swords and shields, snapped some link in my brain. I flung myself upon them, ripping the rapier free, my left hand still cumbered by the small cube of the fireglass box.

They shrieked in their high obscene Rapa way as our blades crossed glittering in the torchlight. My cloak flared out, swirling, as I spun away, slicing a Rapa beak down, avoiding the vicious thraxter slash, stuffing the box back into my breechclout.

“Apim rast! Die!” They were shrilling at me, incensed by the death of the first of them, absolutely confident they would overpower me. They were making an infernal racket, and as the blades crossed and rang and screeched, the noise grew and I knew guards would come running to reinforce these three. I dropped the next, my main-gauche slapped into my hand, and deflected the next one’s thrust. My blade gonged against a shield and I had to skip and duck away. A sword-and-shield-man against a rapier-and-main-gauche-man provide endless room for argument; but it always all boils down in the end to who is the better practitioner with the weapons he uses.

Luckily for me I was able to prove superior. The torchlight splintered from the blades as they chopped and crossed. The two remaining Rapas’ blades were shining and silver; my blade gleamed starkly dark with blood.

“Yetch!” one Rapa shrieked at me, foam flecking from that beaked face. “When we take you it will be the Heavenly Mines for you!”

“Aye!” panted the other, as he thrust up his shield and so managed to deflect my blade. “The Heavenly Mines, cramp, where you will slave until you die!”

These guards would know the Heavenly Mines by hearsay only, by their fearful reputation. There was no information to be gleaned from them. I had slaved in the Heavenly Mines already, and nothing would drag me back there, so I thought, as I twisted a slash and feinted left, then dropped and was able to thrust the rapier through the guts of number three.

Number four shrieked again, in fear this time, and turned to rush from the shed to the safety of his friends. I could hear them coming running, now, shouting the alarm.

He had seen my face. It was bearded, true, and many Rapas cannot tell one apim from another; although with experience I was growing more and more capable of differentiating between Rapa faces. He was a guard and would also be experienced. He would be questioned.

As the fool turned to cast back a frightened glance, the terchick stood out quiveringly from his eye.

He collapsed against the door as those outside sought to thrust it open, and the slight delay gave me time to leap for the far end, bash a plank out, force more away from the beams, and so dart out into the darkness. Still the Twins were not up, but over the eastern horizon, She of the Veils rose, ominously lifting pale level streaks of gold and pink.

Time was running out.

The way back to the inn — an inn I had already made up my mind to leave for a more convenient billet — lay across either one of two bridges across the Black River to the sacred quarter. I chose to return over the built-up and arcaded bridge the Ruathytuans called the Bridge of Sicce, for its massive pillars and piers supported a pressing multitude of houses and shops, with promenades running as many as three or four stories above the main street level. From this high perch many and many a poor devil cast himself or herself into the dark waters in suicide to be swept away to the Ice Floes of Sicce. These galleries and arcades and narrow roofs gave me a fine time as I fled back. My cloak flared in the wind of my passage. She of the Veils rose clear of the jumbled horizon and shone benignly down as I scampered across the rooftops and jumped down from the ledges, level to level, passing across the river and so plunging back into the sacred quarter. Here I could leap from balcony to balcony, hang from ledges, crawl along a razor-backed gable, cling to a chimney, and hurl myself across the gulf of an alley far below. I do not think any eyes spied me as I cavorted across the tiles of sleeping Ruathytu.

What kind of devilish figure, half beast, half gargoyle, I created, hurdling the rooftops, I did not know. I slid down the roof of my inn, plunged to the balcony of my room, and crept stealthily in by the window. I employed a couple of harmless Hamalian servants, and they were not disturbed in the next room. As I turned for a last look at this alien sky I saw She of the Veils floating clear. And against that luminous golden-pink orb floated a long bank of jagged black cloud like a reflection of the city below.

## Chapter Ten

### Of Chido, Casmus the Deldy, and Radak the Syatra

The only result of the night's work that affected me could as well be summed up in the words of young Chido ham Thafey. "He must have been a man," said Chido. "For the fellow left a knife behind him. He isn't the devil the guards would have us believe, by Krun, he isn't!"

Chido, a young man who held a courtesy rank of Amak, for when his father died Chido would become a Vad, screwed up his chinless, watery-eyed, aimless face in a contortion expressing extreme amazement. We were in the throes of fencing practice and Rees was attacking Nath Tolfeyr with huge enjoyment. The high-windowed hall rang with cheerful shouts. Chido — well, Chido was Chido, a young man with much wealth, little sense, great charm, friend of Bladesmen, and with a burning desire to become a renowned duelist.

The only result of the night, I say. Well, four dead men, be they Rapas or not, are not so lightly glossed over by me. I have found a greater respect for human life than a casual observer of my carryings-on on Kregen might imagine, and although the Savanti must share a great deal in those initial impulses, the shedding of blood except in the direst of emergencies remains abhorrent to me. I think my Delia understands. And, Kregen is a world where violence can get out of hand unless a man seeks and holds on to a doctrine, whether from some easy and externally imposed religion, or from a much more difficult inner compulsion, which will make him understand that a human life is a human life no matter in what form the spirit is encased. The unpleasant religion of Len the Silver Leem thrived on violence and lust and cheap promises of fulfillment.

"Come on, Hamun, there's a good fellow," sang out Chido. "Take up your wapier and let's have a set-to."

"No, no, Chido. I feel too fragile just now."

Chido always spoke like that, changing his R's to W's and affecting a high-pitched tone of voice, goggling eyes and all. I suppose no one can live in a country and fail to find someone for whom they can feel a spark of affection. Hamal was the bitter enemy of Vallia, and of my friends of Pandahem, and so that made Tylon Rees and Chido my enemies, too. But I did not hate them. They were jolly company. They amused me.

Excusing myself, I left the salle and strolled out into the city. My life had followed a strange path since I had come here, almost as though a curtain had gone up on a new act. No very great deal of time had elapsed since I had last been hurled back to Earth by the Star Lords, for I had been moving very fast; but there was no sign of anyone I had encountered in my previous sojourn in Hamal. The depredations of the wild folk from over the Mountains of the West continued. The estates of poor Amak Naghan had not burned alone in that endless and bitter struggle on the far frontiers. And the burnings had been savagely echoed here, nearer the capital, in the recent revolt. I had seen a city burn, I had fought in the ruins of a local estate. Now this local violence was over, the Queen in full power, the laws of Hamal firmly on her



side. There might be bandit raids of flutsmen from time to time, but the flutsmen were a thorn in the flesh of all the countries of Havilfar . . .

So now I strolled and watched the throngs of people, all busy about the essential everyday tasks that keep a great city alive. In the sacred quarter within the old walls and the curved helmet-shape of the fork of the rivers, the streets run higgledy-piggledy, often narrow and cramped, shadowed, lined with shops and stores and arcades, with the townhouses of the great ones secluded beyond iron-spiked walls. To the west beyond the old walls lies the new town, where the boulevards run arrow-straight, where the Jikhorkdun stands proudly, where the new temples rise, where the Horters and the lesser gentry sometimes mingle in the passing phases of social movements. The Walls of Kazlili encircle the city in a wide encincture, the new Walls, pierced by stupendous gates, enclosing all the hustle and bustle of a mighty city, proud and arrogant in its power.”

The little wheeled vehicles trundled on their tracks behind their amiths, up and down the broader avenues. I thought of my adventures with Avec and Ilter, and of the time when in just such an amith-drawn carriage I had plunged my face into a basket of ripe shonages. Well, still on the trail of the voller secrets, I was now embroiled with an entirely new set of people.

By day I lounged with this raffish set, gambled, drank, swore, raced. By night I followed up the hints and revelations I had uncovered in my talks. Two other voller manufactories had been entered, with the same barren results . . . dirt and air. Now I was going to find out what I could of the manufactories where the amphorae came from, which were used to convey this mysterious dirt, this infuriating air. I knew the dirt was very similar to that earth and mineral we quarried in the Heavenly Mines in conditions of utmost horror. There were additions to the earth before it reached the silver boxes. So there must be other mines, somewhere in Hamal, making their contributions to the mix in the silver boxes. In the manufactory called Zhyan’s Pinions — called that because an aerial view of the four blocks of brick-built buildings with their white stucco walls and roofs suggested the appearance of a zhyan in flight — the guls filled amphorae with this mysterious dirt. I had found that out from old Casmal, who had no ham in his name, was not of the aristocracy, and yet was tolerated — no, welcomed! — by these young bloods because his cognomen was Casmal the Deldy.

And Deldys he had too, in plenty. He was near enough to a banker for that to fit him as a description; but usuring ways were more to his predilection, more to his way of life, and those rich fat golden deldys he lent came back to him well multiplied — or the young bloods rued the day and ran the gauntlet of their fathers’ displeasure. Casmal the Deldy had ears and eyes everywhere. His corpulence fitted him. He wore a great black cummerbund swathed around his belly — and, I had more than half an idea, some kind of ribbed corset beneath to hold him in — and rich gem-encrusted robes, and he kept his smooth satiny skin oiled and sleek. Oh, yes, Casmal fitted his part in the hectic life of the sacred quarter of Ruathytu.

I had pumped him and gained information, but he had stonewalled on my request to be taken on a visit around the buildings of Zhyan’s Pinions. I was not to get in as easily as that.

“No, no, my dear Amak.” He was punctilious, was Casmal the Deldy, in his lubricious way. As I say, he fitted his part. “I am merely a poor money-lender scraping a living from young bloods. What those guls do down in Zhyan’s Pinions is a mystery to me. All I know or want to know is that I am paid my due for my lovely golden deldys.”

He shut up then. But I guessed the government of Queen Thyllis, desperate after the devastation and the expenses of the successful revolt, was borrowing money everywhere, as hard as it could. Damned war! Always upsets the economy and makes it hard for a poor man to make a living. Just a simple

straightforward fight between equals, one to one, as Trylon Rees had said, that should be the way of it. That would sort out the warmongers. But then, Hamal had the duel, developed to an art form and an entertainment.

So I spent my days, wandering, scraping up information, at the *salle*, circumspectly at the baths of nine, seeking to worm my way into establishments where it was clear Queen Thyllis and her Pallans wanted no one's nose poking around. And, still, for all my working, for all my nighttime flittings over the rooftops, my cloak flaring under the moons, for all my smashing of amphorae, I came not a jot nearer. And, too, I guessed much more of this would arouse suspicions to the point where the Pallans must guess someone was after the volder secrets. They were sensitive about their vollers. They had already set heavier guard details. I had one or two merry fights to break clear, and left three more *terchicks* as evidence that the mischief was done by a man and not a demon with eight arms.

I had to cover my tracks somehow.

All the time these nocturnal expeditions were going on I ruffled my life away as one of the young bloods of the sacred quarter of Ruathytu. I had now practically perfected that blank look of docile imbecility — and damned difficult it was, too, with a figurehead like mine.

The precautions I took in the baths of nine so as to disguise my muscular development and the breadth of those shoulders of mine that, as a boy, had wrought such havoc with my clothes, to the despair of my mother, the sheer animal strength of the body God and adversity have blessed me with — all these precautions make me look back now with amusement. At the time it was deadly serious. The baths of nine — and they are worth a book in themselves — had to be most carefully indulged in, and I pleaded all manner of ingenious excuses. Only with Trylon Rees could I feel reasonably comfortable, and that because the lion-man thought he knew me best of all of them, and understood the burning desire in me to be a Bladesman, a desire frustrated by nature.

Once, I recall, Rees received a challenge from a man — an *apim* — from some outlandish tribe of Hamal renowned for its wrestlers. With his great booming laugh the lion-man accepted the wager, and we all gathered around the mat, with the rules and the laws all carefully detailed, to watch and hoot and roar encouragement, and to lay wagers that made old Casmus the Deldy rub his sly hands together.

The lion-man was a truly remarkable specimen of humanity. His massive golden mane, the golden flecks in his eyes, that tawny skin with the muscles sliding and roping, that bunched bursting power of him — only when I took a more careful look at his challenger did I give this man, one Radak, any chance at all. Then I looked more closely.

Radak the Syatra came from a tribe living far away over by the Mountains of the West, remote and half cut off, under constant threat of raids, although not, I fancied, as forgotten as Paline Valley. His physique had clearly been developed from barbarian ancestors only a generation or so removed. Like a solid block of metal with the muscles deeply etched, as though by acid, with a round head jutting from between massive shoulders, he stood with his fists on his hips, a primitive killing-machine, entirely savage, appearing invulnerable.

“Come on, Radak the Syatra! Let us see if you are made of steel or of flesh and blood!”

“With the blessing of Havil the Green. On your own head be it, Notor!”

Radak's body moved with that blur of speed that betokens an athlete in perfect training or a barbarian in his natural state. I knew savages. Simple-minded a barbarian may be, but he is quick-witted and cunning

because he wishes to keep his skin on his back and his head on his shoulders — and not decorating the trophy posts of his enemies. I looked at the superb chiseled body of Radak with all that dynamic, unstoppable killing power and I knew that I, Dray Prescot, walked about in a body like that, for all that I took great pains with paints and disguises to conceal the facts.

The fight took some time. Accompanied by the whistles and catcalls of the onlookers the two men wrestled. I knew with a little uncomfortable shiver that I'd best call into play those marvelous disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy, if I was ever pitted against either of them, summon up the almost mystical tricks and systems that had given me the advantage in unarmed combat even over the fearsome Khamorros. These two wrestled country style. They grunted and grappled and heaved and fell with enormous splatting squashes and displays of colossal brute power. They streamed sweat. They roared and sledged each other, and twisted, and locked, and still each man remained on his feet. A few khamster grips and locks and they'd fall flat and down and out. I looked on, wanting Trylon Rees to win, of course, but feeling for Radak, named for the voracious man-eating plant of Loh.

Such a display of sheer primal energy! Crashings and bashings, simple barbarian strength pitted against only a fractionally more skilled civilized strength. In the end Rees managed to land so many elbow blows that Radak staggered back, his face a mask of blood, and Rees was on him, bearing him down, smothering him. For a few murs they twitched like a single dying beast, convulsively, each spasm following at greater and greater length, and then Rees patted Radak on the head and stood up, smiling and stretching, and it was all over.

Casmas the Deldy came off reasonably well, although he forked out my golden winnings when I held out my hand.

"You would bet on the Trylon Rees if he was sent against a chavonth," Casmas grumbled. Rees was listening.

"Aye," I said in my best toadying manner. "Aye! For the Trylon Rees is a man among men!"

Rees came over, hot and sweaty, and clapped me on the shoulder, roaring his good humor. I take no pride in all this: it was necessary, it was a distasteful task laid on me.

The betting had not been entirely in Rees's favor. Radak, this massive chunk of barbarism, had been imported into the raffish and decadent world of Ruathytu's sacred quarter by a Vad who fancied he had a grudge against the Trylon of the Golden Wind. When the doctors had patched up Radak the Syatra he was led out. His Vad, an aristocratic shark called Garnath, had swung off with so black a look I knew the business had been nowhere near finished on the wrestling mat. Radak's eyes held all the ferocity of the true savage, smoldering with the inner fires of pure rage, well exemplified in many of the cycles of ballads surrounding the mythical figure of King Kranak whose story has been sung these many thousand years around the hearth-fires of Kregen. The lilt in the songs of Kregen is ideally suited to bring out the true barbarian savage, limning him in fine detail, with his heavy-jawed, low-browed face and mighty-thewed body. That treacherous lilt can abruptly break its rhythm to pitch the imagination over into dark abysses of the mind . . .

Radak the Syatra took the proffered hand and shook with Trylon Rees ham Harshur. His maniacal eyes glared into the tawny eyes of the lion-man.

"You bested me fair, Notor. Vad Garnath is like a leem with a thorn in its paw. Best be wary, Notor."

"Aye, Radak. Your thews are like black iron — would you join me if it could be arranged?"

I saw the flare in Radak's eyes, and understood much from that burst of passion.

"Aye, Notor! Aye!"

Then Vad Garnath yelled from the door, in his baffled fury so far forgetting himself as to call upon the name of Lem as he bade his servant follow him like a dog.

Rees eyed me. "Lem, Hamun," he said, and his lips ricked up. "The foul beast grows stronger every day. There are riots. Soon there will be more than riots within the city."

Chido said with anger: "The Queen will—"

"The Queen will what, good Chido?" Rees shook his head. "I know her guards control the flutsmen's raids to a degree these days. The laws of Hamal are not to be flouted."

"The laws have fallen away lately, Trylon," observed Casmus.

"They have. The Queen is so often away, hidden somewhere with a few favorites in some secret palace. Once she is empress, why, then . . ." The Numim stroked his golden moustaches. "Once, in the old days, the emperors held state in the castle, in the Hanitchik, instead as the Queen does in that damned island palace, the miserable Hammabi el Lamma. If the Queen—" Then he broke off, peering about from beneath those shaggy golden eyebrows, mumbling to himself. Spies — Opaz-forsaken spies were everywhere, in law-ridden Hamal under Queen Thyllis.

Clapping me on the shoulder Rees bellowed himself back into a good humor. I often wondered why he was not puzzled that these affectionate back-slappings of his did not tumble me over onto my nose, as they so often did people like Chido and Nath Tolfeyr. "Come, Hamun! Let's go to the salle! I'll make a Bladesman of you yet, by Krun!"

Always, during this time of my masquerade in Hamal, I had to keep my wits about me. A slip would reveal more than the interesting fact that the Amak of Paline Valley was not a spineless clumsy ninny. I made some proper answer, and so went through more torture in the salle. Truly, it was torture. For a man who knows he has a certain skill, to perform deliberately with less than that skill may sometimes afford him amusement, but I was in no mood for much more of this charade. Truth to tell, being no nearer the secrets of the vollers and with time running out drove me half crazy with evil frustration.

A bunch of prisoners taken in Pandahem was paraded through the streets. I saw these men and diffs, halfings, man-beasts, beast-men, and recognized the blue-and-green insignia half ripped from their tattered clothing. I stood with the crowd, but even with my willingness to play a part I could not yell with the rest. I just stood there, numb. These poor devils were herded down the long straight boulevard called the Arrow of Hork, jeered and spat at on both sides, whipped on in a raggle-tailed bunch to the Arena. Once inside the Jikhorkdun of Ruathytu, they would make sport for the populace. The doom of each one was sealed.

Not Rees, not Chido, none of them in that raffish band of young bloods could get me to the Jikhorkdun to see the sport. Casmus licked his shining lips and vowed he would plunge his hands and arms elbow deep into golden deldys. Tothord, the Elten of the Ruby Hills, shouted eager wagers with Nath Tolfeyr. This Tothord, a dark-visaged man of about Rees's age, much dissipated, had recently lost a younger brother in battle on the southern front. He was anxious to see vengeance taken out on any of his country's enemies.

In our dissolute group we were continually being joined by men from the wars, home on some kind of furlough, and we listened to their talk, before they set off again for fresh dangers and battles. Mostly it was the younger sons who joined the army and the air service in Hamal; those who took the titles and the land remained at home. But, even so, I found out that Trylon Rees was personally raising a regiment of cavalry, equipping and paying them at his own expense. He spent a considerable time in deep conversation with hard, tanned men, Hikdars and Deldars mostly, as they reported the progress of training on his estates of the Golden Wind.

“You’ll ride with me, Hamun?”

This presented a quandary.

“I would be honored, Rees. When—?”

“As soon as my officers have licked the regiment into shape, I shall report myself to the Queen. No doubt some stuffy Pallans will give me my orders. But then, Hamun! Then I shall be off to strike a blow for Hamal!”

I hated the sound of all this.

“Which front—?”

“Who knows! Who cares! I detest wars and I love a fight. I shall not live long, I think, once we are engaged.”

And I admit I felt a twinge of regret at his words, these words of an enemy of my own land, and a friend, for I perceived them to be true.

From then on Rees took it for granted that I would be going with him and his fine new regiment off to war.

Most of the raffish gang with whom we passed our time refused to join. They had the security of rank and position and privilege, and they were of that character of men to whom watching other men going off to do a job — or to go to war — came always as more sweet than going themselves. Chido ham Thafey, screwing up his face so that for once its chinlessness became unnoticeable, stoutly declared that, by Krun, he would go with Rees. He’d be a staffer, a galloper, and go haring on his zorca all over the battlefield with vitally important messages, and by his own prowess sway the course of the fight.

Rees nodded, and smiled his lion smile, and said, yes, and did not disabuse young Chido.

Other factions running in the sacred quarter also were being drawn more and more into the war. News from the southern front merely confirmed that the armies of Hamal were still slowly pushing south into the ancient kingdoms and Kovnates there. From the Mountains of the West came grotesque stories of horror. But from Pandahem came the most thrilling news. Thrilling, that is, to any loyal Hamalian.

I knew that Queen Thyllis had not been officially enthroned and crowned and had not taken up the symbols of her power. She was waiting for the psychological moment. A great victory, with its attendant triumphant parade and review and celebrations in the Jikhorkdun, this would be the time she would choose to be crowned Empress of Hamal.

So while these friendly enemies, or inimical friends, of mine shouted and raved in the Jikhorkdun and the prisoners from Pandahem met their various unpleasant ends, I set about worming my way into the confidence of a Hamalian Air Service officer. He was Hikdar Nath ti Hainlad, a jovial, wide-girthed man with reddish hair and veins breaking on his nose and cheeks. For a bottle and a wad of cham, which he chewed even as he drank, a fascinating contortion of his scarlet cheeks, he was willing to talk about the sky ships. I listened. I learned a great deal, facts and figures I had hitherto never dreamed existed, as we sat on a cool terrace facing south overlooking the Black River. We were in the Horters' section of the city, where I had once lived with Nulty, west of the old walls that secluded the sacred quarter, to the east, on its V of land between the two rivers.

Going back to *The Thraxter and Voller* had proved fruitless, for the landlord of the inn had no knowledge of the whereabouts of Nulty, and all my possessions had gone, Havil the Green knew where. Even though I now wore a dandy's ineffable outfit of gray trousers and green over-frilled and ruffled shirt, with a blue coat slung carelessly from golden cords over one shoulder, I drew quizzical glances. The story of how I, the Amak of Paline Valley, had fled from the duel with the Strom of Hyr Rothy had grown in the retelling. I answered all with a haughty look down my nose. Strom Lart was off to the wars. The landlord did say, heavily: "When he returns, Notor, he will seek you out." To which I replied: "Let him, by Havil the Green!"

So I sat and sipped good Kregan tea while this Air Service Hikdar Nath swilled the wine I paid for, and we talked.

It was mostly technical information, and aerial tactics, for I posed as a man anxious to join the air service, and I will tell you of these technicalities when the time is ripe. I felt I had not wasted my day as I returned to the sacred quarter and a roistering night with Rees and the others. It was essential that I spend some nights out on the town gambling and drinking, as well as out on the town spying, so as to preserve my cover.

