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Avenger of Antares

Dray Prescott #10

Alan Burt Akers

Mushroom eBooks

Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott is a man above medium height, with straight brown hair and brown eyes that are level and dominating. His shoulders are immensely wide and there is about him an abrasive honesty and a fearless courage. He moves like a great hunting cat, quiet and deadly. Born in 1775 and educated in the inhumanly harsh conditions of the late eighteenth century 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 dead 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 city of the island of Valka, of which Prescott is Strom.

Prescott is plunged headlong into fresh adventures on Kregen in the continent of Havilfar. Outwitting the Manhounds of Antares, ghastly parodies of humans used as hunting dogs, and fighting as a hyr-kaidur in the arena of the Jikhorkdun in Huringa in Hyrklana, he becomes King of Djanduim, idolized by his incredibly ferocious four-armed warrior Djangs. But, Hamal, the greatest power in Havilfar, is bent on conquest and Prescott must discover the well-guarded secrets of their airboats. Knowing half the information he is condemned to death by a jealous king. Over the sea he escapes and destroys two huge Hamalian skyships and saves a Vallian galleon. The galleon's crew pluck him from the water and they set

sail home for Vallia . . .

Alan Burt Akers

CHAPTER ONE

The leem lovers demand Jikai

“Blow the winds! Roar the gales!” I had shouted, exulting in my newly won freedom. “Bear me on to Valka and my high fortress of Esser Rarioch! Blow, winds, carry me home to my Delia, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia of Delphond!”

The lie to my boastful shouts was given by that ominous scrap of sail, striped black and amber, intermittently lifting over the horizon rim to the eastward. As our galleon bore on northward so that sail dogged us. I fancied I knew what beings manned her, what devils they were, and I went down to the armory and sharpened up a sword and saw most carefully to the harness of armor Captain Lars Ehren had laid out for me.

“By Vox, Prince!” said Captain Lars, his square spade beard thrusting from his blunt chin like the ram of a swifter. “We will send them scurrying back to their filthy dens with their tails between their legs!”

“Aye, Captain Lars.” I looked at him, there in the armory of his galleon *Ovvend Barynth*, the iron harness cold in my hands. “Have you fought the leem lovers before?”

“No, Majister.”

Concerned lest my tone lead him to suspect all the disquiet with which I faced the prospect of an action with these reiving ships from the Southern Ocean, I hastened to add: “I have. We exposed enough of their tripe to find out they are diffs like any other human being.”

He laughed hugely. The galleon surged through the swell, her timbers creaking, the rush of water echoing along her stout lenken sides, the snap of blocks and the rattling of rigging distant but ever-present sounds. It is not easy to disconcert a galleon captain of Vallia, that proud island empire of Kregen.

“I have heard of them, Majister. Can you speak of your fight?”

I thought of Viridia the Render, and of how that pirate lady and I, as a member of her render crew, had fought off one of those reiving ships from the Southern Ocean. Here, south of the equator off the eastern coast of the continent of Havilfar, the sea was known as the Ocean of Clouds. Viridia and her crew had escaped from the leem lovers’ ship only under the cover of a sudden gale. We had got away, but it had been a near thing.

“They fight dirty, Captain. I always look for the good in a man, and tolerate anyone until he proves himself evil or traitorous; I fancy I would have to look rather too long to find any decent humanity in these leem lovers.”

“I have heard stories, Majister. Unpleasant stories.” Captain Ehren buckled up his armor with the help of young Gil, one of the armorer’s apprentices. He grunted with the effort of drawing in his stomach beneath the cuirass. “These shants carry their aura of evil about with ’em.”

There are many names for these marauding ships and people from around the curve of the world;

“shant” was merely one. We stood up, and stretched and wriggled until we were comfortable, then we clambered up the ladders and so came out onto the quarterdeck. The mingled streaming lights of the Suns of Scorpio blazed down, that glorious twinned fusion of opaz radiance, the emerald and the ruby, pouring in molten floods upon the sea and the ship. By Zair! It was good to be alive on such a day! I did not forget that I carried in my head half the secrets of the airboats that were going to prove of such great value to Vallia, my home on Kregen, in the inevitable war with the hostile empire of Hamal. That information must reach Vallia. I drew dark mental pictures of the holocausts of horror that would follow if Hamal attacked Vallia, suddenly, treacherously, fleets of skyships raining from the skies in steel and fire and destruction.

The first lieutenant, a Hikdar, saluted.

“She stays above the horizon longer, sir,” he said to Captain Ehren.

To cheer them, I said: “It is certain she recognizes us as Vallian. That, my friends, gives pause to her cramp of a captain. It makes him think twice, does that, before he attacks a galleon of Vallia!”

There was a little rumbling of oaths from the officers on the quarterdeck, not a few puzzled and half-recriminating glances in my direction. But I had given Captain Ehren strict orders. We were not to put our helm over and go roaring down to tangle with the shant. I had forbidden these proud men of Vallia, seadogs all, to do what they would naturally have done. This, alone, made them uneasy.

There was certain vital information about the fliers I had to take back to Vallia. Yes, I could see that. But, also, I could see that in the next bur or so I would be solely concerned with the immediate situation. Hopeful plans for the future were not going to be of the slightest use when that Opaz-forsaken leem lover at last decided to attack. Everything, then, for us all would be concentrated into the immediate present.

Captain Lars Ehren knew his business. This galleon had been on her way to the island realm of Hyrklana, farther south, to attempt to buy airboats there when the supply had stopped from Hamal. The Hamalians had reacted by sending two of their tremendous skyships to sink the two Vallian galleons. They had sunk one: *Nikvove of Evir* had burned. Though I'd been treacherously drugged and hauled aboard to be flung down as a flaming human torch upon the Vallians, I had managed to gain control of one of the skyships, *Hirrum Warrior*. By using *Hirrum Warrior* I had contrived to ram the other Hamalese skyship, *Pride of Hanitcha* and wreck and sink them both.

When *Ovvend Barynth*, commanded by Lars Ehren, had picked me out of the sea I had managed to convince his passengers, the deputation to Hyrklana, that our true salvation lay back home in Vallia, where with the information I had we could ourselves manufacture the airboats.

Recalling that fight in the Hamalese skyship I supposed it to be just another battle through which I had gone, willy-nilly. I had fought hard, yes, like a battle-crazed maniac, you might think; but the reasons for my conduct were clear and self-evident. Now, again, I faced a challenge. I bear no man, be he apim like myself or diff like so many others on Kregen, any grudges. Alone, I reserve the right to defend myself and my loved ones, and if this makes me a sinner — as, indeed, it does, it does — then I remain condemned never to roam the Plains of Mist with my clansmen when the last days come.

“She’s hoisting more canvas!” yelled the lookout.

I shaded my eyes and stared across the tumbled blue water, glittering in the glorious light from the Suns of Scorpio.

That ominous sail had increased in size, grown taller, doubled into two, and now showed with perfect clarity the horizontal bands of black and amber. Each panel could be folded down or up, like a concertina, to make or hand sail.

The tall, finlike twin sails foreshortened, drew into one. I frowned. The shant was now heading directly at us, which meant that with our own onward progress it would cut our wake a good few cables' lengths aft. It was up to something, that was clear.

Captain Ehren couldn't understand why his galleon couldn't outrun the shant. He scratched his massive beard, cursing.

"The old *Ovynth*," he said, giving his command her nickname, "is the fastest craft out of Ovvend. Aye," he added with a flash of pride, "and there are mighty fewer faster galleons out of Vondium itself! That's why I was chosen for this journey, to bypass the black devils of Hamal. And this rast of a leem lover overhauls me as a sixteen-oar overhauls a six-oar!"

"Look at his canvas, Lars," I said, pointing. "Just a single tall sail, all in one piece, like the wing of a seed pod from a herm tree, or a fish's fin, or a bird's wing."

"Aye, I see. Heathen ways!"

Vallian galleons are rigged much as an Earthly galleon of the Elizabethan Age would have been rigged, with course and topsail on the foremast, course and topsail on the main, but, instead of lateens on the mizzen and bonaventura mizzen, the Vallians set a square course on their crossjack. To men used to this system, the idea of a tall, narrow battened lugsail would come as strange. But I knew of the powerful sailing qualities of this rig. When the shant came hull up, and I could take a closer look, I felt even more concern over the coming conflict.

"May he rot forever in the Ice Floes of Sicce!" raged Nalgre Sultant, Vad of Kavinstok. He was a hard-faced man, with those thin lips and arrogant eyes of your true noble, for a Vad is a high rank, and his rich clothing proclaimed a man who owned more than a sufficiency of this world's wealth. He was the leader of the Vallian deputation to Hyrklana. Now he favored me with a haughty and hostile look. "Had we not turned back but continued on to Hyrklana, we would not be in this humiliating position, Prince."

I did not bother to answer him. I had not failed to notice the small black and white favor pinned by an ornate gold and opaz brooch to his shoulder cloak. This man, this powerful Vad, was an avowed member of the Racter party, and it was the most powerful political party in Vallia. The racters, as I well knew, had no great love for the emperor, my father-in-law. I'd had my differences with the old devil in the past, too, and I would not lightly forget his intemperate bellow to his guards to "Take off his head, now!" But he'd changed and mellowed since then, and I would prefer him to the racters.

"Prince!" called Vad Nalgre. "You do not answer!"

The way I turned around, slowly, was done not to insult him, but so I might compose myself.

"You wear a rapier, Vad Nalgre," I said in a quiet and gentle voice. "Put your armor on and take up a stouter sword or a boarding spear for the work to come."

He spluttered. But my meaning was plain. He turned away from me and went below, and I caught the tail end of a comment about a hairy barbarian, a wild clansman, marrying the emperor's daughter and thinking he could lord it over loyal Vallians. Because we faced an action I let the comment pass. Later, as

I then thought, I would take the matter up with this Nalgre Sultant, the Vad of Kavinstok.

The only member of the Vallian deputation to Hyrklana of whom I had any knowledge came up to me. This was Lorgad Endo, a shrewd merchant like all Lamnias, that race of diffs with pale-tinted fur and expressions of an honesty eternally mixed with surprise at the world. He wore neat Vallian clothes, those buff breeches and jacket over a white shirt, and the typical Vallian hat with the two square slots in the trim over the eyes. But, being a merchant and a Lamnia, he did not wear a jaunty feather in his hat. Neither, I noticed, did he wear a sword, although a short, stout cudgel of balass swung by a golden chain at his waist.

“What, then, Lorgad,” I said, feeling suddenly much more cheerful. “Will you fight, then, merchant?”

“Yes, Prince. If I must. It never seems to turn an honest ob’s profit for me, all this fighting; but fight I would, rather than a shtarkin should slit my throat”

“Well spoken, Koter Endo,” said I, feeling it desirable that a little formality should be allowed here. “Then please go down to the armory and pick a likely weapon or two, and a harness, and right glad we are to have you with us.”

He favored me with his shrewd little Lamnia smile, and, his laypom-colored fur aglow in the glory of the suns, he went below.

Captain Ehren had given his orders, and the ship had been cleared for action and the men had beaten to quarters. The varters were fully manned, and the gros-varters, those super-ballistae of peculiarly Vallian manufacture, snouted hungrily over our bulwarks. Parties of hands stood ready to deal with all the complexities of sail-trimming orders that would follow once the maneuvering began. Again I looked at the shant — the Lamnia had called these malignant diffs “shtarkins,” just one more of their multifarious names, for no one knew the name they gave themselves — and again I frowned. The tall, narrow black and amber sails had opened out again, so that the vessel once more paralleled our course, but at a distance much closer than before. We had traveled a good distance to the northward since *Ovvend Barynth* had picked me up, and were approaching the northeastern corner of the continent of Havilfar, where the Risshamal Keys stretch their spiky fingers out to the northeast. One of those fingers of islands and cays and desolate outcrops terminates in the island of Piraju. That made me ponder. The leem lover, it seemed to me, was trying to stay to windward of us and pen us in to leeward of the Keys. We would have to tack soon and make a good offing to escape the deadly reefs as well as the sure observation of our enemies of Hamal. The next time we made a board we would be struggling up to the shant, and if we did not do so we would go piling up helter-skelter on the rocks.

As the one-time first lieutenant of a seventy-four I did not much care to be to leeward of my opponent, not, that is, until after we had shattered through his line and could rake him as we broke through and then come to leeward of him and so prevent his escape. Well, there were no stately lines of battleships here. There was a swift and deadly ship from those unknown lands around the curve of the world, and there was a not-quite-so-swift Vallian galleon. It would remain to be seen which of the two was the more deadly.

With that in mind I called for ink and paper. A desk of sturm-wood was set up on the wide quarterdeck, for I had no wish to go below at this juncture, and I set about putting down everything I knew concerning the secrets of the fliers, and the constituents and proportions of the minerals that went into the silver boxes called vaol. I looked up at Captain Ehren.

“Captain, tell me. Have you heard of anything called cayferm?”

“Cayferm, Prince?” He considered. Then he shook that heavy head so his plumes rustled. “No, Majister. The word means nothing.”

“To you and to me, by Vox! But not, I trust, to the wise men of Vallia.”

Cayferm was supposed to be a kind of steam, and cayferm was the mysterious thing — air, immaterial substance, gas, odor — that went into the silver boxes called paol. With a pair of silver boxes, the vaol and the paol, secured in their spherical sliding orbits of wood and bronze, one had complete control over gravity and motion, and could fly an airboat until the chunkrah tired, as my clansmen would say.

Putting all I knew down in cold words brought home to me the sparseness of the hard-won information I had gathered in my days of spying in Ruathytu, capital city of Hamal.

It seemed fitting to me not to use the swift, graceful cursive script of Kregen, and I eschewed the slightly more formal uncial-type lettering. Instead, I wrote in the hyr form, that solemn, dignified, utterly beautiful script of Kregen one finds in the old books. There are many kinds of books on Kregen, as on our Earth, but when reading a lif, that is, an important book, or a hyr-lif, a very important book, one expects and is not disappointed to find that high beauty of lettering.

The paper was carefully placed within a covering of oiled silk and then, sealed by Captain Ehren’s seal, into a leather pouch. “If anything happens to me, Captain, that must reach the emperor. It is vital to Vallia.”

“As to that, Prince, nothing will happen to you and you will carry this vital pouch to the emperor yourself!”

Well, it sounded fine. I clapped Ehren on the shoulder and went away to stare broodingly upon that cramp of a shant.

The leem lover’s vessel cut through the water with little fuss, and I suspected her underwater lines were finer than the somewhat square-cut outlines of her hull and upperworks suggested. The hull had been painted a deep, rich brown. I could see people moving about its decks, the snouts of varters and catapults, the twinkle and gleam of weapons. Quite content to parallel our course, it hung off there, dogging us. Neither of its battened lugs with their tall and slender outlines had been fully unfolded and hoisted to the trucks of its pole masts.

I rubbed my chin. Well, that sea-leem out there represented the many others of his kind who took an ever-increasing toll of shipping from the sea-lanes of the lands I knew, who descended in red horror upon peaceful fishing villages, and who, one day, must be met and challenged by us all. Still rubbing my chin, I pondered if I had carried caution too far in ordering Ehren to run and not to fight. We were in for a fight, for when we tacked the shant would be down on us without delay. I did not think he would conform to our movements and tack with us. He had his scheme working, and that scheme visualized *Ovvend Barynth* plundered, its people slain, and the ship itself sunk without trace. No, there was only one answer to this chin-rubbing.

“Captain! We will tack now, while we still have sea room. Stand to your arms! We go into the attack! We strike for Vallia, for honor and our lives! Hai Jikai!”

CHAPTER TWO

How Wersting Rogahan split the chunkrah's eye

The rush of bare feet upon the planking, the urgent shouts of the petty officers, the creak and rattle of blocks and the squeal as the braces hauled, the ponderous swinging of the yards and the firm heel of the vessel as she swung and then straightened up on her new course, all these old familiar sights and sounds and sensations brought a powerful pang of memory upon me. I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, had been for many years a salt-water sea officer, sailing down into the smoke and flame of battle. Then I had been a swifter captain upon the inner sea of Turismond, the Eye of the World. And then a render with Viridia up along the Hoboling Islands. Oh, yes, as the saying has it, the sea was in my blood. But the Star Lords, those mysterious beings who had summoned me here to this planet of Kregen in the constellation of the Scorpion four hundred light-years from the world of my birth, had given me orders, or so it seemed to me, that I must not set foot upon a vessel, must not sail the seas again.

Well, by Vox! Here I was upon a Vallian galleon and that through no design of my own, save at the end when I had smashed the confounded Hamalese skyship down and had to swim to *Ovvend Barynth*.

Maybe the Star Lords had repented a little in their interdiction.

As we heeled to the breeze and, with our proud Vallian flags stiff and our canvas pouting, went hurtling down on the leem lover, I looked up at the sky and around in the empty air.

There was no sign of that gorgeous scarlet and golden hunting bird, messenger and spy for the Star Lords, planing in wide circles up there. Maybe I was more of a free agent now that I had begun to suspect.

“The shant sees us!” bellowed the first lieutenant. He had leaped into the shrouds and was halfway up the ratlines, pointing, his bronzed face rapturous with the impending battle. He was a waso-Hikdar and his name was Insur ti Fotor. [\[1\]](#) He struck me as a fine officer, one who ran his ship tautly and relieved his captain of mundane concerns, as any good first lieutenant should. One day, Opaz willing, he would command his own vessel. “She’s massing men for’ard!” shouted Insur ti Fotor. “The shant means to make a fight of it!”

“Then let their own pagan gods look out for them,” growled Captain Lars Ehren.

“May Opaz curdle their livers and their lights!” came a yell from the waist. I looked down over the quarterdeck rail. The men clustered in the protection of the palisades down there, barricades of scantlings and wicker-work. As they glared up I saw the gleam of teeth. These sailors of Vallia are a hardy, independent race of men. Habitually bare-chested, clad only in loose breeches cut to a generous size, and tight leather skullcaps, they carried boarding spears or thick cut-and-thrust blades. My heart warmed to them; they are capital men in a gale or an action. With men like these — and they were almost all apims — I felt my people of Vallia stood a chance against the insane ambitions of Hamal.

Shants, the first lieutenant had called these leem lovers. Well, I often called them “shanks,” out of a memory of the sharks of the inner sea, called chanks. The sharks of the outer oceans of Kregen bear a different name.

I looked over the bulwarks again and across the shining sea. It was true: the shank was forging ahead to meet us.

Captain Ehren boomed his gusty laugh. “By Vox! He may have the heels of us. But if I can’t run rings around him, I don’t deserve my certificate from the Todalpheme!”

There was no drum-deldar, there was no whip-deldar aboard a galleon out of Vallia. These race-built ships relied upon the free winds of heaven for propulsion. With my old sailorman's instincts I had sniffed the wind and studied the horizon and, to my disappointment, could sense precious little sign of an impending gale. I had great confidence in these sailors of Vallia. But they had not fought against the shanks from around the world; I had.

The shank foamed along in fine style, leaning over. He was within an ulm of us — an ulm, as you know, being something like five sixths of a Terrestrial mile — and Captain Ehren must give his orders soon. I knew what those orders should be, and Captain Ehren had confirmed them. The moment of decision was the crucial factor: too soon and we'd skim past out of range; too late and we could easily smash in board and board, and that was something I had absolutely no desire at all to happen.

The atmosphere of tension on *Ovvend Barynth* was held in check by the seamanlike qualities of the Vallian sailors. Most galleons carried parties of soldiers, and these, in the usual way of Kregen as well as of Vallia, were composed mostly of mercenaries. If I refer to the fighting-men in these ships as marines, you must forgive an old sailor accustomed to the scarlet coats and the boots and the bayonets of the marines, clumping about a seventy-four and always providing their loyal and invaluable services. The bulk, then, of the marines in *Ovvend Barynth* was made up of Chuliks.

Chuliks are expensive mercenaries, commanding much higher rates of pay than most other diffs. With their smooth yellow faces, shaved heads with the dangling pigtailed, fierce upthrusting tusks, black soulless eyes, they looked a formidable bunch. I was most happy to welcome this body of Chuliks to fight alongside me. Chuliks, as you know, have often figured in more unpleasant roles in my life upon Kregen.

Insur ti Fotor, the first lieutenant, had quitted the shrouds and now stood ready at the quarterdeck rail to bawl his orders the instant Captain Ehren passed the word.

The feel of a ship under me, the breeze on my cheek, the onward swelling surge of the canvas, all uplifted me. Much as I detest war and fighting, I can understand the men who talk of a red curtain dropping before their eyes in the midst of combat. My rapier lay snug in its scabbard, the left-hand dagger at my right side. In my fist I gripped a sword taken from the selfsame rack as the swords held by those about me, the wolfish sailors of Vallia. This sword, straight, heavy, single-edged, was a cheaply produced weapon with a simple iron cross-guard and wooden hilt. The metal of the blade could not compare with the superb steel of the high-quality rapiers; but it was a serviceable weapon, not unlike an Earthly cutlass. The Vallians called it a clanxer — somewhat disparagingly, I thought.

There could be only a few murs left before Ehren gave his order. He stared through his telescope at the onrushing shank vessel.

“What do you make of them, Captain?”

He lowered the glass and turned to me. His face had set into harsh lines. I knew he had seen those evil forms upon the deck of that hostile ship.

“Devils!” he said. His voice boomed and cracked with the violence of his emotions. “Devils, Majister! Spawned from the deepest crevices of Cottmer's Caverns. They fill me with a revulsion, by Vox, that makes my flesh crawl and leaves me unclean!”

“You are not alone in that feeling, Captain Lars.”

Now the moment had arrived and despite the itchy, crawly sensation I knew he was experiencing all over his skin, bringing out the gooseflesh, Captain Ehren gave his order in a harsh, ringing tone. Instantly the first lieutenant bellowed it out, the hands tailed onto the braces, the timoneer thrust the helm over, and *Ovvend Barynth* heeled and thrust at the sea. It spun as the evolution was carried out with faultless precision, went through the eye of the wind like clockwork, and passed at a comfortable distance along the shank's starboard side.

We were still to leeward, but going away from the shank, and in that precise moment of time we had our opportunity.

"Loose!" bellowed Captain Ehren.

Every varter, every gros-varter, every catapult, every Bowman loosed. A veritable cloud of arrows and darts and rocks flew up into the air, curving in their flight, descending onto the leeward side.

"Reload! reload!" the Deldars were bellowing, raging among their crews. Sinewy backs and muscled arms hauled the windlasses to draw back the catapult arms, to bend the varter bows. Already the archers had let fly with their second volley. It would be nice to think that every missile we dispatched found a target, but some of the rocks and darts plunged into the sea in a ring of foam. I stared narrowly at that squat brown-painted ship with its ungainly above-water lines, the railings along its side, the stepped castles at bow and stern, and those two tall black-and-amber-striped sails raking above.

We were hitting her! I saw a whole lower panel of amber rip away from her foremast. Chips flew from her bulwarks where a catapult-flung rock bounced, and rebounded on to smash bloodily onto the deck. The men set up a cheer.

Then the answering broadside came in. Noise clamored about our ears. A man at the nearest varter spun back, streaming blood from a shattered jaw, stumbling to pitch over. Halyards parted and the ship-deldar — that is, the bos'n — roared his crew into knotting, for there was no time now for splicing.

With that and a thunking great hole through the waist palisades, where a rock bounced and miraculously touched no one, we escaped further damage from that broadside.

We were past.

We took the breeze and we went foaming into the northeast with the wind over our starboard beam. If everything held we were on a board that would take us well clear of the Risshamal Keys before we needed to go about again and so run into the northwest for the passage past the island of Astar and so on toward Vallia. The passage would be a long one.

Someone yelled then and I looked back, and there was that Opaz-forsaken cramph of a shank speeding after us.

"He does not mean to let us get away so lightly," observed Captain Ehren.

"Lightly?" said the Lamnian merchant, Lorgad Endo, staring with a sickly cast to his face at the screaming sailor on the deck below. The man's comrades were tending to him, and one wrapped a kerchief about his shattered jaw, so that his awful shrieks were muffled. "Lightly?"

"What the captain means, Endo," said the Vad of Kavinstok in his cutting way, "would be outside the understanding of a merchant."

This was blatant rudeness. The Vad had deliberately omitted the courtesy title of Koter, and as a Koter is a gentleman, and Lorgad Endo was a gentleman, for all he was a merchant and a Lamnia, then he should be addressed as Koter Endo. The others of the deputation to Hyrklana had gathered, all armored, all with weapons, and no doubt they looked a fine warlike party. I had no faith in them to stand to it when the tinker-hammering began.

The Lamnia merely turned away, and crossing the quarterdeck he engaged in conversation with Hikdar Insur.

One of the deputation, an apim, Strom Diluvon, broke into an animated running commentary on the damage sustained by the enemy vessel, and the others paid him rapt attention, so the awkward moment passed.

“He’ll be up with us again, and soon, Prince,” said Captain Ehren. He thumped the telescope into the palm of his left hand.

“You have a good man on the poop varters?”

“Aye. A rascal called Rogahan. The men call him Wersting Rogahan. But he’s so good a shot I had to make him up to dwa-Deldar, and overlook his rank indiscipline.”

“Aye, Captain. So many good men have this streak of resentment of authority.”

And then I, Dray Prescott, realized what I had said.

By Zim-Zair! Had I become so stuffy and orthodox in my old age? Had all these ranks and titles, these princes and Kovs and Stroms that loaded me down, had they corrupted me, made of me a mere establishment figure of clay, turned me from the man who kicked instantly against all authority?

Captain Ehren looked at me oddly, and away, and so I knew my ugly old figurehead of a face must have been glaring with all the malice that, to my sorrow, I know it is capable of.

I took myself off up the ladder and onto the poop.

Right aft where the taffrail had been extended out with platforms into two wings, one over each quarter, were sited the varters. A little forward of them and on the centerline, well abaft the mizzen, stood the aft catapult.

The men clustered around the machines stiffened when I appeared. Well, Zair knew, I was used to that. Wherever I went, it seemed I found myself either at the bottom of the stack — slave, prisoner, condemned — or at the top — Lord of Strombor, Strom of Valka, King of Djanduin, Prince Majister of Vallia, Zorcander of my clansmen of the Great Plains. During that recent period of my espionage in Hamal I had been a nonentity, someone more in the middle of society, as Hamun ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley. But to these men I was Prince Majister of Vallia. I could order them flogged jikaider, put in irons, deprived of rations; I could make life miserable for them at the slightest pretext.

Captain Lars Ehren, I had made it my business to find out, ranked as a good and concerned captain. I would do nothing to undermine his authority, or to tread upon his firm foundations and weaken them.

One of the men with the rank marks of a dwa-Deldar looked up from where he was greasing the varter

chute. He had a thin, exceedingly black streak of chin beard running under his jaws. In his close-fitting leather cap a bright red feather sported. His lean body was bare, and his buff-colored breeches had been cut off above the knees. He was barefoot. I looked at his face, at the lean jaw, the broken nose, the bright and knowing brown eyes. I saw that if I treated him with scrupulous fairness, this was a man with whom I could do business.

“Deldar Rogahan!”

“Aye, Majister.”

“I hear you can split the chunkrah’s eye at a distance where most men can see only their rumps.”

There rose a little titter from the varter crews at this, and I felt encouraged.

“That rast following us there—” I pointed over the stern. The shank foamed along, catching us up, his canvas hoisted fully and, already, the panel we had knocked out replaced. “That cramp of cramps needs something of your skill, Wersting Rogahan.”

At this his mates chortled out loud. In their experience, officers of the quarterdeck seldom bothered to use the men’s own nicknames. And a wersting, as you and I both know, is a most ferocious black-and-white-striped hunting dog. They were a free and easy bunch, these galleon sailors of Vallia, men I would be proud to number in a crew of my own and to name as friends.

“The moment he comes within range of Vela, here, Majister,” said Rogahan, “I shall spit him.”

By this I knew that the varter nicknamed Vela had a better throw than the other. Men always give pet names to their weapons, as well on this Earth as on Kregen.

“If you loose with Vela,” I said, and I looked across at the other varter, that on the starboard side, “then I shall loose with Sosie here and try to match you shot for shot.”

He laughed, for discipline relaxes on occasions such as these. “By Corg, Majister! You may try. But Sosie has a stretched cord and throws poorly these days.”

I frowned. “I do not care to sail in a ship with varters with stretched cords.”

“No more do I, Majister! As Corg is my witness, the stretching happened when we exercised on the way south, just to the leeward of Astar.”

“Nevertheless, Wersting Rogahan, I shall try!”

“May Opaz guide your shot, Prince.”

He couldn’t say fairer than that.

I eyed him.

“I do not think you have the need of Opaz’s guidance, Rogahan. But for Opaz’s wisdom, perhaps. Shoot straight, for the glory of Vallia!”

If this was fustian stuff, I plead guilty; but then, I have used the rhetorical fustian to good purpose before

in my life, and no doubt, Zair willing, will do so again.

As you who have listened to these adventures will know by now, I always feel very much at home with these rough men of the sea, hard-cases, shell-backs, and share much of that feeling of comradeship with their brothers of the land and air services. As for that chattering congregation of faerlings down on the quarterdeck, that deputation for Hyrklana, they were a drag and a bore by comparison with these fighting-men of the galleons.

One of the seamen with a red and blue tattoo of startling indecency across his chest squinted aft and turned to Deldar Rogahan.

“He’s here, Rog. What are you waiting for?”

“I’m the captain of the poop vartars, Nath, you great onker! I’ll say when, do you hear?”

“Aye, Rog, I hear. But, by Corg, you’re leaving it powerful late!”

Rogahan glanced at me. I kept my face immobile. Truth to tell, it had come as a great relief to allow all my own natural facial expressions free rein once more. If they are evil and arrogant and overweening, then I blame no one but myself; certainly they came more sweetly to me than that blank look of idiocy I assumed in Hamal.

Rogahan peered aft along his chute. The Vallians have developed a serviceable sight for their gros-vartars; Rogahan, I judged, would shoot by eye and experience and feel alone, as would I.

He put his hand on the release lever, a mammoth lenken trigger. I watched him. From what he said, my Sosie would under-range his Vela. He loosed. We all watched the rock, for the gros-varter looses either rocks or darts depending on the exigencies of the occasion.

Then everyone let out a howl of glee.

The rock had struck fair into the forepart of the pursuing ship. For the moment we could only observe it had struck, we could not see what damage had been caused. The crew were hard at the windlass rebending the varter. I cocked an eye at Deldar Rogahan. He read my unspoken question instantly.

“Aye, Majister. Just.”

I felt the rising and dipping of the stern, judging the moment to loose, traversing the varter a fraction to bring it dead on line. Then I touched the trigger and the bow clanged and the rock flew. Well, maybe I was lucky. I do not know. In any event my rock flew true. It would hit the shank, I knew that surely enough, for I possess this knack of hitting what I shoot at. But in its manner of striking lay the luck. The rock flew higher than Rogahan’s and for a split instant I thought I had missed. Then the rock struck full against the shank’s foremast, a quarter of the way down, struck and smashed a splintering of brown chips away, perfectly visible.

The men let out another cheer.

“A fine shot, Prince!” yelled Rogahan.

We all watched in great expectancy as the crews went at winding the vartars. The foremast of the shank was in trouble; two of the panels, one black and the other amber, began to shred away. I saw the top

section of the pole mast trembling. If that mast had been made in the usual way, out of foremast, foretop mast, and foretopgallant mast, the thing would have been down already.

In the instant the leem lovers began to fold up their sail from the top to ease the strain, the yell arose on our deck.

“Incoming!”

We could all see the three rocks soaring up, black against the sunlight, tumbling over and over in their trajectories and, in that same instant, I saw they would strike without doubt.

Wersting Rogahan saw that, too. He was a fine varterist.

“By Vox!” he yelled. Then, enraged, “Wind, you onkers! Wind!”

The crew finished winding and we all bent to the task of loading the next rock. With a roar and a smash and a heave the deck shook beneath us and the air was filled with the whirring splinters of ripping death. Two men went down, screaming, six-foot-long splinters impaling them. Other men slipped on the spilled blood. I saw a sailor looking stupidly at his wrist. Where his hand was no one would ever know. In the midst of this the catapult forward of us let fly with an almighty clang. There might not be the choking smoke or the smashing concussions of the iron guns, but in other respects this was very much like the fighting I had endured as a young man in the sea actions of my own world.

Three more times Rogahan and I let fly. We thought we hit five times out of the six shots, and neither would give the other the credit for the odd one.

Again *Ovvend Barynth* was hit.

And, through it all, despite the loss of pressure from the reduced sail area on its foremast, the shank crept closer.

Captain Ehren stormed onto the poop, rapier in hand.

“Prince!” he cried. “We must turn and rend him! Give us the order, I pray you! Majister! We must board!”

If that happened I, for one, would not like to bet on the outcome. I hold in great esteem the fighting sailors of Vallia. They roam the seas in confidence born of achievement. But I knew of the ghastly savagery, the barbarous power, of these leem lovers from the southern oceans of mystery.

“Prince Dray!” bellowed Ehren.

Everyone clustered there was looking at me. I saw their eyes, the stubble on their cheeks, the sweat drops caught there. I nodded. I could not speak.

“Hai Jikai!” shouted Captain Lars Ehren. He went roaring back to his quarterdeck and I said to Deldar Rogahan: “My duty lies on the quarterdeck, too, Wersting. Fight well. If we both live, I shall seek you out.”

He picked up his leather jack and took his clanxer from that Nath whom he had dubbed an onker.

“Corg has me in his keeping, Prince,” he said. He spoke dourly, shrugging the jack tight and lacing the thongs, the sword thrust down his belt. “I shall live. I pray Opaz has you in his keeping.”

I nodded, satisfied, and clattered down the ladder to the quarterdeck. Everyone stood their posts with strict attention to discipline. Swords glimmered in the light of the suns. Men breathed with their mouths wide open. The Chuliks stood in their ranks, immobile, impassive, imponderable to an apim mind.

Onward we rushed. The sea broke away from our bows, and spume flew outward. Our banners spread above us, the brave scarlet flag with the saltire of yellow, the colors of Vallia, and the crimson and pale blue of Ovvend. My own flag, Old Superb, was not flying there. The galleon did not carry my flag in her lockers, and I most certainly did not have one about my person. I was wearing my old scarlet breechclout, under the armor . . .

Closer and closer we rushed. Now the vartars were clanging at point-blank range and the arrows were crisscrossing the narrowing space of water between us. It had to be done in a swift clean rush. I disregarded the sleeting storm of arrows, climbed up a few of the ratlines of the fore shrouds. Now the deck of the shank lay exposed to my view, and I saw the milling numbers of men there — men! Half-men, beast-men, for now I saw them clear!

The ships touched, the tumble-home of our galleon making it essential for Ehren to bring his vessel in on bow or quarter. We had maneuvered well, and I was looking down on the massive aftercastle of the shank.

A rock hissed past me and severed two of the shrouds.

Arrows splattered past.

This was a situation where a shield would be of priceless use, but the men of Vallia, as the warriors of Segesthes and Turismond, do not habitually use the shield. That I was the first to leap onto the deck of the enemy, then, must be put down to the simple fact that, having no shield and making a cock-shy in the shrouds, I was anxious to get down and out of the staked position in the chunkrah’s eye.

Instantly, we were leaping aboard. The shanks, surprised, met us with a wall of steel.

In only a few murs they had rallied, and with wild and screeching shouts that chilled our men’s blood, they were raging against us, hurling us back over our own bulwarks, tumbling us back onto our own decks, and then they were pouring over after us in a screeching tide of hell-spawned destruction!

CHAPTER THREE

Concerning fish heads

There are some experiences in one’s life one may look back on with some reasonably successful attempts at equanimity. All the times you acted like a fool. The times you did things which afterward you wished you had not done, or had done differently.

And there are some occasions you do not wish to recall at all.

Deliberately, I have left out many and many a fight I went through on Kregen, in these accounts, for Kregen is not a world like this Earth. It is hard and cruel, as well as brilliant and beautiful. There men are more often less tolerant of weakness. Some fights I shall never record.

Of that fight in *Ovvend Barynth* as we struggled against these monstrous leem lovers from around the curve of the world I will say but little. Oh, it is not because I lose a fight that I do not relish the telling of it. We lost that first fight between the Miglas and the Canops, there on the field of Mackee. But I have spoken of it. And I have not spoken of battles in which I was victorious: battles of my wonderful clansmen of Felschraung, battles of my marvelous people of Valka, even battles on the Eye of the World, where our red forces were pitted against the green, where Zairians fought Grodnims. But we did not lose that fight against the shanks.

The struggle was long and fierce and most severe.

Bodies struggled and writhed across the decks. Arrows flew. Swords lifted and fell and the blood spattered friend and foe alike. We clumped together and charged, and forced them back, and they reformed and returned. Our Chuliks fought like demons.

The shanks fought like demons, also.

This particular race of diffs from the lands around the curve of the world were shanks, and not, in the event, the shtarkins that the Lamnia, Lorgad Endo, had feared. The main difference between them is one of physiognomy.

You have heard already of the Rapas, those vulture-headed people, and the Fristles, the cat-headed people, and many and many more of the marvelous diffs who inhabit Kregen.

These shanks possessed lithe and muscular bodies fashioned very much after the way an apim's body is shaped, an apim, like you or me. But instead of skins they possessed scales. They grew a short, gristly fishlike tail. From their shoulders and hung on shoulder blades of a somewhat similar configuration to the sliding concentric shoulder blades of my own famous Djangs, each shank has four arms. Unlike the Djangs, the shanks' arms are not homogenous. The upper pair are weaker than the lower pair.

And, as one would expect, crowning each fishy body of the shanks grows a fish head.

The effect of these serried rows of fish heads, all with staring round eyes, scaly mouths, tendrils, and slits for nostrils, came at one with a gruesome and grotesque force.

I do not like fish.

If it is essential, then I will eat fish; but I do not pretend to enjoy a mouthful.

The sight of these fishy excrescences, screeching and hissing, charging on with their weapons lifted, with their steel and bronze glittering, infuriated me. The sprouting green corals in their helmets, the jewels fashioned into the likeness of seaweed and swathed in decoration about them, all this piscine splendor and arrogance, this grotesque transference of the things of one realm to another, repelled me. Yet these shanks were acting only according to their own lights, their own way. They did what nature impelled them to do, as did I. (Although, since my arrival on Kregen and up to this point in my story, I had made valiant attempts to curb my nature, to see things in other ways and with other peoples' eyes. I had had some success, as you know, and some failures.)

