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A Victory for Kregen

Alan Burt Akers

Mushroom eBooks

A Note on Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott is a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, an enigmatic man, with enormously broad shoulders and superbly powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and indomitable courage. He moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly. Reared in the inhumanly harsh conditions of Nelson's navy, he has been transported by the Scorpion agencies of the Star Lords, the Everoinye, and of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, to the savage and exotic world of Kregen, under the twin Suns of Scorpio, four hundred light-years from Earth.

Here, in the unforgiving yet rewarding world of Kregen, struggling through disaster and triumph, Prescott has made his home. Called on to shoulder the burden of being the Emperor of Vallia and of freeing the islands from the cruel grip of invaders, he is determined, once the country is once more united and free, to hand all over to his son Drak. But the Star Lords have dispatched him on a mission for them in the southern continent of Havilfar, and Prescott and eight comrades have barely escaped with their lives from an underground labyrinth of horror. Now Prescott must battle his way home to resume his work for Vallia.

Dray Prescott relates his story on cassettes, and each book is arranged to be read as complete in itself.

Chapter one

Tyfar Wields his Axe

The gray-beaked fellow flourishing his bronze decapitator fondly imagined my name was written on that wicked curved blade. His one desire in life was to keep my head as a precious souvenir. He even provided himself with a wicker basket swinging at his belt all ready for the trophy.

“Hai! Apim — now you die!”

The path down the side of the artificial mountain led here under overarching branches and the mossy-trunked trees stretched about us, ancient and gnarled, patched and puddled in the light of the suns.

As is my custom in a fight, I do not waste breath replying to taunts or battle chants, unless base cunning indicates the advantage of an even more coarse taunt in return, so I bent my head beneath the horizontal slash of the decapitator. The sword in my fist thrust once. The wicker basket, the bronze-studded armor, the leather boots, and the decapitator all fell away to the side, sloughing like too-wet dough, slid off the path and away down the slope between the trees.

The fellow was not alone.

Other headhunters pressed on, yelling, screeching their taunts, seeking to take the heads of us nine — who sought merely to escape off the mountain with our lives.

By chance it happened I led the descent of the mound and so these decapitating warriors met me first. They were not apim like me but those hard, gritty diffs men call Nierdriks, with coarse-skinned, high-beaked, hooded-eyed faces like killer turtles, and compact muscular bodies equipped with only two arms and two legs and no tails. Their bronze blades glimmered molten in the smoky shafts of crimson fire from the red sun, and their hides sheened muddy emerald in the fire from the green sun. With shrill yells of hatred they leaped for me.

My comrades were yelling, hullabalooing to get on along the path and at the Nierdriks. The first two attackers were seen off with no great difficulty. The shifting light and shade beneath the trees and the ruddy slope of the path made the action precarious.

My foot turned on a knobby tree root snaking like a swollen vein across the path.

I pitched headlong. My sword switched up instinctively and parried the flurry of blows. The ground came up — hard. The decapitators were held off easily enough; but I was on the ground and smelling the ages-old dust puffing up into my nostrils, feeling that damned tree root gouging into my back.

With a slash measurably faster and more intemperate than those that had gone before, I slashed the nearest fellow's ankles and then had to twist aside to avoid the thwunking great blow of his comrade's head cleaver. There was no real danger. In the next instant I would be up, on my feet, and that bloodthirsty head-and-body parter would go tumbling down the slope spraying blood.

There was no real danger — but, in the instant as I gathered myself, a shadow moved over me and two firm, muscular legs straddled me, and Tyfar was yelling and swinging his blade over my head.

“Hold, Jak! I'll cover you!”

He was remarkably lucky I hadn't chopped him. He stood over me, swinging and smiting, his shield well up, his axe a silver-stained blur in the dappled shadows.

This was a new and remarkable experience. The sensation intrigued me. Here was I sprawled on the ground in the middle of a fight, and this fine young prince Tyfar stood over me battling off our foemen!

Remarkable!

Also — highly amusing.

All the same, by Zair, comical though it was it could not be allowed to go on.

I wriggled away and degutted the Nierdrik who sought to sink his brand into Tyfar's unshielded side and then sprang up and clouted the next one over the head. His big turtle nose burst and sprayed purple fluids into the shadows.

"You are unharmed, Jak?"

"Aye. Aye, I'm unharmed — Prince." And then, because he was young and vehement and very much your proper prince of honor, I said — and with warmth, "My thanks."

More Nierdriks dropped from the trees upon us and for a space we had a merry set-to. In the confusing shadows, twinned in jade and crimson, we fought. Presently the headhunters drew off and gathered in a bunch a few paces below us on the path. Many bodies strewed the ground between, and they must have realized now that they had sought to slay and take the heads of a party unwilling to allow them that liberty.

Abruptly, one of the turtle-faces spun about, silently, and collapsed.

Barkindrar the Bullet said, "They are real, then." He took out another leaden slingshot and began to fuss with his sling.

Tyfar said, "Yes. It was in my mind they were mere phantoms."

"Not phantoms," said Deb-Lu-Quienyin. "I would have known."

He would, too, not a doubt of it. The kharna, the powers, of a Wizard of Loh would certainly have told Quienyin if we faced hallucinatory projections. He had taken no part in the combat, as was right and proper, and with a typical little hitch to his turban, setting it straight, he was visibly becoming a proper Wizard of Loh, respected and dreaded.

An arrow winged like a sliver of wrath and skewered a Nierdrik through that turtle neck.

"And," quoth Nath the Shaft, "I'll have that one back when we go past."

"You didn't see where my bullet went, Nath?"

"I did not. If you must sling lead then you must expect to lose it. If you must be a slinger then you must—"

"I'll knock the next three over before you clear your quiver, you great fambly!"

Well, that was normal. Nath the Shaft and Barkindrar the Bullet arguing over their respective skills, and wagering any and everything on the outcome of their shots, provided a never-failing source of joy and amusement to us through the horrors we had endured. The Nierdriks clustered in a rocky clearing among the trees, a dozen yards or so below us, and the radiance of the Suns of Scorpio fell about them. They provided capital targets.

Another leaden shot and another feathered shaft flew.

“Ha! Your man is only winged!”

“He’ll never fly again, for sure!”

These two, archer and slinger, prepared to cast again. They were Prince Tyfar’s retainers, the only two he had left to him from his father’s expedition. But, for all the fun and frolic, we had to get down off this artificial mountain before nightfall, and that was not too far off...

An abrupt shriek rent the air.

Two shrieks shattered past us as the Pachak twins bounded down the trail. Ordered, methodical, intensely loyal, Pachaks, but when they loose their yellow hair and turn berserk, then it is prudent for any man to guard himself. Screaming war cries, the twins hurtled down the path. Their weapons glittered. Like maniacal savages of a primitive time before the dawn of civilization, they burst in among the astounded head-hunters.

Barkindrar and Nath held their shots, and only just in time.

“We are with you!” shouted Tyfar. He started in running down the trail after the two Pachaks, whose right arms were going in and out twinkling with fighting fervor. The Pachaks’ two left arms apiece held their shields slanted expertly, and their tail hands swept razor-sharp steel in lethal slashes. The Nierdriks fell back, gabbling, some already turning to run.

So I lumbered down and saw off a man or two and, lo!, the path was clear.

“Well done!” panted Tyfar. “By Krun! That was a sight!”

The two Pachak brothers, Logu Fre-Da and Modo Fre-Da, bent to clean their weapons with methodical care on the scraps of cloth twisted around the corpses. Often it took a considerable time for a Pachak to regain normalcy from that fierce fighting frenzy; but I, like many men, considered that this berserk image of the Pachaks was carefully fostered, designed to impress and intimidate. It formed a part of their life-style only when they chose. All the same, there was no doubt that, often and often, something in that skirling onslaught got into their blood.

The Wizard of Loh, Deb-Lu Quienyin, was looking pleased. So was I. We had arranged with the two Pachaks to look out for the old wizard, and although they had not yet entered his employ and given their nikobi, which code of loyal service would have bound them, they were actively aware of their responsibility.

There were nine of us, nine adventurers seeking to escape from this artificial mound, this Moder which contained treasure and horror, and now I turned to look at my two rascals who came walking down toward us.

Nodgen, the tough Brokelsh, carried a bloodstained spear.

Hunch, the Tryfant, poked apprehensively at one of the Nierdriks, who flopped over, his arms limp.

“Are they all—?” began Hunch.

“You great fambly!” roared Nodgen, in his coarse Brokelsh way.

I did not smile. I was aware of the decline of the suns, and the lengthening jade- and ruby-tinged shadows beneath the trees.

“Let us get on.”

Yes, there were nine of us, and we wended down the side of the Moder and we kept a very sharp eye out for more unpleasantness.

We had chosen to descend by a path different from the one up which the expedition had toiled to the summit, and now as we went down, the sweet scent of twining plants filled our nostrils, and the tinkling sounds of hidden brooks made a mockery of the horror contained within the Moder. Hunch kept on casting glances back up the path. Well, that was fine. That meant we had our backs covered.

To look at us as we came to the base of the descent and surveyed the belt of thorny scrub ahead would no doubt have occasioned either amusement or disdain in any splendid court of Kregen. We had outfitted ourselves with fresh clothes; but now these were ripped and torn and stained. But our weapons were sharp. I noticed with interest that Quienyin continued to carry his shortsword strapped to his waist. Perhaps his powers had not fully returned? He had lost his powers as a famed and feared Wizard of Loh, and within the lowest depths of the Moder he had regained them. But — perhaps he had not satisfied himself? It seemed to me he was not prepared to put full trust in himself or his powers just yet. That made sense, given the harsh and terrible nature of much of Kregen.

The sense of power being exercised wantonly, the crushing feeling of oppression, and the expectation of impending doom we had lived with during our time in the Moder did not magically lift the moment we stepped off the mountain. Naïve to expect it would. The Wizard of the Moder might have been tamed; now we had to face the terrors of the Humped Land, the sere and unforgiving land clustered and clumped with the artificial mounds, each containing fortune and horror.

The land ahead of us and barring our escape would test us all.

“You two,” said Prince Tyfar with that habitual note of command tempered by the feelings of comradeship, “scout the entrance where we came in. It is just possible a few beasts have been left us.”

“Quidang, Prince!” said Barkindrar and Nath, and they took themselves off, moving very circumspectly among the foliage.

The members of the main expedition, from whom we had been parted in the depths of the Moder, would have been long since gone. They would be spurring back to civilization bearing the loot. I looked at Tyfar and he saw my quizzical glance.

“I know, Jak, I know. But we must try.”

“Yes.”

“Let me bustle around and make a fire while those two are gone,” said Hunch, the Tryfant. “I am famished—”

“Very well. Do I need to caution you over the fire?”

“No, no, Jak — I mean, notor — no need.” And Hunch shivered and looked across at the trees where

there were more shadows than the last of the suns shine.

He had taken a sack stuffed with goodies from the abode of the wizard, after we had humbled that proud and cruel man — if the thing had been a man at all — and when the fire was going well within the little dell beneath a bank we had picked, Hunch shook out his sack.

We all stood back. The stench offended.

“By Tryflor!” yelled Hunch. “The damned Moder lord—”

“The rast has tricked us!”

“The food — putrid!”

“Well,” I said over the hubbub. “Maybe it is just as well. That cramph of a Moder lord might have magicked the vittles in our insides. I do not care to contemplate that, by Krun!”

“You have the right of it, Jak,” observed Tyfar. “But we are hungry.”

“The Humped Land will not be so sere that we cannot find aught to eat.”

Tyfar made a face. He was a prince — admittedly, a prince of Hamal, which great empire was locked in deadly combat with my own land of Vallia — and the idea of chasing rodents and other lowly creatures for food did not appeal to him. Then he smiled.

“When you come to the fluttrell’s vane, Jak, one must do what one must. I shall not care for it, no, by Krun. But I will eat a green lizard when my guts rumble!”

“Nodgen,” I said, “do you go and see what fruits there are on those bushes.”

“Aye, Jak — notor — that will be something.”

These two, Hunch the Tryfant and Nodgen the Brokelsh, had been slave with me, and my trick of freeing them and giving them manumission before witnesses still had not quite overcome the old freedom of speech. It mattered nothing to me. But I fancied our deception had to pass muster, at least in the eyes of Tyfar. He was a man with high ideals, studious and yet quick with his axe; but he had been brought up in a culture in which slavery was a mere part of life. I wondered if he would ever be brought to understand what we were trying to do in Vallia, and if he shared the blind hatred of that island empire of his fellows. He thought I came from Djanduin. Well, I do, in a very real sense — but if he discovered I was a Vallian...

I brushed these tiresome thoughts away. We had to survive to cross the Humped Land. I had not forgotten the fearsome swarth riders, who infested the land between the Moders; but I forbore to mention them at that moment, for fear of what would happen to the water pot Hunch was carrying across to the fire.

We set watches and the suns sank and Barkindrar and Nath returned. They reported the compound was empty of life, not a riding animal to be seen. But they did bring a few crusts of bread and a packet of palines wrapped in leaves somewhat shriveled.

“Whoever dropped this and cursed for his loss did us a good turn, by Belzid’s belly,” quoth Barkindrar.

By this I understood that he and Nodgen, Brokelsh both, were compatible.

“You did not believe the Wizard of the Moder had let us get away with his food, then?” said Quienyin. He was clearly interested in Barkindrar’s reasoning.

The slinger looked down, despite all his bluff toughness, discomfited by this direct interest in him by the Wizard of Loh.

“It was in my mind, San. We got away easy, like.”

“We put the damned Moder Lord down,” said Tyfar. “I still wonder if we did the right thing not to kill him. I see it was right and a kind of a small Jikai; but, all the same... He has played a scurvy trick on us.”

“It was right not to slay him, Prince.” I spoke briskly. “Now, if you agree, we will eat up this princely meal, stand our watches, and when the Twins rise we will set off.”

They all gaped.

“But — Jak—”

“I do not think you will enjoy travel in the heat of the suns. And if we are to find ourselves mounts, we must look to the future. Or do you wish to remain a heap of moldering bones here?”

There was no answer on Kregen under Antares to that.

After our exertions and despite our hunger and the conditions in which we found ourselves, we found sleep. The watches changed, and no one felt inclined for conversation. Our thoughts, I feel sure, dwelt on the confrontations of the morrow when we could expect to be visited by the swarth riders. They had shepherded the expedition to this particular Moder out of all the hundreds dotting the Humped Land. They were mysterious, enigmatic; but they were some kind of men and therefore amendable to the argument of steel.

But, for all that, they possessed the only riding animals that we could expect to lay hands on around this desolate place.

With the rising of the Twins, the two second moons of Kregen eternally orbiting each other, we rose also and gathered our weapons and set off marching across the Humped Land.

Under the moon glitter, the dark and ominous shapes of the Moders rose from the plain about us. They stretched for mile after mile, set in patterns, and at random, some relatively small, others encompassing many miles of subterranean passages.

“D’you fancy going down another one to see what we can lay hands on, Hunch?” I overheard Nodgen speaking thus, and half-turned. Hunch spluttered a passionate protest.

“What! Has your ib decayed, Nodgen! Go down there again!”

“It was a thought,” said Nodgen, and he laughed in his coarse, bristly, Brokelsh way.

The Pachak twins marched in silence, and their eyes remained alert and they scanned every inch of the

way.

The slinger and the archer marched one each side of their lord, Prince Tyfar. He strode on, head up, breathing deeply and easily. Yes, I had seen much of goodness in this young man during those periods of horror; now, with our way ahead at least for the moment clear, I hauled alongside him and we fell into a conversation about — of all things — the state of theater in Ruathytu, the capital of Hamal.

“A few houses play the old pieces,” he said. He sounded aggrieved. “But by far the majority play these new nonsenses, all decadence and thumping and sensation. It is the war, I suppose.”

“Yes. Fighting men—”

“But, surely, Jak, a fighting man needs the sustenance of the inner spirit? Needs to have himself revitalized?”

“You mean, when he isn’t trying to stop his head coming off?”

Tyfar breathed in. He eyed me meanly. “You mock me, Jak.”

“Not so. I agree with you. But you are a prince—”

“I am! But — what has that to do with it?”

“Just that you have had the advantages and privileges of an education that was not primarily aimed at earning a living.”

I probed deliberately here. I had opened a gambit — in Jikaida I would have been opening the files for the Deldars to link ready for the zeunting — and he was aware that I meant more than I said.

“You know no man may inherit his father’s estates and titles as easily as he climbs into bed, Jak. You know that, one day, when — and I pray to all the gods it is a long and distant day — my father dies I shall be called on to fight for what is mine. You know that. The law upholds. But a man must uphold himself as well as the law. I have been trained as a fighting man, and much I detested it at the time.”

I had heard how he had always been running off to the libraries as a young lad, and how he had taken up the axe as a kind of reproach to those who taught him.

The conversation at my nudging came around to his axe and he repeated what the slaves had said. He preferred the knowledge that came from books; but he had become an accomplished axeman as though to proclaim his independence from that emblem of many things, the sword. I thought I understood.

There was in this young prince an inner fire I found engaging. His diffident manner, so noticeable when in the company of his father, had all fallen away under the tutelage of the horrors of the Moder. He gave his orders with a snap; yet one was fully alive to his own estimation of himself and what he was doing, as though he saw himself acting a part on a stage of his imagination.

Our conversation wended along most comfortably, and Quienyin joined us to debate again what we had discovered and our chances of the morrow. Our voices were low-toned. And we all kept a sharp lookout.

“We must seek to move from one point of vantage to another,” I said. “If we get our backs against good

cover we can deal with the swarth folk. Once one of them is dismounted we will see what his mettle is on his own two feet.”

“Yes,” nodded Quienyin. “I fancied they did have only two legs apiece. Although, of course, you cannot be sure.”

“Quite.”

“I couldn’t make out what kind of diff they were,” said Tyfar. “There was something of the Chulik about them—”

“No tusks, though,” said Quienyin.

“No tusks. But something about the jut of the head.”

“We shall find out when the suns are up,” I said, and that tended to end the conversation for a space.

The Moders rose from the rubbly plain something like a dwabur apart. Walking those five miles gave us an itchy feeling up the spine, traipsing as we were across relatively open ground. The trouble was, that open ground was probably safer than the areas in the immediate vicinity of the artificial mountains, the Moders, the tombs of the ancient dead and their treasurers and magics.

The rosy shadows of the next Moder enfolded us, and Hunch, for one, let go with a sigh of relief.

“Still!”

Modo’s piercing voice reached us, thrown so as to tell us the position and not to reach to the danger he had spotted ahead. We stopped stock-still. A few scrubby thorn bushes threw splotchy shadows from the Twins. In this dappled shade we stood and watched the file of Nierdriks pad past.

They looked like ghostly silhouettes, animated dark dolls against the radiance of the moons. Silently they padded past, one after the other. They were walking. I, for one, was content to let them go. Had they been riding, now, straddling any of the magnificent assortment of Kregan riding animals — why, then, I do not think my companions would have let them go...

When the last had gone, vanishing into the shadows of the Moder, we resumed our progress.

And we kept even more alert, staring about even more vigilantly.

Quienyin kept up with us, struggling along without a murmur.

“Prince,” I whispered quietly so that the Wizard of Loh would not overhear. “I think we must rest for a moment or two—”

“Rest, Jak? I thought the plan was to march as far as we might in the light of the moons and rest in the heat of the suns.”

He saw my gaze fixed on Quienyin, who had not turned to stare back at us but was doggedly ploughing on over the rubbly surface.

“Ah — yes, of course. It is thoughtless of me.”

Tyfar hurried ahead and checked the Pachaks in the vanguard.

We all rested, although of us all only Quienyin needed the break.

Again I pondered on Prince Tyfar. Many a haughty prince would simply have gone on, ignoring anyone else's discomfort. That Quienyin was a Wizard of Loh was now known to my companions; but that had not caused Tyfar to call a brief halt.

We discussed the fate of our dead fellows of the expedition, and we expressed ourselves as confident that the survivors had escaped. We had seen them emerging into the sunshine before we had been trapped within the Moder, and Tyfar, it was clear, could not countenance any thoughts that his father and sister had not escaped to safety.

“And, Jak, do not forget. Lobur the Dagger was there and he is mighty tender of my sister Thefi.”

“As is Kov Thrangulf.”

“Oh, yes, Kov Thrangulf.”

That pretty little triangle had its explosion due, all in Zair's good time.

When we set off again Quienyin unprotestingly marched stoutly with us. Dawn was not far off. The sweet smell of the air, only faintly tinged with dust, the host of fat stars, the glistering glide of the moons, all held that special pre-dawn hollowness, that waiting silence for the new day.

I began to spy the land with more stringency, seeking a strong place where we might rest. What I needed was precise and as we dipped down into a little groove or runnel in the ground, with thorn-ivy crowned ridges each side, I felt we had come as near as I could hope for. This was not perfect; it was as precise as we would find.

“Here, I think, Tyfar.”

He stared about. I watched his face, wondering if he would suffer a character change now that we were out in the fresh air.

The thorn-ivy, vicious stuff that flays the unwary, clustered thickly on the two ridgeways bordering the runnel. This was the real spiny ivy of Kregen. The Kregish for ivy is *hagli*. If we kept low we would be out of sight of a rider approaching at right angles. We chose a kink in the runnel so we could arrange one avenue only to watch. The clumped bushes shone a lustrous green and the thorns prickled like an army of miniature spearmen.

“You think so, Jak?” Tyfar looked uncertain.

The three principals stood together. The other six would not offer their opinions until asked, although the two Pachaks had every right to speak up.

Presently, Tyfar called, “Barkindrar, Nath. We camp here.”

I nodded to myself.

That was the way it ought to be done. Confidence. The two Pachaks said nothing; silently they got on with cutting thorn-ivy and fashioning a form of boma around the open angle of the kink in the runnel. Old campaigners, these two Pachak hyr-paktuns, capital fellows to have along with you in a chancy business.

“I am quite fond of bright-leaved hagli around the door,” said Quienyin. “But this stuff is murderous.”

We hauled the thorn-ivy around, using sticks and weapons and not touching the stuff, and so fashioned the boma. I spied the land in the first flush of light. Jumping out, I walked a way off, turned to check the look of our hide.

It looked innocent enough.

Going back along the runnel I felt a burst of confidence.

We could hole up there all day and never be spotted unless some damned rider fell on top of us.

If that was what was in Tyfar’s mind, it most certainly was not in mine.

Hunch was in no doubt.

“We can hole up here all day,” he said to Nodgen. “We’ve water to last us and we can march on to the next stream tonight.” He yawned. “I think I shall sleep all day.”

“The dawn wind will blow our tracks away,” said Nodgen. “But you’ll stand your watch like the rest of us, you skulking Tryfant.”

“At least I don’t always need a shave—”

“Quiet, you two,” I said.

They froze.

“All of you — still!”

As the light brightened with the rising of the red sun, Zim, and the green sun, Genodras, and the shadows fled across the sere land, specks drifted high against the radiance. We squinted our eyes. Yes — Flutsmen. They were flutsmen up there, sky flyers sweeping across the land on the lookout for prey. True mercenaries of the skies, the flutsmen serve for pay in various armies; but they mostly enjoy reiving on their own account. And no man is safe from them.

We remained perfectly still.

High and menacing, the wings of their flyers lifting and falling in rhythm, the flutsmen circled twice, rising and falling, and then lined out and headed north.

“May the leather of their clerketers rot so they fall off and break their evil necks,” said Hunch. He shut his eyes tightly. “Have they gone?”

“They’ve gone, you fambly — you can stop shaking.”

“The trouble is,” said Hunch the Tryfant, opening his eyes and looking serious. “I couldn’t run away

then, and you know how it upsets me not to have a clear run.”

There spoke your true Tryfant. But Hunch had proved a good comrade, despite his avowed intention of running off if the going got too tough.

We composed ourselves for the day. I positioned myself so that my head was just under the lowest prickly branch of a thorn-ivy bush, where I had to be careful. The view afforded lowered down — the dusty surface, ocher and dun, blowing a little with the dawn wind, and the prospects of the Moders, massive artificial mounds that gave the Humped Land its name of Moderdrin, spotting the landscape for as far as I could see. Slowly, the Suns of Scorpio crawled across the heavens. And we waited and sweated.

The first sign came, as so often, in a patch of lifting dust.

I narrowed my eyes against the glare. The dust plumed white streamers and grew closer. A body of men rode out there. Logu Fre-Da, who was on watch, called down gently, “Swarths.”

We remained still. The dust neared.

Dark shapes, fragmentary, appearing and disappearing, thickened beneath the dust. We waited.

“How many, Logu?”

An appreciable pause ensued before he replied.

“At least a dozen, notor — perhaps as many as twenty.”

“They will ride nearer.”

“Yes.”

Perhaps twenty — twenty of those hard dark riders who had hounded our caravan toward one particular Moder. Their swarths, agile, scaled risslacas with wedged-shaped heads, fanged, terrible, would carry them in a thumping rash if they spotted us. They would have no mercy, seeing we were not an expedition but merely victims for their sport — or so it was easy to believe.

For very many of the mysterious races of Kregen that is just how it is, no matter that there are many splendid races on Kregen who regard that kind of bestial behavior with abhorrence. There was no mistake with this little lot. If they spotted us they’d seek to have sport with us before they slew us.

“Not a squeak out of you,” said Prince Tyfar. “Or you’ll be down among the Ice Floes of Sicce before you’ve finished yammering.”

Not one of these men crouching with noses in the dust would make so much as a bleat. Now we could hear the soft shurr and stomp of the swarths. From their angle of approach they were making for the nearest Moder. They would pass within three hundred paces of our little thorn boma. They’d never see us. Not from where they would pass, avoiding the line of thorn-ivy. All we had to do was remain perfectly still and silent and we’d be safe.

Gently, making no fuss over it, I stood up.

I climbed out past the edge of the thorn-ivy.

“Jak!” screeched Tyfar. I heard the others cursing.

I walked a few paces forward, toward the swarth riders. I lifted my arms high. I shouted.

“Hai! Rasts! Over here! You zigging bunch of cramphs — what are you waiting for?”

Chapter two

Of the Testing of a Wizard of Loh

Hunch’s agonized wail floated up at my back.

“He’s mad! Oh, may the good Tryflor save me now!”

The ground felt hard and rocky underfoot. The air tasted sweet. The brightness of the day fell about me.

“Hai! Rasts of the dunghill! Why do you tarry?”

Sharp-edged, brittle, black against the radiance, the swarth riders crowded forward. They saw me, standing clear of the thorn boma. I stood alone. The runnel led directly toward me. The vicious heads of the swarths jerked around, dragged by reins in equally vicious fists.

White dust drifted away downwind. The smell of tiny violet flowers crowning spiky bushes, shyly hiding in crevices along the crumbly sides of the runnel, reached me. The suns shone, the wind blew, the flowers blossomed — and I, Dray Prescott, Lord of Strombor and Krozair of Zy, challenged this glorious world of Kregen to do what it could against me...

As Hunch the Tryfant had said, shocked, I must be mad. Well, he was not above four foot six tall, and a Tryfant, and so there were excuses for him. I took a step forward, seeking a secure purchase for my gripping toes, and I drew forth the Lohvian longbow.

The saddle dinosaurs were coated in that white dust, but as they moved and jostled the sheen of their purply-green scales glittered against the thorn-ivy. They began to move, urged on by the riders perched on their backs. All those long, thin lances descended from the vertical, slotting into the horizontal, and lethal steel point was aimed for my heart.

Four abreast — that was all the runnel would allow. There was some jostling and cavorting for positions. Each swarth-man was determined to be in the front rank of four, knowing that those following on would have only tattered rags and blood to take as an aiming point.

I banished my comrades from my mind.

Now the Lohvian longbow mattered — the great longbow was the only thing that mattered, that and the shafts fletched with the blue feathers of the king korf of Erthyrdrin. The longbow I had found in the crystal cave that provided what I lacked and its arrows fletched with the rose-red feathers of the zim korf of Valka had vanished with all the other phantasmal artifacts of the Moder. This longbow, these shafts, came from the Mausoleum of the Flame, and they were real.

The bow drew sweetly. The first shaft sped. The second was in the air, and the third was loosed before

the first struck. The fourth followed instantly.

Four honed steel bodkins drove in to a cruel depth.

The shrieks and the bedlam, the racket of crashing swarths and hurtling riders, might sound sweetly, but there was no time to contemplate them. Two more shafts sped and then I was up and through the little gap in the thorn-ivy we had made dragging bushes down for the boma. Out on the lip of the runnel I could flank those harsh riders. More shafts arched.

The dust swirled. The uproar boiled. Now Nath the Shaft, using his composite bow, joined in. Barkindrar the Bullet swung and hurled.

The dust obscured much of the tangle.

We shot into the mess.

Three swarths cleared the obstacles to their front. They raged down the runnel, heads outstretched, scales glittering between the dust streaks. The lances reached forward. The riders, heads bent in metallic helmets, short cloaks flaring, bellowed down the slot.

One I took. One Nath took. One Barkindrar took.

Nodgen was up and leaping about, waving his spear.

“Leave some for me!”

The two Pachaks were running forward, their tail hands stiff above their heads, the daggered steel brilliant.

“They run!” yelled Tyfar, beside himself, running on with his axe poised.

Four swarths galloped madly away; and one carried a dead rider lolling from the saddle, one sped with empty saddle, and the other two were being urged on with whip and spur.