The city of Ruathytu, the capital of Hamal, the most powerful empire on the continent of Havilfar, is undeniably an impressive monument to power and glory and easy living. Aqueducts span the sky bringing sweet water from the hills. Broad avenues slice cleanly through the mass of buildings. There are colonnades, and arcades, small hills festooned with villas. There is much riotous vegetation, flowers, and the tinkle of fountains is never silent. Zorca chariots and sleeth riders throng the ways. The inhabitants sport jewels, and fans, and bright shawls and scarves. There are awnings of a bewildering variety of colors, ornate domes and terraces — a whole kaleidoscope of color and movement in the declining rays of the twin suns Zim and Genodras.

And yet, to me (who have seen on Kregan Sanurkazz and Zenicce and Vondium, as well as many another bright city), Ruathytu possessed no joy of living, no zest for life, no overriding sense of freedom and pride. Oh, the Hamalians boasted of their fine walls and towers, their domes and aqueducts, but I felt the place as a deadening weight upon me. I changed this, as you shall hear; but then — ah, then how I longed for Valkanium and the cool terraces on Esser Rarioch!

The main Arena in Ruathytu is situated midway between the old walls secluded the sacred quarter to the east and the Walls of Kazlili to the west, and about the same distance south of the River Havilthytus to the north. The island whereon sits the palace of the emperors in its artificial lake scooped from the river lies to the northeast, northwest of the sacred quarter. Great processions pass down the broad Boulevard of Victory from the water gate opposite the palace island to the Jikhorkdun. This is the Arena reserved for the nobility and the gentry. There are other Arenas in Ruathytu, of course, so that the guls and the clums, even, shall be sated with blood . . .

The Maiden with the Many Smiles shone clear above me as I turned into the Street of Sweetmeats and headed for the tavern of *Tempting Forgetfulness*, moonlight pink and golden all about me, and the shadows plum and purple beneath the balconies. I could hear the sounds of roistering from the inns and taverns by the way, and drunken parties staggered past, shouting and singing. I kept my hand close to the hilt of my rapier. The sacred quarter was beset with sudden affrays, steel twinkling in an alley, a corpse stretched upon the stones for the Hamalian watch to find, blood congealed and black in the moonlight.

The alley by the tavern lay half black, half gold.

I saw Rees step from the shadows into the moonlight, holding up his hand in greeting to me.

I lengthened my stride.

Rees swung about with an oath.

“By Krun! I am beset!”

In the next instant he was ferociously at work swirling his rapier at the dark forms of six men who leaped upon him, silently, their cloaks flaring, the steel bright in their fists.

Without a thought, I drew my blade and hurled myself forward into the affray.

## Chapter Eleven

I sweep the floor in Ruathytu

This sudden deadly affray was what living in the sacred quarter of Ruathytu was all about at this time of war.

Even as I ripped my rapier from the scabbard and plunged forward, my thoughts were cynically that this kind of murderous set-to must be going on in a score of other alleyways and moonlit courtyards about the city. So it was that I contrived to spit the nearest attacker through his side ribs, and withdraw and so swirl to the next, at the same time as Rees dealt similarly with one of the remainder, without so much as a thought to my role in Hamal.

Rees's blade clanged against the thraxter of his man, and I felt my own rapier automatically slide up to deflect a savage downward chop from the fellow who leaped at me, all hairy whiskers and glittering eyes and gleaming teeth.

“No, Hamun, no!” yelled Rees, whirling his blade in a masterful over-and-under. “Keep clear! You will be cleft in two!”

Well, this Trylon of the Golden Wind had courage. No one could deny him that. And so began a fight typical of a number that I was forced to engage in during this time of disguise in Ruathytu. I pranced about, swirling my blade, getting in the way of men determined to hack down the Trylon. As though by accident my rapier whistled across to take a thraxter from the open side of Rees, as though by chance my main-gauche caught a blade descending upon his neck. He fought! Oh, yes, he fought magnificently; but I knew he would have been done for had I not clowned and stumbled and shouted and flummoxed about and so, to Rees's surprised and joyful shout, thrust my brand through the guts of the next man. Rees had disposed of another.

“Keep out of my way, Hamun!”

I tripped over my own feet and so was able to sprawl forward, yelling “By Krun” and thereby letting my rapier skewer up as though by pure chance and sink its length in the guts of the man roaring at Rees as he dealt with the last on the other side.

This last one hesitated. These would-be stikitches (assassins) were no true stikitches at all; I could see the outline on their cloaks and shirts where their insignia had been cut away. It seemed clear enough that Vad Garnath had sent six of his men to waylay and murder the Trylon Rees. They had set on him as he stepped out of the tavern to greet me. They wore cloths bundled about their left arms (for no honest man might walk the streets at night carrying a shield — that would be too obvious an admission of evil intent — unless he were a soldier or had lawful permission to carry a shield, duly issued by the local Under-Pallan of the district).

“The rasts run!” bellowed Rees, although there was only one left. He still hadn’t realized I’d downed those I had. He went roaring after the luckless fellow who took to his heels and hared off down the alley. I did not laugh. But, in truth, it was an occasion for a laugh. Rees trailed back after a moment, swearing, having lost his man.

We bent to examine the corpses.

One was still alive, but even as Rees seized him by the throat to haul him up to be questioned, he choked black blood and died.

“Scum!” bellowed Rees. He was furiously enraged.

“Vad Garnath?”

“Probably. Although there are others who would wish for my death.” Rees began to clean his weapon on the clothes of the dead man, and I fell to doing the same, companionably, at his side.

“You must take greater care, Hamun, my friend. You could have got yourself killed, skipping about like that in the way of the swords.”

“Yes, Rees.”

If ever I wanted to laugh . . .!

So that was some relief to me in that hateful business of subterfuge and disguise in Hamal; there were other fights to follow in which I lumbered about, tripping over, sticking foemen before they realized it, to the roaring accompaniment of Rees bellowing at me to take care, and look out, and mind my fool hide out of the way. I enjoyed that part of it, for I was able to do Rees a good turn, and relieve some of the black bile in me. Also, I have little compunction where a stikiche is concerned. Assassination is developed to different levels in the various parts of Kregan, for the world is a world, diverse and strange and nowhere uniform. And, too, there is such a thing as a Stikiche Khand, as I afterward discovered. A khand is not quite the same as a guild; it is an association of experts, and that will perhaps do to sum up what a Kregan khand is. At the time I had suspicions that a Stikiche Khand, an Assassins Guild, did exist in Hamal. Of course, no assassin worth the name is going to parade around in a uniform and proclaim himself a member of his guild. Assassins do not work like that on Kregan, or here on Earth, for that matter.



One result of that night's work came a sennight later when on a pretext Rees managed to issue a challenge to Vad Garnath. The answer could only be made in blood. I will not go through the preparations, the procedures, in which Chido and I made the arrangements to hire the hall, and see about the tickets, and arrange the concessions for the bookmakers. All that side of the business was mere rote.

Rees said to me: "I will not ask you to stand as my second, Hamun. You know why. I have asked Nath Tolfeyr."

There was no answer to that. So, instead, I said: "Will this miserable crampth Vad Garnath fight, Rees?"

"By Krun! If he will not I'll cut up his second and then belt him in the mouth and challenge him again!"

The chronology of my stay as a spy in Ruathytu is, even to me, a little jumbled after all these years, but it must have been around this time that I first heard the rumor that Casmal the Deldy had contracted with due bokkertu to be married, and that I found Nulty.

There had been a stiff little fight and a swift retreat from the wall around Zhyan's Pinions, I recall. The white stucco buildings leered in the moonlight, flushing pink at me, most hurtfully, as I beat off a maddened guard patrol and went flying up onto a balcony, swinging to the next, and escaping over the rooftops beneath the moons. Zhyan's Pinions were not to be broken into so easily. And the guards were maddened because as I knew they had been given orders to capture this nighthawk at all costs, or else . . . At this time I felt it wise to wear a mask, for despite the beard my face might be recognized. I was taking more chances, too, as the time slipped by, in daytime foolery and nighttime espionage, and still the secrets of the vollers eluded me.

The city seemed to mock me as I sped back, a leaping figure in the moon-glimmer, my cloak flaring out from my shoulders, hurtling from purple shadow to purple shadow. Yet I had made some progress, in talking, in listening, and knew for a certainty that a mix of minerals was essential. I had heard it claimed that there were five minerals in a silver box; and others knowledgeably told me there were nine. What these minerals were, they did not know. Hurdling over the rooftops of Ruathytu, I came to the conclusion that I must give up my raffish circle in the sacred quarter and become a gul and try to work my way into Zhyan's Pinions, or any of the other manufactories where they mixed the minerals.

That would not be easy, for obvious reasons, but unless I did something more positive I felt the whole scheme would come to nothing and my bowing and scraping would have been wasted.

The manufactory of Zhyan's Pinions lies north of the River Havilthytus, in a gul suburb. To return to the sacred quarter due south I had to cross the Bridge of Swords. This bridge is so called because it affords ingress for the soldiers quartered all along the north bank of the river opposite the palace island to the sacred quarter in the V of the rivers. Ahead of me as I raced south I could see the three lofting green domes of the Great Temple of Havil the Green. They shone with a sickly patina of mingled light beneath the moons. This great temple stands on the very tip of the V, connected downstream by a bridge to the dominating castle on a spear-point island extending downstream. The interesting phenomenon I have mentioned, that the waters of the Black River do not at once mingle with the more ocher waters of the Havilthytus, is well shown here, for south of the castle the waters are inky black, to the north they are rolling ocher. This sharp division extends downstream for a good long way before, at last, the waters of the two rivers commingle into a muddy brown.

The castle reared to my left. The name of the castle is the Castle of Hanitcha the Harrower, but the folk of Ruathytu call it simply the Hanitchik.

I've known a few dungeons in my time. I heard then of the dungeons of the Hanitchik and determined they were not going to hear me yelling my head off in there, chained to the slimy walls.

By the time I had crossed the Bridge of Swords and passed swiftly beneath the shadow of the Great Temple of Havil the Green, I could remove my mask. Enveloped in the swathes of my old gray cloak I strode along, heading south into the sacred quarter, past the expensive villas in their own grounds and the colonnaded squares and the wide boulevards. There were people still about in these open spaces, but I pushed on into the festering warrens of the taverns and dopa dens and infamous palaces of all delights, past the stables where zorcas snorted softly in their sleep, past the flyer perching towers, and so back to my inn with my mind firmly made up.

The very next day I set about the inquiries that led me at last to a Horter — although he bore the title Horter, he was no gentleman — who employed guls and hired them out at a fat fee and pocketed a good sixty percent of it for himself. The guls had to consent to be plucked, or resign themselves to not having work. This system could only work, I thought, in a city. The labor exchange systems operated for the clums — the great mass of free men in even worse case — were even more diabolical, where they existed.

This Horter, one Larghos ti Frahthur, looked me up and down as I stood before him clad in a decent gul costume of brown shirt and trousers: patched and darned, but clean. I just hoped his beady eyes would not penetrate the cosmetics on my ugly old face that disguised what I know to be the face of a devil. We stood in an outer room of his house. There were desks and shelves, and various files by which he kept track of his villainous proceedings.

“And you say, Chaadur, you have experience with vollers?”

“Yes, Horter Larghos. I seek a place in Zhyan's Pinions.”

“Do you now? Well, it is true we have need of more vollers than anyone could have dreamed before the war.” He grunted and stuffed a wad of cham in his mouth, chewed somewhat discontentedly, staring at me. “You look strong. Why do you not join the army?”

“I would join the air service, but my experience here—”

“All right, all right! By Hanitcha the Harrower! I have my job to do, Havil knows.” He wrote something on a scrap of paper, folded it, sealed it with his ring and a dollop of wax (so it was important enough for him not to use a wafer and so risk my managing to open it), and half flung it at me. “See Deldar Ramit. Now, be off with you!”

And away he went back to his house and his luxuries, secure in the comforting knowledge that I would work and he would pocket sixty percent of what I earned.

It might be interesting to upend him and shake him, in the presence of some guls, and let them take what fell out.

Instead I trudged off and found Deldar Ramit in the echoing corridor surrounding Zhyan's Pinions. The twin suns shot a brave emerald-and-ruby fire across the flagstones. The corridor was patrolled ceaselessly by parties of soldiers. The swods — that is, the common soldiers — looked seasoned tough men, and I guessed they were pulling this duty as a rest from the front. Their officers, too, looked efficient.

This kind of essential but boring guard duty can wear down a soldier. The swods at the Heavenly Mines had been — were, still — real right crampes. These men of Hamal reminded me sharply, as I followed Deldar Ramit to the work area, reminded me with a pang of those soldiers of Canopdrin with whom I had talked around a campfire after a battle — and not so long ago, either.

Well, these were the men who were the enemies of my people.

No matter that I could feel for them as one fighting-man for another. They were the foe. And, as the foe, they must be slain.

How dreadfully simple are the black calculations of war!

I studied these soldiers of Hamal as I followed Deldar Ramit, grumbling away to himself, a rolled list under his arm and his sash of office dangling loose around his fat belly. A Deldar, as you know, is the lowest of the four chief ranks of officer on Kregen. An ob-Deldar is the lowest one can get, as any swod will tell you, but here in Hamal, as, occasionally, elsewhere, they employed an intermediary rank below Deldar. In Hamal they called a man who had been given a little petty authority, and a green badge, and the right to boss the swods about, a Matoc. I was given into the charge of Matoc Ganning, a miserable fellow with tufty eyebrows, a lantern jaw, and an itch in his guts he could not control.

In Hamal, military ranks are given to workers in the government-controlled voller manufactories.

“Chaadur? Well, get hold of that broom, and sweep up the mess here!” Matoc Ganning bellowed, and held his guts, which rumbled like the volcano of Muruaa.

So began a period in which I did all the dirty jobs. When I thought that I was actually sweeping up the droppings of the minerals that powered vollers, I swear the broom trembled in my fists.

Getting anywhere near the guarded rooms where the mix was made was impossible for a mere sweeper. I complained to the Hikdar of the Floor, and with many dirty looks from Matoc Canning, I was put on to humping loads from the leather-lined wooden boxes into the troughs feeding into the inner rooms. I kept my eyes open. The proportions of the mix must be established. I did not think that even Vallia, my home country, possessed men capable of analyzing the minerals and their mix. The guls might go home to their miserable row-houses to sleep at night, or, as many did, to sleep in the barracks in the grounds around Zhyan’s Pinions. I chose to sleep in. I put in a few nights’ good shut-eye, and then I went prowling.

I had to break the necks of only two guards.

I could not get into the iron-bound lenken doors; they remained obstinately shut.

I returned to the barracks in so evil a frame of mind, I would have jumped on the first person to say boo.

Some uproar followed the discovery of the guards. I had to banish the specters. These people were busily engaged in building machines with which they would invade my country, slaughter my people, destroy everything I loved in Vallia and Valka. Twice more I tried, and on the last occasion, a borrowed thraxter in my fist, I had to fight like a demon to win clear and back to the barracks. It was so close a shave I knew my chances here had to be considered finished.

Once again, I had failed.

The idiocy of employing a gul to do work that might ordinarily be done by slaves was simply another

pointer to the fanaticism with which the Hamalians protected their secrets. Slaves were used mercilessly outside, on heavy work. Inside Zhyan's Pinions, guls — and on occasion clums — who could be trusted to be loyal to Hamal were employed. I would not get near the amphorae as they were filled in the normal course of promotion for a very long time.

Smarting under my feelings of inadequacy, I determined to get out of Zhyan's Pinions. I had another string to my bow, and now if ever was the time to use it.

Had I had the vision to foresee what was going to happen before that bow was strung . . . Perhaps Zair knew what he was doing when he denied to frail humanity the gift of prediction. Perhaps, as I often thought, those who claimed that gift, like the Wizards of Loh, were not the happiest of mortals.

A fit of fury possessed me. I could not thus abjectly leave without one last try. This time I would find a sledgehammer and batter the doors down. Inside this one of the four halls of Zhyan's Pinions I must find the secret. I must!

Dirt and air!

How I hated the very thought of the mystery, taunting me with my own shortcomings, my own failings.

I, Dray Prescott, Lord of Strombor, Krozair of Zy, would not let myself be beaten by a stupid iron-bound lenken door and a regiment of guards!

Down by the slave quarters would be the place to find a sledgehammer, neatly numbered and docketed and hung up in its place. From the gul barracks the distance was not far and I arrived in time to witness the opening blows in the floggings of a half dozen slaves. What they had done would be meticulously entered in the daybooks of the officers, so that the Under-Pallans might scrutinize them for misdemeanors, for floutings of the law. The first screams scythed through the moonlight as I slid between bushes, heading for the huts where the tools were stored.

Torches flared from a ring of posts; She of the Veils cast down her fuzzy pink haze over the scene. The slaves had been suspended from whipping-frames, all according to the book. A massively muscled Deldar had started in on number one. The poor devil's back would be a raw red pudding before the regulation number of blows were given. He writhed and screamed, and then fell silent, his head hanging.

I looked along the line of whipping-frames.

Number four was Nulty.

Even as I looked I saw in the torchlight how his left hand, extended and the wrist thonged to the wood, contracted and cupped, the fingers whitening and contorting. So much for the bones of Beng Salter!

Well, Nulty was a Hamalian, one of the men of the country of my enemies. I had important work to do tonight. The whip smashed down again, brutally. It was a cart whip, not a knout or a sjambok — had it been the man would have been dead already — and not a cat-o'-nine-tails. If Nulty was whipped . . . But I had my job to do. I remembered the Amak Naghan, and his death, and Nulty one living sheet of blood, back in the ruined house of Paline Valley.

Was it any business of mine?

The Deldar doing the flogging was clearly enjoying his work. His lips ricked back at each blow. He

struck with all his strength. Well, was he not far more of an enemy than ever poor Nulty could be?

My business?

Number two screeched in anticipation as I went off for my sledgehammer. I bashed the shed door open. I came out with the sledgehammer in my fists. No, it was no business of mine. The sledgehammer glimmered evilly in the moonshine as I went toward the whipping-frames and a business that was no business of mine.

## Chapter Twelve

### Affairs of Honor

I, Dray Prescott, of Kregen and of Earth, am so often a spineless ninny when it comes to seeing friends of mine being knocked about. I knew, even as I stalked forward with the ugly black iron of the sledgehammer cocked ready for action, that I should not be doing this. I should be hammering this sledge at the iron-bound doors, smashing them in, racing into the secret halls to discover the mysteries of the vollers.

Instead I was sacrificing all that to go to the aid of an Hamalian, an enemy, just because I didn't like the idea of his being flogged.

But then — how on this terrible world of Kregen could I call Nulty an enemy?

The Deldar was joyously putting his back into the flogging. There was a Hikdar in command of the punishment detail; he was a lowly holder of his rank, a so-Hikdar.<sup>[5]</sup> There were ten swords, lined up on parade, their shields to the side and their thraxters in their hands, point up, ten glimmering pink-gold blades in the moonlight. A pace to the front on their left flank stood their Matoc. A pace to the rear of the so-Hikdar stood a drummer. As is the case in so many armies, the army of Hamal employed young lads as drummers. This one stood there, beating a brave rat-a-tat on his drum, brilliant in all the gaudy trappings of a drummer-boy, but his face a trifle green.

If he didn't run for it he'd be sorry.

The whip-deldar had just finished with number three. Numbers one and two were hanging senseless; number three was making a disgusting blubbering moan of agony. Nulty was number four.

I broke a cardinal rule.

To give Nulty hope, as I raced forward, I yelled.

“Hai!” I shouted. “Hai! Kleeshes! Fight a man who is not lashed to a post!”

Nulty's head jerked around as though he already tasted ol' snake.

The Hikdar jumped. He stared as I burst from the shadows into the torchglow. The sledgehammer whirled about my head in that cunning two-handed grip that is normally given to an ax of the Saxon pattern, descendant of the great Danish ax. The clansmen of Viktrik use a single-bitted ax in that fashion .

. .

The line of swords broke as the Hikdar yelled. They rushed me.

The facts of the matter are that I should have stood no chance.

But I was thoroughly annoyed with everything, and mostly with myself, and so I swirled the hammer and crushed the ribs of the first and ducked the thraxter of number two and kicked him in the belly in passing and split open the skull of number three and on the continuous circle splattered blood and intestines out through the crevices of number four's lorica. It was swing and jump and swirl and bash and crash. I let the head of the sledge go on swinging, merely guiding it onto the next target, and straightening it and giving it fresh impetus after each collision. This was the way our ancestors fought at Hastings, before the shield wall broke. This was the way an unedged weapon might smite through the bronze hoops of a lorica, crushing and smashing the ribs and inner organs beneath.

Nulty was shrieking; thankfully he was not using my name.

Through a trail of mangled wrecks I forged across to the whipping-frames. The whip-deldar tried to lash me and I caught the thong around the hammer. The Deldar yelled, then, thinking he had me and need only jerk the hammer from my grasp. Instead I hauled him in as a fisherman hoicks in a tarpon. As he spun toward me I shifted grips, took his throat in my hand, and squeezed. As I squeezed I whirled about and the flung stux bit into his back, stripped as he was for the flogging. He grunted, and bright blood gushed from his mouth. I did not simply fling him from me. Dead, he was still a weapon. I hurled him at the Matoc who had flung the stux, and before the non-com could recover I had brained him. The Hikdar, mouth open and frozen, stared at me. He was stricken with the horror of what had happened. The drummer-boy had stopped his retaplan. He hovered, first on one leg, then on the other, uncertain.

I glared at him. Blood dripped over the disguise on my cheeks; I had to be quick if he was to live.

“Run, boy! Run for your life!”

With a squeak he abandoned his drum and fled.

My shout brought the Hikdar to life. His thraxter glimmered in the moonlight as he leaped for me, thinking me distracted, seeking to bury the sharp point in my guts. I backhanded him and brained him. I looked up at Nulty.

His frame was far less well filled than when I had seen him last, at the time of the abortive duel with Strom Lart ham Thordan. I dropped the blood-, brain-, hair-, and intestine-smearred sledgehammer and reached for the knife that, as a gul, I was allowed to carry.

The knife slashed through his thongs and I caught him as he dropped.

A hoarse voice wheezed from whipping-frame number five.

“Nath, old friend! You would not — not leave me!”

By this I knew Nulty had told them his name was Nath.

Nulty swallowed and managed to stand up. His nose was still as bulbous as ever, and this cheered me.

“It is for the Notor to say, Emin.”

Could I leave the other two slaves, and free just my friend? I damn well could, of course, but I did not.