As the shanks violently rushed upon us, seeking to slay us and take our possessions for themselves, I had no right to any other course of action save that of opposing them.

The blades clashed and rang. Arrows hissed spitefully. The shanks used short, heavily curved compound bows, and they drove barbed arrows in with fiendish cruelty. The Vallians were using bows very similar to the Valkan bows, for that style had proved itself in the eyes of the Vallians who could not pull a longbow and so they had adopted it. As the shafts flew I found myself cursing and raging that there was no contingent of bowmen from Loh with me, and to lead them no one else but Seg Segutorio. And, too, if Inch had been there with his monstrous ax. And Turko, also, with a massive shield to lift up at my back. But they were far away, and I was here, caught up in a scene of carnage and savagery.

Our red blood ran to mingle with the greenish blood of the shanks.

They wore armor, of course, and it was fashioned from bronze scales, as would seem inevitable, given their fishy origins. We fought across the decks of the galleon in the heaving sea and gradually the twin suns of Kregen, Zim and Genodras, the red and the green, sank to the horizon.

You may feel I have overemphasized the repulsiveness of these shanks. This could be so. But from them rose a foul aroma, the decaying stench of rotten fish. We gagged as we fought. But, then, I suppose it would be true to guess we stank in their slit nostrils.

We fought. The suns declined. Backward and forward swayed the fight, first upon our deck, then upon theirs, and then back again as men shrieked and died and others ran to take their places.

“Vallia! Vallia!” shouted our men.

“Ishtish! Ishtish!” screeched the shanks.

I must now relate what was to me a strange phenomenon. In the lands of Kregen whereon I had wandered this far in my life, the grouping of continents and islands so familiar to me, a grouping that in after years came to be called Paz, I had always found that among all the myriads of local dialects there ran the strong sure thread of the Kregish language. That tongue had seemed universal. But now, to my astonishment, I discovered that my people of Vallia could not understand the language of the shanks.

A few moments' reflection convinced me that this was a more natural state of affairs than that around the curve of the world, on that other grouping of islands and continents, they should speak the tongue we called Kregish. This reflection was accompanied by much physical exercise in slitting throats, and gouging fishy eyeballs, and inspecting what fishy tripes might be like.

During this stage of the combat I began to have hopes that we would win.

The coded genetic language pill given to me by Maspero so long ago in Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, ensured that with a little application I could perfectly understand the language of these fishy people. In the heat of conflict I discarded that information and bashed on.

“Vallia! Vallia! Opaz is with us!” The shouts grew triumphant now as we smashed the shanks back, over their own brown-painted bulwarks, down onto their decks. Bodies lay everywhere, and there was no time to feel pity at the redness of the blood mixed with the green. Time only for a fleeting and wry acknowledgment of the antipathetic colors, the red and the green, forever locked in mortal combat in the sky, and now once again matched in the very blood of mortal foes!

Many a good man was down.

Hikdar Insur came cleaving his way through a crowd of shanks, and as his brand scorched and flayed

them I noticed their resistance faltering. We were beating them!

“The Risshamal Keys close to larboard, Prince!” panted out Insur.

That was grim news. The breeze would push both our craft, entangled as they were, down on those reefs and rocks. If we were lucky we might strike a long sandy beach, a low-lying cay. Either way, with night coming on and the breeze at last freshening, we’d be shivered to pieces.

I saw Captain Ehren busily engaged. The Chuliks fought still with their ferocious disciplined violence. We were gradually overcoming the fish-men, but the task was nowhere near completed, and would grow sterner as we grew tired. I leaped for the shank’s quarterdeck followed by a ragged scrum of sailors. We used our clanxers and our spears, clearing away the massed tridents opposing us. We forced our way up onto the quarterdeck. The aftercastle, beyond, towered above us, and fish-men were shooting from it.

Our bowmen replied. *We should have shields*, I thought uselessly, and forged on. The command center of the vessel would be positioned here, and here was where the shank captain would be found.

He stood there, phalanxed by a bodyguard, resplendent in golden-scaled armor, a trident in his hand. His fishy face meant nothing to me. I could see differences in the faces of the shanks, the difference between a trout and a pike, say. To the shanks, I guessed, these were differences of great importance, nation by nation. This captain had the face of a barracuda.

He waved his trident with great authority. These fish-men were of a stature to compare with a normal-sized human being. They danced and wriggled and fought as I cleaved my way through them. The captain yelled his orders in a high hissing voice, and I understood them.

“Sinotas! Defend the stairway!” There followed a curse that meant nothing to me. “The hairy filth press close!”

Aye! I said to myself, slicing my clanxer neatly across a thrusting mackerel snout. *Aye, we hairy ones press you damned close, you stinking fishy cramph!*

So we pressed on, and for all the viciousness of their fighting, the shanks fell back, and faltered. If one may ever take a pride in fighting and war and battle, and that is a debatable question, I think the men of Vallia might take pride from that fight they put up from *Ovvend Barynth* against the leem lovers’ ship that I learned was called *Maskinonge*.

We might yet have won.

We might yet have done something that had never been done before, to my knowledge.

We might have taken the ship and carried her triumphantly as a prize of war into the great harbor of Vondium.

As was proper I had taken no part in the management of the galleon. The captain was the master of his vessel, and would command her. My part, as Prince Majister of Vallia, had been to take overall command. Now that I could sense victory within our grasp I began to think that I had not bungled the task. Regretting all the good men dead would not bring them back to life, and there had been no mortal way of escaping a fight with *Maskinonge*, for her superior sailing qualities had given her the dictation in maneuver.

I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye of Captain Ehren and Insur ti Fotor with a small group of hands they had collected making frantic attempts to free us from the entanglement of the shank. My part had led me to an attack upon the fish-men's ship, and now I stood upon her quarterdeck past the barricades, traps, and hooks, face to face with her barracuda-like captain. I would take this ship and then, freed from *Ovvend Barynth*, claw her off the shoals.

For, louder now over the clash of the melee, I could hear the sullen rumble of surf.

We were perilously close to the shore.

The vessels lurched beneath our feet as the currents took them. We fought on, steel against steel, hairy ones against scaly ones. At last I was within sword length of the fish captain, slashing at his bodyguard, feeling my men with me as we made the final charge.

Then my clanxer snapped clean across.

I hurled the hilt into the face of a yelling shank and saw him go down. I ripped out my rapier. This was not the most handy of weapons for this scramble of a fight, this close-quarters melee; but I was adept enough in the use of any weapon to make the most of it.

The trident hissed toward me and I parried it away with the forte of the rapier, much as one would use a small sword; then the slender blade, gleaming clean silver in the declining rays of the suns, skewered forward, neatly, precisely, punching past the rim of the golden-scaled corselet and transfixing that scaly shank neck.

Green ichor spouted as I withdrew, and the captain fell.

The shanks were now in complete rout.

"Vallia! Vallia!" my men were shouting. But only when they began another shout did I realize they were not my men. For they began the old cry: "Hai Jikai! Jikai! Prince Dray! Hai Jikai!"

A dark shadow fled across the deck.

The shadow was hard and black and sharp of edge. It was no cloud.

Well, we had been fighting our own fight and we had been drifting nearer and nearer the coast of Hamal. There were other people involved in this fight now.

The Hamalese flier turned, coming up against the wind after its first inspecting pass. I knew what it would do. The shank vessel was a shambles. The galleon was in little better case. The Vallians' attempts to free the wreckage had so far been fruitless and, locked together, the two vessels drifted down upon the low-lying land. The suns were nearly gone; floods of orange and crimson and emerald stained the water to the westward, and against that flood of radiance the stark black outlines of the land showed as jagged hungry teeth.

Somehow I found Deldar Rogahan in the confusion.

I gripped his arm. He was spattered with blood, a shining green figure in the darkling light.

"Put a varter shot into 'em, Rogahan!"

He was gone on the instant. A few shanks still wished to dispute the loss of their vessel, and with a handful of Chuliks and sailors I drove forward to finish the thing.

I heard a varter clang. I knew Rogahan loosed.

And then the cry we all dreaded burst up.

“Fire! Fire!”

That Opaz-forsaken yetch of a Hamalese airboat had flung down upon us an iron pot filled with blazing combustibles.

With fearful speed the flames roared upon the ships.

Smoke and flame rose into the dying light. The flames twined and lifted, roaring, gigantic tongues of fire shooting into the sky. The airboat turned, insolently it seemed, and I saw its Hamalese colors flying; then it showed us its stern and flew away.

Helpless, on fire, we drifted down onto that bleak and barren shore.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shipwrecked

Darkness lay over land and sea.

The breakers roared and leaped. The entangled ships rode down, wrapped in flames, sheets of fire spreading upon the tumultuous surface of the waters. The waves rolled in to break in crimson bands of flame upon the rocks. Gradually She of the Veils rose into the star-speckled sky to cast down her golden-pinkish light. Everyone left alive clustered to windward of the flames. The flames blew and gyrated in ghastly streamers and fingers of fire down toward the breakers.

The wind would soon pile us up, if the flames did not eat their way back to our precarious perches along the taffrail and the poop varter platforms. I did not think any shanks had survived. Certainly we saw none. But the thought occurred to me that, being descended directly from fish, they might well be singularly at home in the sea. Even so, had any jumped overboard, they were a very long way from home. You may judge of my frame of mind if I say that I did not then give a great deal of praise to these fish-men’s courage in thus venturing so far across the seas; I was concerned only with the foul results of their voyages.

The wild holocaust of breaking waves and iron-fanged rocks lay waiting for us.

“Not long now!” bellowed Captain Ehren above the wind. We had all stripped off our armor. But we still carried our weapons. I was glad to see the Lamnian merchant had survived. The Vad of Kavinstok was also there, drenched with spray, a slash across one cheek; his eyes, bright with bitter anger, rested on me accusingly. I ignored him. Wersting Rogahan clung to his varter platform near me. Wind lashed the spray cut from the waves across us. Before our eyes the flames roared and crackled, and the mizzen suddenly exploded into a pillar of fire.

The conflagration was now so intense that a number of men slipped into the sea, to take their chances

against the breakers. Few were seen again. The heat beat against our bodies. The spray steamed as it spattered the decks where the pitch ran like mercury.

“When we hit, we will slue!” bellowed Ehren. “Then will be the time to jump — when the stern is near the shore.”

He was right, but it was small comfort.

The scene presented a mad, confused nightmare: the black rocks, the spouting waves glinting a fierce orange and ruby in the awful conflagration as the ships burned, the driving wind and stinging sheets of spray, the continuous wild screeching that penetrated our eardrums and battered our bodies. The ships struck. Before they could swing, the waves pounded them and instantly they shivered to kindling. In a tumultuous torrent of helpless humanity we were swept from our perches. Smashed at by timbers and spars, by barrels and wreckage of all description, we went splashing headlong into the sea. The waves tumbled us head over heels. Many a man was struck and knocked unconscious and slipped beneath the contused surface of the sea. But some of us struck out boldly, struggling and fighting to stagger at last up onto a long shelving beach between rocks. The waters dragged at our shoulders, our waists, our legs, until we finally staggered free and collapsed, like drunken men, breathing in loud, harsh gasps, sprawled on the silver sand — but safe!

That night passed miserably as we huddled up the beach, exhausted, trying to sleep and regain our strength. Along toward midnight enough wood had been gathered and stripped to expose the dry layers within, and a fire was started. The men of Kregen do not need an electronic or gas-fueled lighter in order to make flame; if a bow and drill do not suffice, a compression tube will do the trick. We gathered about the fire, warming ourselves and drying our clothes, and I could not fail to remark upon the tameness of this fire compared with the one that had destroyed us. Man is adept at using forces so powerful he barely understands them.

With the first glow in the sky heralding the coming of the suns we stretched and yawned. Awake now, we stood up, ready to take stock of our situation.

The Risshamal Keys consist of a number of fingerlike extensions of islands, cays, mere rocks, shoals, and reefs, all running out in a generally northeastward direction from the northeastern corner of the continent of Havilfar, which is also, of course, the northeastern corner of the empire of Hamal. At the farthest extent of one long island chain rises the island of Piraju. In all, we might have come to grief in worse spots. The length of the longest chain is something of the order of a hundred and seventy dwaburs. [2] Many of the islands are quite deserted, others support a small fishing population. Hamal's laws extended to this remote spot, and I knew there would be garrisons scattered throughout the Keys, evidence of which we had received in so unwelcome a fashion when the airboat attacked us.

“We will have to find a fishing village,” said Captain Ehren. “And barter, buy, or steal a boat.”

The Vad of Kavinstok made a disgusted sound.

“We can barter our ibs, we have nothing with which to buy. You will have to steal a boat, Captain.”

“Whatever method,” said Lars Ehren, frigidly polite. “We will secure a vessel in which to sail for Vallia.”

Wersting Rogahan was coming up the beach swinging a line on which dangled a number of fine fish. I made a face.

I said: "It is practically certain there will be war between Hamal and Vallia. The Hamalians are insane with imperial ambition. Therefore we can claim privilege if we take a boat. The laws of Hamal are precise on the subject."

The Vallians were thoroughly sick of the subject of Hamalese laws. Everything in Hamal is ordered, numbered, ticketed. At this time in their development as an empire the Hamalians still held to many of the old, rigid laws that had given them strength in the past. The signs of a new age were everywhere apparent, not least in the coming to power of Queen Thyllis, who merely awaited the favorable opportunity of a great victory against Hamal's foes to prove in her coronation as empress her divine right to rule. I was sure she would cut through the strict law-structure of Hamal to further her own ends and in the process fatally weaken her nation. Mind you, I welcomed that day. Indeed I did.

A most unpleasant odor curled into my nostrils and, wrinkling up my nose, I turned to where the seamen were busy with their fish and their fire.

The smell did not come from the fish. It is not true, I suppose, to say I dislike all fish. Sardines in olive oil are fine, though not in tomato sauce, and kippers are also very fine. In later years I have taken to tinned salmon where the fresh fish leaves a mere rubbery taste in the mouth. But the smell that was now offending everyone on the beach came from the fire itself.

"By Vox, Wersting! What vile muck are you burning there?"

I might have guessed.

"We found timbers from that Corg-blasted shank, Prince. It is those timbers that stink."

"Impregnated with the damned fish stink," said Captain Ehren.

I inspected some of the wood the hands had gathered. Of a heavy and close-grained appearance, it bore a greasy greenish texture, somewhat spongy to the feel and, surprisingly, not particularly heavy at all. No one recognized the wood.

"The wood stinks of itself," I said. "And I guess it is a capital timber for ship construction."

"Aye," said Lars Ehren. "Capital for fish-men! But I'll allow their stinking craft outsailed our old *Ovyynth*, Opaz rot 'em!"

I said briskly, "This stink blowing downwind will bring out the locals if I'm not mistaken."

How instructive it was to see who made an instinctive check of their weapons, feeling the sword snugged neatly to waist, the spar to hand, the knife at belt!

We ate the fish, and poor fare it was, too. Then we set about marching from the beach southerly, looking for water.

The burning stink from our fire wafted with us for a good long way.

The shank ship, burning, would have alerted the people along this coast, both by fire and smell. We marched, ready for what might befall us.

In the event the local inhabitants were far more frightened of us than we had need to be of them. We first

saw them popping up over the sand dunes inland, where scraggly bushes and coarse rank grasses grew, showing scared faces which seemed all eyes and mouths, before they turned tail and ran. They turned tail quite literally, for these were Yuccamots, a sleek otter-like people with long, broad flattened tails. They had progressed as a race from swimming individually to catch the fish on which they lived, to sailing open boats with purse seines (nets which they looped in a great semicircle and dragged ashore), a whole village hauling on the lines. Their fingers are no longer webbed, but their feet still are. To my delight I found the Yuccamots proud of their webbed feet. How different this was from the shame the Undurkers, those supercilious canine folk from the islands south of Persinia, feel for their hind paws!

Well, it takes all kinds to make a world. The Gons, as you know, are ashamed of their white hair and religiously shave off every last lock of white from their scalps.

We made contact with the Yuccamots, and after a time managed to convince them we bore them no ill will. That we might have to steal one of their boats was a question not raised at this time. The boats themselves possessed the tall incurving stem and stern of the type of boat built two thousand years ago in the Mediterranean. They were flat bottomed, broad beamed, and lacked sails. They were propelled by six massive oars, each crewed by at least eight men, often amidships by a dozen, pushing and pulling, after the manner of swordships. These boats, with the bright colors and the otter-eyes painted in the bows, reminded me most, I suppose, of *xavegas*. The *xavega*, a Portuguese boat used against the Atlantic to catch sardines in exactly the same way as the Yuccamots use their boats to catch their fish, is fast dying out on the Earth. A pity.

The Yuccamots had developed the technique used in *xavegas* of positioning extra men judiciously about the craft and having them haul on lines attached to the looms of the oars. Exactly the same kind of extra manpower on the oars is employed by the captains of the inner sea in their swifterns, and the captains of swordships along the coasts of the outer oceans.

Captain Ehren expressed himself as satisfied with the boats themselves, although wishing for a little more fullness in the bottom lines, or a leeboard, failing a keel. But he was scathing about the absence of masts and sails.

“We can fashion masts, Captain Lars,” I said. “Aye, and sails, also. If it comes to the fluttrell vane, we can do it.”

Captain Ehren favored me with an odd look, and I realized I had unthinkingly used a common Hamalese saying. The fluttrell, that powerful saddle-bird of Havilfar, has that deuced awkward vane at the rear of its head, rather like an ancient Terrestrial pteranodon, and this quite naturally makes riding more than two aback somewhat a matter of ducking down to avoid the massive vane. So “to come to the fluttrell vane” is the cant saying in Hamal for putting up with less than the most desirable.

Once we had convinced the Yuccamots we were merely friendly, shipwrecked mariners, they were ready to aid us. They had noticed our weapons, of course, and so understood we were in good case to defend ourselves against treachery. We were given food to eat — more damned fish — but there were a few gritty loaves and a bowl or two of fruit. The bright yellow berries of the paline were eagerly snatched up, a most sovereign remedy against depression. The paline bush is one of Zair’s greatest gifts to Kregen.

Later on that day, while we sat dozing in the blue shadows of the straw and seaweed huts, the dark leaf-shaped shadow of a flier passed across the mud-packed square. Using great caution I looked out and peered up. The vuller up there was patrolling; it lazed along, its flags fluttering, keeping a watch on what went on below.

“Fliers from the naval air station,” said the Yuccamot headman, old in years yet with a still silky coat and a fat flat tail. His name was Otbrinhan and he wore a white robe much adorned with motifs in green thread of seashells and squids and amazingly finned fish. “They say we must guard against attacks.”

He saw my astonishment.

“Aye, Notor. Attacks.” He flapped his tail, making a meaty thump against the dried mud. “When I ask who will attack us poor folk, the Hikdar laughs and says we will know when they attack. It is beyond me.”

“Where is this air station, Otbrinhan?”

He used his tail to point the way, angled inland and past the crest of a sizable gorse-clad hill that rose a dwabur off. This island was of a fair size, and being so close to the equator I expected dense jungles. But the salt water ran through the soil far inland and made of it poor-quality stuff. Other islands in the chain were choked with jungles.

“How far?”

I might have guessed that to a seafaring folk, a land distance was difficult to describe. Two days, he told me, but I had to recalculate that to the length of stride of my apims and to knock off at least half a day.

Later I said comfortably to Captain Ehren: “I think we will not need to steal a boat from these folk, Captain Lars.”

“I am heartily glad to hear it. A single boat is an enormous treasure to them.”

“So what if it is?” demanded Kov Nalgre Sultant in his unpleasant hectoring tone. “They are no friends to Vallia.”

“They are friendly enough to us!” began Ehren, hotly.

“Do not seek a quarrel with me, captain!” The Vad of Kavinstok’s color was up, his lips thin and most unpleasantly curled, his jeweled hand pressing down the equally jeweled hilt of his rapier.

If it came to it I would control this insufferable Vad. If the empire ruled over by my Delia’s father was to survive we would need every single one of the good men of Vallia. Between these two, this bluff ship captain and this over-refined and contemptuous Vad, there was in my mind no choice. But, surprisingly, the little Lamnian merchant stepped forward. He held a leather bag in his hand and as we looked at him, surprised, Lorgad Endo drew the string and upended the bag over his palm and poured out a small stream of silver.

“These are sinvers from Xilicia,” he said. He spoke quite calmly. “I came by them honestly in the way of trade. They seemed to me, when we set out on this journey, to be a useful currency to carry to Havilfar, seeing that Xilicia is one of the ancient kingdoms bordering the Shrouded Sea.”

“True, Koter Endo,” said Strom Diluvon.

“Let us then pay these good Yuccamots for their hospitality. If we all put together what we have, we may yet find we have enough to buy a boat.”

“This I doubt, Koter,” said Captain Ehren. “Faith! All my treasures are gone with the old *Ovynth!*”

“And mine! And mine!” various survivors commented.

I moved forward.

“The offer made by Koter Endo is brave and generous. We will pay these Yuccamots for their food and drink. But we will have no need to steal a boat. We shall take a flier from the Opaz-forsaken crampths of the Hamalian Air Service!”

They gaped at me.

“And how, Prince Majister,” said Vad Nalgre, emphasizing the title and thus further insulting me by his tone, “do you propose to do that?”

But Hikdar Insur ti Fotor had jumped forward, excitedly speaking over the last of the Vad’s words.

“By Vox! It is a good plan, Prince! Let us go forth now and show these Hamalian vosks how true Vallians fight!”

In the hubbub that followed these survivors further divided out. There were those, led by the Vad, who were for stealing a boat. There were those who would strike for the air station and take a flier. I held up my arm.

“Let there be no dissension here. We strike a blow for Vallia if we take a voller. We merely embarrass poor fisher-folk if we steal a boat.” I bent my ugly face toward the Vad. “And in any case, Vad Nalgre, do not think, if we stole a boat, that you would be excused rowing.”

Some in the gathered throng, ruffianly seamen mostly, guffawed lustily at this sally.

The Vad flushed, and yet he was deathly still, icy. His Vallian nobility was outraged by the crude words and ways of a hairy barbarian who had dared to marry the Princess Majestrix of the empire of Vallia.

My old figurehead of a face must have worn that look of the devil, for the Vad of Kavinstok, for all his icy coolness, flinched back. His hand crept up and fingered the black and white favor fastened with the gold and opaz brooch he had made sure not to lose. His anger burned within him, his eyes showed the cost of holding his tongue. But he could not stop himself from saying: “I shall remember, Prince Majestrix! By Lycurs, I shall remember!”

CHAPTER FIVE

“For Vallia and Prince Dray!”

There is little to be said about the affray against the Hamalian Air Service station upon that forlorn little island of the Risshamal Keys. Leaving those of our company who, like Lorgad Endo, were not fighting-men, and leaving, also, the wounded we had carried here on litters improvised from wreckage, the rest of us set off.

We panted along over the coarse sand and the coarse grasses, addressing ourselves to the discomfort of the journey. The weather remained bright and hot, and this close to the equator we were soon sweating and puffing. But I would brook no delay.

The air station turned out to be a mere miserable stockade constructed of coral and rocks, for timbers were hard to come by here. The Hamalese flag floated from a mast. Sentries patrolled, their bronze helmets brazen in the twin suns' glare.

No, there is little needs to be said. We surprised them and fought until we had killed enough to make the rest throw down their arms. We were merciful, although Wersting Rogahan fingered an evil-looking knife, muttering about slit throats.

There were but two vollers there. One was the little patrol craft we had seen earlier, a three-seater, fast and not particularly comfortable. The other was more substantial, with decking and varter platforms, with two masts from which our first concern was to strip away the Hamalese flags.

We discovered that a third flier, similar to this second one, was away on extended patrol over the islands. That, I reasoned, had been the rast who had thrown down the iron pots of fire upon *Ovvend Barynth* and *Maskinonge*.

The moment this flier returned we could expect pursuit.

Someone had let rip a defiant yell, as we fought, shouting: "Vallia! Vallia!" And someone else, caught up in the excitement, had roared out: "For Vallia and Prince Dray!"

So these cramphs knew who we were.

No, there is not much to say. What I remember with the most vividness is poop varterist Nath, whom Deldar Rogahan had dubbed an onker, flinging himself in front of the body of the first lieutenant, thereby taking the arrow that would have slain Insur ti Fotor.

Later Hikdar Insur shook his head in wonderment, as he stood looking down upon the scrawny, hairy, half-naked body of this Nath. He looked up at me and I saw the pain in his face.

"Why did he do it, Prince?"

"You know the answer to that better than I do, Insur."

He started at my use of his first name, unadorned. These things are of importance on Kregen.

"This is not the first time, Prince. We fought an argenter of Pandahem and there a lusty rogue just like this, Naghan the Ears, he was called, for his ears were large, I admit, and stuck out at right angles, well, he threw himself into a spear that would have de-gutted me. I slew the man who did it, as I slew this cramph of a Hamalian, here. But I do not understand it."

It was not for me to tell him that, on occasion, in the heat of battle, ordinary roaring, brawling fighting-men will gladly give their lives for others for whom they cherish an affection. It is not a thing much talked about in the refined drawing rooms of civilization. It is much out of fashion on this Earth, here, explained away by psychological expertise as obsessional madness, fighting idiocy, the seamy underside of truth to the legends of heroes. And, true, there is much to be said for that. But in battle many ordinary things become supernormal, and anything may happen.

I did not think anyone, seaman or soldier or hired mercenary, would throw his own body into a spear aimed at Vad Nalgre Sultant, Vad of Kavinstok.

So, instead, I clapped Insur ti Fotor on the back, and bade him give thanks to Opaz he was alive.

“Do not waste the sacrifice of Nath,” I said.

“I shall not, Prince. I am anxious to return to the village, for I left the leather pouch entrusted to my keeping by Captain Ehren with the Lamnia, Lorgad Endo. He is a brave fellow, right enough, but he is no fighting-man.”

This was the pouch containing my writings upon the Hamalese secrets of the vollers.

“You and Captain Ehren are charged with delivering that paper safely into the hands of the emperor himself. If you have any difficulty in getting to see him, as you may very well have, then ask for Delia, Princess Majestrix, and say you come from me.”

He laughed. He was back to the affairs of Kregen once more, the reflections prompted by the death of Nath put into their proper perspective. “Aye, my Prince! A messenger from Dray Prescott, Prince Majister of Vallia, has a sure passport to the glorious presence of the Princess Majestrix!”

I knew that, and it worried me at times. If an enemy said he came from me, and so wormed his way close to Delia . . . I had no ring to give as a talisman, for I detest wearing rings upon my fingers, or anywhere else, for that matter, even in my ear as a lusty sailorman should. I could only say to Insur ti Fotor that he should say certain words that would ensure a speedy passage through the fusty formalities and dry protocol of the palace.

Strom Diluvon could fly an airboat and they all piled aboard the larger of the two craft. I piloted the smaller back, keeping a watch. We landed near the village and went the rest of the way on foot.

The first thing Hikdar Insur did was to retrieve the precious pouch from Endo.

Arrangements were quickly made. The Lamnian merchant paid out his Xilician sinvers to the chief man, Otbrinhan, and we took aboard dried fish, jars of water, and a supply of the gritty bread. A trading vessel threaded her way through this section of the islands once a month — that was the month of She of the Veils — coming from a sizable port town farther south. Otbrinhan was delighted.

“Now we can buy real bronze plates for the dome of our temple!” he cried, thumping his tail.

The village must catch enough fish not only to subsist but to sell for other essential supplies. I glanced up at the rock-built temple with its whitewashed walls. The dome, a mud-packed affair over cunning groinings, gleamed whitely in the suns. If this village could cover that dome with bronze that gleamed and sparkled — what a great triumph that would be! What a victory over other less fortunate villages on other islands nearby! What a marvelous tribute to Havil the Green!

I have seen the great temple of Havil the Green in Ruathytu with its three great green domes. I try not to let sentiment overcome sense in my appreciation of the artifacts of those who call themselves my enemies. I had then a great detestation for the Green, as you know. Havil the Green was the great god of the state religion of Hamal. Yes, I knew with joy that the truer and more enlightened religion of Opaz, the glorious twinned spirit, was creeping into Hamal. And, too, I knew the loathsome cult of Lem the Silver Leem, with its dark ritual and bloodletting and sacrifice and lusting, grew daily stronger there. But, even I, Dray Prescott, who was a Krozair of Zy, must admit that the great temple of Havil the Green in Ruathytu was a most imposing affair.

“I wish you well of it, Otbrinhan.”

“May Havil the Green shine upon you, Notor, all the rest of your days!”

I did not smile, but the grimace would have been perfectly in keeping. This little Yuccamot, Otbrinhan, did not know, could not know, that since my baptism in the Sacred Pool of the River Zelph in far Aphrasöe I was assured of a thousand years of life. I gave him the formal salutation and took myself off. I found the waso-Hikdar, Insur ti Fotor, checking the supplies being loaded into the patrol voller.

“How long, Insur, have you been in the rank of waso-Hikdar?”

“Three seasons, my Prince.”

I pondered. I had no real influence in the navy of Vallia. Oh, I knew old Sonomon Barcash, the Kov of Ava. He was a highly placed admiral, what the Vallians called Jen Admiral.^[3] He was not the Lord High Admiral, what the Vallians dub the Hyr Jen Admiral. But he owed me a favor. And, of a surety, this fine young man, Insur ti Fotor, deserved promotion in his rank.

With a scrap of cloth and cuttlefish ink I wrote a short note, using the uncial style, to Sonomon Barcash, calling his attention to waso-Hikdar Insur, and suggesting he should be promoted at least to shiv- and rightfully to shebov-Hikdar.^[4]

I did not tell Insur what I had written. He stowed the cloth away with the leather pouch. To anticipate myself, I learned subsequently that between them, Captain Ehren and Hikdar Insur had made a copy of my writing concerning the secrets of the Hamalese vollers. Each man carried a copy. And, too, I learned that when my Delia discovered all and heard of my wishes concerning Insur, she put herself out, and, lo!, Insur ti Fotor became not a shiv-, not a shebov-, but an ord-Hikdar! Such is the glory and womanly wonder of my Delia, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia of Delphond!

When I told Captain Ehren that it would please me if among two or three others of his men I thought should be rewarded, he would promote Wersting Rogahan to so-Deldar, the good captain made a face.

“Truly, my Prince, that rascal has the luck of five-handed Eos-Bakchi! Very well, I will thus promote him in due deference to your wishes.” Then he boomed his gusty laugh and finished: “Aye, Majister! Rogue he is, but he deserves the rewards of his impertinence!”

Insur carried another scrap of cloth, written in cuttlefish ink, and this called my Delia’s attention to Captain Lars Ehren himself. She knew as well as I the importance of loyal friends in the conflicts that lay ahead within Vallia. Captain Ehren was almost at the highest rank of Hikdar; I told Delia he should be promoted Jiktär, and this matter, being a weighty one, would demand all her skill. In the event, she contrived it, beautifully. Lars Ehren jumped the first grade within the Jiktär rank, becoming a dwa-Jiktär. This pleased me when it was told me, later . . . much later . . .

Between that happy time and now there lay a great many adventures, and foolish escapades, and much danger, as you shall hear.

Preparations were made, the route planned, the vollers checked. I wished to leave before sunset. This was accomplished. If you do not understand that I fully appreciated how selfish I was being in this distribution of favors, then you have listened with half an ear to these adventures. I drew a great and selfish satisfaction from giving favors and promotions to my friends. I do not make friends lightly, and I

value them. Time has little of consequence in this matter. Perhaps this delight in assisting those who assist me is a weakness, a kind of insurance, a fear, deep and inexpressible, that they may turn and rend me. I do not know. But I like to think it pure selfishness on my part, and not dread of the unknowable future.

Captain Ehren expostulated, red in the face, waving his arms.

“But, Prince! Surely you will return to Vallia with us!”

“Not so, Captain Lars. You have what I have already discovered about the vollers, safely stowed away in the pouch. But that is only the half of it. I must discover what this cayferm is. I think, maybe, the wise men of Vallia may not know, either. And it is essential that Vallia build her own vollers. You have seen what these vast and marvelous skyships of the Hamalians can do. Well! When they attack us in Vallia — and I say *when* and *notif* — *we* must be ready for them. You must fly to Vondium and lay all before the emperor. For me — it is Hamal and a little bladesmanship.”

Puzzled he might be, loyal he most certainly was.

“If this is your command, Prince, then may the Invisible Twins witness it is my duty to obey. I do so.” He took himself aboard the patrol flier. “Remberee, my Prince. Remberee!”

“Remberee!” I called back. “Remberee!”

CHAPTER SIX

Hamun ham Farthytu returns to Ruathytu

I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, Lord of Strombor and Krozair of Zy, trod once more the marble paving stones of the great city of Ruathytu, capital of the Empire of Hamal.

Once more I was Hamun ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley.

Yes, I have borne many names, for good or ill, but I confess that this alias of Hamun ham Farthytu, despite the promise I had given to the dying Amak, old Naghan, weighed on me. For one thing, to act the part of a simpleton, a weakling, never came easily. I had to put on an imbecilic expression, and force my corrugated old features into smiles, and never once let that fierce dark passion surge to the extent even of laying my hand upon the hilt of thraxter or rapier. I went directly to my inn, *The Kyr Nath and the Fifi*.

The Lamnian merchant, Lorgad Endo, had responded with a warm generosity, if an untypical merchant's way, when I had applied for the loan of three deldys. He had passed over six of the golden coins of Havilfar at once, without demur. I had insisted on giving him a piece of cloth on which, with cuttlefish ink, I had scribbled a note to Delia, telling her to repay the six deldys and to reimburse Koter Endo for the sinvers he had expended in the Yuccamot village on our behalf. This she did.

So it was that I had been able to buy a decent gray shirt, a blue pair of trousers, a pair of somewhat cheap leather boots, and a flamboyant green jacket, with a scrap of dubious fur trimming, to sling like a hussar's pelisse about my shoulders. My rapier and main-gauche were by now familiar weapons in the sacred quarter of Ruathytu, where the young bloods had taken up this foreign style with the same bungling enthusiasm they had taken up sleeth racing.

Well, you may imagine some of my mixed feelings when I turned into that narrow alleyway in the sacred quarter, the Alley of Cloves, and so walked up to the inn, where it leaned in a bower of trees below the

scarped embankment above. That large tree by the balcony of my window had seen many surreptitious nighttime exits and entrances, when I had been spying in Ruathytu seeking the volder secrets.

The last time I had left here, discreetly clad, acting the part of Bagor ti Hemlad, I had not envisioned that before I returned to this lodging so much would come to pass: that I would find the secrets, be taken up as a thief, work as a slave, and then be taunted and tortured and made mock of by that she-leem, Queen Thyllis of Hamal. She was one queen who had opened an account with me for which the final reckoning remained still to be made.

I turned in at the door and went up to my room. As I pushed the door open I saw a pretty little Fristle fifi, her silvery fur electric with passion, her eyes blazing, her arms about a hairy, bulky, bulbous-nosed, shambling barrel of a man, writhing and tossing on the bed.

“Nulty!” I bellowed so that the drapes fluttered.

Absolute turmoil!

The Fristle girl flew off the bed, her long legs flashing, her blouse, of apple green, snapping even more buttons. She was remarkably pretty, as to their fame are so many of these young cat-girls, with their slanting eyes and pretty fur and delicate whiskers and delightful feline outlines. “Master!”

Nulty was beside himself, and prostrate on the floor, and shooing the fifi away, and dragging the bedclothes straight, and tidying the room, and dragging up a sturm-wood chair, and bringing out a brass tray with a bottle of Malab’s Blood and remembering I did not care for that deep purple wine and so rushing in with a fresh squat bottle of Yellow Uction and pouring a glass, and offering me a brass dish of palines, and—

“Stop!” I roared. “Nulty, you rascal! Stand and let me look at you!”

“Master!” said Nulty. He came up to my chest, was broad and bulky, with a nose so bulbous I had to restrain myself from seizing for a shonage, a great shambling fellow with shock hair — and yet with shrewd sharp eyes for all that. He knew I was not the Amak of Paline Valley, for he had served old Naghan, and his son, Hamun. Rather, he knew I was not Hamun ham Farthytu. He knew my name was Dray Prescott. But by the right of a dying bequest and a promise, he knew I was, in very truth, the Amak of Paline Valley.

“Your friend, Nulty,” I said. “I have no desire to stand in the way of a beautiful friendship. But I am hungry and thirsty for better fare than wine! Fetch a meal from the landlord. And, Nulty — tea! Tea!”

“Aye, master,” said Nulty, the manservant I had acquired as Amak of Paline Valley. He scuttled off, and I caught a few choice phrases about how Havil the Green ran this world and how someone else could run it a damned sight better; that someone, he let Havil the Green remain in no doubt whatever, being none other than Nulty himself. I felt my lips move, and realized I was smiling. Nulty, this shambling barrel of an apim, was my body-servant and my friend. Also he was a Hamalian and therefore, as I was Prince Majister of Vallia, a most powerful and dangerous potential enemy.

What rot these nationalities are, to be sure!

He brought in the tea — that glorious fragrant Kregan tea — and a plate of choice vosk rashers, and momolams, with taylynes, and a vast squish pie with thick cream. I set to, and bellowed to him to draw up a chair and tuck in as well, and so between mouthfuls he had the story I wished him to know.

“No, Nulty. I have not been back to Paline Valley.” And: “No, Nulty, I did not go to the place where I went after the duel.” And: “More tea, Nulty, you great fambly, for I’m parched!”

I told him I had been off on a holiday during which I had lost everything gambling. That was so eminently believable it answered all his queries. I had set the stolen flier onto a due eastern course and let her go free and by now she would be well out into the Ocean of Clouds if a storm did not bring her down, for she’d been of that variety of volder susceptible to wind pressure.

After that I’d walked and ridden partway in an amith-drawn tracked vehicle, and then walked. I had looked at the city of Ruathytu with its long-striding aqueducts bringing crystal-clear water from the hills to north and south, its many domed temples, its powerful walls, and its thronged bridges, the Bridge of Sicce with its towered houses crowded above the Black River. And, too, I had looked at the grim castle on its narrow crag just east of the junction of the two rivers, the castle of Hanitcha the Harrower that men called the Hanitchik. And, you may be sure, I had not failed to look most malevolently at the tall palace on its artificial lake island, the palace of Hammabi el Lamma, where the diabolical Queen Thyllis ruled with such evil and terrible power.

All Nulty said was: “When do we return to Paline Valley, Amak? For I am grown weary of this great city.”