These two last were shot out by Tyfar’s retainers. I had thrown down the Lohvian longbow which had served so well and, ripping out the thraxter, the straight cut and thrust sword of Havilfar, leaped headlong into the dust.

It was all a bedlam of heaving scaled bodies and wicked fangs and lashing blades. Some of the Chulik-like riders attempted to claw their weapons free. They could be given no chance to fight back, of course, and we set on them with a will. We had seen what they had accomplished, and we did not wish to suffer a like fate. The fight was quick and deadly. The thraxter slimed and lifted, struck and thrust, withdrew with more ominous streaks along the dulled blade.

Tyfar fought with a wild panache, his axe blurring in short lethal strokes. The two Pachaks fought as Pachaks fight. And Nodgen’s thick spear thrust with all the power of his bristle body.

And — there was Hunch, his bill cunningly slanted, cutting the legs away from the riders who attempted to smite down on him. Yes, Tryfants will put in a wild, brave, skirling charge, magnificent in attack. It is the retreat, in the withdrawal, when doubts arise, that Tryfants rout so easily.

The suddenness of the attack, the ambush that had shot them into pieces, and then the headlong rush of fighting men undid these swarthenmen. None escaped. Modo Fre-Da, curling his tail cunningly out of the way, leaped astride a swarth. He seized up the reins and jammed in his heels. The animal shot ahead. Furiously, the Pachak hyr-paktun galloped after the dead rider lolling in the saddle of his fleeing swarth.

We others gathered up the reins of the surviving animals, quieting them in the dust and turmoil, sorting them out and calming them. No one was bitten, which was a thankfulness.

The saddle dinosaurs were middling-quality mounts, with two among their number of superior breed. These two had the thickened scale plating over their eyes, which were fierce and arrogant, and their tails were triple-barbed. Once you know how to handle a swarth, he is a tractable enough mount. Mind you, I would take a zorca or a vove any day of the week.

“Did you see—”

And: “That fellow bit on the shaft!”

And: “He went over backward and his head—”

We looked at the corpses of the swarth riders.

“Muzzards,” said Quienyin, walking up and standing, his head on one side to balance his turban before he pushed it straight. “Ugly customers. There are a lot of them down south in the Dawn Lands.”

They did look a little like Chuliks, at that. They did not have the oily yellow skin of the upthrust tusks, but their build and thickness and stance — when they were alive — suggested the Chulik morphology to our eyes.

Their skins carried a leaden hue, which had not been caused by death, and they exuded a musky stink I, for one, found unpleasant. Modo returned with the dead warrior still lolling in the saddle, and so we nine stood, looking down on the dead. The living animals clustered farther along the runnel and began tentatively to rip off the thorn-ivy, munching it up quite oblivious of the thorns. Tough, your Kregan swarth — although their trick is simply to twist their fanged mouths around to get the thorns in sideways and then get their masticating dentures at the sharp spines.

This, as I saw it, was just another example of that peculiarly Kregan marriage of convenience between conflicting demands. The omnivorous animal comes equipped with two sets of implements. At the time I was still, despite my conversations with a Savapim, unsure if these Kregan eccentricities were part of natural evolution — either on Kregan or some other world — or if they were the result of artificial interference with nature’s handiwork.

“Cut-price, unsophisticated Chuliks,” said Logu Fre-Da, nodding to his brother. “These Muzzards.”

“They bear harness and weapons, brother.”

“Aye, brother.”

The Pachaks were mercenaries. I, too, have been a paktun in my time. We were not long in stripping harness and weapons and collecting the loot in a pile. The bodies we left for the carrion-eaters of the Humped Land to dispose of, in nature’s way. I know I did, and I am sure some of the others must have also, said a short prayer to Zair for the well-being of these lost souls in the Ice Floes of Sicce.

Then we crawled into the shade beyond the boma and contemplated the pile of harnesses and weapons.

“Which, Jak,” said Tyfar, “reminds me you never did change your scarlet breechclout.”

“Why, no,” I said. “But we were rather — busy.”

“Yes.”

“I shall keep it, as I am sure there is nothing hygienic on these Muzzards. But I admit I am not averse to a stout coat of leather, studded with bronze. And a helmet, too, although—” and here I picked one up and turned it on my hand— “they are poor specimens, of iron bands and leather filling.”

“They put the wind up me, I can tell you.”

“Is that all they put up you, Hunch?” Nodgen guffawed. “Then you’re lucky.”

Because the two Pachaks were hyr-paktuns, wearing the golden pakzhan at their throats, I knew they would be able to handle the long lances from swarthback. I said to Hunch, “Can you manipulate a lance? Or would it be a waste for you?”

“A waste, notor,” he said at once, without preamble. “I like a long-staved weapon; but these are ill-balanced, as I judge.”

And, by Vox, he was right.

“Let me cut an arm’s length off the end,” said Nodgen. “Then I’ll have a capital long-spear.”

“Each man to his own needs,” I said, and looked at Tyfar. “Prince?”

He smiled.

“I will stay true to my axe.”

In the saddlebags we found comestibles of a hardtack kind, such as a warrior would carry. There was also wine in leather bottles. Tyfar and I exchanged glances.

“Water for now,” I said. “I’ll answer for Nodgen and Hunch.”

“And I for Barkindrar and Nath.”

Quienyin said, “The brothers Fre-Da will, I think, answer for themselves, as is right and proper.”

The Pachaks lifted their tail hands in acknowledgment.

“When the suns are over the yard arm,” I said, although in the Kregish it was not what I said at all. We lay back, munching hardtack, sipping water sparingly, and every now and then a white gleam in Hunch’s face told of his roving eyeballs gazing fondly on the wine skins.

Truly, Moderdrin is an amazing and forbidding place. The mountains stud the plain with their humps, crowned by jumbles of towers and domes and walls, smothered in vegetation, with tumbling waterfalls

and bosky avenues in which, as we knew, were to be found savage denizens.

But, those denizens were nowise as monstrous as the horrors within the artificial mountains.

We dozed and kept watch, and the water remained stoppered in the bottles. Prince Tyfar showed signs of wishing to protest, after the first sips had ceased to refresh him.

“Prince,” I said, and I spoke evenly, “if you drink now you will simply sweat the precious liquid away, wasting it. Wait until the worst of the heat goes.”

“But my mouth is afire—”

“Suck a pebble.” I nodded at the Pachaks. The cheeks on each hardy Pachak face bulged.

He did as I bid; and he had the sense to see the sense in it. I felt he was a young man, prince or no, who grasped the uses of sense in a way that would be approved, at least, by men who thought as I did. For your full-bloodied, rambunctious hell-for-leather rampant princeling, Prince Tyfar was altogether too much of an intellectual — and a superb axeman, withal.

He had gone raging into the Muzzards. There was no dilly-dallying there. I fancied he was more of a proper prince than most of that ilk in Hamal.

Three times during that day we spotted flights of flutsmen, and we stayed close. The swarths were lying down and dozing against the heat, shivering their scaly tails every now and then. We were not observed by those sky reivers.

That night we drank sparingly, mounted up on nine of the animals, and led the remaining six bundled up with all we thought necessary to take. The ground scavengers had been at work on the corpses, but our presence had deterred the warvols from swooping down on rustling wings to join in the devouring. By morning there would be left only bones.

At my insistence, Tyfar and Quienyin rode the two superior swarths. Tyfar, I noticed, just took the best one without even thinking about it. Quienyin looked across at me, and it was then I insisted he take the beast.

So, mounted up, not quite as thirsty as we had been, we set off again across the Humped Land, the Land of the Fifth Note. The strong probability was that the Moder Lords organized these Muzzard swarth riders, and agreed among themselves which mound the arriving expeditions of gold-and-magic-hungry adventurers should be directed into. Well, the wizards had their fun running poor crazed folk through their tombs, torturing them and extracting the last jot of enjoyment from their anguish. As for the magic items we had taken, they had been expended in our troubled ascent to the surface and escape. There would be no spells of paralysis, no more burning drops, no more tail-shrivelers for us now. Now we must rely on steel and muscle to see us through.

That night passed and toward dawn we ventured to close one of the mounds where we filled the bottles at a stream and set up, stalked, and slew our supper. Everyone cheered up.

“If it means steering out of here from Moder to Moder—”

“Aye, Jak!” said Tyfar. He beamed. “We will be back into the grasslands in no time. And then we will hear word of my father and sister, I am sure.”

I looked at the Wizard of Loh, who sat by the fire munching a leg of one of the birds brought down by Barkindrar the Bullet.

Again we had chosen a strong place for our camp, beneath a rocky outcrop where the fire was shielded by cut branches of thorn-ivy. The swarths rested after their exertions of the night, and I fancied they were well content that their new masters rode them at night and rested them by day here.

“I feel sure you are right, Tyfar. We follow their tracks, I believe, although the wind wipes them out smartly enough.”

“Once I am back in Hamal — once we are both there, Jak — you do not forget my invitation to a bladesman’s night out in the Sacred Quarter?”

“I do not. I anticipate it with relish.”

By Vox! Did I not!

What, I wondered, would he say if I said, quite casually, “Oh, and, Prince Tyfar of Hamal, by the way, I am Dray Prescott, Emperor of Vallia, the chief of your country’s sworn enemies?”

That, I felt, would repay in the glory of his face much discomfort.

But, of course, he would not believe me.

How could he?

He would think I jested with him, and in damned poor taste, into the bargain.

He knew nothing of me, save what I had told him, and that was going to have to be altered, soon. He would ask what on Kregen the Emperor of Vallia, the great rast, was doing down here in the Dawn Lands of Havilfar. That was, by Vox, a good question. Tyfar knew nothing of the Star Lords and their engaging habit of putting me into situations of peril in order to affect the future course of the world.

Well, I had done the Star Lords’ bidding here and was now free to return home to Vallia. I longed to get back, to see Delia again and my comrades and what of my family deigned to show up when their grizzly old graint of a father returned from one of his wild jaunts over the world. There was so much still to be done in Vallia it defied all common-sense evaluation. The island was split by war and factions; the people had called on me, had fetched me to be their emperor, and I was in duty bound to honor that trust and that demand. The island would be united and healed. Then I would hand it all over to my fine son Drak, and with a thankful sigh shake the reins of empire from my sticky hands.

And, make no mistake, this was what I intended to do.

All the same, Drak was in Vallia now, and I had many outstanding councilors and generals. I could leave the country to get on well enough without me for a space.

For — I had other fish to fry.

Down here in the Dawn Lands I was not too far away from Migladrin, from Herrelldrin, from Djanuin. Also, in the opposite direction lay Hyrkiana. In all these lands I had business.

“Jak!”

I did not jump. I realized I had been sitting brooding on the Wizard of Loh.

“By the Seven Arcades, Jak! You were far gone in your thoughts — I did not pry,” he added, quickly. I did not wish to understand just what he meant, although the gist was plain enough. I did not smile; but I was aware of an easing in the graven lines on my craggy old beakhead of a face.

“Yes, Quienyin, I was thinking. Prince Tyfar would like news of his family and friends, and I do not doubt the others of us nine would, also.”

“And you?”

“Yes.”

He nodded, half to himself.

“You miss Hyrklana, Jak?”

Before I could open my mouth — for thus suddenly had come up the change in the story of myself that Prince Tyfar of Hamal must know — the prince spoke.

“Hyrklana? That nest of pirates? What has that to do with you, Jak of Djanduin?”

I sighed. There, displayed before me, was the reckoning for the sin of lying about one’s origins and playing at cloak and dagger for the fun of it. I had told Quienyin I hailed from Hyrklana, that large and independent island kingdom off the east coast of the continent of Havilfar, and I had told Tyfar I came from Djanduin, the remote, massive peninsula in the far south and west of the continent.

And, as you know, I had not lied in saying I was from Djanduin. I never forget I am King of Djanduin.

Usually, it is not particularly helpful in maintaining a good cloak and dagger cover to say you come from a country you know nothing of and have never visited.

Dressed up in a disguise and wearing a gray mask, I had successfully convinced Lobur the Dagger, one of Tyfar’s father’s retinue, that I was of Hamal. Other priorities had supervened in my description of my place of origin, and I felt it high time I sorted out the tangle.

Looking about as the suns smote down, shedding their streaming mingled lights, I sighed. How we practice to deceive and then come a cropper in the nets of our own weaving!

“Well, Jak?” Tyfar, your proper prince, was a trifle tart. “Are you from Djanduin? Or Hyrklana?”

“Would it make any difference, Tyfar?”

He waved a hand. “No. I think we have been through enough together by now — I think I know you — I thought I knew you. But Hyrklana. You know what they think of the Hamalese there.”

“I do. I have visited Hyrklana and I have unfinished business there.”

“But,” interposed Quienyin. “You are not Hyrklanian?”

“No.”

“So you are from Djanduin?”

I could have left it there. Djan knew, I was well enough cognizant of all Djanduin to claim it completely as my country. As long I had fought for that beautiful land against her enemies and won.

“I have land in Djanduin,” I said. “I love the place — it is unspoiled so far.”

“So you are a notor of Djanduin, as we believe?”

“Yes.”

Tyfar was continuing to stare at me. “You know that because of the war waged by the Empress Thyllis, Hamal is not much cared for in many lands of Havilfar. This is simple knowledge. Perhaps you are from a land that has been invaded by Hamal. Perhaps, Jak my friend, you conceive yourself as an enemy to me?”

I had waited on his last words in some trepidation. But I was able to relax. He had said, “enemy to me.” Had he said, “enemy to my country” my reply must, in all honor, have been different.

The trouble was, Tyfar was quite right. Mad Empress Thyllis had alienated just about every country within reach of her iron legions.

And, also, I had the feeling, substantiated only by intuition and a few scraps of idle converse, that Tyfar’s father, Prince Nedfar, was both not happy with Thyllis and not in her good books. And I had suggested to Lobur the Dagger that I worked secretly for Empress Thyllis. I squared my shoulders.

“I cannot tell you, Tyfar, all that I would wish to tell you. Suffice it to say that I know the Sacred Quarter, I can walk it blindfolded, I have ruffled many a night away as a bladesman. I have wide estates in the country — well, not so much wide as passing fair and rich — and I work for the good of the country.”

That was true.

He was surprised.

“You are Hamalese?”

I have estates in Hamal. I am called there Hamun ham Farthytu, the Amak of Paline Valley. But I was not Hamalese. If anything, I was Vallian, not being born on Kregen.

These things I could not tell Tyfar — or Quienyin.

“I work for the good of Hamal,” I said. Again, I spoke the truth, even though, perhaps, Vallia would have to put down the worst excrescences of Hamal, chief of whom was the Empress Thyllis. “I deplore what the empire is doing to neutral countries—”

“So do I, by Krun!”

That declaration, by a prince whose father was second cousin to the empress, really was nailing his colors to the mast.

I managed a smile.

“Then we see eye to eye in that, Tyfar. Do not press me further. Only remember: what I do I do for the good of Hamal and for all of Paz. For the eventual good.”

“And you will not confide in me?”

“Not will not.”

He frowned and then banished the scowl and replaced it with a smile, uncertain, but a smile nonetheless. “I — see.”

And Deb-Lu-Quienyin, that puissant Wizard of Loh, sat looking at me, and he had stopped gnawing on his bone.

“Hyrklana, Djanduin, or Hamal,” he said briskly, waving the bone, “it does not matter, not to me. I have gone through so much with Notor Jak that if he came from some hellhole in Queltar — where no man should have to exist — by the Seven Arcades, he is a man and a friend—”

“Well said, San.” Tyfar stood up. Now he did smile. “I see you are about secret business, Jak. Well and good. That is your affair and none of mine. You have given me your word that you work for Hamal. I, too, work for Hamal, as does my father. I trust we do not work in opposition.”

I shook my head. “Now, now, Prince. You will not worm it out of me like that!”

He laughed. Some princes I knew would have called on their retainers to spit me there and then.

So, because I did not wish to drop into a maudlin scene, I took up the thought that had been in my mind when this scene began.

“We would all like to know that our families and friends are safe.” I addressed myself to Quienyin directly. “You know what I talk about, San. It is nothing new. But we have no rights to your kharna, no claims—”

“Come now, Jak — do not belittle what we nine mean one to the other!”

I nodded. “So be it. If you go into lupu you can tell us what is happening far off. I think Tyfar would more than welcome news that his father and sister are safely out of this desolate place.”

We all sat, still and silent, looking at the Wizard of Loh.

He stared at me. I could guess what he was thinking. He had sustained a nasty accident and had lost his powers and now he had recovered them, or most of them, in the lowest zone of the Moder. He had explained that the Wizard of the Moder had no real conceptualization of what awful powers he had locked up in the lowest zone. An ordinary wizard, one Yagno, a sorcerer of the Cult of Almuensis, mightily puffed up with pomp and pride in his own prowess, had ventured down into the lowest zone and had never returned. This was not so much a useful gift to us in telling us what we wanted to know. This

was much more the testing moment for Quienyin himself.

And he saw that very clearly.

How strange, thus to read the riddle of a Wizard of Loh!

They are rightly feared and respected; but they are mortal, human men, and many a mighty warlord and king has his own Wizard of Loh to serve him as he sees fit. My own Wizard of Loh — although it is foolish, really, to call any Wizard of Loh as a normal retainer — had been sent back to Loh. No man unless he has other powers will willingly cross a Wizard of Loh. They are rumored to be able to do terrible things. And, in Zair's truth, I have seen wondrous deeds. And, here we were, calmly realizing that a Wizard of Loh was on trial with himself.

What other proof could be required to show how our experiences had made of us nine a special band of brothers?

Speaking with all that old bumbling hesitancy completely banished, Quienyin said, "Very well."

Very carefully, he made his preparations.

Some Wizards of Loh I have known were able to go into lupu very quickly, with a minimum of fuss, and so send a spying eye out to reveal what transpired at a distance. Others go through a rigmarole of mental agility, physical activity, and magical mumbo jumbo to achieve the same result.

Deb-Lu Quienyin was, as it were, starting from scratch. He was like a novice wizard, seeking to insert his mind along the planes of arcane knowledge. Very sensibly, he went back to basics and set about going into lupu with all the trappings that thaumaturgical art form required.

Equally, just as Tyfar's attitude to us had been tempered from princely choler by our mutual experiences and new-found comradeship, so Quienyin's wizardly contempt for ordinary mortals had been modified. We watched him in no sense of judgment whatsoever; rather we actively sympathized with him and wished him well and in however minor a way sought to partake of his struggle. But, when all is said and done, the ways of Wizards of Loh of Kregen are passing strange...

We could only sit and stare.

Deb-Lu-Quienyin composed himself. He sat cross-legged, his head thrown back, and his eyes covered by his hands. I noticed how the veins crawled on the backs of his hands; yet his hands were plump and full-fleshed. He remained perfectly still, silent and unmoving.

Respecting Quienyin's preliminary insertion of his kharna into unspecified but occult dimensions, we also sat still.

Quienyin began to tremble.

His whole plump body shook. His shoulders moved. He brought his hands down slowly from his face. His eyeballs were rolled up, and the whites of his eyes glared out in a sightless blasphemy of a gargoyle head. Hunch choked back in his throat. We sat, enthralled, knowing how Quienyin battled himself as he sought to hurl his kharna through realms unguessed of by ordinary men.

Breathing almost at a standstill, Quienyin appeared to gather himself, as a zorca gathers himself at an

obstacle. With a wavering cry he rose slowly to his feet. His arms lifted, rising out from his sides, lifting to the horizontal. His fingers were stiffly outthrust. Gently at first, and then faster and faster, he revolved, whirling about, his arms razoring the air.

As always, my mind conjured the vivid impression of a whirling Dervish, a maniac cyclone, a hurricane-whirled scarecrow.

Abruptly, Quienyin ceased to whorl about so madly. He sank to the ground and resumed that calm pose of contemplation. Both his hands rested flat on the ground.

And then he looked up at us and was ready to answer our questions.

Rather, he was ready to speak to Prince Tyfar.

What the Wizard of Loh had to say reassured the young prince. Had it not done so, I own, I would have found the subsequent confusion inconvenient.

Yet, even as I relate these events, I am touched by the weirdness of it all. Here Quienyin sat, and he was aware of and could tell us of events transpiring dwaburs away across the land. Just how far a Wizard of Loh can see in lupu is a matter of serious conjecture. They, for sure, give nothing of their secrets away to the casual inquirer. True, in conversation with Quienyin I had learned much. But, then, that was before he had recovered his powers. I wondered, as he spoke to Tyfar, if he would recall with displeasure what he had said, and seek in some nefarious and occult way to rob me of the knowledge.

“Is it possible, San—?” began Modo Fre-Da.

“May we crave, San—?” began Logu Fre-Da.

Both spoke together.

So Quienyin told them what they wished to know. I listened, for I needed to learn of my comrades, bearing in mind what I half-purported toward them. They asked for their mother, for their father was long dead, having met his end gallantly on an unmarked battlefield. She lived in Dolardansmot, whereaway that was I did not know, and they were very tender toward her. They made inquiry about no other person.

Nodgen and Hunch, Barkindrar and Nath, all received news, good or bad — Barkindrar’s younger brother had died of a fall down a disused well, which depressed him for a space, until he reflected, half aloud, that what the Resplendent Bridzilkesh ordained must be accepted as one accepts the needle — and they all turned to look at me.

“Well, Jak,” said Quienyin, kindly, although he looked tired, “and where in the world of Kregen shall I seek for your loved ones?”

Chapter three

The Bonds of Comradeship

Before replying, I pulled off the boot taken from a dead Muzzard and chucked it down. The boot was not so much either too tight or too loose as badly fitting; it was well enough for riding, but walking in it and its mate would be agonizing. I wriggled my bare toes. The eight pairs of eyes regarded me

expectantly. I scratched under my anklebone.

“Well, Jak? And is there no one in the whole wide world?”

“Without disrespect, San — you are clearly tired. Your exertions have exhausted you.” I pulled off the other boot and wriggled those bare toes in turn. “And, you are quite clearly possessed of very great powers indeed, for you have been able to give us news of our relations, people you have never met or seen. This, I know, is unusual—”

“Yes, Jak. Although I do not think I am fully recovered, I am able to do more in lupu than many Wizards of Loh.”

Deb-Lu-Quienyin spoke simply. There was no boasting here. Also, in the comradeship forged between us nine in the horrors through which we had successfully fought, Quienyin’s own history had been, at least partially, revealed.

“Come on, Jak,” spoke up Tyfar. “If San Quienyin is willing, then surely you must long to know.”

Interesting how, when the Wizard of Loh displayed his supernatural abilities, we’d all resumed calling him San.

“Or is it that you do not have any blood relatives still alive?”

Again I scratched my foot.

“There is a man whose whereabouts I would like to establish. If I know him aright he will be tossing people about like split logs. He is a Khamster, A Khamorro, a high Kham. No doubt he will be in Herrelldrin now.”

“And he cannot then be any kin to you.”

“No. A good comrade. As we are down—”

And then I hauled myself up, all canvas flapping. By Krun! I’d been about to say, “down here in Havilfar,” which was a perfectly logical thought to a Vallian, or anyone from the northern hemisphere of Kregen. But if I claimed Hamal, which was the most powerful empire in Havilfar, the southern continent, I’d hardly talk about being “down here.” So I scratched my foot again and reached over for a small piece of meat clinging to a leaf platter, and said, “down not too far it will be convenient for me to go to Herrelldrin and seek him out. If he is there. If you can scan him, San.”

“No blood relation?”

“No.”

He sat quite still for a moment, looking on me. He had put his ridiculous turban aside after the last items of news had been passed on in lupu, and his red Lohvian hair stuck out like the feathers of the rooster with the wind up his tail. His old face had lost many of the lines and wrinkles, and had filled out, and his clear and piercing eyes looked astonishingly young. And I felt he was looking at me as though I were a glass of crystal-clear water.

Sink me! I burst out to myself. I had too much at stake in Kregen to allow a tithe of my secrets to be

spilled here, even despite the special comradeship we nine felt.

“No blood relation, this fearsome Khamorro. I suggest you sleep now, Quienyin, and then we can talk on this matter later.”

“You are very desirous of finding this man?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will sleep for a space. Wake me at the hour of mid, when the suns burn in the zenith. I may be able... Well, no matter, Jak the Sturr. I did you a pleasant repose.”

And with that Deb-Lu-Quienyin rolled over onto his side on the spread cloths and seemed immediately to fall into a deep slumber. I chewed my morsel of meat and gazed at the Wizard of Loh. I did not mind if he read some of my riddles. And the six retainers, also, were men amenable to reason of one kind or another. But Prince Tyfar, this brave, bright, bonny princeling of Hamal, my country's bitter enemy? What would he say, what do? No. I must continue with my deceptions. And, by Krun, they were not petty deceptions, either!

Tyfar shook his head, smiling.

“I am mightily glad my father and sister are safe. I thank Havil the Green for that. The news for you will be as good, Jak — and did you notice the sudden formality of Deb-Lu-Quienyin? He called you Jak the Sturr, which you claim is your name.”

“And, Tyfar, I notice you do not give a warm thanks to Havil the Green. Mayhap, Krun of the Steel Blade merits a greater gratitude?”

We trod thin ice here.

He eyed me.

“Aye, Jak the Sturr. Aye.”

“So be it.”

Havil the Green presided as the chief god of many lands of Havilfar. He had, in the past, represented to me all that was evil and to be destroyed. I was over those impulses now, and could even come out with a good rolling Hamalian prayer or two addressed to Havil the Green. All the same, fighting men tend toward Krun... as must be clear from the conversations peppered with his name.

“And also, Jak, the Sturr — I do not think your name can be Sturr. It does not fit.”

I lifted an eyebrow. Sturr is the slang name given to a louche fellow, a morose, silent, boorish kind of chap who is all left feet and ten thumbs. “No? I thought it suited me.”

“The Lady Ariane nal Amklana dubbed you Jak the Unsturr.”

“She — let us not talk of her.”

“Willingly.”

The Lady Ariane nal Amklana, of Hyrklana, had not turned out quite as we'd expected during our recent adventures. I had thought Tyfar was inclined to become romantically attached to her. Now I knew he was not. He deserved a far finer mate than Ariane.

“Let us take up the question of your name, Jak.”

“Before that, I will just say that one should not be too hard on Ariane. She was sore pressed. By Krun! But she does have fire—”

“A fire that is inwardly directed only.”

“Let us talk of our plans to get out of here—”

“The Sturr — or the Unsturr?”

I just looked at him. We sat in the grateful shadow and the watch was set and the others were lying back and no doubt reviewing what Quienyin had told them and, an ob would bring a talen, wishing they were out of Moderdrin and safely back with their loved ones. Although — well, there were arguments about that, also...

Once a young man sets his feet on the mercenaries' path and seeks to become a paktun and then a hyr-paktun, he must banish foolish longings for home. He will return in the fullness of time, bearing his scars and the choicest items of his loot — if he is lucky — and take a wife and settle down and raise more fine young men to go off adventuring across Kregen. But daydreaming of home is weakening. Thanks to Opaz — men are weakened every day doing that!

“Should, Jak, I call you—” said Tyfar. He was half-laughing. “Should I dub you Muzzardjid?”[\[1\]](#)

“I think not.”

“It is a fairly won name.”

“Maybe. Not for me.”

“I just do not like Sturr. I am a prince and empowered to confer names upon the worthy. You are — although you have not said — I guess, of a middling rank of nobility?”

The name of Hamun ham Farthytu had been conferred upon in all honor; it was not just another alias. And the rank of Amak is at the bottom end of the higher nobility; there is the wide range of the lesser nobility, of course. But caution held me. Even in this, the old harum-scarum, rip-roaring Dray Prescott who would go raging into a fight without an ounce of sense in his head, would have held back. The Amak of Paline Valley was an identity, a real identity, that I did not wish to reveal as yet.

So, leaning back on an elbow, I said, “It is of no matter, Tyfar. What concerns me is the slow progress we make.”

He looked as though he was going to carry on with his thought; but he must have changed his mind, for he contented himself with, “Very well, Jak. But as soon as the time is ripe I shall dub you with a name more fitting. So you have been warned.” He wiped his lips with a cloth and closed his eyes in the heat. “As to our making better progress, I think it still too risky to travel in daylight. But, if we must—”

“Think of Quienyin.”

“I am.”

“Given an opportunity, we can change our mode of travel. But it will be chancy—”

So we talked, low-voiced, and then ceased this prattling and sought the deeper shade and tried to sleep. We had ample water, thanks to the stream from the Moder, and our swarths were cared for. We had food, meat, and fruits. But we all felt the screaming need to get out of this damned place.

Promptly on the hour of mid Quienyin woke up and, reaching for his turban, looked around our little camp. He saw me. He opened his mouth and I spoke quickly, quietly.

“Tyfar is asleep. I would prefer not to awaken him.”

He nodded and then caught his turban and slapped it down, hard. The blue cloth was dusty and cracked, and many of the fake pearls and brilliants had been lost. But it still gave him that aura of omniscience so necessary for the credulous folk.

“Do you wish...?”

“When the suns are gone down a little more.”

“We will see what a Wizard of Loh can do, then.”

“Remember, Quienyin, I do not ask this of you, do not beg or plead. I know nothing of the cost to you; but, I—”

“There is no need to go on. Of course I shall do all I can. Are not we all comrades?”

This was, truly, a most strange way for a feared Wizard of Loh to talk. But, by the insufferable aroma of Makki Grodno’s left armpit — he was right.

“You have never been to Loh, Jak?”