The knife slashed Emin free. He was an apim, bulky and strong, not a Hamalian, I judged, by the language he used about them. Number six was in worse case, and had to be helped down. She was a Fristle. (A Fristle is a furred diff after the fashion of a cat. The females are considered among the most beautiful of Kregen.) Like all Fristle women younger than middle age she was lissome and furrily attractive; she had been sent here to be punished from the retinue of some Hamalian officer's wife. She sobbed her gratitude, tears streaking the soft down of her cheeks, her eyes glistening.

"No time, no time," I said, deliberately harsh. "We have to run for it now. Can you run, Fristle?"

"I can run faster than a furless apim, apim!"

"Good! Then let us run."

We ran.

Nulty and Emin had taken up thraxters for themselves from the dead guards, and — as was proper — the officer's sword for me. They had also ripped off four of the soldiers' short green capes for us. We ran beneath the moons of Kregen, out through the shrubs, beyond the trees, leaving the barracks. We heard the beginnings of the alarm and saw flaring torches as we left Zhyan's Pinions . . .

We ran due south.

I guessed the guards would assume we had taken to the guls' quarters, to the eastward or northward, for due south over the Bridge of Swords lay the sacred quarter. No fugitive gul or slave would find much of a haven there. So we were able to slink through the shadows, following my well traveled routes, closing up into a compact body when we traversed an open space, pressing ever on to the inn. Getting them inside presented the problem only of sliding them down the roof and onto the balcony. Everything was as it had been when I'd left here to assume the identity of Chaadur, the gul. Now we all crowded into my room and I whispered to them with great fierceness to be quiet in their joy.

I said: "I will help you on your way to escape, or—"

Nulty coughed, and scraped his foot, and when I glared at him, he said: "Truly, Notor, I thought you were dead. You vanished from the duel — aye! That was a bad time. But these two — they are my friends. We were caught in a little enterprise, and would have been flogged but for you, Notor."

"So?"

But I had guessed what the old reprobate would say.

"Emin and I, and the Fristle Salima, wish to stay and serve you, Notor."

All I could say was, "I have been away on business. I will say I have brought you back with me from Paline Valley. Nulty will advise you of Paline Valley—"

"Nulty, lord?" said the girl Salima, her cat eyes as wide as they would go.

Nulty's face was a picture. Then he mumbled something and rumbled, and I understood. He had been ashamed of what I had done, and, as I learned, that foul cramp the landlord of *The Thraxter and Voller* had sold him into slavery. Then Nulty, as a slave, could not bear to bring further dishonor to the name of Paline Valley. So he had called himself Nath. There are many Naths on Kregen, a result of the ancient

tale of rollicking adventure called *The Quest of Kyr Nath*. I think Kyr Nath may be likened to our Earthly Hercules.

A freshly inked mark had to be scored in the little black book.

The two Hamalian servants I'd hired had been discharged before I had gone off adventuring as the gul Chaadur, although I had retained the rental of my rooms. Now the three fugitives could sleep next door. In the morning Nulty, temporarily rigged in some of my old clothes that would fit him somehow, went out for clothes for them all. I squared the accounts away with the landlord, and expressed surprise he had not heard me come in last night, hinting at a drunken sleep on his part, and so, in fine, the affair was smoothed over.

Chido ham Thafey, Amak by courtesy, came to see me, full of all the latest engrossing news of the sacred quarter. It was all mediocre stuff, a mere series of trifles, and his evident engagement with this pettiness made me see that I had been falling into the very pit I swore could never entrap me. He commented on my new retainers, and I passed them off with the remark that Paline Valley was a surprising place. The slave brandings of Nulty, Emin, and Salima, all in correct numbers by Hamalese Law, I had removed with a concoction the formula of which had been shown me in Zenicce. That great enclave city was not overly liked upon the high seas of Kregen, and this was a reason for that dislike. For themselves, the folk of Zenicce think it great sport to take slaves, and wash out their brands, and so rebrand them as their own for all the world to see.

Chido's main item of news concerned a new sword-master from Zenicce. Because the Horters and nobles of Hamal had been brought up to the thraxter as their national sword, this new craze for rapier-and-dagger fighting meant they imported men to teach them. This new sword-master from Zenicce, so Chido said, was the best anyone had ever seen — and he had been brought in by none other than Vad Garnath.

I admit I felt interest at this news. This was not petty. "So you see, Hamun!" cried Chido. "This wast Garnath will challenge Trylon Rees again, will call on Leotes ti Ponthieu as his second, and then, and then—"

"Aye, Chido, and then!" I glowered at Chido, but he was busy looking about my room for a glass and wine. "Is this Leotes ti Ponthieu then so great a swordsman?"

The wine bottle clinked against the glass as Chido poured. It was early for him. "I have never seen a better. He is quick, strong, vicious." As always, Chido made Ws of his R's, so that he said, for example, "Twylyon Wees," and "stwong," but I do not care to imitate him so faithfully. He looked deucedly upset now, though, and no mistake.

Now I perceived a little irony here, a tiny thing that would have swayed the idlers of the sacred quarter when this sword-master from the enclave city of Zenicce came among them. My enclave of Strombor, of which I am Lord, is honored to wear the brave old scarlet. The colors of Ponthieu are purple and ocher. And the colors of this Queen Thyllis of Hamal were purple and gold. So this Leotes had landed with a head start.

By the Black Chunkrah, I said to myself, but it was a dolefully long time since I had been to Zenicce and Strombor!

And I had, here in enemy Ruathytu, to be very careful what oaths I let fall. There could be no carefree bellowing of "By Vox!" or "By Pandrite!" or any other of my old favorites. "By Zair!" would go



unrecognized, of course. “By Opaz!” would be dangerous, for all that I knew there was a strong following in the city for Opaz, the spirit of the Invisible Twins, as there was for Lem the Silver Leem, in direct opposition.

And the various diseased portions of the anatomy of Makki-Grodno had received no attention from me lately at all, at all . . .

So I said, as gently as I could: “Oh, Chido, you are a great family! Rees will eat this Leotes and spit the pips out.”

Chido shook his head, clutching his glass. “You have not seen the Zeniccean fight, Hamun!”

The rapier-and-dagger-men of Zenicce are most skilled, as I knew, for I had once swaggered as a bravo-fighter of Zenicce. The fumbling attempts of the aristocracy of Hamal to take up rapier-work, to become, in their terms, Blades-men, would make a sword-master of Strombor or Eward — or Ponthieu! — smile the wide wicked grin of a shark. Vallians are most nimble with the rapier, and I have met fine swordsmen from Pandahem. Despite my brave words and despite my confidence in Rees, I felt strongly that if this Leotes ti Ponthieu was a sword-master of a high quality in Zenicce, he would do Rees’s business for him.

There are twenty-four Houses in Zenicce, noble and lay. Chance had directed that Vad Garnath in his pursuit of revenge should choose a bravo-fighter from the noble House of Ponthieu, a House which at that time was a deadly foe to my own House of Strombor. I would have no compunction with this Leotes.

The preparations for the inevitable duel went ahead, just as they had before, with one exception. Nath Tolfeyr cried off from being Rees’s second. Chido would have jumped in, but Rees sternly bade him away. The lion-man looked in truth as noble as a lion does in the imagination, as he glanced around the upper room of the tavern where we had gathered on the night before the encounter. It was scarcely an affair of honor any longer, but it was holding up my own work.

I said: “I shall stand as your second, Rees.”

“Very well, Hamun. As I shall most certainly thrust this dog of a Zeniccean through the guts after a few passes, it will serve.” But he did not thank me, and I knew that he was more worried than he cared to admit. His confidence remained high.

Chido swore most vilely, but Rees had a duty for him that had nothing to do with duels. Chido was packed off to the wide Plains of the Golden Wind to pick up the rudiments of military lore necessary for his appointment as a staffer.

I had my own private thoughts about the regiment Rees was putting together, but I did not speak my thoughts to the lion-man.

Casmas the Deldy announced, with an oily smile, that even though he was contracted to be married — and to a charmer! a marvel! a passion-lily of scarlet fervor! a most luscious armful! and rich into the bargain! — he would be taking bets. This time the betting so heavily favored the Zeniccean bravo-fighter that it seemed no one gave Rees a chance. I laid a bet and Casmas smiled and fingered his chin, chuckling, already counting the money as his. So, rather dolefully on the part of Rees’s friends, we trooped down to the hall ready for the duel.

The first man I saw inside was Lart ham Thordan, Strom of Hyr Rothy. He started when he saw me, then sneered, and passed a comment to a crony that some Amaks ran away from duels and hid behind the rapiers of lion-men friends. I ignored him. I had to.

Everyone crowded around. I carried out my duties as second, and, as everyone expected, Vad Garnath successfully satisfied the judges that he could not fight and his second must do so in his place. Leotes ti Ponthieu stepped forward.

Well, we know his type. He was a bravo-fighter. He lived by his rapier. One day — and he knew it — he would die by a rapier or dagger. Rees faced him, and the bout began. I saw, at once, that Rees was quite out of his class. Even so, Rees balked him of a death, for Leotes' blade took a chunk of flesh away from Rees's side, and the blood being drawn, the bout might be called off. I leaped forward, shouting that honor had been satisfied. Rees looked abruptly shriveled. He was carried off and I swung about to follow him through the turmoil of shouting men and women, yelling to his attendants to carry him gently.

The confusion was remarkable, for Rees had many friends as well as enemies. And the ladies of Ruathytu would not miss such a spectacle. I pushed after Rees, but the crowd pressed in, and the noise and bustle racketed from the high ceiling.

“Rees!”

“Keep back, keep back!”

I saw the lion-man lift himself from the stretcher. He looked terrible. A doctor was working busily away, but a dreadful red stained his bandages with terrible rapidity.

“Honor — Hamun,” said Rees, and I could just hear him through the din. “You . . . keep off it . . . old fellow . . .”

Then the crowd closed in and he was whisked from my sight.

Strom Lart stood before me. I was aware of Casmás the Deldy, and Nath Tolfeyr, and Tothord of the Ruby Hills, in the press.

“So your champion has fallen, Amak Hamun!” Strom Lart was enjoying this. He was dressed in the off-duty rig of a soldier, a totrix cavalryman, and that big bloated face was flushed scarlet with greed for the enjoyment of pain and humiliation. “We have a debt unpaid, you and I, clum-lover!”

I went to push past. “Out of the way, you fat fool,” I said. “I must see how Rees is.”

He did not roar or bellow, although the scarlet of his cheeks deepened even more grotesquely. He lifted his glove. I knew what he was going to do and could do nothing myself.

Before them all, Strom Lart of Hyr Rothy slapped me across the face with his gauntlet.

“And this time, Amak, do not run away!”

## Chapter Thirteen

Amak Hamun upholds his reputation

The person who was Hamun ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley, struggled with the person who was Dray Prescott.

Dray Prescott might have bowed icily, and then seen about choosing a nice sharp weapon to redress the insult. He might — given that although these proceedings were lethal and savage in the extreme, we still were operating within the context of civilization — have smashed his fist into Lart’s face, and kicked him as he went down for good measure.

Hamun, of course, could do none of these things.

Hamun could only stutter, and look about, and excuse himself, and so flee with Strom Lart’s ominous words ringing in his ears.

“This time you cannot run away, Amak! This time I shall spit you like a roasting vosk!”

If I tell you that my thoughts of Vallia and Valka, of Djanduin and all my loyal peoples there, grew woefully thin and attenuated, shrinking beside the white flare of my rage, I think you will understand just how I felt. I do not pretend to take pride in things that have no moment. Pride is for the puffed up empty-headed of two worlds. But some things seem natural for me to do, and some things seem unnatural. Taking a blow in the face and then turning tail and running away are not things that seem natural to me.

When I obey the injunction to turn the other cheek — as I do on occasion — that seems natural. This last scene did not strike me as right then, nor does it seem right now, when I believe I may have grown just a trifle wiser than I was then, still a crack-brained hothead despite all my vows and good intentions to think first and not bash out first. I had thought this thing through. Hamun would have acted as I had acted; therefore it had been necessary.

The challenge was brought by the same pair of clowns who had come before, and things were arranged, and again I waived a second. These two, the Elten and the Kyr, sensed a change in my attitude. For one thing, I had withdrawn into my old taciturnity that had fallen away from me since my marriage.

I shoed them away, collected Nulty with his hamper of wine and palines and sweetmeats and good things, and went off to see how Rees was coming along. His wound had turned septic and although Kregen’s doctors are past Earth’s medieval mumbo-jumbo about the necessity for a wound to be fouled with pus before it will mend, they tend to worry, not without cause, about infections. The wound had been cleansed and treated and everyone said it would knit and mend in no time. Rees managed a smile for me. Chido was there, having burst a fluttrell getting back.

We spent what was, in truth, a pleasant bur or two in conversation. As a Trylon, Rees was not as rich as he might be. The cause of this was, I gathered, the introduction of cattle onto his savannah lands. The topsoil had loosened under too heavy grazing, and the ominous name of his land had proved itself no idle nomenclature. The Golden Wind was a wind blowing Trylon Rees’s lands away. But he still kept up a reasonable villa within the sacred quarter, a villa tiny by comparison with some of the villas belonging to other Trylons, and Vads and Kovs. And so we sat talking and drinking on his balcony, where his bed had been wheeled.

He expressed himself as much concerned by Strom Lart’s challenge. I tried to turn his mind to other things, for I had already decided what I would do.

We spoke of this fine regiment he was forming, and against my better judgment, I said: “Are you sure it

is wise to form a cavalry regiment of zorcas only, Rees?”

His tawny eyes flashed gold at me. I could imagine the great lion roar he would have given at other times.

“Do you think I should form a regiment riding totrixes?”

The contempt on his face was not for me.

“The zorca is a marvelous animal,” I said. Indeed, the zorca is royalty among saddle animals! But the zorca is so close-coupled, so slender as to leg, so dainty even within the toughness and the fiery spirit of the animal, that I always handle zorcas in a very special way. Voves, those massive eight-legged saddle-animals of Segesthes, were unknown here. Hamal did not even have the smaller voves of Zenicce. The totrix, now, that slate-hided six-legged animal of stubborn willfulness and damned awkward riding habits, that should figure in a cavalry regiment fighting in far Pandahem.

“Well, Hamun,” said Chido, railing me, “would you have us ride out on sleeths?”

“I do not like sleeths.” The sleeth, that dinosaur-like riding animal that walks like some menacing allosaurus and was the passion of the bloods here in Ruathytu as well as in Huringa in Hyrklana, does not please me. I am a zorcaman after I am a voveman.

I had to make myself laugh — a most hollow sound — and turn the conversation. I was in the act of giving advice — and damned good advice — to an enemy regimental commander! Such things spies have to do, no wonder it is a jealous profession.

“I’ll make a Bladesman of you yet,” said Rees. But I saw his wound pained him, and with a roll of my eyes at Chido I rose and bid him Remberree.

He bellowed: “Young Hamun! Listen to me, you stubborn onker! Get Nath Tolfeyr for a second — he has even agreed — and then drop out. You’ll never face that cramph Lart.”

“Don’t fret, Rees. Get better. I’ll handle the affair, as Havil the Green is my witness.”

“Some damned witness he’ll make!” shouted Rees, most blasphemously. Only his own people could hear, thank Zair.

We left and took ourselves off to a tavern where we spent the rest of the morning at Jikaida. Chido was good if a trifle reckless and I had no compunctions about beating him. Because the tavern was crowded and the table not overlarge, we played the smallest reasonable game of Jikaida, that called Poron Jikaida. The board has six squares upon it, two at the top and three at the sides, and each square is called a drin. Each drin is further subdivided into squares six a side. Poron Jikaida is an infantry game, very like chess with the addition of that useful Halma-like move, and despite my cares I found myself absorbed.[\[6\]](#)

Pushing the blue and yellow pieces back into their velvet-lined box, I stretched, and bellowed for tea. Chido grumbled but paid up, the golden deldy that was the bet ringing most sweetly upon the sturm-wood table. The tavern was filled with men stoking for the afternoon’s activities. There was no Jikhorkdun this day, I remember; instead there was another of the interminable handicapped zorca-versus-sleeth races. Unless the faithful zorca is given an impossible handicap, he will beat that two-legged dinosaurian monstrosity of a sleeth every time.

Our conversation turned on the wave of cults and faith-healing sweeping the country, and I was minded to tell Chido of Beng Salter's bones and his grandiose claims at curing ailments, at which Chido laughed and said, stab him, he'd believe any of 'em in times like these.

Even as I watched his bright chinless face all agog and listened to his artless voice, sipping my sweet Kregan tea, I suddenly saw that same Strom Hormish of Rivensmot who had jostled and insulted me at the shrine of Beng Salter. This was the boor who had put into my head the idea of acting the part of a weakling so as to make a more effective spy. I regretted that decision now. It had seemed a good idea at the time. So you may imagine with what bile I regarded the fellow as he minced into the tavern, dressed in foppish finery, a foam of green lace at his neck, a beautifully cut satin coat on his back, a baldric blazing with gems over his shoulder, and — and! — a rapier and main-gauche for arms. This promised.

He had evidently patronized this tavern before — it was *The Golden Talu*, I remember — for servants ran about before him carrying chairs, pushing tables, and spreading cloths, and the landlord, a Lamnia with beautifully brushed golden fur, fussed about him, a brand-new white apron donned just for the occasion.

There are, as I have previously indicated, a whole range of taverns and inns on Kregan, ranging from those which are fit for mere swinish boozing to others which provide meals and overnight stops, to those where ladies may go for refreshments secure in the knowledge that they are perfectly safe in a first-class hostelry. Here in the sacred quarter *The Golden Talu* was a place of the latter category; a number of Horteras and ladies of quality sat at the tables, at ease. The main drink at this time of the day, too, was good Kregan tea. So when Chido nudged me and said quickly from the side of his mouth, "By Krun, Hamun! Look yonder — old Casmus, the great usurious humbug! By Havil! What a beauty!" I took my eyes away from Strom Hormish of Rivensmot, knowing he would keep, and followed where Chido directed.

Casmus the Deldy, oiled, sweating, profuse, was guiding a girl to a table by the window. She was beautiful, beautiful, as I had observed before, when I'd snatched her from the beak and talons of a snow-white zhyan, beautiful in the way of looking and not touching. What the hell she was marrying old Casmus the Deldy for I had no idea — unless his cognomen held all the answer necessary.

I think she saw me almost as soon as she entered the tavern. Certainly, she could scarcely keep her eyes off me, but she did not make a mention of me to Casmus, for he had not seen Chido and me, and bent all his effusiveness upon his bride-to-be.

As though in some shadow play of a Kregan village, with the samphron-oil lamps casting the grotesque or beautiful shadows upon the linen sheet, with entrance after entrance, Strom Lart, he with whom I would soon be crossing swords, entered. He saw Strom Hormish, already swilling wine among the tea-drinkers, and he went straight across. There was a sickly plethora of bows and blandishments, then both men sat down and put their heads together. Birds of a feather, thought I.

This pretty pot might yet boil into an affair of light amusement, or deadly peril, with the steel flying and the blood spurting. In my mood I knew which I would prefer.

The way it did go I would not relish to have to suffer again.

Chido's slender frame partially shielded me from the view of the two Storms at their table. Casmus was so wrapped up in his little passionflower that he had eyes for nothing else. The girl was pale, very pale. Her color came and went, it is true, but by the way her breast moved, and the little helpless fluttery movements of her hands, and by other signs, I knew she had no joy in this marriage with Casmus the

Deldy.

The genteel uproar in the tavern, so different from the full-throated bellowings of taverns when the moons have risen, sounded all about; there was much coming and going as the midday meal was served. Kregans like six or more good meals a day, as I have said. Chido and I tucked into good red beef from cattle that might, for all we knew, have been destroying Rees's lands. There were momolams, green vegetables, a great fruit pie, and many cups of tea to follow the table wine, a poor stuff, to my surprise; then the inevitable and sweetly necessary silver dish of palines.

With my mouth full of palines I looked up and there was the fair hair, rosebud mouth, and pale blue eyes of the girl I had pulled from the zhyan's claws outside *The Crippled Chavonth* in the dusty town of Urigal in the lazy and half-forgotten Kovnate of Waarom. Before I could stand up, over Chido's sudden explosion of wonder, she was blurting out quick words.

"I have only a moment, Horter. You saved me once, in Urigal. You risked your life for me, a stranger, and I could not thank you then, for my guardian and his men prevented, and you were gone. But now, Horter, I beseech you! I need a strong arm to defend me once again."

Chido was staring in bewilderment, beginning to stutter a question.

She ignored him as I half rose, a serviette to my lips, bowing to her.

"I am Rosala of Match Urt. My father was the Strom there, but he is dead now and my fortunes have fallen away, and I am being forced to marry that fat disgusting Casmal."

"Jolly bad show, that," burbled Chido. We ignored him. She was imploring me with her great pale blue eyes, the tears dropping down her deathly white cheeks, pleading with me.

"You are a brave warrior. I know that. You have proved it, Horter . . . I do not know your name. No one knew . . . or would not tell me. I beseech you, sir, help me! Take me away from that horrid Casmal! Please!"

Of course! Nothing simpler! Just leap on the nearest zorca and away!

But I was not Dray Prescott here. I was Hamun ham Farthytu, with a certain reputation to uphold.

What a situation!

I was aware of movement on the other side of the table and then of course laughter breaking through Rosala's words as she pleaded.

"Please, Horter! You are brave! You will find a way. I beseech you, for the courage you have already shown, the kindness to me — save me from that wretch!"

"Courage, Hortera, courage?" Strom Lart bellowed his amusement. "The man is a poltroon!"

"He is a ninny," boomed Strom Hormish, "a swordless weakling, fit only for rast-nest fodder."

Rosala of Match Urt stared speechlessly at me, her hands clasped together, all her vulnerable beauty crying out for rescue.

I put down the serviette.

“I am Hamun ham Farthytu, Hortera. I regret I do not know you. You are mistaken. I cannot help you.”

## Chapter Fourteen

### Jikaida en passant

A blank followed that performance until I found myself back in my rooms in the inn, with Chido much perplexed and worried and declaring that, by Krun, he'd never known me like this before, old fellow. I took a stiff drink of wine; the stuff tasted foul, unmixed as it was, and I spat it out.

I said to Chido: “You're a good fellow, Chido. But leave me alone right now. I have some thinking to do—”

“If that's the way of it, Hamun . . .” He brightened. “I've engaged to race old Tothord.” He hovered, hesitating. “Well, Remberee, Hamun. I'll see you.”

“Remberee, Chido.”

When he had gone, shaking his head, I stretched out on the bed, shooed Nulty away, threw a boot at the Fristle, Salima, who wanted to comfort me, and I fell into dark and evil thoughts.

How low I had sunk!