“What? And where will you find a Fristle fifi there?”

“I can live without them. No wife, no children for me, Amak. I served Amak Naghan, and his son, faithfully. Now you are returned safely, may Havil the Green be praised—”

“Yes, well, as to that, there is nothing in Paline Valley to which to return, is there?”

“We can rebuild! We can find people willing to go to start a new life. I have made friends. There are many guls, aye, and clums, also, who would leap with joy at the chance to start a fresh life.”

That must be true. There were many slaves in Hamal’s Ruathytu, Zair knew. And one miserable step above them, different only in that they called themselves free men, were the oozing masses of clums. Above them, better off, as craftsmen, with rights under the laws, were the guls. All these working-class people groaned under oppressions and taxes and iniquities. If a gul by his daily work as, for instance, a cobbler, employing a clum or two and a few slaves, made a couple of sinvers a day, the strict government of Hamal would relieve him of one of them by way of taxes. Yet I, an Amak, a low rank of noble, paid only ten percent in income tax.

On upward through the ranks of nobility, the nobles paid less and less. An Elten paid nine and a Rango paid eight percent. A Strom paid five percent. A Trylon paid four percent. A Vad paid two percent. A Kov just did not pay at all. Truly, the rewards of nobility were very great in Hamal!

Despite that I lived on a world four hundred light-years from the planet of my birth, and was wont to swagger about clad in a scarlet breechclout, a sword in my fist — all these bright cities with their fountains and their aqueducts, their armies and their air fleets, had to be paid for. Nowhere in the whole universe, I judge, is a man free of income tax.

“There is a gul with a shop just off the Kyro of the Horters,” went on Nulty. [\[5\]](#) “An honest fellow, I think, by name of Lon the Honey. His brother keeps hives outside the city walls and Lon sells the honey. He would be useful in Paline Valley. And there is a blacksmith who was condemned to be flogged

unjustly, master, unjustly. And two sisters, seamstresses, who can weave the most wonderful cloth and are tired of making dresses for Horteras. And—”

“Cease, Nulty!”

I could see what he had been doing. He had been sure I was dead this time. He was a shrewd fellow, as I have said, and loyal. Now he must have conceived his loyalty as extending to Paline Valley itself in the absence of the Amak. That fine estate far over against the Mountains of the West had been raided and destroyed by the wild men from beyond those mountains in the eternal frontier fighting that went on, on those borders of Hamal. With a new people, free men and women who owed no slave-status to anyone, he could start anew. Suddenly I knew this was the right thing to do. I had promised to make the name of Hamun ham Farthytu renowned in Ruathytu, and I had not done so. I had acted the part of the foppish buffoon, too feeble to grasp a sword in earnest, even though I had wounded, as though by accident, a Strom in a duel. Duels were regulated by the laws, a part and parcel of the raffish, exciting, foppish, decadent life of the sacred quarter.

“Nulty,” I said. He looked up quickly at my tone. “You have done right. You will collect all the people you know. I am sure you have picked well. You will no longer be my body-servant, you will be Crebent of Paline Valley.” A Crebent stands rather in the light of a bailiff or castellan, a trusted man who commands and operates estates, castles, industries, for his master. He looked at me, and I did not know, at first, if joy or sorrow was the predominant emotion he felt.

Then: “I thank you, master. I shall be a loyal Crebent. I joy in that and in your trust in me.” He scowled. “But, by Havil the Green, I wish you were returning yourself!”

“That cannot be. You know, Nulty. But I fancy we have nowhere near enough money to finance a return.”

“No, Amak.”

“In that case, Nulty, I really think that Hamun ham Farthytu will have to forget what he told you at the shrine of Beng Salter.”

A fierce and unholy satisfaction lit Nulty’s hairy face then. He brushed his mop of hair back and glared with joy upon me. “And we will inscribe the name of ham Farthytu on a fine marble monument in the Palace of Names!”

“We will, Nulty.”

This we did, in all pomp and ceremony, after the events I am about to relate. In addition to Nulty’s clear excitement at recruiting people to go to Paline Valley, a long distance, and there put the estates back into order, I sensed that these people who would go with him, guls and clums, were also quite anxious — to pitch it no higher — to leave Ruathytu at this moment. The army would be out recruiting in full force, soon. There were many of the poorer folk who would be willingly admitted to the army, where previously that career would have been closed to them. Mind you, I was realistic enough to realize that no gul, let alone a clum, stood any chance of making promotion past the rank of so-Deldar, and that only after he was extraordinarily lucky and had survived battles enough to have made a more fortunately placed man an ord-Hikdar at the least.

“How much money do we have left, Nulty?”

He made a face and went and fetched the lenken chest with the brass hinges and locks. He took out four golden deldys, five silver sinvers, and a leather bag of obs.

“Is that all?”

“You took everything with you, Amak, when you went away.”

“So I did. And I sold the voller, too.”

Nulty was not to know that all that money had been used to bribe my way to the secrets of the vollers. I cleared my throat and lifted the cup and the tea was cold. I could use that fact to clear the moment, and I bellowed: “Nulty! Tea, Nulty, tea!”

“Yes, master!”

So that was what he thought of my gambling habits.

I quite agreed with him.

The plan, then, when it was formed, came out of necessity and vicissitude. It was not foolproof, but it was serviceable.

Unlike some men who would have jumped up right away and gone roaring off to find their friends of the sacred quarter and start the ball rolling, I sat and drank the tea Nulty brought. No tea, and especially Kregan tea, can be taken lightly or without due thought.

The fates of nations hung on my actions here in Hamal — this is true — and yet I spent time working a petty little gamble in order to send a pack of folk a bare step above slaves to a distant estate to renovate it. Truly, I wondered if I was quite sane, and fretted over just how I could explain my foolish actions to Delia.

Would she say that a true Vallian would consign all these crampes of Hamalians to the Ice Floes of Sicce? Somehow, I thought my Delia would not say that, would understand what I was doing and applaud.

Thus with Delia uppermost in my mind — the most usual and loving place in my thoughts, in any case — I said to Nulty: “Listen and mark me well. You take these new people. They are free, you tell me. Well, there will be no slaves in Paline Valley. No slaves, ever again. You understand?”

“I hear you, master.” He rubbed his ear. “I cannot say I understand. Some work is hard for a man, and it is fitting that a slave should do this work.”

“However fitting it is, there will be no slaves in Paline Valley.”

“As you say, Amak.” Then he fixed his shrewd eyes on me. “And if we are raided again and we take some prisoners. Must we then not put them to slavery, but kill them all?”

Of course, that was an old ethical poser.

“If they cannot be exchanged they will be ransomed. If not, you must talk to them and set them free and promise them if they come again they will surely be slain.”

“It seems to me you store up trouble against the future.”

“By Krun! I know whereof I speak!”

“Yes, master.”

I wasn't going to apologize to him, for you know my views on that. Instead, I said: “Make sure you enlist a good force of flyers, mirvol men in preference to fluttrell riders. The old Amak had a fine mirvol aerial cavalry.”

“Aye, master.”

“I am going out now. Rustle out some fine fancy clothes, lots of lace and gewgaws. The Hamun ham Farthytu those ninnies of the sacred quarter know will walk among them again, in all his foppish finery, for the last time.”

I dressed in drippings of lace and bows, silken ribbons, fancy blue trousers, frilled white shirt, and a glaring green jacket with a scarlet cape thrown over all. I looked terrible. I wore one of these hard black Spanish hats, with a narrow black leather under the back of my head. My boots had been spat into a polished luster by Nulty. I waved a kerchief in my right hand and held a beribboned balass cane in my left. As I say, I looked a foppish fool.

But I buckled on one of those fine rapiers Delia had given me, and its matching left-hand dagger, the Jiktar and the Hikdar.

So I sallied forth to meet again Rees the lion-man, and dear chinless Chido, and all the others of my acquaintance among that raffish set of the sacred quarter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wersting versus manhound

The sacred quarter of Ruathytu is a twisting maze of alleys penned between the walls of the villas secluded in their grounds or balanced upon crags and heights within the city. There are boulevards intersecting with colonnades and lines of shops. There is a huge open square, a piazza with colonnades on three or four levels, drenched with flowers and greenery, laced with the tinkle of waterfalls, the great Kyro of the Vadvars. At the eastern end of the quarter on its V-shaped spit of land rises the three-domed Great Temple of Havil the Green. Under one of those domes is situated the Palace of Names. The name of ham Farthytu would be engraved in marble there before I left Ruathytu. The sacred quarter contains salles d'armes, the dueling halls, theaters, drinking dens, fighting arenas for the smaller but no less bloody encounters, tavern after tavern, and dopa dens. In short, the sacred quarter is a brawling, colorful, and vibrant section of a city, and just such a quarter is to be found in any great city of Kregen. Here in Hamalese Ruathytu, though, all the energy does not add up to a great shout of good living, of a zest for life. The Hamalians are a glum folk, as I have said, and they need perhaps a little too much of the stimulation of the Jikhorkdun, the great amphitheater, to bring a glow to their sallow faces.

I feel I do them an injustice, but give me the folk of Sanurkazz, or Vondium, or some of Zenicce, any time!

Looking back, I find it incredible in these accounts that I have not described in any detail the great city of

Vondium, capital of Vallia, or, come to that, my own capital city of Valkanium in Valka.

By Zair! How we could sing in *The Fleeced Ponsho* in Sanurkazz, or in my high hall of Esser Rarioch in Valkanium!

As I walked through the labyrinthine ways of the sacred quarter, heading for roistering haunts, I felt the familiar pang that I had not seen for long and long my two rogues of oar-comrades, Nath and Zolta. They were far away in the Eye of the World. They must believe me dead. How I beseeched Zair, the puissant red-sun deity, that they should both still live and I would see them once again, and soon!

If you can picture me then as the very excrescence of a dandy, beribboned and frilled, mincing along with my bedecked cane, a pomander in my kerchief to my nose, then how would my two rascally oar-comrades, Zolta and Nath, see me? They would howl and the tears would come to their eyes and they would fall about holding their guts. “What, Pur Dray!” they’d yodel. “Is this the rig for hauling at the sweeps of a Zair-forgotten Magdaggian swifter, with those crampths of Magdag overlords a-whipping your back?” And they’d be off after a drink and a wench, roaring their mirth. I felt hot as the memories gushed up. How we had fought and roved and drunk there as we reived across the inner sea! Truly, I missed much. I was still a Krozair of Zy, and this meant very much to me, as you know. I would trade the Kovs and the Stroms, aye, and the Prince Majisters, too, to be still a Krozair of Zy — and this my Delia knew, also.

The first person I met of my acquaintances as I paused outside the tavern with the two Fristle fifis as signboard, *The Two Fifis*, was Nath Tolfeyr. He saw me and there was a visible struggle in his face to retain that indolent, elegant posture of indifference that is the mark of the dandy of the sacred quarter.

“Why, Amak Hamun! By Havil! You are a stranger.”

“No longer a stranger, Nath. What fun is there to be had these days in the quarter?”

He looked offensively resigned to an ill fate. His long arms and legs moved with elegance as he paced by my side. He wore the rapier and dagger, as did most of the young bloods affecting the new ways, but he was skilled in their use.

“This devilish war, Hamun. It drains the fun out of life.”

I forbore to inquire why he was not with the army or the air service. I had no wish to pick a fight with him, for all that I knew he was secretly addicted to the ways of Lem the Silver Leem.

“Have you news of Rees, or Chido, or Casmás the Deldy?”

“You have not heard? No, if you have been away, then you would not have. Rees’s regiment was in a battle. I think we won, although to think otherwise is not healthy, I assure you.”

“Tell me, Nath, and quickly!”

He looked surprised at my tone.

“Rees has been sorely wounded.”

For all that Rees the lion-man was supposed to be an enemy, I felt a pang of sorrow.

“Is this wound serious?”

“Enough for him to be invalidated at home. He will recover, so the doctors say. But he is pretty useless at present”

“I am most sorry to hear. And Chido?”

Nath Tolfeyr laughed. “Chido went off his zorca and fell head over heels into a swill bin. He broke a rib in the vosk swill, which is typical of Chido, as you must admit.”

The thought of chinless, goggle-eyed, good-natured Chido falling headfirst into a bucket of swill could not fail to amuse me. Chido ham Thafey, who held the courtesy rank of Amak, and who would become a Vad when his father died, was one of those addle-pated, good-natured, nincompoopish young men of the world who somehow, despite their incongruities, never fail to raise an affectionate chuckle.

“Typical of Chido, I admit. Is Rees at home on his estates of the Golden Wind, or—”

“He is here, in his villa, with Chido. They both lie there roaring at each other all day, cursing for their ills.”

Well, it made an amusing picture, although I knew that Rees should never have led his regiment of zorcamen off to war, for he had not been fully recovered at the time. I bid a polite farewell to Nath Tolfeyr as we turned into the Boulevard of the Goldsmiths.

“I am for the baths of the nine, and the Dancing Rostrum, Hamun. Will you not join me?”

“I thank you for your invitation, Nath. I am for Rees and Chido.”

“Fare you well with Havil, then.”

He made that a mocking parting. Had he said, “Lem go with you,” he would have been more sincere, but the cult of Lem flourished in secret here in Ruathytu, as did the religion of Opaz. The way was not far to Rees’s villa, and as I went I reflected that the state religion of Havil obsessed many people here, and yet the slighter religions of Werl-am-Nardith and Blessed Xerenike the Open-Handed were tolerated and had their own small temples in various quarters of the city. What the religions of the guls and the clums were, I did not then know with any coherent understanding, although they used the names of Kuerden the Merciless and Kaerlan the Merciful. And as for the slaves, they might practice what devil rites they chose, brought from their own country, provided they paid lip service to Havil the Green.

Rees’s small villa was as I last remembered it. I was announced and went in, and stopped short in the doorway, wanting to burst out laughing.

My two friends, Rees and Chido, occupied beds set side by side. The beds were equipped with wheels that they might be taken to the balcony for fresh air. Between the two beds a table had been erected and a Jikaida board occupied the table, with a sprawl of playing pieces. Rees was in the act of hurling a blue piece — it was a King’s Paktun — at Chido, who was drawing the sheets up over his bright chinless face, and crying out: “Mercy, Rees, mercy! I’ll not take your Pallan, then, but it isn’t fair, Rees, it deuced isn’t fair!”

And, being Chido, he made of his R’s all W’s, so that he called Rees “Wees.”

“Of course it ain’t fair, you great fambly! But you took my Pallan because I was looking at the nurse as

she bent over, and you'll ruin the game! And I'm not in the mood to start another. So finish this one."

"But I did finish it with your captured Pallan!"

"You roaring great onker!" bellowed Rees, and he hurled the King's Paktun, and Chido let out a yell and vanished completely beneath the bedclothes.

I said, "Is this how the returning heroes fight their battles all over again?"

"Hamun!" they both yelled, and Chido popped up for air.

Neither could get out of bed, and so I went across and we shook hands in the Hamalese way, and fell at once into animated conversation. We talked about the war and their experiences, whereat we laughed again at Chido's misfortune with the swill bucket. I did not speak of the time I had employed swill buckets and vosks to good purpose in the Black Marble Quarries of Zenicce. So we prattled on and wine was brought and we talked and talked. None of it matters much, now; it was all trite inconsequential stuff. But, by Krun, it was good to see these two again!

Their hurts were mending. Chido was strapped up, and Rees, for all his bellowing and roaring in true lion-man fashion, would have been in great pain but for the forest of acupuncture needles stuck in him. Moxybustion was being used and fragrant herbs burned at the ends of the acupuncture needles.

They had been posted to the northern front, after all, and had sailed for the island of Pandahem where the forces of Hamal were pushing on eastward after crossing the central mountains at the most westerly point. Rees's regiment of zorcas had been drawn up, and I could imagine their smart alignment and their glittering spears, for Rees had had them trained well. But, as I had told him in a roundabout way, his men were not sufficiently trained. And a zorca, that marvelous four-legged saddle-animal, so close-coupled, so filled with fire and spirit, is not the mount for a shoulder-to-shoulder, crunching charge in the heat of battle. Rees had put in his charge when ordered to do so by the Chuktar commanding. They had come to grief on the spears of the Pandaheem.

"Damned cullish knaves from Iyam," growled Rees. "They wouldn't stand. They drew us on and stuck their damned spears in my beautiful zorcas. And then a regiment of Havil-cursed totrixes — although they weren't quite like totrixes, really — took us in flank and rear. We went over like bowling pins." I sighed.

What he had encountered was a regiment of Pandaheem hersanys, heavy, ugly, six-legged brutes, with thick coats of chalky-white hair, hard of mouth and mean of eye.

"This is no time to talk of that, Rees," I said briskly. "Or of Chido swimming in vosk-swill. You must get better, and quickly. Then, perhaps, you may look a little more kindly upon a regiment of totrixes, after all."

I shouldn't have been saying this to an enemy, Opaz knew. But Rees settled that treachery on my part by booming out: "No totrixes for me, Hamun, my Bladesman! I've spoken to old Kov Pereth. He's agreed that I shall reform the regiment. Then, we shall see."

Kov Pereth was the Pallan in charge of the Northern Front, commanding the Army of Pandahem, the Hamalian army, that is. I had brought a basket of fresh fruit with me, although I guessed Rees would not lack, and I covered any awkwardness by bringing this forward and myself taking up a heaping pile of palines on my palm.

We ate for a space, and then Rees said, “You will not ride with us, when we ride out again, Hamun?”

“Not while you use a regiment of zorcas.”

“Well, stick to your confounded totrixes, then!”

“It is not that I like the totrix. I do not. But the beast has his uses.”

A doctor bustled in, one Doctor Larghos the Needle — they bear that name so often, of course — and hustled me out with the fussy movements of a mother chicken.

I shouted over my shoulder that I would call the next day, and then I was pushed out, and an acupuncture needle, ready in Larghos the Needle’s hand, nearly took an eye out.

All this ribaldry was all very well. It was not only a duty I felt I owed friends, it was a human touch. But it would not set my scheme afoot. And, rickety though that was, and simple, for I tend to the simple although I can be devious if I have to, it was all I had to gain the money needed to set up the new people in Paline Valley.

Now you must remember that Rees and Chido both thought of me as just such a foolish nincompoop as Chido was, say, but without even his skill with the rapier and left-hand dagger. I had wounded an adversary in a duel, as they imagined by accident, but my stock as a duelist and Bladesman was nil. When I ran across other people I knew they were universally patronizing, or supercilious, or downright rude. I ignored them all. I was after just one man — and, of course, you who have listened to this story of mine will know just who that one man was:

Leotes ti Ponthieu.

The aristocrats of Ruathytu had taken up the rapier and in their fumbling ways they wished to learn the tricks of fighting with the Jiktar and the Hikdar, and so they imported sword-masters, mainly from Zenicce. This Leotes, as I knew, was a very great swordsman indeed, a true Bladesman, one who had earned his living as a bravo-fighter in Zenicce, and was now coining the money teaching the young bloods here in Ruathytu.

He had fought a duel with Rees, wounding him, under the orders of Rees’s enemy, Vad Garnath. Leotes had been Garnath’s second. Garnath had pleaded an inability to fight, had succeeded in convincing the judges, and so Leotes had fought . . .

But, first, I had to find Casmás the Deldy. This fat and unctuous money-lender had been deprived by me of his unwilling bride. But he did not know that. Once all this pettifogging intrigue had been settled, then I would take a certain amount of the money I intended to win and so bribe my way again to the secrets of the cayferm, that mysterious non-substance that went into the paol silver box, thereby giving a voller that magical power to ride the upper levels of the empty air.

It was all worked out, you see, all planned. Well, man sows and Opaz reaps, as they say on Kregen.

Now that I was no longer under the protection of Rees, the Trylon of the Golden Wind, for he lay abed sorely wounded, I found men anxious to be unkind to me. As my part still called for me to screw up my face into that imbecilic grin of good nature and to take no offense at the most blatant affront, these men passed by without a challenge. I did not want a score of fights on my hand. I wanted the one big killing — and I hasten to add I mean killing in the gambler’s sense and not in the Bladesman’s more bloody

meaning.

Although the House of Ponthieu in Zenicce was still a bitter foe to my own House of Strombor, yet I had no wish to slay this Leotes ti Ponthieu. A little prick with the rapier, a drop or two of blood, and the bout would have been won and the Hamalese dueling laws respected. A single drop of blood would be enough to prove I had won.

Walking circumspectly, for I had already had to swallow down my anger as dandies and fops made mock of me, I came to the respectable tavern, *The Golden Talu*. Here had been the scene where I had publicly failed that remarkably beautiful girl, in the looking-and-not-touching style, Rosala of Match Urt, when she had sought my aid. Afterward I had, with the twinkle of rapier-play under moonlight, rescued her from Casmus the Deldy. Now she was safely away, I hoped, with my own people in Djanduin, of which wonderful country I was king.

Neither Vad Garnath nor Leotes ti Ponthieu sat in the elegantly appointed rooms of *The Golden Talu*, sipping fragrant Kregan tea. There were others there I would avoid. I saw the two Stroms, friends with each other and detested by many more folk than I alone, Strom Lart ham Thordan, whom I had wounded in the duel, as though by accident, and Strom Hormish na Rivensmot, whose boorishness had first prompted me to this present disguise of a foppish fool.

I ignored them. Poor creatures both, they would have instantly baited me, secure in their knowledge that the Trylon Rees lay sick abed, and secure, also, in their knowledge that either could dispatch that onker Amak Hamun with the sword in a duel at any time. Then I would have had to be unpleasant with them, shedding my disguise, and Vad Garnath and his schemes would have slipped away.

I ran this Vad Garnath to earth, at last, as he was shouting and beating his fist on the arm of his chair, one of a disgusting crowd taking huge enjoyment from a variation of the blood sports of Ruathytu. In a private arena — it was not over-large and seated perhaps fifty people in luxury — the central sanded area witnessed the mortal combat between wersting and manhound.

Manhound versus wersting!

Yes, I, Dray Prescott, admit the thought made the blood jog more rapidly through my veins.

Those vicious black-and-white-striped hunting dogs are, indeed, ferocious for their size and weight. But a manhound! A jiklo, a human being, an apim, so trained from birth, and his parents structurally adapted generation by generation, that he runs on all fours, with a streaming clotted mane of hair flowing out behind, his nails grown into ripping claws, his teeth sharp and jagged! Pricked of ear, the jiklo, savage of eye, with a squashed pug nose that scents its prey with unerring accuracy! Human beings, jiklos, but hunting dogs in their feral nature, their cunning hunting skills, their primordial barbarism! I had met the Manhounds of Antares before. I had run from them and I had battled them with a wooden stave. There yet remained a score outstanding with the manhounds.

I stood in the shadows at the rear of the private arena, my status as an Amak and my foppish clothes securing my entry, with Elten Nath of Maharlad allowing his chamberlain to take my golden deldy and to order up a Fristle slave girl with a cup of wine for me.

“Who do you fancy, Amak Hamun?” Elten Nath laughed easily. He was rancid with fat, jowls sagging, thinning hair lank over a shining skull. He made a good thing out of this private arena of his, here deep within his villa in the sacred quarter.

“How did you come by a jiklo, Elten Nath?”

He gestured. “The Queen, whose name be revered, sometimes allows a private Horter to buy a jiklo from her. She is thinking of breeding them herself, you know, instead of importing them.”

The noises from the arena, a succession of howls and ululations from the wersting, and a staccato succession of spits and snarls from the manhound, grew so that conversation became difficult. I forced myself to watch the spectacle. Vad Garnath sat with his companion, Leotes, amid a gang of cronies in the front row of seats. Since Garnath had employed Leotes and Leotes had proved himself a killer and a swordsman without peer in Ruathytu, it was a wise thing to remain on friendly terms with the Vad. His dark hair was combed and jeweled with brilliants, his cheeks were painted, his rings flashed against his very white fingers, and he laughed a great deal.

I will not weary you with details of the fight between the wersting and the jiklo. It was bloody and savage and horrible in the extreme. Truth to tell, there is much more to say of the manhounds than this single encounter in the arena, as you shall hear.

The werstings are most ferocious. The manhound was covered in rips and scratches, an eye torn out, his hair all clogged and matted with blood. The noise spurted up, horrific, spiteful, a decadent accompaniment to a decadent spectacle. The wersting — well, what was left of him — was swept up and carried off in four baskets. Each basket dripped dark blood through the wicker.

“By Lem!” shouted Vad Garnath, sweating, shaking, a silken kerchief mopping his thick face. “A brave sport, Elten Nath! A fine showing! You are to be congratulated.”

Elten Nath of Maharlad smirked.

“I am pleased you enjoyed my poor efforts, Vad. We are thinking of matching the manhound against a chavonth.”

“Capital, my dear Nath, capital. Make sure you let me know and reserve me this excellent seat.”

“It shall be done.”

“By Lem!” cried Vad Garnath again. “This makes life worth the living!”

He swore by Lem, still officially proscribed, here in this vile company. I moved down toward his seat.

He saw me.

He stared. Then he threw back his head, the sweat running down the creases, the gems brilliant in his hair, and he laughed.

“May the all-glorious Lem witness what we have here! The Amak of Paline Valley! The poltroon! Now that his protector, Rees the Infamous, slugs abed, this nulsh crawls to me to beg my overlordship! By Lem! But it is a rich jest!”

I said, “The Tylon Rees lies abed because he is sore wounded fighting his country’s battles.”

Garnath hooted at this. “Rees the lion-man, the forsworn? He ran from the battlefield, his tail between his legs. I know! He is a coward and a thief and an abomination in my sight!”

“Yet he is a man, Garnath, which you scarcely are.”

“What?” He surged up, astonished.

Leotes put a hand on his arm.

“I will spit him for you, Vad, if you wish it.”

I stared at Leotes ti Ponthieu.

“You could try, Bravo, you could try.”

“Ha! What is this? The mewling poltroon turning bantam cock?” Vad Garnath couldn’t believe his ears. The clustered nobles and Horters were listening, avid to see me rush upon my death.

“It is you who are the abomination, Garnath.”

“I — I am the Vad Garnath! Remember that, yetch!”

“You are the yetch.” I spoke in a low conversational tone, but everyone could hear. “You, Garnath the filth, are a boaster, a nulsh, a yetch, a rast, a cramp.” I stood there before him as he bloated and swelled with anger, the dark blood rushing to his face. “And this thing you hire to kill for you, this Leotes of infamy, he is a kleesh.”

I have before remarked how this word “kleesh” upsets the men of Kregen, although apparently not affecting me.

Leotes roared at me, ugly with passion, his face a single scarlet blob. I hit him on the nose, once. I said, “Arrange the duel as soon as you care. Vermin like you should be exterminated, along with your foul Lem.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Death of a Bladesman

Yes, it was petty, beneath a man’s dignity, selfish. But, all the same, it was damned liberating, I can tell you.

When, at last, I ran across Casmás the Deldy, the news had outrun me.

Night hung over Ruathytu, and the Maiden with the Many Smiles and the Twins glinted golden-pink reflections back from the ocher waters of the River Havilthytus and the black waters of the River Mak. Lights sparkled everywhere, and the link slaves escorted their parties of Horters and nobles through the streets. Casmás lived in the Shining Quarter, in the angle of the Walls of Kazlili and the Black River. A slight eminence arose here, around which the walls curved, and south of the walls and outside them lay the scattered shanty towns of the clums. The Shining Quarter lifted on its little hill, festooned with lights and waterfalls and graveled pathways; very secluded, very rich, a haven for the most wealthy class of Horters who were not yet nobles.

The way led from the sacred quarter westward through one of the numerous gates let into the old walls

and along a main east-west boulevard to the Kyro of the Horters. All this section of the city is laid out in parallel streets leading from the main avenues, a concentrated series of blocks of houses and apartments varying from the luxurious to the merely comfortable. This is the Horters' quarter. It is, of course, perfectly clear the word "quarter" is used in Ruathytu to describe a section of the city and not a numerical one fourth. The way led south from the Kyro of the Horters, where I stopped to partake of a cup of tea in one of the ever-open tea shops, for this is a weakness of mine, and then on over the Bridge of Nalgre the Penitent. Torchlights and cressets lit most of the way, and the blaze reflected back from the black waters sliding past below. I hurried on, turning sharp right over the bridge and following the paved embankment on the south side of the river.

Directly to my left towered the massive and noisy edifice of the Jikhorkdun of the Thoth. Not as large as the Great Jikhorkdun to the north, the Thoth Jikhorkdun is nonetheless a massive affair, the amphitheater capacious and endowed with kaidur barracks and beast pens and coy cages. The noise wallowed into the night sky: fierce yells, and the drumming din of thousands enjoying a nighttime spectacle by the lights of thousands of torches and lamps.

Up the incline into the Shining Quarter, under the trees and along the graveled paths, where the villas lay secluded with watchful werstings prowling, and then at last to Casmus' villa. I was barely in time. When last I had been here I had been rescuing Rosala, fighting off werstings and guards and enduring the passionate urgings of Rosala's maid, Paline.

Casmus was about to step into his preysany litter. The cloth was solidly picked out in gold embroideries, the hangings of silver, the embossed and carved ornaments of bronze. The two preysanys stood patiently, for they are a superior kind of calsanys, much used for this work. Casmus' guards mustered with links, ready to light and guard him on his way.

I shouted and ran up and a guard offered to stop me, so I took his stux away, gently, and poked my head between the curtains. Casmus looked up with his fat chins rolling.

"Amak Hamun! By Havil, we all thought you gone to the Ice Hoes of Sicce!"

"Lahal, Casmus. I am like to, in truth."

"Lahal, Amak — and I know! I have heard! I must hurry. The bets will already be being laid."

"Then," said I, jumping into the litter, "I will ride with you, Casmus. For there is much I must talk about."

"You have made your will, of course?"

The preysanys started as the chief guard yelled, and the whole cavalcade started off to retrace the journey I had just made. There was reason for Casmus thus living at a distance from the sacred quarter, for many a dandy had felt it too much of an infernal nuisance to walk that distance, to plead for an extension of credit, having already sold his zorca or sleeth and not having the wherewithal to hire a preysany litter or ride the amith-drawn trolleys.

"I hadn't given it a thought," I said. This Casmus in his unctuous and lubricious way owned very many of the young bloods, body and soul. Most of them went in fear of their fathers, the men with the titles and the money. Casmus was not called the Deldy for nothing. He would make a fat killing out of this encounter. "I have a scheme, Casmus, and you must play a part."

He listened to me with his fat eyelids crinkled and half shut. His pulse was on the money markets. I told

him I had been having lessons with the rapier and fancied my chance against Vad Garnath and wished to bet heavily on myself.

“If this is your wish, Amak.” The litter jounced over the cobbles, the link lights flaring beyond the curtains. The gold gleamed dully bright. “But how do you know Vad Garnath will fight?”

“As to Leotes—” I did not finish the sentence. I let Casmus believe I staked all on beating Garnath. In the end I convinced him to take many bets on my behalf.

“It will cost you a great deal of money, Amak Hamun. Can you honor your debts?”

“Yes. Paline Valley is not without resources.”

He grunted. We talked amiably then, and he told me he was engaged to marry a widow, whose husband had been slain while serving with the air squadrons fighting in Nivendrin, one of that tangled skein of kingdoms and Kovnates between the Shrouded Sea and the mighty River Os, often called He of the Commendable Countenance. “She is comfortable and fat and jolly, poor soul, and a Ranga. Her husband, the late Rango, was not a wealthy man.” Here Casmus spread his plump white hands with their freight of golden rings. “But, what would you? She has the title, I have the money. Very soon, I think, my dear Amak, the queen, whose name be revered, will see fit to issue my patent.”

“You are to be congratulated, Casmus,” I said. Well, at the least, a fat jolly widow was far more of a mate for him than the aloof beauty, Rosala of Match Urt. But I was not overmuch concerned with his affairs, and prompted him to tell me of wider events. It seemed that the ambitions of Hamal, ambitions I dubbed as insane, to extend its empire simultaneously to the south, the west, and across the sea to the north, had been temporarily checked. There was no joy in that for me, though; for the westward advance over the Mountains of the West had halted in frontier wrangling with the wild men. The southern advance over the River Os, which was the natural geographical southern boundary of Hamal, had been deliberately held up once the back of Nivendrin had been broken. A line would be established and held. Then the whole remaining weight of Hamalese power could be launched unchecked against the island of Pandahem.

Aye, I said to myself, and after Pandahem — Vallia!

“They are strange and ancient people, there below He of the Commendable Countenance,” said Casmus. He shook his fat head. “Old and uncommon beyond belief.” Well, I believed that to be true. All that vast area of Havilfar with its internecine warfare, its complex politics, its intermixed patterns of men and half-men, that whole area known, for obvious reasons, as the Dawn Lands, was terra incognita to me. One day, no doubt, I would visit and traverse those convoluted frontiers and journey among the relics of the civilizations of the Dawn.

But, here and now, a duel awaited me.

Casmus was of the opinion that the betting would be heavy. This surprised me. “But surely no one will give me a chance against Leotes?” Then I hurriedly corrected my slip. “Against Garnath?”

He chuckled. “Normally, no. But such is the fame of Leotes that there have been few duels in which he has been engaged since he wounded Rees. The betting will be on the artistry with which he dispatches you.” Casmus coughed, recollecting himself. “I crave your pardon, Amak. But the way of the world.” And again he spread those plump white hands.

“Well, bet on a victory for me, without side issues. If you discover anyone willing to bet on some fancy way in which Leotes may be seen off, let me know. I will accommodate you.”

He glanced at me obliquely. He was puzzled.

“I detect a change in you, Amak Hamun. You talk almost as though you expect to survive unscathed.”

“As far as the bets are concerned, Casmus, I shall win.”

He chose not to reply, dismissing that as mere wind; and I was content to ride in silence for a space.

Truth to tell the mere arranging of the duel had exhausted my interest in the matter. I yearned to place the fat golden deldys into Nulty’s hand and bid him collect his people and start for Paline Valley, as I myself would begin to discover the last secret of the cayferm. I had no ideas as yet on the best way of doing that beyond seeking out the gul Ornol and bribing him afresh.

The rest of the night passed as the arrangements for hiring the dueling hall were made, the bets placed, and the odds increasing all the time in my favor as people realized I was fool enough to think I could make a fight of it. Casmus attempted to restrain me as I accepted any and every bet. One man in a wine-reeking tavern waved his pewter pot and bet me I could not slice Leotes’ trousers away so that they fell in ribbons. “I will do that,” I said, and then remembered to smile and giggle foolishly. “I will cover your note to a thousand deldys, if needs be.”

Casmus gasped. The fellow, one Jefan from Nulvosmot, a not too savory town up in the northeast on the mainland near the Risshamal Keys, slopped his wine. “A thousand golden deldys?” He looked at me suspiciously. “You can cover the bet?”

“Better, perhaps, than you.”

“I own fish-processing plants, seaweed factories, more slaves than—” He stopped and drank, very flushed. Then he spat out: “A thousand, then! And Casmus is my witness.”

“Done!”

He was typical. I took bet after bet. They were like the chanks of the inner sea, greedily grasping after every last drop of blood. Casmus shook his head and noted the bets, for he would take a commission, and pronounced privately to me as we went to the next tavern: “You cannot possibly cover these wagers, Amak! That is transgressing the law.”

“I can cover them, Casmus. Do not fret. Just make sure you get the best odds.”

So it went on all that night, and the formal challenge by Vad Garnath’s seconds had not yet been given!

This was done first thing in the morning as I awoke from a light sleep. Nulty let them in and the business was concluded without ado. Rapier and main-gauche? Certainly. First blood, as the law required? Why, does that rast Garnath then desire a fight to the finish? It is in his mind. Then tell the cramp he must satisfy the law, that it is of no concern to me. As you wish. No, my fine friends, as you wish, for I will be satisfied with first blood, and will stop then. But the Vad, we understand, will fight to a finish. Him or Leotes, miserable crawling cramp both.

They were nonplussed, these two popinjays in their fancy foppish dress and their affected manners; but it

was understood and arranged and they left. They'd even bet me privately five hundred deldys apiece that I would lose, and in what manner Leotes would cut me up.

"Well, master," said Nulty. "I know you are a swordsman. But you've become a boaster now."

"True, friend Nulty, true. But to a purpose only, mind."

Word came during the day that Vad Garnath had obtained a dispensation, seeing the serious nature of the challenge, that the duel might be fought to a finish, if necessary. The strict Hamalese laws would still operate, but much of their sting would be removed. This meant the Vad or Leotes could kill me with impunity. I returned an answer by the servant who brought the message that I would draw first blood.

Then an interesting permutation on the situation occurred in the arrival of a further pair of seconds. These came from Leotes ti Ponthieu, on his own account, challenging me. I accepted at once. "I'll fight both the rasts, singly or both together!" I bawled out of the inn window at the departing backs of the seconds.

Uncouth, yes, refreshing — well . . .

The impression I had created and which remained was that I had been away taking rapier lessons and was now puffed with pride, more than half drunk. Any other explanation would have been far more sinister. Everyone believed implicitly that Leotes was the finest swordsman in Ruathytu, and would have no trouble with my new skills. They were right on one count; he was the finest swordsman among the sacred quarter rufflers. You know of my feelings about swordsmen. I have reached a certain age and a certain skill, but always I know that one day, possibly, I shall meet a greater master with the sword. When that day comes I look forward to the greatest and most enjoyable fight of my life. Leotes could be the man. He had never been extended here, not even by Rees. I did gamble, in very truth. There is precious little of chivalry or gallantry — strange bedfellows for me, I allow — in any Bladesman knowing he will always win, of boasting he is the finest swordsman in the world, or in two worlds in my case. Such a boaster merely murders his opponents. I faced each challenge as a fresh encounter in which I could be killed as easily as the other fellow.

The lure of easy gold had brought Leotes from Zenicce to Ruathytu. Also, I learned, he had been disappointed in his hopes of becoming House Champion for Ponthieu. So that meant there was at least one bravo-fighter of superior skill left still in Zenicce — and fighting for Ponthieu, Drig take him!

The night of the duel came. I had been to see Rees and Chido and had not spoken of the affair. But they knew. Their concern was distressing to me. I could not explain, but I told them not to worry — a footling sort of statement, by Vox! — and that I would see them as ever the next day. Chido's father was coming up from their estates to see him, and Rees's wife and twins, also. I felt a little surprise, not equating Rees with the cares and problems of matrimony and fatherhood.