“I paid a fleeing visit to Erthydrin, and—”

“Well, they are a strange, fey lot up there, and hardly call themselves Lohvians at all.”

“That is sooth. You have traveled widely?”

“Mainly in this continent of Havilfar. I, I must confess, regard travel as a means of arriving somewhere.”

“As we did in that caravan across the Desolate Wastes?”

“Grim though it was, the time had its pleasant moments.”

“You have been to Hamal?”

“I shall not return to that empire.” His gaze twitched to the sleeping form of Tyfar, and then away. I

would have to ask Deb-Lu-Quienyin what had chanced in Hamal. I felt he did not care for the place. “I did make a quick trip to Pandahem; but that was not successful.”

“And Vallia?”

He glanced up at me.

Was there a special note in my voice, a tremor, an inflection, as I spoke the name of the country of which I was emperor? Did he truly see so much more than ordinary mortals?

“Vallia? No, Jak. I have never been there.”

I took a breath. Tyfar slumbered. The others were either asleep, dreaming, or standing watch. I summoned my courage.

“I think, Quienyin, if you visited Vallia you would be received with proper respect. You would like it there.”

“Oh? You speak with — authority — of the empire at war with the empire of Hamal.”

“You remember I asked you about the Wizard of Loh called Phu-Si-Yantong?”

“I do. San Yantong is a most puissant adept — I was sorry to have missed him.”

I jumped, startled. “You mean — he was there — in Jikaida City?”

“I thought so. I am not sure. His kharrna is very powerful, superb, superb. I did not press too hard.”

I swallowed down. By Vox! That devil Phu-Si-Yantong, so near! Yet — could he have been and not struck a blow at me?

“When I asked you of Yantong before you said he was marked for great things. You expressed the hope that he would prosper. You also said nothing about his little difficulty.” I know my old beakhead of a face had grown grim and like a leem’s mask as I spoke, and I could do nothing about that. One cannot always hide emotions behind a placid countenance. I went on and the words ground out like vosk skulls being crushed in the grinders. “Do you still harbor good wishes toward Yantong? Have you learned nothing of him since we spoke?”

He was abruptly intense, concentrated. He looked at me and those lines that had been vanishing on his face deepened and grooved. The force of his power shocked out.

“You speak in a way that could offend a Wizard of Loh, Jak. I will not be offended. But it is necessary that you explain yourself.”

Given the awesome powers of the Wizards of Loh, given their aloofness from the petty concerns of normal men, given that they regard others as, if not inferior beings, then beings without the same necessities of the inner life — what Deb-Lu-Quienyin said to me was perfectly rational.

Any man of Kregen would tremble if a Wizard of Loh spoke to him thus.

“By Hlo-Hli! Jak! Speak!”

“If you seek—”

“No ifs, Jak, by the Seven Arcades!”

“Seek the truth of Yantong. I promise to speak then. Although—” and I glowered down on my comrade, Deb-Lu-Quienyin “—although, my friend, my words will then be unnecessary.”

“You speak now in riddles.” He breathed in and then out, deliberately. This was an exercise in self-control. I waited.

Presently he said, “I will do as you suggest — and only because of our comradeship, which is something precious to me because it is something I could never fully experience as a Wizard of Loh. This is a matter I do not expect you to understand.”

“I do understand something, probably more than you realize. I have had dealings with Wizards of Loh before.”

“Then let me go off a ways and try my newfound kharna.”

The shadows lay very short now, mere blobs of reddish and greenish discoloration under the thorn-ivy. Everything possessed two shadows. Quienyin and his two shadows went off to crouch down by the rock face. He took up a position which, although I had no idea of its significance, I recognized to be a position of ritual. He looked exceedingly uncomfortable, too.

Four times during the course of the day skeins of flutsmen had sailed over us, high and distant, mere forbidding specks, potent with disaster. They worried me. I looked up now as Quienyin sat so uncomfortably, and up there another wedge of flutsmen winged over. Slotted like nits in a ponsho fleece as we were down here, we were not likely to be espied easily. But the worry remained. The flutsmen were active and I wondered what caused that. Something, of a surety, had stirred them up.

Common sense indicated that I should try to catch some sleep. I did doze off for a few burs. I was awakened by Nath and Barkindrar coming off watch and the two Pachaks going on. I decided not to raise a ruckus over their waking me up; I know I sleep lightly, ready to leap up almost, it seems, before the danger that stalks me would leap for my throat. It is an old sailorman’s trick.

The Shaft and the Bullet were not too sleepy, and were carrying on with great vehemence the argument that had absorbed them during their watch.

“Jikaida! Now you can take your Jikaida and—”

“Now, Barkindrar! What you say against Jikaida can be said against Vajikry. Do not forget that!”

They wrangled on about the merits or otherwise of Jikaida, which is the preeminent board game of Kregen, and of Vajikry, which is of not quite so universal acceptance but which is, as I know to my sore cost, highly baffling and irritating and calculated to arouse the itch in any man or woman. Vajikry takes a special kind of twisted logic, I suppose, to make a good player.

So, with that as a starter, I found myself running an old Jikaida game through my head, move and countermove, and so I closed my eyes and, lo! I was being shaken awake and the shadows were measurably longer. Thus does abused nature force her just demands on the physique.

The hand shaking me, the footstep, the low voice, were all devoid of menace.

I sat up.

“Time to go on watch, Jak — notor.”

I looked at Hunch.

He licked his lips. “You said — you said you would stand a watch, Jak.”

“Aye. I did and I will. And I could wish you and Nodgen did not have to keep up with this notor nonsense.”

Nodgen said, “We have talked about this, Jak. We were all three slave together. You escaped. You have made something of yourself and have manumitted us before Prince Tyfar. But we think you are truly a notor, a great lord.”

“That’s as may be. But your freedom is very real to you, because the word of Tyfar, Prince of Hamal, is worth much.”

“Oh, yes, we will take the bronze tablets. But we still believe you to be a great lord, and therefore we do not mind calling you notor. Only,” and here Hunch screwed his Tryfant face up, “only, sometimes, Jak, it is hard to remember.”

“By the disgusting diseased tripes of Makki Grodno! I do not care. But you will have the outrage of an offended princeling if you forget in his hearing.”

“Aye, that we will.” They both sounded marvelously little alarmed. This special sense of comradeship developed between us, and the terror of the Moder worked on us all, paktun, retainer, escaped slave, wizard, and prince.

And, as though to underline those thoughts, the voice of Deb-Lu-Quienyin, who was privy to Hunch’s and Nodgen’s secret, reached us. He sounded troubled.

“Tyfar would overlook that lapse,” said Quienyin. “Jak, I must speak to you — and at once—”

“Assuredly.” I stood up. Quienyin stood back in the shadows, so that I could not discern his expression. He wore his turban. A fierce bellow cut the air from the thorn-ivy.

“Vakkas! Riders heading for us!”

I spun to look. Tyfar was sinking down behind the thorns and the others were flattening out, steel in their fists.

Beyond them, across the flat and clear in the slanting rays of the suns, a party of riders broke from a clump of twisty trunks, the crinkly leaves down-drooping and unmoving in the breathless air.

The men rode totrixes, zorcass, hirvels. There was not a swarth among them. They rode hard, lashing their beasts on, and the dust rose in a flat smear behind them, hanging betrayingly in a long yellow-white streak. I looked up. Up there the flutsmen curved down, the wings of their flyers wide and stiff, and the

glint and wink of weapons glittered a stark promise of destruction over the doomed party of riders below.

Chapter four

Dead Men Pose Puzzles

Straight for the rocky outcrop and running at lung-bursting speed, the forlorn party rode on. They were making for the shelter we had chosen. There, it was clear, they hoped to make a stand against the reining sky mercenaries. Now the sound of the hooves beat a rattling tattoo against the hard ground.

“They’ll never make it.” Tyfar stared hotly through the thorn-ivy.

If that young prince decided to stand up and run out to assist those doomed jutmen, I, for one, would seek to stop him. He was become precious to me, now, as a comrade. I would not relish his death. I had seen too much of death.

“Jak—” whispered Quienyin.

“Yes?”

“I have sought out—”

“See! They shoot!” Tyfar was panting now, and his lithe body humped as though about to leap out.

I said, “We cannot allow Tyfar to throw his life away. We will do what we can, but—”

Quienyin looked vaguely through a chink in the thorns.

“Those poor people will never reach here alive.” He looked back at me. “There is much we must talk about.”

“I agree. But, I think, it will have to wait the outcome of this mess out here.”

“You are right. But I will say I am — am shattered—”

“So you descried a little, then, and understand more?”

“Indeed! Indeed!”

“Nath the Shaft!” called Tyfar in a low, penetrating voice.

“My Prince!”

“Shaft ’em, you onker! Shaft ’em!”

“Nath,” I said. My voice jerked his head around, and his reaching fingers stilled as they touched the feathers of the shaft in his quiver.

“Jak, Jak!” said Tyfar. “What? You cannot abandon them!”

“No. No, I suppose not. But they are done for — there are ten of them and twenty-five or thirty flutsmen. We can—”

“We can shaft them from cover — and we must hurry!”

His face blazed eagerness at me. I sighed. What can one do with these high and mighty princelings whose honor code rules them to death and destruction? And yet — Tyfar was a man of better mettle than mere unthinking bludgeoning.

“You don’t have to let those flutsmen know we are here, do you?” said Hunch. His voice quavered.

Nodgen hefted his spear. He could throw that with skill and power, even though it was not a stux, the stout throwing spear of Havilfar. “I have four spears,” he said. His voice growled. “That’s four of the cramphs.”

“They are too far away for you, Nodgen, you onker!”

“They’ll come nearer, once the arrows fly.”

“That,” I said, “is true.”

“I will not wait any longer.” Tyfar shouted it. He started to stand up. I moved forward. What I was going to do Opaz alone knows. I was confused, knowing I ought to help those poor folk out there against those rasts of flutsmen, and knowing, also, that my responsibilities were wider by far than this mere stupid little fracas in the Humped Land.

The flutsmen swooped down.

The great Lohvian longbow snugged into my grip. The blue-fledged arrow nocked home sweetly. I lifted the bow and stood up. By Zair! The stupid things I have done in my time on Kregen! But — Kregen is a world where anything may happen and frequently does.

Together, Nath the Shaft, Barkindrar the Bullet, and I, Dray Prescott, prince of onkers, let fly.

Three flutsmen sagged and dropped from their clerketers, the leather flying thongs holding their bodies dangling from the big birds as they struggled to stay aloft with the limp, dragging weight frightening them and hauling them down.

Again we shot, and again. Someone of us missed the third time; who it was I do not know.

Now the flutsmen were veering like gale-tossed spindrift, swirling over toward our rocky outcrop. The rear ten or so fell straight down, the fluttrells settling with a flurrying uproar and updriven billows of dust about the galloping jutmen. The fight sprawled over there across the flat.

We shot again as the leading flyers chuted down toward us. The two Pachaks and Hunch brought the short bows taken from the Muzzards into action. Those damned flutsmen astride their fluttrells, all a mass of glitter and waving clumped feathers and brandished weapons, looked massive and indomitable. They looked as though they could fly right through us. That is the impression they seek to convey.

The leading flyers were close enough for Nodgen to hurl his spear. The thick shaft burst through the leather and feathered flying gear of his target, and the flutsmen screeched, a thin, high wail of despair

cutting through the din. He went smashing back against his wicker saddle, slipped sideways, making despairing, jerking grippings with his hands, which slid off to dangle.

“Where’s the next?” raved Nodgen.

The flutsmen circled. We shot, a rolling fighting of steel birds that wreaked cruel damage on the flesh-and-blood birds aloft. Spears sliced down to rattle against the rocks. But, as so often happens when a man afoot shoots it out with a man aloft, the man on the ground has all the advantages. A barbed spear grazed past Tyfar’s arm, and he cursed, and shook his axe.

We kept low, cocking our bows up steeply, using the rocks as cover, keeping in the shadows of the thorn-ivy. The fluttrells would not come near that, for they are canny birds when it comes to self-preservation.

A flung stux whipped in toward me and I flicked it away with an outthrust arm. The men up there must have loosed their crossbows against the jutmen out on the flat, and thinking to finish the thing quickly, had not reloaded. In this they were poor quality flutsmen, quite unlike the band in which I had served.

The dust smothered across the fight out on the flat and only a thin and attenuated yelling told us that men were still left to battle it out. We had taken the major part of the force attacking the vakkas and they would have to fend for themselves until we had seen off the reivers attempting to slay us. So — we fought.

Now your true-blue mercenary of the skies knows when to fight from his natural perch, astride the back of a bird or flying animal, or when to alight and get on with handstrokes on the ground. We had seen off a sizeable gang of this bunch; now the rest forced their fluttrells in to haphazard landings and leaped off their backs, swords and spears brandished. They leaped toward us over the dust between the rocks.

Nath the Shaft calmly shot two of them out even as they cocked their legs over the wicker saddles and the sheening feathers.

The rest of us shot methodically, and then we were at the tinker’s work. The flutsmen they were close to proved to be a surprise. They were the usual mixture of diffs and apims, a Rapa, a Fristle, a Brokelsh. They were clearly still unaware quite of their losses. They ran in and started to fight bravely enough. But when half their number fell, screaming, with not one of us so much as scratched, they abruptly came to a realization of the situation. As I said, they were of poor quality. They were, if you will pardon the conceit, masichieri of the skies.

When this rattle-taggle band broke back for their birds, I shouted the orders it was necessary to give and see obeyed instantly.

The Pachaks raced forward first. They were, after all, hyr-paktuns, with the golden pakzhan at their throats. They were more used to what goes on in the aftermath of battles than Tyfar’s two retainers, or the Tryfant Hunch. But Nodgen, who had been a mercenary in his time — almost made paktun — understood swiftly, and was out of the rocks and running after the two Pachaks.

Tyfar yelled to me. “The people out there!”

“Let us go over, by all means.”

So the rest of us ran past the end of the thorn-ivy and quitted the shelter of the rocks. We ran toward

the boil of dust marking the fight. Long before we reached it, the flutsmen were lifting away, the birds' wings flapping with vigorous downstrokes to gain takeoff speed.

Then I let out a roar.

“The fambls! Come back! Come back—”

But the jutmen, freed of the horror of the flutsmen all around them, simply clapped in their spurs and went haring away across the flats. They galloped in a string and they had their heads down and I do not doubt that most of them had their eyes shut, also.

So we stopped running, and stood and watched the folk we had rescued simply flee in panic.

“The stupid onkers!” said Tyfar. He breathed in, and then made a grimace of distaste, and spat. The dust drifted in, clogging our mouths, flat and unpleasant on the tongue.

Among the drift of detritus of the fight — dead animals, dead birds, dead flutsmen, dead jutmen, and a scatter of weapons — an arm lifted.

“One of them,” I said, “at least is alive.”

We ran across.

He had been a strong fighting man, clad in bronze-bound leather, with a neat trim of silver to the rim of his helmet. His face, heavily bearded, was waxen now, all the high color fled. His lips were ricked back. Near him lay a young man, dressed in clothes and armor of exceeding richness, and this young man's neck was twisted and ripped, and he could have looked down his own shoulder blades, had his eyes still possessed the gift of sight.

“He — is dead — the young lord,” gasped the bearded, dying man. “So — best — I die, too...”

“Who was he?” said Tyfar. He spoke in a hard, contained voice.

The bearded lips opened but only a gargle sounded.

I bent closer.

“Rest easy, dom. You are safe now—”

“Flutsmen — lord, my lord — you must—” His head fell sideways, and those craggy, bearded lips gusted a last breath.

I stood up.

“I,” said Tyfar, “wonder who they were.”

“It does not matter. They are dead or fled.”

We stared about on that unpleasant scene.

Presently, Hunch said, “Can we go back to the rocks now, please?”

“Not before you and Barkindrar and Nath have collected what is useful to us. And be quick about it. There may be other flutsmen about.”

Hunch looked sick.

“Do we have to?”

“Assuredly you do. Now — jump!”

Tyfar nodded. “Nath, Barkindrar, set to it.”

I ploughed in to help select anything we thought would be of use to us. But, as a prince, Tyfar moved a little way off. He did not help us strip the dead of the rich armor, or rake through the satchels, or lift up the blood-caked weapons. But he did not walk away. He stood nearby, and if any further flutsmen showed up, why, then he would show what being a prince involved.

The bulky, bearded man bothered me. He had given his life, and that had not been enough. His young lord was dead. I surmised they were part of an expedition out to venture down a Moder after treasure and magic, and had been separated from the main body by the Muzzard vakkas. Then the flutsmen, ever avid to pick up morsels like that, had attacked.

Twisted under a fine zorca that had been shafted — I took a single look and then looked away. The vile things that happen to faithful saddle animals at the hands of men is a sore subject with me, as with many other men on two worlds. Twisted under this poor dead zorca, as I say, lay the body of a large man who had been pitched from the saddle. His neck had broken.

I studied his face, calm, lined, filled with the remnants of a vigor that had sustained him in life and was now deserting him in death. He wore magnificent armor. It had not stopped his neck from being smashed. I sucked in my breath and went to work.

He was not the bearded servitor’s young lord, and I guessed he was a lord in his own right, gone adventuring on his own account. The expedition of which we nine were the last to escape from Moderdrin had contained nine separate expeditions within our ranks. The armor came off easily, for it had been well cared for. I hoisted it on my back and took his weapons and then trailed off after the others who were hurrying back to the rocks.

I saw Prince Tyfar looking at me.

He said nothing.

I said, “When you have been adventuring out in the wild and hostile world, Tyfar—” And then I stopped myself.

He would not understand. He might learn — if he lived long enough. But I knew enough to know that his ideas of honor could not comprehend my motives.

“Just, Tyfar, one thing.”

“Yes, Jak?”

“Do not think the less of me. I hazard a guess that you have never starved, never been flogged, never really wanted in all your life. These things give a man a different view of the values in life and, yes, I know I am being insufferable and almost preaching, but I value your comradeship and would not see it spoiled over so small a matter.”

And, even then, that was the wrong note. The matter was not small when it touched the honor of a prince of Hamal.

Then he surprised me.

“I have a deal to learn — everything is not contained in books or the instructions of axemasters. I shall don this poor young lord’s armor, which Nath and Barkindrar carry back for me — when it is necessary.”

I felt, I admit, suitably chastened.

When he reached the outcrop, the others had finished up their work and had secured the surviving fluttrells. The big birds were chained down by their wing chains, and had found it suddenly restful in the shade.

I nodded. “Well done.”

“And, what do we do with the swarths?”

“Cut them loose,” said Tyfar. “They will fend for themselves and, eventually, find their way to fresh employment.”

“Agreed.”

The night would soon be upon us and although we could fly quite easily by the light of the moons, we judged it better to give the fluttrells a time to recuperate. Hunch busied himself brewing up tea, that superb Kregan tea, for a supply was discovered in the saddlebags we had taken from the dead animals. Also, we found something that told us who at least some of these folk had been.

Modo brought the package across and we opened it and read the warrant in the last of the light.

“Rolan Hamarker, Vad of Thangal — most odd.” Tyfar looked up from the paper. “That is a good Hamalese name. Yet I do not know of anyone called that. Thangal has no Vad. It is a Trylonate.”

“Due northwest of Ruthmayern,” I said.

“Yes. This is, indeed, a curiosity.”

“And this came from the effects of the young man?”

“Yes, Jak,” said Modo.

“Well, there was nothing with the other lord to identify him. And that, to me, is stranger still.”

“You are right, by Krun!” said Tyfar.

“Perhaps,” said Quienyin in his mellow voice. “They did not wish to give their true names when they ventured into Moderdrin.”

“Of course.” Tyfar beamed on the Wizard of Loh. “You have the right of it.”

“Probably,” I said.

We now had a plethora of weapons and armor and equipment. So we could take our pick. Any good Kregan will take as many weapons along with him as the situation warrants, or the situation that might arise the day after tomorrow will warrant.

As I picked up the dead lord’s sword, I looked across at Tyfar and said, “But that warrant, made out for Rolan Hamarker, gives him authority to arrest anyone he sees fit to question. It is exceedingly wide. And, of course, you observe the signature and the seal?”

“I do. It is the seal of King Doghamrei. Although the scrawl is so bad it could have been signed by any damned slave who had stolen the seal cylinder.”

“King Doghamrei,” I said, and I fell silent, my mind choked with memories: of Ob-Eye, his one optic quite mad, trussing me up and stuffing me into a metal cage, of the cage being swung over the bulwarks of the massive Hamalian skyship Hirrume Warrior, of Ob-Eye thrusting the torch into the mass of combustibles piled around my bound form, of the cage being readied to drop onto the decks of the Vallian galleon Ovvend Barynth on the sea below. They’d set my pants alight, all right. Somehow, because I was a Krozair of Zy, as I truly think, and because I did not wish to be parted from Delia, I had gotten out of that scrape. But — all those vile things had been done to me not on the orders of the Empress Thyllis — Queen Thyllis as she was then — but of King Doghamrei. Oh, yes, I recalled him with some clarity.

And so, because of all those old memories ghosting up, I said, “By Krun! I’ve half a mind to feel sorry he’s still alive.”

Then I looked at Tyfar.

He smiled.

“Then in that you do not stand alone, Jak. He never did succeed in his plot to marry the empress — her poor dotting husband still mopes away in some fusty tower or other — and King Doghamrei is still only a servile king in fee to the empress.”

“Well, I was incautious in my sentiments. Perhaps, one day, you will understand my feelings.”

“My father once fought a duel with Doghamrei—”

“Ha! Then I’ll wager Prince Nedfar acted as a true horter and let the rast off — more’s the pity.”

“He did and it is. But that is smoke blown with the wind.”

“Your father, Tyfar, is a prince for whom I cherish the most lively affection and respect. Now, why couldn’t he be a king — or even an emperor?”

Tyfar drew his cheeks in. He looked suddenly grave, all the banter fled.

“You run on leem’s tracks hastily, Jak.”

“I will say no more. I have said too much.”

“Yes. But, I think — I know — your sentiments are not yours alone.”

“Ah!”

Now, of course, all this sentiment was sweet in the ears of a Vallian. Anything to discomfit Hamal until that empire was willing to talk decently to her neighbors must be to the advantage of Vallia. All the same, what I had said about Tyfar’s father, Prince Nedfar, was true.

What a plot it would be to depose Thyllis and set up Nedfar as emperor of Hamal! I fancied I could talk to him, get him to see reason, see that all the countries of Paz had to unite to face the menace of the shanks, who raided and spoiled from over the curve of the world. For I felt sure their depredations, raids at the moment, would develop into a mass migration, a gigantic attempt to invade our lands. And that, we of Paz could not in honor allow. The fish heads would not be satisfied until every one of us, diff and apim, man, woman, and child, was exterminated.

We made our selections of weapons and armor and equipment and stuffed ourselves with the food in the saddlebags. Then we decided to let our meal go down and set off astride the fluttrells in exactly two burs.

Sitting with my back propped up against a folded cloak on a rock, I popped palines into my mouth, chewing the luscious berries contentedly. Quienyin sat down by my side and I offered him the yellow berries, extending the dish.

He chewed. Tyfar walked across and we passed the dish around. We felt relaxed, comfortable, perfectly confident that now that we had flying steeds we would be out of Moderdrin in no time. Quienyin coughed.

“Prince Tyfar. This war between you and your neighbors, which has extended into Vallia—”

“Yes. Vallia is recalcitrant. The Hyr Notor has the command there. But the news is — odd, to say the least. We have had to recall a number of regiments.”

“So I believe. They have a new emperor up in Vallia now, do they not? Tell me, Tyfar, what are your views on this new and fearsome emperor of Vallia, this Dray Prescott?”

Chapter five

“Dray Prescott, Vile Emperor of a Vile Empire!”

One of the tethered fluttrells let out a squawk, and Hunch gentled him with quick, sympathetic skill. A small branch broke and fell from the fire. Nath and Barkindrar suddenly laughed, and I caught a coarse reference to Vajikry. The light of the moons shone exceedingly brightly upon the dusty land.

“The Emperor of Vallia?” said Tyfar, Prince of Hamal. “Well, now. A hyr-lif might be written about that great devil.”

“Tyfar,” I said, “did you see this great devil Dray Prescott paraded through the streets of Ruathytu lashed

to the tail of a calsany? In the Empress Thyllis's coronation procession?"

"Aye, Jak, I did."

"And, Tyfar," said Quienyin, and he looked at me as he spoke to the Prince, "your thoughts on that occasion?"

Tyfar poked at the fire with a stripped branch.

"This Emperor Dray — it was just, that he should be brought down and humbled, but the way of the doing of it..."

Quienyin took his penetrating gaze from my leem's-head of a face and stared questioningly at Tyfar.

"Yes?"

"By Krun! The rast deserved what he got, did he not?"

"He deserves all he gets," I said.

"But, all the same..." And, again, Prince Tyfar did not complete his sentence. I wondered if he was unwilling to face the consequences of his own thoughts, or unwilling to reveal them to us.

He pulled his shoulders back and threw the branch on the fire.

"Anyway, Quienyin. Why do you question me, now, about the great devil Dray Prescott?"

The nasty suspicion gathered in my mind that I knew the answer to that. But, then, why was it nasty? If Deb-Lu-Quienyin had discovered the truth about Phu-Si-Yantong, then surely he would understand the horrendous problems confronting Paz? Yantong's insane dream was to encompass all of Paz, to take over and control and dominate all of the grouping of continents and islands on our side of the world of Kregen. He had made a start with Pandahem and other places, was destroying Vallia even now, even though we Vallians fought back, and had, under the alias of the Hyr Notor, achieved much with Hamal.

If Quienyin knew all this, as I now suspected he did, then of a certainty he must see the justice of the fight being waged by those opposed to Phu-Si-Yantong.

One of the chiefs of that opposition to the maniacal Wizard of Loh was Dray Prescott, Emperor of Vallia. This, I believed, was what Quienyin was leading up to, what he was telling me in this way. And, cunning old leem-hunter that he was, he had his reasons.

"Well, Quienyin? I fly to join my people. We have been through much together, surely you can find a more enjoyable subject of conversation?" Tyfar stood up and stretched his legs. "By Krun! When Princess Thefi hears what has been going on—"

"Will you join the army of Hamal, or the Air Service, and fight in Vallia, Tyfar?"

Quienyin's question drew a down-drawn and hesitating look from Tyfar.

"We are comrades, Quienyin, and therefore — for anyone else to question me thus would touch—"

“Your honor?”

And then, characteristically, Tyfar laughed. “I do not know! My whole view of the world has changed. What is honor? It can get you killed, that is sure, certain sure.”

I said, “But that knowledge would not stop you from acting in honor, Tyfar? You would not let those vakkas be hounded to death by the flutsmen without an effort to help them.”

“That is true. It was foolish. But Jak, and you know it, I would do it again.”

“Then,” said Quienyin, “as your comrade — and thus taking full advantage of being rude or overweening to you — I would counsel you most seriously not to go to Vallia to fight.” He shook his head and his turban did not so much as quiver. “No, Tyfar. I am a Wizard of Loh — and I say to you with all the force at my disposal, do not go to fight the Vallians.”

“Why?”

That was your Prince Tyfar for you. Straight out, direct, to the point. It was a damned good question and a damned hard one for Quienyin to answer.

I studied their faces by the lights of the moons and the erratic flickers of ruddy light from the fire. Quienyin and I were wrapped up in what underlay our words; Tyfar was in the middle and slowly becoming aware of what was not being openly spoken of. He could become exceedingly angry, a prince being treated like a child. But he was Tyfar. He spoke evenly.

“You have no answer for me, Quienyin? I think you are being mysterious on purpose — but what is your purpose?”

“It is simple. It is to save you much grief.”

Tyfar sucked in his cheeks. Then: “So it is true. You Wizards of Loh can see into the future?”

“Perhaps.”

At that I smirked. No Wizard of Loh was going to reveal any of his secrets, and the worse that was thought of them the more their power and the dread they invoked in the hearts of ordinary folk.

“You spoke of Dray Prescott, the vile emperor of a vile empire. Why should I not go up there and chastise him for the evil he has wrought?”

“Do you know of this evil? Can you show it to me?”

Tyfar spread his arms. “Well — all men know—”

“All men hear tales. Dray Prescott has the yrium, he has that special power, that charisma that marks him out among men and—”

“The yrium!” Tyfar was incensed. “Rather he has the yrrum, the evil charismatic presence, the vile leading the vile, rotten clean through, decadent—” He was panting.

I said, and I spoke gently, “I think the Empress Thyllis would joy to hear you speak thus, Tyfar.”

That sobered him.

He stared toward Quienyin and then toward me. I say toward. I don't think he saw us, not then, for he was looking with his inward eye at past events and conversations and trying to grapple with the problems he now saw more clearly than, probably, he had ever seen in his life before.

At last he said, and his words were still breathless, "So you tell me Dray Prescott has the yrium and not the yrrum, that he is not evil clean through, that he has not brought shame and misery to Hamal, that—"

"I tell you, Tyfar," interrupted Quienyin, "only to search your own ib for the truths in these things."

"And I," I said, "tell us all it is time we departed."

Whatever was going through Quienyin's mind would have to wait. He was Up To Something, as he would have said in his Capital Letter Days. But I banished all that from my own mind as we rose into the air.

Ah! To fly free on the back of a great bird, soar through the sweet air of Kregen, with the blaze of the stars and the fat, serene moons shining down! She of the Veils and the Maiden with the Many Smiles shone refulgently, pink and gold, shining down on the fleeting surface of Kregen passing swiftly below.