And yet, it was all my own doing. Every step of the way I had been the master of my own decisions. I had chosen to act this part, thinking how clever it would be. I had forfeited my primitive ideas of honor to what I conceived of as my duty.

Well, this day's sorry doing was an end to the business.

The unsettling thought occurred to me that given the situation of war between Hamal and Vallia — an eventuality I dreaded — my duty would be to kill this Strom Lart in any way I could, duel or no duel. But I had already made up my mind not to kill him, for affairs of that nature tended in Hamal to drag on with potential litigation and all kinds of entanglements. The situation baffled and infuriated me. All manner of common sense attitudes are scattered to the winds in wartime. How could I conceive of Nulty, and Chido, and Rees, as mortal enemies? Was this not a situation similar to that which made of my friends Tilda the Beautiful and her son Pando the boy Kov of Bormark my enemies through the hostility of Pandahem and Vallia?

Stupid, stupid . . .

The duel had been set for late evening (all the murs of Kregen have their own names, varying with the seasons, of course), and at last I roused myself, had a meal, bathed, and, again, hurled the other boot at Salima as she purred in with a sponge to scrub my back. I dressed carefully. Around my waist I wrapped the old scarlet breech-clout. With that drawn up and buckled I donned a fresh frame of mind.

Over that I wore a fine white ruffled shirt, dripping with lace. A pair of dark blue trousers, strapped under my boots, concealed them completely. I slung a fur-trimmed satin jacket of a lurid green color over my shoulder by its golden chains, rather after the fashion of a hussar's pelisse. The rapier and dagger I selected were a matched pair given me by Delia. They were superb weapons. I had declined the Trylon

Rees's kind offer of a set of his own weapons. Most of the rapiers in use in Ruathytu had been purchased in Zenicce, part payment for vollers, probably, and were of good quality. My friends of the House of Eward were fine swordsmiths. Soon the Hamalians would be forging rapiers themselves, although the armories were hard at work turning out thraxters and stuxes for the army. But these two, the Jiktar and the Hikdar, the rapier and main-gauche, were of pure Vallian make, superb.

That thick-bladed knife I always refer to as my old sailor's knife, for all that this specimen had never been to sea, went as ever strapped over my right hip.

"Now," I said to my wavering reflection in the mirror. "To sort out Strom Lart. And, sink me!" I burst out, all to myself, puffed up with anger and bile. "If he tries to be clever I'll skewer him, by Makki-Grodno's diseased left eyeball!"

In the event I had to be clever myself, for as I entered the dueling hall, and saw the eager faces of friends and enemies, and heard the bets being called — a fatuous business, that, with the bets on just what Strom Lart would do and how he would do it, and the artistic execution of his designs — I realized it would still pay me to preserve my cover. Chido was there, but Rees was not well enough to attend. Casmus the Deldy was there. He had brought his passionflower, his lily of desire, the china doll beauty, Rosala of Match Urt. She looked dreadful, I could see, beneath the paint and powder.

Casmus, I saw at once, had been unpleasant to her.

When a noble family falls on hard times and they plan to recoup their fortunes by marrying off a beautiful and nubile girl of the family to a fabulously wealthy moneylender, they do not much care for the girl to ask strangers to rescue her. Her family, those prideful, hard-eyed, hard-lipped men I had seen outside *The Crippled Chavonth*, no less than Casmus, would have been vile to Rosala.

Again that unsettling thought struck me — they were all Hamalian.

I remember the duel that followed with some warm affection. I clowned about, as I had done in alley-fights with Rees. At the last moment my blade would flick across, as though purely by chance, and deflect Lart's thrusts. I stumbled about, and flailed the rapier as though it were an ax, and retreated with my legs twinkling, and slipped so clumsily as to let Lart stagger past barely missing by a whisker the blade that had no intention — then — of sinking into his vitals. I needed to keep clear of public entanglements with the confoundedly pedantic laws of Hamal.

The crowd yelled and hullabalooed, and I had plenty of time to take my eyes away from Strom Lart and his bloodthirsty swashbucklings to look at Rosala. She sat frozen like a lump of black ice — black ice, despite her whiteness.

Chido was beside himself, yelling: "Keep him out, Hamun! Bladesman! Bladesman!"

Strom Lart's followers were chanting also, and the din built up into an inferno of sound.

Having clowned around long enough, I decided to finish the thing. Lart had skill, of that there was no doubt. But he did not have the experience that might have told him I merely toyed with him. As I was not acting the part of a master swordsman baiting an inferior, toying with him in that sense, but, instead, acting as though I were in terror of my life and only managing to keep alive by the most atrocious series of passages of good fortune, I fancied the keen eyes of the master swordsman from Ponthieu, Leotes, might not have penetrated my antics. Leotes stood at the side, limber and lithe, his dark handsome face intent on the bout. I marked him. I took care when the climactic point came that Strom Lart's gross body



blocked Leotes' view.

Lart rushed, using a quite clever system of connected passes (all the terms of Earthly fencing could be brought in; suffice it to say Lart used a passage linked by a strict discipline taught him by swordsmen from Zenicce), and I yelped aloud, and twisted, awkwardly and with smooth subtle cunning, and then stepped back, my left hand high, withdrawing the blade from Lart's right arm. His rapier, snared by my dagger, snaked up alongside my dagger, and my rapier snaked up, also, through his arm. He dropped his main-gauche before he dropped his rapier.

For a single and fleeting instant, as I recovered, I let my point hover at his throat. I looked into his eyes. I laughed at him.

“How easy it would be, Strom Lart!”

“You — you—” he gobbled. He held his arm and the blood was already dribbling between his fingers.

I swung away.

The judges declared the duel ended in blood and honor and we could collect our winnings and go home. Casmas was so exuberant he actually came up and slapped me on the back.

“By Havil, Amak! You have done me a good turn this day! No one expected you to live! And the bets — all the lovely golden deldys — you are to be congratulated, Amak Hamun!”

Casmas was raking in the deldys. He had made a killing here if no one else had.

I did not reply. Chido was wringing my hand and bubbling, quite forgetting to collect his winnings from Casmas. I willingly allowed them to carry me off in triumph to a late supper. Casmas, who lived in a sumptuous villa, but not in the sacred quarter, excused himself, smirking, saying his passionflower awaited. Rosala's family went with Casmas. They were brilliant, foppishly dressed men, yet hard and flint eyed.

We settled down to serious drinking, Chido, Nath Tolfeyr, Tothord of the Ruby Hills, old fussy Strom Dolan, and others of our cronies. We missed the Trylon Rees, for the Numim was acknowledged the leader in all our escapades.

“Let us go to him and turn him out of bed, and tell him the news!”

“No, no!” I shouted weakly. “He needs his rest.”

“He'll rest all the better when he hears, Hamun! Come on!” And Chido and Nath Tolfeyr laughed and yammered and would not listen to me, and so we trooped out into the night, ruffling it in our cloaks, with our rapiers swinging, beneath the moons of Kregen.

Well, I will not weary you with our antics that night as we traversed the sacred quarter, hunting trouble. A spirit of adventure, sheer mischief, floated in the warm air.

We ran yelling with laughter from the watch, and they, despite the strict rules and laws of Hamal, were never so anxious to catch us. We drank from bottles, and we lost stupid old Strom Bolan, who fell down the steps into a dopa den, and yelled at us as he staggered up that since he was down here he would stay, and crack a bottle or two of dopa, and we yelled down that he was a fool and an onker; he

hiccupped and pushed through into the den and we, cursing him for his folly, left him and pressed on to Rees's villa. Well, as I say, we were young and high-spirited, for all that our ages would have made us appallingly old on this Earth, and we roused Rees and he roared his joy at our news and fresh bottles were brought.

By the time I slipped away the Maiden with the Many Smiles floated serenely above, and the Twins were eternally orbiting each other midway down the western sky. The light was far too great for the kind of enterprise on which I embarked, but I would not wait.

I insist I am not a man puffed up with pride. Pride is for fools. But I knew then, as I swung off for Casmus' luxurious villa in the shining quarter — a select area of secluded villas tucked into the southwestern corner of the city between the Walls of Kazlili and the Black River — that this fraught emotion I experienced, which led me into harebrained schemes, was as near to baffled pride as I care to admit.

I unslung the bright green pelisse. I took off the white frilled shirt. I stripped off the dark blue trousers and the boots. Clad only in my old scarlet breechclout, with rapier and dagger belted to my waist, with my sailor's knife over my hip, I stalked off. I had the sense to throw the great gray cloak over all; but it was touch and go, in my frame of mind, whether I damned 'em all to the Ice Floes of Sicce, and left it with my clothes bundled up and slung into a bush beneath Casmus' walls. I did however — and not without a curse of annoyance — don the mask.

Casmus the Deldy's outer wall was frosted with razor-edged glass. I simply tore up a bush, hurled it onto the glass, handed myself up, and leaped down on the inner side.

Without a snarl, without a screech, the great vicious black-and-white form of a wersting launched itself at my throat!

Werstings are bulky, black-and-white-striped hunting dogs of Kregen, lethal in their vicious savagery. I had met them before, but not about the same kind of business I was engaged in now. The wersting leaped. I saw the fangs in his gaping red mouth and I flung myself sideways and the rapier licked up and in, silver bright under the moons, black and greasy as I rolled away, dragging it clear. The beast let out a whining grunt of pure astonished pain. A second thrust finished him.

I padded on over the turf, beneath the shade trees, between the graceful fountains, toward the villa of Casmus the Deldy. I held the rapier gripped in my fist.

Lights from mellow samphron-oil lamps still shone from windows. I selected a first-floor window above a balcony and handed up the greenery, peered in past hangings. The room contained Casmus himself playing Jikaida with one of Rosala's family. Two other men sat drinking and polishing their weapons. So the family was keeping the proprieties before the marriage. Very right and proper, too!

As I watched, Casmus, with a fat chuckle, swept up a swod from his opponent's central drin. The swod in Jikaida, named for a common soldier, a private, is almost equivalent to the pawn in chess. I chinned myself up, mentally working out the next move I would have made to confound Casmus — his king's paktun stood perilously exposed — and so worked my way along to the next window. This was in darkness, with a faint moonglow reflecting from the dark panes. My knife eased the catch and I slipped to soft rugs inside.

The room was empty, with a bed ready, and I guessed it was a guest room for one of Rosala's family of hawks. I padded along the corridor to the back of the house and soon found a door that looked

promising. This door was smaller than the usual, and stood in an angle between two larger doors. It was typical of the doors to rooms for body-servants, in instant attention upon their masters or mistresses. The girl in the bed inside awoke to my brown hand across her mouth, a dagger flashing in her eyes, and my evil old face glowering down upon her.

She tried to scream and then to bite, and I showed her the error of her ways.

“Do you know the Hortera Rosala of Match Urt?”

Her eyes, wide with shock, blinked. I tickled her and said, “Blink twice if you know—” She blinked twice. I said, “Very good. Blink twice if you will keep silent if I take my hand away.” Instantly, two more blinks. I took my hand away, ready to slap it back at once if she yelled.

She took a breath — she was a slip of a thing with lustrous dark hair in the cheap oil dip’s light — and said: “I am Paline and the lady Rosala is my mistress; have you come to rescue her?”

Those romantic plays and books that are the rage of Kregen with their foolish notions of high passionate love, and excursions and alarms! They have much to answer for.

“How do you know, Paline, that I have not come to ravish you?”

She giggled. She was thoroughly at home and enjoying every minute of it.

“You wear a mask, and you carry a sword, and you are a Notor, sure. These things are not necessary to ravish Paline.”

I did not chuckle. I said, “Where is the lady Rosala?”

She rose at once, clad in a long white nightgown, and on bare feet she led me out of her room and into the one next door. Rosala lay sleeping in the wide double bed, beneath a canopy ostentatiously woven of gold thread, with blue flowers and yellow faerlings embroidered upon it. Paline shook her awake. She sat up, her fair hair gleaming in the light, and saw me, and put a hand to her mouth.

“The great Jikai has come to rescue you, my lady! We must dress and fly! Hurry, my lady, hurry!”

“We?” I said.

Rosala looked at me.

“Surely, you who drew me from the zhyan’s claws would not leave my faithful Paline? You would not desert a defenseless girl?”

Almost — almost but not quite — I laughed at this.

“Get dressed, Rosala, and you too, Paline. I would prefer to leave without a fight.”

At this Paline pouted. She was a vivacious girl, very much a gypsy with her dark hair and brilliant eyes.

They dressed and I growled at them to wear dark sensible clothing and, by Krun, to hurry. At which, in a silent twitter — a state very easily induced in the middle of the night when a masked madman storms into your bedchamber, I assure you — they hastily gathered up this and that, knickknacks, combs,

brushes, mirrors, silver boxes, shawls, toiletries. Significantly, Rosala had pitifully few poor gems to carry away.

“I will carry these things, Notor,” said Paline. “For, doubtless, you will be engaged in fighting.”

Callous? Brave? Or merely a silly head stuffed with romantic nonsense from millennia-old adventures on Kregen?

We crept out on tiptoe. Paline, it was clear, didn't mind if we did make a noise. She thirsted for my rapier to tickle the guts of these cramps of Casmus the Deldy's household.

Casmus employed a sizable retinue of servitors and guards, besides his slaves. They were originally from a variety of social strata and of a jumble of diffs; under the lure of his gold they would serve as reasonably well as one might expect.

“This way, Jikai,” said Rosala. She was, by her use of that great word, now convinced that I was all kinds of hero. I just wanted to get this thing done with and set about my real tasks in enemy Hamal. We went through a rear passage.

I thought we would win free without trouble.

Then, as we came out of the shadows of the last flight of stairs with the rear door bolted and barred before us, Paline let out a squeak and cowered next to her mistress. Both girls huddled, shaken, petrified with fear.

Two guards stepped from a doorway at the side. They were fully armed and accoutered in the fashion of Hamalian swods. They saw the girls and me and they did not hesitate. The Rapa's big vulturine beak parted as he let out a hoarse shriek of rage, and the stux fairly flew toward me in the lamplight. The Brokelsh, his hairy body huge and ominous under the armor, drew his thraxter and charged up the stairs after the stux.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” screamed Rosala.

Paline licked her lips, recovered. “Now, Jikai! *Fight!*”

## Chapter Fifteen

### I buy a slave

Whatever Amak Hamun of Paline Valley would have done was neither here nor there. I knew what Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy, would do. The stux was snatched from the air in my left hand, reversed, and in a twinkling sent flying back. It took the Brokelsh in the throat above the collarband of his lorica. He could not shriek, but his eyes glared madly, and he clawed at the javelin embedded in his throat; then he toppled and fell with a smash.

I hurdled his prostrate body, whirling the rapier. As I passed Paline I slapped her bottom with my left hand, and yelled: “Unbolt the door, wench! And jump to it!”

The Rapa faced me bravely enough. These bird-faced diffs are a fierce and predatory folk, serving as mercenaries all over the place, and adept with weapons. Not so cruelly fearsome as Chuliks, perhaps, and Chuliks are devils from hell, but tough adversaries. My rapier crossed with his thraxter, he threw up

his shield, and then I had slipped in, and, knocking the shield aside, gripped him by the throat in my left fist and drove the rapier into his body, fatally low. He writhed, but I held his throat, glaring madly into his face, and so prevented an outcry as he died.

Paline was standing watching, her face shining and rapt.

“The door, girl! Or must I whip you!”

She shrieked and fled for the door. Rosala was there to help. Between them they unbolted and lifted the bar, struggling, until I dropped the Rapa corpse and leaped to aid them. The door opened and pink moons-light flooded in.

“Wait,” I grunted. I peered out. No sign of any guards — but the leaping black-and-white shape of a wersting.

He yowled and leaped. Damned intemperate, these hunting dogs. But he did not know me, and so was legally entitled to rip out my throat. I had no business here. I let him have the rapier, but he died shrilling in the wild ululating cry of the wersting.

“Hurry!” I yelled and we belted heads down for the glass-topped wall.

A fold of Paline’s dress smothered the sharp edges. I hefted the two girls up, fairly hurling them over to fall shaken and scratched into the bushes on the far side. As I went over I heard an uproar behind me and caught the fiery gleam of torches. More werstings were ululating. I picked myself up, tore down Paline’s dress, all ripped. I thrust the rapier through the dress in two quick passes, cleaned it, and then snapped it back into the scabbard. As I say, I do not like to foul with blood a scabbard Delia has given me. I grabbed the two girls, one under each arm, holding them around their stomachs, their arms and legs dangling, and ran for the shadows of the trees.

As my clansmen of Segesthes say: “In for a zorca, in for a vove.” Rosala knew who I was, despite the mask. She had no business wedding old Casmus, anyway. I collected up my clothes and we bundled off into the dark streets of the golden quarter, hurrying up the tree-lined avenues, going through the narrow lanes of the Horters’ quarter, passing right by *The Thraxter and Voller*, going on toward my inn in the sacred quarter. Our cloaks muffled us. We moved with purpose. Link slaves were about, but I did not hire one for the journey. Slaves may be made to talk.

No sign of pursuit developed. I own I felt relief that I did not have to kill one of Rosala’s family. As I have indicated, I had shifted billets from the first inn I had patronized here, finding one in a narrower alley, with a convenient tree growing up giving me a quick passage from the adjoining roof. This inn was called *The Kyr Nath and the Fifi*, a reference to a more disreputable incident in the career of the Kregan Hercules.

I hefted the girls up by their rumps, slid them along the tree branch, ignoring their squeaks, maneuvered them down onto my balcony. The window opened as Paline landed, and Nulty took her into his embrace, very familiarly, I thought, and dragged her inside. I pushed Rosala through and slammed the window and the shutters — and we had done it!

Rosala of Match Urt would demand explanations, and I was not prepared to give them. I fobbed her off with as little information as I could; the problem remained. What was to be done with her and her maid?

If I felt that chance owed me some recompense, I do not think that was an unreasonable attitude.

Chance and my own stupid cleverness had brought me into my present position, and chance must have relented, at least in the matter of Rosala.

With the girls safely hidden in the next room, and Emin and Salima sworn to secrecy, a secrecy I felt confident they would maintain, for as much as I would trust anyone in their position I trusted them, we were in fit state to receive Chido on his morning call. The duel and its aftermath had left him with a fragile head, but a dish of palines soon cured him. We settled that we would walk out, and he told me he was in need of a new slave, for he had freed his slave of the zorcas, and was thus perfectly handicapped, dear fellow, in the zorca races.

I gave Chido this, that he had freed the slave on good terms, giving him enough so that he was able to live comfortably as a clum. What his descendants might do was another matter, a problem of the clums.

The various slave markets throughout the city always repelled me. They held an undeniable fascination, of course, but you know my view on slavery. We strolled down there, and only because, having taken this fresh hitch upon fate, and having decided that the next person who tried to insult or put down Hamun ham Farhytu, the Amak of Paline Valley, would get a bloody nose and a challenge and six inches of honed steel, I was persuaded to venture into haunts where unpleasant characters made it a habit to go for their morning refreshment.

Long terraces set with tables and chairs overlooked the central area, where buyers might stand to make their bids. Water was continuously sprinkled, but as seems always the way with a slave market, dust puffed beneath the feet of the eager buyers. On the stone platform at the far end, with steps leading on and off, and the barracoons in the rear, the miserable bundles of humanity were paraded up and made to strip, clanking in their chains. Bidding was brisk. There are various slave markets, of course, catering for different qualifications in slaves. The simple laboring slaves were something of a glut on the market, what with the prisoners the war was bringing in, despite the huge numbers sacrificed in the Arena. This market dealt usually in skilled slaves, of the kind Chido needed as a zorcaman, a task that is nowise as simple as it sounds.

We sat down on the terrace, out of the blaze of the suns, and watched the proceedings. The auctioneers took turns. They seemed always to be big broad men, able to crack a whip with a cannon-shot report, able to size up the points of their merchandise in just the right, honeyed words to bring the bids rolling in. And, too, they were honest with it. One husky-looking Bleg, with his batlike face hideous in the suns-shine, was revealed as having a broken and badly set leg, and his value came down accordingly. I suppose slaving is like anything else; once you acquire a bad name no one will trust your goods.

Tothord of the Ruby Hills was there, sipping a light forenoon yellow wine, and eating a luscious gregarian mousse between sips. "What diff do you fancy, then, Chido?"

"Apim, if possible. But I do not mind too much. I don't think I could stand the smell of a Rapa, though, by Krun!"

"They don't smell so bad once you get used to them," I said.

Chido grimaced. "If you ever can!"

All the slaves being put up, either singly or in teams, were male. Some of them were very valuable, skilled men. All had been tamed — or almost all . . .

In the dust of the bidding area, a kind of arena of acquisition, most of the bidders wore a fold of their

scarf flung across their mouths and nostrils. Obeying Chido's injunction, I had come with an orange scarf carelessly thrown over my shoulders, ready for when he dragged me down into the dust. He watched the slaves as they were put up, his young eyes shrewd. He was no fool when it came to slaves.

Why, except by the actions of chance, had I happened to pick up an orange scarf, when Nulty had handed me a green one?

Suddenly Chido stiffened like a ponsho-trag on the scent of a stray. "That's my fellow!" he said decisively.

The slave was a brown-haired, well-built intelligent-looking young apim. The auctioneer bellowed that he had been captured in a raid in Pandahem, that he had been a member of a Lomian zorca patrol. Chido rushed off down the wooden steps from the cool terrace into the dust of shouting men, waving his arms, already bawling out ten deldys as a starter. I followed reluctantly.

"Twelve deldys!" bellowed a Lamnia close by. "Fifteen!" screeched Chido.

At a guess a smart zorca handler would be worth twenty-five. Prices fluctuated wildly, of course.

The price rose. I was attracted by the novel sight of an auctioneer abruptly catapulting from the curtains at the back of the podium concealing the gates to the cages. The auctioneer was a big fellow; his whip was wrapped around his neck and he fairly flew through the air. He landed with a crash, and his personal slaves picked him up and dusted him off and hustled him back. I heard yells behind the curtain.

"Twenty!" bellowed the Lamnia. These golden-furred halflings are shrewd merchants, and I knew he'd work it so that his final bid was twenty-five or so, thus forcing Chido, if he wanted the slave, to pay over the odds. And so it fell out. Chido yelped: "Twenty-three!" The Lamnia, dusting his fur, said, "Twenty-five," and Chido was left holding the sticky end.

"By Krun!" he said. "I've set my heart on that fellow!" And, with a loud roar, he hollered, "Twenty-six!"

The apim zorca handler was knocked down to Chido. He pushed his way through to pay at the raised desk where a Relt, one of those gentle cousins of the fierce Rapas, took the money. I was looking after Chido, and sighing, and thinking dark thoughts about slavery, when a massive booming voice burst through the tumult. I heard it distinctly.