"Ah, Hamun! Wait until you see my boy, by Krun! My little Reesnik! He is seventeen, a marvel! And" — here a huge, slobbering fatuous smile broke over Rees's Numim face — "my darling Saffi!" His great golden mane glowed with the last of the streaming lights of Zim and Genodras flooding in through the open window.

"He has talked of nothing else, Hamun, since the news came." Chido's rib was mending, but he was still well strapped up.

"And it is fitting that I should, Chido, you fambly! My wife, the glorious Rashi, and my young boy, Roban, will be coming also. We are a family, I tell you, you bachelor scamp, of which any man might be

proud.”

Rees was right, too. As a Trylon he had the responsibility of ensuring the line went on, and this Rees of his, this son, would have to fight and scheme his way to his father’s titles, as was the way of Kregen. Any man may begin the long trek of life’s journey in the gutter and by courage and skill and perseverance wind up a noble, a Vad or a Kov, or even a prince or king. Who better should know this than one such rascal called Dray Prescott?

Although, I added to myself as I left, and the addition was made somewhat briskly, I was nowhere near ready to wind up yet.

The dueling hall was packed. Bets were still being laid. The nobles and the Horters and their ladies crammed the seats and stood in every perch. The central space had even been a little restricted to afford more seating. The samphron-oil lamps glowed a mellow even light. I drew the attention of the judge to the decreased space of the dueling area. Before he could answer, Vad Garnath spoke with a contemptuous sneer.

“All the less space for you to run, yetch.”

I didn’t bother to answer.

My friends were there, my enemies were there. I had taken no second, and the judge well understood why. Nath Tolfeyr undertook the duties of a second but without the obligation to cross swords if I fell out. Everything was made ready. The buzz of excited conversation never stopped. These people were betting on the exact ways Leotes or Garnath would cut me up. No one gave any thought to the idea I might draw first blood.

I had insisted that Casmias should sit with Nath Tolfeyr at my end of the mat. He was busily taking bets, not trusting a staylor to do that for him. Next to Casmias sat a little dumpling of a woman, whose fashionable spread skirt revealed fat white thighs. I nodded in their direction. She squealed and gripped Casmias’ arm, and he turned absently, writing busily, and his thoughts came out even as he spoke.

“ . . . Five hundred deldys, the odds being — Ah, my dear? No, do not fret. Everything is in perfect order.” And he turned back at a shout to take a paltry hundred sinvers on Leotes taking off my left ear before my right.

I knew the heavy bettors would have talked to Leotes and arranged with him his exact program of butchering me. These last minute wagers were from the marks ripe for the plucking.

The catcalling and abuse I endured! The way these painted and scented ninnies contumed me! All knew I was a weakling, a poltroon, for I had proved it a hundred times in the avoidance of an issue, the bypassing of an insult, the cowardly backing out of a challenge. And now I was boasting away about what I was going to do and taking huge bets on the outcome, backing myself. Well, they said among themselves, when I had lost I had better honor my debts and pay up. If I welshed it would be the Heavenly Mines for me, by Havil the Green!

Leotes stepped forward.

He had chosen to wear his Ponthieu colors of purple and ocher, and this made him a favorite with the crowd, for the queen’s personal colors were gold and purple. I wore plain black trousers, cut short to the knees, boots, and a white shirt from which most of the frilling had been removed. In addition, I had

wound around my waist a wide cummerbund of brilliant scarlet. By Makki-Grodno's worm-infested tripes! Let these ninnies take heed of that, if they could!

"So, Garnath," I said loudly, over the hubbub. "You send your lackey to do the work first! Never fear, rast-nest, I shall meet you with great joy!"

"Yetch!" he bellowed, going crimson.

The judge demanded more dignity in this serious affair.

"Dignity is for men," I shouted. "Not for nulshes like these offal of calsanys."

Well, it was all good rousing stuff. The necessary formalities were gone through. Leotes was too much of a Bladesman to be prompted into anger. He was cool and professional. He said: "I shall cut you up, Hamun the Onker, as you deserve."

Give him his due. He was a professional.

We crossed blades.

I felt the power in his wrist at once, and searched for his skill. Naturally I was using the finest of the rapiers and its matched main-gauche that Delia had given me. The blades rang and screeched, sliding and licking and parting. He essayed a strong but essentially simple series of passes and attacks. I met them all as the textbooks and the sword-masters prescribed. He smiled. He had heard I had been off taking lessons, and he read this defense as standard salles d'armes stuff. He pressed again, more warmly. Again I held him off without effort. When he committed himself, and it was for real, then I would know.

Our feet stamped up and down in perfect line. Our bodies held in balance, our arms in the regulation poses, rapier and dagger angled just so. The people had been yelling, for they expected Leotes to begin chopping me up at once. Now they gradually became silent and fell into complete absorption with the spectacle. I held him off, then let my dagger slide just that fraction off line that would indicate an opening. He saw it, he feinted and pressed in, and I, confidently expecting a neat lunge finished with a flick to cut my exposed ear, instead barely managed to scrape my rapier up and across as his dagger flashed to my chest.

He leaped back, surprised he had missed.

I cursed. He'd been aiming to remove the last frills of my shirt, a nice showy beginning to the cutting-up process. But he'd almost had me. I could not afford to give any more free openings. Then he pressed in earnest, and I discovered how good this bravo-fighter from Zenicce really was.

He was good — very, very good.

And, good as he was, he quickly realized that he faced a master swordsman, also. A tense look crept about his eyes. He essayed simple attacks, and complicated linked series of attacks; I knew them all and beat him back. So far I had not attacked. The steel rang and slithered, our feet stamped, and gradually his breathing grew louder and more ragged.

"Come on, Leotes!" yelled a frustrated onlooker. "Start slicing him up!"

"Yes, by Havil! Let's see the color of his blood!"

The blades sang together, dagger and rapier, rapier and dagger.

He flung himself in, now, seeking no longer to slice me but simply to kill me and so have it over with. I pressed him off, forced him back, and then instigated an attack. As I say, he was very, very good. He survived, but now the sweat collected at the corners of his nose, and his mouth hung open as he breathed. His trousers were cut away as I had bet Jefan.

With a delicate touch, finicky, I'd say, I slid the steel into his left arm, my rapier and dagger crossed and down.

"First blood!" I shouted.

"No! No!" screamed the crowd. They were raging. "To the death!"

Leotes looked ghastly. I felt sorry for him. I was quite prepared to let it go at that, and see about Garnath. But the bravo-fighter from Ponthieu rushed in, his left arm still in action, the hand still gripping the dagger. "No!" he shrieked. "To the death!"

I circled him around the central area, for with rapier-and-dagger-work the simple small-sword style of straight up and down is overmatched. There followed a quick passade and he staggered back, his shoulder staining dark with blood.

I caught the judge's eye. "First and second blood!" I called. "Take witness! I do not desire this man's death. By the law of Hamal I abjure his death, and place it upon his own head!"

"Kill him, you fool Leotes! Kill him!" screeched Garnath. He bent swiftly and spoke to a slave girl in the gray slave breechclout, but with a silver-tissue bodice, who he had brought to hand him his spiced wine.

I swung back. "Do you want to die, Leotes?"

"I shall surely kill you, rast!"

And he tried.

Fully intending not to slay the onker, I played his blades, and as his left-hand dagger grew weaker I cut in and thrust, intending to spit his thigh and, I hoped, make him fall down and thus be incapable of continuing the bout. But he sought at the end to be clever with his swordplay and spun sideways and ducked down to let me have that long, lunging, desperate throw, with his left hand on the ground. My rapier went clean through his throat.

He jerked back, writhed on the blade, and as I withdrew, he toppled. Before his seconds could rush to him I bent over. He stared up, sick with his own knowledge. He could just speak with the bright blood pumping up.

"Who — are — you?"

I bent close. He had earned this.

"You know of Strombor, Leotes of Ponthieu?"

He nodded, unable to speak now. His eyes glared madly. I said, very softly, "I am the Lord of Strombor."

Then he died, this Leotes, Bladesman, sword-master of Ponthieu, bravo-fighter of Zenicce.

There was some considerable confusion. Out of it all I bellowed in that foretop hailing voice: "Garnath the Kleesh! Garnath the Foul! Stand forth, Garnath, and make your bow!"

Like any onker, I, Dray Prescott, had overdone it.

I scooped up a glass cup of wine and drained it and flung the glass at Nath Tolfeyr. I strode to the mat, and waited.

After a moment Vad Garnath appeared. He was accounted a fine swordsman, I knew, yet all around me the bettors were frantically trying to lay off the bets they had made, and to wager afresh that I would win.

I stared at this Vad. "To the death, I think you said, cramph. I think so, too, for the sake of my friend, the Trylon Rees of the Golden Wind. You are not fit to—" And then I suddenly halted. I felt a wave of the most dizzying weakness pass over me. Vad Garnath smiled. He whickered his rapier about, very swashbuckling as to swagger, very powerfully proud.

"You were saying, Amak?"

"By the Black Chunkrah! You — you've—"

"To the death, I believe, Amak Hamun, boaster, coward."

I stood, swaying, my rapier wavering, the whole vivid scene jumping erratically. The devil had drugged my drink! That silver-bodied slave girl! I did not know the poison then, but its effects were subtly to overpower me and gradually to take away my strength and sense of balance. I staggered, and recovered, and the room swam.

The judge called for order. Garnath's rapier flashed out, and, somehow, mine met it. The blades crossed and rang like tocsin bells.

In the next instant, with that infernal dizziness clawing at me and dragging me down into ever-increasing weakness, I was fighting desperately for my life.

CHAPTER NINE

Of the duelists' mat and the nose of Vad Garnath

Weakness grew on me with dizzying speed. Garnath's blade flamed before my eyes, streaks and dazzlement of blinding silver darting into my brain. I felt as though a wersting pack ululated at my heels to pull me down, or a pack of our powerful hunting rarks of the Great Plains of Segesthes bayed after me as they bayed after the slinking leem, until we might ride up astride our voves to dispatch the feline furies.

The dueling hall reeled about me. I could be back aboard a frigate beating about off Brest, forever servicing the ships of the line on eternal blockade. I did not feel as though I rode a swinger, hurtling between the colossal growths of Aphrasöe the Swinging City, for there no one would weave a net of blinding steel before my eyes and seek to bury that glittering blade in my guts.

Sheer instinctive bladesmanship kept out Garnath's steel.

He pressed his attack, for he knew well that the drug his serving slave had slipped into that glass cup of wine would soon drop me, and the crowd would not fail to notice a swordsman who fell without a wound, and ask questions. He had to be quick and finish me. I struggled against the nausea, and the dizziness, and my wrist firmed a little, enough to beat away a savage attack and to make the beginnings of a counter.

Garnath looked surprised.

We surged together for a moment, body to body, our four blades locked and thrusting skyward. I glared madly into his eyes.

"You kleesh, Garnath! I shall not slay you now. I will let you live and tremble at my vengeance to come!"

"Boastful yetch! Be very sure I shall spit you — now!"

His rapier snickered free and darted for my ribs as he fell back to make a space and so with straightened arm attempted to thrust me through. My dagger came down with agonizing slowness, but the steel deflected Garnath's blade. A moment later, a moment nearer, and he would have scored my side and so, whoever slew who, he would have drawn first blood and my wager would be lost.

This could not be allowed to go on.

If I say I summoned up all the vicious and dark energies in me, I do an injustice to the mystic disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy that came to my aid and saved me. I did summon up all my will, all that vision of the opponent as transparent, as though the force of will alone guided my arm and eye, gave me an uncanny foreknowledge of where he would strike. These disciplines came from long hours of contemplation and of weapons practice on the Isle of Zy where often and often during my long stay among the Zairians of the Eye of the World I had gone, season by season, to reinforce and continue afresh all that I had learned during my year of total concentration there. Being a Krozair of Zy is a continuous process, never stilled until at last one sets off for that long last journey to the Ice Floes of Sicce.

Now this Vad Garnath became transparent and far off to me; by calling on the will and making of the will a single central instrument, I was able for a short time to hold on, and grasp my blade, and so make a finish.

In a quick and savage flurry Garnath, laughing with his expected triumph, swaggered in, flicking and flashing and feinting. I met him stoutly, dazzled him with my rapier and slashed my long, narrow left-hand dagger across his right thigh. I stepped back.

"First blood!" I thought I shouted; but I knew I croaked.

Garnath stood for a moment looking for all of Kregen like an onkerish calsany, glaring at the line of blood welling from his slashed trouser leg.

"Fall down, you rast," I said.

He tried to come at me again, and tottered, and his leg would not support him, and he fell.

I stood above him. He forced himself up on hands and knees, his head twisted up, glaring at me with a sick and awful knowledge.

“You are an abomination under the suns, Garnath. The Trylon Rees’s honor is intact, while your honor is shredded and worthless. You are shamed, Garnath! Now — down on your nose or I spit you through!”

Down he plumped on his nose.

I was not minded to reveal my disguise, to shout with great fierceness a battle cry that would betray me. I had worked hard and long at being the Amak Hamun; I would not throw that work away, for there yet remained much to be done for Vallia. But I did stagger forward, and I know the dueling hall rang and reverberated with the yells of the crowd, though I heard none of it. I bent and wiped the main-gauche carefully upon Garnath’s frilled shirt, jerking him up the better to get at it. He lay, trembling. I was trembling, too.

It is not my way to thrust a blade foul with blood into a scabbard given to me by Delia of Delphond.

The noise in my head was not the noise of the crowd. The mat swayed and swooped. I stepped back and someone gripped my elbow. In a narrowing circle of bright vision with a ring of black and purple shadows dropping down I saw Garnath’s seconds caring for him. I tried to shake my head. I felt, I saw, I experienced . . . then the darkness of Notor Zan claimed me entirely.

I awoke in Rees’s room high in his small villa, between Rees and Chido, the three of us lying there like three wounded soldiers in a hospital ward. There was much to learn.

“Thank Havil you are awake, Hamun!” Rees looked remarkably cheerful. His golden mane glowed. Chido chuckled and, between mouthfuls of palines, the pair of them told me what had transpired.

Nulty had come to them in terrible straits. Garnath’s men had visited my inn, *The Kyr Nath and the Fifi*, and sought to take me away. His loyalty to me, as a person, was never more fittingly displayed. Rees had immediately dispatched a strong party of his own retainers and a brisk little brawl had blown up there in the narrow streets of the sacred quarter. Rees’s folk had dealt with Garnath’s. Rees shook his great head.

“The rast sent that marvelous wrestler of his, Radak the Syatra. When Radak discovered he was to fight my people he refused. I suppose Garnath thought him thirsting for revenge because I had bested him in a fair fight. I have sent Radak away to the Plains of the Golden Wind, and now we face litigation over ownership and purchase and enticing a retainer. But these are small affairs beside your news, Hamun!”

“Absolutely!” cried Chido. “How did you do it? Where did you learn your rapier-work, Hamun? We heard such stories.”

Being Chido, he said “wapier,” of course, and I made shift to tell them I had met a wandering sword-master on his way to Zenicce, meeting by chance, and he had showed me a few tricks.

They both kept badgering me.

But there was nothing more I could tell them. I did promise to show them some of these astonishing tricks, and, indeed, this could be done. There are mechanical contrivances in swordplay that stand one in good stead; but for the inner drawing out of the will, the intuitive response to an attack even in its earliest

stages of development, this is not mechanical. This is the art and soul and fiery spirit of swordplay.

When I asked after Casmus the Deldy, Rees pointed to a stout iron-bound lenken box on the floor.

“Stuffed with gold, Hamun!” he said. “We have not counted it, but that old rogue Casmus swears it is all there — less his commission, of course.”

“And the thousand from Jefan ti Nulvosmot for ripping off Leotes’ trousers?”

“It is all there — less, of course, Casmus’ collection fee.”

“Of course.”

They laughed, joying in my good fortune.

All my belongings had been brought and Nulty had overseen everything and was now ensconced as a privileged retainer in the household of the Numim, Rees ham Harshur, Tylon of the Golden Wind. Being gentlemen the Tylon and the Amak had not poked around in my lenken chests. I felt relief at that, for some of the stuff in there was so obviously Vallian that all my carefully worked out explanations against such a discovery might not have sufficed. If I felt regret at deceiving these two, I had to subsume that regret into the much more profound regret that the stupidities of fate and the insane ambitions of their rulers set us apart, enemies by nation, friends by personal inclination.

Once I had recovered consciousness and could eat and drink hugely, the effects of the drug soon wore off. Rees nodded when I told him.

“A foul and cowardly potion,” he said. “And I heard what it was you said to this Garnath of the dunghill. I thank you for that, Hamun.”

“And this drug?”

“Memphees. Distilled from the bark of the poison tree memph, with subtle additions from the cactus trechinolc. It seeps through the body and gradually takes away one’s strength and senses. Enough will kill.”

I grimaced. “We have not heard the last of this cramph.”

“There is nothing we can do about this drugging of you, Hamun. Proof is lacking, for the rast will have slain that poor slave girl and written her down in his records, all fair, as Casmus knows, as the victim of an accident. Casmus may know, but it is a risk he takes. When one insures slaves it is good to make very certain the premiums bring payment.”

“Yes,” said Chido. “And that horror Garnath will have his records written up for the annual government inspection. The law is touchy regarding slaves in the old country.”

Why did it always distress me so much when these two spoke so affectionately of their country, the mortal enemy of my own?

“As to that,” said Rees, “what with all the new slaves in the country from the wars, Casmus is seriously thinking of closing down the slave-insurance side of his business. The profits are small enough, and people do not bother when it is almost as cheap and much less bother to buy fresh.”

So they talked, these two, of men who might well be from Pandahem, and very soon perhaps from Vallia, if this Queen Thyllis had her way.

Even in law-ridden Hamal we were thrown back on our own resources in the struggle against Vad Garnath. He was rich, as all knew, and he had the proud “ham” in his name which proclaimed him as a scion of one of the oldest families of Hamal. He was Garnath ham Hestan, Vad of Middle Nalem, a Vadvarate west of the Black Hills in which originates the Black River. That he chose to spend his time in the capital instead of on his estates meant merely he was a pleasure-loving man, able to afford this raffish high-life living. That he had failed to raise a regiment for service was looked at a little askance, and would be looked at with greater and greater disfavor as the war dragged on. He would have to do something about that, soon. Rees chuckled — rather nastily — and said the rast had been talking of raising a squadron of small fliers, or of equipping a flight of skyships.

I fretted. They would not let me quit my bed for a full day, and I had to lay and ponder what was going on in the wide world. All this talk of regiments and skyships embittered me. My people of Valka and Vallia must have vollers, and soon! The ones we had bought from Hamal before the troubles would soon be mere junk, judging by the Hamalese practice of selling us Krasny work, inferior models. When I had last spent a short spell in my kingdom of Djanduin, far to the south and west of Havilfar, after my trip to Earth to search out the history of Alex Hunter, I had given certain instructions to my Djangs. A party had left by a circuitous and safe route taking six matched pairs of the Djanduin flyers with those wide yellow wings and vicious black beaks, the flutduin, by airboat as a present to Delia in Valka. She would know what to do with them, and with the ferocious Djang riders I had also sent. There would not be time to breed a race of saddle-birds in Valka before the storm burst from Hamal, but I had a thousand years of life ahead, and there lay many, many plans in my head for that future.

Even so, by careful husbandry, both in Djanduin and elsewhere in Havilfar where I had friends, I fancied I could scrape together a promising beginning of an aerial cavalry for Valka. What Delia’s father, the dread emperor of Vallia, might say I did not much care. He would know — or ought to know — that I had at heart the welfare of all Vallia and not just my island Stromnate of Valka.

“You’re dreaming, Hamun!” bellowed Rees. At the happy tone in his voice I looked up, prepared to contest most hotly this calumny, and saw a party of Numims in the doorway, all rushing forward in a billowing cloud of bright colors and fluttering ribbons and flowing golden manes, their bold lion faces alight, shouting their greetings to Rees.

“Rashi!” he said ecstatically, after the first, proper Lahals, and he embraced his wife in an enormous hug that made Doctor Larghos the Needle tut-tut and hop about from foot to foot. Then it was his eldest son, potential heir and Trylon-to-be, young Rees. Then Rees’s twin sister, Saffi. And then, last of all, as was proper, the youngster, Roban. Well, they kicked up a right shindig, roaring and booming in their lion way, golden fur glowing, eyes bright, laughing with their father.

I saw Larghos looking worried.

“Avast, Rees, you great nurdling lion-man!” I bellowed it out so that they turned from his bed to regard this boorish and insulting apim. “Rees, will you deny me the pleasure of saying Lahal?”

“You are the nurdling apim, Hamun, but gladly will I introduce you to my wonderful family.”

Larghos tugged out a kerchief and mopped his brow. Chido was introduced and then Larghos shooped them all away. “Your father needs rest! You are liable to break all his ribs and open all his wounds.”

“Silence, you drooling numbskull!” bellowed Rees. But I saw. His face was unhealthily yellow, lacking that glorious golden tint of the Numim. He was a sick man, and all this hullabalooing and hugging was draining him. Later, his family saw him in less boisterous fashion. His wife was charming, a regal lady, in the nicest sense of that word. His two sons were tough little beggars, and Rees, at seventeen, was filling out and looked set to become just such another bullroarer as his father. I took to young Roban, sensing he might feel left out. He had not yet grown his mane, of course, but he had clear bright eyes and I liked the way he spoke up. We played a game of poron-Jikaida while Rees talked to Rees — young Rees was trying to outgrow the diminutive Reesnik now, as is the way of youngsters — and I found Roban sharp at the game, and I made him fight hard. We never did finish, for Saffi put her glorious golden head around the door and complained with typical sisterly logic that: “You men hog everything!”

The lads were banished and Saffi sat on her father’s bed. Chido and I turned toward each other and carried on the Jikaida abandoned by Roban. This Saffi was really a remarkable girl. Numims have much the same bodily configurations of Fristles, of course, both being cat-people. But whereas a Fristle fifi is giggly and soft-furred, seductive and sensual, and entirely desirable, a Numim young lady is quite different. Apparently possessing all these qualities, the Numim is more like a sleek and regal lioness, rather than a pampered Siamese cat. Saffi was not sensual, but she was sensuous. Her body charmed me, clad in the fashion of Hamal with that short, pleated and flared skirt cut away from the thighs. Her deep blue bodice was of a simple material and cut, but its shape made me think, and this I confess, of my Delia. I sighed.

Why on this world of Kregen was I wasting my time among a parcel of rascals, avowed enemies, when I might be home in Esser Rarioch, with Delia and my twins, Drak and Lela?

Numim girls do not have whiskers, either, and their faces are soft and smooth within the frame of that glorious golden hair.

Chido perked up no end when his father, the Vad, arrived bringing his sister, Chelestima, a fascinating girl with dark hair and bright cheeks, a few years younger than Chido and, clearly, devoted to him. Their mother had died and the old Vad depended on Chelestima. She was dressed in such a way that I felt for her, clad in clothes that while being expensive and beautifully sewn, were dowdy and unfashionable. The first thing the Vad said after the greetings was: “And how much did you win on the Amak of Paline Valley, Chido?”

Chido spluttered out weakly that he had not wagered.

“Then you’re still the onker I thought!” The old boy held himself erect, whip-smart, his black clothes, silver ornaments, and thraxter the marks of a grand Horter of Hamal. “This Amak was your friend, I am told, and there was much money to be won. You lost an opportunity there, my boy. Money doesn’t drop from fluttrell wings.”

“Yes, Father.”

Well, I will say no more about this tough old character, Chido’s father, the Vad of Eurys, save to say he impressed me as a man Vallia could well do without as an enemy. (Eurys is situated in a bold curve of the coast of southeast Hamal opposite Niklana, the small island to the immediate north of Hyrklanda.) I will have more to say about the Vad of Eurys later.

You may imagine the whole household was in the utmost turmoil with all the visitors. I bellowed until a slave girl brought my clothes and I could dress. I took up a thraxter and belted it to my waist, flung my

brilliant green jacket about my shoulders, and so escaped.

The business with Nulty was conducted with all speed and due process of law. I kept of the hoard I had won sufficient for what lay ahead; Ormol was a gul and the sight of gold often frightened these poor people.

“How will you get to Paline Valley, Amak?”

“If I come, I shall come, Nulty. That is my problem.”

The lawyers of Hamal are a rich and bloated species of humanity, for they are always engaged in business. Nulty was duly confirmed as my Crebent for Paline Valley. I would be sorry to see him go, for many reasons, and he sensed this. But life is made up of greetings and partings, of Lahals and Remberees . . . I was officially abjured of any guilt in the death of Leotes, according to the rules under which we had fought, and the name of ham Farthytu was duly inscribed in the Palace of Names.

I had taken a thraxter, the straight cut-and-thrust sword that is the typical Hamalese weapon, for a purpose. I was not molested. The rogues of the sacred quarter were most wary of me now, and I was stood drinks, and clapped on the back, and generally made to think of myself as the very devil of a fellow. This could not make me change my ways, but for someone else — dare I suggest Chido? — this fame would bring problems. I did not intend to stay here long, anyway.

Taking an amith-trolley out to the Horters' quarter and over the Bridge of Nalgre the Penitent, I made my way up to the Shining Quarter. I had to give my thanks to Casmus for his handling of the affair, for all he had taken his percentage. Truth to tell, I do not much care for these money merchants. They grub. But, then, that is their nature, and we all grub after our fashion. He received me most warmly, and although I spent only a bur at his villa I learned he was even more certain of receiving his patent of nobility. His marriage of the Ranga, the jolly fat widow, did not mean he would automatically be made a Rango, of course. He was confident he would become more than an Amaknik; if he was really fortunate, an Elten, at least.

“My felicitations, Casmus.” I did not add that the more money he lent Queen Thyllis and her government, and winked over the interest and a too ready repayment, the higher up they would push him. He knew that, the devious old rascal.

So I finished my tea and left.

The shadows of the tall-legged aqueduct that strode across the plain from the southern hills, and crossing the walls passed close to the eastern side of the Thoth Arena, lay long in twinned penumbras of red and green as I walked back to the bridge. The slaves were hard at work pumping the water into the Jikhorkdun, for amphitheaters demand mortal great amounts of water. I was reminded of those monstrous water wheels in the caverns beneath the citadel of Mungul Sidrath, and I sighed and walked on, lost in reverie.

“I have found you at last, Amak Hamun! May Lem be praised!” There was Nath Tolfeyr, very worried, one hand to his rapier hilt, the other to his lips.

About to be crushingly rude, I was prevented from saying anything as Nath grabbed my arm, most familiarly, and said in a swift rush: “Act naturally, Hamun! We owe you something, for Rees, and Vad Garnath is a beast unslaked. He will surely have you tormented, privately. You are a doomed man, unless— We can save you, Hamun. You must come with me at once to the Most Glorious Temple of

Lem the Silver Leem. Only he can save you now!”

CHAPTER TEN

In the temple of Lem the Silver Leem

I, Dray Prescott, Prince Majister of Vallia and official upholder of Opaz the pure spirit of the Invisible Twins, did not immediately smash this Lem the Silver Leem idolater and blasphemer across the face, and kick him as he went down.

“Hurry, Hamun, hurry! Your friends will do what they can, but Garnath has spies everywhere!”

He hurried me on, into the bewildering shadows of the aqueduct. The water rustled and splashed far above, and the sounds of slaves working came to us; the doleful clank of bronze buckets and the duller thunk of wooden tubs.

“What—” I was not so much shocked and astonished as repulsed and nauseated.

“Don’t chatter, Hamun! Your friends— Well, we all knew you would win, of course. Lem is your only hope. Hurry and say nothing and keep close.”

Then the idea struck me that it would be useful to know something of this monstrous Lem. All I knew was what I had been told and what I had seen in Migla, and what I judged to be the character of those men I knew who worshiped the foul leem-beast, Lem.

So, forcing myself to remain calm, I hurried on with Nath.

He was not such a bad fellow, anyway, for he had stood as my second, although refusing to fight if the necessity arose, for which I could scarcely blame him. He was acknowledged by Rees, who heartily disliked Lem, swearing rather by Krun. So, as I say, I decided this could be an adventure, and followed Nath Tolfeyr into the shadows.

The Most Glorious Temple had been cleverly hidden, I will say that for these leem lovers. We hurried into the shadows of the aqueduct and, passing through a waste area much cluttered with building materials and old lumber and wrecked carts and fliers, entered a narrow opening appearing casually, as though a mere space between rotting piles of bricks. There we came onto a steeply descending stairway.

“I waited here for you, for I knew you had gone to Casmus. This is my temple; there are others of which I do not know.”

“Let us go down, then, Nath. Perhaps I shall be safe as you suggest.”

He laughed, his cares sloughed off with the closing of the door behind us. We clattered down the stairs. “Oh, we do not mean to hide you here, Hamun. By Lem, no! Vad Garnath is one of us at least in belief, if a pariah trag in all else.”

I thought I was catching his drift, and I did not like the way of it. But, as they say among my clansmen, “In for a zorca, in for a vove.” I was here now; I would see this thing through.

The darkness was broken at the foot of the steps where a cresset showed greasy light upon the streaked walls. Here a lenken door opened and we went through. The door was guarded by a Bleg, his weird

bat-face perfectly fitting the surroundings. His thraxter was gripped naked in his fist and he carried a shield. They guarded their shrine of Lem, then. I took notice of the Bleg's harness, for as much may be learned from a person's clothes as his weapons. The Bleg guarding the door wore ordinary swod uniform, the private soldier's lorica and bronze kilt and greaves. His helmet was unremarkable. His colors and devices were of a flat brown hue, picked out with silver. Brown and silver. Were they, then, the secret colors of Lem the Silver Leem?

When I dub the people I was about to meet leem lovers, it must be understood I mean them to have no connection with the shanks, the shants, the shtarkins, those unholy folk from across the curve of the world, who were also called leem lovers. The name applied in the case here, and was applied as an epithet in the other. I felt these leem lovers here would call those other raiding, murdering fish-heads anything but leem lovers.

"Keep quiet, Hamun. Say nothing. We are late."

We stood before a tall brown curtain with silver tassels. Cautiously, Nath parted the drapes and peered in. Then he beckoned and we slipped through.

The massive cavern must have been natural at first, subsequently hacked out to wider dimensions. Water trickled darkly down one corner, for we were sufficiently near the Black River. The roof writhed in shadows cast by smoking torches and cressets. The foul stink of incense hung in the air. At least a hundred people knelt on the stone floor, all intoning chants, genuflecting, dropping into the full incline, and then the crouch, all clamped in the grip of a controlled yet hysterical religious fervor of adoration.

High above the altar a monstrous silver image of a leem gleamed starkly bright.

The thing must have been at least twenty feet in length, from the tip of the tail that in life lashed with such frenzy, to the snout of the wicked head with the cruel gaping fangs. Leems are feral beasts. The eight-legged leem is furred, feline, and vicious, with a wedge-shaped head, and fangs that can strike through solid lenk. Its taloned paws can smash a man's head in like a rotten fruit. Weasel-shaped but the size of a full-grown leopard, a leem is a wild and terrifying beast with which I have had somewhat to do in my own wild life upon Kregen, as you know, and was to have more in the future, as you shall hear.

Priests, with gold added to the brown and silver of their robes, stood upon the dais in varying positions of power and authority. To one side a black basalt slab indicated that some of the stories about Lem must be true. A tall iron cage on the other side gaped open, and a fire flamed and fluttered at its base. Shadows writhed like bats in the vast chamber. The stomach-churning stink of leem hung in the air, barely concealed by the pervasive sickly smell of incense.

"Down on your knees, Hamun, for the love of Lem!"

Now.

Had I still been that same Dray Prescott who had faced the Princess Natema Cydones of Esztercari on the flowered roof garden of the opal palace in Zenicce, when all manner of bribes and insults had been heaped on me, when my Delia had faced a horrible death, when— Well, it is an old story, and still rouses my blood when I think of it.

These days the Princess Natema was happily married to my good friend Prince Varden Wanek of the House of Eward, and they had children. And I, the Lord of Strombor, had married my Delia and we had our two adorable twins. But, scatheless, it seemed, I, at least, was still rushing headlong into dangers and

adventures!

No longer was I that same Dray Prescott. I had tried to conquer the passionate nature that burst all bonds at first headstrong rush. I attempted to think before I burst into action. That old Dray Prescott would never have bowed the knee to some pagan, blasphemous silver idol in its samphron-oil-lamp radiance. On this occasion, though, I conquered my self. I knelt. As I speak to you on this tape recorder in this South American hotel, I recall even as late as last season I had occasion to rush blindly into just such a foolish, headstrong parcel of trouble as I used to in my younger days. And, in between, during all my days on Kregen, I have always had to face the fact that I will sometimes flail out and bash a few skulls before I stop to think on . . .

Nath Tolfeyr let out a sigh of relief as he dropped to his knees next to me.

The atmosphere of cloying horror grew. The chants were in a tongue that had been deliberately fabricated, a doggerel of dialects and neologisms. I could understand it, through the agency of that genetic language pill given me by Maspero. What was being said sickened me. We had, as Nath said, come in late.

What was left of the girl child was being offered up to the silver image. The man with the silver leem-mask over his face held the pitiful torso up, the blood dripping down, making the sacrifice directly to the god. The god! The diseased vomiting of a sick mind, more like . . .

Had we arrived earlier, before the child had been sacrificed, I know I would never have, could never have, even though it resulted in my death, meekly plumped down on my knees.

So the ghastly business went on, the mumbo-jumbo, and the sexual athletics which followed and closed the religious service. I felt my hand on my thraxter. Maybe it was a duty laid on me by the Star Lords to investigate Lem the Silver Leem. They had not called me to Kregen, four hundred light-years through the void, for nothing.

Presently Nath Tolfeyr whispered: "Stay here on your knees."

He slipped away. A few murs later he was back, and with him a man robed in the brown and silver, with a great silver mask of a leem over his face, carrying a whip and a chain, and with a rampant, obscene leem in a circle of silver swinging on his breast by a silver chain around his neck.

I am fond of silver. The metal was being blasphemed here.

At a beckoning we went with the priest into a side chamber where lamps threw light across an altar with a smaller silver-leem image, a black basalt table, very smooth, and an array of bronze knives with curious bone handles, of black and white.

At least ten men and women crowded in, wearing silver masks over their eyes and across their noses, like dominoes. But I recognized some of them, raffish hooligans and easy trollops from the sacred quarter. They all knew me.

The atmosphere grew more tense, and that abominable incense stink wafted in, carrying with it the stench of leem.

The room was hot and crowded.

“Take off his green jacket!” commanded the man in the silver leem-mask. “Take it from hence and burn it.”

About to protest I was severely nudged in the ribs by Nath, who had donned a silver mask. His was not as large or important as that worn by the priest, but it was more impressive than the dominoes worn by the witnesses.

Well, I will not go into details of what followed. It nauseated me at the time, and does to this day. I was stripped. Eventually we were all naked, but still those others wore their masks. A mask gives a person a great sense of power. It conceals truth and enables a man or woman to don a new personality.

The blasphemies against Opaz were uttered with a glee that told me these people were doomed and damned. I think, even then, had they known of Zair and included him in their obscene blasphemies, I would have broken all their necks. As it was, they could not, of course, touch the true core of belief.

Partway through the ceremonies a heated iron was brought. The brand was very tiny, shaped in the uncial for the Kregish letter L. This was branded on a personal part of my anatomy. I endured this. I knew that, thanks to my immersion in the Pool of Baptism of the River Zelph, all brands wear away from me in time. The pressure grew. Chants rose. Customs were followed that, I suppose, the painted cavemen had already discarded.

The sacrifice was a chicken, and, again, I felt a reprieve.

The blood was sprinkled upon me, in my hair, daubed on my face. Women rubbed the blood in. Well, I’ve waded through rivers of blood, as the cant saying has it. It meant nothing.

From a hyr-lif — and that was a blasphemy, also — the rules, the penalties, the obligations were read out. Once initiated, the converts were meant to be kept. There are silly secret societies like this on Earth, where a knife is brandished and threats are made to disembowel if the petty little secrets are revealed. But these fanatical followers of Lem the Silver Leem were not bluffing: they’d gleefully spill my tripes if I betrayed them; indeed the drawing out of guts was merely a small penalty among those recited to me with such lip-smacking appreciation.

Lem, the Silver Leem, they said, was real and awful and possessed of the greatest powers. Once under his protection the acolyte could look forward to great prosperity, massive good fortune, much money, and an orgy every full moon.

Given that they excluded the three smaller moons of Kregen, and the Twins naturally coincide, this meant a ripe old time would be had. I was not light-headed by this time, but I was genuinely feeling sick, and the stink of the incense got down into my stomach.

I cannot speak of the rest of it.

Eventually, now a full-fledged acolyte of Lem, I was taken away to another cavern, hollowed from the ground away from the Black River. Here everyone settled down to drinking and dancing and wenching. From this point on the religious aspects of the night’s doings grew less, and the affair turned into an orgy one might chance upon in a frenzied dopa den of the sleaziest portions of a city of Kregen.

They gave me a silver domino, and I wore this, out of shame.

For, Star Lords and their mysterious commands or not, this was not my idea of life. I had already

disliked Lem, now I detested and despised the evil cult of Lem.

Who knew how many poor children they had bought or stolen away? A slave child would hardly be missed, and a missing child from the shanty clum towns outside the city walls would not raise a single voice in protest. Even a child taken from the guls' quarters would soon be forgotten after a few of the routine inquiries made by the watch under the laws of Hamal.

Along with the silver mask I had donned a short tunic of brown, trimmed with imitation silver lace. I sat at a table with Nath Tolfeyr, and I drank a little wine. It was good stuff, too, thick and purple and potent, so that I mixed it well with water. When they began singing I found I could not join in, for the songs were obscene ditties about the exploits of Lem, but I saw Nath frown, and I essayed a few unmelodious warblings.

So there I was, apparently sitting at ease, with a pretty shishi at my side plying me with wine, drinking and singing, when I looked up and saw a blocky figure come striding up between the tables. He was dressed in brown and silver, and he wore a curved dagger suspended on silver chains at his waist. But despite the silver leem-mask over his face, I recognized him.

Nath said: "We have a new acolyte, Hyr-Majister. A worthy addition to our strength, a great convert."

I wilted a little at the blasphemous use of the "Hyr-Majister" for this scoundrel.

Vad Garnath stood looking down at me through the slits in his silver mask and I saw his eyes glittering like a leem's eyes through the leem eye-sockets.

"I see." His hands played with the dagger. No one else, as far as I could see, wore arms.

"You have wrought well, Hyr-Jik."

"I felt it would be to our mutual advantage."