The windrush in my face, blowing through my hair... The feel of the rhythmic rise and fall as the fluttrell bore me on with wide pinions beating... The whole sublime sense of flight and motion and headlong movement... Yes, flying over the face of Kregen beneath the moons, there is very little in two worlds to equal that, by Zair!

And, as for the fluttrells themselves, they were the big birds with the silly head vanes that were always in the way, it seems. Well, there is a simpleminded saying among the simple folk of Kregen that sums up the magic in simple terms. Of the birds' flight through the air, they say: "They can do it because they think they can do it." A pathetic little bit of philosophy, perhaps. But it rings, all the same, it rings...

Our flying mounts skeined through the air and we drove on through the moons-washed night. When by the feel of the birds' motion and the little draggling skip to the wings we knew they had had enough, we descended in a grove of tuffa trees, for we had flown past the end of the Humped Land and left that desolate landscape astern. The fluttrells had been hard-driven by their former owners. It is the habit of flutsmen to use their mounts to the utmost. We had a distance to travel and wished to husband the fluttrells' strength.

All of us, I feel, had been touched by that night flight.

We spoke softly, doing what had to be done in the way of caring for the birds and of brewing up. Then the wine was passed around. We spoke quietly, not just because we were somewhere in Havilfar none of us knew and therefore must expect the eruption of danger at any moment. As I say, we had been impressed by that flight under the moons.

Prince Tyfar did not raise our previous subject of conversation. I, for one, by Vox, was happy to let it lie.

Nodgen, as a bristly Brokelsh, was content to dunk his head in the stream and splash water vigorously all over himself. Hunch, being a Tryfant — and you know how foppish they can be on occasion — had

to go the whole hog and give himself the full treatment. Mind you, although I say I have no feelings one way or the other for Tryfants, I had seen enough of Hunch by now to have summed him up better, I fancy, than he guessed or knew himself. And Nodgen shared my opinion. Hunch was a Tryfant, sure enough, not above four foot six in height and full of quivers and quavers and always with an eye open for the nearest bolt hole — but he had gone with us through the horrors of the Moder.

“Jak,” said Quienyin as I turned away from the stream, shaking myself like a collie.

“Aye,” I said, blowing water. “Aye, Quienyin. What you have to say is overdue.”

“Come a little way apart. Much Is To Be Said.”

Those capital Capital Letters, as it were, alerted me. I followed the Wizard of Loh into the shadows of the tufa trees and we settled down, facing each other so that we might keep an eye open on each other’s back.

I said, bluntly, “You have sussed Phu-Si-Yantong and you do not care for what you have found.”

He rubbed his fingers through that reddish hair, shoving the turban aside, uncaring if it fell to the ground.

“We Wizards of Loh set store by certain standards. We have power and we try not to abuse it. Certainly we lust after gold and gems and suchlike baubles — or some of us — but it is the pursuit of knowledge and its manipulation that is our goal and that sustains us. We do not seek petty princely dominion.”

“But...”

“But, Jak the Sturr, I have been overcome. I entertain the liveliest respect and admiration for San Yantong. He represented all that was fundamentally encouraging about us Wizards of Loh. He would make a stir in the world, we all said—”

I stared at Quienyin. “He was your tutor.”

Quienyin did not flinch back. “No. We do not work on that basis in Loh, where we are trained. Not at all. And, also, we never discuss this training. But our comradeship down the Moder has—”

“It seems to me, Quienyin, there has been altogether too much talk about this comradeship. Methinks there is too much protestation going on.”

He would not know my source for the adapted quote; but Nalgre ti Liancesmot expresses similar sentiments in Part Three of the Seventh Book of The Vicissitudes of Panadian the Ibreiver.

He nodded again; but it was not an unthinking nod. Rather, it was the expression of a man who has reached a conclusion.

“Now that I am a little aware of the quality of person I am to do business with, I agree with you.”

“So you think you know who I am?”

“Certainly. You are Jak, calling himself the Sturr, claiming to hail from Hamal — or Djanduin or Hyrklana if the mood takes him — a paktun, probably a hyr-paktun. Is there any other quality you would

wish me to assume you possess?”

The old devil was thrusting the gimlet right in, well enough. I warmed to him.

“I have had dealings with Wizards of Loh before. I respect their arts. I respect their integrity insofar as I have met with it. I own to a grievous debt outstanding to a Wizard in Ruathytu—”

“You refer to San Rening? Que-si-Rening who was resident and secret Wizard of Loh to Queen Thyllis?”

I shook my head in amazement. “I do. He assisted me and I promised to aid him, and I have not done so.”

“Do not trouble your head over San Rening—”

“No!” I said. “He is not dead?”

“No. He effected his escape. It was prettily done. I did not know you knew him. He lives now in safety and practices at a small court in the Dawn Lands. It is not a useful thing for you to know which—”

“No. I agree. But I am glad he is a free man again.”

“But San Yantong...”

“Do you also know Khe-Hi-Bjanching?”

Bjanching was that certain Wizard of Loh with whom Delia and I and others had gone through the adventure of the doors and the test — and the pit, too, by Vox! — and he had taken up residence in my home of Esser Rarioch. Now he had been banished back to Loh by superior sorcery and I wondered if he was well, as I wondered if all my friends who had been sent sorcerously packing off to their homes were well.

“I have heard the name, only. He is a new and young adept and has his name to make.”

“If you contact him on whatever astral plane you go wandering in when you are in lupu, tell him he is missed.”

He inclined his red-haired head.

“As you please.”

“And now — about this kleesh Yantong.”

He talked, slowly at first and then warming to his subject as his indignation overcame him. Yantong had been defying the sacred tenets of the Wizards of Loh. Always the Sans exercised their power from the background, from the shadows. Now Yantong wanted to strut forth and hog the limelight, to take the power and be seen to take it, slaying all who stood in his path. Quienyin was quite clearly shattered.

He told me a few things I did not know; but generally he merely recited what I knew of Yantong’s sins against humanity.

“And yet,” I said, “he is a man. There must be something of good in him. Surely, everything has not been thrown away?”

“I would like to think that, Jak. But if there is aught of goodness left in him, I have not descried it.”

I let out a breath.

“Well. I’ll put a blade through his guts if we meet, if I can; but I’ll still like to think he’s not all evil. Can there be such a thing as a totally evil man?”

“Theory says not. But we have to test that theory.”

“Yes — and my Khamorro?”

“You mean, of course, Turko the Shield?”

I refused to be amazed.

“You know much. I accept that, and I respect your still tongue and your friendship. Yes, I mean Turko.”

“He quitted Herrelldrin. You will not be surprised if I tell you he attempted to reach Vallia—”

“Attempted?”

“He is down in South Pandahem. As a Khamorro he works in a booth in a fairground—”

“My Turko!”

“It is a common occupation for the Khamsters—”

“Aye, it is. And they do not like anyone but themselves calling them Khamster.”

“So I believe. He is well, and seems to be resigned to his fate. There is a girl and a man — but they veil their emotions.

If you go to South Pandahem you will find him at the Sign of the Golden Prychan in Mahendrasmot.”

“I’ve never been there. But I shall go.”

Quienyin shifted around. He licked his lips. If he weren’t a Wizard of Loh I’d have thought he was nerving himself to ask something. We spoke a little, then at random, waiting for the burs to pass so that we might resume our flight. At last he said, in a straight, fierce voice, “And if I went to Vallia, you believe I would be well received?”

If he wasn’t going to come out with it, neither was I.

“Yes. Go to Vondium. Go to the Imperial Palace. You have the presence to gain audience of the empress. She will receive you kindly, if you tell her — certain things she will wish to know.”

“Thank you — Jak. The prospect pleases me.”

“You will be right royally welcome, Quienyin.”

Tyfar was moving about down by the fluttrells and a general animation stirred our little camp as we prepared to carry on.

“Of course,” I said. “The empress may not be in Vondium. She is often away about her own affairs. Then ask to see the Prince Majister, Drak. Or Kov Farris. You will, I am sure, know just who best to see.”

“I shall — Jak.”

I stood up. I stretched. Then, sharply, I said, “And my friends in Hyrklana?”

“I shall attempt to obtain news.”

“Good. Now it seems we are moving on.”

Chapter six

We Fly Over the Dawn Lands

We reached Astrashum, the city from which expeditions set out for the Humped Land. In this place Hunch, Nodgen, and I had been auctioned off on the slave block. The man who had bought us, Tarkshur the Lash, a Kataki, had ventured into the Moder filled with avarice. He had been left with his tail fast gripped in the uncuttable tentacle of one horrific kind of Snatchban. The decision seemed to me sound to banish memories of the Moder from my mind.

Prince Nedfar and his party had gone on to Jikaida City. The other principals alive of our expedition had taken their leave and gone home. Kov Loriman, the Hunting Kov, was reported as being in fine fettle. Ariane nal Amklana had set off for Hyrklana with her small imperious head lifted in regal disdain.

Folk in Astrashum expressed themselves as vastly surprised there had been as many as three survivors from the original nine. Quienyin and I kept very low, and we set off at once for Jikaida City. Nedfar, Quienyin warned us, had left immediately for Hamal. Fresh airboats from Hamal had been flown in for his party. Their passage home would be swift.

“I joy that my father and sister, and all the others, are safe,” said Tyfar. But he bit his lip, and added: “But I view with alarm what the empress will say. My father did not conclude the embassy with Prince Mefto and we have no great store of armies on which to call. She knows he does not see eye to eye with her war policy. I call on Krun of the Steel Blade to watch over him.”

“And I, too,” I said. “We follow?”

“As fast as our fluttrells can fly.”

“Prince,” said Nath the Shaft, respectfully, “flyers are scarce, as we all know. We must take care of them, lest they are stolen away from us. Their value is above price.”

“That is the war—”

“Aye!”

“Can you tell why Thyllis entrusted your father with the task of making the alliance with Mefto?” I wanted to know.

“He is known to be above party politics, seeking only the welfare of Hamal. If we can win the war quickly, then much grievous loss will be spared us. Thyllis knew this.”

Well, that made sense in a nonsensical world.

Honest men are used by the cunning of two worlds — as I know, having been used and user in my time.

Flying over the Dawn Lands of Havilfar reveals their haphazard splendor. They are like a patchwork quilt of countries. There are scores of tiny Stromnates and trylonates, larger vadvarates and kovnates, and broad prinedoms and kingdoms. Here was where the first men to reach these shores settled, around the Shrouded Sea. Now all this wide land was in ferment as the looming monster of Hamal, to the north, sent tentacles of force to rip them apart and take all. Truly, the Empress of Hamal, this Thyllis, was besotted with a crazed ambition.

In this she shared the maniacal notions of Phu-Si-Yantong. Always, as you know, I wavered and hesitated over my own role in these great affairs of state. For, was not I, this new Emperor of Vallia, also caught up in these mad power politics?

To reach Hamal we flew something east of north. I was content in this, for to fly direct to South Pandahem would have occasioned flying over the Wild Lands of Northwestern Havilfar, and no man, unless he be mad, a fool, or uncaring, willingly ventures there. Once we hit Hamal I'd bid remberree to my comrades and fly on out over the sea and then take a sharp left turn along the northern shore of Havilfar, by the Southern Ocean, and skirting the island of Wan Witherm, reach Pandahem.

That was the theory, one of those famous theories I had been promulgating and failing to perform just lately.

Mind you, had I not been with this band of eight comrades, I would probably have flown westward, visited Migladrin and Djanduin, and then flown north to Pandahem up the South Lohvian Sea between Havilfar and Loh.

I am glad, now, that I did not...

Prince Tyfar was eager to press on.

“I wonder what Princess Thefi took from the Mausoleum of the Flame,” he said. “As for that scamp, Lobur the Dagger — he and I will buffet each other when we meet.”

“And,” I said, turning the blade in the wound, “do not forget Kov Thrangulf.”

“No. Who could forget him — save the entire world? He is hard put upon and there is something in the man finer than the world sees, struggling to get out. I wish Lobur was not so hard on him.”

“We will soon be in Hamal and then your worries will be over. Also, it is there that our ways will part.”

“I grieve for that, Jak. Cannot you stay in Hamal? After all, it is your country.”

“I am under duress — wen, you know I may not talk of that, save to assure you as I have.”

“If ever you need a friend in Hamal — you know where they are.”

“Aye. Thank Krun I do, Tyfar!”

The southern border of Hamal is marked off by the majestic River Os. This wends its regal way from the Mountains of the West which spine the center of the continent there, to the Ocean of Clouds in the east. Its mouth divides to run around the country of Ifilion, which is fiercely independent and had not been overrun by the iron legions of Hamal.

South of the Os the countries had been invaded and subjected and Clef Pesquadrin, Ystilbur, Frorkenhume, had all felt the oppression of the iron legions. And still Thyllis’s ambitions were not slaked, and she sent her iron legions farther to the south still. And, down in the Dawn Lands, the opposition to her and her schemes grew.

Flyers cannot sustain the long hauls that fliers may, and we had to descend periodically to rest and feed our fluttrells. Naturally, we chose places well out of the way. We were not disturbed as we flew north. The land opened out into a broad and pleasant prospect, and although we skirted towns and hamlets, we saw them, gleaming like lilies across the green fields.

At one halt in the shade of missals, Quienyin told me that my friends in Hyrklana were alive. I felt the leap of relief. Balass the Hawk, Oby, Naghan the Gnat, and Tilly were dear to me. The Wizard of Loh struck a note of alarm when he said they were involved in the Jikhorkdun again. I frowned.

“That bloody arena of Huringa should be—”

“Not while human nature is as human nature is, Jak.”

“As soon as I meet up with Turko — but, no. I have other things to do which supervene — I think.” The truth was, by Zair, I was all at sea. Vallia called. Yes, yes, the country was in good hands. But — well, easy enough to sense my feelings even if they do me no credit as your cool and hardheaded adventurer. I wanted to see Delia. I wanted to know that my home was not once more a sea of flames.

Emotion and feeling rule us, whether we will it or not. “As soon as I have done what I must do, it is Hyrklana for me, and the Jikhorkdun of Huringa.”

Quienyin nodded sympathetically.

“They are all perfectly safe, I assure you.”

“In the Jikhorkdun?”

“Yes.”

The old sayings have fallen into disrepute on Kregen as on Earth. I had to do what I had to do. There was no easy way out for me. But we all smirk when we hear the words, “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.” They are trite, stupid, meaning nothing out of overuse and unthinking repetition. But, they do mean a great deal. I had to go back to Vallia, first, and stopping off for Turko was an indulgence to my sensibilities. By Zair! What it is to be an emperor, what it is to be a man!

“South Pandahem is a more or less direct route through to Vallia,” said Quienyin. “Hyrklana is not.”

I stared at him. He knew who I was all right. But we kept up the pretense. I really think — I know — he had been so profoundly shocked at his discoveries of the antics of his old friend Phu-Si-Yantong that he was still in something of a state of shock. And he had not asked me what I was doing down in the Dawn Lands. I could not tell him that, of course. He could know nothing of a power that had sent me here in the first place, a power immeasurably greater than all the powers of the Wizards of Loh combined.

From northwest to southeast the Dawn Lands stretch for something just under three thousand miles. From northeast to southwest the breadth is of the order of one thousand five hundred, reaching a little more past the Western Mountains.

The whole place is like a beehive of energy.

Kingdoms rise and fall, borders stretch and contract. Racial, religious, political differences hold the frontiers. Geography plays its part, so that rivers and mountains form natural barriers. We flew on north and east and so passed the massive lenk forests of Shirrerdrin. Ahead lay Khorundur.

“We approach areas where runs the writ of Hamal,” said Tyfar. He sounded half angry and ashamed along with his pleasure.

I knew why.

So I took no notice. We made a frugal camp and decided what to do. Now you can shoot a paly and feast on succulent roast venison. You can slingshot a bird down and eat that. And you can pull fruit off trees and enjoy the succulent flesh and juices. But you cannot easily come by bread, or tea, or wine out in the wilds.

“I will go in,” said Nath the Shaft. “With Barkindrar. We have money, good gold which these folk of the city will exchange for food—”

“Wine,” said Hunch.

“Shall we go in, Hunch?” said Nodgen.

“Me? Why? Barkindrar and Nath offered, didn’t they?”

“Buy only enough to last us over Khorundur. Beyond that kingdom we will be among friends and may ask for all we need,” Tyfar told his retainers.

“Quidang, Prince!”

So the two went off and we waited and waited and when so much time had elapsed that we knew they were not coming back, Tyfar said, “They have been taken up. I shall go in after them and fetch them out. They are loyal men — and comrades.”

Standing up, I looked at Tyfar, and there was no need for words.

Hunch quavered out: “You are going off and leaving me here, Jak!”

“You will be safe enough, Hunch. After all, Nodgen has his spear — and you have your bill, I see.”

The two Pachaks started laughing, and then Hunch, staring around, laughed, too. But it was a dolorous sound, for all that.

The city stood beside the banks of a pretty little river which wound between wooded slopes. Built of a bright yellow brick, this little city of Khorunlad. That yellow is a fine, strong color, yet not harsh, not offensive... The yellow of just that tint is called tromp in Kregish, a fuller tone than the more subtle yellow called lay. Domes were burnished with copper, green and glowing, and the avenues opened out into stone-flagged kyros where striped awnings promised refreshment for thirsty throats.

We two, Tyfar and I, walked in past the open gates. They were stout, fabricated of bronze-bound lenk, and the watchtowers were manned. Many of the roofs of buildings uplifted landing platforms for airboats. I perked up.

We had both chosen to wear the armor taken from the dead lords destroyed by the flutsmen. We looked a resplendent pair. That was all to the good, for we had to get to Nath and Barkindrar before anything too unpleasant occurred to them.

Tyfar was all for going up to the magistrates and asking.

I pursed my lips.

“We-ell, Tyfar, we are strangers. D’you see the looks we got from the guard? And they looked handy fighting men, not your local city militia at all.”

I considered it odd that we had not been questioned, were not already in some iron-barred cell charged with some nameless crime, and our weapons gone and our pockets emptied.

The armor I wore was of that superb supple mesh link manufactured in some of the countries of the Dawn Lands. Armor of the highest quality is usually made to fit the wearer. I was glad that the dead lord had been large across the shoulders. All the same, I had had to let the shoulder thongs out to their fullest extent to get the harness on. Tyfar’s dead lord’s armor was of the plate variety, a kax of exceptional beauty which snuggled on Tyfar’s brawny yet supple frame. We wore the green and yellow cloaks that came with the outfit, our helmets glittered in the suns, our weapons jutted with a fine panache, and, in short, we presented a splendid spectacle of two of the lords of the land.

Well, maybe that had not been such a good idea, after all.

Maybe had I done as I so often did, and padded in barefoot with a breechclout and weapons, I would have avoided the mischief. But, then, I would have avoided an adventure that afforded me enormous joy — even though I was not aware of it at the time.

Chapter seven

Of a Meeting in a Hayloft

The first kyro to which we came was a plaza of pleasing proportions. The flags were uniformly arranged in blue and white hexagons. Tyfar stopped and stared at the tables beneath the bright umbrellas outside a tavern with the promising name of The Bottle and Morrow.

“Ronelines,” he said, and smacked his lips. “I have a penchant for them — and with thick, clotted cream.”

I sighed. People in clean and colorful clothes sitting at the tables were spooning up the ronelines smothered in thick cream. Ronelines are very much your Kregan strawberry, and highly tasty, too. Tyfar strode across and started opening his scrip ready to dole out money.

Deb-Lu-Quienyin suddenly appeared at my elbow.

A wash of coldness shriveled in the heat of the day.

“Jak — our two comrades. They are lodged in a hayloft in Blue Vosk Street. Barkindrar is injured.”

I could see right through Quienyin.

One or two people at the tables were beginning to look more closely toward me. The Wizard of Loh had gone into lupu back in our camp and had thrown his astral projection to advise and warn us. How many times I had been hounded by the infernal projection of Yantong!

“Thank you, San. We will hurry. Best you—”

But Quienyin’s projection moved into the shadows by the far wall of the tavern — and vanished. His going was a matter of the supernatural; I just hoped the clients spooning up their ronelines and cream would disbelieve the evidence of their eyes and believe common sense.

I started after Tyfar.

He sat down and leaned back in the wooden chair and looked around. Before the little Fistle fifi in her yellow apron could reach him I stormed up and whispered in a modulated bellow in his earhole, “Tyfar! Our comrades are in trouble and Barkindrar is injured. You’ll have to forgo your ronelines.”

He stood up at once, quelling the flash of fury on his face.

“That Barkindrar! Let us go, then, Jak — and mayhap we can stop here on our way back. By Krun! Ronelines and cream!”

We walked smartly off.

A Rapa slave in the gray slave breechclout stepped out of our way as we rounded the corner out of the kyro. He carried an enormous table on his back, and his beak was thrust forward. Perched on the table was a wicker basket and in the basket, wrapped in soft moss, lay two tiny Rapa babies. The Rapa lowered his eyes as he walked by.

“Rapa,” I said, “tell me where is Blue Vosk Street.”

He could only have been able to see our lower halves; but he could see the polished boots, and the sword scabbards, and the ends of the expensive cloaks.

“Masters,” he quavered. He dare not straighten up for the babies would slide off the table. “Masters. Straight along the Avenue of a Thousand Delights, and turn left — no, masters, turn right — a hundred paces along, by the river.”

I found a copper ob and pushed it into his hand.

“Thank you, Rapa.”

What he said I did not know, for I went off quickly, with Tyfar tailing along.

We walked up the Avenue of a Thousand Delights, and while there might only have been nine hundred ninety-nine on display, the place warranted the trademark of a thousand. Following directions we turned a hundred paces along by the river, which here was confined by wooden stakes and a mass of overgrown foliage, and so entered Blue Vosk Street. Here, it was clear, lived the folk who catered to the customers for the thousand delights.

Tyfar put a hand to his sword hilt.

“Ignore the cutpurses,” I said, “and slit the throats of the cutthroats — first.”

“What a place! I did not know such a place could exist.”

“You mean because it is a hundred paces or so from refinement and civilization?” The stink didn’t bother me; Tyfar put a kerchief to his nose with his free hand. “No, Jak. I did not mean that.”

But I fancied I knew what he did mean. He was a prince and had not rubbed shoulders with the poor of the world. Many of the shacks were simply moldering away. Those built of the soft mud, hardened by a kiss of fire, were sloughing their footings into the mud in which they were set. People moved about their business, and three-quarters of that, I’ll warrant, was highly illegal. I drew my cloak around that splendid mesh mail. Tyfar saw the movement.

“Do you likewise, Tyfar. We are too brightly decked for this neighborhood. And keep your weather eye open.”

“Where is this pestiferous hayloft?”

A string of calsanys blundered past, their backs obscured by swaying lashings of straw. The Rapa leading them shuffled, head down, a wisp of straw sticking out from under the vulturine beak. Farther along a pair of hirvels drew a cart which lurched over the ruts, its fragile wheels appearing as if they would burst asunder at every forward plunge. Slaves were not too much in evidence. The people here were on the breadline, no doubt, and villainy kept their stomachs apart from their backbones.

Khorundur was one of the countries of the Dawn Lands in which airboats were manufactured. These fliers were in nowise as splendid or efficient as those made in such secrecy by Hamal or Hyrklana; but they were functional, although small and oftentimes chancy of operation. No doubt the voller builders of Khorundur had not mastered all the secrets of the various ingredients contained in the silver boxes that uplifted and powered vollers.

Six taverns stood cheek by jowl, so that when a drunk was thrown out of the first, he could work his way along the rest without having to walk too far. Beyond them a cluster of stores displayed dusty goods, and then a hostelry lifted two stories. A beam and ropes jutted from a double door in the gabled front.

“There,” said Tyfar, and he would have pointed had I not cautioned him swiftly. “Yes, Jak, you are right.

They are a cutthroat lot down here.”

“And quiet. Too quiet. Something is going on.”

He did not have the ruffianly experience of an old adventurer to give him the scent of mischief. The string of calsanys had gone, the cart vanished up a dolorous side alley. The people were taking themselves off the street. Although the surface was pockmarked with potholes and rutted, this street for these people would serve as their open-air gathering place. One would expect it to be filled with chaffering throngs, and also one would be certain that we two, our expensive cloaks betraying us even though the armor was concealed, would have been subjected to more than simple horseplay. In all probability as many attacks as there were paces would have been launched against us.

So that meant just one thing.

You have to have the nose for authority if you wish to stay alive in many of the more raffish and desperate places of Kregen.

Zair knows, I'd kicked against authority enough in my time.

“Just rest a moment in the shade of this awning, Tyfar.”

“But we must press on! Barkindrar—”

“Watch.”

He glared at me. Something in my manner showed him I did not counsel thus without reason. More probably, although it pains me to report this, something about my manner must have told him I was in no mood to be argued with. He was a prince; but he subsided and we stood in the shadows, looking keenly out onto that doleful street.

A neighborhood gets to know when trouble is on its way.

In a tightly controlled voice, Tyfar said, “We should have gone straight away to the magistrates. Or even the king. His palace may be a moth-eaten dump; but he is a king and would have received me as a prince.”

About to find a diplomatic way of reminding Tyfar of his country of origin, I closed my mouth. The tramp of iron-studded soles and the swish and clang of a party of soldiers kept us both stock still. I said in a voice that just carried, “This is the reason, Tyfar. Bide you still.”

The soldiers were paktuns, clearly enough, a mixture of races, all clad in a semblance of uniform. They were a hard-bitten lot. At their head marched their Jiktar, and I can say I did not care for him at first glance. I would not like to serve as a paktun in his pastang. He had not brought his whole pastang, a company which might be eighty strong; but only three audos, three sections of eight men each. The iron-studded boots stomped the rutted road.

The mercenaries approached from the direction we had come, and I said to Tyfar, “Quickly, now! Around the back of the stables and in the rear window. Sharp!”

We ran between the wooden wall of the stables and the sagging mud wall of the nearest store. At the back a lumberyard showed with an adobe wall beyond. Thick trees cut off the view. At the back of the

hostelry an aromatic yard piled with dung and straw and a few broken carts gave us access to the back of the building. There were a few calsanys in their stalls and a hirvel twitched his snout at us, his cup-shaped ears flicking forward, his tall round neck curving. The air hung unnaturally quiet, and the buzz of flies sounded like miniature ripsaws.

“In this window — quick and quiet!”

The sill was rotten and I shoved the wooden leaves open cautiously. The interior of the place stank. The floor was cumbered with shadow-shrouded impedimenta of the animal trade. Stalls lined both walls with a ladder beyond. Most of the stalls were empty. In the one nearest to the ladder a freymul, the poor man’s zorca, suddenly looked splendid as he tossed his head in a shaft of the suns’ light breaking in through a crack in the dilapidated walls. His fine chocolate-colored coat with those brave streaks of tromp beneath gleamed, and he showed his teeth and neighed.

“That’s done it,” I said. “Up the ladder!”

I sprang up the ladder four rungs at a time. If one of the treads snapped beneath my boots... But they held. I reached the landing at the top and faced a half-open door in which the light of a mineral-oil lamp glowed. Shadows moved.

In the hayloft, Quienyin had said.

Tyfar sprang up the ladder after me.

Three paces took me to the door.

My hand reached out to push the door open.

Abruptly, it was snatched back.

I stared into the oil lamp’s radiance. Hay piled up to the pitch of the roof. A woman stood facing me, the bow in her hand bent and the steel head of the arrow aimed directly at my breast. The man who had flung the door open appeared. It was nicely done. In a single instant the bow could loose and the arrow drive through me.

“Hold still, dom,” said the man. He was apim, strongly built and with a brown beard, trimmed to a point. His eyes were dark and his face, big-boned, powerful, held a look of such savage anger I knew I would have to treat him with the utmost caution. “One move — one — and you’re spitted.”

“Stand quite still,” said the woman.

Her voice was mellifluous, very pleasing in other circumstances. She wore a russet tunic and russet trousers, cut tightly, and her slender waist was cinched by a wide brown belt, and the gold buckle glittered in the light. As to her face, that lay in shadow; but I caught the impression of a firmness there, the shape conveying that sense of strength as her head half-turned to stare along the shaft. Her eyes fastened upon me, large and brown and luminous above the bar of shadow from her left arm.

“We shall all have to move very—” I began.

The man spat out a curse.

“You speak when you are spoken to, dom, not before. You are very near death.”

“Oh, aye,” I said. “And so are we all—”

The man lifted his fist. His nostrils pinched in.

“Kaldu!” The voice of command as the woman spoke smoked into the room. She was used to telling people what to do and seeing them do it. “Quiet, Kaldu. No chance has brought these two horters here.”

“They mean us mischief, my lady. Let me—”

I said, “Stop clowning about, Kaldu. Listen to your mistress. And we must all get out of here. The watch is on the way. Where are — where is the injured man and his comrade?”

The bow was held in a grip that did not tremble by so much as an eyelash. The bow was a big, compound reflex weapon that pulled enough to let a man know he held a bow; the girl gripped it and held the arrow in such a fashion that told me she knew exactly what she was doing. One thing was sure, this mysterious woman was a superb archer.

“You know? How could you? The watch—?”

“Come on, Kaldu,” I said. “Close your mouth. We must get out of here at once.”

“I believe you,” the woman said. She lowered the bow.