"Notor Prescott! Majister!"

I felt as though a whip had scorched my spine.

I looked toward the dais. Guards were holding down a giant of a man whose four arms flailed their chains about, whose fierce red haired head glared intolerantly on the rabble. He saw me, he saw the way my hand flashed instantly to my lips, and he nodded. His bellowings ceased. At once, he became docile.

A Djang!

And I — I, Dray Prescott, was the king of the Djangs!

Without a second's hesitation, I saw it all clearly.

A stout apim in a green cummerbund bid twelve deldys.

I waited.

The bidding crept up, but slowly. All realized this ferocious four-armed Djang had been knocking the auctioneer and slave-masters about, and had not been cowed by whip or chains. He would prove an unacceptable handful in any decent household. Djangs were very rare as slaves, rare as mercenaries. They kept to their own land of Djanduin, ever ready to ward off the attacks of the Gorgrens, who sought to subdue and enslave them. Well, we had seen off the Gorgrens, Kytun and Ortyg and my army of Djanduin, seen them off handsomely. I did not recognize the Djang up there, being sold off like a beast, but he knew me. I was his majister.

I shouted: “Twenty deldys.”

One or two faces turned in my direction, but I sidled away, and waited for an opposing bid; none came. I heard a man snigger and say: “The fool who buys that four-armed monster is buying trouble, by Havil the Green!”

I paid the Relt. The twenty deldys just about cleaned out what I had in my purse. The Djang, still loaded with chains, stepped down to me. I saw a scurry in the crowd as men pressed away. They anticipated trouble. The chains, according to the law of Hamal, would be returned by me to the slave market within a day. I said: “Follow me, slave.”

“Aye, master.”

Here came Chido, leading his apim zorca handler.

“Now, by Krun, Hamun! What in Hamal have you been up to?”

“A whim,” I said, and turning, caught the eye of the Djang and winked. He did not respond. People were looking at him. Like any Djang, in tactical matters he was quick-witted.

“I’m taking this fellow back right away, Chido. I’ve a rod in pickle for him that’ll teach him manners.”

“We — ell,” began Chido.

But I strode off — I made it a good brisk pace to avoid further queries — and shouted back that I’d see Chido at the Dancing Rostrum later, and gave a jerk at the chains.

“Come along, slave,” I bellowed, so that onlookers heard me clearly. “I’ll teach you good manners, four arms or no four arms, by Havil the Green!” The onlookers, poor fools, sniggered. One shouted: “Whip him good, Horter!”

We attracted some attention as we walked back to *The Kyr Nath and the Fifi*, but not overmuch. People on Kregen are well accustomed to outlandish morphology. Just that a Djang is something special, more trouble than they are worth, to quote most slave-masters and aragorn. Only the Djang girls — ah! They are a prize above rubies.

As we turned into the alley leading to the inn, I said, “What is your name, brother?”

“My king,” he said, and his face flushed with painful arrogance, “I am Kharon Wonlin Bandermaid, Majister.”



I nodded. "I knew N. Wonlin Sundermair — a friend. He was assassinated — in my tent — and I was not there, I remember."

"Yes, Majister. The Wonlin tan hold Nath Sundermair in high memory and esteem."

"You were too young to fight?"

"Yes, Majister." We stopped just in the mouth of the alley. "So filled with a young man's fire, and the wars over, I thought to go as a mercenary . . . alas, this is the result."

"You are free now, Kharon. Listen carefully. I am known here as Hamun ham Farthytu, the Amak of Paline Valley. There is an Hamalian, old Nulty, who is loyal and knows. No one else knows." I gestured. "I am here in Ruathytu to discover — Why, what ails you, man?"

K. Wonlin Bandermair was looking distressed, and making vague gestures with his hands, his face creased. "Majister!" he said. "I am a fighting-man. I know nothing of these high affairs of state, no, by Zodjuin of the Silver Stux!"

Well, warmed by his oath though I was, I recognized his words as truth. That is the matter with these four-armed Djangs, as you know. They are the bonniest fighters in all Havilfar, but, it saddens me to say, they are somewhat thick when it comes to affairs above a Jiktat's rank.

"We will go in now, Kharon. Remember, keep a still tongue in your head. No majistering me. Merely master." As he nodded, I added: "I judge you were a ranker? Yes? Well, K. Wonlin Bandermair, by the authority vested in me as King of Djanduin, you are hereby created a Deldar." He flushed suddenly with pleasure — no greater pleasure than mine, I assure you, in thus handing out largesse. It is deceptively easy to miss the fact that handing out titles and ranks and money and lands gives more pleasure to the giver than the receiver — at least, selfishly, it does to me. "A shiv-Deldar, Kharon. [7] So you are over halfway to a Hikdar."

"Thank you, Majister, thank you!"

So we went in, and if Nulty wondered why a miserable slave should look so happy he made no comment.

I thought I knew my Djangs. They would fight until no drop of blood remained in their bodies. With wise and sound leadership, they were invincible. That was, all too terribly, to be put to the test, as you shall hear. For now, I set about the rest of the plan that had flashed upon me.

Nulty saw about sending the chains back to the slave market. I told him that the Djang would cooperate with us. He gave me a skeptical look. What with a fine lady in hiding in the next room, and a fearsome four-armed Djang meekly taking orders, he must have considered I was running a wild kind of menagerie!

Now a slave who escapes in Hamal is a diabolical nuisance to his master, for under their infernal laws the lax master is in for all kinds of trouble. They are a hard sharp bunch, still, although I have changed their ways of late. At this time I went about my plan with an evil cunning that gave me great joy.

Meeting Chido at the Dancing Rostrum, a huge hall with many mirrors where one might dance the night away, I took a few turns around the hall, dancing with a charming Lamnia girl. Then I fell into

conversation with an Elten, was joined by Strom Hormish of Rivensmot, that scarlet-faced buffoon, who was not at all sure how to take me now, after my apparently accidental wounding of his friend, Strom Lart of Hyr Rothy.

Strom Hormish alluded to our brush at the shrine of Beng Salter, and I passed it off, adding that if he wanted to challenge me to a duel I was ready to serve him as I had served Strom Lart. He was not sure. He sensed a change in the Amak of Paline Valley. He hesitated. I steered the conversation on to challenges, knowing the Strom had built himself a private amphitheater where he would stage private spectacles for his friends. I expressed a desire to attend one of these, and, in short, I ingratiated myself with him. Chido was dancing, and so I was spared his looks.

“And I’ll wager you a thousand gold deldys, Strom, that this Djang of mine will knock over a wersting. A chavonth, even.”

“I cannot believe that, Amak!”

“By Krun! It is the truth, as Havil the Green is my witness!”

Well, I steered him along, and his red avarice got the better of him. In the end nothing would suit him but that he must buy this fearsome Djang and match him himself. He used his rank as a Strom to bear me down, with the naked threat that a challenge would follow, as I richly deserved; the more he talked the greater his courage. Of course, it had been an accident, my getting the better of Strom Lart! It had to be!

This Strom had been the instrument to turn me into the weakling I had acted, with, I thought with undue modesty, reasonable success after that first failure with his friend Strom Lart. Now he would be the instrument to cauterize a little of the smart of those wounds. He bought my four-armed Djang from me, and I passed on the paperwork I had had from the Relt at the slave market. Legally, K. Wonlin Bandermaid was now the property of Strom Hormish of Rivensmot.

The explanations to Kharon Bandermaid when I delivered him over brought a devilish smile to his savage face. Strom Hormish’s slave-master took charge of Kharon and I left. The timing was perfect. I strolled down to a voller park, selected the craft that took my fancy, stole it — or, as a soldier of Djanduin fighting his enemies would say, liberated it — and flew back under cover of darkness and picked up Rosala and Paline. At the same time I gave Emin and Salima the opportunity to leave, at which they jumped. Then it was merely a matter of landing at the prearranged time just outside Strom Hormish’s villa, and picking up the ferocious form of my Djang, Kharon, after he had battered his way out with the sword they had given him to fight a wersting for their pleasure.

I saw the party on its way to Djanduin amid many Remberees. Life would return to normal for them all, for I had an idea on that score for Rosala of Match Urt. And now, by Vox, to work!

## Chapter Sixteen

### The fight in the folly

Getting back to work was nowhere as easy as I had expected. The Pallans in charge of the various stages of voller production were now alerted to the threat of spies, and there were massive increases in guard details. I had a few narrow escapes, and so, not without a curse or two, abandoned the idea of breaking into a voller shed. There were other ways. Rumors had spread about the frightening nighthawk with the flaring cloak and the mask, who flitted over rooftops and could not be caught.

There were strong rumors that he was a Vallian.

I listened with a stony face as Chido expounded the rumors for me.

“We’re unable to sell vollers to Vallia, Hamun, at a time like this. That makes sense, doesn’t it, by Hanitcha the Harrower!” He sipped his wine where we sat watching Nath Tolfeyr being cut down to size by the Zeniccean, Leotes ti Ponthieu. The points were rebated, for it was a mere practice bout, or else Nath would have been a degutted corpse. “The Vallians don’t like it, too bad for them! They’ve sent a deputation to plead with us for vollers.” He laughed, a cheery, good-natured laugh. “They don’t stand a chance in an Herrelldrin hell!”

“So the Pallans think one of the Vallians from the deputation is trying to steal their secrets?”

“Our secrets, Hamun, my old sport!”

“Quite.”

“Well, it’s only a theory. But the Queen will send the Vallians away with fleas in their collective ears.”

He used a Kregish expression, but that was what he meant.

We were contracted for a gambling zorca race in the afternoon, and we went and cheered on the animals as they raced the course. They didn’t have zorca chariot racing here, as we did in Valka. But they’d import that, too, before long. Strom Hormish arrived, and made a scene over the Havil-forsaken Djang who had run off. He was liable for all kinds of penalties under the law.

“Bad luck, Strom,” chortled Chido, and went back to cheering on his zorca, urging him to ride down all opposition.

“He seemed docile enough to me, Strom,” I said. “It is bad luck. Did you whip him?”

“No, as Hanitcha harrows our good intentions! I gave him a thraxter and told him to fight a wersting — and he ran!”

Even Tothord of the Ruby Hills laughed over that.

The idle raffish days slipped by. I saw the Vallian delegation taking the air, shepherded through the sacred quarter, and recognized some of its members. I calculated that the Emperor of Vallia, Delia’s father, had given up all hopes of his wild son-in-law finding the secrets of the vollers, as well he might. It seemed to me the Racter party, who wanted to oust him from power, had pressured him into this delegation. It would get nowhere. But at least it would show the people of the Vallian empire that something was being done. If by chance it succeeded, the racters would take the credit. When it failed they would put the blame on the Emperor.

How my Delia must have seethed over this!

The voller in which I had arrived, cracking up by the burning farmhouse where I was held by a Rapa while another hit me on the head, just before I met Rees the lion-man, had been sold for scrap. Now I determined to sell the model I had bought in its place, for I scarcely used the thing and I was running short of cash. I think, too, the strain of being an undercover agent, and a potential Bladesman, was telling on me at this time.

A buyer had been found. He lived about twenty dwaburs east along the River Havilthytus, and I would fly the voller out and return by boat. I looked forward to the journey, for it would be over new ground and I might turn up some chance to help my mission change from a shambles of disaster to brilliant success.

The twin suns, Zim and Genodras, cast down their mingled streaming colored fires as I flew east over the rich Hamalese countryside. I spotted a cloud of flutsmen, and after my first instinctive tensing, relaxed. They would be fresh recruits, hired by Hamal, being prepared to be sent out against the empire's enemies. I watched the birds and their riders and saw them diving down onto what was evidently a small but extremely rich villa by the river. The place was laid out as a pleasure garden.

I frowned. Something was amiss.

Two other airboats flew past without halting. I suppose the flutsmen were confident, knowing they would be mistaken for allies, hired by Hamal, as I had mistaken them. But I could recognize a flutsmen raid when I saw one. Why should they descend on this small and lonely villa, a pleasure palace in miniature?

Wheeling the flier and buckling up my weapons, I headed down to the villa of pleasure.

The scene below revealed in horrid clarity just what was going on. The Flutsmen had now all landed and were busily engaged in their furious and reckless way with the guards. The reivers kept a ring before a tiny folly, perched on a spit of land jutting into the river, where skiffs and sailboats were moored. The scene was idyllic, bowered in sweet-smelling trees. The struggle below smeared that fresh brightness in horror.

A small group of reivers, their backs for the moment secured from attack by the guards as their comrades battled on, burst into the folly.

My voller landed beside the folly, a little white-painted rococo pavilion. Women were screaming. I saw guards stretched upon the green turf. The guards were apims, Rapas, Numims, Brokelsh, mercenaries very quick with the sword. The flutsmen had not had it all their own way, and there were flutsmen corpses lying there, the brave clotted streamers bedraggled. I leaped out, tearing free my rapier and dagger, and ran for the pavilion.

A Numim staggered out, his fierce lion-face anguished.

He tried to speak, gurgled, and fell. The stux had penetrated deep into his back. I leaped up the steps and burst into the pavilion. Cool shadows fell about me. The scene jumped into instant clarity and focus.

Three beautiful girls lay dead on silken cushions, their blood staining the mosaic floor among the soft rugs.

Someone had blundered there, for the girls were Chail Sheom, courtesans, garlanded with golden chains, extraordinarily beautiful and worth a fortune each. The woman who sat on a cushion, her face a mask of horror, surprised me. She wore all black: the short pleated and flared skirt of Hamal; a frilled, lacy blouse; a cummerbund around a tiny waist; and a turban-like cloth wound about her head — all black. She was beautiful, oh yes, in a hard feral way, with intense passion in her eyes, and a mouth that could firm to instant command. Her eyes were green, slanting, commanding. She sat, motionless, watching the six flutsmen who had come to take her.

They were arguing among themselves, as is the flutsmen's way. The three who had slain the girls were being reviled by the other three. That made sense. They had a large dark blue bag, and one was pulling the drawstring open, clearly intending to stuff this woman, at least, into the bag, even if they'd missed the girls.

"For the sake of Barflut the Razor Feathered!" boomed one. "Nath, get your fumbling fingers out of it, you onker!"

"Hurry and stuff the she-leem in the sack!" rapped back Nath, furious. "The other guards will be here soon!"

They wrestled with the sack, which opened a fraction before the drawstring stuck again.

"Pick the she-leem up, throw her over your shoulder! By Gish! Have I to tell you everything?"

The woman saw me. The chill of horror in her eyes warmed, it seemed to me, much as a samphron-oil lamp might glow in the Ice Floes of Sicce. She saw me looking at her and the flutsmen, and a strange calculating look drove the horror from her green eyes. She seemed to grow taller, more lithe, sensuous, utterly commanding and demanding.

"May Milah Bateh bless you with the brains of a calsany!" The flutsmen were wrangling away, swearing their convoluted flutsmen's oaths, still tearing at the drawstring of the sack while two of them busied themselves stripping the gems from the bodies of the slain Chail Sheom. This big fellow Nath backhanded his companion away and started for the woman in black seated immobile on her cushion. "You are rancid brained yourself, Nalgre! Go see if the guards are—" He broke off as this Nalgre turned, saw me, and let out a shriek of anger and joy.

"A ponshe come for the shearing! By Gish! I need the sight of bubbling blood to drown your babbling, oh Nath, father of onkers!"

"Father and mother of vosks, Nalgre of the clipped wings! Stick him and end your silly chattering."

Well, as I knew, flutsmen are deadly fighters. They scour the skies seeking prey. They are a foul pest, it is true, but they have given me much enjoyment in my time. As now.

Nalgre whipped up his thraxter and came at me.

Despite the stories that a flutsmen would never walk across a street to pick up a golden deldy but would fly, they are marvelous fighters afoot. We engaged, and from the back Nath bellowed: "I'll take the she-leem. Rondas, Naghan, go and show Nalgre the Vosk how a flutsmen fights!"

With cheery shouts two flutsmen bore down on me. For a few moments I was beset; then I dropped one — whether Rondas or Naghan I did not know — and cut Nalgre's face with a slash that only his superb speed turned from a fatal to an injurious blow. He yelled — in anger — and forced himself back again.

The other one — either Rondas or Naghan — screeched and staggered away holding his guts. The rapier does its work neatly and with dispatch there, and they wore only light flying leathers without armor. Nalgre began to boil. The other two bellowed multifarious flutsmen's oaths and rushed at me, and in a blur of twinkling steel I fended them off. Another went down — we had not been introduced — and I saw Nath hoisting the black-clad woman up over his shoulder. She made no movement or struggle. Her

stony self-possession after that first frozen horror intrigued me. I dealt with another — and still Nalgre, streaming blood, eluded me. I swung back, stuck out a foot, and tripped him. There was no time to stab into his unprotected back as he went down, for Nath, bellowing like a chunkrah in labor, bore down on me, immense, his feathers flaming with color, those clotted streamers whirling from his leather flying helmet.

I said, “Put the lady down, Nath—”

His thraxter blurred before my face.

I beat it away with the dagger, drove the rapier in with a precision that must be exquisite. The blade passed a finger’s breadth by the woman’s dangling body. Nath gave a last-minute lurch, the blade scored his side, and then I let him have the dagger-hilt in the face.

He dropped the woman in black.

He swung ferociously to face me, his heavy face enraged and engorged with blood. His eyes glittered. Nalgre staggered up dizzily, swerved to the door. “Out, Nath, out! The guards! The guards!”

I was not keen to slay these two. They amused me. They were reiving flutsmen, true, but they had failed here. The flutsmen who had slain the poor slave girls were already dead or dying.

“By Gish! This one fights like a Hyr-paktun!” bellowed Nath. He glanced at his companion, then back at me. He made no further effort to engage but ran swiftly out into the sunshine. I heard a fierce yell. Nalgre darted after. I flicked blood drops from my blade and then went across and cleaned both dagger and rapier on the gaudy flying silks of a dead flutsmen. Only then could I see to the woman. She was not harmed. She sat on the floor, and her face showed in startling contrast to the black of her costume. She watched me with those slanting green eyes. At last, as I said nothing, she spoke.

“I am the Kovneva Serea of Piraju.” Then, speaking in a low cold monotone that contrasted with what she said as her white face contrasted with the black silks: “Hai, Jikai!”

About to tell her that this little scuffle was in no way a Jikai, high or small, I was stopped by the entrance of a detachment of breathless guards. Bulky, hard men wearing link mesh, and with thraxters and shields handled with a competence that told of long experience, they hustled in — and made straight for me with the clearest of intentions of cutting me down on the spot!

I had to jump and parry for a moment before the Kovneva lashed them with biting invective and cowed them. By Zair, but she knew how to command!

“This Jikai saved me, you cramphs! And you were out chasing phantoms, lured away by those rasts of flutsmen!” She would not hear a word any of them could say. Their faces were the tough hard-bitten chunks of oak veteran warriors. They took her scorn ill; yet they endured.

She drove them out icily, viciously, contemptuously. When the guards had gone she turned to me again. I felt my muscles haul my backbone up a little straighter as she fastened those slanting green eyes upon me, as her lips softened from that single scarlet gash to two soft curves. I knew that a Kovneva was a high rank. As for Piraju, that was an island off the northeastern tip of Hamal, precariously attached to the mainland by one of the long chains of tiny islands that stretch out like fingers into the Southern Ocean, the Risshamal Keys.

“You do not speak, Jikai. Your name?”

Well, now.

To give her any of my varied assortment of real names would mean one of two things: those she did not recognize would mean nothing; those she did recognize would brand me as an enemy. To tell her I was Amak Hamun? No — that would blow my cover completely. So, once again, I had to invent a new name, on the spur of the moment, knowing my neck stood at risk. A Kovneva holds real and awesome powers in her own place.

“Lahal, Kovneva,” I said. “I am Bagor ti Hemlad.”

“Lahal, Bagor ti Hemlad.”

I’d steered clear of any noble rankings, contenting myself with being a Horter. Hemlad, you will recall, was the town in which, in company with Avec Brand and Ilter Monicep, I had had an adventure involving smashing my face into an old lady’s basket of ripe shonages. I had been thrown into the basket of ripe fruit by a combination of circumstances including the lurching of an amith-drawn vehicle. Often I saw the trolleys being drawn so cheerfully on their tracks through the streets of Ruathytu by one of those marvelous diffs, the amith, with their apim upper half and totrix rear half, I thought of Avec and Ilter and those days wandering the south central area of Hamal.

It seemed to me, then, as far as I could judge, that I had pitched it just right. This imperious Kovneva would lose interest in a mere Horter. A man of rank would have intrigued her. A mere mercenary, a paktun, a soldier-of-fortune, might have repelled her. Anyway, what I desired occurred, for when I said I was in a hurry, that she was now perfectly safe, and that I must press on, she did not attempt to dissuade me, except that she insisted I drink a glass of wine with her. It was the best Jholaix. I dissembled well; few people can afford the best of Jholaix.

“The wine pleases you, Bagor?”

“It is very fine, Kovneva. My thanks.”

Her amusement made those green eyes flare with all the reflections from Genodras. A mere Horter of slender means might never drink Jholaix from the day he was born to the day he died. I smiled inwardly.

I was now able to take my leave. I flew on to make my sale, disposed of the voller, and took a boat back up the River Havilthytus. When the vessel passed that white pavilion, you may be sure I stared; the place was deserted.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Espionage

Nothing useful came out of that trip back up the River Havilthytus. Nothing useful, it seemed to me, was coming out of my entire spying efforts in Hamal. The news with which Chido greeted me, although I had heard rumors before I slung my coat down onto the bed for Nulty to clear away in my room in *The Kyr Nath and the Fifi*, was that something of a reverse had been suffered by the army of Pandahem. That is what the Hamalians called their forces operating in Pandahem; it was not the army of the Pandaheem. I grimaced, thinking, good for them, the Hamalian crampes.

Chido noticed the glitter of gold falling from my coat as Nulty cleared it away.

“Oh,” I said, offhandedly. “Just a souvenir I picked up.”

“It is magnificent, Hamun!”

Well, I was not about to tell Chido that this little golden trinket had been given to Bagor ti Hemlad by the Kovneva Serea of Piraju for services rendered. It was a nice piece, fashioned into the shape of a zhantil, that golden-maned tawny wild beast of Kregen, studded with a violet gemstone that Chido, handling it reverently, told me was extraordinarily valuable.

“I prefer scarron,” I said.

So I passed it off. For safety I pinned the thing to the scarlet breechclout, and locked the chain on it. I did not want to leave it lying about to excite further comment, and I did not wish to wear it where it might be seen. A spy has to think of these things.

Before I made up my mind to sell it I would have to make careful inquiries concerning the Kovneva Serea, and, in all probability, break the violet-and-gold-zhantil brooch up, which would be a pity.