Vad Garnath turned, unable to bear the sight of me. Nath, I heard quite distinctly, chuckled.

"He called you Hyr-Jik," I said.

"Yes. The higher ranks are graded in the normal way. But we have, also, darker significations."

Nath Tolfeyr was an adept, then. "Jik" is the familiar abbreviation for "Jiktar," as I have often used it, as "Del" is for "Deldar" and "Hik" for "Hikdar" and "Chuk" for "Chuktar." Nath had given me now an insight into the hierarchy, and I detected the old familiar story of the intrigues and jealousies of politics. As the Hyr-Majister, Vad Garnath had been making himself unpopular. Now that I was a member of the secret cult he would be unable to attack me directly and have me killed; in this Nath Tolfeyr and those others who now considered themselves my friends had calculated aright. But I thought I might understand men like Vad Garnath a little better than they did. So it would behoove me to put my shoulder to the wheel and help along in the overthrow and ruin of Garnath.

Then I checked.

Cayferm!

I had to put all this foolishness behind me. Tomorrow I would seek out Ormol, the gul, and bribe him. I

would choke the information out of him this time, instead of allowing him to weasel out of it.

“When does this finish, Nath — I mean, Hyr-Jik?”

“When the last one falls asleep. But you may leave if that is your wish.”

“It is.”

He rose. That must have been a signal, for others rose, also, and so it was as a body that we went to the robing rooms to don our everyday garments. My green jacket was gone.

“Green is a color not allowed here, acolyte,” said Nath. “And the name of the Holder of the Green is never mentioned here.” I knew he meant Havil. They never mentioned the name of the state religion’s god, but they reviled the name of Opaz. Now that was interesting . . . it showed where their true fear lay.

Most of the revelers would remain immersed in the debauchery until the break of day. The little party now leaving would slip out of the hidden stairway two by two. Most would have waiting link slaves and preysany litters standing securely well away from this plot of wasteland. As we went up to put our silver dominoes into their appointed stations I saw the man in the mask who had conducted my induction ceremony remove his mask. Lo! It was Strom Dolan.

I had remarked previously that I considered Strom Dolan to be a fussy Bladesman, with exaggerated ideas of his own importance. Now I began to see why he entertained those ideas.

He took my arm as we went up the stairs.

“You have been saved, Hamun, out of our friendship for you and for the Trylon Rees. Sadly, he refuses to join us. And, you, too, blasphemed the all-glorious Lem when you challenged Vad Garnath.” He wagged his finger. “You must put all that aside, now that you are an acolyte and have seen the true way.”

Nath coughed and, abruptly, I understood. Nath Tolfeyr had told Strom Dolan that I wished to be converted and to adore Lem. He had saved me. Why?

“I shall remember, Strom Dolan.”

He jumped a little at my use of his real name, for he was a Hyr-Prince Chuk in the Lem hierarchy. But we were out of the tunnel now, under the stars and the moons.

We shook hands, but not in the Hamalese way. We said good night; we did not say Remberee. We shook hands and we used words that were sacred to Lem. All this was childish stuff, of course, but at least it gave me valuable knowledge as to how pappattu was being made. I fancied I’d know a damned leem lover from now on.

Nath said he would accompany me. We were lucky in picking up a link clum outside the Thoth Jikhorkdun. The massive pile reared against the stars. Despite what had transpired this night my mind went back to the island-realm of Hyrklana, and the capital of Huringa. There, in the Jikhorkdun, I had fought as a kaidur — as a hyr-kaidur! So when Nath passed some remark about meeting footpads, a disgruntled pack of clums, or slaves on the run, I slapped my thraxter and said: “By Kaidun, Nath! If we cannot see off a pack of mangy curs like that, may our arms fail with the glass eye and brass sword of Beng Thrax!”

He glanced at me in the wavering light of the torch upheld in the clum's hand. "By Havil, Hamun! You speak like a kaidur!"

"I had an interest in the Jikhorkdun," I said, slurring the word and thus betraying an amateur knowledge. "It passed."

"I confess I rejoice in the games too, the spectacles." And here he launched into an enthusiastic description of the latest games, in which kaidur had fought kaidur, and coys had struggled for their lives against wild beasts, and all the old stories of the amphitheater came out. I looked at the clum going ahead with the torch, a painfully thin lad with a shock of brown hair. His ribs stuck out above the dingy green loincloth swathed around his middle by a length of rope. He was in poor condition, half starved, no doubt living in some filthy hovel in one of the disgusting shanty towns, working long hours at night with his link light, desperate for customers and then dependent on the whim of those who employed him. The usual price was an ob an ulm. Some of these fine gentry of Ruathytu thought it a jest to turn a link man away with a toe, which is a copper coin worth one sixth of an ob, or, even, with nothing at all save threats.

The clums and guls of Ruathytu use the word "havvey" instead of "toc," which is precious to them, forming the coin of which they see most. If you see any connection between the slang word "havvey" and the great and glorious name of Havil — well, you are right . . .

We went to Nath Tolfeyr's lodgings and he said he did not mind if I slept on the floor. An old campaigner sleeps on floors as a matter of course. I did not wish to disturb Rees's household at this late hour. Just before we paid off the link-man, Nath leaving that task for me, I spoke as he lowered his torch. He would extinguish that the moment his customers had gone. Torches cost money. He could find his way back in the dark, on the lookout for customers, shouting, "Loxo! Loxo!" "Loxo" is one of the names in Kregish for these torches of wood with their wrappings of tow and pitch. "What is your name, link-man?" I said.

"Naghan, if it pleases you, Notor."

"Well, Naghan, here are seven obs." Seven obs had once led me to a duel.

He took them, joyful at receiving twice his hire. Then I tossed him another coin. "And here is a silver sinver. I find I have suddenly lost my taste for silver."

"Thank you, Notor! May Havil bless you, Notor!" He would have babbled on, but, feeling the greatest get-onker in two worlds, I went inside and slammed the door so the frame rattled.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Of a fire and an abduction

The next morning, after I had taken an extensive bath to rid myself of the odor of the previous night, an incredible thing happened to me. I went along to one of the tailors' shops in the Street of Threads, which opened off the Kyro of the Vadvars, and there I bought a brand-new, brilliant green jacket.

I tried it on and, of course, it was far too narrow across the shoulders. The stitching creaked. The shopkeeper, a wizened gul with tired eyes and tailor's chalk marks all over his own worn but immaculate clothes, exclaimed in surprise. Most of the gul shops here were owned by Horters or nobles, and the guls must go home to their own quarters at night.

I felt the snow-white ling fur trimming. I am fond of ling fur. I think of my Delia and the Plains of Segesthes when I touch that smooth, silky fur.

“Can you alter it?”

“Indeed yes, Notor.”

“This afternoon, then.”

He bowed me out. He'd have to insert a fresh panel all the way up the back, a good two hands' breadths wider.

The incredible thing was, simply, that I felt pure relief at wearing a green jacket. Incredible — positively eerie! That I, a Krozair Brother, should actually feel I was cleaner wearing the green! Well, I think this goes to show how much that depravity of the night before, with Lem the Silver Leem, had affected me.

I promised myself as I strolled along toward Rees's villa, I would seek out Ormol that night. Too many side issues had taken my feet from the path. Mind you, it did occur to me to wonder just how the wise men of Vallia were performing with the information I had sent them via Delia and the emperor.

Just as I was going past a baker's shop and sniffing the delightful flavor of those long Kregan loaves, I was hailed by Tothord, the Elten of the Ruby Hills. He looked animated.

“Have you not heard, Hamun? They are bringing in a new batch of prisoners today! I shall watch the procession, and then it will be the Jikhorkdun for me!”

For him and half Ruathytu. This Tothord gloated over the torture of those poor devils of prisoners of war as they were thrust into the arena, to be slain by armored and armed men, or to be devoured by wild beasts. I did not keep up with the Jikhorkdun here in Ruathytu. It was messier even than the Arena in Huringa, where I had fought as a hyr-kaidur. They had been days, though!

I took an amith-trolley with Tothord to see the procession come splendidly down the Arrow of Hork to the Arena. I went merely because I thought I would carry the information and a report to Rees and Chido, and thereby cheer them.

A whole regiment of infantry preceded the prisoners. This regiment, and like a good spy I committed to memory their number and their strength, was the twenty-first regiment of foot, the numerals blazed proudly forth on their shields. Their band marched ahead, their colors flying in the radiance of the suns. Then came the prisoners. They staggered and shambled, loaded with chains, and I saw that many had bloody feet, after their long march up through Hamal from their homeland of Clef Pesquadrin, in the western portion of the Dawn Lands, under the shadow of the mountains.

They were slender, nut-brown-skinned men, with long, lank black hair that fell past their shoulders. Most had been stripped of their clothes, but some still wore scraps of leather and the remnants of once brave harness. Yes, they staggered and stumbled as they walked, for they had been pressed in the last stages of their march to reach the Great Jikhorkdun on the time allotted to them. I had to turn away. Tothord stood there on tiptoe, yelling with the rest of the onlookers, his mouth open and spittle upon his lips, his face frenzied.

Well, and might not just such a procession of beaten Hamalians be treated with the same reception, in a few years' time, when paraded through the streets of Vondium?

Then a tremendous shriek arose from the crowd and I swung back to look. The prisoners had passed and a second regiment swung along just coming into view. But, between them, snuffling with heads low, their matted hair combed into arrogant upflung cockscombs and streaming out behind, loping along on human hands and feet grown into ferocious killing instruments, their serrated jagged teeth gleaming — yes — jiklos. Manhounds!

There were twenty of them, held in leash by iron chains, and their keepers were armored and armed with long prodding goads, which they used with great care. These were the famous Manhounds of Faol, which is an island in the far northwest of Havilfar. How, then, had these beasts — beasts, for all they were apim! — come to be in the south? Then I realized there would have been ample time to have brought the manhounds into the parade and so give an extra titillation to the excited crowds. The prisoners from Clef Pesquadrin knew exactly what was in store for them in the Arena, poor devils.

Turning away, barely remembering I ought to note the number of this second regiment (the two hundred and fifty-first regiment of foot), I blundered off. No one paid me any attention. Because I had had my green coat burned and the new one was not yet ready, I had a gray coat slung over my shoulders. I went on toward Rees's villa.

The people of Ruathytu were still well fed, I reflected, with ample food and all the items of civilized living they required. If the clums could afford to buy it, there was food available for them also. No, this great empire of Hamal had not even begun to feel the pinch of war. Well, by Vox, I vowed, if they attacked Vallia they'd very soon learn of the miseries brought by war!

When I got to the villa I was met by distressing news.

Rees's Chamberlain met me in the entrance hall. He was a lion-man, also, immensely big and burly, with a fantastic ruffed mane of blowing gold. He wore a robe of decent white, as we had done back in Paline Valley, and a bunch of keys swung from his belt — as did a thraxter, also. He carried a wand of office. It appeared to be a solid gold wand; later I discovered it was mere sturm-wood gilded over. This man, Korgan the Keys, bore so sorrowful a look on his face I thought Rees was dead.

"No, Notor. He is not dead. But Doctor Larghos the Needle fears for his life. None may visit, save Lady Rashi."

"May Havil and Krun have him in their keeping," I said quickly, but not automatically. I promised myself that if Zair would condescend as a good god should to save the life of my friend, I would perform certain obligations when I once more trod good Zairian soil on the southern shore of the inner sea.

Chido and his father and sister had left for Eurys less than a bur ago. They had flown. The old Vad had said, icily I guessed, that if his son Chido's friend had chosen to stay out all night then they could not wait around on his pleasure to say Remberee. Well, that fitted the traditional character of the man, all fire and dignity and pride.

So, disconsolate, I wandered off, at a loose end in the sacred quarter of Ruathytu. Drig knows that is an open invitation for idle hands and mischief!

The rest of the day passed somehow. I took the baths of nine, and loitered about the colonnades, and took meals in the Kregan fashion, six or so square meals a day minimum. By mid-afternoon the street throngs had thinned considerably and the bestial drumroll bursting out of the Great Jikhorkdun and the other Arenas told where the people had gone.

Feeling pretty beastly myself, I took myself north over the Bridge of Swords that leads from the vast kyro before the Great Temple of Havil the Green, across the River Havilthytus. I walked along quietly, inconspicuous enough, toward the soldiers' quarter. Here the massive square-cut blocks of the barracks rose in neat regimental checkerboards. (I do not say like Jikaida boards, for I have a finicky sense of propriety in these matters.) I was able to get close enough to an outside block and to creep unobserved along the brick wall to the gateway with its wooden doors. The sentry went to sleep standing up, with my help, and I lowered him to the ground. From the bushes a mere four double-armfuls of brush and twigs, all nice and dry from the sun's radiance, were sufficient. I struck flame with flint and steel and set the brush alight. Waiting until after the flames took and abruptly crackled up fiercely, I ran off.

Moments later I again walked up the road out of the tree shadows. A little crowd of passersby had gathered and, together, in a companionable exchange of considered opinions, we watched the barrack block burn down.

The soldiers ran and the fire engines galloped up — quoffas going as fast as they could drawing huge vats of water, totrixes drawing the equipment — but they couldn't halt the flames. The smoke rose, a black smudge against the bright sky.

Petty? Of course. A great blow for Vallia against Hamal? Hardly. A venting of spleen, a letting of bile? Certainly.

But, then, it is true: Drig will find work for empty hands.

An aqueduct from the hills to the north passed close by these soldiers' barracks. Farther south it split into two, one branch going to the Great Temple and the other to the Hanitchik on its narrow island due east. I eyed the tall stone-built arches. Hmm. I remember that little "Hmm" most clearly.

Now, had I a few barrels of gunpowder . . . I sighed, and took myself off to prepare for the night.

On the way I called in at the tailor's. The green jacket was ready, the white ling fur soft and silky, magnificent. The fur was wasted as trimming, really, for it is long and lightweight, and ideal for warm coats. But such is the way of these decadent societies. I paid over the golden deldys and went back to the villa.

I had not expected my arrival to be greeted in the way it was.

Rashi, Rees's charming wife, clasped me into her arms sobbing and crying and shrieking all over me. Young Roban was standing in the dining room doorway, distraught and crying with huge dry sobs that shook his body. The chamberlain, Rorgan the Keys, lay stretched dead upon the floor, his blood dribbling away, for he had not died easily. I could see that, with the eyes of a warrior; but there were no dead bodies in a ring around him, as there surely had been when at last he had sunk down, his fouled thraxter snapped across.

Across the entrance hall the bodies of two slave girls lay sprawled indecently, where they had been flung forward by the stuxes that still jutted up from the center of their slender backs, the cruel iron heads deeply buried.

Other slaves showed terrified faces, peering around corners and from doorways. None would approach this frightful scene of carnage.

I held the shaking form of the lady of the house, and stared about. “*Rees!*” I shouted. “In Zair’s name! What has happened here?”

A voice quavered from the head of the stairs, an old man’s voice, and I looked up, over the trembling shoulders of Rashi.

“Hamun,” said Rees, the lion-man, from the head of the stairs, where he stood supported by two of his retainers. His face showed a sickly greenish-yellow. “Reesnik, my son — they have slain him . . . slain him . . .”

Then my friend, Trylon Rees of the Golden Wind, pitched full length down the stairs, out of the helpless feeble hands of his retainers. Gently I set Rashi aside and ran to Rees. He was not dead. I lifted my head and yelled.

“Doctor Larghos the Needle! Here, man, as you value your life!”

Larghos came forward, with blood smearing his white coat, holding his bag open. A spray of needles tinkled to the floor as he stumbled. I grasped him and held him up.

“I have seen—” he gasped. “Saffi is gone, gone!”

“Look to the Notor,” I growled.

The doctor, regaining some semblance of sanity, for it was not his blood that so dreadfully smeared his coat but the blood of the few guards left alive, bent to Rees and began his healing work.

Looking about, I tried to think. Someone in this madhouse must know what had happened . . . but then I knew too, with the sick feeling of dread certainty, just what devilish business had gone on here.

Vad Garnath had had his revenge! He had slain Rees’s son and taken away his daughter Saffi, to sell into slavery.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I give my word

Rees gave a long moan from the floor, a shuddering tortured cry of agony. I jumped across. Doctor Larghos looked up, his face contorted with grief.

“He will live, Notor, just. He must be taken upstairs, but carefully, for he is sore wounded internally. He will live, by the grace of Havil.”

“Men!” I bellowed. I looked around and half a dozen faces disappeared behind pillars and doorways. I leaped for the nearest and dragged out two retainers by the scruffs of their necks. “Help me with the master or you die!” I meant it, too. Between us, and with exquisite care, we took Rees back up the stairs and into his room where we placed him back in his bed. He groaned as he lay back, but his feverish eyes remained open, staring up at me with a glitter that told of the torture eating at his brain.

“Hamun — old friend—”

That was not strictly true, for we had known each other for so short a period. But what he felt I felt, too.

“Do not speak, Notor,” said Larghos.

“I must. It was Garnath, Hamun. Garnath!”

“Aye.” I fussed with the sheets. “The laws in Hamal—”

“The law cannot touch him, for there is no — no proof.” Talking was agony for him, but he forced the words out. “I know it was Garnath. But all who saw him are dead — dead, like Reesnik.”

Doctor Larghos tried to silence him, but the lion-man snarled — a little, weak snarl — and said in a breathy whisper: “I would go seek him out and demand just restitution, Hamun. But—” His glazed eyes rolled and he looked down the bed. “I — am not — able.”

What could I do?

What could I say?

I do not make friends lightly. I value those I have.

I gently pressed his shoulder back to the pillow. I stared down into his lion-face.

“I will go, Rees. I will tear the rast to pieces if necessary.”

“Saffi . . .”

So, I had to say it.

“I will bring Saffi home, Rees, safe and sound, if she lives.” Then I saw the pain in his eyes, and so I added quickly: “She does live, Rees. Believe in that.”

He nodded and a last whisper came from him just before Larghos thrust in the Notor Zan needle that would put him into a deep sleep. “I trust you, old fellow. Saffi . . .”

I stepped back from the bed.

I had given my word. I would break my word to Lem the Silver Leem, to an overlord of Magdag. But not to Rees, not to a friend.

Tonight I was to go to seek Ormol, and in some foul dopa den bribe him to the secret Vallia would need. I had perjured myself in this fresh promise. Delia would understand and forgive me, but I would not forgive myself. What was the life of the daughter of an enemy of Vallia worth? Nothing? Nothing!

This brilliant golden beauty, Saffi — she was Hamalian. I owed my loyalty and devotion to my Delia, to her father the emperor, and to my lands of Valka and Vallia. If I failed, and the Hamalians attacked Valka, and all my wonderful island was laid in black ruins . . .? Would not the ravished land, the widows and orphans, all shriek aloud to Opaz for just vengeance upon me?

But — Rees was a friend and I had given my word.

Perhaps there was yet a way. Hamal might yet have her hand stayed by events. There might yet be time.

So I tried to convince myself as I went to the room allotted to me in Rees's villa.

I donned my old scarlet breechclout. Over that I drew a dark blue shirt and a pair of dark blue trousers. I strapped on Delia's rapier and dagger. I hung a quiver of terchicks over my right shoulder, the small and deadly throwing knives snugged to hand. On my right hip went the ever-faithful sailor's knife. Then I swathed my gray cape about the whole and went out — and had to return to put on my Hamalese boots. I am accustomed when hunting to go barefoot.

Rashi sat by her husband's bedside and I did not disturb her. I saw Roban. What could I say? Contenting myself with all that could be said, bidding him lift up his chin and stop crying and remember he was now and for a time the head of the household, I gave him a fine left-hand dagger, which I had brought from my room with this in mind.

"Roban. Now you must become a man." He was only twelve. I had seen young Pando, at ten, so I knew. Had I not myself served in the horrific conditions of a powder monkey? "Take this dagger. Protect your mother and your father. If all goes well I shall return before the suns rise."

"Yes, Hamun," he said. His words were like flat stones beneath a calsany cart. I turned, my cloak flaring, and left.

I knew where Vad Garnath lived.

I am no great believer in revenge. It saps the spirit of a man. But, equally, I am no believer in the slaying of seventeen-year-old young men and the kidnapping of their beautiful seventeen-year-old sisters.

Garnath's opulent villa lay in darkness save for one window, shuttered and bolted, through the chinks of which showed the harsh light of an oil lamp. I forced the bolt. I smashed the window. I leaped through.

A gray-haired old crone met me, screaming, her wrinkled face working. She wore a night-robe, and she thought I brought her death.

"Listen to me, old woman. Where is the Vad?"

She could not speak for a moment. Then: "Gone, master, gone!"

"Aye, I know that. The villa is in darkness and there are no guards."

"There are werstings in the grounds."

"I saw none." I glared at her. "But if I see them when I go they will be dead. Now, tell me. Where is the Vad?"

"I do not know, master! He is gone, gone!"

She was half paralyzed by fear. I said: "Have you seen anything of a Numim girl brought here?"

She shook her head, but by that gesture I saw she lied. I shook her, gently, for I feared that she would break to pieces.

"Where did they take the Numim girl?"

She hesitated, and then burst out: “The Vad took her with him. She was bound. She wept.”

“She wept,” I said. My anger was horrible, even to me.

But I saw this poor old crone knew no more. There were no guards left, which meant Garnath trusted to the werstings to protect his property. The watch would also keep an eye out, as they did under the laws. There was nothing more here. I went back. On the way I was forced to slay a wersting. I kicked the black-and-white-striped carcass out of the way and ran swiftly into the shadows. Above me floated She of the Veils, casting sharp and pink-rimmed shadows in the moonlight.

The blood thumped through my body. By Zim-Zair! It had been too long since I had indulged in exercise of this kind. But there was a gorgeous Numim girl to be saved, and a foul Vad to be dealt with. I had no time to exult. The dismal truth was that I had no clue whatsoever. Saffi could have been taken anywhere, for a girl of her beauty would find a ready market anywhere in Havilfar.

An acquaintance of Vad Garnath’s might know where the rast had taken himself off to. Even if he had had the girl sold by an agent, I would choke him until he told me the name.

The streets of Ruathytu lay golden and pink under the moon. Soon the Maiden with the Many Smiles would lift above the horizon and pour her golden light down along the waters of the River Havilthytus. People glanced at me as I passed; they must have seen enough of my face not to offer to halt me. No sounds of beasts or howling slaves reached me as I pulled the ornate bronze bellpull at Elten Nath’s door. I hammered and banged, and drew my dagger and clanged and clattered the heavy steel wrap-over guard against the iron-headed nails studding the lenken door.

A sleepy slave with a lamp opened the inspection grille.

“Open quickly, man of little sense! Open quickly that I may not tell Elten Nath of your mischief and your insolence!”

But he wasn’t going to open the door on that bluster.

“The master sleeps, Notor. Go away!”

There just was not time to argue. There was no time, either, to smash the door down. Every mur I delayed meant that Saffi was being taken farther and farther into degradation and slavery. I ran around the side of the building and a patrolling Rapa, attracted by the uproar, had the misfortune to appear and the greater misfortune to go to sleep standing up. I did not ease him to the ground, but ran on. The first feasible window I came across would have to do. It was narrow and barred. I took the bars in my fists and bunched my muscles, compressing all the blocky power of my back that had pulled an oar in a damned Magdaggian swifter, and I wrenched. The bars did not bend. They ripped shatteringly from their stone sockets. Into the window I went and through the room into the corridor where half a dozen lamps showed me doors and the layout. To find the bed chamber of Nath na Maharlad was the work of throwing open every door until I looked in on a naked girl half draped across a bed, her silver chains in the style called nohnam, her silks flowing upon the carpet. The Elten Nath lay asleep. In his night attire his pudginess was revealed by the swell of his stomach. His thin, lank hair lay untidily upon his skull, and his flabby lips were parted as he snored. I took him around the throat beneath the lowest of his chins and lifted him up and shook him.

His eyelids snapped up.

I let him see my face.

I loosened my grip and I said: “Tell me where Vad Garnath is or you are a dead man.”

“You maniac!” he started. But I squeezed and his eyes popped. I released him a little and he said, choking, “I do not know!”

A flutter of movement at my side caught the tail of my eye. I half turned. The Chail Sheom, her shoulders naked, her chains glittering in the samphron lamp’s gleam, was about to plunge a curved jeweled dagger into my side. With the old defender’s kick I let her have the side of my foot across the throat. She catapulted across the room and lay still. I looked back at the Elten.

“If you wish to die I will accommodate you, Nath. Tell me: where is Garnath?”

“You are crazed, mad, Hamun! Let me breathe, for the sake of Lem — for sweet Havil’s sake!”

So, given the opening, I said in a voice I forced into a solemn tone: “It is vitally important I find Garnath, in the name of he of the silver flanks.”

“Let my throat go, you onker! I will tell you all I know. For the sweet silver sake of Lem. Hamun! My throat!”

I let my constricting fingers loosen.

“May Ghoomshah the Lubricious moisten my throat, Hamun! You have a grip like a jiklo!” Unsteadily, Elten Nath reached across the bed for a silver goblet on a side table, poured himself wine. I let him. He drank, making wet slobbering sounds, swallowing convulsively. He eyed me. “If you have done Gilda a mischief” — he nodded at the girl, collapsed in her chains, her hair falling about her naked shoulders — “I will charge you.”

“Send the bill, Nath, but, for the sake of the Silver Lem himself, where is Vad Garnath?”

He worked his throat muscles. “I do not know.” He winced back automatically. “I swear it! Is this Lem’s business?”

“Yes,” I said.

“You are not of our lodge, Hamun. Vad Garnath as Hyr-Majister has ingress and privileges over many of the lodges of Ruathytu.”

“Yes,” I said again. “But where is he now?”

The impression came over me, sinkingly, that this fat Elten was not lying. “I do not know, Hamun. He mentioned a business deal, he mentioned a trip into the country, yes, that is true. Also, he mentioned Rosil na Morcray. You know, Hamun, the Chuktar Strom—”

“Yes, yes, I know that Katak. Tell me, Nath!”

“I do not know! They are gone — the Vad and the Chuktar Strom, together. They did not confide in me.”

As I decided that this fat lump had nothing to tell me my face lost all semblance of the inanity that had characterized it as Hamun ham Farthytu.

“By Lem!” whispered the Elten Nath of Maharlad. “You look a very devil! Do you seek the Vad to slay him?”

Common sense came back.

“No. It is on Lem’s business.” Then, thinking he might know more, I added: “I am not of your lodge, Nath, being from the Lodge of the Thoth. But it is important for you to tell me.”

He shook his head. I had to swallow my disappointment.

“I will let myself out of the front door, Nath.” He contented himself with a nod and a grunt and began to get out of the bed to see about his slave girl, Gilda. This house, like many built in the sacred quarter, was possessed of windows onto the street. Many, instead of having a blank outer wall, contained arcades of shops along the outer walls, which the wealthy occupants of the villas let out to guls. This system paid good dividends all around. Now I padded to the door. The doorman, unnerved, I think, by my apparently nervous habit of half-drawing the rapier and thunking it back into the scabbard, rapidly unbolted and unbarred the door. I walked out into the pink-lit night.

I might as well have done nothing for all the good I had done in chasing after Saffi, the golden lion-maid. The truth of the matter was, I was a completely useless get-onker. As the Gdoinye, the golden and scarlet raptor of the Star Lords would shriek offensively down at me, I was a stupid onker of onkers, and deserved all the misery I laid up in store for myself. There can be no worse feeling, I imagine, than this sense of self-insignificance, in the world of ordinary emotions. Had hubris at last given me my death blow?

Who can say where the thought came from? I do not think the Savanti had anything to do with it. Perhaps the Star Lords sent the stray thought into my blockheaded skull, to save me from myself and so preserve my miserable carcass for their future requirements upon Kregen; in any case, the thought ghosted in.

On the instant I went haring through the alleyways, rushing headlong, not caring what the passersby might care to think.

Memories of that mad dash back to Rees’s house remain vague. A sense of urgency bloated me, the feeling that I would fail if I did not exert the last breath in my body. I recall a stocky, gorgeously clad noble, arrogant with self-importance, failing to get out of my way in time. Somehow the fool tumbled head over heels, amid the yells of his retainers, into one of the sunken cesspits whose cover, alas for the wretch, splintered under the impact of his gross body. I do not think any one of his party followed me. At least my rapier blade was not fouled with blood.

I entered Rees’s house in a whirl, and Rashi, the tears dried upon her cheeks, and Roban, manfully clutching the main-gauche I had given him, and the slaves, walking small, looked at me in alarm.

Jiktar Horan, Rees’s guard commander, had just returned — to horror. He tried to get some sense out of me, and I began to put pieces together from what he told me. Jiktar Horan and a strong party of his men — lion-men all — had been decoyed away on a pretext, and the guard thus reduced had no chance against Vad Garnath’s stikitches (assassins). From Horan I learned something that redoubled, if that were possible, the anger consuming me. Rees’s own guards had gone on an errand similar to that when they

had rescued me earlier, answering Nulty's desperate plea. And Rees had said nothing! He had not reproached me! Clearly, he must have realized far too late it had been a trick. The anger that consumed me — how natural it must have been at the time, how human, and yet, looking back, how futile and shameful a thing it was.

I spoke rationally, as I thought, to Rashi. "Give me a small garment of Saffi's."

She thought a moment, then stammered, "A scarf, Hamun? One of Saffi's scarves?"

"Excellent, Rashi. I will take it now."

They all jumped as I said the word "now" — yet I thought I spoke most gently.

The scarf slipped sensually into my hands, sensil, that superfine form of silk, and with golden threads artfully woven into it so that it glittered. I tucked it down into my old scarlet breechclout, under my shirt.

They all clamored to know if I had found Saffi or a clue, and I said, again rationally, that I had not, but that I would find out before Far and Havil rose in the sky in the morning.

Then, with my weapons about me, I raced into the moonshot darkness. I headed directly for the massive pile of the palace on its artificial island in its artificial lake in the River Havilthytus. Directly for the queen's palace of Hammabi el Lamma I ran, and I felt no sorrow for any who sought to bar my way.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A golden scarf serves destiny

The moons of Kregen cast down their pink-gold light upon the uprearing many-pinnacled bulk of Hammabi el Lamma. A soft night wind whispered among the towers and eaves, and ruffled the ocher waters of the River Havilthytus. I stared with intemperate and yet, thankfully, still calculating eyes upon the night scene along the waterfront. Most of Ruathytu's commerce is carried on at night, with the huge, overloaded quoffa carts bringing in the produce of the countryside and taking out the refuse. Gangs of slaves work by the light of the moons repairing roads and bridges, cleaning the streets, seeing to it that when Far and Havil rise and cast down that glorious opaline radiance of the Suns of Scorpio the city is sweet and clean for the day — as demanded by the laws of Hamal.

I gripped my rapier hilt. In that evil palace ruled by the iron hand of tyranny lay the answer to my quest. The evil was certain, for Queen Thyllis ruled here. The answer was not so certain, and I begged Zair for help in my search. Nothing was certain, save that I must break into the palace before anything else might be done.

You who have listened to these tapes will by now have a fair-to-middling grasp of the layout of Ruathytu, and will know that not a single bridge connected the artificial island of the palace of Hammabi el Lamma to either bank of the river.

The rulers of Ruathytu preferred this system. A riotous mob would be put to some pains to take boats and row to attack the palace, whereas they would easily stream, shouting and raving, across the stones of a bridge.

Gangs of slaves in the gray slave breechclouts worked here; but easy though it might have been for me to have exchanged my clothes for theirs, and disguised myself and joined them, I did not want to enter

the palace unarmed and disadvantaged.

With a quick thought to Zair — and, to be truthful, to Opaz and Djan, too — I lowered myself noiselessly and without a ripple into the water. I swam gently across the Havilthytus out of observation, to land on the island at its westerly point. Water dribbled from me as I cautiously prowled along the rocky foreshore, half in water, half hopping from rock to rock, to make my way to the wicket gate from which King Doghamrei had had his lackey Derson Ob-Eye carry me, drugged, to what both thought would be my death.

The wicket was closed fast.

“By the Black Chunkrah!” I said viciously. “I’ll rouse some rast within, else sink me!”

The Hamalese boots slung about my neck for the swim and the clamber along the rocks thudded against the door. After a bit I pulled them on and then kicked the door, hard.

“Come on! Come on!” I bellowed.

The night scent of moon-blooms wafted down from dirt-filled crevices in the rocks. The water at my back gurgled and splashed as it ran past to the sea. The moons shed light enough to see the raised venous wood of the door, and the iron bolt-heads, lacquered against rust. I kicked again, shouting.

The door groaned.

This postern was heavily defended by murdering holes let into the overhang of rock above. A crack of light shafted out past the edge of the door. I took the lenk into my hands and pulled. The cautiously pushing guard gasped as he was yanked forward by the door.

“Rast!” I bellowed, swirling my cape. “Must the Queen’s merker wait for offal like you?”

He cringed. The torch quivered in his hand, producing distorted shadows.

“I crave indulgence, Notor—” he began.

“You will hear more of this, onker,” I said, and I strode past. I made of my words and of my striding imperious gestures, for this was the way I planned to return and I must impress the guard.

I brushed past him, seeing the thraxter naked in his right hand, the torch uplifted in his left. Over the slimy stones I strode where I had once waited, drugged and paralyzed, for King Doghamrei to give his last evil orders to Derson Ob-Eye. Up the flang-infested corridors, where streamers like Spanish moss caught and clung, I barged on with absolute confidence until I rounded a corner of the stairs. Then I paused to consider. I had only the vaguest idea of directions. A merker, as you know, is a Kregan messenger who travels swiftly through the air astride a fluttelepper or volclepper. It was not too outrageous for such a one to use this quiet postern gate. If the guard gave a thought to the absence of a saddle-bird and my wet clothes he would put two and two together and snigger at the thought I had fallen off into the river.

As I mounted higher into the palace, more and more people became evident, going about their never-ending business of keeping the queen’s palace operating. Most were slaves, too busy with their work and their miseries to bother over me. I was not challenged by any of the slave-masters, and for this — for their sakes — I was glad.

In a rock cavern I saw three Katakis prodding and lashing a group of slaves about some groaning contrivance, and I frowned. I had no time to ponder the significance of this new phenomenon of Katakis, those evil master-slavers from the Shrouded Sea, venturing afield, for they usually keep close to the lands bordering the Shrouded Sea, as you know. Vad Garnath was the man for whose blood I was engaged, and he had employed a Katakis, this Chuktar Strom, to do his dirty business for him.

So I pressed on — my face set into a harsh and ugly mask of self-possessed fury, very proper for a high official of the queen's — and came at last to a corridor where the floor had been laid with blue and white mosaics, and the walls hung with cheap tapestries from Hennardrin. Here I recognized a large and repulsive statue of a warrior mounted on a totrix represented in the act of slashing his thraxter through the neck of a Chulik mercenary. I had passed this statue in its niche on my way from my cell to the rooms of Queen Thyllis. Anyway, the statue represented pure wishful thinking. Any Chulik mercenary worth his salt would have slipped that thraxter blow and sunk his weapon into the underbelly of the totrix and cut the rider down as he tumbled off.

A few paces down a corridor where the thin oil lamps glowed stood a female slave, clad in the gray slave breech-clout, with a silver-tissue bodice, and a rope of gilt chains about her shoulders and waist. She carried a wooden tray on which stood a fat purple bottle, three silver goblets, and a silver dish partly filled with palines, their bright yellow rotundity very reassuring. I beckoned to her.

“Yes, Notor,” she whispered, her head bent.

I took a paline, and chewed it. Each goblet contained the lees of wine. The bottle was empty.

“I seek Que-si-Rening, slave,” I said. I made myself speak with the contemptuous air of absolute authority the despicable slave-owners use to their human chattel. The girl was apim; her dark hair was drawn back and tied with a single strand of dried grass. She lifted her face to me, and I saw she had been weeping. Her problems were remote to me then, and I sorrow for that now. But there are many slaves on Kregen, and my duty lay to Saffi first, at that juncture. I knew that one day slavery would be abolished on Kregen, for I had sworn it; but, to my shame, that day was not yet, there in the tawdry glamour of the palace of Queen Thyllis.

“He sleeps, Notor.”

“Show me his room.”

She bowed her head again, meekly, for she had seen my rapier and knew I was of the nobility of Hamal. We went along the corridor, then into an intersecting one, and I took another paline, chewing with great satisfaction. We came to a low door, arched and cut from the living rock of the old island on which the artificial island had been reared.

The girl said, “Notor, this is his door.”

“Be off with you, wench, about your business.”

I knocked upon the door.

I made the knock light and respectful.

All the pent-up anguish at the thought of what was happening to Rees's daughter, Saffi, at this very moment boiled and bubbled in me, and yet I had to proceed with caution. I could understand why I felt

so strongly about Saffi, whom I had met only so recently, for in her plight and in her beauty I was reminded of Delia and of what I had endured when I had for a space lost her. Truth to tell, during that dreadful time I might have been searching for the glorious Delia herself, my emotions engaged on her behalf for this golden lion-maid.

For all my prudence, however, after I had knocked thus respectfully, I did not wait for a summons to enter but pushed the door open and shouldered my way into the chamber.

The rock walls showed here and there, angular and harsh, beneath the tapestries. Again, these were cheap drapes from Hennardrin, that country in the extreme northwest of Havilfar where, I supposed, some fugitives from Walfarg had settled and given the inhabitants the thirst for if not the skill to produce the marvelous tapestries of old Walfarg. Well-upholstered sturm-wood furniture, and a mass of fleecy ponsho-skins scattered upon the carpeted floor, showed that Que-si-Rening valued his bones and liked his comfort. He sat up now in a massive winged armchair, a musty book open before him, and I saw in his eyes that distant drugged look that overtakes one who is deeply engrossed in the pages of a *hyr-lif*.

His vision cleared quickly enough when he saw me.

Ready for him to cry out or attempt to blast me with a blood-curdling curse, I had no need to leap forward to silence him.

He eyed me with no surprise beyond a faint quiver of his left eyebrow.

“You are unceremonious about your entrances, Bagor ti Hemlad.”

“Aye, San,” I said, “for I come upon a pressing business.”

This man had to be handled with care.

He gestured me to the chair facing his own. His long, mournful face with its betraying yellowish cast emphasized by two thin black moustaches curving down past his rat-trap of a mouth gave no impression of offense or of condemnation. His black boot-button eyes shone in the samphron-lamp’s glow, half concealed by his heavy, drooping eyelids. His presence was a tangible thing in the chamber, and his silk gown with its maze of arcane symbols and embroidered runes heightened the eerie effect that would have intimidated any slave bold enough to push in here.