I heard Tyfar let out a shaky breath. He did not put as much trust as I did in the bowmanship of this girl. “Which way is the watch coming?”

“In the direction of the Avenue of a Thousand—”

“Very well. We must go over the roof to the bakery beyond. Kaldu, fetch Barkindrar. Tell Nath.” She swung to face Tyfar and me. “I do not know who you are — yet. But if you are traitors—”

“Barkindrar and Nath are my men,” spoke up Tyfar. “Lady. I trust they are not badly hurt—”

“They can run.” Tyfar flinched back.

“Then,” I said, “for the sake of Havil the Green, let us all run!”

The girl flashed me a look. “Havil,” she said. “You are Hamalese?”

“Yes—” began Tyfar.

I said, “Havil is known over all Havilfar. Now enough shilly-shallying.” Barkindrar and Nath appeared, helped along by Kaldu. He loomed over them. “Come on, you two famblys. We must run for it.”

They started to speak and an enormous battering began on the door. The noise burst up from front and back of the building.

“The watch!” said Kaldu. “We are too late!”

“No!” flared the girl. She looked like an enraged zhanthilla, fiery, incensed, splendid. “It’s never too late, until you’re dead!”

Chapter eight

An Arrow in the Swamp

The bakery leaned against the stables for mutual support. They propped each other. The aroma of baking bread fought with the dungy whiffs from the yard at the back of the barn. As we prepared to run through the opposite door to the bakery, the woman looked at Barkindrar. The Brokelsh was clearly in pain; but in that sullen, mulish, Brokelsh way he refused to acknowledge the fact. The woman placed her hand on Barkindrar’s forehead.

The hand was shapely, firm, clearly the hand of a woman and yet I knew that hand could accomplish warrior deeds. Her face relaxed for a betraying moment from her tough no-nonsense pose and revealed the compassion she felt. Then she swung back to us, hard and imperative.

“They take their time. They will never see us past the bakery.”

She wore a rapier and main gauche. The bow went up on her shoulder out of the way. Her brown hair, trimmed neatly and rather too short, shone bravely in the light of the suns.

I looked past the jut of the stable roof as we went out. If some damned inquisitive mercenary took it into his head to move well out into the yard, he could not fail to see us. Once they had broken into the building they’d be up the stairs like a pack of werstings, all fangs and ravagings.

The bakery was a single-story affair and we ought to scramble down easily enough. I judged there would be no need to set a rear guard, and Nod the Straw, out on the roof, would have warned us if a mercenary did stroll out too far.

Nod the Straw, a wispy little fellow who worked in the stables, waited for us on the roof. His pop-eyes and thick-lipped mouth expressed no surprise that there were two more people suddenly appearing from the shelter of his barn. But he was savagely annoyed and kept brandishing a cut-down pitchfork.

“I know who it was,” he raved. “That crop-eared, no-good kleesh of a Sorgan! He must have betrayed us — and they’ll give him a dozen stripes quicker’n a dozen silver sinvers.”

“Never mind about who betrayed us now, Nod,” said the woman. “Help get Barkindrar down off your roof.”

Tyfar said, “Do you all go on. I shall hold the roof and delay them—”

The woman threw him a glance that I, for one, would not welcome. Although, by Krun, that self-same look that says what a great ninny you are has been thrown at me in my time.

“Leave off, Nod,” said Kaldu. “I will take Barkindrar on my back.”

“You great dermiflon!” jibed Nod the Straw. But he desisted in his efforts, and Kaldu took Barkindrar up and bore him swiftly down over the roof of the bakery. Nath the Shaft followed with Nod the Straw.

“What are you waiting for?” said Tyfar. He drew his sword. “I can hold them off for long enough—”

“You think, then,” said this woman in her imperious way, “that you are some kind of Jikai?”

Tyfar’s color rose up into his cheeks.

“I think I know where honor—”

“Honor!” She laughed, and, even then, even in all that thumping racket from below, and the peril in which we stood, that laughter rose, pure and untrammelled, and exciting.

“Go on, Tyfar,” I said. “There is time to get across into the shadows of the bakery.”

“I shall not precede this — lady.”

“Then,” I said, and if you are surprised you still do not understand that old reprobate, Dray Prescott, “then I shall go at once myself and leave you two to wrangle it out between you.”

And, with that, I jumped down onto the adjoining roof and crabbed deuced swiftly across to follow the others as they clawed their way down a crumbling wall to the alley. I had no compunction. I knew Tyfar’s honor would make him follow me, wasting no more time. If the woman wished to be last, no doubt following some obscure honor code or discipline of her own, then we’d only hold things up by further wrangling.

Tyfar breathed down my neck as I jumped for the alley.

“That woman! Insufferable! Vosk-headed! Stubborn as a graint!”

“Charming, though, you must agree.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I noticed her at once. Although I would not say charming — in fact, charming is the last word I’d use. Attractive, alluring, beautiful — yes, she’s all those. But who can put up with seductiveness cloaked with superciliousness?”

I peered suspiciously at Tyfar. “Isn’t that San Blarnoi? Although, to be sure, I think the quote phrases it somewhat differently from ‘put up with’.”

“San Blarnoi knew what he was talking about. That woman!”

“Yes?” came that smooth mellifluous voice, sweet as honey and sharp as a rapier. “What woman would that be, horter?”

Tyfar spun about. I was facing him, and he swung back to stare accusingly at me. His whole stance, his shining face, screamed out: “You might have warned me!”

I said, “Why, some shrewish fishwife who landladies it at our last inn. Now, we had best hurry. Those paktuns looked as though they know their job. And if Sorgan did betray you they’ll know we have an injured man.”

“Yes,” she said, instantly forgetting the pettiness of impending annoyance at Tyfar’s incautious words. “We must get on. Kaldu! Make for Horter Rathon’s.”

“Quidang, my lady.”

We all ran down the alley, and we ran away from Blue Vosk Street and headed for the thick stand of tall timber.

“There is a section of bog in here, lady,” said Nod the Straw. “No one ventures here.” His eyes rolled. “I do not like to go in — but—”

“Needs must when you come to the fluttrell’s vane, Nod.”

“Aye, my lady.”

“This Rathon,” I said, “to whom we are all running like a flock of ponshos. Did Sorgan know of him and his house?”

“No,” said Kaldu.

Tyfar wanted to bristle up at the incivility. But I restrained him with a quiet word. How odd it is that a prince will stand for uncouthness when an arrow is aimed at his heart, and prickles up when it is not! Although, to give Tyfar his dues, he wasn’t the least afraid of arrows in the normal course of things. That a beautiful and well-formed woman had been the person aiming the shaft at us — that, I think, had thrown him off balance.

The trees closed over us, a mixture of the beautiful as well as the ugly in Kregan trees. The path became distinctly moist. I looked back. Our footprints were perfectly legible to the eyes of a tracker.

“It gets a lot stickier ahead,” said Nod. “Unfortunately.”

“There is a boat,” said the woman. She spoke briskly. “We can cross the river without trouble, and lose ourselves in the Aracloins.[\[2\]](#)Horter Rathon will give us shelter.”

“Why did you not go there first, instead of to Blue Vosk Street?”

She gave me a withering look.

“That was nearest. We did not know who Barkindrar and Nath were when the watch tried to take them up. When we realized they were Hamalese, of course, we stepped in.”

“You are revolutionaries?”

The moment I spoke I heard the fatuity of my question.

She said, “Kaldu! Watch your step.”

He did not answer but plunged on with Barkindrar slung over his back. The Bullet had taken a nasty cut along the leg. The wound was bound — and bound expertly, too, the handiwork as I guessed of this surprising woman.

Along by the edge of the river where this boggy section was difficult to tell from river itself, we threaded along the narrow path. Nod the Straw led, and he was not at all happy. In any niksuth, any small marshy area, of Kregen you are likely to find uncooperative life. Teeth and fangs, spines and stings, they hop up

out of the bog and seek to drag you down for a juicy dinner. Even in a city like Khorunlad. Aware of this delightful fact of Kregan bogs, I loosened my thraxter in the scabbard.

“If no one comes here,” I said. “The watch will not think we have. There is no need to hurry, they will not know how long we have been gone from the stables.”

“There was a quantity of blood spilled on the straw,” she said.

“I see. Then we had best hurry.”

“Jak,” called Tyfar.

I swung about to look.

He was half off and half on the path, and one leg was going deeper and deeper into a foul-smelling stink of blackness. Tendriliferous vines snaked over the oozing mud. But he got a grip on a clump of weed and arrested his sucking-in.

He had been following up last. The girl at my side said, “The oaf!” She spoke tartly.

Tyfar got a better grip and started to haul himself in.

A head appeared over his shoulder, one of those snouting, fanged heads of Kregen, all scale and tendrils and gape-jaws. The eyes were red slits. It hoisted itself a little free of the ooze with two broad paddle-like forefeet. In the next instant it would open and close that fearsome set of jaws, and Tyfar’s head would provide the dinner the thing craved.

The girl took a single step forward. She was splendid.

The bow came from her shoulder as a skater comes off the ice. The arrow nocked, was drawn back — to the ear — and the shaft flew. Straight and strongly driven, that shaft. It pierced cleanly through one of those red slit eyes. The steel point must have gouged on, deep into the minuscule brain.

I could not watch the death throes of the beast any more. A mate to the first appeared almost soundlessly beside me and the jagged-fanged jaws thrust for the girl in her russets, who stood ready with a second shaft aimed for the monster by Tyfar.

My thraxter swept around and then straightened. Point first it drove into a red-slitted eye. The thraxter would not have cut the thing’s scaly neck deeply enough. But the solid steel punched through eye and head and into brain. I jerked back. Like its mate, it thrashed and screeched.

The girl gave a single convulsive jump back.

Her bow lifted, the arrow pulled — then she summed up the picture and did not loose.

“I give you my thanks for saving Tyfar,” I said.

He was off the ooze now and safely on the path. His leg sheened with the muck. He waved his sword at us and then started to run along the treacherous path to catch us up. I own I felt enormous relief knowing that he was safe.

The woman looked at me. Woman? Girl? She was young, around Tyfar's age, I judged, although men and women change so slowly over their better than two hundred or so years of life on Kregen. Sometimes she had the airs of a queen, and at others those of a roistering tavern wench, and both were nicely calculated. She was controlled in her emotions; but her emotions were real and could break out fiercely—

“By Krun, Jak! That beastie nearly had me — and you!”

“You were busy saving Tyfar, for which my thanks again.”

“You are his father?”

“No, no. He is a good comrade.”

“Then you have my thanks, for what they are worth, for my life—”

“Do not, I beg you, say, for what that is worth.”

“Sometimes my life has meant a great deal to me, and sometimes nothing at all.”

Tyfar panted up then, and started in at once thanking the girl. Then he said, “And I do not know to whom I owe my life.”

“You may call me Jaezila.”

We started off along the path again, and I felt it prudent to hang back. I did this to guard against pursuit and, also, as I realized with a sly amusement, so that they might have it out between them.

“Jaezila,” said Tyfar, rolling the syllables around his mouth as though they were best Jholaix. “And is that all — my lady?”

“No. It will do for you — Jikai.”

She cut him with that great word, used as she used it, in mockery of his warrior prowess.

“Jaezila,” persisted Tyfar, and I own I was impressed by his refusal to become warm. After all, he was a prince. “And no more — you are Hamalese?” He sounded doubtful.

I thought I detected a wary note in Jaezila's voice.

“Hamalese — does it matter? I seek to aid you, who are Hamalese. Is not that good enough?”

“I accept that.” Tyfar passed on, following her beyond the end of a screen of curly-fronded ferns where the dragonflies, as big as chickens, flitted and flurried on diamond wings. “And what brought you to Khorunlad?”

“Your breeding left much to be desired, dom.”

Tyfar bridled up like a spurred zorca. To be accused of poor breeding, and a Prince of Hamal! And to be addressed so familiarly as dom, the common greeting! I watched it all, enthralled.

Then I jumped forward.

My Val! We had been growing very chummy with these people, with stubborn Kaldu and this enigmatic woman styling herself Jaezila. But we did not know them. I didn't want Tyfar labeling himself a prince — particularly a Prince of Hamal — until we knew them a great deal better.

“You may be surprised to know—” Tyfar was saying with his voice as frosty as the caverns of the Ice Floes of Sicce. He was going to put Jaezila properly in her place by telling her that she had the honor of addressing a prince, I didn't doubt that. I burst in, quite rudely.

“Come on, come! Don't stand chaffering. I think there were sounds of pursuit along the path.”

Tyfar immediately swung about and lifted his sword.

Jaezila simply looked at me. “You think there is pursuit?”

She missed nothing, this girl, nothing...

“And if there is not, that is still no reason to stand lollygagging about. By Krun! Let us get out of this bog and onto firmer ground.”

“Fifty paces will bring us to the bank. If you can call it a bank. I scouted this area—”

I said, “You are not from Khorunlad, Jaezila. Hamalese? Maybe. But I do not inquire why you help us from Hamal.”

“Do you think that the Empress Thyllis will conquer all the Dawn Lands, Jak?”

That was a confounded question!

It suited my purposes to be thought a Hamalese. Yet it went against the grain to have to say that, yes, mad Empress Thyllis would overrun all the Dawn Lands, one after the other.

“She might,” I said. “If her throat is not cut first.”

She drew her breath in. The others showed up ahead waiting under a grove of drooping missals. Beyond them the river glimmered blue as the summer sky.

“You spoke of revolution,” said Jaezila. “Now, I see—”

I interrupted, swiftly but courteously: “My lady Jaezila, do not misunderstand me.” Zair knew, I'd taken long enough getting myself accepted as a Hamalese, and this girl quite clearly was more than she appeared. She could go running back to Hamal with a tale that would destroy my plans. I had to dissimulate. “I spoke figuratively. We all serve the empress, do we not? Hamal is set on the road of conquest, is not this so?”

“By Jehamnet! Hamal is set on the road to conquest!”

Her voice contained emotions I couldn't fathom. She swore by Jehamnet, a spirit of harvest time associated with crop failures and similar disasters, and who is known as Jevalnet in Vallia, and Jegrodnet and Jezarnet in the Eye of the World. But she had said Jehamnet, which is Hamalian. He is known as

Jehavnet in most of Havilfar. I fancied she was Hamalese and therefore, down here, out doing skullduggery for Thyllis. I held my tongue.

We gathered by the boat, a little skiff that would just about take us all and give us a hand's-breadth freeboard. The river rippled gently in a small breeze. On the opposite bank the walls and roofs of the jumbled Aracloins offered shelter. We pushed off and Kaldu and I pulled the oars, taking it gently. There were a sizeable number of other boats on the river. A low pontoon bridge spanned the river lower down, and this impediment assisted in the formation and continuance of the boggy area upstream.

So, moving cautiously but with purpose, we successfully reached the safety of Horter Rathon's questionable establishment.

Chapter nine

We Strike a Blow for Hamal

"By Havil! I don't intend to sit here mewed up like a blind bird!"

"I agree. And I'll tell you something else, Tyfar. If we're not back at the camp before very soon, the Pachaks will come in after us. Or even, Krun forfend, Hunch might—"

"What!" And Tyfar lay back on the pallet and roared.

Horter Nath Rathon joined in the laughter, although he wasn't at all sure what the jest might be. He was like that. He was a jolly, fat, smiling, hand-washing little man, clad in a long green and red gown with a silver chain around his neck and depending from it a bunch of keys reposing on the proud jut of his belly. He had sent one of his servants out to spy the land.

This fellow, Ormol — a massive Gon whose shaven head gleamed brilliantly from the application of unguents, a fashion some of the Gons have — came back to report not the hair or hide of a Havil-forsaken mercenary to be seen.

Nath Rathon burbled and jingled his keys.

"Excellent, Ormol. Now go and keep watch."

Ormol went off, his pate glistening, and I looked carefully at Tyfar. Young Prince Tyfar was high of color, and a trifle breathless, and given to wider gestures than usual. He was not drunk. The nearness of his escape from death in the little swamp was beginning to work on him, and he was going through the shakes like a true horter. Also, I fancy the idea that he had been saved and his life preserved to him by the quick and skillful actions of a girl came as a novel surprise.

"You will assuredly have to wait until the suns set," cautioned Nath Rathon.

"That is a pesky long way off," grumbled Tyfar.

"I think," I said, "our friends will wait until nightfall." I did not add that I felt it highly unlikely they would venture into Khorunlad before Quienyin had sussed the city in lupu for us.

There might well be a period of fraught explanation if his apparition appeared, ghostlike, to scare the others half to death.

But, then, I had come to the conclusion that it would take a lot more than that, a very great deal more than that, to scare this mysterious young lady Jazila witless.

She had tended to Barkindrar's wound, and the Bullet had declared stoutly that he was fit to walk out with us. The situation was complicated — some situations are and some are not and most times they are resolved by death but not always — and we understood that while the official policy of Khorundur toward Hamal was neutrality, factions inevitably arose. The common folk labored under the delusion that if the Empress Thyllis took over their country they would miraculously inherit a better life, with free food and rivers of wine and not a day's work in a sennight. If this is pitching the stories they believed too high, think only of the slaves that would come onto the market after a successful invasion and conquest. Hamalian gold was in this.

Rathon clinched that for me when he said to Jazila when she walked in, smiling, "I fear, my lady, you will buy no vollers now."

She frowned, quickly, losing that smile on the instant, whereat I surmised her mission to buy vollers for Hamal was a secret one. Thyllis had been prodigal with her treasure and had given patents of nobility for gold. She had lost many fliers. Clearly, she was desirous of purchasing what she could not make.

"Why so, Horter Rathon?"

"You were seen when — these two Hamalese — It were best you left the city, my lady. It is hard enough work as it is."

He might smile and jingle his keys; but he was a man for Hamal, and if the common folk welcomed invasion, the better-off did not. That was obvious. They had hired bands of mercenaries, and because paktuns were hard to come by had had to hire men who were not of the top quality, or even of the second or third quality. I did not think the paktuns who had chased us were as low as masichieri; but I was told that masichieri, mere bandits masquerading as mercenaries when it suited them, were in the city in large numbers to keep order.

This, as you will readily perceive, placed me in a quandary.

I was opposed to Hamal, although pretending to be Hamalese. The poor folk were deluded. But those who were opposed to Hamal employed means I did not much relish. I would not strike a blow willingly against folk who stood up in opposition to mad Empress Thyllis. So, as I listened to the others debating what best to do, I felt myself to be shoved nose-first into a dilemma.

"My work must be completed," Jazila was saying, and her composure remained. There was the hint, the merest hint, of her true feelings boiling away.

"How, my lady?" Rathon spread his hands. "You will be taken up by the watch. These mercenaries the nobles have hired, they are little better than drikingers, bandits who will slit your throat for a copper ob."

"And, my lady," put in Kaldu, "the voller manufacturers here are all rich." His brown beard tufted. "Well, that follows, by Krun, does it not? They will not welcome you."

"And it was all arranged!" said Jazila. Her face — what a wonderful face she had! Broad-browed, subtle, perfect of curve of cheek and lip, illuminated by a passionate desire to esteem well of life — I felt myself drawn to her. As for Tyfar, he was goggling away. "Everything was going splendidly," she said.

Some lesser girl would have been crying by now. “And then these people against Hamal seized the power, and the vaunted neutrality of Khorundur — where is it now?”

“I and my associates will get the common folk out into the streets,” said Rathon. “But that is going to take time. And there will be a great deal of blood spilled.” He lifted his keys and then let them jingle against his gut. “Well, they are common folk and so ’tis of no matter.”

I turned away from him, and took my ugly, hating old beakhead of a face off out of the way. By Vox! But wasn’t that the way of your maniacal, empire-puggled Hamalese bastard?

Tyfar followed me.

“What ails you, Jak? Your face — you look as though you have fallen among stampeding calsanys.”

“No matter,” I said. Control returned to me, and with it common sense. “I think it would be a good plan to take a few vollers for ourselves.” I did not add that I would fly mine to South Pandahem and then Vallia.

“Capital!” Tyfar brisked up. “Let us make a plan.”

Rathon began at once to put all manner of obstacles in the way — the sentries were alert, we had no chance of reaching a landing platform, didn’t we have gold to buy a voller, it was madness. Jaezila looked fierce. “The plan is good!”

I was not so sure. This lady, if she was not Hamalese, at least worked for my enemies. I felt drawn to her and she was, in truth, splendid. But she was an enemy. Well, poof to that. Were not Chido and Rees enemies, and were they not good friends, Bladesmen, comrades? In this, at least, we could work together.

I noticed that this Jaezila had an odd little habit of suddenly turning her head, and looking slightly to her side and rear, as though expecting to find someone there.

Now, in this enterprise going forward I had to think most carefully. We were a bunch of desperadoes, yes. But we purposed taking a voller from folk who were aligned against us in the political arena, and folk who were fighting against my enemies. It was a puzzle. In the end I did the only thing I could do, and went along and placed the outcome in the hands of Zair.

Barkindrar the Bullet would have to be figured into the calculations. Eventually we persuaded Nath Rathon to apprise us of the best location for picking up vollers, and he said that the bright sparks flew in from the outlying districts and parked on the roof of The Rokveil’s Head.

“They’ll be inspecting the undersides of tables with Beng Dikkane^[3] long before the hour of midnight.” And he laughed.

I forced myself to be polite to him.

“Then, good Nath Rathon, you will show us this place a few burs before that.”

“Me? Oh, no, dom. I will send Ormol—”

Jaezila and Tyfar looked questioningly at me.

“Oh, no, dom,” I said, “you will show us.”

He spluttered indignant protests. What my face looked like I do not know; but I do know I fought for control. I made myself relax. Just why I acted as I did, Zair forgive me, you may more readily perceive — now — than I did — then.

“I wish that you, Nath Rathon, should show us The Rokveil’s Head. I do not think you will argue.”

He blinked. His keys jangled. He opened his mouth, looked at me, closed his mouth. His face, fat and plump and merry, on a sudden looked amazingly long. He shut that glistening mouth. Then, weakly, he said, “As you wish. I shall lead you.”

“Good,” I said. And I smiled most genially.

Our preparations made, we ventured out when She of the Veils cast her rosy golden light over the nighted city. The way was not far. We walked as a party of roisterers, out for a good time, and we made no bones about singing a few ditties. There was no problem as to who was to fly the vollers. Retainers of nobles and adventurers as we were, flying air-boats was a mere matter of normal occupation.

The Rokveil’s Head turned out to be an imposing place, lit up with many lanterns, pillared and porticoed, and doing a humming business. Tyfar and I, allowing our expensive cloaks to conceal our armor, had no difficulty in entering. That mark of the notor we now realized had brought us with the ease that had puzzled us into the city. The lords ran this city. And the common folk looked to Hamal for relief. Truly, that was a colossal and vile joke on innocent people, to be sure!

Nath Rathon had dressed himself in popinjay fashion, which we assumed to be normal for him. Jaezila had borrowed a demure but still devastating evening gown, all sheer peach-colored sensil. Rathon had taken it from one of the women of his establishment, and with the gown a display of gems. They were all fakes. And Kaldu wore a sober evening lounging robe of dark green. We all wore weapons — except Jaezila, outside our clothes — and this was a mere natural part of evening attire.

The flunkeys wanted to bustle about and take our wraps and cloaks; but Rathon assured them that this was not necessary as he had just happened to meet this party and they were desirous of patronizing the best establishment in the city and so he had just gone out of his way to bring them here. No, they were not friends of his and he did not know them, and now he must take himself home to his house and family in the eastern suburbs.

The majordomo thanked Rathon for bringing him the custom; but Rathon, whose hand hovered now continually at his mouth, smiled and bobbed and went off very quickly. We did not know if his deception would pass muster.

As we went up the wide balustraded stairway with the carved statues of sylvies flanking the treads, Tyfar said, “I am not sure that was a clever move, Jak. It seems to be you may have placed Rathon in some jeopardy if he is recognized.”

“Oh,” I said, airily, “he will get away with it.”

Privately, I would have no sorrow if Rathon were discovered and thrown out of Khorundur. That would be one agent of Hamal the less. So we went on up. The halls were palatial. There were many slaves, all stupidly dressed in feathers and bangles and little else. Much wine was in evidence. The sounds of

laughter and horseplay reached us from the various magnificent chambers. We passed a room in which Jikaida was in full swing, with great piles of gold wagered on the outcome. Jikalla too was being played, along with Vajikry. We saw no rooms devoted to the Game of Moons and that surprised no one.

People were staggering about, this early already the worse for wear. And so, steadily, we passed on up the wide stairways until we reached the top floor.

Sometimes I have swift attacks of nostalgia for remembered struggles. Sometimes; usually I am too bound up with the struggle going on at the moment. We found the door leading to the roof and stepped out under the stars of Kregen.

“We take three if we can,” said Tyfar. “Is that agreed?”

He was brilliantly excited, keyed up. “We strike a blow for Hamal tonight! Do not forget that.”

“How can we forget it?” said Jaezila.

Tyfar colored up again, and then shook himself, dark in the starlight, and we padded off in search of a suitable voller for the first of us to fly away. Our first port of call would be to pick up Barkindrar and Nath, and then we’d make for the camp and pick up the others. Then it was Hamal...

The airboats were parked neatly and the guards moved about, dim silhouettes against the stars.

Tyfar crept forward with Kaldu at his elbow.

Jaezila and I, for the moment, waited in the shadows.

“That one, I think, Jak, for me.”

“Yes. A fleet craft. But you cannot trust a voller from Khorundur as you would trust one from Hamal.”

“No — yes. You are right. But, I am not sure if I should go to Hamal. My work here has been spoiled—”

“You’ll never obtain fliers now that the lords are against Hamal. Is there nowhere else you can try?”

“You mock me, of course. I find your manners — uncouth.” She used the word sturr. I laughed. Oh, yes, I laughed.

“You have the right of it, my lady. That is my name. Jak the Sturr.”

She gazed at me. And then she, too, laughed. The look of her, the way her head tilted, the star-gleam in her eyes . . . I felt my stupid old heart give a leap. She was magnificent, and she worked for my enemies.

Quietly, the laughter still bubbling away but held now within her poised manner, she said, “I shall not forget the way you dealt with that beastie that sought — it was quick.”

“No quicker than the way you loosed to save poor Tyfar.”

“Poor Tyfar! Indeed! He is a ninny, is he not?”

“No . . . No. He is a gallant young man a little out of his depth.”

And, a ghost rising to torment me, I carried on the thought in my head — like Barty Vessler.

“Well, Jak the Sturr,” she said, and there was the bite of decision in her voice, “you are not out of your depth in this midnight murder and mayhem, that is very sure.”

“I hope there is no murder.”

“So do I.”

A low whistle cut the dimness. We moved forward. Kaldu stood over the unconscious body of a Khibil guard. A Fristle slumbered at his side. Kaldu held his sword very purposefully.

“There are two vollers, my lady. And the third for the hyr-paktun.”

She looked at me, swiftly. “Kaldu dubs you a hyr-paktun and he has an eye for these things. Do you wear the pakzhan at your throat, Jak the Sturr?”

“I have done so, in my time, my lady.”

“So be it. Then let us board — and woe betide the laggard!”

“Now, just a minute—” began Tyfar.

She turned on him like a zantilla turning to meet the rush of a leem.

“Tyfar! Fambly! Get aboard and fly — the guards will not wait for your waiting.”

“My lady, you treat me hard—”

“Now Krun save me from a pretty-speechifying ninny!” she said, and swung her leg over the voller’s coaming. That fancy sensil robe split down and revealed her long russet-clad leg. She was in the voller in a twinkling and Kaldu at her side.

I said to Tyfar, “Take your voller, Tyfar, and let us go.”

“What a — a girl!” stuttered Tyfar.

What a girl, indeed!

Chapter ten

The Brothers Fre-Da Give Nikobi

As the three vollers touched down on the grass and then ghosted in under the trees out of chance sight from the air, I felt relief that we had carried it off successfully. Tyfar leaped down from his craft, leaving Nath to assist Barkindrar. Such is the way of unheeding princes. I was watching Tyfar.

A shadow moved under the trees and the moons’ glitter caught on the blade that pressed against his breast.

I started to leap down, dragging the thraxter free, when Tyfar said, “What? What? Oh — yes, I understand, Modo.”

The Pachak’s tail hand quivered and the blade vanished in shadow.

I came up with them, pretty sharpish, and Modo, seeing me, said, “Jak. A word from San Quienyin. He wishes you to call him Naghan and not to let these new people know he is a Wizard of Loh.”

“Very well. If it is his wish.”

The others crowded forward and Hunch and Nodgen came up, and the pappattu was made, and Quienyin had forsaken his blue robes and doffed that turban, and stood forth in a simple brown tunic — admittedly, there was a touch of silver braid at throat and hem — to be introduced as Naghan.

“Naghan what?” said Jaezila in her sweet voice, not at all rudely. She smiled and charmed old Quienyin clean through.

“Naghan the Dodderer, some folk call me, my lady. But, for you, the name Naghan the Seeing is more seemly. If it pleases you, my lady.”

I marveled. Such humbleness from a Wizard of Loh!

“It pleases me, Naghan the Seeing. And I am famished—”

“My lady!” And Hunch was there, grimacing away, filled with enormous desires to be of help to this imperious and lovely lady, who had appeared at our camp from the shadows.

We ate the viands we had, and none that we had brought from Khorunlad, alas.

“We rest for two burs,” declared Tyfar. “And then we fly. And we will let our fluttrells go free. They will bring joy to whoever finds them.”