Chido did say, before we went out to a gaming match he had contracted to bring me to, “It seems you are lucky to find it, Hamun. It is clearly a trophy of war. Pandahem work, I’ve no doubt.” Then, before I could comment, he was burbling on in his artless way: “The Havil-forsaken news means that Rees will be marching out before he’s fully fit! It isn’t right, Hamun! Rees’s regiment bivouacs outside Ruathytu tomorrow.”

This stupid reverse of the Hamalese forces in Pandahem, which I welcomed with vicious pleasure, meant that a friend was going marching off to war before he was fit enough to do so. Truly, fate is a weird old fabricator at times!

“That means you’ll be marching out, too, Chido.”

“Looking forward to it, old sport, looking forward.”

Amak Chido spoke in an offhand way, with that cultivated drawl of the raffish set of Ruathytu, but he had been thinking about what going off to war would mean, and those thoughts had not been entirely to his liking.

“If Rees insists on an entire regiment of zorcamen,” I said, and I spoke more weightily than I intended, “then I cannot march with you.”

It was a sore point between us. That it was the truth merely helped its use as an excuse for me to stay in the city.

Perhaps I ought to say here that this “truth” was simply the fact that for all the training Rees’s men had undergone, they were new recruits, raw. The best use for them would be as a thundering great mob charging headlong into the enemy. But they rode zorcas. Not the most suitable animal for a charge, when other forms of saddle-animal were available. As zorcamen they should be employed in the scouting role. But they would be totally unfitted to carry out that task with all the skills it demanded. Whoever was running the Hamalese war effort was here allowing rank and status and a glib tongue to lead them astray. A new Pallan for the Northern Front had been appointed, one Kov Pereth; I supposed Rees had got to



him.

There were plenty of glum faces as we went the rounds of the sacred quarter. Every Hamalian believed fervently that his empire would win this war, and would go on extending the boundaries of empire, but at setbacks like these they grew glum, where, I believe, other races would grow angry.

It was on this day, I recall, that my winnowing of the wind at last yielded a result. Time was running out faster than I cared to contemplate. True, this setback to the Hamalese army of Pandahem gave me a little more breathing space; but all the time I spent here in Hamal I was somberly aware that when at last I prised loose the secret of the vollers a great deal more time would be required for the builders of Vallia to construct our own fliers. I was not overlooking the fact that Hamal was operating an expedition at a considerable distance from her home bases, and that she might overstretch her resources. From all I had seen in Hamal I knew the empire ruled by Queen Thyllis was immensely rich and powerful, with untapped resources of men, materials, and money. She would have to be struck many shrewd blows before the Hamalians could be convinced of the wisdom of halting their imperial ambitions and expansions. So that when at last all Pandahem had been conquered — perhaps even before the final mopping-up operations — the Hamalians would launch themselves in their clouds of sky ships against my home of Vallia. Looking back, I can think with warm affection — and not a little wry amusement, considering the way of it — how I now completely took the island empire of Vallia as my homeland. Vallia and Valka, Djanduin and Strombor!

The best way of winnowing the wind, I discovered, lay in scattering golden deldys with a lavish hand.

The astrologers of this Earth consider that a person born under the sign of Scorpio is not only strong, silent, courageous, and passionate — claims I admit I could only regard with a surprised amusement — but is also an intriguer, fond of all that is disguised or secret. If that is so I was a sorry specimen of my sky sign.

All my heavy-handed espionage had come to nothing, leaving me with dirt and air only. So I took that other course I had been planning for a time before I sold the voller. With that capital sum, and with much else I won in the frenzied gambling of the sacred quarter, I coldly bribed my way to the information.

What price honor and romance!

Down in a dopa den where slimy walls dripped and cheap dips flared in cracked crocks, where the dregs of the gentry slouched in crude wooden settles, drinking dopa, driving what unimaginable phantoms from their brains I knew not and cared less, I talked to rat-faced, nervous men, men who twitched and kept one eye always roving, looking over their shoulders. I did not take any pride in this work. This dopa den had been constructed out of one of the ancient guardhouses along the waterfront walls, where they were rotting away after the new walls had been built in a wider cincture around the city. I sat and listened as Jedgul, with his cloak muffled to his ears, his eyes two bright spots in the shadows, told me he knew a man who knew another man who knew a gul who might be able to provide what I sought — and so on and so on. It was an unsavory business.

Suffice it to say, by spending a great deal of money and by beating down with harsh words and cruel threats, I was promised a meeting with a man who understood the composition of the minerals in the silver boxes, and would tell me — for a price.

I think you will understand that although I would far prefer to have done this business clad in my old scarlet breechclout, my rapier in my fist, leaping over the rooftops beneath the whirling moons of Kregen, to do it at all was the imperative driving me on. A single thought of Delia, and my twins, in far-off Valka,

awaiting the onslaught of the Hamalese invaders, was more than enough to make me understand I would do anything —*anything* — to ensure their safety and happiness.

On a night when Notor Zan had swallowed up the moons, I huddled by the wall of a manufactory in the sensil quarter of the city. Although silk was still being turned into sensil in some of the buildings, this massive block had been turned over to voller production — specifically, the filling of the amphorae from the various minerals from mines all over Hamal.

The man I knew as Ormol let me in, a finger to his lips. He was apim. We crept through the darkness, he leading, for he knew the way well from his daily labors here. When at last he let fall a crack of light from a fireglass lantern and I saw the amphorae, the scoops, the scales, and measuring devices, the troughs filled with minerals and sands and earths, I swallowed down hard. This, I felt sure, must be success!

He showed me, speaking in a low throaty whisper, what I had struggled so hard to discover. I think you will understand if, at this moment, I do not tell you of all the technical matters of the silver boxes, reserving them for a later and much more suitable occasion in my narrative. One thing, though, of interest: five minerals resulted in one kind of voller, nine in another. One flier might be pushed willy-nilly by the wind; the other might not. The only means of describing the effect I had then, with my brushed-up mid-nineteenth-century science, was to say that a voller could seize on to the subetheric forces, could lift itself against the pull of gravity, and yet lean against those forces as though leaning against an infinitely resisting fence along the line of its own direction.

Enough. The fireglass light cast weird distortions of light and shadow over Ormol's evil face. My own face, too, was as evil, even more so, hard and ugly with the unholy passions of a long-contested victory.

When I had assured myself that I had mastered the minerals, their names, their proportions, the results that would accrue from mixtures of different strengths, I tucked packets of the various earths into the pouched belt I had worn to that end. I was dressed in dark blue trousers, shirt, and cloak, and wore shoes. I carried no rapier and dagger, instead a Hamalese thraxter was belted to my waist.

"Is that enough, Bagor?" whispered Ormol. His eyes in the fireglass glow gleamed like a leem's.

"No, Ormol. What of the *theother* silver boxes?"

He shivered. "I know only of the vaol-boxes, Bagor. That is my work."

"You must know something, Ormol!" I gripped his shoulder, shook him. "They are empty — and yet they cannot be empty!"

"They are not empty! Even I know that— For the sake of Kuerden the Merciless, let go of my arm!"

I pushed my ugly figurehead close to his face. "What do the paol-boxes contain, Ormol? Tell me, or by Havil the Green I'll—"

"No, no, Bagor!" He writhed, but I did not let him go. In this close sweaty darkness with the light gleaming weirdly and the shrouded shadowed forms of amphorae and troughs and scales all about us, here the destiny of nations was at stake.

The vaol-boxes contained minerals, and I had the mix and the composition, at last. The paol-boxes contained — nothing! No, for Ormol said they were not empty! I shook him again.

“By Krun! Ormol — what do the paol-boxes have in them?”

“My arm! By Kaerlan the Merciful, Bagor! My arm!”

“If I am sure of one thing, Ormol, you onker, it is that the paol-boxes do not contain your arm! Speak, or I’ll have your arm off and see if it will fit!”

But I eased the pressure, and he gasped, and his fingers moved like a crab’s legs.

“Cayferm!” he said. “Steam!”

It made no sense to me then. The common Kregish word for steam *iskish*. I’d never heard of *cayferm*.

With a sobbing grunt, Ormol twisted free as I pondered what he had said. The wooden door of the fireglass lantern smacked shut. Through the abrupt darkness I thought I caught a glimpse of him, silhouetted like a bat against a high skylight, but that was illusion: it was a night of Notor Zan, and he was gone.

I let him go.

The names of the nine ingredients were imprinted on my brain. For good measure — and ill luck as it turned out — I took up three of the scales they used here, for I recognized the workmanship of them and knew they would be invaluable in Vallia. After all, Vallia was going to be drawn into a war against Hamal, despite all our attempts to prevent it.

The way back through the darkness took me little time. I felt uplifted. I had done more tonight than in all my long sojourn in Hamal. And I had a clue, a single slender thread, it was true, to the contents of the other silver boxes. I felt very good then, I remember, as I made for the massive iron-bound lenken door that had opened so easily for Ormol.

He had known what cayferm was. I would seek him out again and give him more money, and ask again. Truly, as I put out my hand to draw the door open, I felt I had succeeded at long last.

The door creaked uneasily as I drew it back stealthily.

I had to be sensible. I had not succeeded yet. Almost; not quite. A few more hours’ work — and then I would succeed!

A torchlight flared in my face.

A voice, a hateful voice, thick and rich and giving commands that gave pleasure, bellowed: “Take him!”

The net descended about my head and shoulders with wicked entangling folds. I half drew the thraxter, still near blinded by lights that glared all about me. If skull-bashing was necessary, then I would skull-bash with a will!

The thraxter caught in the net.

Iron-studded sandals scuffled at my back, and like a leem I ducked and sprang and fell, the net wrapping me as a fish is wrapped, and whatever they bit me with landed precisely under my ear.

Notor Zan . . .

## Chapter Eighteen

### Queen Thyllis outfits Bagor ti Hemlad

The twin suns of Kregen burned down harshly on my naked back as I swung the pickax, smashing granite, and so I was not at all displeased when Matoc Fokal hauled me out of the sweating line of slaves.[\[8\]](#)

Fokal wasn't a bad sort, really, for a Hamalian slave overseer. He carried the balass, that black and uncomfortably hard stick of office, and would thwack us about, but he seldom bashed our heads, unlike some of the other overseers.

“What's afoot, Fokal?”

We walked along the lip of the ramparts. Ruathytu's walls were being strengthened and the slaves broke fingernails and sweated their guts out over the fortifications. We were all chained up, and Fokal had to summon Deldar Nath the Whip to come with the key before I could be released. I still clashed my own chains, though, swinging between my legs and my wrists as I walked. Everything done according to the law, in Hamal . . .

“I do not know, Bagor, you wild onker. A summons for you to go with a party of guards.” He spat. “It is not the Jikhorkdun, though.” Then he let rip a bellyful of laughter. “Not that I wouldn't pay my sinver to see you facing a wild leem, by Beng Thrax and his glass eye!”

Around us the busy work went on. Among those poor devils who were slaves for the rest of their lives were men like the man I was supposed to be, a common criminal. I did not know whether to pound granite to dust in anger or to howl to the suns in glee — here was I, spying against Hamal, and they had caught me stealing three valuable scales, and had tried me and sentenced me as a thief! A laugh, I suppose, even for Dray Prescott, could be the only correct response.

The guards turned out to be ordinary swods under the command of an ord-Deldar.[\[9\]](#) We marched off with me in the center, all their iron-studded sandals crashing down in time, a left-right-left of brutal power, their stuxes all aslant, the suns gleaming from their helmets and loricas, their shields brave with the painted insignia of their pastang and regiment.

Matoc Fokal was a slave overseer with a sense of humor as well as a balass rod. “Treat him gently,” he bawled after the guard detail. “That Bagor is like a wild leem if you upset him!”

Not for the first time I blessed the conceit that had led me to use again that name of Bagor when dealing with the underworld of Ruathytu. No possible connection could be established between the naked slave in his chains sweating along among guards, and the effeminate Hamun ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley. My friends who had not gone off to war with the Trylon Rees's regiment of zorcamen would think I visited Paline Valley.

My hair had grown, too, although the slave overseers saw to it that we were cropped and bathed at regulation intervals.

Bundled into the back of a cart drawn by two calsanys, and the canvas awning let down, I was trundled off I knew not where.

The guards' harsh footfalls paralleled the cart. All for one miserable slave? I began to wonder if, perhaps, my disguise had been penetrated. But then, by how much? How deeply into my multifarious deceptions had they penetrated? It was no good worrying; I would find out in Zair's good time.

The calsanys halted just after the hollow echoes told me we had entered a stone courtyard bounded by high walls. The moment I was dragged out a great blindfold was whipped about my eyes. Prodded and pushed, I went where I was directed, up stone stairs, along passages, then into corridors where carpets felt soft and luxurious beneath my toughened soles. Coolness dropped about me, and the tinkle and splash of fountains sounded most refreshingly. I heard girls laughing. I heard the deep-toned voices of men in conversation, their worlds clearly far removed from that of slaving.

A feeling of soft pressure against my shoulder explained why no one appeared to have taken any notice of a party of armed guards and a naked slave in chains; some form of pierced screen, of wood or ivory, probably, shielded us from their observation. I was led into a room I knew by the echoes to be relatively small. A door clashed. The guards remained, for I heard their suppressed breathing, the creak of their harness.

After a moment a fat and unctuous voice said: "Is this it?"

"This is the slave Bagor, Notor," said the Deldar.

The abrupt feel of soft fingers prodding my muscles, digging me in the belly, poking about in my mouth, sickened me.

I bit.

The resultant shriek was most instructive. The blow that sent me reeling until brought up by the chains was also intended to be instructive.

"The nulsh!" The fat eunuch — it had to be — sounded anguished. "Take it away! Wash it! Clean it! Perfume it! Do not bring the offensive carcass before me again until it has been tamed."

The Deldar's voice hid a quaver. "We were told the slave Bagor was a wild leem, Notor."

They carted me off and I went through a caricature of the baths of nine. At least, I washed off the sweat and the dust. They dressed me up in a mocking suit of colored clothes, all bright yellows and greens and reds, with feathers, bells, and ribbons. I knew I looked an imbecile; I would endure, for by now I was intrigued.

Again the blindfold was wrapped about me. This second time the journey was shorter, and involved getting into and out of a boat. The soldiers pulled the oars and by the splashings I knew they were an unhandy lot. I was prodded up a steep and slippery flight of stone steps, very narrow, and the guards lumbered after, swearing by their soldier gods.

More chambers and corridors and stairs followed. At last, and not before time, I was told to incline. I did so. I wanted to know what was going on. The incline involves the prostration of the entire body, head down, rump up, a stupid and undignified position, one used by slaves for princes.

Or princesses. The blindfold was whipped away, many lights blinded me, and a harsh voice bade me crouch. I crouched.

Then, blinking, I could see through the tears in my smarting eyes.

She sat on a throne fashioned from crystal, a block of multifaceted crystal that must have weighed tons. The delicate gilding of arms and backrest could not disguise the power of that throne. Many brightly hued rugs bestrewed the throne and the dais. There golden-chained Chail Sheom simpered in attendance. Giant Womoxes waved faerling fans on each side of her. She looked — and I'll give her her due — mighty impressive.

“So, Bagor ti Hemlad. You are nothing better than a common thief.”

She no longer wore all black. Her body was smothered in silver tissue, with a gold-tissue vest. Her jewels scintillated with a sparkle from the ranked lights so that she appeared a glittering statue — and, yet, no statue, for now the blood burned in her cheeks, and those slanting green eyes leached fiercely upon me, a corner of the rich red lips caught up between white pointed teeth.

“You do not answer! Speak, onker.”

I was staring past the massively muscled man in the half-armor of gilded steel and the brilliantly feathered helmet, who stood by her left side, leaning on an arm of the throne and fingering his rapier, and I stared and stared at the familiar, horrible forms that crouched at her feet. Poor silly fat Queen Fahia of Hyrklana had attained a kind of surrogate dignity with her pet neemus, those vicious and treacherous black-furred cats. This woman, who had called herself the Kovneva Serea of Piraju, had gone at a bound far past fat Queen Fahia.

I looked at the jiklos.

I knew them, these manhounds. I had been chased by them through the jungles of Faol, had faced them with a wooden stave, had seen them rip shrieking victims to pieces. Apims, are the manhounds of Faol, apims trained to run on all fours and with their jagged teeth seize upon their prey. This woman of the blazing green eyes kept jiklos as her throne-step pets!

To give the woman her due she gave me time to answer. Not so the man in half-armor. He left off fingering his rapier. He bounded down the dais steps, his face congested, roaring at me.

“No stinking cramp of a slave insults the Majestrix while King Doghamrei stands ready to defend her honor!”

Just before he reached me with every intention of knocking me headlong, I said, quickly and icily, “So King Doghamrei would soil his lily-white hands on a slave?” and then I sidestepped, clanging my chains, and tripped him and trod on him as he fell.

Bedlam!

The guards yelled and dragged me off and this buffoon King Doghamrei shrieked as I put a foot into his ribs and the Queen — for obviously this icy woman who had traveled incognito as the Kovneva Serea was Queen Thyllis of the Empire of Hamal — gave curt orders that in surprising time sorted out the rumpus.

I was dragged up and then flung down before her.

Doghamrei — the king of one of the kingdoms within the Empire of Hamal — was being sick and hustled away by his slaves. Oh, yes, that had been quite refreshing. Quite like old times. I thought the Queen would now release me, seeing that I had saved her life, finding a regal pretext to overturn the law and the sentence, and then I could get on with finding out what this mysterious cayferm was that went into the paol-boxes.

Of course — Dray Prescott, as ever, was as stupid as an onker, a get-onker!

Speaking in a low level voice that flayed like one of my clansmen's skinning knives, she told me that her routine perusal of the criminal lists had revealed the name of Bagor. My personal effects, taken from me and docketed, revealed the violet-and-gold-zhantil brooch. She had had me brought here to inspect me. Here she took her green eyes away from my face, which must have been looking diabolical. When she continued I detected a quiver in her voice. "Only chance brought you to me in the first instance. Chance saw to it that I was apprised of your imprisonment. You, Bagor, whom I dignified with the cry of Jikai, are a common criminal."

"For three damned scales?" I shouted.

One of the guards — they were a fresh lot, clad in mesh and probably of the same pastang that had been on duty at the little white folly — came up and hit me. I wasn't watching him, staring at the Queen. He staggered me. I turned and swung a loop of my chains at his legs. It is an old trick. He toppled with a surprised yell and I put my knee in his nose as he went down.

"I do not like rasts striking me, Queen, when I am not looking!" I bellowed up at her.

She did not flinch.

Her amusement made her courtiers and her guards nervous.

"I am told you are a wild leem, Bagor. If you go on like this you will surely be beaten—" She mentioned one or three of the names for the unpleasant ways they have in Hamal of beating people — all under the law, of course.

If I say that I couldn't take all this seriously, I believe you will understand my frame of mind. There I had been, poised on the threshold of true discovery of the secrets of the fliers. I had the composition of the vaol-boxes in my head. The paol-boxes would have yielded their secret to me when I challenged Ormol again. And then I had been arrested as a thief for taking those three scales. The pouched belt of dirt had been ditched as soon as I regained consciousness, but the scales damned me. I was weighed in them and found guilty, so to speak. And, even after all that, I could have won free from the chain gang on the walls. Once back in the sacred quarter I was safe as Hamun, Amak of Paline Valley. And now this Jezebel of a queen was playing with me, having fun, dressing me up in humiliating clothing, taunting me with her lazy power.

"What do you want of me, Queen?" I bellowed. "I have a sentence to complete of three seasons. Let me get back to the walls and smash granite for the defense of the city!"

She put her pointed chin on her fist and stared down at me, over the heads of her vile jiklos, her green slanting eyes appraising me. "You are ceasing to amuse me, Bagor."

Before I could get out the exact words with which to annoy her, a Pallan approached swiftly from the rear side of the throne, picking his way apprehensively past the manhounds — as well he might, for they

lollered their tongues at him, and saliva dribbled down their hideously human jaws. He whispered in Queen Thyllis' ear for a few moments, and a look of cruel satisfaction slowly gathered on her face, flushing the chiseled whiteness, lending a more venomous cast so that one saw her character in an entirely new and altogether more hideous aspect. Truly, she had been merely playing with me!

The Pallan blew his golden whistle and guards — more of the link-mesh-clad men — dragged in a wretch who stumbled, falling, to be dragged so that his body fairly bounced across the rich carpets. The courtiers — a brilliant lot to whom I had given scant attention — buzzed with muted excitement.

“Stand the nulsh up so we may see the face of evil!”

The man was lifted and banged down on his torn and bleeding feet. He was dressed in the brown of a gul, much patched. He stood near me, his face puffy from blows he had not dodged, one eye closed; blood streaked over his scalp from his tangled hair.

“This is the man, Majestrix!” squeaked the Pallan. He sniffled in his eagerness. “He has been put to the question and he has confessed all. The indictment is written fair—”

“Spare the laws of Hamal in my own palace!” rapped Queen Thyllis. She looked at this poor devil and I could only liken her look to that of a voryasen in the pool of the Phokaym. “Nulsh! You have been convicted of spying for Pandahem. You would betray my armies to your own foul lords!”

The man lifted his head. He glared up, shaking in his chains, filthy, bloody, finished.

“I work for Menaham!” he croaked. “Long live Menaham, beloved of Pandrite!”

I had no love for The Bloody Menaham, but this man deserved well in the thoughts of a fighting-man.

Someone in the pressing crowd of courtiers, sycophants all, began a chanting and the rest took it up and soon that high hall rang with the words.

“Syatra! Syatra! Syatra!”

Instantly, I understood, and I knew the purpose of that cleared area in the hall, where ornate gilded railings — only they were solid gold, as I afterward discovered — kept folk away from a circular slab of marble. The noise beat against the gilded rafters, echoed in the groined vaultings, smothered all reason.

“Syatra! Syatra! Syatra!”

An old Xaffer, one of that strange remote race of diffs, trundled across to the railings. Under his directions steel-clad guards removed a section of railing and then the circular slab of marble lifted and swung aside on rollers. A round opening in the roof suddenly cleared, allowing the twin suns' rays to spear down like spotlights. They were not quite centered over the hole in the floor. The shouting stopped, and a hush of breathless expectancy hung in that vast and evil hall.

The spy from The Bloody Menaham shrieked as he saw what snaked, white and sucking and seeking, up through the hole.

A syatra is a corpse-white man-eating plant, with spine-barbed leaves and many thick fleshy tentacles sprouting from a central trunk. Growths like Venus's-flytraps, larger than coffins, grow around the trunk. Steam drifted from the opening and a gust of raw damp air swept chokingly from the hole in the marble



floor. Inch had told me that the tropical jungles of Chem on the continent of Loh are choked with these devilish syatras.