The credulous of Kregen credit these Wizards of Loh with phenomenal powers, believing in their occult authority and in their capacity to blast with a curse or a spell. For myself, I own, by Zair, that there is a great deal more to be learned of the Wizards of Loh before the final verdict may safely be given.

“You did not expect to see me, San.” I made of this either a question or a statement, and sat back for him to pick up what end of the stick he cared. He might not know that I had been drugged and spirited away from here, to be tossed overboard from a skyship, drugged, chained, and in flames. If he did know, I fancied he itched to comprehend how the devil I had clawed my way back from the Ice Floes of Sicce!

“Does the Queen know you visit me, Bagor?”

“No,” I said. Bagor ti Hemlad was the name by which I was known to this Wizard of Loh. I went on before he could reply. “I once knew a famed Wizard, San, as I told you, and for a service I was able to render him he went into *lupu* for me, and was able to see at a distance.”

Rening nodded his head. "This is so." The lamplight gleamed from his bright red Lohvian hair. "If you wish me to perform a similar service for you, what have you done to requite me?"

I laughed. I, Dray Prescot, laughed.

"You know King Doghamrei. You understood the purpose of his questions when he had you sound me out. Well, I fancy my service to you will be handsomely rendered in the future, and not too far off, at that."

We had set up a kind of mute alliance, this wizard and I, when that nurdling blunderer King Doghamrei had attempted to find out the queen's intentions toward me. I was counting on that friendship now.

"You believe, then, Bagor, that a Wizard of Loh may look into the future?"

Careful! I had to tread warily here. I leaned forward.

"As to that, San, I do not profess to know. This famed wizard of whom I speak went into lupu and told me of the whereabouts and the fortunes of a woman at a distance."

He nodded. "It can be done. But she was known to him, I daresay."

"He knew of one close to her."

"Do I know the person?"

I took out Saffi's silk scarf. "If you do not, this is her scarf. I ask of you, San, tell me where she is!"

For a moment I thought he would refuse. But I think he caught something of my urgency, though I had myself well under control now. He stood up and stretched, and I swear his old bones creaked, and he looked down at me, pondering.

"Very well, Bagor ti Hemlad. For the future, then."

This business of going into lupu both fascinated and repelled me. I had seen the wizard Lu-si-Yuong do this thing in the Hostile Territories of distant Turismond. Images of Lilah, a Queen of Pain of Loh, and Seg Segutorio, my good friend, ghosted up in my mind. Then I came back to the present as Que-si-Rening went through his ritual.

Squatting down on a ponsho-skin and covering his eyes with his hands, Que-si-Rening threw his head back and sat silent and unmoving. The samphron-oil lamp glistened its light across his red hair. This is the first stage of lupu, when the ib is rendered powerful and the cords binding the immaterial to the material attenuate.

Saffi's golden scarf lay draped across his bent bony knees, a glittering gossamer wisp of beauty. Presently the wizard began to tremble. His thin body shuddered so that his ornate silken robes shook. Slowly he drew down his hands from before his face. His eyeballs were turned up, all but invisible, the whites twin crescents eating at an onlooker's sanity. His clawlike hands fell to the scarf, began to stroke it, pulling through one fist and then the other.

An eerie, funereal cry broke chillingly from Rening.

Tottering, he stood up, his arms widespread, and he began to gyrate, faster and faster, like a whirling Dervish, spinning around and around. As he reeled Saffi's scarf whirled about him, golden and streaming in the oil-lamp's gleam.

Abruptly, Que-si-Rening sank to the ground, placed both hands flat against the ponsho-fleece, and, throwing back his head, stared at me with his eyes wide and drugged and *knowing*.

The wise men who study the literature of Kregen often divide the sprawling confused mass of myth and legend into three distinct classes. One class consists of those great stories known all over that marvelous world: fables like *The Quest of Tyr Nath* and *Canticles of the Rose City*. Another brings together the local legends applicable to certain areas of the planet, song-cycles of tongues attributable to localities, of which *The Triumph of the Gods* from Djanduin is a fair example. But all classes of myth and legend possess a sub-classification: the legends in which a Wizard of Loh figures always command a special and respectful place in the tally of Kregen lore.

Despite my pragmatic adherence to known facts, I had to concede that this wizard, looking at me so shrewdly, *knew*.

“What do you see, San?”

If I spoke more roughly than a Wizard of Loh might expect, Que-si-Rening understood, for he himself had been subjected to indignity enough in this forced exile from his homeland to recognize another in the same straits. He must, I considered, know enough about this uncouth Bagor ti Hemlad to understand he was no ordinary slave, no ordinary Horter or noble. For a Wizard of Loh, these distinctions verged on the hazy line of indifference.

He handed me the scarf.

“I have seen the person who had worn this scarf. I recognized two of her companions.”

I did not speak.

“Vad Garnath. I saw him standing with the wind in his face, the stars above, the great wastes burning beneath. And with him stood that evil Katakai with the bladed tail.”

I waited.

“They fly north.”

I said nothing.

“They take the girl for their own purposes far to the northwest. There is more I cannot tell you of, for it lies between Phu-si-Yantong and me. The girl is of no importance, a cipher. She is being sold to the masters of the Manhounds of Faol as a mere bargaining piece.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Flutsmen guard the skies

The Manhounds of Antares!

Saffi would be callously driven through the jungles and the plains in a vain pathetic effort to outrun the jiklos and the hunters who sought their pleasure in this vicious sport. The Manhounds of Faol with their jagged fangs and sharp claws would rend her soft golden body, and the quarrels from the crossbows of the mighty hunters would plunge bloodily — No! I would not allow Saffi to be used as human quarry for the Manhounds of Antares.

I wrenched the door open not knowing how I had crossed the carpeted floor before Que-si-Rening spoke again.

“Bagor!” He stretched out his hand as I glanced back. “Take care. The Queen keeps me secret. If you betray me it will be the Heavenly Mines for us both.”

“What do you know of the Heavenly Mines?”

“Enough to know I would prefer to die torn to pieces in the Jikhorkdun than labor in the Heavenly Mines.”

“Then you are a wise man.”

There was no more time for talk. Much must be done, and at once. I did remember to thank the Wizard of Loh. When I prowled back down past the sleazy lower levels of the palace, which supported in the physical and laboring senses the sumptuous and decadent magnificence aloft, I had scarcely a care for whomever I might meet. I have no recollection of slaying a soul, and of sending only one overpompous and inquisitive slave overseer to sleep. I tapped him on the skull with great moderation, I believe. But my next coherent memory is of dragging myself up out of the water of the Havilthytus and, hitching up my rapier and pulling my boots on, of racing through the paling light toward Rees’s villa.

They let me in as the twin suns fully cleared the city skyline.

The news must be told, no matter how cruel and bitter.

Rashi shrieked and fainted away into the arms of her maids.

Roban brandished the main-gauche and swore to accompany me.

I said to Jiktar Horan: “See that this imp remains safely indoors, Jiktar.”

“Aye, Notor.” This Horan, a ferociously maned Numim, pulled his golden ruff of hair. “But the manhounds are a bad business. We will need a larger voller than any here.”

“No time for that, Jiktar. I am leaving now. I will take provisions.” I bent my eye upon the slave who had been appointed overseer, and he ducked his head and caused a great scuffle among the others as they ran to provision Rees’s small flier. This voller would take me, and me alone. He travels fastest who travels alone. That is not always true, but, by Zim-Zair, it would be true now.

I gave Jiktar Horan precise information on the island of Faol and of the whereabouts of the infamous manhounds. This so-called sport of hunting humans is kept veiled, half hinted at, not openly discussed in Havilfar. Encar Capela, the Kov of Faol, still remained a mystery to me, for I had never met him. I promised myself a much needed meeting one of these fine days. This Capela held a fanatical pride in his packs of bloodthirsty jiklos, and, as I well knew, the rich from all Havilfar patronized his devilishly

planned hunting expeditions. I told Horan that if he ran into trouble he could do worse than seek assistance from the Trylon of South Faol, below the river, for this Trylon — and I did not know if he was truly aware of what went on in North Faol across the river — held himself and his people aloof from Encar Capela.

“I have heard whispers, sniggers, obscene hints about this hunt they call the Great Jikai,” said Jiktat Horan. “This nulsh of a Kov of North Faol requires to see his head jumping about on the floor, by Krun!”

“I’m with you in that, Horan.”

Among the provisions piled into the little voller were crossbows, sheaves of quarrels, thraxters, shields, stuxes, so that when I took off and shouted down Remberree I felt I sailed into action with a veritable arsenal about me. This was no mere fad, no stupid overkill; every weapon might be essential. On that beautiful yet harsh and cruel world of Kregen a man’s weapons stand between him and ever-present death.

My course lay northwest across Hamal until I reached the southernmost limit of Skull Bay, where I would turn almost due west with just enough northing in my flight to take me over the jungles and past Hennardrin to the island of Faol. This route avoided the difficult passage of the Mountains of the West, where even now the armies of Hamal clashed with the wild men from the wastelands beyond. The voller would carry me to the north of Paline Valley.

Thrusting the speed lever fully forward I let the flier pelt ahead through the thin air. The magical power contained in the silver boxes hurtling me on was the secret that had brought me to Hamal. I had willfully neglected that duty. I do not think I spent a pleasant flight, but I managed to doze off from time to time, for I had not slept for many burs. By the time I reached Gilmoy and saw again that fantastic finger of scintillating white rock thrusting upward stark into the air I had regained some little grasp on sanity.

The White Rock of Gilmoy, famed throughout Havilfar, passed away below and I headed directly for the foul dens of the Manhounds of Faol.

It took me a complete Kregen day and night to fly from Ruathytu to Faol, and I admit I pressed the voller harshly, the speed lever over to the full all the way.

It was a handful of burs into the morning when I slanted down over the river separating Urn Faol from Thoth Faol. I flew on more carefully now, on the lookout for fliers above and riders below.

Below me were those places where I had run with screaming panic-stricken people about me, helpless quarry for the vicious fangs of the jiklos, sport for the rich hunters in their Great Jikai. But there was no time now to think of all those people, and what had become of them. Now I had to make my way into the barred cages and caves where the people to be used as quarry were kept, and seek out Saffi, and somehow bring her out safely.

Was that arrogant slave-master, Nalgre, still lording it over the miserable people he organized into parties to be hunted to death? Him and his jiklo pet, the lascivious female jiklo with the red bolero jacket and the blonde crusted hair — these two symbolized the horrific power of the Jikai that used manhounds to scent the prey, and that prey as human as the hunters, as human as the jiklos themselves!

Although, I truly believed then, the manhounds were rapidly losing the last vestiges of true humanity and were lapsing back into primordial savagery.

Up here only a few degrees south of the equator the weather was warm enough for me to throw off the blue shirt and trousers, to kick off the boots. Once more I was ready for action clad only in my old scarlet breechclout, my weapons about me, a few oddments of gear in a lesten-hide purse at my waist.

Inquiries made some time ago had given me the name of the Kov of Faol's capital city, Smerdislad, but I would avoid the place. The Kov's lands were mainly untended, agriculture existed merely on a subsistence level, but the jungles rioted, for all his wealth came from the manhounds. In his evil hunts and in the breeding and selling of jiklos lay his fortunes. So Smerdislad existed to bolster Encar Capela's grandiose dreams of power and wealth; the caves and cages of the poor devils who ran shrieking from his slaving jiklos were far removed from his glittering city.

Despite my frantic rush through the sky I had a neat and workmanlike plan arranged in my head. By Zair! If I couldn't get my fingers around the throat of that arrogant nulsh Nalgre and choke a little sense into him, my name wasn't Dray Prescott!

Well, man grows corn for Zair to sickle, which is another way of saying man sows and Opaz reaps. I saw the skein of fluttrells, high, as I came over the straggling edge of the jungle. I squinted up against the emerald and ruby fires. Black and ominous, the fluttrells hung there, stark against the radiance. In clear air a fast voller can outrun a saddle-bird with ease; Rees's personal flier was very fast, as I had proved.

When the fluttrells, their wings half folded to give them extra speed in the dive, slanted in for the attack head on, I thought in my pride at Delia's masterly teaching of the ways of airboats that I could simply shoot ahead, passing either under them or through them, I didn't much care which.

The flutsmen up there were reiving mercenaries of the skies, hiring themselves out to anyone who cared to pay their exorbitant fees for dirty work. The weapon-glint brought a rick to my lips. By Krun! If they wanted a fight I'd not oblige them! I wanted simply to burst through and away, to Saffi; I did not wish to have to make a detour here.

The flutleader was clever, I will grant the cramph that.

He split his forces and sent a half-skein to box me in on either side. I bored for the gap. I could see the flutsmen now, astride the fluttrells, and as I neared them, crossbow bolts hissed through the air toward me. I swerved the flier. Another shower passed to starboard. Again I swerved. A third flight of bolts hissed away to larboard.

I felt I was through the gap. I half turned to stare up as the fluttrells opened their wings to plane up out of that mad downward dive; and I never knew, to this day, just what devil it was who chunked a crossbow quarrel through the light skinning of the flier and into the lenk and bronze orbs supporting the flier's silver boxes.

The voller went mad.

It flipped end over end. I clung on for dear life. It pirouetted up for the sky, and fell on its beam ends, and smashed toward the trees. I gasped as wind buffeted me and tree branches lashed my body. Down through the branches crashed the flier, and the devils up there were still shooting at me, crossbow bolts hissing and thudding into the trunk as I went spinning and crashing down. All the stuffing was knocked out of me. I recall the impression of the jungle coming up like a gigantic green fist.

Notor Zan, with whom I have had a nodding acquaintance in my spirited times on Kregen, came up with

outstretched hand. He did not wish to shake hands with me, though; the final blow stretched me senseless across a branch a hundred feet up in the fetid air of the jungle.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Into the caverns of the manhounds

How are the mighty fallen! How ridiculous I, Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy, Lord of Strombor, must appear in this undignified descent to earth. With what furious oaths I had started out to rescue Saffi, the golden lion-maid, and with what painful shamefulness had I carried out that task!

I knew where I was when I awoke — instantly.

Around me sounded the sob and moan of slaves. In my nostrils was the stale stench of naked and unwashed humanity. I opened my eyes and, yes, there were the crumbling and water-soaked cave walls, and the solid lenken logs used as bars to seal off the opening. Beyond was the jungle clearing, lined with the papishin-leaved huts of the heavily armed, patrolling guards.

My head ached, but that would clear. This time I had not been hurled into this situation by the Star Lords. Of late those aloof and unknowable beings had left me alone and had not called on me to hurl myself headlong into some desperate scrape to rescue a wight whose eventual destiny they could read and influence. But, all the same, I was in the same fix. I was naked and unarmed and pressed into a slave bagnio. From the masses of milling slaves about me, the guards would bring out a few at a time to be herded into the jungle or onto the open lands to be hunted. Were those treacherous guides still going out with the quarry, bolstering their courage with false stories of help and so making them run with good heart? Well, no doubt, in Zair's good time I would find out.

Then the truth in all its awful humbling effect hit me. Saffi! I had come to rescue her, and was now myself merely another prisoner!

With that I lurched to my feet. The pains in my head and back must be ignored. All around me in the cave stood or sat or lay the other miserable occupants. I guessed that the horn soon would blow for mealtime; then there would be the usual mad stampede within the caves to get to the meal room first and so grab a portion of eatable food. The weak would find only dilse, a poor grain, and that would but meanly sustain them.

I selected the one I would question with some care, a young Brokelsh, still very strong, with his black body-hairs bristling. I spoke to him without arrogance, with, rather, a humble awareness of my task. But he knew nothing of any lion-maid. I did not lose my temper. I tried another young man, an apim, but he merely looked up at me stupidly and a trickle of spittle ran down his chin.

Keeping a grip on myself I tried others, gradually working my way through the caves. While at first I asked young men, for they are very apt to notice beautiful young maidens, I extended my inquiries to girls, also, for they, too, have an eye for a rival, even in places as dolorous as these.

No one had seen or heard of a golden lion-maid.

Had Que-si-Rening been wrong? Had his trance-state given him nothing? Had he lied to me? I sweated as I prowled like a leem through the caves searching for Saffi or anyone who might know of her and her whereabouts.

These miserable people were being held here ready to be taken out and used as human quarry. In their Jikai villas the great hunters would be sipping cool drinks and munching palines as their slaves cleaned and polished their crossbows, swords, and spears. The manhounds would be slavering at the bars of their cages, ready to run on the scent of these poor naked people. A beautiful girl was not wasted here, as I had once thought; she would bring particularly high bidding from those who wished to hunt her down. So I prowled on, searching, and feeling the match of my temper burning faster and faster.

Among all these people there was not one young man, with a strong, well-muscled body and the alert look of a hunter about him; there was not a single guide. These guides were introduced to give the slaves the false idea that they might escape; and with hope to sustain them the poor devils would run the harder and thus provide more sport. There were no guides. And, as I noticed on my frantic search through cavern after cavern, there were fewer slaves penned here than I remembered. Either the Kov had not been replenishing stocks or the hunts had been exceptionally severe of late.

At last the time for feeding arrived and like leaves driven by gales the slaves sped madly for the feeding cave. Here the fighting still went on to reach first into the piles of food; while there were fewer slaves there was also less food. I secured a hunk of vosk and a heel of bread, for I was sharp set. I stared about, for here, if nowhere else, would one expect to see everyone within the caves. Among all that congested rabble of miserable humanity I could see not a single Numim girl. At the shrill call of the stentor's horn the slaves started up in their maddened exit. I went with them smartly enough, although angered, for that horn signaled the arrival of manhounds set to chase everyone out and back to the barred caves in the cliff-face.

Naked, I went with the rest.

Those flutsmen, reiving mercenaries of the skies, had been acting according to their natural lights when they'd attacked me. They were held on contract by the Kov of Faol. To their own accounts would have gone my belongings, all the weapons and the gear from the smashed flier, and my clothes. They had turned over my body to the slave-masters here, making a nice profit from the whole transaction. No one flew over Faol in security; that was obvious.

A chill foreboding, very painful to me in my state of heightened frustration, grew on me that not only had I landed back in Faol in circumstances different from those I expected but that I might have made a profound and stupid mistake. Well, that would not be the first mistake I had made in my life, nor was it to be the last, as, if these tapes last, you shall hear. Again and again I recalled to mind exactly what the Wizard of Loh, Que-si-Rening, had said.

A frantic search of my memory brought me back to those last fateful words: *She is being sold to the masters of the Manhounds of Faol . . .*

Then what did the last few words mean . . . as a mere bargaining piece . . . ?

The chief concern was allayed in the answers given to me by a Brokelsh whose spirit had not been as much broken as the others of various races confined with us.

"No, dom," said this Brokelsh, shaking his heavy head. "There have been no hunts for a sennight."

"You are sure, dom?"

"If you doubt my word I will gladly break your back."

Well, he might try.

“I do not doubt your word.” I eyed him. Like most of the members of his race, this Brokelsh was covered with a thick coarse mat of black bristly hair. His pugnacious face glowered on me. With an eye to the future, I said, “And would you break the backs of the guards if you were loosed?”

“Aye, dom, with great pleasure, as the Resplendent Bridzikelsh is my witness.”

Beneath that coarse coat of bristle his muscles rippled his skin. He would be a useful man in a fight.

“What is your name, dom?”

“Men call me Bartak the Hyrshiv, for I am the twelfth son of Bartak the Ob.”

“Then when I break free, Bartak the Hyrshiv, I will welcome you at my side.”

He grunted and turned away. I gauged his feelings. He considered me a mere boaster, a bladder of wind. So be it. I felt little more than that, by Zair!

He did not ask my name, and that was convenient, for I had no time to waste thinking which one of my grandiose collection of names I would use. Prescott the Onker. That, as the scarlet and golden raptor of the Star Lords joyed in calling me, that was the right name for me now. Dray Prescott, Onker of Onkers.

The thought occurred to me that I had outflown Vad Garnath and his Katak slave-master, the Chuktar Strom. Perhaps Rees’s swift vroller had brought me here before Saffi had had time to be sold. I did not think that, the more I mulled it over. The thoughts led me on. A bargaining piece? And Que-si-Rening had mentioned another Wizard of Loh, this Phu-si-Yantong. There had been in Rening’s face and manner when he mentioned San Yantong a hidden reserve of emotion, a feeling I had given scant attention at the time. But had Rening been cautious, apprehensive — frightened, even — of this unknown wizard, Phu-si-Yantong? Could he figure into this devilish equation?

One fact remained crystal clear. Saffi was not confined with these miserable folk, held as quarry for the Great Jikai. Therefore I had no business to remain here a mur longer.

The words of the wizard recurred again and again: *Sold to the masters of the Manhounds of Faol.*

So I had sped here like a credulous idiot, where I myself had been incarcerated once: here, where the *victims* of the manhounds and the mighty hunters were held.

But . . . *the masters of the Manhounds of Faol* . . .

The masters.

On the instant I swung to the thick logs of lenk barring the cave and hailed one of the patrolling guards. He was a Rapa, his fierce, beaked, vulturine face hard with the authority of his position, his weapons giving him all the confidence of the strong among the rabble of naked, defenseless slaves. I beckoned this Rapa.

He stalked across, thwacking a rattan against his gaitered legs, his forest-green tunic stretched tight upon his shoulders.

“Rapa,” I said, not too loudly. “I would like to talk with you.”

He sniffed through his beak. Like all Rapas, he exuded an odor that, I admit, grows less offensive with every season as I grow older. “If you call me over for no good reason, yetch, you will be striped. I shall like that.”

He came close to the bars and now his rattan licked up like a snake ready to slash at me between the wooden bars.

I said, “I have a good reason, Rapa. You stink.”

He gaped at me, his beak quivering, that vulturine face showing avian shock.

“Nulsh!” he screeched and jumped in, slashing the rattan down. I moved sideways to the next log, reached out so that my arms avoided the blow which whistled harmlessly past. I took his long gobbly neck between my hands and I gripped and I lifted him off his feet. I choked him enough so that without a sound he slumped. I opened my fists and let him fall.

The Brokelsh, Bartak the Hyrshiv, grunted with surprise.

“You are a dead man, dom.”

Another guard had seen, an Och. The Ochs are small and have six limbs. This one ran across and tried to spit me with his spear at the same time setting up a shrill yell of alarm. I choked him, too. It needed but the one hand.

Bartak said: “You have a plan?”

“Yes. Let’s go into the next cave. We may have sport ourselves, before long.” And I handed him the Och’s spear. He took it. Like any man who is dependent on his muscles and his weapons for his life upon Kregen, he handled the spear in a knowing way. I took the Rapa’s thraxter and we moved into the next cave. From its bars we could see a knot of guards running. They were angry. They shouted.

“I hope your plan works,” said Bartak. He was not a man to wear his emotions too lightly in anything save touching his honor.

“If it does not, we shall chill our rumps on the Ice Floes of Sicce.”

The Rapa’s sword was a cheap affair, with a black-painted wooden grip, a brass hilt, and the steel of the blade would probably snap across if used against armor. It was a perfectly satisfactory weapon to use on the naked bodies of slaves.

Behind the series of barred cave openings in the cliff lay the warren of slave quarters. Bartak and I moved through the various caves, not running but not dawdling. When I fancied we had gone far enough I stopped. Bartak stood, gripping the spear, looking at me. He seemed perfectly satisfied to follow my lead. “We will wait until they run past. I do not think any of the slaves will betray us.”

“In that you are right. They run like ponshos fleeing from leems.”

The slaves were screaming now, running pell-mell, colliding, fighting and struggling to get as far away as they could from the guards now pouring in through the cave where lay the unconscious bodies of their

two comrades. We waited, the Brokelsh and I.

Presently I said, "Most of the guards have passed now. If we meet any latecomers—"

"I have used a spear before, dom."

"I had noticed."

We went back to the cave and from the depths of the warrens the uproar of the searching guards and the shrieking slaves reached us in echoing thunder. We saw only two more guards, and from these Bartak obtained a sword and I a stuxcal. The carrier with its eight stuxes was a most useful addition. We went on, and now Bartak's spear and my thraxter were stained with blood.

The first stux came free from its clips and I balanced the javelin as we approached the pushed-open gateway in the lenken bars. The guards had left only one of their number to prevent an escape, and he went down with the stux through his throat. Like any reiver of Kregen I retrieved the weapon as we passed. I also took his thraxter in its scabbard. We did not bother to take any clothes, but ran headlong into the clearing and made straight for the huts with the papishin-leaf roofs.

We dodged into the shadows out of the opaline brilliance of the Suns of Scorpio and glared out cautiously.

Bartak said, "I think we are unobserved, dom." Then, with a lift of his blunt and powerful face, he said, "I would esteem it an honor to know your name."

So, because it meant nothing, I said, "I am Dray Prescott."

"Then, Dray Prescott, let us run into the jungle and be gone from this pest hole, for I think the Resplendent Bridzikelsh smiles on us this day!"

"And on others, also." I nodded back. From the opened gateway in the barred cave-mouth other slaves were running. They ran out, some shrieking in joy, others running with grim determination, others hobbling along with all the remnants of their strength. I could not aid them, but I wished them well.

"Do not tarry, Dray Prescott! Run, dom, run!"

About to follow his advice, I paused. The escaped prisoners were running with intent. A man with a shock of black hair led them in giant bounds, waving them on. They ran toward a corner of the clearing where leafy roofs rose beyond a thin screen of jungle. I frowned. Was that man a false guide, luring them on?

Bartak the Hyrshiv answered the question on my mind. "That is Nath Palton, a guard who was broken and condemned as slave."

"Aye!" I said. "And he leads to the fliers or the fluttrells, I'll wager!"

"Yes."

I admit that I felt a great wave of relief. I had been torn between following the slaves, and my own task. I was certain the dread forms of the manhounds would soon sniff upon their trails. Now, I realized, the slaves would never have attempted to run, knowing the jiklos would destroy them, if they had not trusted

Nath Palton. They did not need my help, then.

“Why do you not run with them, Bartak?”

“You said you had a plan, Dray Prescott.”

“I did not think the slaves would run out, with the jiklos—”

“You did not know Nath Palton.”

“True.”

With that I felt I could leave this ex-guard Palton to see to the escaped slaves. Without another word I ran on in the shadows of the huts.

As far as I had known from my previous experiences here no fliers or saddle-birds had been kept near the slave pens. Now that a whole mass of slaves bore down to steal aerial steeds the way was effectively barred. So I must pursue my original intention. We came out past the last of the huts, past the slave barracks where the quarries were prepared for the hunt. Beyond, at a short distance, lay the Jikai villas, where the mighty hunters lived in style pending their hunts. Bartak looked about. We were alone. He nodded to a substantial house halfway along, and he smiled that typical pugnacious Brokelsh smile.

“Nalgre the slave-master,” he said. He spoke with great satisfaction.

“Aye, Bartak. Nalgre.”

We began to walk carefully toward this fine house belonging to that same Nalgre who so enjoyed to torture the slaves he prepared for the hunt. The suns beat down and there was a sweet, sickly taint of rotting jungle in our nostrils.

“He has been sick of late,” said Bartak. “His belly troubles him.” Then he laughed. “Also his pet jiklo died. She was poisoned. It was said one of the tame slaves did it out of spite.”

“And was Nalgre’s revenge—?”

“Horrible.”

The house boasted a verandah, but the reclining chairs and hammocks were empty. We padded up the wooden steps and went into the coolness within. At once I sensed the oppressive atmosphere of the place. Solidly built, the house would have been a comfortable home. But the place looked dusty and unkempt, with corners of carpets turned up, a table on its side, glasses with crushed rims still clustering on a silver tray. We heard the yowls and shrieks from the back of the house as we went in by the front door. We saw no servants or slaves. Bartak held his spear at the ready as we pushed through a bead curtain into a long, low room at the back. The screaming intensified. I had not heard its like before — save, perhaps, on those occasions I had slain a manhound.

We gazed at that scene. We stood silently, watching.

Long windows let angled patterns of emerald and ruby light splash upon a floor that, once polished, was now scuffed and marked everywhere by the scratch of taloned claws. No furniture cluttered that room. In the center stood Nalgre. He looked much as I remembered him, arrogant, hard, slashing his whip

about, but his face had yellowed and grown gaunt, and there was a droop to the set of his shoulders. A real slave-master, this Nalgre, running the hunt for his master, the Kov of Faol; yet his sickness had taken a toll of him. Now he stood in boots and brown trousers, naked to the waist, his body yellowish and yet still full fleshed and thick with muscle. His whip snapped again and again, mercilessly. The manhound he flogged shrieked and hissed and tried to dodge, but she could not draw away for the thick iron chains that bound her by iron staples to the wooden floor.

“His new pet, Dray Prescott,” whispered Bartak. “He is training her.”

“Torturing her, I think.”

“Yes. It is much the same to Nalgre. He whips and tortures her so that she will fawn on him and lick his boots, as his last pet did before she was poisoned.”

“I have come a long way to see this Nalgre.”

Bartak looked at me with some puzzlement. We stood for the space of a few heartbeats watching Nalgre as he abused the female jiklo. She was a fine well-grown specimen, savage, evil of eye, and pregnant. Whether Nalgre either noticed or cared I did not know. I fancied that if he did know he would not have cared.

His whip cracked against her side.

She yowled and jangled the chains in her desperation to get away from that cruel lash, and Nalgre laughed and swore at her and kicked her viciously.

“I’ll teach you manners, you four-legged shishi! I’ll show you your master, by Havil! You’ll scream for mercy, aye, and you’ll like it, and lick my boots!” The whip smashed full upon her back, beating down her crest of matted blonde hair. Red weals stood out vividly all over her body. Again Nalgre kicked her.

She hissed and screeched. She saw us. Jiklos are apim — that is, they were apim before they were thus transmogrified into manhounds — and still have the power of speech, no matter that they speak with a breathiness very dreadful to hear.

The female jiklo saw us, she saw the weapons in our hands, she saw that we were naked and therefore slaves, but she did not cry out to her master that men had come to slay him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Have you turned weakling, Dray Prescott?”

Blood dripped upon the clawed wooden floor from the full-fleshed body of the jiklo, and blood splattered from the whip as Nalgre lashed and lashed. For the first time I saw an expression other than bestial ferocity upon the face of a Manhound of Antares. For this female jiklo’s face twisted now in a grimace of anticipatory relish.

Bartak may have seen that expression, too, for he stepped forward with a certain deadly intent.

Nalgre the slave-master knew nothing of our presence, understood nothing of the sudden change in his pet, until he heard my voice.

“No, dom,” I said loudly. “Do not kill the rast, at least, do not kill him yet.”

Nalgre jumped around as though he trod upon a rattler. He saw us. He saw our weapons. He showed not the slightest fear. He had been long accustomed to taking prisoners and breaking slaves. His arrogance and self-importance grew long roots in his evil mind. He swore vilely and shouted and jumped forward.

“Get back to your stinking caves, you yetches! Back, slaves; crawl away before I have you punished!” He leaped for us, whirling the whip in readiness to slash at our naked hides, as he was used to doing. “Ho! Guards! Drag these nulshes away! To the flogging frames! Guards!”

Bartak, halted by my order not to kill Nalgre, turned to look with some astonishment at me, the spear still held ready for the lethal, stabbing thrust. Nalgre’s whip looped about his body, leaving a red line upon his black bristles and making him start and yelp.

“What do you mean, do not kill him? Have you turned weakling, Dray Prescott?”

“No, Bartak,” I said, taking the whip and jerking it in. “I have a few questions for the cramp; that is all.” I reeled Nalgre in and, I admit with a shame I cannot defend, for all it appeared reasonable at the time, struck him upon the nose. He dropped the whip. He yelled again, but this time the yells were of a different caliber.

“That’ll teach you to whip a pregnant female,” I said.

He tried to hold his nose, but I had, as my contemporaries on the Downs would have said, tapped his claret. His hands dripped blood. This time it was his own.

The jiklo snarled and hissed.

“Well, Dray Prescott, ask him the questions and then I will thrust this spear into his guts.”

The jiklo snarled.

I looked at her.

“You are safe now, manhound. He will not hurt you again.” Half turning my head I said to Bartak, “Hold the rast.”

I approached the jiklo. She stood, trembling, suddenly still, those vicious jagged fangs revealed as her lips peeled back. I bent toward her.

“If I unchain you, so that you may escape from this Nalgre yetch, will you harm us?”

I could see the unreality of the situation. But I wanted to talk to Nalgre without a manhound chained to the floor between us, and a pregnant manhound, at that. Had she not possessed those short, enormously muscled, rear legs of the true jiklo, and had been standing up, I own she would have presented a very creditable picture of a woman, in body if not in face, for she was well formed. Now I stared directly into her blue eyes.

The manhounds usually speak in a thick rasp, an unholy howl driven by their ferocious natures. Some of that coarseness comes from the clumsy local Faol dialect these jiklos used. She spoke.

“I will not harm you.”

Simple words. But what words to issue from the horrific fanged mouth of a jiklo!

“Are you mad?” demanded Bartak. “Are you bereft of your senses? That thing — she will gut us as soon as look at us.”

I stared at the female jiklo. I saw her skin, lightly downed with a golden fuzz, very white in the mingled suns-glow, with the blood dripping and the whip-marks and the ugly blue-purple and yellow bruises. She sat back to look up at me, her head on one side, the massive crusted mane of yellow hair broken away where Nalgre’s whip had struck down. Above her wrinkled pug nose, her blue eyes were clear now, steady on my brown eyes, and her lips, drawn closed over those risslaca-sharp teeth, looked so touchingly human. I marveled at myself. A Manhound of Antares, touchingly human? But I was seeing a jiklo in a totally new light. And, too, I did not forget that Queen Thyllis had bought tame jiklos for her throne-step pets.

“Will you rip out our guts if I free you, jiklo?”

Slowly, she shook her head. Nalgre, held by Bartak’s spear pressing into his navel, groped for words, gargling, trying to regain his sense of proportion.

“This thing will not harm you further, jiklo,” I said.

“If you free me, apim who stands upright, I swear by Kaleba the Unknown I will not harm you.”

Just who Kaleba the Unknown might be I did not know, and I had no time to spare to marvel that these savage beasts still possessed either a culture or a religion that lifted their spirits from the ranks of true beasts.

I bent to the iron chains.

“Then you are free to go, jiklo.”

“I give you my thanks. And I am called Melow, Melow the Supple — although now I carry child.”

The situation was rapidly slipping away from me. To carry on a conversation with a manhound, when before now all my thoughts had centered on ways and means of killing them all off; the whole scene was borne in on me with a most sour suspicion that I was once again behaving like the onker of onkers I knew I really was.

Bartak finished it for me.

“Ask your questions of this nulsh, and then let us be off. And then free that devil — after!”

“I have given her my word,” I said. I spoke mildly. I reached for the chains. My hand passed close to her ferocious mouth. The lips remained drawn forward; the wickedly serrated teeth remained invisible.

“Is this your plan, then, Dray Prescott?”

“It is now,” I said.

I released the manhound.

She stood up on four feet — rather, on two hands and two feet — and padded a little way off. She sat down again and began to clean herself. After a moment, without another word, I turned back to Nalgre and looked at him.

“One question, Nalgre.”

His yellowish face now bore a tinge of green.

“Where is the Numim maiden? The golden lion-maid?”

Bartak gave his spear a prod.

“Mercy, mercy!” said Nalgre, the slave-master.

“Tell me where the Numim maid is, Nalgre — and quickly!”

“She was bought for the Kov! She is not here! The Kov has her in his fortress. I swear it!”

“Is his fortress in Smerdislad?”

“Yes, yes! His fortress is Smerdislad!”

Nalgre, despite the pressing spear in his stomach, slumped to the floor. Bartak stared at him as a leem stares at a ponsho. Nalgre put his hands together, over his heart.

“Spare me! I will promise you anything! I have much gold, much silver. I have Chail Sheom, jewels, zorcas, silks and furs, much gold, silver—”

“You repeat yourself, Nalgre. And you do not mention that you have many slaves also.”

Bartak sniggered.

“*Had* many slaves.”

“That is true,” I said.

“Let me live — anything — my life — all I have is yours.”

“What of yours you had is already ours, if we wished it,” said Bartak with that Brokelsh touch of brutality.

“Chain him down to the floor, Bartak, and let us go.”

Bartak took a delight in hauling the chains tightly. I did not wish the blood of this creature, and I was prepared to leave him to face the wrath of his master, the Kov of Faol, which is, to be sure, the coward’s way. I did not see the inevitable; Bartak had already done so.

Pretty soon now the guards must come to the slave-master’s fine house to tell him, in fear and trembling,

that a number of slaves had escaped and guards had been slain.

We had not been molested for that reason: all the guards were out searching for runaway slaves.

Before I left I turned back to Nalgre, who crouched, chained down to the floor, clearly bemused that he was still alive.

“Nalgre,” I said. “Thing of joy to kleeshes. Tell me. Where is your flier? Your fluttrells?”

He gabbled out they were parked separately from the others, half an ulm along the path at right angles to the main road. I nodded. I did not answer him, but gestured to Bartak and walked out of the room, going by the back doorway straight toward the cross-path. Bartak followed. We had not gone twenty paces when we heard the sounds from within the house.

I stopped.

“By the Black Chunkrah!” I said. “I am a fool. I should have thought—”

Bartak smiled his Brokelsh smile. “Does it matter?”

“Yes and no. It does matter, but it does not matter now.”

All the same, I felt guilty as I saw the jiklo called Melow the Supple trot from the rear door of the house and jump, lithely still despite her condition, onto the path. She followed us as we ran swiftly along the little path. Less than half an ulm away we came to a stockade. Bartak pushed the gate open and we stepped inside. There were three fluttrells vastly excited by the smell of blood, and a small voller.

“This, I think,” said Bartak the Hyrshiv, “was your plan, Dray Prescott.”

“A part.”

We climbed into the voller. It would be more suitable for what I desired. I turned to the controls at once and prepared to thrust the levers over. A soft thump sounded at my back, and Bartak let out a yelp. I swung about instantly, one of the thraxters in my fist, pointed, ready.

The manhound sat up in the stern of the voller. Bartak drew toward me, visibly disconcerted.

Melow the Supple said, “I cannot stay here now. There are certain signs by which it is known that a jiklo has killed.”

“I see.”

“We can’t take this beast with us!” said Bartak. He licked his lips and gripped his spear.

“This is Melow the Supple,” I said. And then I astonished myself. “And she is no beast. Rather, a beast has treated her as a beast. Very well. We will take you away from here, and then you may depart safely wherever you wish to go.”