“If they do not fly wild, Tyfar, as anyone would who had to support you—”

“Whatever happens to the fluttrells,” I said, “they deserve well of us. Now, rest us all — and I shall stand the first watch.”

Tyfar and Jaezila glared hotly, one at the other. I sighed. Bantam cocks — and a bantam hen, by Krun!

The Maiden with the Many Smiles shed down her fuzzy pink light as we took off into the soft night air. Tyfar expressed himself as mightily pleased that Jaezila elected to fly with me.

“For if I have to endure the barbs of her tongue,” he said, “I swear by the names I shall—” And then Jaezila, climbing up beside me, smiled down, and Tyfar was struck dumb.

So we flew over the sleeping face of Kregen beneath the moons. Two of the lesser moons hurtled close by above. The night air breathed sweet and cool. The windrush in my face, my hair blowing, ah, yes — and a glorious girl at my side! Well, she was not Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains; but I felt then they would be well-matched, and that, in all soberness, by Zair, was a strange feeling for me.

She talked a little, small inconsequential matters, of her mother whom she loved dearly, and her brothers and sisters, although she did not mention their names. It would have been all too easy to slide into confidences, and to have spilled out my own near-despairing feelings about my own children. But I did not. I purported to come from Hamal, and must therefore watch my tongue.

Hunch and Nodgen sat in the body of the voller. We fledged on our way north and east toward the empire of my enemies.

And I had to make a decision. I was going to stop by South Pandahem and drag Turko the Shield out of his fairground booth. Then I would look in on Vallia, just, I assured myself, to make sure the place was on an even keel. I felt a traitor even to think it might not be with Drak at the helm. And then it would be Hyrklana for me.

“You are pensive, Jak the Storr.”

“Aye, my lady. I am thinking that I shall have to leave you and Tyfar soon.”

“Oh!” she flared. “Why link my name with that ninny’s?”

“Now, young lady,” I said, and I heard my voice harden, “you are altogether too harsh on Tyfar. He is a young man with high ideals and great notions of honor—”

“Like to make a laughingstock of himself—”

“That is true. But, at the least, laughingstock or no, he will not be shamed.”

She cocked her head at me. The moons’ light caught her hair and sheened soft brown and fuzzy pink. “No. I think you are right. But he is so — so—”

“Gallant?”

“Very well.” And she laughed, her head thrown back. “A gallant ninny!”

We flew on into the blaze of dawn when the twin suns, Far and Havil, rose and the land came alive with color. Tyfar, in the lead voller, pointed down. Below us a small stream wended between wooded uplands. Some two dwaburs ahead, almost lost to sight, the towers of a city or fortress rose from the trees. Below us, by the stream, a clearing offered a landing place. Down we went.

Making camp, with the vollers pulled into the shelter of the trees, and a circumspect fire going, we surveyed our paltry rations and resigned ourselves to going hungry. The Pachaks glided into the woods to find game. Hunch brewed tea. Barkindrar, wounded leg or not, went off by the river to sling at birds.

Nath the Shaft and I stood watch.

Presently this Deb-Lu-Quienyin, whom we now called Naghan the Seeing, approached. He looked thoughtful.

“Tyfar and Jaezila and Kaldu are for Hamal. I would like very much now to go to Vallia. But — what of you, Jak?”

“You know. South Pandahem.”

“Yes. I followed your adventures in Khorunlad, a little, a few quick observations in lupu to make sure you were all right. I can tell you I was heartily glad you came out safely.”

I favored him with a searching look. His face that had, since he'd regained his powers, lost a deal of those lines and wrinkles, was now down-drawn in fatigue. The smudges under his eyes, bruised purple, were new.

“You are tired, Quienyin?”

“Aye, Jak. By the Seven Arcades! Since our little trip with Monsters and Moders I do think... I need to sleep in a soft bed for a whole season.”

“That can be arranged in Vallia.”

“So? I shall go, and, I sincerely trust, with your blessing. But you?”

“Give me a look out, from time to time,” I said, lightly, thinking nothing of the words, trying to jolly him along. He was very down and I wondered why. “I shall pull out with a whole skin, never fear.”

He shook his head.

“From anyone else, I would take that as boasting, Jak—”

I was dutifully repentant. “And from me, also, I confess.”

“Mayhap.”

I drew a breath. “I have known other Wizards of Loh. Some I account good friends and others, as you know, as foe-men. But for none have I felt... Even Khe-Hi... It is strange. I would never have believed it of a Wizard of Loh. But it is, and I joy in the gift.”

He smiled. “And I, too — Jak.”

Again, that hesitation before the name. A deliberate hesitation? Yes, by Vox, I said to myself. Oh, yes...

The Pachaks came back with game, and Barkindrar with a half-dozen birds, and Hunch got busy by the fire. Nodgen helped. Barkindrar stretched out with a grunt of relief, sticking his wounded leg before him like a crutch itself. Nath bent to him and Jaezila came across, imperious and commanding, ordering this and that, and mightily tender as she unwrapped the bandages to attend to the Bullet's leg. I noticed that Kaldu remained always near his lady, ready to leap instantly to her defense. As a retainer, he was invaluable. Tyfar stood by as Jaezila worked on his man, and the cooking smells began to waft up. It was a pretty scene, there in the woodland, not quite Arden, perhaps, but very much a scene as I would like it on two worlds.

Now appeared a good opportunity to inspect the vollers we had liberated. I used this euphemism quite deliberately, to cloak the mischief we might have wrought in the desperate straits of our own needs. Two of these craft would go eventually to Vallia, and only one to Hamal. The Khorundese craft bulked far more blockily than the petal-shaped vollers of comparable size manufactured in Hamal or Hyrklana. They were profusely ornamented. I had felt the handling of the example I had flown to be clumsier than I was

used to, not so quick in response to the levers of control. But, more primitive though they might be, they flew.

The food was served and we ate, a quite unbalanced diet; but succulent. Then I drew the Pachak twins aside.

“Brothers Fre-Da,” I addressed them seriously. “San Quienyin is for Vallia. Would you consider accompanying him?”

They looked, one at the other, each waiting a sign.

I went on, “I can assure you he will be received with honor in Vondium. As will you.”

“Will there be honorable employment for us there, Jak?”

I pulled my lip. “I am told the Emperor of Vallia no longer employs mercenaries to fight for his country.”

“This word,” said Logu Fre-Da, “we have heard.”

“With acrimony among the paktunsa,” elaborated Modo Fre-Da.

“It would not be seemly to allow the San to travel alone. I think if you give your nikobi, Vallia will welcome you royally. And there are many Pachaks who now call Vallia home.”

The twins looked at each other again and the looks said it all. They nodded. “This we will do.”

“Good.” I felt relieved. “Then that is settled.”

Nodgen returned to camp then bearing two huge armfuls of paline branches, and we all fell on the yellow cherry-like fruits with delight. So the day passed. Any good Kregan likes his eight good square meals a day — six at a pinch. But, as I say, our meals were woefully unbalanced. The suns began to sink.

The ostentatious way in which Prince Tyfar and Jaezila each avoided the other’s company amused me. We were given a demonstration again of her prowess with the bow, for she hauled the bow off her shoulder, nocked the shaft, and let fly, and the bird that had been fleeing across the clearing fell plump down alongside Hunch. He jumped a foot.

“By Tryflor!” He grabbed the bird by the neck and swung it about, so that the arrow whirled. “It would not surprise me if the bird descended already plucked and stuffed for the fire!”

We all laughed.

Shadows of russet and sea green lay across the clearing. The Suns of Scorpio plunged into banks of ocher and rose clouds, and the broad bulk of Kregen rolled up to enfold them once more in night. The vollers were brought out from under the trees.

Barkindrar the Bullet declared roundly that, by the Resplendent Bridzikelsh, he could get his leg up into the voller without assistance. He climbed in awkwardly. Nath the Shaft hovered over him. Tyfar was in the cabin stowing away his armor. At the second voller the Pachaks were stowing their gear and organizing the meticulous arrangements for their new employer to whom they had given their nikobi, and Quienyin was leaning on the coaming watching me walk across to him. I made up my mind.

“Hunch! Nodgen!”

“Jak?”

“You will fly with San Quienyin.”

“But—!”

“I shall see you soon. But I value the protection you, together with the twins, can afford the San.”

“Oh, of course,” said Hunch, crossly. “We can look after him all right.”

“So long as there is somewhere to run away, eh, Hunch?” And Nodgen guffawed. But there was no malice in him. He had seen how his comrade Hunch could fight, as had I.

“Up with you,” I said.

The good-byes were made. Tyfar came over with the others and we all called the Remberees... Quienyin and those four men to look after him lifted away in the voller into the darkling shadows. The suns were nearly gone.

Tyfar hurried back to finish stowing his armor. He had picked up a fine harness and cared for it. Jaezila and Kaldu stood looking over the coaming of the foredeck beside the control levers. I started for the remaining flier. Then I halted and swung back. I wanted a final word with Jaezila and Tyfar both, some jumbled notions in my old vosk skull of a head of trying to get them to see reason, one with the other. When Jaezila arrived in Ruathytu that young lady would discover that the gallant ninny Tyfar was a Prince of Hamal.

A twinge of disappointment that I would miss that entertaining spectacle afforded me resigned amusement.

From under the shadows of the trees men broke in a long savage line of twinkling steel and bared teeth. They yelled war cries as they charged. They raced for the voller where Jaezila’s bow slapped into her fist. I stood halfway between the voller and the thrusting line of foemen.

“Run, Jak!” screamed Jaezila.

There was no time to reach either of the fliers.

I unlimbered the thraxter and swung about.

“Take off!” I bellowed.

The men running in with such headlong ferocity were a mix of races. I cast a swift look back. Jaezila was about to leap over the coaming to join me. There was no sign of Tyfar.

In a buffeting of wings, scores of mirvols catapulted over the trees, fell toward the voller. The flying animals bore flyers on their backs, counterparts to the footmen advancing against me. Weapons flamed in the last of the suns.

The trap had been sprung. But the cramphs were too late to take Quienyin's airboat. Just before I swung about to start hammering at the running men I saw Kaldu seize Jaezila and draw her back into the voller. Heartbeats later the voller lifted into the air, smashing through the fluttering wings of the mirvols. She turned, she lifted, two mirvols collided and fell away in a smashing clawing of wing and talon, and then the voller soared away over the trees.

I was left to face the savage onrush of naked steel.

Chapter eleven

Vajikry

The thongs binding my wrists were not lesten hide and when the time came for me to burst them, I fancied they'd snap without too much effort. As I stood before Trylon Nath Orscop I had to check myself and realize that time had not arrived yet.

His private room was furnished with an austerity surprising in a man wielding his kind of power. He sat behind a plain desk of balass, black and shining, the walls were covered by plain silk drapes, the floor by plain carpets of some indescribable weave that scratched the feet, and his men wore plain dark harnesses of black and bronze. But they had been smart enough in knocking me over, netting me with iron links in the old way of man management on Kregen. Now I was brought before the trylon to discover what he wanted.

A trylon is four rungs down the ladder of nobility, usually. This Nath Orscop, the Trylon of Absordur, ruled a small trylonate; but it was buried in the woodlands, rich in timber and minerals, and he kept himself to himself. He had a single ruling passion, and I was to discover what that was rather sharply.

"You claim your name is Jak the Sturr?"

"Yes, notor."

I spoke with just enough neutrality in my voice to pass muster. I was prepared to humor this trylon, for the fellow intrigued me. He wore clothes of severe cut, a rusty black, with a flat, black velvet cap. His face was long and narrow, gaunt, very pale, and his gray eyes seemed filmed. Deeply indented lines grooved beside his nose and mouth. A tall oblong of pallid violence, that face, framed in the rusty black.

"You play Vajikry, of course."

"Moderately, notor. Now, if it is Jikaida—"

The guard at my side, a hulking Gon, hit me alongside the head with his bludgeon.

"My lord!" bellowed the Gon. "I heard nothing!"

"That is good," said Trylon Nath, as I put a hand to my head where the famous Bells of Beng Kishi were starting their second round of campanological mayhem. "That name, that game, is never mentioned here. Only—" And here he leered at me. "Only we flog jikaider — that is the only use for the name here in Absordur."

"As the notor pleases," I said, eyeing the Gon's bludgeon.

Many a fellow winces when Jikaida is mentioned; this cramp seemed possessed of more than a fair share of hatred for the game. But, for Vajikry, his passion was all-encompassing.

“All who enter my trylonate uninvited are given the opportunity to play Vajikry. The game is supreme here. If you win you go free and with a handful of golden deldys to go with you. If you lose...”

He didn't have to tell me, did he?

I said, “Do many men win, notor?”

He sniggered and wiped his pallid lips with a kerchief.

“Do not let that disturb you, Jak the Sturr. You will need all your concentration for the game.”

I'd been playing games a lot, just lately, what with Kazz-Jikaida and Monsters and Moders — and now, Vajikry. I'm no real hand at it, and admit that. Maybe I was in a tighter spot than I had realized.

Trylon Nath stood up from behind that black balass desk. At his waist he wore a bronze-link belt, and a thick, curved dagger sheath swung from locketts. The blade of that kind of dagger, well-known in Havilfar, is often as wide as a knuckle at the hilt, and a Kregan knuckle is 4.2 inches. The blade curves very sharply to a fine point, is sharpened on both edges, and can go in your guts and burst your heart. The Havilfarese call that manner of dagger a kalider. The hilt was thick and heavy and without gems.

“Now, Jak the Sturr, you will be given refreshment. We meet here as the suns go down. You will play Vajikry with me. Whatever your gods may be you would do well to pray to them for guidance.”

“Yes, notor,” I said, bowing. “Thank you, notor.”

He smiled.

They stuffed me into a small stone-walled chamber with a window large enough for a woflo to squirm through and gave me to eat. Rough viands: coarse bread, fatty vosk rashers, stewed cabbage, momolams too long in the tooth for tastiness, and, at the end, a clay dish with eleven palines. I know, I counted.

The water from an earthenware cup tasted of weeds and mud.

In the next cell a man was singing a nice cheerful song. His voice rose dolorously. He sang “The March of the Skeletons.” This starts off by recounting how a brilliant and charming girl returned from a boat holiday, and goes on, as is the way of that inscrutable Kregan humor, to detail her story of how the skeletons all marched from the graveyard in search of their missing flesh and blood. As I say, a nice, rousing, cheerful song for the surroundings.

The spires and battlemented towers we had glimpsed as we set the vollers down crowned the very place in which I was confined. This was the palace and chief city of Trylon Nath's Absordur. I had seen little of it, being brought here festooned with iron nets. Pretty soon when the shafts of emerald and ruby from that mocking window shifted to the far wall the guards took me out and spruced me up a trifle under three buckets of water, and then we all marched off to Trylon Nath's private room.

If I felt just as those skeletons felt, marching off all clicking and bony in search of their missing flesh, I am sure you will grasp my feelings. Vajikry! That infuriating game!

I remember once, in the Fleeced Ponso in Sanurkazz, Nath and Zolta starting on a game in all friendship with a couple of swiftermen, and how, long before the end, the bottles were flying, the fists were flying, the ale was flying, we were flying and the mobiles — well, jolly fat mobiles with their rusty swords, no, they weren't flying after us. But it was a right old punch-up — and all over a simple board game. Trouble is, Vajikry is not as simple as it looks.

Trylon Nath Orscop sat at his black balass desk and I saw his long pallid face and the way he gloated on the Vajikry board set out on the polished desk surface. The board was hexagonal, although you can have round or square boards, and a serpent or ladder-like series of hexes or squares coil inward from one edge to the center. Often there are two parallel coils, curled one within the other, and this confounded mournful-faced old buzzard would have the dual-coil variety, naturally.

The Vajikry board looks not unlike a coil of rope. If you set squares so that two squares abut onto one, giving two ways to go, you have what is in effect the same as hexagons. I am not a hexagon man, preferring eight ways to go rather than six; but the linear distance argument holds some weight. I looked at the board, and at the guards standing beside me with their bludgeons ready and their swords scabbarded. Four samphron-oil lamps shed a mellow light, a silver dish contained a piled-up display of fruits, wine stood in flasks — it looked a cosy scene, and this old vulture brooded over it like a dopa-doomed Rapa.

“Come in and sit down, Jak the Sturr. I trust you are ready for the game?”

“Notor,” I said, and sat in the sturmwood chair across from Trylon Nath.

The pieces were set out, and, surmising that I had better show some interest in the confounded game, I studied them. It is not necessary to understand very much about Vajikry to follow what happened. By Vox, no! But, all the same, the game is a tartar. You have a number of pieces of different ranks, and the irritating thing is that while the chief piece, called a Rok, of which you have two, can take the other pieces of superior rank, he cannot take the lowest ranked superior piece, called a strom. In between, the kov can take vads and trylons; vads can take trylons and Stroms; and trylons can take Stroms. This is the old scissors, stone, paper idea, or pikes, swordsmen, cavalry on a sterner field. For — a strom may capture a Rok.

The Roks cannot take the opposing Roks; but of the inferior pieces, some are called flutsmen, and when a Rok chooses to land on a square — or hex — containing a friendly flutsmen he can fly right off the board and reappear during a later turn at a prescribed distance. I suppose there is a resemblance to the zeunt of Jikaida in this move. The other inferior pieces cannot be taken by their opposite numbers. Some inferior pieces are zoids, traps, and a secret mark is made on a flap of the board denominating which particular pieces are traps. When a superior piece lands on the square of a zoid, the secret mark is turned up and, lo! the superior piece is taken instead.

That, at the least, has always appealed to me.

If a superior piece is taken, not a Rok, of course, you can promote an inferior piece, not a flutsmen, to his place.

So I studied the board and saw that Trylon Nath was a Vajikry fiend, all right, for he had laid out the maximum number of pieces allowed to each rank. The numbers, in varying, control the duration of the game, as well as changing its character.

We were in for a long session, until one of us had taken both the opposing Roks and then safely seated

at least one of his own Roks at the spider's web center of the board.

And no flutsman may enter the final circle at the center.

"I shall, of course, allow you to go first."

"Thank you, notor."

"Play well, Jak the Sturr. I do not trouble myself over winning or losing." In that, the old buzzard lied most damnably, that was very clear. "But, for you, a lost game is a lost life."

"So I gathered — notor."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Let us get down to it, as King Naghan said to the fifi."

"Yes, notor."

So, not without some hesitation, I moved my first piece. This was a nicely carved representation of a swordsman, an inferior piece, called a hiviku. Now Hiviku the Artful is, I suppose, the Havilfarese equivalent to Vikatu the Dodger, the archetypal old sweat, the old soldier who knows all the tricks and can swing the lead furiously. And this I was now about to do. I took my time. I played cautiously, well guessing that Trylon Nath would suss me out in no time and then bore in with all his force. And his long mournful face would look more mournful still. For he might be an old reprobate; but he dearly loved his Vajikry, and longed to meet an opponent who would give him a prolonged and engrossing tussle. I knew I was in no frame of mind to concentrate. My Val! Didn't Turko, all Vallia, await me?

Well, that's as may be.

We played. I fell smack into one of his traps, and with a mournful look he turned up the secret mark and his zoid whisked one of my vads away.

I had a nice opening showing, and took a chance, and one of my flutsmen removed a Rok from the board, ready to come in hell for leather when he least expected it. He reached for the wine.

He poured himself, so I judged his temper concerning slaves.

"You will join me, Jak the Sturr?"

The wine was a green pimpim, thick and cloying, out of Loh.

"Thank you, notor. A little pale yellow, if I may...?"

He waved a negligent hand to the array of bottles and amphorae stacked on the side table and the floor on tripods.

I stood up. The guards were all looking at the board, and I judged Trylon Nath was forced to play them when he had no unsuspecting and uninvited guests. The thongs binding my wrists impeded me only a little. The chains and nets had been removed. I moved to the side table and took up a goblet. I half-turned, looking at the room, placing the positions of the guards.

Very well...

Turning my back on the Trylon so that I could break the thongs, I suddenly turned back. The old devil was in the act of lifting up the flap of the board to look at my secret mark denominating one of my hivikus as a zoid.

The yetch!

Swiftly I twisted back to the table and broke the thongs. My wrists tingled as they came free. Holding a glass, low, I swung back to face into the room. The guards were smirking away, one to the other, letting their lord see how much they admired his astuteness.

There were four strides to the desk — three if I jumped a trifle.

Three strides took me there, that wicked curved dagger came free of Trylon Nath's scabbard, and the broad, sharp blade pressed against his neck.

"Just all hold still," I said, cheerfully.

Trylon Nath was a rigid lump. He knew a single twitch from that deadly curved blade could slit his throat from ear to ear.

"Yes, trylon," I told him. "And will slit your damned throat. Now you will play my game, and not your cheating brand of damned Vajikry."

"You are a dead man, Jak the Sturr."

"And, my friend, so are you, if that be the case. Now, up with you. I am tired of games."

The guards sweated. They looked at me and I looked at them. They knew the score.

"We are going to take a little walk." I didn't care if I sounded like a cheap melodrama down on Wharf Street in Vondium. "You have a voller? Good. I shall regard that as fair quittance for unwanted hospitality." Then I wounded him sorely. "And for a damned cheating rogue who wins foul at Vajikry."

"Never!" he said, and he tried to twist that gaunt head to glare at me. The blade bit and he choked. "I had you — you know nothing of the arts of Vajikry—"

"I know enough to know when to take a dagger to your scrawny throat. Move!" And I amplified that with: "Bratch!"

He jumped.

We went out of the room and if the guards thought to stop me they saw my face and made no move. Which was the wiser course for them. We went up the stairs, and retainers and servitors shrank away as the trylon called, hoarsely: "Let us pass. This mad leem means me ill."

"Right, trylon," I said. "Absolutely right!"

"You will spare me my life? I can give you wealth—"

"A voller is all I need. And, Trylon Nath Orscop, I may return your voller to you, one day, and play

another game of Vajikry with you. It is, I own, infuriating and fascinating.”

A thought struck me. They had in the nature of these things stripped my splendid mesh steel from me and taken my weapons away. I am so used to padding about in the old scarlet breechclout I'd clean forgot I owned a pretty little arsenal, and fine armor.

“Oh, trylon. Bid your people bring my belongings. All of them.” And the bright curved kalider twitched against his skin.

“You heard!” shrieked Nath Orscop. “Run, you nulshes! Fetch this — this man's armor and weapons!”

So, as we emerged onto a flat roof between two spires and I fastened my gaze on a chunky little voller, retainers ran up bearing the mesh steel and the armory. “Into the voller with them!” I snapped it out, and they obeyed. I wondered why no one had challenged that dagger at the throat of the lord. Surely, some one of all these folk would wish to see the trylon dead?

But I climbed into the voller gripping Orscop by the neck.

He slumped down and his gaunt face turned up, pleadingly.

“You said...”

I looked over the side. The landing chains were cast off. I moved the control levers and the voller lifted a couple of feet into the air. I nodded, satisfied.

“Over you go, Orscop. And thank whatever gods you pray to that I spare you your miserable hide.”

He clawed up, gibbering, and as he went over the side I assisted him with an ungentle foot.

Then, roaring with laughter, I sent the voller skimming into the night sky, racing away under the Moons of Kregen.

Chapter twelve

Of an Invitation at the Golden Prychan

Why is the air of one continent or island so different from that of any other? Each country's air holds its own essences and aromas. Does the air over Valka smell sweeter than the air over any other part of Vallia? I believe so — but to ask me to explain it — ah, there you should better question the TodalpHEME, the wise mathematicians and meteorologists of Kregen.

I know that as I breathed in the air of the island of Pandahem, I tasted the difference, and vivid memories of Pando and Tilda rose up to torment me. Yes, at that time on Kregen I still owed dues to many people. I gave thanks that Deb-Lu-Quienyin had eased my mind on the score of Que-si-Rening. But, when I went to Hyrklana this time, I vowed, as well as seeking out Balass the Hawk, Oby, and Tilly, I would make more strenuous efforts to discover what had befallen the Princess Lilah. All the agents I had sent off to make inquiries had reported a total absence of news. All that was known then, all I had heard here and there, were merely rumors. Rumors of the “tragedy” that had overtaken Princess Lilah of Hyrklana.

So I marched down from the jungly foothills where I had hidden Trylon Nath Orscop's voller. And, of

course, he had not lost on the deal. The airboat I had left in the clearing, the one of the three we had liberated in Khorunlad was fair recompense.

The island of Pandahem, between Vallia to the north and Havilfar to the south, is divided into two halves by a massive east-west chain of mountains, variously named along their rambling length. Kingdoms divide up the northern portion of the island, lands some of which I knew well. The southern half's kingdoms were virtually unknown to me, and were mostly smothered in thick, lush, hot, and mostly inhospitable jungles.

Walking along the overgrown path toward the town of Mahendrasmot I fell into conversation with a lanky Relt. He was clad decently in loincloth and sandals, with his rolled coat over one shoulder. Looking like skinnier replicas of their distant cousins the fierce and voracious Rapas, the Relts do have beaked faces, but these are of altogether a gentler aspect. He carried a hollow bamboo filled with pens, and a scrip with paper and three bottles of ink, bamboo bottles, swung at his girdle.

He was a staylor, and so we fell into easy conversation, as I had been a staylor at one time, working for the Overlords of Magdag. He, this Relt called Ravenshal, knew nothing of the inner sea of Kregen, of course.

“The fair, Jak?” he said, striding along easily, with the deep green of the foliage each side of the path framing his eager birdlike face. “It is a dire place, dreadful, sometimes. There are a large number of seafaring folk who go there, and, well, you know how rough they are.”

“Yes, Ravenshal. They lead a rough life.”

“People come from a long distance to the fairground. The sailors from the swordships are almost as bad as the renders they chase.”

“Do pirates frequent these coasts?”

“Naturally. Commerce is brisk.”

“Of course. And do you know the Golden Prychan?”

He gave his beak a brisk rub with his fist. Then: “I would not wish to know the place. It is infamous.”

Well, I commented to myself, that sounds a capital place to hoick Turko out of.

In Trylon Nath's airboat I had stumbled on a bundle of clothes, and so had selected a plain brown tunic and a short blue cloak. I had without any regrets laid aside the splendid mesh steel. That was like to get me into trouble where I was going, among wrestlers. But I carried my weapons. They, of course, would attract no undue attention.

Ravenshal told me he had been up to take a deposition from a tree-tapper who lived up in the hills. His wife had run off and he wanted the lord of Mahendrasmot to send men to find her and had offered a reward of a hundred silver dhems.

“He must care for her—” I said.

“Perhaps.” Ravenshal, belittling his nervous ways, had seen most of it. “But it is lonely up in the hills.”

“That’s why she ran off, then. Some young spark from the city, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“If Notor Pergon lays hands on him, he will wish he had not seduced another man’s wife away.”

“Strict, is he, this Notor Pergon? And with this notorious fairground in his city?”

Ravenshal fisted his beak again. “Yes, strict. He is a strom, and proud of that. The fairground brings in money. But Notor Pergon will take the hundred silver dhems for his trouble, and take his pleasure out on the hide of the young man.”

“If he catches him.”

“He will, he will, if such a man exists. He runs his city as the suns cross the sky, does the notor.”

So as we walked down the overgrown track to the city we talked and I learned a little something of the place my Turko passed his life away in a fairground booth.

The mild Relt stolor was anxious to get back to his wife and children, saying he lived in a pretty little house near the men’s quarters of the steel works. “There is a modicum of regular work to be had there, Jak.” And then, with that gracious little lift to his beak that Relts have, he said, “I do not know why you go to Mahendrasmot, but you would do me honor if you supped with me and my family this night.”

Well, now...

I said with a gravity that was not assumed, “It is you who do me the honor, Stolor Ravenshal. I shall be delighted.”

So that was how I, a desperado of desperadoes — as you know only too well — entered this strict city with its gutter side discreetly hidden in the fairground, in the meek company of a Relt stolor.

His house was delightful, small and cheerful, his wife was charming, and the kids splendiferous, a squeaking bunch of charming mischief. We ate well, wine was brought, the lamps were lit, and when I broached the subject of going to see about finding an inn for the night, nothing would halt them in their protestations that I must use their guest room and welcome, seeing it was now little used after Rashenska’s sister had moved so far away, fully fifty dwaburs along the coast, with that husband of hers.

Rashenska brought the lamp to the guest room, neat and tidy, and fussed only a little, and Ravenshal came along to bid me a good night’s sleep with Pandrite, and gently drew his wife away, and they went off full of smiles.

I slept with my usual caution, weapons at hand.

In the morning they greeted me with smiles, and a cup of superb Kregen tea, and small octagonal biscuits they call sweet Ordums. I stretched. After the toilet we sat down to a fine breakfast of crisp vosk rashers, and loloo’s eggs, and more tea, and red honey and palines.

You see — there are good simple folk on Kregen, just as there are on this Earth.

The mention of payment would have been insulting.

I went out and found a tiny Banje shop in the nearest souk where they sold baubles for children, and

candies and knick-knacks of that kind, and went back to Ravenshal's little house, and insisted they take the trifles I had brought. The children squealed, tiny bundles, all beak and feathers, and fell on the candies.

“And again my thanks. Remberee!”

“Remberee, Jak — and you have brought us luck. I have a commission today that will bring in at least five dhems. Five whole dhems! You have brought us good luck, praise to Pandrite.”

Shaking my head and wondering about the way of the world, I took my hulking old self off to the Golden Prychan.