Despite the foul odors gushing from the hole the courtiers craned forward, rustling their bright robes, their golden ornaments clashing like a barbaric accompaniment to the horror going forward here. I shot a quick savage look at Queen Thyllis and as though she could read my mind she made a quick and incisive gesture. Instantly I was seized by my chains, dragged helplessly across the floor. I shouted at her, words, broken phrases, I know not what. The poor devil of Menaham had not stopped shrieking. He was dragged to the lip of the pit, through the gap in the railings, and as though merely waiting for this juicy morsel, the syatra flailed a tentacle around his waist.

Screaming, struggling, he was dragged toward the hole and the palely pink-and-green caverns of crushing horror.

Yet still he shrieked, and then as the corpse-white syatra burst full upon his shattered senses he retained a few final moments of lucidity — of pride and defiance!

“For Menaham!” He yelled it out, strong and bell-like. “I, Tyr Dopitka ti Appanshad, spit upon you all!” And then, as the agony came on him: “Pandrite, aid me! Opaz — Pandr—”

The miasmatic air of malignity in that foul pit hung no more heavily than the venomous atmosphere in the high hall. The rollers rumbled back, the marble slab closed, the old Xaffer fussily superintended the replacement of the gold railings.

“You, Bagor ti Hemlad!” Queen Thyllis spoke with caustic virulence. “One word — and that fate awaits you!”

## Chapter Nineteen

### Of a big toe and mockery

I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, with a whole gaudy raggie-taggle tail of high-sounding names, paced my stone cell, four paces north, four paces south, over and over, and if every now and again I thumped a fist against the stone walls so that my knuckles buzzed — I felt Zair and Opaz and Djan were dealing most unkindly with me.

Many a Kregan in my position might think that Havil the Green, or Lem the Silver Leem, had gained an ascendancy. I would not countenance the thought that Grodno so much as breathed in Zair’s pure air — although I had seen sights that made me realize the reality. I was locked in that reeking palace of Queen Thyllis of Hamal. I had seen sights that made me think that perhaps the damned Grodnims of the green northern shore of the inner sea were not so damned as others were, here. Evil flowered here. Queen Thyllis knew of those ancient Queens of Pain of Loh. She consciously modeled herself on the legends and stories of horror that clung about their names and reputations. Poor silly fat Queen Fahia of Huringa in Hyrklana was a simpering ninny compared to the vibrant evil of Queen Thyllis. Queen Lilah of Hiclantung, with whom I had passed a time or two, seemed to me in retrospect quite a charming little lady with her remote witchlike face. This Queen Thyllis overmatched them all. I, Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor, Krozair of Zy, knew in all seriousness that it behooved me to walk damned small while she was around. That I, inevitably, would not do so merely made me perk up a little at the thought of spitting in her eye. What, I wondered, would this Thyllis do if I hurled the bloody tail of a leem full in her cold face.

There was time to think rational thoughts in my cell, and I forcibly made myself do so. For one thing: all the peoples of Havilfar had compacted never to sell airboats to anyone of the continent of Loh. This ban extended to Pandahem. I knew why, now, a puzzle that had been with me for a long time. And the answer was simple. In the old days, when the Queens of Pain had ruled and the Empire of Walfarg, which was commonly called the Empire of Loh, extended over vast territories, over Pandahem, for instance, the Havilfarese had suffered constant invasion and harassment. Now they would sooner impale a Lohvian than sell him a voller. Simple, human — and with gigantic consequences.

Another rational thought that was likely to drive me irrational was that I held fifty percent of the secrets of the fliers. I had the itchy feeling that some of the wiser men of Vallia might know about this damned cayferm. If I could get back home — home! here on Kregen and not four hundred light-years off through the deeps of interstellar space — I would crack into a program of voller construction. I knew why the fliers these treacherous Hamalians sold to Vallia, Zenicce, and elsewhere were unreliable. The mix of minerals was made impure — deliberately. The techs of the Vallian Air Service would have to shake up the boxes to free the clogged minerals when one of their fliers broke down. Also there were breakages in the linkages that controlled the boxes' attitudes, which in their turn controlled an airboat's flight.

All this I had my hands on, and I was locked in a cell!

Do you blame me that I had worked myself up to such a pitch that when a Hikdar brought a squad along to drag me out I went berserk? I lashed at them, getting my chains around their necks, cutting their feet from under them, kicking and gouging and biting. They were frightened to kill me, and to that I owe my life. In the end they swamped me by sheer weight and numbers and dragged me off, bawling.

Sink me! I do not remember those times in the decadent palace of Queen Thyllis with any pleasure. She was a cold calculating bitch. She knew exactly what she wanted to do with me. I do not believe any sexual overtones — or undertones — entered into it. She had seen me fight. She wanted to break me. She would do it in the end. I'd be dead then, but if she got any satisfaction from me I'd be damned!

So lost in mortification was I that I bellowed at her, insulting her, calling her all the Makki-Grodno diseased names I could put my coarse sailorman's tongue around. She rode them all, wallowing in a kind of perverted masochism in the luxury of seeing me suffer. I was dressed like a popinjay, in silks and ribbons and bows and feathers.

The costume was obscene to me. I tried ripping it off, but they thrashed me and put fresh clothes on my bleeding back. I was partially senseless when I was dragged before this evil playacting Queen of Pain.

She allowed one of her pet jiklos to come down and lick my bleeding wounds.

I spat in the thing's face, but my parched mouth wouldn't bring up a single gobbet.

"Give him a drink, so that he may scream," said the Queen. I drank — scummy water, but like Jholaix.

"I should have let Nath and Nalgre have their way with you, Queen!" I croaked up. "They would have enjoyed that."

"Onker. Those flutsmen were paid by someone in Pandahem to kidnap me. You forget yourself, Bagor the wild leem." She leaned down toward me, so that the gems in her solid breastplate dazzled me. "Would you care to face my pretty jiklos in the Jikhorkdun?"

A flash of spirit shook me. Would she be such a fool?

I dissembled. “That would be sport for you, shishi.”

She did not flinch at the word.

“It would be too easy for you. My pretty manhounds would slay you too fast.” She tickled one manhound behind the ear and he purred, tongue lolling. And he was human, apim, like me! She breathed faster. “You do not like being flogged, Bagor?”

“Ask a silly question, Queen, and . . .”

“You will be flogged, Bagor. Maybe even the syatra will suck on you, crunching your bones! But I will be merciful to you. Crawl to me, Bagor the zhantil! Crawl to me and kiss my foot, oh Bagor, the great Jikai!”

Well, maybe I would have kissed her foot with its green-painted toenails, just to avoid a flogging, if she hadn’t flung in that taunt about Jikai. I know what a High Jikai is. I crawled up the marble steps to her, over the crystal footstool of the throne. Guards followed my every move. They were enjoying the fun, not as much as their queen, who overmatched them in depravity, but it was fun to them all the same. I crawled up and she negligently pulled her silver-glitter dress up her ankles. She pulled it over her calves, past her knees. She craned over to look down on me, her green slanting eyes bright upon me with malicious intent, her twisted lips glistening.

I thought she would kick me in the face.

She did not. “Kiss my foot, Bagor the zhantil!”

I bent down and brushed my lips against her foot, got her big toe nicely positioned, opened my mouth — and bit.

She screeched.

That got to the bitch.

Guards yanked me back and the whips and the balass sticks rose and fell. In for a zorca, in for a vove . . . I reared up, flailing the chains, laid a guard’s head open, kicked another betwixt wind and water. But the devils had fixed my chains in a new way so that I could not get a good swing on them. They hampered me, tripping me, and flail as I might I could not reach any more of the onkers, and so half stood, half crouched, growling like a veritable wild beast of the jungle, panting with fury, my hair over my eyes, roaring, futile, ludicrous.

This time I spent a good long session pacing in my cell, wondering what the Queen would do. No one told me if I had given her blood poisoning when I bit her toe. The rancid food they fed me, the slops and stinking cheese and rock-hard crusts, might all easily contain poison enough to bloat her toe, and her leg, and her body, and her evil, scheming, cold-blooded head . . .

Still, she had not introduced me to the dungeons below the castle; I had not visited the Hanitchik. There were torture chambers below her palace, here on the island in the artificial lake in the River Havilthytus. I needed no one to tell me that. She was playing with me, as a strigicaw might play with a woflo. All the vaunted laws of Hamal were excluded here in this diabolical palace of Queen Thyllis.

On the occasions I was dragged bleeding and struggling to the great hall to be made a butt of I wondered if among those bright sycophantic courtiers stood and laughed any of my acquaintances of the sacred quarter. They would not have recognized me. I was a hairy mess, for Queen Thyllis, although having me washed, would not have my hair cut. She had a use for it, she said, taunting me.

She got over the toe-biting, and I was dealt with most unpleasantly. As you know, my dip in the Pool of Baptism in distant Aphrasöe — I thought of the Swinging City a great deal during that horrible time — besides assuring me of a thousand years of life, gave me also remarkable, vital recuperative powers. I playacted for all I was worth, groaning and yelling to prove I was not mended. But they thwacked me, anyway.

Despite my original belief that no sexual taint motivated the Queen's sadistic behavior, inevitably and by degrees I came to realize that sex must go at least some way toward explaining her conduct. Yet she made no overtures whatsoever during this captivity. I have had experiences with amatory queens, but suffice it to say at this time Queen Thyllis played with me for the slaking of her lust for cruelty. She could easily have been far worse. I know that. But I gave her no encouragement whatsoever.

The arrival of King Doghamrei in my cell, recovered from the bruised ribs I had given him on the dais of the Queen's throne, heralded a fresh face, and a new phase of unpleasantness. This king lorded it over a moderate-sized kingdom within the empire, the kingdom of Hirrume. I discovered he had plans to enlarge his kingdom, strictly within the empire, at the expense of neighboring kings and Kovs, and he had not been king long. Also, as I discovered, he hankered after the Queen, with a view to making himself King of Hamal and, when the due observances had been made, emperor. The setback in Pandahem had also set back the ceremonies Queen Thyllis had promised herself as marking her coronation as empress. The various priests and monks of Havil the Green, the state religious establishment, would no doubt argue strongly that the coronation could not take place until all the omens were auspicious. That made sense.

The new face turned out to be long and thin and of a yellowish cast, with two thin black moustaches drooping past a narrow mouth, and with a pair of boot-button black eyes of penetrating brilliance. I guessed who this thin and angular man must be the moment I saw him. Not from his appearance alone, was I thus confident. There was about him an aura of mystical fanaticism, that aura of power I had seen before in the person of Lu-si-Yuong. Also, his red hair shone in the torchlight with a most pressing brilliance. He obviously blackened his moustaches from vanity — and I found that passing strange in one of the famous Wizards of Loh.

“Examine this yetch, Que-si-Rening.” King Doghamrei spoke with his usual uncouth bellow. “By Krun! I want to know all there is to know about his miserable body and his thrice-damned ib! Make him talk, Que-si-Rening!”

The Wizards of Loh in these days may be merely a dying and faded remnant of the great force they once were, but they wield hidden and some say occult powers. It was as well to be on the safe side with them. This bully-boy king with his roaring ways, steel armor, and rapier seemed to me to be digging a pit for himself.

“You are the man known as Bagor ti Hemlad, slave?” The wizard's voice crackled like old parchment.

“I am, San. Ask your questions.”

His head went up when I gave him that ancient title for sage, dominie, master. He stared at me narrowly. “You have met a Wizard of Loh before?”

“Aye, San. He did me a turn — as I did him.”

“Then maybe I will find something here to make of my life less barren. I do not receive the meed that is my due.”

“It is strange that here in Hamal I should find a Wizard of Loh, in a land where all things Lohvian are detested.”

“The Queen has her fancies. I am kept secret.”

“Get on with it, get on with it!” rasped Doghamrei.

The great blockheaded idiot didn't seem to realize that in this three-cornered contest the Wizard of Loh was already in my corner.

Que-si-Rening sat on the straw-stuffed pallet that served as a bed. There were not above a dozen nits in it, for I had gone hunting with thumbnails sharp and at the ready.

“Tell me, Bagor, whom men dub a wild leem, do you lust after the body of Queen Thyllis of Hamal?”

“Eh?” I gaped at him.

“Don't shilly-shally, you rast! Give an answer, or you will be flogged jikaider!”

“If you need a Wizard of Loh to worm out the answers to questions that have no sense, cramph,” I said to King Doghamrei, “you should know jikaidering will avail you nothing.” I added, for good measure, “Kleesh!”

He roared and tried to strike me, but I ducked, my chains jangling, and he hit the wall and bellowed like a stuck chunkrah.

“May Havil the Green pour onto you from a great height, cramph,” I said with great equanimity.

The wizard brushed his long moustaches. He'd enjoyed it, too.

But this was a serious matter. I saw what was in this puffed-up king's mind. Truth to tell, in all honesty, it must have seemed, to many people around the court in this great island palace of Hammabi el Lamma, that the Queen was besotted by more than mere cruelty. Her treatment of me would be measured in many a scheming brain as an exhibition of frustrated lust. Well, so be it. I had to turn this to my own account, as any wily clansman would.

The king sucked his knuckles and swore. Que-si-Rening bent forward. His dark hypnotic eyes bored into mine, and I forced myself to contain all that was Dray Prescott, to hold on to my own ib, as the Kregan saying has it.

“You will save much pain, Bagor, if you speak.”

“I'll speak,” I said. “By Krun! This nurdling oaf Doghamrei may have that ice-cold bitch to bed at night, and he'll freeze to death.”

Doghamrei started bellowing for the guards and but for the wizard's few quick and pointed words we

might have had a fair old dust up then. I had been eating, if not luxuriously, enough, and I had not lost my strength. I was a little stiff and sore, to be sure, but I am used to discomfort.

“Tell this onker he can keep his queen. And to the Ice Floes—”

“Enough, Bagor!”

Well, enough is enough. But, being Dray Prescott, I was ready to take this as far as it would go. A streak of agony hit me as I thought of my Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains. Then the king, still sucking his knuckles, was yelling violently at the guards, and going out, and ordering the Wizard of Loh to get his stupid backside out after him.

If he was satisfied with my answers — all well and good. I thought I had made it clear. As it turned out, the fool didn't believe me — for which, later on, I mentally gave thanks to Zair in his omnipotent wisdom.

As though her spies had given her cognizance of what had transpired in my cell, the very next interview with the Queen differed radically from all those that had gone before. I was dressed up in those ridiculous and demeaning clothes. I was led in my chains along new corridors, the guards very tense and nervous (the acupuncture needles must have been busy pricking their aches and pains away), and so to a private chamber deep within the palace of Hammabi el Lamma.

Queen Thyllis was dressed most sumptuously to receive me. Smothered as ever in jewels, she shimmered in the soft samphron lamps' glow. Yet she wore a tight black bodice, and a wisp of black skirt. Her long white legs hinted at rosy curves under transparent tissues. Her midriff was bare, her navel blazing with a gigantic emerald. She'd blundered there, had she known it; a scarron would have pleased me more. And, for the first time, her hair swung free, massively looped in pearls, yet glittering and glinting a cornfield yellow. That hair was bleached and dyed, I wagered, cynical in such matters.

“You will drink wine with me, Bagor my Jikai?”

“If it is Jholaix.”

“Ah!” She stared at me hard, the lamplight shining on her moist lips. Their thinness had all gone. She gestured and one of her chained slave girls poured.

As though to impose her will completely upon mine, she leaned back, one naked arm behind her head, the other lifting a golden cup of wine. She said: “Shall I have you tortured as you deserve, Bagor?”

I did not shrug. That is a gesture foreign to me. But I sipped the wine, grimaced, and put the goblet down.

That aroused her.

“It is best Jholaix, rast!”

“Third-grade Jholaix, Queen. You have been swindled if you believe you drink of the best.”

Her pale face flushed. Her slanting green eyes fairly snapped. Suddenly I was ashamed of what I'd done. The wine was good — very good. Not the best, of course, for that seldom leaves Jholaix in Pandahem. But fine. It was better than third class. Now I realized that my spiting of her might have put some poor devil of a wine merchant's life in danger.

Then she said, spitting the words out: “I know wine, nulsh! This is the finest. You cannot mock me!”

Again I did not shrug. “One does not need to mock you, Queen.”

I think, then, that she realized something about me she had not hitherto allowed herself to see. She panted a little, the mass of jewels upon the black bodice in turmoil. Then she clapped a golden hammer against a golden gong — always a handy item of ornamental furniture to bring the slaves scurrying — and when the guards came she said: “Take him down.” She added a few terse instructions about the items of torture I was to undergo.

The guards by now thought they understood my mettle. I was trussed up like a side of vosk ready for the spit of a pagan feast. Down the stairs we went, and I saw over the stolid faces of the guards carrying me the alive, vibrant, coldly evil face of Queen Thyllis, gloating.

The moment we were outside that chamber the guards relaxed. Poor devils, they went in mortal terror of the Queen. They were a vile bunch, I knew, but their evil paled to nothing beside hers.

As I say, the guards thought they understood my mettle. They had trussed me like a roast vosk, but they had not used lesten-hide. They relaxed when we passed from the presence of the Queen, and I was able to bunch up my body, exert a bursting muscular surge of power, snap the bonds, and then set about the guards with my chains. I had fixed those damned chains myself, after being caught once, and so I had a little movement.

We had a fine old skipping, lunging, prancing set-to on the stairs. I wedged my back against the wall in an angle and kicked and bludgeoned them down the treads. They went clanging and clattering down in fine style. I belted the last one across the face with a lethal bight of chain even as he thought about using his thraxter with intent. They tumbled away. I leaped down, kicked the nearest, hurdled them and scooped up a thraxter on the way.

As for getting out of the vile palace of Hammabi el Lamma, that was an entirely different kettle of fish.

I prowled along, most angry, not caring for the moment to trust myself to grab a guard and prod the information from him. Soon as look at the crampths I’d do for them, such was my black mood. So, once again, sheer black anger undid me . . .

In that maze of galleries and corridors I stalked along. I saw no one. This struck me as strange. Then I found myself in the corridor wherein was situated my own cell. I walked past the door, looking in as I did so, and saw my late meal laid out, the second supper of Kregen. The cup of water was what I needed, so I stepped in, took up the cup, and drank it all down at a gulp. It was foul and bitter, but it wet my throat.

“Mother Zinzu the Blessed!” I said. “I needed that!” Which statement was a pure blasphemy, seeing that Mother Zinzu the Blessed is the patron saint of the drinking classes of Sanurkazz.

So, standing in the center of my cell, the door open and unbarred, I girded myself afresh to bash a way out. The dizziness crept treacherously, at first, a faint white tremor along my limbs, a distant gong-note, infinitely repeated, in my skull. I felt — oh, I felt nothing. I knew I was swaying, for the walls were rocking. I fell. I fell full length even as I knew I had toppled backward toward the door. So, as I fell toward the east my thraxter flew from my nerveless fingers and flashed under the straw pallet. It was the most curious experience. My head and shoulders hit the bed, I rolled over, feeling nothing, slumped

down, half sitting, my head hanging. I could see and hear perfectly, yet I could not move!

I was held in a paralysis. Conscious, helpless, I just slumped there. The dip in its niche in the stone wall quivered and spider-shadows ran. I lay there, too astonished to swear. By the time I had worked out that the water had been drugged — why? why? — and had made stupendous and entirely useless efforts to move, I had also come to the grim conclusion that I could do nothing until the effects of the drug wore off.

A face peered suspiciously around the door. This face bore a huge badly sewn scar across the right cheek, the nose, and the left eye; the blade that had caused the damage had gouged out that eye, so that this guard was known as Derson Ob-Eye. He withdrew, I heard a faint whistle, and then two guards clanked into the room, lifting me, stiff and stark and paralyzed, carrying me out like a side of roast vosk, bound without cords!

They moved furtively. Derson Ob-Eye led the way by shadowy runnels, down winding flang-infested stairways, under low arches where the cobwebs brushed and caught and streamed from the guards' steel like Spanish moss. At a small postern stood a bulky man swathed in a massive gray cape. He turned as we approached and I saw it was King Doghamrei.

So that was one little mystery solved.

Ob-Eye grunted and lifted a butt end of a torch from its becket, held it against my face. I could not blink, could not so much as twitch a muscle.

King Doghamrei smiled.

"I know you can see and hear me, nulsh. I will not strike you, for you will not feel it." Doghamrei was really enjoying himself now. "You will be taken well out to sea. You will be dropped from that great height you promised to have Havil the Green pour on me. I shall not be there. But it will be done. Ob-Eye and my guards know the penalties for failure." He was trembling, and sweat dewed his upper lip and forehead. "Take him, and go, and your Kuerden the Merciless will seem to you a kind and tolerant mother beside me if you fail!"

This Derson Ob-Eye was an apt pupil to a vile master. He chuckled, with a brown snaggletoothed smile.

"The pleasure will be ours, King, when he pitches overboard and makes a coffin-sized hole in the sea!"

"Far out, dolt. Far out, so that no one will ever look upon his filthy face again."

I tried to speak. I know my face remained stony, but some hint of the effort I was making must have shown in my eyes, in the veins of my neck and forehead, for King Doghamrei laughed again, bending close in the sputtering torchlight to gloat upon my helplessness.

"There will be no escape for you, rast! The Queen even aids my scheme, for she sends sky ships to deal with vermin off our coast." He was thoroughly enjoying himself, and reluctant to see me go. "I use my own ship in a dual purpose this day! Now may Lem the Silver Leem be praised!"

Well. That did, of course, explain much . . .

Brisker now, exultant, King Doghamrei tongue-lashed his men into action. "And tell Hikdar Hardin well out to sea, mind, Ob-Eye! I want no trace of this kleesh ever found again."



“As you command, King.” Ob-Eye let his single eye’s gaze wander toward me and he sniggered. “And I have a scheme that will delight you, great King.” The two guards hefted me and carried me off, and so I had to wait to hear Ob-Eye’s little scheme. When I discovered it I knew he was right: it would delight the great cramp King Doghamrei. How I wanted to yell at him that if he thought Queen Thyllis would tolerate him alongside her on the throne of Hamal for an instant, he was so great a get-onker as to be ineffable. But I could not move.

They took me in a little flier out to the coast in the dawning light as the emerald-and-ruby glory broke over the land, and we slanted down to a vast flat area of dust and scrawny grass where row after row of monstrous Hamalese sky ships were lined up. I watched everything with feverish eyes.

Ob-Eye had me loaded aboard a giant of the skies, a veritable aerial fortress. Thick were her timbers, massive her upperworks, profuse her provision of varters and catapults, her ports for bowmen. All this was a revelation to me, accustomed to the small vollers and airboats; the greatest fliers I had seen had not even approximated in size to these monsters. I saw then something of the awful power of Hamal.