Melow the Supple said nothing to that. Had she not previously thanked me I would have supposed manhounds incapable of gratitude.

How wrong I was, you shall hear . . .

The weather aloft was bright and hot, but I tossed back one of Nalgre's flying furs; for such had been the vehemence of our escape none of us had stopped to snatch up clothes. The furs were superb, glossy and black, having at least twenty-four skins to each flying fur. The skins were from foburfs, the small four-legged mammals living in the taiga, those vast coniferous forests of South Havilfar. The skins were matched superbly, and sewn by mistresses of the needle. The pity of it is, of course, that twenty-four little foburfs apiece no longer lived in their sprawling coniferous domain.

We took off with a savage upward acceleration and an equally violent downward swoop beyond the palisade. I guided the flier low above the treetops. As was becoming a habit — and a bad one — with me, I hammered the speed lever over to full. This voller was of the kind which do not move independently of the air currents, and so the slipstream battered back above the tiny forward screen. Bartak looked back and I looked back with him, amused by his studious avoidance of the female jiklo. We could see no sign of pursuit, although I fancied I detected little dots of flyers heading due south away from us.

Incidentally, a female jiklo should in all accuracy be called a jikla. I found the word odd on the tongue, and Melow, herself, often referred to herself as a female jiklo. They were not called, for whatever liberated reasoning I do not know, womanhounds. There were other creatures on Kregen I was yet to meet who merited that title of horror.

With the gorgeous black furs wrapped about us we were most comfortable. In truth, the weather system of Kregen differs much from this Earth's. Here in the north of Havilfar the rising warm air of the equator takes up with it moisture from the oceans. When the air cools and sinks in the long meteorological rhythm it is not dry, like the air that scorches the Sahara on our Earth. Great Sahara-like deserts are found in Loh. Havilfar has wastelands, badlands, to the south of where we were but they are not true, ever-shifting, sand deserts.

The flier screamed through the air and I turned to look forward to keep a lookout for the first glimpse of the promised fortress-city of Smerdislad.

It is possible by fast flier to travel from the southern point of Faol to the northern in under three burs. This voller of Nalgre's was nowise as fine or fast as Rees's, as was natural, but we made good time. I kept a close lookout for flutsmen. If any of the reiving yetches crossed my path again I'd shoot first and ask questions later — or, rather, hurl a stux or three and yell derision after. As it turned out the flutsmen did not run across us. It was only too clear they were out chasing runaway slaves. I heartily wished the flutsmen bad luck, with a curse.

Bartak the Hyrshiv, a man who spoke when he felt words were necessary, said, "This Numim maid, Dray Prescott, is she of great value?"

"She is." I felt it expedient to add: "But that is not why I seek her."

That, evidently, did not call for a reply in Bartak's view. He went back to contemplating the sky, his black foburf fur no blacker than his own bristles.

Over the bluster of the slipstream, Melow the Supple shouted, her hoarse voice harsh and muffled.

"I have been to Smerdislad, Dray Prescott. They will not treat you kindly there if you arrive naked in a voller."

“My thanks, Melow the Supple.” I pointed down. “There are our clothes and our credentials.”

With that I slammed the levers over and sent the voller hurtling down toward the startled party of zorcamen riding out into the clearing below.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Melow the Supple

What followed, although it worked exactly as I had planned it to work, happened in what was to me such an extraordinary atmosphere of elation and inflated good humor I have ever after pondered the possibility that some subtle drug wafted from that Faolese jungle and addled our senses.

The party of zorcamen must have flinched back at their very first sight of us. And, indeed, we must have made an alarming spectacle.

From a voller that swooped from the sky like a pouncing volleem sprang three black-furred creatures who suddenly threw off their glistening black furs and charged, naked and brandishing weapons. One of these apparitions was a Brokelsh with a singularly pugnacious way with him. The second was an uncouth, ugly-faced desperado of a fellow, the very sort to steer well clear of down a dark alleyway at night. And the third was a vicious manhound, her red lolling tongue and sharp jagged teeth calculated to strike terror into the hearts of these fine, fancy courtiers.

Incontinently they put spurs to their zorcas and tried to flee and as impetuously we were upon them and had thrown them to the ground. There were seven of them. While Bartak the Hyrshiv stood over two, describing in the most pungent tones what he intended to do to them if they so much as blinked, and while I glared at my two and let them listen, Melow merely walked around and around her three. The three wights huddled together, clinging to one another, their eyes huge and rolling as they watched the horrific form of the jikla as she paced around and around them, her claws glistening in the light of the suns.

Round about then, I think, I saw the funny side of all this. I started to laugh. Bartak cast a single frozen look at me, turned to glare at Melow, and then he too started to rumble like an earthquake in the Shrouded Sea.

Melow said in her raspy voice, “Why do you not slay them all?”

But I would have none of that. Dead men tell no tales, that is true, but I wanted them to tell *me* tales.

Yes, Notor, they babbled, we will tell you all you wish to know. The Numim girl is why we are here and why all the other great crippled ones are gathered. We are Vad Quarnach’s men. Yes, Notor, he is Quarnach Algarond, the Vad of the Dudinter District of the great city of Ba-Marish. He is a most wealthy man and will pay much if you spare our miserable lives. Yes, Notor, his marvelous airboat is parked beside the stream. We will gladly tell you how many men he has and maidens also.

I swear I saw the glimmer of a smile rick up the thin lips of the manhound.

The whole episode passed off rather like a fever-dream.

We took their clothes. Fancy clothing, these young popinjays wore, parti-colored, so that I found myself

wearing half orange and half yellow, and Bartak wore half blue and half silver. I had to slit the tunic up the back to get it over my shoulders, but I slung a jacket with the coloring reversed over my left shoulder and drew it up with dudinter cords. [6] Their weapons were those of the mighty hunters who go upon the Great Jikai with the Manhounds of Faol, hunting human beings.

As I say, everything proceeded as in a dream. We found the airboat and a marvel she was, too: massively decorated, lavish as to cabins and awnings and promenades, and yet with a fair arsenal of varters disposed advantageously. I think we laughed every time we tripped up a wight, or gently bashed a skull. We laid them out alongside each other, bound and gagged in their own clothing. The maidens took one look at Melow and, clanking their dudinter chains, collapsed in faints that were the genuine ground-thunking article. We laid out these poor Chail Sheom, too, but I did spare a fraction of a mur to strike off their pretty and vile chains.

I had the feeling these folk from Ba-Marish were not so much decadent as merely self-indulgent. Loving pretty things, scented and powdered, wearing fine silks and linens, overeating the finest foods and guzzling the best vintages of Havilfar, they clearly set the highest store by the good things of life — the good things in their view — and were determined to live and die hedonists.

“Ba-Marish, Bartak,” I said. We stood by the airboat looking at the last fellow who slumbered with a bruise on his skull, wrapped in brilliant blue silks. “I know of the city, of course, about a hundred and fifty dwaburs south of Ba-Fela, on the west coast, opposite Ng’grogga. But I have not visited the place. Can you tell me of it?”

Bartak grunted and bit into a juicy chunk of beef so that the juices dribbled. He chewed mightily for a space. Then he said, “All those free port-cities consider themselves the saviors of Havilfar. From the old days. When they fought and resisted the Lohvians and their Bridzikelsh-forsaken invasions.”

“They appear sadly fallen away from their old ways, then.”

“They live in the past. Their pastimes are gorging, drinking, and wenching — and making money.”

“Reasonable objectives in life, I’d say — if there were not others.”

Melow padded across. I had told her to take what clothing pleased her, and added that she need never wear the gray slave breechclout again, as far as I was concerned. Now she had decked her plump body in a gaudy array of sensils, silks, and linens of the brightest colors, a confusing glittering mass of jewels and dudinter about her. Her hair was cropped so that it fluffed about her head, the massive matting of crest-hair all shorn away. She looked different. I can safely say that. It is an old story.

“Why care about the past, Dray Prescott? What is this Ba-Marish to you?”

“A great deal, Melow. You have your freedom. Take whatever you desire from these possessions. These evil people who hunt humans for sport will seek protection at my hands in vain. They forfeit their pretty things as they have already forfeited their rights of humanity.”

For a moment I thought I had been clumsy in my speech, exposing a subject on which the jikla would be sore; but she gave again that yowling hiss and that ricking grimace to her lips, from which I surmised she laughed and smiled.

“These people told us the hunt will begin on tomorrow, Dray Prescott, so your precious Numim maiden is safe for one more night.”

‘True. And we use that night to our advantage.’

Then I paused.

I had been instrumental in rescuing both Bartak and Melow, but there was no reason on Kregen why either should go with me to Smerdislad. And — did I want them with me?

“I shall go into the city,” I said. “I would wish you, Bartak, and you, Melow, to do as you desire. There is much wealth here. You could be rich.”

Melow said, her voice as harsh as ever, “I shall go with you, Dray Prescott.”

I sighed. I had heard that before, in other places. Bartak hesitated. He had finished the beef and now he took up a dudinter bowl of gregarians and began to munch. I did not press him. The two of them would present problems the next day. But they had been of the utmost use so far.

But this brief interlude of solemnity, in a situation that remained both dreamlike and hilarious could not last. We prodded the Vad into consciousness again and sat him in his great ivory chair, with the sensil cushions stuffed with down from the breasts of baby zhyans, and the dudinter supports and canopy, and we stood before him, glaring. Quarnach Algarond, the Vad of the Dudinter District, could not walk. He must be transported everywhere by slaves carrying his luxurious palanquin. He sat nervously, for he was a cowed man. Naturally, he was fat, with a silly, fat vosk face, dripping with sweat, and a fuzz of blond hair slicked back beneath his dudinter coronet. We glared at him, and he sat back, and his pudgy hands, ringed on every finger, plucked at his thick purple lips.

“You may take all you see, if you do not slay me.”

Bartak, being a Brokelsh and therefore somewhat coarse of manner and mind, said, “We may slay you and take all we will.”

The Vad couldn’t answer that. He sat, plucking his thick, shining lips, and his obese body shook.

“Vad Quarnach,” I said, putting the old devilish bite into my words, “are you known in Smerdislad?”

“No. No one there knows me. You may rely on that. I would not betray you if you release me.”

He had mistaken the reason for my inquiry. I pressed him further, and learned all I wished to know. The Kov of Faol occasionally arranged extra special hunts for extra special guests. One such hunt began the next day and was designed for those would-be mighty hunters who could no longer stalk through the jungles on foot after their quarry, or who were too fragile to bestride fluttrell or mirvol, or to shoot from a speeding airboat. Truly, this was the cripples’ Jikai.

The carrying poles for Vad Quarnach’s palanquin, much decorated with spiral carvings and embossed plaques of this dudinter of which he was so proud, were so arranged that sixteen slaves or four preysanys might convey him. This fanciful airboat of his, something of the style of a pagoda of the air, contained stables with half-doors along its lower sides. Here his men’s zorcas were kept, and half a dozen preysanys for the palanquin. I eyed the gorgeous finery of the palanquin with a lively interest.

The men we had surprised in the jungle had gone riding off after a slave who had thrown herself overboard. She had been observed to strike the heavily foliated branches of the trees, and because the

airboat was flying at a low altitude, escape serious injury. When I asked why she had not been brought back, my face hardened at the answer. She had sought to escape, knowing the fate in store for her, and the brilliant courtiers had soon found her, naked and running, and tripped her by her dudinter chains. But, in subduing her and bringing her back to her master, she had forced them to overcome her struggles, and, as they said, shrugging, she had died of it.

This girl had been intended as Vad Quarnach's offering for the Jikai. Each member of the hunt brought a beautiful girl for the pool. Now Quarnach had lost his.

Bartak the Hyrshiv spat.

"I say take off his head now, Dray Prescott, and have done."

This Bartak the Brokelsh came from a rural community in Hyrzibar's Finger, that long promontory dividing the sea from the Gulf of Wracks in southeast Havilfar. He had gone wandering, as so many young men did, and after various adventures, including a spell as a flutsman, had been captured by the aragorn. The mercenaries had sold him to the Kov of Faol for sport in the Great Jikai of the manhounds. I shook my head. Bartak would be a useful man in a fight, as he had proved; I could not accept his advice on more cerebral matters, such as the decision that needed to be taken now.

"I have never been to Hyrzibar's Finger, Bartak. Are they all like you, there?"

"Aye. And what of it?"

That Drig-driven breeze must have wafted from the Faolese jungle then, for I laughed. Hyrzibar, as a shishi exclusively serving the minor godlings of mythology, had a long and vivid series of poems and stories clustered about her name. Her Finger was notorious, and I gathered that not only geography had fastened the name upon the southeastern promontory of Havilfar above Quennohch.

"It is no matter. Bartak, I think you would be well pleased to take all these wonderful possessions for your own, and fly this airboat back to Hyrzibar's Finger with them."

"I admit it is a fair prospect." He stroked a thick thumb down his bristles, regarding me. "Would you then, take nothing for yourself?"

"Weapons and a zorca only, I fancy."

"You never cease to amaze me."

Melow the jikla let out a hissing screech at this, from which I gathered she sniffed that subtle breeze too.

"And, Melow the Supple," I said. "What am I to do with you?"

"Nothing, Dray Prescott. For I have said I will go with you."

"Into Smerdislad? Then how can I accomplish my errand?"

The sudden viciousness of manhounds and their ferocious tempers are things spoken of with awe on the parts of Kregen where the jiklos are known. I stood calmly, looking at Melow, prepared for that feral outburst of fury to launch straight at me. I could feel the warmth of the late afternoon suns upon my neck, and the smell of the jungle reached me as I waited for Melow the Supple to make up her mind.

Melow had no tail to twitch. But her gaudy new clothes rustled about her, and the dudinter chains clanked as she moved with stiff arms and legs, clanked in mockery of the iron chains she had always worn before.

“Very well, Dray Prescott. When your errand is done I will be waiting for you outside the dark walls of Smerdislad.”

“You would be known in Smerdislad, Melow. You would be taken and punished. Is that not true?” I said.

“This is so, Dray Prescott.”

“Then if you wait for me, I will come back for you.” I wanted to burst out into roaring laughter as I spoke, and yet I felt only a deadliness upon me, there in that devil-haunted jungle. “Although, what I am to do with you after, Opaz alone knows. And,” I added with an acerbity fully justified, “he isn’t telling me.”

The Brokelsh was eating again and I joined him despite his distressing habit of hurling half-eaten chicken legs, bones from chops, stones from fruit — everything with which he had finished — over his shoulders in what appeared a never-ending fusillade. I ducked a sizable vosk bone from which Bartak had sucked the marrow and picked up a nice-looking piece of cold glacéd vosk, and sank my teeth into it and set to with a will. Bartak had routed out bowls filled with masses of the most delicious fruit. I do not think it necessary to have to tell you of what metal Quarnach had had his bowls fashioned. Melow dragged down a whole cooked half-ponsho and settled down to devour the succulent meat. Well, we feasted after our various fashions.

Presently I freed two of the slave girls. I half drew my thraxter and slammed it back into the scabbard so that the poor creatures jumped. “Feed the people and the animals.” I glowered on them. “If you try to run away the jiklo is still hungry. She will chomp on your bones.” They shrieked and shuddered at this, and hurried about their tasks, very nervous and with constant apprehensive glances toward Melow, who sat breaking up juicy bones and sucking out the marrow.

Why, then, did all this make my mouth twitch and threaten to send me into convulsions of laughter? I am still not sure, but I fancy there must have been some potent mirth-producing perfume wafting from the jungle.

Even this bubbling if concealed hilarity could not blind me to the evil intentions harbored by Vad Quarnach for the hunt the next day. He would cheerfully shoot his arbalest at Saffi, the golden lion-maid, and at other beautiful girls, all in the name of sport. I would talk to Bartak, and caution him; I could do no more.

My preparations were made most carefully and in different fashion from those I had intended. The first thing was to turn Quarnach Algarond, Vad of the Dudinter District of Ba-Marish, out of his palanquin. His fat body quivered like one of these modern plastic sacks filled with oil. He spent no time in pleading, but I did see that he was settled into a lesser chair with carrying poles handy. Then I inspected the palanquin.

As I have said, it was a gorgeous affair, and the dudinter, being noncorrosive, and of a greater hardness than gold by reason of the silver mixed with it, gave the whole affair a weight and a dignity most becoming to the stature of a Vad, which is a rank very high in the listing of nobles, being merely one step

below a Kov. The cushions were soft, the embroidery excellent, the backrest solid, so that an arrow or knife would not bite through. With that as a starting point I felt confident of success.

Throwing off the parti-colored clothes taken from the courtiers I ransacked Quarnach's private lenken chest. He had an amazing quantity of fine clothes, and I dressed myself so that I almost resembled a whistling faerling, or myself as I had been dressed by Queen Thyllis, although with much greater taste and style. From all the weapons available I selected the two best thraxters. Two of the sportsmen's crossbows with their close-grained herm-wood stocks went into the capacious flapped pockets outside the palanquin. Inside there were shelves, and these I stocked with a considerable plunder of jewels and money. Bartak looked on, not exactly glowing, but with an expression that said: "Have a care, my impetuous friend, for you take what is mine."

I retained the stuxcal, for it might prove useful. In addition I fastened one of the guard's shields upon the roof. The guards were nearly as effeminate as their masters, and they had given us no trouble. Quite the contrary, for they had seemed glad to surrender. Their uniforms were foppish, with too much flashy show and not enough hard soldierly leather. The men were Tryfants, diffis not much larger than Ochs, and if well led the Tryfants may carry out a wild enough charge, full of panache; I will not speak of them in retreat. There are many strange and different diffis upon Kregen of which I have not spoken yet, as there are many races of apims. I have no great feelings one way or the other for Tryfants.

A sack of provisions completed all I required of the Vad's possessions apart from the two preysanys and the zorca. The preysany, that superior form of calsany, is a much more even-tempered animal than the calsany, and harnessing up two fore and two aft in the carrying poles presented no difficulties. I led the zorca to the rear and knotted a long leading string to the palanquin. Then I turned to my companions, Bartak and Melow.

"You will reach the city after the suns have gone, Dray Prescott," said Melow in her hoarse voice. "I will await you by the tomb of Imbis Frohlan the Ship Merchant three ulms from the gate. You cannot miss the tomb, for it bears a ship upon the marble, a marble argenter, and that is rare among the nations of Havilfar."

"True, Melow. So be it."

The jikla was right, for most of the Havilfarese are not seafaring people. Vessels from other nations come to trade with them. Much of their own merchandise flies. I fancied I would have little trouble picking out a marble-carved argenter among the lines of tombs along the road to Smerdislad.

A great deal of money was spent, season by season, by honor-conscious families to keep back the encroaching jungle from the tombs.

Having satisfied myself that my projected mode of conveyance was satisfactory, I untied the zorca and mounted up. Bartak laid a squat black-bristled hand upon the bridle. "I bid you Remberree, Dray Prescott." He stared up at me. "I have told you I come from Hyrzibar's Finger, near to a town called Brodensmot. You have not told me where you come from."

I sighed. Where to tell him. Strombor? Valka? Vallia? Djanduin? Would Paline Valley suffice? Could I say I came from Hemlad, as Bagor, that instantly invented fellow who had rescued Queen Thyllis, had claimed? Where?

I could always point upward into the air and say I came from Earth. With that Drig-driven perfumed air about my head that word might be worth a giggle. Then I checked myself. I looked down on Bartak the

Hyrshiv, the Brokelsh, and although I did not smile I think my face did not make him flinch back.

“I am Dray Prescott, of Strombor,” I said.

“Strombor. I do not know it, dom.” He took a breath. “But, wherever upon Kregen it may lie, it breeds men!”

With that, and a last Remberree to Melow the Supple, I nudged the zorca and began my solitary march to Smerdislad and the cripples’ Jikai, to find Saffi, the golden lion-maid.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

My first encounter with the Wizard Phu-si-Yantong

“As to Garnath, he will be here in good time, Quarnach. You need not fret so. He will fail to bring the lion-maid at his peril, for he has promised Phu-si-Yantong much.”

“I admit I am anxious to see the Numim wench myself, Kov Numrais.” I slouched in the upholstered chair provided for the members of the hunt, and I simpered. “I hear the Numims provide capital sport.”

“You are right, Quarnach.” This Kov Numrais pulled his black beard with a ringed hand. Thin and crafty and with a spine shattered in a fall so that his lower limbs were useless, he sat stiffly, his black eyes aglitter with the promise of rediscovering some of his vanished manhood in the Jikai. There were to be six cripples in the hunt. “Oh, yes, Quarnach,” said Kov Numrais, who owned a Kovnate called Neagron north of the Shrouded Sea. “There are too few spirited wenches to run, by Yskaroth! And the Numims are not a plentiful race of diffs, more’s the pity. We shall see a Great Jikai this day!”

I did not rise and hit him. For one thing, I was now acting the part of Vad Quarnach, and was therefore chained to my chair. They had accepted my story without a question. I had begun with the truth, saying that the girl for the hunt had cast herself over the side of my airboat. We had landed to claim her. I embroidered here on what I thought these creatures would like to hear of the inflicted punishment. Then, I had said, we attracted the attention of reiving flutsmen and were set upon. Only the speed of my preysanys in running me into the trees saved me. All the rest of my suite and my airboat had been captured. Not a one of them commented on my thus fleeing and saving my own skin, while my people stayed and died or were taken up for slavery. That was what they would have done. They understood that.

As for the missing girl, the Trylon of Thurkin had brought three, not being able to choose the fairest or more spirited, and so that was all right. All right! Had I not had my plan all neatly worked out in my head I do not think I could have sat still under this evil effrontery.

That made three of us in the hunt. The fourth was Vad Garnath and I guessed he would be faking as was I, pretending to be a cripple and thus confined to his chair. The fifth was the famous Wizard of Loh, Phu-si-Yantong. The sixth was a woman, a Chulik woman from the Chulik islands off the east coast of Balintol. She called herself Chimula the Sumptuous, and although we took her to be a Kovneva, for she was carried in much state and with evident display of great riches, we did not believe she had given us her real name. It was of no consequence then, although after— Well, that is for a later place in these tapes.

Sitting confined in a chair all day is a miserable way of life although most of those forced to do so manage to contrive the best out of it with great courage. I admit I fretted. To pass the time until the

expected arrival of Garnath we played Jikaida. We played a large variant, with a hundred squares to a drin and with twelve drins to the board. There had been nothing else I could do but hire slaves with the money I had brought, for a man in a chair demands attentions. The slaves moved the bright pieces upon the board as we played. Kov Numrais na Neagron proved a cunning and devious player. In Jikaida the object is, as in most games of a like nature, to capture the opposing king, or check him. I marched my lines of swods up in fine style, using the vaulting technique to push on boldly, bringing up a powerful second division of zorcas and totrixes, for this was a cavalry game. There were also flyers, and these I flung in, in fine style. Numrais sucked me in, and then struck, surrounding a major force and making me commit my powerful pieces to my disadvantage. I fought hard, but my mind was not on the game.[\[7\]](#)

Afterwards, we drank superb chilled spiced wine, and ate light pastries. The odd reflection crossed my mind that very soon I could as easily be thrusting a thraxter blade into this fellow and his companions as eating and drinking with them.

I had left the brown bristling growth on my chin, and had further enhanced its shadow with a brown berry stain. Quarnach had his own selection of masks and dominoes, like any noble, for many of them choose to mingle in places where they do not wish their faces to be seen. Almost all were fashioned from dudinter. I wore one with diamond-rimmed eye-sockets; a scarron chain of those marvelous scarlet jewels outlined the whole domino. No one was curious, but I let slip that my accident had marked my face.

We sat in a chamber high in the city of Smerdislad with extensive views across the jungles. The greenery out there with the mingled rays of the Suns of Scorpio lighting up the whole scene and picking out the blazing colors of flowers blooming lavishly in the upper terraces could not fail to move me. To be chained to a chair, unable to stride out, expanding the chest, filling it with Zair's good air! Well, a surrogate had been found by these people. What Nalgre the slave-master had said was correct. Smerdislad was the Kov's fortress. From those lofting dark walls that kept the jungle at bay, the place rose through tiered levels, circular, arcaded, terraced, rising until at the very pinnacle a scintillating tower of white rock crowned the edifice. This was done, I surmised, in imitation of the natural wonder of the White Rock of Gilmoy. In the chambers and warrens below crowded the slaves. The Horters had their lodgings higher up. The nobles lived at the topmost levels, and the visiting hunters who could pay the enormous fees demanded for these special services of Encar Capela, the Kov of Faol. Most hunts took place from the caves, as I well knew.

The whole pile was built upon a dome of rock. It broke from the jungle like a boil. Clothed with buildings, the rock possessed a hollow heart, lit by many cunning light and ventilation slots. In the very heart of the fortress of Smerdislad were held the extra special hunts.

As to sustenance for the city, that came from the unceasing toil of slaves in cleared areas, from much trade by vollers which landed and took off from flying platforms, and all this activity was paid for by hunters' fees. Truly, Encar Capela must fancy himself a fine rich noble, living high on the vosk, I said to myself, sipping my wine, my mind evil with plans to change the ways of Encar Capela, the Kov of Faol.

Capela entered then, swearing, slashing a thin rattan against his armored legs. He was a febrile, energetic man, with dark hair cropped short, a fierce black moustache, and a body hard and fit from much exercise. His nose had been broken and badly reset, and his lips were that paradox often seen in hard men of action who yet love the hedonistic life: they were thick and sensual and yet could tighten into a cruel thin line when the man's passions were aroused to maim and kill.

"By the Foul Fernal himself!" he bellowed. "Where is the yetch Garnath?" He saw us looking at him, and he banged his rattan onto the table, making the Jikaida men jump with a rattle. "I owe you an apology,

sirs and lady. But we shall make this Garnath pay — oh, yes!”

And then, following the Kov of Faol, entered a man of whom I shall have much to say when the time is ripe. For now I mention merely that I looked at him with some attention. For this was the notorious Wizard of Loh, Phu-si-Yantong. His litter swayed rhythmically from side to side, and tiny golden bells about it tingled and tinkled in a way that should have been most cheerful, but that, instead, sent out a most dread alarm. His bearers were Womoxes, those huge, shaggy horned men from an island off the west coast of my own Vallia — and that gave me to think, I can tell you. Each massive hunk of Womox muscle was clothed in a shining black tabard-like garment, cinctured at the waist by an equally shining belt of green lizard-skin. Each massive Womox carried slung from his belt the Womox shortsword, that pattern of blade somewhat thicker and heavier than a thraxter. They padded barefoot. Their heads thrust down, bulky like a ram between the shoulder blades, and their ferocious horns were all gilded, every one.

Phu-si-Yantong had brought with him a large and glittering retinue, of Relt stylors, of Chail Sheom, of guards and slaves and free servants. I will not detail them all here, for I own I looked most at his Womoxes.

The cloth-of-gold curtains were half drawn in his palanquin so that he appeared as a mere black shadow propped upon cushions of cloth-of-gold. Their dark gleam, all sliding red-gold and purple-black, repelled me, in a flash, so that I drew back. I think my splendid diamond-and-scarron-dudinter domino must have caught the light of the suns and flashed, for I saw the dark shadow within the palanquin turn, as though an old weak neck swiveled creakily. I looked away, deliberately, at the Chulika, who was sitting up eagerly in her chair, staring out brazenly upon the new arrivals.

A voice spoke. “Where is Vad Garnath ham Hestan?” The tone of that voice! I felt a prickle of unease shiver up my spine, at that thin, ghostly, harshly echoing voice, as though this Phu-si-Yantong spoke softly in a cavern of vampire bats.

Without question the other occupants of the high room in the fortress-city of Smerdislad were powerfully affected by that whispering breathy voice speaking in the accents of doom. Well, Phu-si-Yantong was an evil man, as everyone who knew him said. Looking back on that bright colorful scene of greenery and garden blossoms, jewels and gold and silver, feathers and silks, how little I understood what dark dramas and stark terrors this wizard was to bring me in the seasons yet unborn!

A Rapa guard, heavily armed, wearing a black and green harness, dragged forward a young girl, a Fristle fifi, half swooning with fear. The Rapa uncoiled the lash with evident satisfaction, for his crest engorged and grew brilliant. That lash was much like a Russian knout, or a sjambok, a long tapering vileness of thick animal-skin. If he hit the girl with that she would be dead or maimed; at the very least, if he hit her gently she would be severely pained.

“What do you do, San?” said the Kov of Faol.

“I wish to show my girls the True Path of Obedience.”

The Rapa lifted the whip and as it snapped forward, obscenely black in the brilliant rays of the suns, I saw he struck in the pain-ways. The fifi screamed. Her soft fur leaped under the blow. Three times the Rapa struck, and three times I, Dray Prescott, forced myself to remain in that damned seat. I sat, and the girl was struck three blows, and she fell unconscious. Slaves carried her away.

“The True Path is Obedience to the Master,” said Yantong in that eerie double-echoing voice, so soft and slurred and yet so penetrating that all in the room heard without difficulty.

Encar Capela laughed.

“You have the right of it, San. And Vad Garnath has been sighted. See!” And Capela pointed through the arcaded opening out into the brilliant sky. We all peered to look. A merker spun toward the fortress, and in his hand a lighted torch streamed a long trailing spume of black smoke. “See, the signal! The lion-maid will soon be with us.”

“That is good,” said Kov Numrais na Neagron. “Had the Rapa attempted to strike *her* pain-ways she would have had his manhood off or his eyes out. Hai! I look forward to this Jikai, by Yskaroth!”

I have told you of this scene and now I must say that my thoughts, as we waited for Vad Garnath to arrive, cannot possibly be repeated. I, Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy, had sat on my backside in a chair and watched a Rapa lash a girl! So impossible did this thing seem to me, so much at variance with the tenor of my life upon this cruel world of Kregen, that I dare not repeat my thoughts to anyone — least of all to Delia, my Delia of Delphond.

A baby neemu, all soft and cuddly, let out a meow from where it wriggled on the knees of the Trylon Thurkin. He was an insignificant fellow, this Trylon, with a lopsided look to his face and a large squashy nose. He had been born with useless legs. At least, by his efforts to retain his father’s Trylonate, he proved both that he was much more than he looked and that it was possible for a crippled man to make his way upon Kregen, which is a task to daunt the most stouthearted.

Attended to by the slaves, eating and drinking and talking, we waited until, with something of an entrance, Garnath ham Hestan, Vad of Middle Nalem, was carried into the room followed by his retinue, among whom strutted the Katakai, Rosil na Morcray.

I looked intently among his people for that glorious golden form of Saffi the lion-maid. She was not there. She had not been brought here into this upper chamber. Like all the other girls to be used in the hunt, she was under close guard below, being readied for this Great Jikai.

I tightly gripped the arms of the chair and took my necessary part in the pappattu. This Katakai looked an interesting rast. Someone had made a passing reference to my palanquin, for as I have said Quarnach had had much of it overlaid with ivory. This was real true ivory from Chem, as I could see, for it possessed that creamy color and soft smooth texture, unlike the ivory from Northern Havilfar, which is altogether a sharper white, chalky, and coarse textured.

“Very pretty,” said the Katakai, Strom Rosil. He carried a true rank in the Hamalese army as a Chuktar. He passed his dark hand over the ivory. “My men would imperil their ibs to prize this loose after a battle.”

He stood there, blocky, dark, and forbidding like any damned Katakai. His low brow above the flaring nostrils and gape-jawed mouth, his wide-spaced eyes, narrow, and brilliant, and cold, his cocky attitude, his arrogantly upflung bladed tail, all vividly brought back to me my first meeting with diffs of his race, down in the south in the village of Podia on a forgotten island of the Shrouded Sea. These Katakis, aragorn and slave-masters by profession and nature, were truly evil. With that whiplike tail with a glittering curved blade strapped to its tip, the Katakai presented a stark and brutal figure of sheer power.

The vultures were gathering, and of them all I calculated that this Katakai, this Chuktar Strom, would be the most formidable. Well, in that I made a profound mistake, for then I did not know the Wizard Phu-si-Yantong. But in all else, I think, I was right.

Strom Rosil wore a smart Hamalese uniform. But his helmet was pure Kataki: small, round, close-fitting, without crest or feather. That was so he might lash his tail about freely, giving full play to that terrible weapon. As a paktun, that is, a notorious mercenary, he had risen in the service of Hamal, commanding brigades of the army. Now, with the urgings of Vad Garnath hardly necessary, he had reverted to his ancestral way of life and masterminded the capture of Saffi, so as to further the plans of Garnath. I did not know what the plans were, or how they were affected by Yantong; all I knew now was that Saffi was here, in this place, and so was I. I could shilly-shally no longer.

These people were here on a hunting holiday. It was all to be fun and games, drinking, singing, and hunting beautiful young girls to the death.

“You do not speak, Vad Quarnach.” The Chuktar Strom tried to see into my palanquin. “Have you a shishi there with you occupying your tongue?” And he gave a dark self-satisfied chuckle and put his hands on the curtains by my face.

I said, “If you draw the curtains, Kataki, your tail will rot and fall off.”

He jerked back, outraged. Oh, yes, I could almost hear his thoughts churning away: *This fellow is a Vad, and therefore important. But I am a Kataki and a Strom and a Chuktar!* So he put his hand on the curtain to draw it back; Zair knows what would have happened next if Vad Garnath had not called across.

“It seems we are late, Rosil. Bear me witness it was no fault of ours.”

As the Kataki turned back, letting the curtain fall, Garnath went on, his voice rising: “And, anyway, Kov Encar, we are here, the lion-maid is here; so what harm is there?”

What answer the Kov of Faol might have made was chopped off by the soft, whispery voice of the wizard.

“You have kept us waiting, Vad Garnath. For that we forgive you. But our forgiveness is not bought cheaply.”

The Kataki stood by Garnath’s litter now, facing the wizard’s palanquin, and I saw clearly in them both the fear and the sick terror. I marveled. For I did not know this Phu-si-Yantong then, did not know him at all.

They had a good excuse for their lateness (true or not I did not know), and if flutsmen had attacked them it gave color to my own story. I was concerned over Saffi only.

Toilet facilities, of course, were provided within the palanquin and it was the unenviable task of a little slave girl to empty the basins. I leaned a little sideways and said to this poor creature, one hired from the Kov of Faol, “It is necessary for me to retire for a moment. Tell the bearers to take me out.”

The bearers were Fristles; at the slave girl’s words they began to carry me away.

“What, Quarnach! We are about to begin!”

“You must excuse me, Kov. I will join you presently.”

Encar Capela nodded, not ill pleased. If one of his customers, and moreover one who had not brought a girl for quarry, chose to miss the beginning of the Jikai, then all the more sport for his other guests.

But Kov Numrais, thin and crafty though he was, must have found a liking for Vad Quarnach in him after the victory at Jikaida, for he sang out: “Oh, come now, Encar! Let us wait a few murs. It is little enough, Yskaroth knows!”

Sometimes well-meaning people, even people who go on hunts to shoot young girls can be well-meaning, create the most devilish problems. I had thought it would be simple: Just slide out of the chair, take up my weapons, and dealing with any nurdling rasts who got in the way, seek out Saffi, free her, and take a voller out to the tomb of Imbis Frolhan the Ship Merchant.

Now, it was clear, I was fated to accompany these rasts to the huge cavern within the rock-dome. I did not want to be with them in the arched gallery running all around the dome. Nor did I wish to be in the artificial jungle — we had been told Capela had arranged a crystal jungle, this time, for our special benefit — at the center. I wanted to get in among the passageways and readying rooms, where the slaves and guards and animal-handlers and manhounds were kept or stabled. There, I knew, I would find Saffi.

“Schtump!” came the whispering eerie voice of the wizard. “Schtump, Vad Quarnach.”

Now schtump means hurry up, but it means it in a way that can be as offensive as one cares to make it, as I have indicated. One seldom hears just that cutting malevolent tone addressed to a noble — except, as here, when that noble is being told to get a move on by someone of a higher rank.

What factual rank Yantong possessed I did not know. As a Wizard of Loh he very naturally considered himself superior to any other creature of Kregen apart from another wizard, and it was now clear to me that Yantong would acknowledge no peers. I remembered the feeling of apprehension I had received from Que-si-Rening when he had gone into lupu and had, only briefly, contacted the aura of this Phu-si-Yantong.

None of the others expressed surprise or shock at the wizard’s tone. The Kov of Faol, indeed, added his own urgent demand that I make speed. Kov Numrais, fingering his beard, looked across at my palanquin with not a little uncertainty at what he had conjured up by his suggestion.

As my Fristles bore me away to a small toilet chamber with the little slave girl trotting alongside, I reflected that insults should roll from me as water rolls from a duck’s back. One thing now remained important. The hunt would have to begin without me.

Filled with the light from the Suns of Scorpio, the high room broke into a babblement of sound as fresh wine was brought and the mighty crippled hunters and their retainers prepared to wait the few murs I had been granted. I left them and the bronze doors clashed shut, the guards in the forest-green of the Kov of Faol slamming their spear-butts against the ground and resuming their static poses of alertness.

If I say there now seemed to me one thing only I could do, you will understand that all my plans had tumbled into ruin.

In the small toilet chamber I bade the Fristles set me down. I sent them away and told them to keep out of my sight until I sent the slave girl for them. As for this young lady, I said to her in a voice that made her flinch back: “Go outside, shif.” She looked terrified. I leaned forward and pointed at the door through which we had come. “Shif! Outside!”[\[8\]](#)

“Yes, master.” She bowed herself in half and then scuttled out.

I sat back, took three deep breaths, and set to work.

By the diseased, odoriferous, and dripping tripe of Makki-Grodno! I had to break the chains of mischance snarling me up.

The fancy clothes of Vad Quarnach came off in the palanquin so that I might leave clad only in the old scarlet breechclout. If secret eyes watched they would not see a cripple jump out and strip off his clothes; they would see a broad-shouldered desperado abruptly appear from the palanquin, and that should confuse them, by Zair!

The noise of my movements almost betrayed me.

Only in the last second, as I reached for the scabbarded thraxter, did I hear the slither of naked feet on stone.

I jerked around on the seat.

An oiled, naked man reared between the curtains, a long curved dagger in his fist striking down with savage force to plunge into my body and finish me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Saffi the golden lion-maid

The dagger bit into my left shoulder, high. I thumped the fellow on the nose, but the blow lost most of its force, for I was entangled with the clothes around my legs and had not the space to lean into the punch. He snarled at me and slashed again and I managed to get my left hand around his right wrist. I could get no real grip, for the dagger-cut stung. We wrestled for a moment, he trying to tear free and sink his blade into my belly, I trying to untangle myself and sprawl out and so get at him. I recognized him, for he had come in the retinue with Vad Garnath, and I guessed he was one of the Katakai, the Chuktar Strom's men. My remarks about a rotting tail falling off had occasioned this clumsy attempt at reprisal. As a stikitche, this fellow left much to be desired.