Had I saved Ravenshal from footpads on the road he and his wife could not have been more attentive. And they were diffs and I was apim. Truly, I thought, as I passed along the crowded streets where people shouted and jostled and the mytzer carts clattered by without thought for the unwary pedestrian, truly, that was the spirit and attitude sorely needed in all Paz to confront the menace of the Shanks.

The fact that the stolor had been able to walk down that lonely, jungly road and not be attacked by footpads also gave a good idea that this Strom Pergon, strict as he was reputed, kept an iron control on his stromnate. That could work for me, in some areas; but it was far more likely to make any mayhem more difficult. Just what had Turko got himself into here?

The notorious fairground of Mahendrasmot was not what I expected. For a start, it was fenced in by a tall lapped-wood barrier, and uniformed guards patrolled outside and stood sentry at the gates. This early in the morning the place held a lackluster look. Marquees and tents flapped a trifle in the early morning breeze; but the pennons hung limply. The ground was still soft and puddled with the marks of last night's feet. When the daily rain came drenching down only the boardwalks gave pedestrians a reasonably mud-free walk. I went in. That was not difficult. The corollary came to my mind, to be pushed away.

The Golden Prychan looked a formidable inn. It stood four square just inside the eastern gate. Many riding animals of the lesser kind stood hitched to rails; but there were three totrixes and just the one zorca.

The walls were built of baked brick. The roof was tile. The chimneys were twisted brick. And the windows were glazed. All these signs of affluence were emphasized by the sign swinging at its grandest on a tall pole. The prychan, which is the tawny-golden furred version of the black neemu, showed up there in bold style, painted by an artist of imagination. The neemu again brought my thoughts back to Hyrklana, for fat Queen Fahia loved to have her pet neemus, fierce, independent four-legged hunting cats, lolling on the steps of her throne.

Standing with my head cocked back studying the sign, I became aware of a shadow at my side and then a voice, saying: “You stare overlong at the prychan, dom. Do you wish to have your ribs crushed? Or would you prefer a broken arm — only the one, since you have only two?” I looked down.

He was big. He was burly. He smiled with his lower jaw swinging like a jib boom in a gale. He wore a pair of tights colored bright purple, and a wersting breechclout. Otherwise he was naked — naked and hairless. He was a Chulik. I drew in my breath.

“Llahal, dom. I was admiring the sign. You are a wrestler?”

“Come now, dom. Do not refuse my offer. I am sharp set, for I bested Tranko last night, and I owed

him that.”

This Chulik’s tusks had been sawn off close to his gums. That is a cruel and horrendous thing to do. Much as I deplore the activities of Chuliks, I had grown to a better understanding of them and their ways. Trained to be mercenaries from birth, they are superb paktuns, demanding high rates of pay. With their merciless black eyes and pigtailed, their oiled yellow skins, their fierce three-inch tusks thrusting up from the corners of their mouths, they earn their hire. But — this one, tuskless — a wrestler in a fairground? Oh, my Turko!

As I did not reply immediately, the Chulik said in a less friendly voice, “You are impolite. I am Kimche the Lock. I shall have to teach you manners.”

“Look, Kimche the Lock, I do not wish to fight you—”

“I did not say fight. I said wrestle.”

“Why should I? By the Blessed Pandrite! Why?”

“Why?” Now that really puzzled him. He shook that bald yellow head. “Why? You mock me. Me! Is this not the Golden Prychan?”

“So I believe.”

“Well, then! Onker!”

So, of course, very late in the day, I fell in.

“Oh — the Golden Prychan — you are all wrestlers here—”

“Take up your guard. It is the third sycle of the Hikaidish. Protect yourself!”

“I,” I said, “carry weapons.”

Now he was truly puzzled, puzzled and angry. His chest swelled. The yellow skin, oiled and glistening, stretched like a drum.

“You talk of weapons, here? You are decadent or mad.”

If I’d had a hat I’d have taken it off and jumped on it.

By Zair!

“I am not a wrestler. I came here seeking someone—”

“If you are frightened witless to try a fall with Kimche the Lock, why, dom, you should have said so. There is no shame in fearing to grip wrists with me.” His face broke into an oily smile. He clapped me on the back. “Now I understand!”

“If that is how you will have it.”

“Of course!” His bad temper evaporated. “There is no shame in it, dom. By Likshu the Treacherous! I

understand!” And then he stuck his thumbs into his mouth and began to massage those pathetic stumps.

I looked about. Nothing much was happening, save a couple of gyps starting an interesting friendship. Kimche took his thumbs out of his mouth, spat, and said with a wistful air, “All the same. I could have gone a fall or three with you. I am fair set for it.”

“Perhaps you know the man I seek?”

“There is such a man?” He looked puzzled again and I guessed he was considering the reason he had found for himself for my lack of response to his genial challenge.

“There is. His name is Turko—”

He looked about at once, and put a finger to his lips.

“Ssh, dom! Have you no wits! Caution!”

He drew me out of the streaming mingled radiance of the Suns of Scorpio into the shadows under the eaves. He looked about again, with much eye rolling. For a Chulik he was evidencing much non-Chulik behavior. But, then, his tusks had been sawed off, and that must profoundly change the mental attitudes of any self-respecting Chulik.

For a start, how could one call him a Yellow-Tusker now?

The dependent fronds of a brilliantly green tree, a fugitive from the jungle — or the advance guard of the jungle returning — concealed us from prying eyes out along the boardwalk. Kimche stared at me, and his tongue crept out to lick his lips.

“I did not take you for Hamalese. If you are, I shall surely fight and slay you — you do understand that?”

“I do.”

One factor I had not overlooked was the simple problem of the island of Pandahem now being in the vulture-like grip of Phu-Si-Yantong. With the duped help of the iron legions of Hamal he, under his cloaking alias of the Hyr Notor, had conquered the various and separate kingdoms of the island. Queen Lush of Lome had been his tool, coming from Pandahem, and was now with us of Vallia. Other rulers had been subjugated or slain. Yantong ran the island working through human tools. If there was a resistance to Hamal, then Turko would be up to his Khamorro neck in it, that was for sure.

“I am aware of the problems you Pandaheem face—”

“Tell me your name, rank, and station, dom.”

He had no fear of me or my weapons. In a twinkling he would have my back across his knee, and, snap! — one more Hamalese cramp gone to the Ice Floes of Sicce.

“I am Jak the Sturr. And I fight against Hamal.”

He stared at me with those feral black Chulik eyes.

He nodded. "Very well. And Turko is in trouble. Do not think you can deceive him, for he is a man among men."

"When can I see him? Where is he?"

"Early this morning, before dawn, he went to Black Algon's marquee to reason with him once again. I do not think he was successful." Kimche screwed up his mouth. "I think Turko must take my advice and break the yetch's back."

I sighed.

Problems, problems...

"Tell me, Kimche the Lock."

The story was simple and straightforward and not at all pretty. One of the wrestlers' comrades, a young Khibil called Andrinis, was deeply in love with a Khibil maiden who was slave to Black Algon. She worked in a fire-eating and magic act. Black Algon, gloating in his own power, would not release her or sell her. Andrinis was in despair. His comrades had vowed to help him; but short of violence, gold being of no assistance, they had so far failed to secure the maiden Saenci's release.

"Trust Turko to become embroiled in an affair like this. Can nothing be done to convince Black Algon to part with the girl?"

"One thing only, by Likshu the Treacherous. Break the nulsh's back!"

Now, I had hitherto on Kregen detested Chuliks as fierce and inhuman diffs. They had caused me much pain. But, then, so had other diffs, and apims, too, by Krun! Lately, certain experiences had modified my views on the Yellow-Tuskers, and, too, I did not forget that Chulik with whom I had spoken before the Battle of the Dragon's Bones. So I could talk quite reasonably to Kimche the Lock, and treat him as a man first, discounting all my old hostile feelings toward Chuliks. Truly, life brings changes to the most flinty of characters!

"The marquee of Black Algon? And you say this fellow supports the Hamalese?"

"Aye. If you go there, take care. He has many friends among the wrestlers in the booth of Jimstye Gaptooth. He is the mortal foe of us at the Golden Prychan, who are comrades all."

One of the cardinal principles of staying alive on Kregen is to remember names. Names confer power, not power for misuse, but self-power, the knowledge to orient a life-style amid dangers. If you forget or confuse names, you can end up skewered on the end of a rapier or have your head off in the slice of a cleaver — so be warned!

I nodded. "I shall tread carefully. Tell me, Kimche, does this Jimstye Gaptooth have any Khamorros in his booth?"

"Yes."

The monosyllable shook me. The savagery with which Kimche spoke told me much. I did not press. What there was to learn I would find out. That was as certain as Zim and Genodras rose and set, by Zair!

Chapter thirteen

Of a Few Falls with Beng Drudoj

Black Algon's marquee was tightly shut and his slaves told me he had gone into the city about important business. There was no sign of Turko. When I mentioned Saenci, the Khibil slave girl, the slaves ran off. Annoyed, I walked around the fairground, spying it out, seeing the bright booths and sideshows and all the gaudy come-ons and money-taking-offs revealed in the pitiless light of the suns. The air dried up the mud. Shortly after the hour of mid the rains would fall down in solid masses of water, and the mud would ooze again into its sticky consistency. I took myself back to the Golden Prychan.

"It is time for ale, Jak the Sturr," Kimche greeted me. He took me through the wide, sawdust-sanded floor into a back snug. The bamboo-paneled room contained about a dozen wrestlers. They looked a ripe assortment of battered humanity. The ale was brought in by Fristle fifis, and we sat to drink.

I was reminded of Dav Olmes and his penchant for stopping at the least provocation for a stoup of ale. These men were drinkers.

Food, very naturally, was brought in and no one seemed to be concerned if I would pay the reckoning. There were Khamorros among these wrestlers. Kimche wiped suds, and leaned forward, and said, "You know the story of Lallia the Slave Girl, Jak?"

"I know the story of Lallia the Slave Girl."

"Well, it is not quite like that, Kimche," put in broken-nosed Naghan the Grip.

"I know, I know. But Andrinis and Saenci worry our Turko. That is what concerns us. He is our best Khamorro and Jimstye Gaptooth has three high kham Khamorros — and what may a mortal man do against them?"

The other wrestlers, florid and bulky and coiling with muscles, grumbled and grunted, and drank. Truthfully, there are few mortal men who may go up in handgrips against a Khamorro and stand a chance in a Herrelldrin hell of winning.

I asked the obvious questions, and learned that the wagers dictated the relative powers of the contests. In catch as catch can the ordinary wrestler, with Turko available, handled his opposite number and called in Turko in the inevitable crisis. As Jimstye Gaptooth could put more Khamorros onto the canvas than the consortium operating from the Golden Prychan, Turko was called on frequently.

The smell of sweat in the bamboo-walled snug was barely noticeable, for these wrestlers were particular about themselves. But the smells of oils and liniments rose pungently. Some of the men wore bandages, tightly strapped and pasted, and two carried broken arms in slings of clean yellow cloth.

"And," said Nolro, a young Khamorro whose headband indicated he had barely begun his climb through the khams, "where is Turko, anyway?"

"And Andrinis?"

"By Morro the Muscle!" declared Nolro. "We fight tonight and if Turko is not here—"

Kimche reached for the ale. “He will be ready to step onto the canvas, Nolro. You, of all men, should know that.”

“I do. But — I worry...”

When they questioned how I had come to know Turko I simply said we had met in the past and as I was passing through I thought to look him up. I made no big thing of it, and went on to question them as to the advisability of all this ale-drinking if they fought this night. They guffawed.

“This ale gives us our strength, dom!”

Well, it might, too, given that it was brewed from top-quality Kregan barley and hops and was filled with good things. I drank and wiped my lips, and we talked of this and that. And still, Turko did not appear. He was never once referred to as Turko the Shield. A couple of times they called him Turko the Rym, and I will not advise you of what that means. So the time passed and then the note of exasperation in their voices sharpened. They were a consortium of wrestlers, and if one let the others down, his shares were forfeit. Also, his honor was smirched, that was plain. I sighed. I had no desire to step into a ring and take Turko’s place. But, if I had to, I had to...

The secret disciplines under which the Khamorros train in Herrelldrin, the syples, their allegiances and their kham status, are all shown on their reed-syple, the headband with its symbols. I could read a paltry handful of those, from previous experience, and recognized none of the reed-syples of the Khamorros here.

Turko, of his own desire, wore a plain scarlet reed-syple. By this he proclaimed his allegiance, his disdain of other syple disciplines, and to hell with anyone who questioned his kham status. A bit of a rogue Khamorro, our Turko the Shield. And he had a fine mocking way with him, too!

I looked at Muvko the Breaker, who appeared to be the likeliest of the khamsters present.

“Muvko,” I said, with a smile. “I mistook good Kimche’s offer of a fall or three. After we have finished our bout, would you do me the honor of gripping wrists?”

He laughed good naturedly. I guessed these Khamorros were not high khamsters, lacking the refinement of skill to take them into the master class, and were happy to find employment in a fairground booth. For all that, no ordinary unskilled mortal in the arcane lore of wrestling stood a chance against them in fair combat.

“If Kimche leaves you with any bones joined together.”

“By Beng Drudoj Grip and Fall!” quoth Kimche. He was mightily pleased and showing it for a Chulik. But, remember, he was minus his tusks. “You are my man, Jak, after all!”

“Then let us begin,” I said, and stood up.

Their practice ring was functional. An alcove with a neat little bronze statue of Beng Drudoj, the patron saint of wrestlers, faced a broad table with medical impedimenta at hand. Most of the medical assistance, as far as I could see, consisted of bottles of liniment and unguents, bandages and slings, and copious buckets into which a man might spit his teeth. And over this table on which a defeated combatant would be laid out frowned the intolerant bronze features of Beng Drudoj Grip and Fall.

These spartan surroundings were enough to perk a flutter through the heart!

Because I have had the good fortune to go through the Disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy, which teach a man wrestling and unarmed combat tricks — all the martial arts — that leave the best syples of the Khamorros far in the shadows, I had been able, without actually fighting Turko, to convince him that I had the besting of him and many a high khamster.

So, Kimche and I stripped off and began and it was not made too swift and there was a deal of grunting and straining before he gave me best. I stood back.

“You fight well, Kimche. But—”

“By Likshu the Treacherous!” he panted, standing up and shaking himself like a dog run from the sea. “You must be a Khamorro!”

“No, Kimche. I am not a Khamorro.”

“Then,” said Muvko the Breaker, stepping forward, “let us see what you can avail against a true khamster.”

Muvko was, as I had suspected, competent within the syples. Again I made nothing great of it, and the contest prolonged itself long past the moment when Turko, for one, would have had Muvko flat on his back. But it is foolish to puff up one’s abilities if there are skullduggeries to follow.

“Now may Morro the Muscle be my witness!” declared Muvko, sitting up and staring at me. “If you are no Khamorro — what manner of man are you?”

Useless to answer, “A Krozair of Zy.” So I smiled, and said, “I had luck and the knack of it, Muvko. Now, who is for ale?”

My intentions were plain to them. And, having seen me in action, they were fully in agreement.

“And when Turko returns, we will have a few words to say!”

“Aye!”

The daily downpour had come and gone outside, no doubt adding a fair quantity of fresh growth in that voracious jungle, and we started to prepare seriously for the evening’s contest.

Hoping that I had not created too great an impression, I joined in. After all, ordinary wrestlers stand no real chances against Khamorros. The wagers and rules reflected this, as they would have to do. So — how could I be explained? As a freak, that seemed the only answer, and thus I was accepted. They made plain I was standing in for Turko, and could have no share of the consortium’s profits on my own account. This seemed reasonable.

A smart trot across to the marquee of Black Algon revealed the place open and girding its magical loins for the night’s doings. Black Algon, himself, was still not there. Neither were Saenci and Turko. And Andrinós was still missing.

Back at the Golden Prychan, Kimche expressed himself of the opinion that mischief was afoot but that, by Beng Drudoj Triceps and Biceps, he had no inkling what it might be.

“Sink me!” I burst out. “If he’s got Turko and the others chained up in some infernal chundrog, I’ll—”

“So would we all, Jak, if we knew if and where!”

“There is one way to find out, a very old and still reasonably efficacious way.”

“If you can find any rast to question.”

“True, may the black lotus-flowers of Hodan-Set breathe on the cramph!”

“Jimstye Gaptooth may know,” said Nolro. “He must put in an appearance tonight when his men fight us.”

“By Morro the Muscle! Could we do it?” demanded Muvko.

A hubbub ensued. Of one thing I was sure, in all the bicep-rolling, muscle-flexing, stomach-tautening going on around me, these fellows would be ugly customers to cross on a wet and windy night, by Krun!

Kimche, the Chulik, a man who had been trained from birth to bear weapons and who now, tuskless, worked as a wrestler in a fairground booth, struck a note of warning.

“Remember, doms! Jimstye Gaptooth employs swordsmen. Who among you can handle a blade?”

The reaction to this unwelcome reminder brought scowls and fists gripping wrists and twisting so the muscles jumped, and a coarse variety of oaths heating the atmosphere. But the fact remained and real; just as these wrestlers were masters of their craft, so swordsmen hired by Jimstye Gaptooth would be masters of theirs. Only Kimche could face them with steel in his fist, and only the Khamorros could hope to live against pointed and edged weapons with empty hands.

“I have a large club,” shouted Fat Lorgan, and his belly shook. “With a nail in the head!”

“And I a dagger,” said Sly Nath the Trivet, looking fierce.

They looked at my little arsenal stacked to hand.

“When is this expedition to be, doms?” I said.

“After the bouts, when the credulous public are all drunk and chasing women and Jimstye Gaptooth is counting his money.”

“A remarkably fitting time,” I observed.

Each office of the consortium was held by a wrestler, and they were punctilious in the discharge of their duties. They employed a tall and supercilious Ng’grogan to present a front to the public, and to call their titles and stations before the contests. He was not, this Abanch from Ng’grogan, anything at all like Inch, Kov of the Black Mountains. In a spirit of devilment I offered Abanch a juicy portion of squish pie as we took our meal, the fifth or sixth of the day.

“Thank you, master Jak,” he said, and took it and wolfed it down. I waited. Abanch looked around. “Is there more? For I am inordinately fond of squish pie.”

Kimche handed across the rest.

I said, "I knew a man who stood on his head—"

"Ah!" said Abanch, and spluttered rich juice down his chin and crumbs onto the table. "He is your high and mighty, hoity-toity Ng'grogan, too good for the likes of me."

I did not hit him. He was like Inch in only one thing; he was tall.

But, in the public address he made as the crowds flocked into the enormous marquee where the contest would take place, Abanch earned his hire money. The public paid. They were mostly men, with a sprinkling of women, seafaring folk, and I did not doubt there were a number of renders among them, pirates who had crept in a longboat into some jungly creek and stolen ashore for a night's jaunt among the flesh-pots. As for the swordshipmen, they preened in fancy uniforms and flashed their smiles and their swords and gold lace.

Many steelworkers and city folk, of course, patronized the fairground. The place was brilliantly illuminated by mineral-oil lamps, with bits of colored glass to lend a fairyland lighting. The noise was prodigious and quite drowned out the eternal sound of the sea. Refreshments were served continually, and many a honey cake was flung in the wrath of an argument along the benches. As for drink, that flowed in a broad river of ale and wine and fermented in the brains and bloodstreams of the spectators.

The whole scene in the marquee was rough and rowdy and heated. Everyone hungered to see the fights. As for betting, that was a nicely calculated art and anyone whose skill was lacking would go home with his pocket linings hanging out — if he was not hit on the head in the firm belief that he walked thus to conceal the waist belt stuffed with gold and silver.

Before Abanch had finished two men were carried out, unconscious or dead, it did not seem to matter. The crowds yelled.

The contest began.

Well, by the offensive stink of Makki Grodno's disgusting diseased liver and lights, it went ill for the consortium from the Golden Prychan.

In the singles only two of our fellows scored outright wins.

When the tag matches began we were on to a hiding to nothing.

Four of us stood on small raised platforms outside the ring, which was fenced with a single bronze chain at waist height. The canvas covered sturmwood planking, and the whole was raised a little. Four of us stood on these platforms, and four of Jimstye Gaptooth's men stood on platforms adjacent.

One from each side leaped into the ring and started to twist each other's arms and legs off.

Kimche was controlling this bout. He faced me across the canvas where squirming bodies writhed. The crowd wanted blood.

Our man, it was Sly Nath the Trivet, hoicked himself on top of his opponent and started banging his head on the canvas covered sturmwood. This was highly pleasing.

The leader of the opposition bellowed, and a hulking Gon, his head a sheen of buttered baldness, leaped into the ring and caught Sly Nath around the throat and choked him back.

“Fat Lorgan!”

Fat Lorgan leaped and used his belly to knock the Gon down. He sat on his head. The first two crawled away on hands and knees. The crowd bellowed. Presently two more were at it, and then I was called in and got my man down, and was only just in time to avoid a diabolical kick in the ear. Kimche loomed up and threw that one away, and we looked about, and, lo! we of the Golden Prychan remained in the ring. Of Gaptooth’s men, none remained. Two were spitting blood on the platform around the outside of the bronze chain; one was lying head down, out to the wide; and the last was being sick all over a plump gentleman in the front row of benches.

Mind you, Sly Nath had an eye that would, come the morning, be a single gigantic purple lump. And Fat Lorgan was staring at a finger that bent backward and dangled when he pushed it.

The yelling lessened by a fraction, and Kimche said, “Next foursome.”

Slowly, we of the Golden Prychan overhauled the lead Jimstye Gaptooth’s wrestlers had opened. A singles win counted as one, and one was scored for every man remaining in the ring after the opposition had been thrown out.

Then Muvko said to me as we sat on the participants’ benches, “Now they start in earnest. Their Khamorros come on.”

So I looked at the four men on their platforms, as Kimche, Muvko, and Nolro walked across to our platforms. I joined them, studying the Khamorros belonging to Gaptooth. They were all, instantly seen, of high khams. They were all deadly.

So Kimche began, for Muvko was leader of this bout. The Chulik did not last more than a few murs against the khamster and Nolro went in. Then another one from the other side was followed by me. As I jumped the bronze chain a single scarlet thought flamed across my vosk skull of a head.

What was I doing here? What on Kregen was the Emperor of Vallia doing playing tag with a bunch of bone-breaking Khamorros? In a sleazy fairground booth by the light of cheap mineral-oil lamps and surrounded by a blood-hungry mob? It was crazy.

And then, of course, all that went from my mind and I leaped on the fellow who was about to snap Kimche’s arm, hauled him off, twisted him in the grips, and hurled him over the bronze chain.

After that it was a splendid blur.

I saw no reason to injure these Khamorros. They were only employees. So I caught them by an ear, or a wrist, or by some more interesting part of their anatomy, and threw them away.

The bout was over very quickly, The marquee held a complete silence for six heartbeats, and then the benches erupted.

Muvko was shaking his head.

“You are a marked man now, Jak.”

“Just let us get this over with honor and then we can go and ask Jimstye Gaptooth the questions.”

“May Morro the Muscle have you in his keeping.”

Four more bouts took place with fresh Khamorros or the ones who had been defeated returning. That made no matter. Between us, Muvko, Nolro, Kimche, and I threw them all over the bronze chain. Yes, yes, it was petty, all sweaty men heaving and grunting; but, too, there was a panache about it.

They were shouting now, from the benches, shouting that great word that is the unarmed combatman’s equivalent to the Jikai of the swordsman.

“Hikai!” they shrilled. “Hai, Hikai!”

It was quite a night.

And that night was less than a third over.

“What!” I shouted at Kimche as Abanch took his inordinate length into the ring to shout our triumph. “Not over!”

“We were the first contest of the night. There are two more to come.” He saw my face. “We are not involved—”

“Thank Pandrite for that!” Then I glowered at the backs of the Khamorros as they trailed away up the aisle between the seats. “All the same, I was just getting the blood flowing nicely and freely... Perhaps it is a pity, after all.”

“But the third contest will be fought by Jimstye Gaptooth’s people — some he has in reserve, these who will have recovered.”

I glowered. I felt the old blood climbing up inside my head and I ground down on that scarlet rage.

“I can’t wait all damned night to see this cramph!”

“There he is, just come in, and passing strange it is, too, that he was not here to see his men in action.” Kimche nodded his bald yellow Chulik head. I looked where he indicated.

Jimstye Gaptooth — well, yes, his two front teeth were missing. He lowered himself to a padded seat at the front reserved for principals. He wore sumptuous clothes of blue and ivory, with much gold lace. He was bulky and fatter than he ought to be, with a full-fleshed face that concentrated into a single crimson scowl. At his side sat a man who took my closer attention.

I knew this man — I had never seen him in my life before, but I knew him. He wore gray leathers all over his body, except his head, and his face was very pale, with dark hair cropped short. His mouth, a mere thin gash, his sharp nose — and his eyes! Dark, piercing, intent, concentrating on all he saw with the power of an incisive instinct — revealed him to me. Revealed him as clearly as the rapier and main gauche he wore in the bravo-fighter’s unmistakable fashion.

A bravo-fighter from the enclave city of Zenicce.

By his colors of gray and blue, worn discreetly, I knew him to belong to the noble House of Klaiton. I had no quarrel with that House. My own House, the House of Strombor, had more than once assisted in an insurance loss for young Nalgre Stahleker, Prince of the House of Klaiton, and his seductive wife, Nashta. So what was a bravo-fighter of Zenicce doing sitting next to a professional wrestling owner in South Pandahem?

Kimche told me, and my face darkened.

“And the story is true, Jak. This swordsman, Miklasu, eloped with the Princess Nashta. He was the house champion. The prince did not seek him, so we are told, because he said if his wife wished to go she would go, and if she did not she would return.”

“And?”

“She chose to return. And her ship sank off the coast of Segesthes in a great storm, sent, it was said, by one of the Sea Lords, Notor Shorthush of the Waves. So Miklasu hires his sword and, it was said, he told his cronies he was well quit of the woman.”

I had known Princess Nashta. Her seductiveness had destroyed her, that and the weakness of her will. And I felt for Prince Nalgre, even though I could not guess at the real reasons why his wife should leave him. Perhaps Quervey the Murgey would know, for all reports spoke well of Nalgre. Delia had said he was a fine young man. Of such puzzles is the world constructed.

“So we must wait until the end of the contests,” said Kimche.

“No,” I said. “I do not think so.”

Whatever Jak the Sturr might do in these circumstances was one thing; but I knew what Jak the Drang would do — aye, and Dray Prescott!

The changing rooms yielded my clothes. The other wrestlers were clearing their things out. We went outside, under the stars and the fuzzy pink light of the Maiden with the Many Smiles. I had brought the kalider taken from Trylon Nath Orscop. With this naked in my hand I prowled around the outside of the marquee. The others, led by Kimche, followed.

“What, Jak—?”

“I can’t lollygag about all night,” I said.

The first guy rope parted under the keen steel.

I went around the marquee methodically, slicing the guy ropes asunder. The marquee began to sag. By the time I had reached three-quarters of the way the roof billowed in. The roars of excitement within changed to yells of alarm. The marquee billowed like a collapsing dermiflon, speared on the field of battle. It rippled and sagged and flapped, and the rest of the ropes parted.

The whole lot collapsed.

“There,” I said, standing up with the dagger in my fist. “Now perhaps that rast will come out!”

Chapter fourteen

The Khamorro Way

Like fish struggling upstream, the audience battled their way out beneath the collapsing folds of cloth. The uproar was just as prodigious as a sensible man would expect. By the fuzzy pink light of the Maiden with the Many Smiles we stared on that heaving scene. I stuffed the kalider away and moved across the boardwalk where mud lay in thick cakes from heedless boots.

“Watch for the rast! Spread around the marquee.”

“This is not in the plan, Jak!” Kimche looked wild, gesticulating, his bald yellow head glistening in streaks of mingled color in the moons’ light.

“But it will get him out, Kimche. We need to ask him, do we not?”

“Aye. Aye, Jak, that we do.”

No one could believe the marquee had fallen of itself and the first conjectures, expressed with many oaths, took the view that some god or spirit inimical to Beng Drudoj Flying Alsh had wrecked the bouts out of spite. Some very watchable fights started between the pirates and the steelworkers, and drew admiring crowds. No doubt Beng Drudoj Grip and Fall took pleasure from this substitute entertainment. The light of torches splashed the scene with vivid color. The smell and mood of the crowds thickened.

The wrestlers from the Golden Prychan spread out and pretty soon Sly Nath the Trivet came arunning, pointing. His eye was beginning to look magnificent. We followed him and saw a group of men staggering out from the folds of fallen cloth. They staggered up amid much blasphemy. The guards had come running up; but the marquee was fallen and they couldn’t put it up again. The wrestling was abandoned for the night. The cut guy ropes were found, and the blasphemies mounted against the night sky.

Sly Nath, eye and all, was chuckling away to himself.

Well, yes, it was funny, too, if you thought about it...

We followed Jimstye Gaptooth and the bravo-fighter Miklasu, as they went off with their people. I would not have been surprised if they stayed at an inn called The Black Neemu; but its name was The Wristy Grip, which showed how proud they were of their wrestlers.

“I,” said Fat Lorgan, “do not have my club with the nail in its head with me.”

“I think, Jak,” said Kimche, after due consideration, “that I would like to have a sword. A Khamorro can break the bones of a swordsman, that is well known; but if the swordsman is very good, an unarmed man has no chance. It is a matter of relative skills.”