Two sky ships lifted off as the twin suns cleared the horizon, and as we rose, so the suns raced up the sky. Ob-Eye had the complete confidence of his master, and I saw and heard him giving intolerant and contemptuous orders to the captain of the ship, this Hikdar Hardin. This ship sported the colors and insignia of Hirrume. The lead ship showed the purple and gold of the Queen. In trail we flew out over the sea.

A hexagonal structure mounted on stilts just forward of the center allowed an uninterrupted sweep of deck fore and aft beneath. Other towers of various shapes and sizes housed artillery, the varters and catapults; this hexagonal bridge was the center of command, and there I was carried. The sky ships are built in a number of different fashions and styles, in the never-ending effort to achieve better efficiency. High in the control area, with Hikdar Hardin most uneasy, with Ob-Eye chuckling away, chewing cham and thoroughly enjoying himself, I waited like a chunk of frozen beef.

When a lookout shrilled, high and fierce, everyone, including me, felt a climactic moment had arrived.

Under Ob-Eye’s malicious eye the guards hoisted me up. They unlocked my chains and threw them on the deck. They stripped off my gaudy and humiliating clothes — for I had not had time to remove them after my regretted drink — and they dressed me in a gray shirt and blue trousers. Ob-Eye explained. He wanted to distill every moment of horror thrice over.

“When you fall into the sea, rast, those onkers aboard the Queen’s ship will think you a crewman and will suspect nothing.” Then he nearly split a gut laughing. “But, cramp, you will not be falling into the sea, will you?” And he guffawed his merriment to the skies.

Over our heads fluttered the bright colors of Hamal, and I realized we had slowed. Ob-Eye gave curt instructions. I was lifted and twisted so that I could look forward and down.

I saw — and, seeing, I understood — and the full horror of what these cramps from Hamal were doing drove coldness between my shoulder blades and a painful cramp into my stomach.

Below on the blue glittering surface of the sea sailed two beautiful ships. I recognized one for sure; the other I did not know. They foamed along, their sails stiff and curved, proud, and from their trucks floated the yellow saltire on a scarlet ground that was the flag of Vallia.

Vallian galleons!

Oh, yes, it was perfectly plain what was afoot here. If Hamal would not sell vollers to Vallia, then Vallia must try to buy them elsewhere. Never before, I had been told, had Vallian galleons been allowed farther south than the towns of the northern coast of Hamal. They were restricted to the westward of the Risshamal Keys. The deputation to Ruathytu had been exceptional. And now here were these two gorgeous galleons, their sails proudly billowing, the spume flying, their forefeet crashing through the blue seas, driving on southerly to Hyrklana!

Like an onker I wanted to yell a warning to those two galleons down there, small with the distance and yet clear in every detail. The suns blinded from their paintwork, their gilding caught gleams from the ivory curve of their sails.

The Queen's sky ship from Hamal was *Pride of Hanitcha*, and she had drawn out ahead of us. I watched in pure horror as she circled twice, coming up with the wind on the wake of the nearest galleon. I knew, then, and I felt the surging blood clashing and clamoring in my skull.

“Look, Bagor the wild leem! Look!”

A primitive lust for killing swept over the decks of King Doghamrei's sky ship, *Hirrume Warrior*. Lips ricked back from teeth, eyes showed a devilish gleam, weapons were more fiercely grasped. *Pride of Hanitcha* slowed, hovered. I saw the black rocks tumbling down. I saw the iron pots spouting fire screaming down through the air to burst upon the spotless deck below, to spread and grow and devour the galleon, flickers of flame mounting with horrid swiftness up shrouds and stays, bringing down yards and spars, utterly consuming that marvelous galleon, so far from her home port in Vallia.

I could not weep, for I was paralyzed.

“See, you rast! Now we burn the other — and you, Bagor the kleesh, will be the first torch to be flung down on her decks!”

They wheeled up an iron cage stuffed with combustibles. A torch glared in Ob-Eye's hand. His one eye was quite mad.

“Thrust him in, put the torch to him, and throw him down upon the Vallian ship!”

Chapter Twenty

Sky ships and galleons

They stuffed me in the iron cage among the combustibles.

They wheeled the cage to the bulwark.

They lifted it on tackles.

They swung it out over the water.

Ob-Eye himself put the torch in.

Flames crackled up about me.

By Zim-Zair! This was no way for a Krozair of Zy to die and leave this wonderful world of Kregen and go reiving among the Ice Floes of Sicce! By the Black Chunkrah! What would my maniacal clansmen say, riding their voves like the wind across the Great Plains of Segesthes? By Vox! How would my people of Valka take the news? By Djan! My Djangs would nod their heads and say a man needed four arms, by Zodjuin of the Silver Stux! And Strombor . . . and Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains?

Flames sprouted about me and I felt nothing.

*Hirrum* Warrior, captained by Hikdar Hardin, had not quite reached the correct position in the sky from which to release the flaming cage of combustibles onto the deck of the Vallian. The galleon I had not recognized had been burned. The one below now, creeping apparently slowly back toward us as we crept up along her wake, was *Ovvend Barynth*. A fine galleon, she was, belonging to the Kov of Ovvend, farther along the coast from Delphond, and I had been aboard her in the crowded harbor of Vondium in my capacity as Prince Majister of Vallia. In a few murs she would be a flaming volcano, and I the blazing human torch of her destruction.

The flames touched me.

Like a high-spirited zorca responding to a clumsy rider's spurs, I felt the kiss of flame. I felt the heat. I felt the searing pain. I jumped.

*I jumped!*

Whether the drug needed the stimulus of pain to drag its victim back to life, whether I just shattered through my agony all the chemical bonds holding me, I did not know. What I did know was that strength and feeling flooded back to my arms and legs, to my shoulders and back — and to my rear, which felt as though my trousers were on fire.

I leaped.

I got a hand to the cable above the cage and I got the other onto the little wooden derrick. I hauled myself in hand over hand and gave a last barbaric kick at the flaming cage, knocking it free. It dropped away with a great hissing and roaring of flame — I did not stop to watch it drop all the way into the sea. I knew in the inferno of sensations clamoring at me that it would drop short of *Ovvend Barynth*. Even as I handed in along the derrick I caught a faint ironical cheer breaking up from the deck of the Vallian galleon. Trust my sailormen of Vallia to jeer at an enemy's mistake!

Ob-Eye was glaring at me, openmouthed, his hands half-raised. Someone had done half the job already on him. All I needed to do as I came inboard was to smash my fist into his one good eye, and knock him flat. A stux flashed past my ribs. A thraxter chunked down past my head, biting deep into the bulwark. I ignored all of them for the fiery pains shooting and darting up my backside. I was aflame, all right; my pants were well alight.

I couldn't stop. I charged headlong into the crowd of idlers who had gathered to watch me burn and bomb. They scattered, yelling, and thraxters flashed before my eyes. I seized the nearest guard, broke his neck, took his thraxter, slashed the faces of the next three who came at me, won a space in which it might be possible to extinguish the fire in my rear.

I hurled myself onto the deck and rolled over and over in a vile stink of burning cloth and singed flesh.

When I leaped up a fresh group of skymen faced me, ready to overbear me. I knew exactly what I must do. I was alone, stranded on the decks of an enemy sky ship stuffed with foemen, and I had a job to do.

There was some satisfaction in it as I bellowed out, high and hard and as loud as I could, “Hai! Jikai!” I hurdled the group opposite me, put in a couple of thwacks as I cleared their prostrate bodies, gripped with my left hand onto the rail and went for the next bunch. They thought they had me penned between them and the control area, where Hikdar Hardin gaped like a loon above the skymen at the levers.

These men were protected by a wrought-iron screened cage and I wrenched the door open so that the hinges squealed. Hardin clapped his mouth shut, whipped out his sword, and came for me. I did not kill him; a Bladesman pass and his sword went whirling up, end over end, sparkling. I thumped him alongside the temple with the hilt, just below the rim of his helmet, and showed my thraxter-point to the two skymen at the levers.

One babbled, “Do not kill me, Notor! I know nothing—”

The other went for his dagger.

Him, I clouted and stretched senseless. The other one cowered back, screaming. Faces showed beyond the perforations in the wrought-iron screen. The door groaned. So I had to hit this screaming wretch, knocking him out. I bundled his unconscious body atop that of his comrade’s and wedged the Hikdar’s body across both, using the captain as a wedge. The wrought-iron door in the screen would not open easily now.

I leaped to the levers. These, with Delia’s tuition fresh in my mind, I could understand. Hard over with the speed-forward lever. This, I knew, would bring the two silver boxes linked to the controls beneath my feet closer together. The boxes would most probably be in a well-armored compartment in the center of the ship. The other lever, that controlling attitude, I thrust to starboard. Now the two silver boxes would be rotating around each other in their concentric rings of wooden and bronze mountings. *Hirrum* *Warrior* responded instantly. The sky ship picked up speed and swung on to her new course.

All this time the frenzied yelling outside the bridge-like control area mounted in fury. I laughed. I, Dray Prescott, laughed. Let them fume! To the Ice Floes of Sicce with all of them — and with that yetch Lem to keep them company!

Through the forward screens, more pierced to afford a good view, I could see *Pride of Hanitcha*, the Queen’s sky ship, turning with contemptuous solid ease there in the thin air, swinging back to find out why we had not burned the second galleon. On our respective courses, which I found I could feel with the same instinctive feel I had for a frigate ghosting in under reduced canvas between shoals, I saw *Pride of Hanitcha* would cross directly above *Ovvend Barynth*. When sky ship crossed galleon more hideous spouts of fiery destruction would tumble down . . .

The speed lever was notched over as far as it would go. I hammered it with the flat of my hand. Outside that wrought-iron screen the crewmen of the sky ship howled and danced. Now they had brought up a timber and were using it as a battering ram. The sky ship hurtled on through thin air. I held her course. The wrought-iron door bulged, screeching, and one of the skymen’s arms was trapped, acting as a wedge. The Hikdar draped across, closing off movement. The door jerked again as the timber struck. The note boomed like a gong of battle.

Now the devils were clambering on the wrought-iron roof trying to stick stuxes and thraxters down at me. I flailed the thraxter up at them, clanging against steel like an anvil chorus. Now the roof of the

hexagonal bridge-like structure swarmed with men trying to get at me. Now I was in a cage of my own devising — a cage not filled with blazing combustibles but a cage affording me protection!

They'd break through soon. I knew that. Again I hammered at the speed lever. Ahead of me the towered side of the Queen's sky ship, pierced and looped and wicked with varters and catapults swung closer. Men were running about her decks. The Queen had not known what King Doghamrei was up to in his plans to get rid of me, and his insane plotting was going to cost Queen Thyllis dear. The bows of *Pride of Hanitcha* began to swing. She was trying to dip beneath my ram. If I missed I would not get another chance, by Vox!

The cacophony of yelling outside the iron cage, where the skymen struggled to break in, mounted in intensity. They had realized what was happening. There was precious little deck for them to mass on, for the control cage had been specifically designed to stand as a fortress, a strong point, and its wrought-iron mesh, cunningly angled, afforded a fine view out but would prevent the easy entry of enemy bolts and arrows.

No time to laugh now, no time for anything but to keep the sky ship on course and hold off these Hamalian rasts . . .

The door groaned and squealed and gapped a fraction, enough for an intrepid soul to hurl a stux. I caught it and returned it, a neat little cast through the iron crack, and the skyman screeched and fell away. Another took his place with a crossbow. The levers were hard over. I could force them no farther. If the skymen slew me and forced their way into the control cage they might yet be in time to divert the swift destructive rush of the sky ship.

Dodging the first bolt as it whistled past my head was the quick and instinctive reaction of a Krozair. Leaving the levers, I jumped for the door, whipped the thraxter in and out, and tumbled the crossbowman back, spouting blood from a wrecked face.

"Kill him! Kill him!" shouted a Hikdar, foaming, his face scarlet, urging his men on. He was a dwa-Hikdar and subordinate to his captain, Hardin, who was a zan-Hikdar, and who now lay wedged against the door having desperately little chance of ever making that next and vital step to ob-Jiktar. The skymen made a fresh rush, bashing their timber against the door, as the dwa-Hikdar urged them on with that typical battle cry of Hamal: "Hanitch! Hanitch! Kill! Strike the nulsh down!"

The iron door gonged. I thrust at the first unfortunate on the timber and he dodged back, colliding with his fellows. There was an instant's confusion, then they had dropped the timber among their own feet and legs, and the timber fought for Vallia!

"Hai! Jikai!" I roared at them to infuriate them, to goad them, and all the time the monstrous sky ship bore down on her equally monstrous consort across the swirling sky.

Like a Bladesman I whickered the thraxter at them as, yelling, they rushed again. A quick glance forward showed me the Queen's sky ship *Pride of Hanitcha*, painted, gilded, the flags fluttering, rushing in with so close and sudden a telescopic effect that in a trice all I could see was her central portion, its middle tower with a wrought-iron cage similar to the one in which I battled on. Then all that vanished in a single chaotic glimpse of the control cage. *Pride of Hanitcha* had made a last desperate attempt to slide under me. She failed.

The crash hurled me across the cage and I grabbed the levers to steady myself. Men were reeling and shrieking about the decks, toppling, to plunge twisted over the side. With a deliberate savagery I thrust

both levers hard down, sending *Hirume Warrior* with *Pride of Hanitcha* impaled on her ram and her beak planted in her vitals plunging for the sea.

Absolute bedlam foamed outside.

They'd given up trying to break in. Men were screaming and yelling, calling on the gods and godlings and saints, bellowing all manner of oaths. Distinctly, over the racket, I heard a panic-stricken voice shrilling: "Help me now, Lem the Silver Leem! To you the sacrifice, to you the power, to me the deliverance! Lem! Lem!"

Any idiot who called on Lem for help deserved all he got.

Also, I heard a strong voice calling on Opaz, and this, I admit, gave me a pang.

The sea rushed up. I caught a distorted glimpse of it, all twisted and on end, past the deck of the Queen's sky ship. I'd gaffed that one, brutally! Judging distances is a necessary accomplishment of a first lieutenant of a seventy-four if he wishes to remain in that position. When the sea boiled beneath, for we were now almost standing on our starboard bow with men falling off in spouts of white foam into the water, I eased the controls. Those silver boxes would have to earn their keep now! Half of their secrets I knew. Somehow, whatever was really in the paol-box reacted with the mix of minerals in the vaol-box and lifted *Hirume Warrior*. The sea flattened out beneath us. The ram spur of the sky ship must have sunk deeply into the vitals of *Pride of Hanitcha* and disrupted the careful balancing in the wood and bronze circles where her two silver boxes operated. She was not lifting. Together, flat, like a pair of old boots, the two sky ships splashed into the sea, gouting water and debris in a flower of destruction.

Even while the ship floundered and the water cascaded up past the splintered bulwarks, I dragged the three unconscious men away from the door. I dragged it open on its buckled hinges, straining with effort. I roared out, crabbing along half on the deck, half on the bulwarks. What I looked like I do not care to imagine — what I remember is the decidedly cool feel about my backside. Men were leaping into the water, clinging to bits of wreckage. The sky ship might not sink for some time; there would be ample wreckage to support her company.

Ob-Eye, his face congested, a beautiful swelling of magnificent coloration around his one good eye, saw me and yelled. He charged. There was no time for Bladesman's work here. We had borne on past the track of the galleon, but she was bowling along in a stiff breeze and would be gone in a trice.

"You cramph, you rast — I'll cut you down, by Lem!"

I slid his sword, circled, clunked him over the head, and dived over the side into the water. I started swimming, fast. I am able to swim fast, Zair be praised, and I had only to knock three clutching pairs of hands away as I scythed through the wreckage. The galleon, from this angle, towered into the blue sky, seemingly immense, a spired castle of white canvas, where before she had been a vulnerable toy on the ocean floor.

I yelled.

"*Ovvend Barynth!* Ahoy!" Water sloshed into my mouth and I spat, took a couple of strokes, and heaved up again, waving. "Ahoy! *Ovvend Barynth!* Ahoy, you pack of rascals! Vallia! Vallia! Ahoy!"

The galleon sailed on, leaning with the wind, remote and majestic, aloof. I cursed. Spitting water, I lifted as far as I could, waving frantically. Behind me the sea was covered with wreckage and heads bobbed. I

looked hungrily at the galleon as she surged past, white water spouting under her, the long race-built lines of her gliding through the water.

What I would have to do I had no wish to do. But there was nothing else for it.

“Ahoy, *Ovvend Barynth!*” I really yelled now. “Ahoy, you bunch of witless scow-bellied loons! Vallia! I am Prince Dray Prescott! Prince Majister of Vallia! Haul up, you bunch of famblys! Ahoy! Ahoy! Vallia! Vallia!”

An instant that was as long as eternity — then the main-topsail yard went over, the sail went to the mast, and I knew my vaunting self-boasting had at last made the captain take notice. I lay back in the water and floated and waited until the boat came. Brawny suns-bronzed arms hauled me in over the transom and I tumbled down to the stern sheets.

“You said you were a prince!” The voice of the young officer was strongly accusative. I own I looked a sight, all hairy, filthy, blood smeared, and with the seat of my pants burned away.

I fixed him with my eye.

“Is Captain Lars Ehren still in command of *Ovvend Barynth!*”

He looked bewildered. Water dripped from me: crimson water. Opaz knew what thoughts were going through the heads of his men. They had seen a great galleon of Vallia burn. They had seen one sky ship crash headlong into another and bring her down in destruction. And now a hairy maniac had swum over to them, bellowing like a chunkrah, claiming to be a prince of Vallia.

No — not claiming to be a prince of Vallia.

Claiming to be the Prince Majister.

I had been through a pretty bizarre experience, and a fight that for all the lack of actual blade-to-blade contact was as deadly as any a Bladesman might covet, and so I now confess I was just a trifle sharp with this young man. And, too, wearing trousers without a seat is a far cry from not wearing trousers or a breechclout at all . . .

“Well, youngster! Brace up! I asked you a question.”

We had pulled in close enough to *Ovvend Barynth* to make any reply of his superfluous. A chunky man with a huge spade beard leaped up onto the ratlines, gripping with one mahogany fist, peering down at his boat as she pulled alongside with the bowman standing up ready to hook on.

“Prince Dray!” bellowed down this squat and bearded man. He almost fell off his own slip, so excited were his movements, letting go of the shrouds to wave and yell. “*Prince Dray!*”

“Ahoy there, Captain Lars!” I roared up. “Lahal!”

“Lahal it is, my Prince! And may Opaz be forever praised for sending you to me in this evil hour. *Nikvove of Evir* burned, Majister, burned! Did you see?”

“I saw, Captain Lars.” Old naval habits impelled me up and out of the boat first. Captain Lars Ehren jumped to the deck and bellowed for due honors to be paid to me as I came aboard; but I roared at him,

and clasped his hand. “You are for Hyrklana, of course? Vollers?”

“Aye, Prince.”

“It is a fruitless journey. Turn back, Captain. Put your helm over and brace your yards around. We can find our own fliers in Vallia, by Vox!”

The Vallian deputation for Hyrklana aboard, of whom I knew only one man, and that slightly, demurred, but I overbore them. Truth to tell, I think the ghastly sight of a great Vallian galleon burning — there was now no sign of *Nikvove of Evir* at all — convinced them with more urgency. We picked up a mere handful of the men from the doomed ship who had managed to hurl themselves overboard. Captain Lars Ehren turned his ship’s rakish beakhead to the north and with the wind over our starboard beam we punched into the seas, going home.

There was much to be accomplished still in Hamal, for I had not given up my schemes for that country, not by a long zorca-horn. Rees the lion-man, chinless Chido, they would not be forgotten — the Trylon Rees with his booming laugh and his “We’ll make you a Bladesman yet, Hamun!” — and there was, also, that extraordinarily unpleasant Queen Thyllis to be reckoned with, and the obnoxious King Doghamrei — and there were others.

I fancied that Hamun ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley, candidate for Bladesman, would one day ride into Ruathytu and go knocking on doors in the sacred quarter.

I did not forget the crampths of Hamal had burned and sunk a fine galleon of Vallia.

But, most important, glorious and wonderful despite it had been bought in cunning and treachery, I carried with me fifty percent of the secrets of the fliers, and the wise men of Vallia must supply the answers for the other fifty percent. The Emperor, my Delia’s father, would want to know the reason why if they did not.

Delia! Delia of the Blue Mountains, Delia of Delphond!

Home, home to Vallia! Blow the winds! Roar the gales! Bear me on and on to Valka and my high fortress of Esser Rarioch overlooking Valkanium and the bay! Home, home, home . . .

“You shiver, my Prince!” Captain Lars Ehren looked concerned. “Your clothes — let me provide you with the best we have.”

“A simple breechclout will do, Captain.” I sniffed the breeze, hugely. “I shall enjoy this journey home. A breech-clout, if you will, Captain — provided it is a scarlet one!”

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]Prescot has recorded his adventures on Kregen and those tapes were found in Africa. The *Tapes from Africa* constitute the substance of these books. [A.B.A.]

[2]At this point it is appropriate to remark that there is another infuriating gap in the taped records of Prescott's adventures on Kregen. After he was reunited with his friends aboard the flier over the Shrouded Sea, as related at the end of the previous volume, *Fliers of Antares*, he picks up the narrative as it appears here at the opening of *Bladesman of Antares*. From later evidence it appears he cleared up the Migladrin situation and then went back to his home in Valka. Where else he may have gone must for the moment remain conjectural. I think not much time elapsed; but I detect a new philosophy about Prescott in his surprising decision to leave Delia at home and to make sure she stayed there. We know how he misses her, and we also know she has stowed away to accompany him in the past. [A.B.A.]

[3]See *Fliers of Antares*. Dray Prescott #8. [A.B.A.]

[4]See *Swordships of Scorpio*, Dray Prescott #4. [A.B.A.]

[5]So is Kregish *forthree*. The man had risen three steps in his rank of Hikdar. [A.B.A.]

[6]Prescot gives here, and elsewhere, quite comprehensive information and rules for playing Jikaida. The game is fascinating. With the kind consent of Donald A. Wollheim, the publisher of Dray Prescott's story, I hope to be able soon to include playing instructions and rules for Jikaida as an appendix to a forthcoming volume of Dray Prescott's adventures. [A.B.A.]

[7]Shiv: six.

[8]After Prescott recorded the words, "Notor Zan," he must have switched the machine off for a break, as he often does, and — as again and unfortunately so — begun again at a point in his narrative subsequent to his departure point. I think nothing vital occurred in the lost interim. Prescott has been made slave before; no doubt vile though it was to him it was not sufficiently original to reward extended comment. [A.B.A.]

[9]Ord: eight.