With something of an effort I thrust him back, so that he staggered and half fell upon the stones. The damned fancy clothes would not come free, despite my frenzied kicks. The thraxter scabbard jammed itself up in some infuriating way against the window and the seat, and I couldn't get the sword free. The assassin leaped in again, silently. I, too, had not cried out, for this fellow might yet do me a service if I could only get myself untangled and to rights.

The dagger hissed past my face and I slogged a fist into his jaw, and he staggered back again. Clumsy he might be, true; but courage and determination he had, for he gathered himself for another attempt.

His oiled body glistened in the crude oil-lamp's flame. He came in with more caution this time, but with a very deadly intent. He feinted the dagger left, then artfully sliced it down right. He would have had me, too, but I slapped his wrist away, gave up trying to free my feet and legs from the entangling clothes, and concentrated on the thraxter. The pommel suddenly leaped free from its wedging and the hilt snugged into my hand. The blade hissed as it cleared the scabbard.

The assassin drove in again, dagger high, ready to plunge down and past what he must consider my

enfeebled guard. I let him move in. His broad sweaty face bore down — and then the sword-blade slashed and he was falling back, unable to scream, half his face chopped off. I leaned over to prod him again; it was unnecessary. He lay there, his arms wide, the dagger with my blood upon it still clutched in his fist.

The damned clothes fell free at last and I could step out. I didn't give a damn now for what secret eyes might spy on me. If there were observers, then the damage was done.

The work of only a moment saw the dead man lifted and draped facedown over the window. His blood now gushed into the palanquin. Working swiftly I dressed him in my abandoned clothes. I bundled him into the chair, set him up and fastened the dudinter mask with the emerald eye-sockets and scarron-chain edging above the wreck of his face. He might be mistaken for the Vad Quarnach for long enough for it to be of help.

Among Quarnach's collection of masks was a steel domino without ornamentation, very much like the upper half of the face-masks used by kaidurs in the Arenas of the Dawn Lands. I fastened it on my face, covering my forehead, eyes, and nose, the cheek-pieces deeply curved. There was no beaver to cover the chin. I guessed it had been Quarnach's fad to have such a mask among his collection. For weapons, two thraxters, a dagger, a knife, and a loaded crossbow would do. I took a quiver of quarrels, though I fancied there would be no time to reload and the arbalest was strictly a single-shot weapon in my schemes.

The door through which the Fristles had brought me into the toilet room was closed. Opposite it a stone of the wall, revolving upon its longitudinal axis, exposed a dark opening. From this had crept the stikitche. I stepped toward the opening and a thump on the door and a shout sounded.

“Vad Quarnach! We wait!”

“By the Black Chunkrah!” I said softly. “Wait, you rasts!”

The revolving stone closed again easily enough. I guessed the Katakai knew of it through Phu-si-Yantong (in which I was right), and a fleeting moment of interest in what schemes these three, Garnath, the Chuktar Strom, and the wizard, might have crossed my mind. Then I padded down a dark corridor toward a slit of light at the far end.

The would-be assassin had had no part in my plans until he had appeared; now I hoped he would give a little pause to the proceedings, for however long it took them to discover just who he was. Even then, Strom Rosil would scarcely wish to acknowledge the fellow as one of his men. He was a little sauce added to the dish I was concocting, here in the fortress-city of Smerdislad.

What with the Star Lords and the Savanti and my concerns over Vallia and Djanduin there had been absolutely no time for me to honor a private pledge I had made when I'd first made contact with the Manhounds of Antares. I had determined one day to return here to Faol and sort the jiklos out, once and for all. The manner of my returning had been completely unforeseen by me, envisaging something after the style of an avenging host of fliers and warriors, and my primary concern must remain the rescue of Saffi, the lion-maid. That went without question.

The thought that these so-called mighty hunters should revel in terrifying and shooting young girls, beautiful or not, revolted me. The wanton slaying of anyone is anathema to me, as you know. I do not think I am alone in this feeling.

The slit of light turned out to be the gap between door and jamb of the exit from the secret passageway. The blood from my wounded left shoulder was leaving a betraying trail. The wound would have to be bound up as soon as I could contrive it. Apart from a diabolically infuriating weakness of that left arm, I felt as yet no ill effects. Once outside that door and into the first of the maze of corridors and chambers and alleyways tunneled beneath the city's upper levels, above the huge empty space at the center, I could set about the first of the tasks confronting me.

The guard went to sleep quite peacefully.

I put on his forest-green tunic and wrapped his gaiters about my legs. He wore a white undertunic and with this I contrived to make a pad for my shoulder, to try to staunch the flow of blood. I put the steel domino into the pouch at my waist where it was a confoundedly awkward shaped bundle, to be sure. The guard had no shield, and I'd not brought the one I'd taken from Quarnach's Tryfant guard, for I did not fancy the weight on my injured left arm, and considered I would be quicker as a fighter without that encumbrance. I kept the crossbow at the ready and set off down the nearest corridor leading below, curving gently around the massive inner bubble within the city of Smerdislad.

No one paid me any attention, for there were numerous slaves and retainers and guards moving about their business. It is often thus in a large household where slaves are employed, and guards to keep them in order.

Lack of insignia of rank on the tunic proclaimed me a swod. When I spoke to the ob-Deldar I addressed him as "Deldar," which pleased him, for the swods love to put heavy emphasis on that "ob" before the officer's rank, thus letting him know how far beneath contempt is an ob-Deldar.

"The jiklos' quarters, dom?" said this Deldar, very friendly. "You've drawn a right leem's nest there."

"I have been ordered, Deldar," I said, sounding as meekly humble as ever Hamun ham Farthytu had sounded in far Ruathytu. "They are somewhere near the quarters used by the girls for the hunt, I believe."

He looked at me. "I do not know you, I think."

"That is true, Deldar, for I am newly arrived in Smerdislad and reported for duty this morning. That is why I ask."

Foreign mercenaries were no new thing on Kregen.

He gave me the necessary directions, adding that the girls' quarters were nowhere near the jiklos', being directly opposite on the other side of the interior city.

After I had walked on through the curving passageways I went past the entrances to the jiklos' quarters. I kept to the great outer circle around the inner areas, moving on always with a steady pacing as though about my master's business, until I came to the quarters of the quarries.

Here guards would no doubt seek to stop me.

The oppressive, unhealthy atmosphere of the place sickened me. I had passed the animals' quarters, and the variegated smells had told me that many ferocious beasts were kept penned within. Now the musky scents and delicate perfumes of women told me I had arrived.

There was no particular ill feeling in my shoulder and the swod's short uniform cape, artfully draped,

concealed the lump of wadding. I just hoped I'd still be able to use the arm when the time came.

"What do you want, dom?"

The guard who spoke was a swod like myself, a heavysset, thickly muscled fellow, an apim. His companion on the other side of the entrance door glanced across and then went back to leaning on his spear. These were real spears, not stuxes.

"Is Jiktat Nath inside, dom?" I spoke offhandedly.

"Jiktat Nath who? I know no Jiktat Nath."

Well, Zair knows, you can't guess right every time.

"Jiktat Nath ti Coyton," I said, using a name that brought back memories. "You must know him. A real right Jik, he is."

"Aren't they all? No, dom. And you may not enter here where the maidens are kept."

I glanced casually along the broad corridor, both left and right, and saw only an old slave in a tattered gray breechclout staggering along under a load of firewood.

"I agree with you," I said. "But I think I shall enter."

I struck him most cleanly along the jaw, where his helmet strap curved away from my fist, and whirled back to catch his companion's spear on my left arm and so strike him, too. I felt my left arm, then, a jolt of pain tearing down from the injured shoulder. "By Vox!" I said, annoyed. I bashed the doors open, dragged the two guards inside and dumped them and peered out. The slave with the firewood had gone. No one else had seen, although two slave girls carrying baskets of eggs came into view. I popped back inside and closed the doors.

Just how much time I would have I did not know. Probably not much, if the Kov of Faol ran a properly regulated household.

This place appeared to me to be a curious mixture. Hollowed from the rock and patchily slapped over with whitewash, it was hung with a few shabby tapestries. It was at once stark and unpleasant, as befitted slave quarters. But it was also enlivened with a few touches of comfort, like ponsho-skin rugs, and upholstered divans, and the cooling tinkle of water sounded from a side room where a stream spouted into a stone basin. A few naked girls were bathing there. After a single look I passed by them and pushed on. Saffi was not of their number. They did not see me; at least, not one cried out.

A couple of outraged, fluttering Xaffers trotted up to me. A strange and remote race of diffs, the Xaffers, often used in harems and Chail Sheom quarters when slave. I showed them a grim face and bellowed: "In the name of the Kov! Jump to it, onkers!"

Their protestations could not stop me, but I would not deal harshly with them. I pushed in, going through heavy ornate drapes of embroidered linen past other rooms where girls of many different races sat or reclined listlessly. Clearly, these slave-women's quarters held no happy lighthearted chatter; these girls were only too well aware of their fate in the Kovnate of Faol. I did not see Saffi.

There could not be much time left. I tried to think. The Xaffers had fluttered after me, declaiming

indignantly at the intrusion. No man, especially a common swod in a green tunic, had any right of entry here.

In the oil-lamp's gleam I poked about, upending divans in case Saffi had been rolled up in a carpet and hidden there, a favorite trick. Deeper and deeper I prowled. Now there was only one Xaffer shrilling outrage at me. That meant the other had gone for help.

In a wall devoid of ornamentation or covering a heavy lenken door stood fast shut, with a bar on this side. Just beyond, a door with a strange green-and-blue-curlicue design stood half open, and I heard a girl singing. I would not be surprised if that was Saffi singing, for Numim maidens are not easily frightened.

Between the two doors stood two guards. It was clear they kept this inner portal under close watch. The Xaffer at my back, stumbling along in his foofray satin slippers was shrilling something about: "If you wished to join the inner guard you should have come through the proper door!" I ignored him and halted, looking at these two guards.

If you wonder why I halted, it was for the simple reason that these two were Pachaks. As you know, Pachaks, besides being excellent fighters, are renowned for their loyalty. It makes good sense to station them where positions of trust are to be held. These two were remarkably tall for their race, their snug round bronze helmets coming fully up to my chin. They were both extremely broad across the chest, also, and they had in the clear blue light of their eyes, in the competent way they handled their weapons, and in the alert and ready fashion in which they held their bladed tails cocked over their shoulders, a very potent message. That message was, starkly: "No one unauthorized shall pass this door alive."

I said, "I seek the Jiktar Nath ti Coyton, Deldars."

For both were waso-Deldars, and therefore important men in the lower hierarchy of Capela's guards.

"We know no Jiktar Nath ti Coyton," one of them said. "You had best wait quietly here and we will call the Hikdar."

That would be standing orders.

I did not wish to slay them. Pachaks are good fighters, as you know, and men of integrity. Their straw-yellow hair, almost white, has flared over many a battlefield, for they have more than a touch of the berserker about them, and tend to strip off their helmets when in action. But, being good soldiers, they keep their armor on. (I sometimes think their berserker rages, which occur only when they are fighting, are a carefully controlled part of their image.) I eyed them with some caution. As you know, apart from the whiplike, ferociously effective tail with its glittering steel blade gripped in the hand at its tip, the other curious fact about a Pachak is his possession of two left arms. These two arms are not, I will allow, either as strong or as vicious as the two left arms of a Djang, but nonetheless they give a Pachak a most effective defense with a shield. Both these waso-Deldars carried shields.

More and more at this time I was coming to the conclusion that the ecological balances and racial distributions of Kregen had been planned aeons ago — and planned most probably by the Star Lords. Little else, I felt then, would account for the amazing variety and spread of cultures and races upon this always fresh and marvelous world.

"Wait, swod!" growled the one who had spoken. He flicked his right hand and — lo! — it held his thraxter. He gestured. "Pragan, go and ask the Hikdar of this swod. I will detain him here until you

return.”

“At once, Apgarl.” The second Pachak easily lifted the log barring the lenken door and went out. These two had a chain of command, then, that was clear. That would be like the Pachaks.

That glittering blade, a foot long, glittered in the lamp’s gleam as it circled above the guard’s head. Within the deadly circle of that bladed tail it behooved any fighting-man to beware.

“Look, Deldar,” I said in a most reasonable tone of voice. “I have my duty to do. You are making an unnecessary fuss.”

“Stand still!”

“But—”

“Guards do not come here through the wenches’ quarters, nor do they stride with thraxters in their hands. Be still.”

I sighed. There was nothing else for it.

Saffi must be beyond that blue-and-green-curlicued door. Singing or not, she must be there. It would take time to get her out, and the other Pachak would be back with his Hikdar soon.

I did not kill the Pachak. As I say, and I believe you understand, I have a regard for that short stout race of halflings. I leaped, got in under his tail, elbowed his thraxter away, reached for his throat — and his two left arms jerked out like pistons and his shield smashed into my ribs and sent me sprawling back. I landed on my injured left shoulder. I felt the jab of scarlet pain, but there was no time to do anything else but roll frantically aside as his bladed tail came down thwacking onto the stones. He had struck with a flat blade so as to knock me out. I forced myself up and this time my thraxter met his in a jingle of steel. The tail whipped back ready for another blow. I nicked his sword down and prepared to sway aside from the next blow, and had barely time to gasp.

“Onker!” said the Pachak. His tail, instead of curling over his shoulder and around and down for a blow, abruptly disappeared. In the next second I saw a betraying glitter between his legs. The foot-long blade, horizontal and lethal, darted like a javelin straight for me, impelled by the stiffened, muscular tail.

If you have seen a flexible rammer used to thrust home a thirty-two pounder roundshot you will know how a flexible rope can become in a twinkling a hard bar. Even as I leaped I caught an expression on his face of pity, his blue eyes very bright. Then I was jumping up and the sword gripped in his tail hand hissed between my legs as it had hissed between his. I came down hard, got his tail between my knees, jerked upright. He looked his surprise. I straightened my legs, my knees snapped back perhaps four inches, enough to drag him forward, my thraxter bashed away his, and then, without stopping, I brought the hilt around and thumped it solidly against his chin. He gave a gasp; he did not fall down. I had to hit him three times before he sagged to his knees.

He rolled over onto his side, his tail now limp, that deadly steel scraping uselessly across the stones. I stepped back and saluted him with the sword.

Suddenly a low musical voice at my back said, “You give him the Jikai, then, Amak Hamun?”

I whirled.

Saffi stood in the doorway, her superb body bare, her glorious golden hair a dazzlement about her golden shoulders.

“We are leaving now, Saffi.”

“I am glad it is you who have come for me, Hamun. Is my father alive?”

“He lives.”

She let out a little sigh. She walked toward the fallen Pachak and took up his thraxter. I knew she would be skilled in its use. Also, she snapped off the cords of his green cape and flung it about herself. Then, together, we made for the open lenken door.

I thought about the Pachak’s green cape as I picked up the crossbow from where I had dropped it. Pachaks, like Katakis, do not like billowy, tangling clothing at their backs, and it is clear to see why, for a cape might easily interfere with that smooth sweeping looping of their bladed tails. So, having to wear the Kov’s regulation uniform cape, perhaps this Pachak, whose name I knew was Apgarl, had fought at a disadvantage. Perhaps his cape equaled my abandoned crossbow. I had not wished to slay him, as I might easily have done. Maybe I had been lucky.

Saffi, the daughter of Rees, the Trylon of the Golden Wind, must have observed the encounter; she had given a backhanded Jikai, so she must have observed the byplay with cape and crossbow.

We went swiftly along the curving corridor. If anyone asked, we were merely a guard taking a captive along according to orders; and if that did not satisfy the interlocutor, then six inches of sharp steel would.

The lion-girl walked with a free loping swing, and her face showed the burning passion of her nature. I said, “Look downcast, like a slave, Saffi. If you do not I shall spank you.”

“You might try!” she flared.

I glared at her. She lowered her eyes. She held the thraxter beneath the green cape, hidden, and I saw the way her right fist clenched. But she made her face assume a hangdog expression, and she hung her head in proper slave style.

We spent some time finding our way down the passageways. Now if I relate what next befell us in a straightforward and matter-of-fact way, it will sound the merest flight of fancy. Yet that is my way, as these tapes prove. Quite clearly and without doubt, at least to my mind, the Star Lords or the Savanti had taken a most direct hand in events. What their motives were, I did not know; of their results I can speak with absolute authority. For as we turned from a small corridor into a wide paved cavern, ablaze with light and filled with people moving on their errands, I saw a small half-closed doorway. I stopped. Ahead across the paved area a marching body of troops approached. They were Pachaks, all of them, and they meant business. I grabbed Saffi’s arm and bundled her through the narrow doorway.

“Hamun!”

“Be silent, Saffi. I might battle them all — aye, and slay them all, if Zair smiled — but that is not the way of wisdom.”

She pouted at me in the gloom. The place hung with dust we had disturbed, and if we sneezed we might

betray ourselves. I moved farther down the narrow slot. Saffi inched along after. I felt a slight warm breeze on my cheek. There was practically no light now, and I could barely make out a bronze grille from which the warm perfumed air wafted.

I put my finger to my lips. “Not a sound.” My words just reached her golden ears.

Then — I must tell this just as it occurred. Then from the bronze grille and borne on the scented breeze came the sound of voices, talking in grim and purposeful fashion, three voices not so much arguing as discussing a knotty problem. I listened. In a moment we must back out of the slot and seek to escape.

But I listened.

The words bit through the dark air, hissing, sibilant, cold with a passionless dedication to an overweening ambition.

There, deep in the depths of the fortress-city of Smerdislad, away on the island of Faol, close to the continent of Havilfar, many and many a dwabur from home, I heard those chillingly shocking words. There in the darkness I heard and I could not believe I heard right.

For that thin and evil whisper said: “We must first win him to our views. For in all Vallia the man to be most feared is this same Dray Prescott.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Savanti and the Star Lords ordain fate

Saffi tugged my arm. I felt the wound in my shoulder. But I could not move. I think my mouth hung open in a foolish loose-lipped idiot’s grin. The voice of Phu-si-Yantong wafted through the bronze grille, there in the fortress of Smerdislad lost in the jungles of Faol.

“We must bring every artifice to bear on this Dray Prescott.”

The voice of Strom Rosil, the Katakis Chuktar: “Why not have him killed, and end it? A stikitché—”

“Like your man sent to slay the fool Quarnach, Rosil?” said the voice of Vad Garnath, sharp with goading malice.

Phu-si-Yantong quelled them. “He must not be slain. Through him we can rule all Vallia — aye, and the Vallian empire!”

Strom Rosil would not easily be quelled, although he spoke in a lowered, malevolent tone. “My man was no professional stikitché. The hunt is delayed. I care nothing for the hunt, and the onker Quarnach may crawl about the corridors bleeding to death for all I care. My Katakis and I need slaves! When we have Pandahem and then Vallia—”

Vad Garnath laughed. Saffi, who tried to listen, shivered.

“Much will depend on Queen Thyllis. For she believes her power to be absolute.”

“Remember,” came the ghost-whisper of Yantong. “Today her power in Hamal is absolute. We plan for the day after tomorrow.”

“And I grow impatient, by the Triple Tails of Targ the Untouchable!”

“Then I caution you to learn wisdom, Rosil, or you may suffer from a visit from your own Chezra-gon-Kranak for your sins.”

“By my tail!” The voice of the Chuktar Strom growled with malefic force through the bronzed grille. “I know well how to deal with those who cross my path.”

Still I was unable to move. Saffi tugged again; I barely felt her fingers on my arm, although pain struck from my shoulder. These three had been talking and I had stumbled into the middle of their talk, so that much of what they said meant nothing, overheard as it was out of context. But I felt I was on the verge of great discoveries. Yantong was talking about Strom Rosil’s twin, the Stromich Ranjal who was, I gathered, about some evil business for this unholy trio. I could not tear myself away. I listened, fascinated.

Saffi cautiously edged up close to me and I felt her golden hair tickling my neck. She put her lips close to my ear and whispered: “Amak Hamun! We must go before they search us out!”

I did not reply.

She was right. That paralysis dropped away. I began to move, and heard Phu-si-Yantong saying: “So the problem of Dray Prescott will find its own solution when the emperor is gone. Very well. I am concerned over this attempt by the king of Menahem to steal the secrets of voller manufacture.”

Vad Garnath laughed again. “The spy Dopitka ti Appanshad was taken and put to the question and sent to Queen Thyllis’ syatra. The spines pierced him through and—”

“Yes, Garnath, I can well imagine what happened to the spy from Menahem. But there may well be others. I am of Loh. I owe the cities of Havilfar — and Hamal and Hyrklana — much enmity from the old times and the ancient days. Without vollers the Empire of Loh was as a broken reed. Now the position has swung as the weathercock swings. Pandahem must not gain vollers, and none must be allowed to go to the Vallian rasts.” His whispering voice cut through the darkness. I found I was gripping the hilt of my thraxter with a grip that pained. “The vaol boxes and the paol boxes contain the seeds of a power greater than any you have imagined. They must never be broken.”

“What if they are?” Vad Garnath sounded impatient. “Even I do not know the nobles of Hamal charged with these secrets. They are not spoken of. Until the Nine Faceless Ones approach a noble and summon him to voller-duty he — or anyone — must remain ignorant of the secrets. All a meddler will find is dirt and air.”

Dirt and air!

Now I felt absolutely certain that the Savanti or the Star Lords had brought me to just this spot and just this time. I stopped moving back and strained to listen, and Saffi fretfully tugged again, anxious to be gone.

She dared not speak, and neither of us dared make a sound. So I listened as these three talked. They did not mention the word cayferm once, but I felt an uplifting sense that I had taken a measurable stride closer to the heart of the secret.

Now I could leave here. Now I could see a course of action ahead of me that would bring the secrets tumbling into my lap like shonages from a full-grown tree. Marvelous!

My first wriggling movement backward started Saffi agilely back down the slot. The last words I heard were from that Phu-si-Yantong upon whose face I had not yet gazed. He was giving Garnath orders about the volgendrins. Garnath was answering with the laughter entirely fled from his voice, and Rosil, too, sounded surly and vicious.

The Wizard of Loh, Phu-si-Yantong, said, "Extra Gerawin and other efficient guards must be used. It does not matter from which country they come, for my plans call for all of Havilfar to yield to me the One True Way. Use Gerawin, Pachaks, anyone who can fight well and is loyal to his hire to defend the volgendrins."

Going back down the slot of darkness I mulled that over. We had to escape from this hellhole, but, equally, I had to know what secret information it was I had gained. I knew Gerawin only too well. They were squat, bandy-legged diffs with damned sharp tridents who so efficiently flew astride their tyryvols and guarded the Heavenly Mines where I had slaved in such horror. As for volgendrins, well, I had heard men speak of them and had passed it by, being busy about other pursuits. But the word conjured up certain possibilities . . .

At the little half-hidden door leading out Saffi turned to me. In the lamplight splashing in, she looked furious clean through.

"Father said you were a strange one, Amak Hamun! By Krun! He was right! Do you want to spend forever in here?"

"What those men had to say interested me, Saffi."

"A fine time you pick to eavesdrop!"

Well, that was true. I reflected, not without joy, that if I had not decided to try to rescue this glorious lion-maid, if I had selfishly gone about the much more important business of Vallia in Hamal, I would never have heard of this wizard, Phu-si-Yantong, would never have come here, to this hidden fortress, never have squeezed down a slot of blackness and so overheard evil plans concerning Vallia. The chances that seemed miraculous were no chances. I had chosen to try to rescue Saffi, and the Savanti had used that to their own ends. I felt convinced this must be the work of the Savanti, those mortal but superhuman men of the Swinging City, Aphrasöe, the more I thought on the question. They had the welfare of men at heart on Kregen, that I knew. Just what the Star Lords' plans might be, I, a mortal, had no way of knowing.

We could no longer mingle freely with the guards and slaves within the inner fortress. The alarm had been given. A lion-maid, as had been proven so conclusively, is a rare and precious object in vile dens where beautiful girls are hunted; Saffi needed a hooded cloak. The slave from whom we obtained the gray slave garment was probably very pleased indeed to be afforded the opportunity of a quiet sleep. Together, Saffi in her cloak, I as a forest-green-clad guardsman, we prowled on.

Presently she said: "You go up, Hamun!"

"Aye."

She sniffed and pulled the hood closer about her golden hair.

Up we went, through passageways and caverns. We had to dodge away out of sight two or three times as bodies of guards marched past; among slaves we pressed on boldly.

All feeling had left my shoulder now. I tucked my arm into the side of the tunic and it hung like a lump of meat on a butcher's hook. I kept the crossbow. Saffi might take the one shot; I discarded the quiver. At last we saw doors ahead that, I trusted to Zair, must take us out to a landing platform on the roof. Only three guards stood their posts here, and all were Rapas. Saffi shot one. I spitted the second, and Saffi, not without a splendid example of swordplay, dispatched the third. We pushed through the open doors onto a flat roof and saw vollers lined up, quietly waiting for us.

It was not quite as easy as that.

To our right reared the tall glitteringly white column of the central tower. Up there no doubt the Kov of Faol had his own amusements. Certainly, he had guards. They began to shoot down as we ran for the nearest suitable voller, a four-place craft with rakish lines indicating speed. Other guards sprang to bar our path. We had a right merry set-to then, but in all honesty I recall little of it. I do remember Saffi, most glorious, blazing golden, striking shrewd blows, and myself shouting the Jikai to her, saying, "A true daughter of a noble father," and other silly words besides. Then Saffi was pushing me into the voller. I flopped down. Saffi straddled above me. I recalled that I was supposed to be rescuing her, and levered myself up past her. I was able to smash the thraxter down on a couple of Rapas and an apim who would have dragged us out. The voller moved, lurched, sprang into the air.

We soared away over the jungle.

Zair must have been with us for it was some time before the pursuing airboats took off. The preparations for the hunt had begun early; the day was barely half gone. We could expect no grateful concealment as the twin suns, Zim and Genodras, sank below the horizon.

Saffi set a course due south. Well, that would do for now. We must outrun our pursuers, or fox them in some way, and then we might begin the long flight back to Ruathytu. Saffi must have thought along the same lines, for she looked back, and her long golden hair blew out splendidly past her face. She laughed with an exultation that is reserved for the battle-mad or the gloriously adventurous of two worlds. I could not feel my shoulder; all I could feel was a damned gray wave roaring over my thick skull, blotting out reasonable thought.

"We will outfly them, Hamun, and then hide in the jungle. They will never find us once we find a safe place!"

"The — manhounds—" I croaked.

"With a weapon in my fist, I do not think I would fear even a manhound, with you at my side!"

Well, Numim girls are notorious for their ardor. I shivered. I was a damned sick apim, that was certain. After the dip in the sacred Pool of Baptism that had ensured me a full thousand years of life, I was also strongly able to recover from wounds and sickness. But it would take time; that fellow's dagger had bitten deeply, more deeply than I realized. I was running a temperature, and I felt as bad as ever I had, apart from certain more scarlet moments of my life — as when I crossed the path of the Phokaym along the Klackadrin.

Thoughts of Numim girls brought up certain memories. I now felt confident Numim girls were as tough as

was said; and I fancied Numim men were also as tough and would keep a promise.

“Straight on, Saffi,” I croaked out. “Keep going.” I managed to sprawl forward and stick my head up enough to see where we were going. Saffi looked back.

“They keep close, Hamun. We should dive into the jungle and hide.”

“No! Keep straight on.”

She pouted at me, and her golden eyes regarded me with calculation.

“I am not delirious, Saffi. I will get over this rast-given wound directly.” It was an effort to think and speak. “Keep on. Look for a clearing; caves, huts — and villas.”

I closed my eyes. If I had gambled wrong, then it was all over. Going down to hide in the jungle was a meaningless gesture, when the Manhounds of Antares sniffed at our trail . . .

The airboat sliced through the air, warm at our low altitude, and once in a while Saffi turned and looked back. Then she would stare ahead again, and the creases on her forehead indented deeper, so I knew our pursuers stayed doggedly with us.

We had chosen a fast voller, but we had not picked the fastest in Smerdislad.

Saffi said, “Two vollers gain on us, Hamun.”

“They have purer minerals in their silver boxes,” I said, mumbling. Then I realized what I was saying. But I could do nothing about that. Saffi took no notice, and I believe she thought I was delirious. Well, I was rambling in my speech, and must not talk again until the time came.

As Zair is my witness, I have at all times attempted to tell the truth in these tapes as I saw it. I own to many failings, and I am a great rogue when necessity presses, and yet I believe I have not willingly deceived you. So I must now confess that I do not recall what happened from the time Saffi reported the two pursuing vollers were lunging for our airboat to the time when I awoke festooned with acupuncture needles — and many of them moxybustion examples, aromatically smoldering — to stare up into the concerned face of Doctor Larghos the Needle. What I tell is what Saffi told me. It was a most hairy time, she said, her golden face alight with the passions of the fight still strong upon her.

Saffi swerved the voller about, avoiding the lancing hail of bolts fleeing from our pursuers. The voller was stocked with many of the familiar weapons of aerial fighting. Although I had thrown away the quiver of bolts, there was another to hand. Somehow, with one hand and the crossbow thrust against a rib of the voller’s frame, I succeeded in loading. Saffi shouted, and I loosed and the pilot of the leading pursuer hurled backward, his hands clawing skyward, a crossbow quarrel through his throat.

But their vehement onslaught could not be halted by slowly placed, single shots. The first voller surged up on our larboard and Saffi jinked away to the starboard and dropping, and the second let her come and rode with her, and the cruel iron grappling hooks sailed toward us.

My thraxter bit ineffectually at the wire-wound ropes. I ripped out two of the grapnels and with them chunks of the voller’s skin, and the air rushed through the gaps. But the airboats grappled us. Saffi set the controls and we plunged on and down toward the jungle. The two vollers plummeted with us. They were packed with armed men. I fought. I do not remember, but I fought. Sometimes, in the small hours of the

night when my brain releases my mind to wander freely over the lurid paths of memory I think I recall scarlet fractions of that fight.

There are painful memories of a glorious golden form at my side, with a bloodied sword. There are hazy recollections of pain that was beyond pain gouging all along my left side. Saffi and I fight well as a team, and we fought well on that long-gone day. A crossbow quarrel sprouted from my left shoulder, and I am told I yelled: "Waste your shots, you kleeshes!" For there was little they could do to that left arm of mine now save chop it off entire.

"Your back, Hamun!"

Whirling, I ducked clumsily and the thraxter, with a life of its own sought and took the life of the Rapa chopping at my head. Thraxters clanged and hammered, lunged and withdrew. How many men died I do not know. Saffi was wounded, the blood drenching down her golden skin. I must have fought as a berserker. But we were surely done for. The airboats were down low now, our voller penned between the other two. The green jungle tops fleeted past below. When an uprearing tree lashed our keel and scraped and tore away below, the whole flier shuddered.

"Fight to the end, Hamun!" yelled Saffi. Her golden hair waved wildly in the wind of our passage.

"We will fight, Saffi!" I shouted back. "But it is not the end! *Look!*"

I had not misjudged the quality of the Numims.

A clearing appeared below, past the last of the jungle trees. To one side reared a rock-face honeycombed with the black openings of caves. Huts burned. Villas burned. Down there the corpses of many manhounds lay sprawled, feathered with crossbow bolts. And up into the sky rose the vollers bearing the golden colors of the Trylon of the Golden Wind.

Jiktar Horan, Rees's guard commander, had kept his word.

There is little left to tell, for Saffi, her glorious golden eyes wide with the wonder of it all, finished by saying:

"And dear Horan and our men simply took those foul vollermen of Faol apart, Amak Hamun!"

I managed to say, from where I lay flat on my back with the needles smoldering and Doctor Larghos fussing, "You called me Hamun when we fought together, Saffi."

She smiled. "If you wish it, Hamun."

"It is you who do me the honor, Saffi. And your wound?"

At this Larghos the Needle piped up with: "The Lady Saffi must rest, Amak! But she would hear nothing but how you were and if you were likely to die! I told her—"

"And I ask her, Larghos the Needle." I smiled at Saffi. The smile did not pain. "You have proved everything true, Saffi. Now for the sake of your father, the Trylon Rees, you must rest."

"If you say so, Hamun."

There could be no rest for me.

Doctor Larghos strapped up my arm. I knew but did not tell him that a few hours of rest and recuperation would see the wound healed. But he persisted in his fussing, and my tiredness made me tolerate his mollycoddling.

There was one thing more left to do before I could fly for home.

I did not tell Saffi or Horan or Larghos the Needle what I intended, for they would not have understood. It was taken for granted by all of them that I would be going with them back to Ruathytu.

Jiktar Horan, a true professional, and his lion-men had followed my directions and had found this place and had worked it over. There were no Manhounds of Faol left alive. The slaves, those who had not run off, would be taken away, some to a slavery more kind than the horrors to be found in Faol, others to freedom. The faithless guides either had been killed or had escaped. Their work was done. The lion-men had cleansed this place of horror in their search for their Trylon's daughter. So my vow had come to be honored, in a strange fashion, truly: for the time being the foul practices of the Kov of Faol and his manhounds had been stamped out here.

I knew there were other places in Havilfar where the Manhounds of Antares would still be used for horrific sport.

Encar Capela, the Kov of Faol, still lived.

The final consummation of this cleansing process remained.

That would have to wait. The Savanti had placed in my hands information I dared not waste. Before I could return to Hamal and seek to know the truth of the Nine Faceless Ones, and through them the secrets of the silver boxes, I must return home. I craved to see my Delia once again, and my twins, Drak and Lela. But, also, I had to know how far the wise men of Vallia had progressed in their unraveling of the information I had already sent them.

When the last streaming light of Zim and Genodras had faded from the sky and the Maiden with the Many Smiles hung barely above the horizon, I cast off in the battered voller and set a course back to Smerdislad. The Numims did not see me go. I have some facility at stealing airboats, as you know.

Three ulms from the gate of Smerdislad, along the road of the tombs, Melow the Supple had said.

An ulm is about 1,500 yards, so I would have to fly very low indeed and touch down within easy sight of watchful guards upon the ramparts.

The Maiden with the Many Smiles did not smile down on me, for which I was most grateful, thanking Zair. The fuzzy pink and golden orb shone fitfully through a high drift of cloud. Shadows lay inky dark, but I picked out the impressive marble argenter, the ship with all sails spread, above the tomb of Imbis Frolhan the Ship Merchant. I touched down in shadows and prepared to spring out.

Fatigue had been beaten back a little by my enforced rest after that unremembered fight with Saffi aboard the voller, but pressed back only a little. I needed rest.

A hoarse hissing voice reached me from the shadows of the tomb.

“I have waited, Dray Prescott of Strombor. You come hard upon my time.”

I knew.

If I do not recount in full what then happened it is because again I have but hazy and fragmentary memories. I know I tore off the bandages so carefully placed upon my arm by Doctor Larghos the Needle. I needed two hands for this work. Melow the Supple lay quietly as I carried her to the voller. I sent the airboat up and set the course northward. Then I turned to the jikla.

The birth was easy by a human reckoning, but hard in the nature of things, and I sweated by the fuzzy pink moonlight, easing the two baby jiklos into the world of Kregen. Melow the Supple bore twins, a boy and a girl manhound. When it was done and everything was cleaned up and tidied away and a fold of cloth enclosed the two tiny forms, one on each side of her, I slumped back, exhausted.

Melow lay looking at her twins, and I swear that motherhood made of her face that was normally of so ferocious an aspect a kindly and concerned benediction as she gazed at her babies.

She looked up at me.

“I did not think you would return. Truly, Dray Prescott, you are not as other men.”

“So I have been told, Melow. And usually in anger.”

“I do not bear you anger, Dray Prescott.” She fussed with the cloth about the girl jikla. “And where do we fly now?”

We were out over the sea, heading north with just a touch of east in our course, so that we would pass safely far east of the Koroles, the islands off the east coast of Pandahem.

“We fly to Valka.”

“Valka? Do I know it?” The hazy golden moonlight struck twin shadows as She of the Veils rose from the sea rim. “No matter. For in all Kregen I have nowhere to go now, Dray Prescott, save by your side.”

How strange, by Vox, were the fates that sought to link me with a deadly and vicious Manhound of Antares!

“You will always be a welcome comrade, Melow the Supple.”

After all my adventures I had achieved much in Havilfar; and if war was to come with Hamal, then my home of Vallia would not fight defenseless in the air. Much remained to be done, but I would deal with that when the time came. I, Dray Prescott, smiled at the jikla, Melow the Supple, and at her baby twins.

“We fly for Valka, Melow, and for home.”

How marvelous it was to be flying back to Delia! Often and often in my life on Kregen I have flown, sailed, ridden, or walked on my own two feet back home to Delia. I own it to be the more perfect experience of travel in all of Kregen or of Earth.

Many a time I had returned to Delia, and if Zair and all the other gods of Kregen grant the boon to me, then always will I return many and many a time yet to come.

Home! Back to Valka and my Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains!

That can never tire. That, for me, is always the perfect ending to every adventure.

I would have it no other way.

About the author

Alan Burt Akers is a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer. Bulmer has published over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction.

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at www.mushroom-ebooks.com

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Arena of Antares

Fliers of Antares

Bladesman of Antares

Avenger of Antares

Armada of Antares

Notes

[1]*Waso*: five.

[2]*Dwabur*: five miles.

[3]*Jen*: Prescott has often used this word and I have changed it to its English equivalent, "Lord." It compares with the Hamalese "Notor." "Jen" is pure Vallian, I believe. [A.B.A.]

[4]*Shiv*: six.*Shebov*: seven.*Ord*: eight.*So*: three.

[5]*Kyro*: square or piazza.

[6]*Dudinter*: electrum. The Districts of the Ba-cities are named for their chief products; the nobles take their titles from the Districts for which they are responsible and from which come their wealth. [A.B.A.]

[7]Here Prescott goes into an analysis of the game, which he lost, clearly annoyed with himself. As he

says, his mind was on matters of more weight at the time. [A.B.A.]

[8]*Shif*: serving girl or slave wench. A word not often used by Prescott since it appears to signify a degree of arrogant contempt by its user. Here, of course, that was the intention in Prescott's use, and why I retain it in transposition. [A.B.A.]