I well knew that Kimche would have the skills of the sword, being a Chulik.

“I only want to talk to this Gaptooth, not fight his army of khamsters.”

“But the two will of necessity go together.”

“May Drig take the fellow!” I am used to going ahunting alone. I said, briskly, “Do you return to the

Golden Prychan and fetch what weapons you have, and mine, also. I shall sniff around a little. Something May Turn Up.” Shades of Quienyin!

The fairground formed a pulsing bubble of light and noise in the moonlit night. The Wristy Grip reached up three imposing stories, and many windows were illuminated, and the sounds of revelry within indicated a good night was being enjoyed.

If you consider me a bash-on sort of fellow, well, you may be right in that I like to get on with it. But I fancied that it would be less than clever to go in the front door acting as an ordinary customer. I eyed the upper windows. It was a climb under the moons of Kregen for me...

Kimche and the others trailed off, and I sensed they were not too sure about leaving me. But I told them to get back with the naked steel and to think about the Khamorros. As they went off into the shadows I went around to the back of the inn.

Climbing into other people’s houses, and inns, and palaces, is a tricky business; but one which has its own lessons. I clawed up a vine by the rear wall, and chinned myself to a ledge, and so opened a window, whose wood, while warped, did not squeak, and so dropped silently into a darkened room.

The sounds of breathing came from a bed, half-seen.

I tiptoed to the door and let myself out into a corridor.

I knew exactly what I wanted.

If Turko was being held prisoner, which seemed the only explanation for his absence, it appeared highly unlikely he would be held here in the inn. But — he might be. So I eased to the head of the stairs and had not to wait too long before a potman came puffing up. He was looking for fresh candles, as he was relieved to tell me. He was a Fristle. His green and yellow striped apron was bunched around his neck when he spoke to me, and my fist was tight around the cloth.

“And where is the Khamorro they hold prisoner here?”

His cat’s eyes goggled. “No, notor, no — I know nothing of any prisoner!”

Eventually, I believed him. I pondered.

Brown shadows lay thick in the corridor. Dust hung in the air and tickled the nostril. The sounds of revelry from below wafted up faintly, as from a distant shore. The corridor was very quiet. I knew that I could not trust this Fristle potman an inch.

Wrapping his unconscious body in his striped apron, I stowed him away in a broom cupboard. Then I started down the stairs.

The doors of the rooms of the next floor down were all closed, and from the sounds within I judged it prudent to let them remain shut. At the far end of the corridor a double door promised to reveal something more interesting. I put my ear to it. The rumbling sounds of conversation could not be interpreted into words. Again, I pondered.

It seemed most likely to me that Gaptooth and his cronies would have a private suite here, and these rooms were likely to lie beyond this double door. So, very well, then. In we go...

The double doors were locked. So I kicked them in. Beyond them lay a small anteroom and the doors at the far end opened almost instantly at the racket I had made and men crowded in. Some were Khamorros and some bore naked steel.

“I have come to see Jimstye Gaptooth,” I said. “Is this the way to greet an old friend?”

That held them for the space of three heartbeats.

As soon as I spoke I realized I had been too clever for my own good. As an old friend, my story would be stupid. My story, to hold water, would demand a rueful admission of misplaced loyalty.

Why, with a glib story all ready, had I blurted out this nonsense about being an old friend?

They ushered me into the chambers beyond the anteroom. The place was furnished with a kind of tongue-licking lavishness I found not to my taste. Gaptooth bustled forward, very much the center of attention. At his shoulder hovered the bravo-fighter.

So, one story having been shot and the other about to be shot to pieces, I decided I would have to bait this Jimstye.

“Old friend? I don’t know you. Who the devil are you?”

“I am Nalgre ti Hamonlad,” I said, inventing on the spot with a nudge-nudge to the swordsman, Miklasu, in the use of the name Nalgre.

“But I know him, the nulsh!” spoke up a Khamorro I had thrown over the bronze chains at least three times.

“And I! Let me at him in fair fight—” Others crowded forward.

“If you choose not to recognize me, Jimstye,” I said brightly, over the hubbub, “then that is your affair. I did not know you were in Mahendrasmot, otherwise I would have signed up with you instead of that mangy lot at the Golden Prychan.”

So, I had blended both stories. Let him chew on the implications of his refusal to acknowledge an old friend.

He looked annoyed.

“I’ve never met you — but if you are the man who—”

“He is! He is, the rast!”

The fellow who spoke thus, a husky khamster, stood near enough to enable me to take his arm in a grip to pull and then push him. He staggered; but being a Khamorro, he recovered with cat-like speed and bored in, his hands razoring for me.

I sidestepped, swung back, chopped him, and then, as he went on past flailing, kicked him up the backside.

“Can’t you control these idiots?” I demanded hotly. “By Havil! You always said you hated the guts of all Khamorros.”

The gazes of these feared men of martial art fame fixed on Gaptooth. He looked keenly at me and lifted a hand.

“You are clever, you rast. I admire Khamorros and always have. Take him out and slice his throat—”

For a space no one made a move.

“So you don’t want me to fight for you in the contests?”

He sneered. “You would?”

“Why am I here, Jimstye — even if you deny friendship?”

“Shastum! Silence!” he called over the hubbub. “Let me think.”

The upshot of his thoughts was that avarice won over common sense. He knew damn well he didn’t know me. But if I was the man who had bested his fighters, and I was willing to work for him — he saw much money flowing in. And perhaps that is common sense, after all, making the most of what occurs.

“I did not see you fight. Can you—”

“Let me!” And: “I’ll twist his neck!”

They just did not believe, these Khamorros, and that was understandable. They were accustomed to seeing men shrink away from them unless they carried steel and knew well how to use it. The truth is, of course, that the very highest khamsters do not travel overfar from Herrelldrin, which is down in the southwest of Havilfar. These men were not out of the top drawer; but they were good. All Khamorros are good at their trade.

After half a dozen lay about the chamber I said to Jimstye, “That is enough.” I had my eye on the farther door which must lead to the inner private chambers and if Turko was here, that was where he would be. “You are satisfied — old friend?”

“I am satisfied. We will discuss terms later.”

He gestured to the wrestlers. “Best clear out now and take advantage of the night off. When I find who cut down the marquee I shall pull his thumbs out, for a start. Go on!”

It was clear to them as to me that he wanted to discuss terms with his new acquisition in private. That suited me. When they had gone, he said, “Wine, Nalgre ti Hamonlad?” Miklasu moistened his lips and went across to a side table. His rapier and main gauche were plain, hard-used weapons, the Jiktar and the Hikdar, the weapons of a killer.

I said, “I believe, Jimstye Gaptooth, that you know- the whereabouts of a friend of mine. I am minded to see him, and at once. Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me where he is?”

He looked surprised. Miklasu turned sharply from the table, a glass of wine in each hand, the red steady as a level.

“A friend? I know we have never met before, and I see you used that to gain entrance.” He frowned. “Although you pressed overhard by trying to stir up trouble between me and my Khamorros. What friend?”

“Turko.”

Miklasu dropped both wine glasses. His rapier and his main gauche flamed in his fists, drawn instantly, a superb bravo-fighter’s fighting draw.

Gaptooth laughed. “So it was all a fake, a trick! You are from the Golden Prychan, after all, and you are another seeking this Turko!” He turned to Miklasu. “Kill him.”

The bravo-fighter moved forward, and his sword and dagger were held just so.

“I am not one to be taken by a khamster,” he said. “You have no weapons. So, it follows you will surely die.”

“As to that, we shall see. Klaiton, is it?”

He stared. “What—?”

“Get on with it, Miklasu, get on with it!”

“Before he starts,” I said, “tell me — if I am to die it will prove of illusory comfort. Where is Turko?”

Again he laughed. “Oh, you will die. There is no swordsman in all Pandahem like unto Miklasu. And, Turko—” He jerked his thumb toward that inner door. I sighed.

Now I remembered my encounter with Mefto the Kazzur, when that superb Kildoi swordsman had bested me in fair fight. I thought it highly likely that I could beat this Miklasu; but, as always, there was the chance that he would have the beating of me. And Turko was my first concern.

I ran for the door, kicked it down, and burst through.

The three of them were in there, hung up like chickens on hooks. They were all mother naked. The room gave ingress to other bedrooms. The sound at my back heralded the vicious onslaught of Miklasu. I turned to face him.

I shouted, “I — Nalgre ti Hamonlad — caution you, Miklasu. I do not wish to slay you—” And then he ran in on me with his rapier doing all the flash and the dagger ready to rip into my guts. A pretty bravo-fighter’s trick, that. I swayed, took his wrist, but he hacked back and so I ducked away. He was good.

Turko said, “I might have known...”

The two Khibils, Andrinós and Saenci, hung in their bonds, gawping. I noticed that the Khibil maiden had not been crying. Andrinós’s foxy face showed determination as well as a goggling surprise at my eruption.

Miklasu foined around; but he was too canny to let me get close to him. Gaptooth appeared, shrieking

for the bravo-fighter to get on with it.

Working my way around out of the reach of that sharp rapier, I came along the wall where the three captives hung. There was not much time left, for the row would surely bring the wrestlers arunning. I whipped out the kalider, slashed Turko's bonds. He fell to his knees and, for two heartbeats, his head hung down. Then he was up, flexing his superb muscles. He did not say anything. I threw him the dagger and turned to make a feint at Miklasu and so draw him away. Turko could have handled the rapierman, I knew, but his muscles would be stiff and the blood must be giving him one hell of a time right now. He made no sound, but slashed the other two free.

When he had done that, he moved with his ferocious speed toward Jimstye Gaptooth... Long before that man could escape, Turko had his neck in one fist. He looked across at me.

"Do you remember Mungul Sidrath?"

"Aye."

"So do I."

He put Jimstye Gaptooth to sleep. Miklasu shouted, and leaped, and the rapier and dagger swirled in a twin cyclone of glittering steel and the Khibil maiden let out a tiny scream and Miklasu was suddenly upside down, his head crashing into the floor, and the rapier and main gauche were in my fists.

"And about time too," said Turko. "Nalgre, was it?"

I bent to the bravo-fighter. He was not dead, and his eyes opened and fluttered. "Nalgre Stahleker," I said. "I know him. I knew his wife, too, Princess Nashta."

Miklasu's eyes rolled up.

Disgust shook me. I stopped what I was going to say, some stupid boasting about the Lord of Strombor. I turned to Turko.

"Let us get out of this pestiferous place."

"With all my heart, Nalgre. My limbs appear to have returned to me."

"But," said Andrinus. "How?"

I ripped the cloak away from Miklasu and handed it to Saenci. She was a beautifully formed girl. Turko ripped off Gaptooth's shirt-tunic and Andrinus donned that.

"We go out the way I came in," I said.

Then Turko smiled. "Hark," he said.

The uproar outside took on a new and suddenly splendid difference. We went into the main chamber and saw a very large and knobby club with a six-inch nail embedded in the head going up and down like the head of a sissingbird snapping insects. A thraxter was slicing away with all the Chulik skills. Other weapons were being used, and the Khamorros were throwing people about like ninepins. Against the high khamsters our people would have had a more tricky time; but Turko waded in with all the venom

engendered by being hung up like a chicken on a meat hook, and I took my part, and in short order we broke back through the door and ran down the stairs in a shouting, laughing mob.

No one offered to stop us as we ran out of The Wristy Grip into the pink radiance of the Maiden with the Many Smiles and the rosy golden light of She of the Veils.

Chapter fifteen

The Confidence of the Kov of Falinur

The experiences through which I had gone since escaping from the Humped Land formed a distinct pattern in my head. Finding Turko was not quite the last knot of that pattern. He was, of course, unwilling to leave the Golden Prychan and his wrestling comrades until the business of Andrinós and Saenci had been settled. But, for all that — and I warmed to the idea — he was ragingly eager to return to Vallia.

Born in Herrelldrin though he had been, trained as a Khamorro, rising to a high kham, he now made his home in Valka and regarded himself as a Vallian. Well, did not I, also?

The last knot in this chain would be, of course, Hyrklana.

And that must wait until we had returned to Vallia.

“He has had a fright, that Jimstye Gaptooth,” quoth Kimche. “But if you leave us, Turko, we face a hard time of it in the contests.”

This was a matter I must not interfere in and must leave to Turko.

“When I joined the consortium of the Golden Prychan,” said Turko, and he spoke slowly and with gravity, “I was beholden to you. But I did warn you, fair and square—”

“Yes. You said you would have to leave us one day—”

“And that day is now. Black Algon must be made to see reason.”

“I have gold,” I said.

They all stared at me.

“But I will not interfere.”

Andrinós, one arm about Saenci as we talked in the bamboo-lined snug, said, “If we win free, I will go with Turko.” He did not know where Turko was bound. Saenci would go with him. “And for the gold — that I will earn and repay and thank you with all my heart.”

I nodded.

With a lift of her Khibil head, Saenci said, “Tell Black Algon I will never return to him. If he refuses the gold, tell him I shall surely kill myself. Then he will have neither gold nor me.” She made herself smile. “And he is very avaricious.”

So that was the way of it. Turko said to me, “Andrinós is a lucky fellow.”

And I said, “Yes.”

Now Turko the Shield is an extraordinarily handsome man. With the superb athletic build of a Khamorro and that brilliant profile, he must have wreaked havoc in many a female heart. When he married and settled down, then, I judged, a shadow would come over the bright days of many and many a beautiful maid.

And, as you shall hear, I had the confounded problem of Korero the Shield to attempt to solve...

Perhaps it was just blind luck; perhaps it was fate; perhaps it was some beneficent god or spirit of Kregen taking a hand, but what fell out heartened every one of us.

On the very day Turko, Andrinus, and Saenci prepared to walk with me up that lonely, jungly path, the Khibil's gold having been paid over and her manumission processed very smoothly, three fearsome Khamorros arrived at the fairground and were immediately taken into the consortium of the Golden Prychan. Kimche rubbed a thick hand over his glistening yellow pate.

“Now may Likshu the Treacherous smile, doms! Our comrade Turko leaves us and we replace him with three of his compatriots!”

So, laughing, filled with good cheer, we set off for the flier hidden away in the jungle.

Fliers are rare craft in Pandahem. Andrinus and Saenci walked on ahead of us, close together, so I was able to have a private word with Turko as we followed. When I expressed myself as being surprised that so many Khamorros came to Mahendrasmot, he smiled that ironical, infuriating damned smile of his.

“Mahendrasmot is well known. The fairground attracts people from far away. And, Dray, as you saw, the Khamorros were not high khams.”

“And you?”

He repeated what I had heard from our comrades of their shattering surprise when they had been sorcerously hurled back to their homelands. Turko had begun to work his way back to Vallia and had bogged down here, out of cash, and taking the fairground job to earn his passage money on. At this time there was no real volume of trade between Pandahem under Yantong and our sections of Vallia, apart from smuggling. He would have landed in an inhospitable section of Vallia, and he told me how concerned he had become at the rumors and stories out of Vallia.

He was avid for news. I told him of the changed circumstances in the island empire, how the old emperor was dead, and of how I had been fetched to be the new. I said we must all act as our consciences dictated, and there were new men in the world, and Vallia was most miserably divided up and many of her people cruelly mistreated by Yantong and his minions, by riffraff, flutsmen, aragorn, and by the Hamalese.

“There are stern battles ahead, Turko—”

“And I shall be there, with my shield.”

“It is in my mind to make you—” And then I stopped myself. I had been going to say I would create Turko a kov, that exalted rank similar to that of duke, as a preparation for broaching the subject of

Korero. I saw that as contemptible.

I said, "I have fought in a few battles since we parted, Turko. I have a fine Kildoi to guard my back with his shields. You will meet Korero the Shield."

His eyebrows lifted and he half-turned. Then, in stony silence, he walked on up the jungly path. Andrinós and Saenci were laughing. The suns burned down.

I ploughed on, my throat on fire. "Since you will have no truck with steel and edged weapons, in which you have my admiration, I think it right—"

Then he said, "So you are casting me off?"

"My Val!" I said. "Sink me! Of course not! You are a fambly to think it, let alone say it!"

"So what is in your mind for me, then, Dray? Or should I call you emperor, majister—?"

"Do you wish to try a few falls, dom? Listen, and shut that black-fanged winespout!"

Then he laughed. "You are the same, at any rate, thanks be to Morro the Muscle!"

"Seg and Inch are both kovs of Vallia. I see no reason why you should not be a kov also. I shall arrange this. And, as a kov—"

"You can get rid of me and my shield at your back in the day of battle?"

"Not so. Oh, no! When we fight the Hamalese, as we must, and the clansmen, and the riffraff tearing the heart out of our country, I shall count on you, Kov Turko, to be in the thick of it, as usual."

He kicked a jungly frond that tendriled across the path.

"And, being a kov, and high and mighty some of them are, as we both know—" He stopped speaking then and scowled.

We walked for a space in silence.

Khamorros have reflexes as quick as thought. Turko's hand whipped out and his fist cupped a sparkling fat, blue insect. It was harmless. It buzzed in the prison of Turko's fingers for a space; then he opened his hand and the fly buzzed free.

"Yes," he said. "Seg is a kov and Seg is damned unhappy with his kovnate. Oh, Thelda loves it—" He saw my face. "What? Is Thelda dead? What has chanced with Seg?"

Very firmly, I lied to him. "Thelda is reported dead, seeing no one has seen her in Vondium since we were all parted. Seg is getting over it." As I spoke I realized these were not lies, for Seg's wife, Thelda, although not dead but very happily married to Lol Polisto in all ignorance that her real husband was not dead, was generally regarded as being dead. Seg thought so. I cleared my throat. "Seg is unhappy, yes... But that does not mean you will be."

"It does not. If I am to be a kov I would like to take over Seg's kovnate of Falinur. They are a bunch of rogues who deserve to be brought into a better understanding of life."

I was astounded. Then it was my turn to laugh. "I have spoken to Seg about his kovnate. He remains a kov. But, Turko, you have the lands and the titles and are the Kov of Falinur."

"Right," he said, and I did not miss the ring in his voice. "I thank you for this, majister. There will be changes. And the first will be to alter that damned miserable ocher and umber checkerboard schturval.[\[4\]](#) Those colors for your kovnate clothes and symbols are depressing. I shall border each square with a nice thick line of cheerful red."

"Quidang!" I said, and thus mocked him in turn.

He was filled with a bubbling confidence, which both amazed and heartened me. I had been totally unsure how he would take to the idea that he was no longer to stand at my back in battle with his shield. I had wondered how he would receive the comical notion that he should be a kov, with titles and estates and cities owing allegiance to him. He seemed to be thriving on the latter idea, and I, shrewdly I suppose, surmised he had not given up on the former and would seek to stand with me in battle as always.

Korero would have to be handled, too...

So, as we found the hidden voller and all climbed aboard, I felt that the future for the midlands of Vallia looked brighter than it had for seasons.

We took off and soared away, heading for the islands of Vallia and what was left of my empire. And, at the thought, I suddenly felt a coldness, and stupidly longed to be down the Moder with all the Monsters and menace... By the Black Chunkrah! A few footling fun and games around passages and secret doors and ghoulish weirdies seemed then to be children's pastimes beside the job facing me in Vallia and all of Paz. Again and again I had tried to throw off the yoke, and always some stupidity in my own nature forced me to resume the burden. The single decisive fact impelling me to go on was simply this: that I had been called on, chosen, fetched by the people of Vallia to lead them in their way of life and their struggle for freedom.

My comrades were individual people, with strong characters and minds of their own. If, sometimes, it sounds as though I ordered them about willy-nilly, this is not so. Each one was a personality, a real living, breathing person, and if I fail to bring them vividly alive to you in these tapes, then the lack is mine, the loss yours, for, by Zair, they are a bonny bunch!

Now Turko said to me, "I see you fly due west. So you do not intend to chance the mountains?"

I shook my head.

"This voller may not let us down as those cranky rubbish heaps from Hamal so often do. But the mountains offer a risk we do not have to accept." I looked at him. "Anyway, I've a mind to fly over Rahartdrin."

I had told him how we had lost contact with so many of the outlying provinces and islands. Rahartdrin, the large island off the southwest of Vallia, was the kovnate of the Lady Katrin Rashumin. As a friend of Delia's, her welfare concerned me. No news had come out of that part of the empire, and all our spies had either reported failure or had not returned.

Turning north off the west coast of Pandahem, we soared on over the southern reaches of the Hobolings and struck out across the Sea of Opaz. The whole distance was above seven hundred dwaburs and we

estimated should take us the best part of three days, as the flier was not of the fast variety. We took turns to conn the helm and stand by the levers, Saenci catered splendidly, and we bustled through the skies of Kregen in fine style.

The strategic concept of having to stop for fuel, and have coaling stations conveniently scattered across the world, was one with which I was at that time unfamiliar. Vittles and water were the limiting factors in a journey time. The silver boxes, the vaol and paol, with their mix of minerals and gas, upheld us and drove us on, so there was no need to make any halts.

Out over the Sea of Opaz, the islands of the Hobolings dropped astern; looking for the dawn and then a few burs of sunshine before we reached Rahartdrin, I stood at the controls and felt the lightness of spirits on me. I felt more free than I had for ages, and this despite the ponderous weight of the problems facing me at home. Going back to Delia; that was the answer. So I stood there and snuffed the night air and Deb-Lu-Quienyin appeared at my side.

His ghostly form glimmered spectrally against the side of the voller. I could see the canvas stitching through him.

He gestured. Commandingly, he pointed two points off the starboard bow. Darkness shrouded the sea, with the massed glitter of the stars above and the Twins fast sinking in the west. Then he stabbed his fingers into the air, five fingers, and his mouth framed the word "Bur." The Kregen bur is forty terrestrial minutes long and there are forty-eight of them to a Kregen day.

I moved the controls and the voller swung onto the heading Quienyin indicated. The Wizard of Loh smiled, and pushed his turban straight, and disappeared.

Well, I said to myself, lucky Andrinus and Saenci had not witnessed that supernatural manifestation. I felt the chill. Yet how splendidly different this apparition from those with which that egomaniacal cramp Phu-Si-Yantong favored us!

Turko came on deck at the change of course. He yawned.

"In about five burs' time, Turko, we shall see something interesting. The suns should just about be up by then."

He looked at me. "What—?"

A brief, a very brief, explanation had to suffice.

"And this Wizard of Loh. You will no doubt kick Khe-Hi-Bjanching out as you—"

"Now, Turko!"

But he was smiling, and as we sailed on he launched into a summary of his plans for his new kovnate. I listened. I fancied the recalcitrant folk of Falinur were in for a shock. Turko had seen how Seg's methods had failed to impress. As I listened I realized that Seg had attempted to do things in the way he knew I would approve, without force. Turko was prepared to bear down that much harder — well, by Vox! So was Seg; but he had genuinely attempted to apply the new principles we all wanted to bring to the hard and harsh world of Kregen. There was a lesson here. But, I knew, I would not give up my plans, even if, from time to time, they were temporarily set back.

As for Quienyin, this visit proved to me he had been accepted in Vallia, and for that I joyed.

I broke the bad news about Falinur with a little lift of that mockery subsisting between us. “Oh, and Turko. The ex-pallan, Layco Jhansi, has taken over in Falinur. We will have to send him packing first.”

Turko glowered. I had told him of the treachery of Layco Jhansi, the old emperor’s chief pallan. “I find it odd, to say the least, Dray. Vallia, the island empire, divided up into a parcel of warring factions. Odd, damned odd.”

“Odd but true. We hold Vondium and much of the south and midlands. But we must patrol these artificial frontiers, and hold strong reserves in loci where they can march instantly to any threatened point. And the flutsmen drop down anywhere, for they are returning to Vallia in increasing numbers. The world regards Vallia as doomed and as merely a fat prize to be sucked dry. Oh, and we have good friends in Hawkwa country, up in the Northeast.”

“And Inch and Princess — I mean Empress — Delia? The Blue Mountain Boys, Korf Aighos, they would not take kindly to these rasts stealing from them. That is certain. And the Black Mountain Men. Inch’s kovnate must have fought.”

“They both did and have kept themselves relatively clear of the vermin infesting our land; but it is mighty hard.”

He had received the news that our island of Valka had been cleaned up with joy. “I expect fresh regiments from Valka to join in the struggle,” I told him. “The job is immense.”

“Right. So between Inch and me, we can squeeze this traitorous Layco Jhansi until he squeaks.”

“You have yet to win Falinur back.”

“I’ll do that.”

He did not say that the gift of the kovnate was a poor gift, seeing it was occupied by usurpers. I felt fresh resolve in him, and knew the wise thing had been done here.

Seg Segutorio had been happy to dump Falinur. Next time around, he would run a kovnate that would be a marvel.

The voller’s speed was about five db. [\[5\]](#)She was not fast, but she was a useful, chunky craft with a deal of urge in her. Neither Turko nor I could place her country of manufacture. The wise men at home would have to examine her silver boxes to learn what secrets she contained. Certainly, she was unlike the fliers with which we were familiar.

The alteration of course to starboard would bring us east of Rahartdrin. A number of small islands dot the sea off the south coast of Vallia here. Some are densely populated by reason of their fertile soil, others are barren and empty. Many are ringed by fanged rocks. As the sky lightened and the first rays of palest rose and leaf green flushed the sky we saw that a gale had broomed the sea beneath us during the night. We had been speeding faster than we thought. Down there the sea heaved in long, running swells, the breeze brushed the tops into shot-silk, it was a day for expanding the chest and avoiding a lee shore.

Turko pointed. I nodded.

A ship down there, dismasted, wallowing, had not avoided a lee shore. The islands ahead reached out cruel reefs of rock and the sea spouted in climbing combs of foam. The ship was doomed, for she could never claw off the rocks and round the headland into a muddy bay opening up on the far side.

“This is what Quienyin meant,” I said. “But he had more in his mind than merely to summon us to witness a shipwreck.”

“She’s an argenter out of one of the free cities along the Lohvian coast,” said Turko. His expression remained noncommittal. What we did would be down to me, and Turko would loyally support me, for that was the way he had chosen.

“We could—” I said, and stopped and looked again, figuring angles and calculating with a seaman’s quickness. “It could be done.”

Turko mistook my meaning. “You’ll never get them all aboard, Dray!”

The deck of the argenter was packed with men. Like any ship given the appellation of argenter, she was broad in the beam, capacious, a tubby, comfortable, not particularly weatherly vessel, and fleets of argenters formed the backbone of the merchant navies of the maritime nations — except Vallia. I noticed an odd thing about those men seething on the deck below. They had all stripped off so as to be able to swim after the impending shipwreck had pitched them into the sea; but every man carried weapons strapped to his naked body. Yes, I know I say a Kregan will not willingly walk his world without weapons; but when you must swim for your life in murderous breakers, that, surely, is one occasion when you must cast away your sword, your spear, your bow? These men were naked and armed.

Turko was quite right. Taking a quick block count I reckoned there must be a hundred fifty to two hundred men jammed on the deck, all braced for the impending impact. We’d never get them all in this flier.

“Rustle out what rope we have aft, Turko. Get Andrinós. We’ll tow that argenter around the point!”

Instantly, without fussing, Turko went aft to the rope locker. We might not have enough. We could drop a line to them down there; they’d not shoot a line up to us. A pretty little calculation entered my mind as we maneuvered into position. Could even Seg Segutorio, in my view the greatest bowman of Kregen, shoot a shaft trailing a line from that ship up to us? Turko let out a yell and he waved, so I knew we had rope enough.

The trickiest part of the operation would be keeping a steady strain on the hawser. The argenter was going up and down sluggishly and rolling with that dead effect that told me she was filling. It would be touch and go. Three results were in the offing: she could strike the rocks and fly to flinders, she could be towed around the point — or she could sink before either of those events took place. The line dangled down and was seized in a forest of upraised arms and made fast to the inboard stump of the bowsprit. Gingerly, I opened up the forward control lever and the vóller moved ahead.

Aft, Turko kept a watchful eye on the line.

“And get your head out of the way. If she snaps—”

“Aye, Dray. I know.”

And, with his superb Khamorro reflexes, he would be moving and avoiding the deadly whiptail of

broken line faster than the eye could follow.

The argenter proved a stubborn beast. Most Kregen vollers are soundless in flight; had engines been involved they would have been screaming in protest. But we moved. We moved!

Slowly, painfully, we hauled the argenter crabbing through the waves, seeing the white water bursting clean over her. Not a man was washed off. Her blunt bows rose and fell and churned the white froth in a welter of foam. Slowly she came around and we crawled for the point. The hawser sang.

This unknown voller might not be fast; but she could pull!

Gradually we saw the vital stretch of sea opening up as we hauled the ship away from the rocks. It was a maelstrom down there. The men clustered, looking up at us, and we prayed with them that all the gods of Kregen would smile on this enterprise.

As we passed clear of the spit of land dividing the cruel rock reef from the muddy bay, a small group of totrixmen galloped along the spiny ridge below. The six legs of their mounts spraddled out and their leathers glistened in the flung spray. They carried lances, and their helmets gleamed in the early light. They rode inland and were lost to view.

“Company,” I shouted at Turko. “We’ll have a reception committee.”

“Friends?”

And then, of course, I realized that this part of Vallia was firmly in the hands of a vicious foeman, that Kataki Strom, Rosil Yasi, the Strom of Morcray, who was a tool of Phu-si-Yantong’s and who would joy to see me dead. I may add that those sentiments were reciprocated in part.

“More likely to be enemies, Turko.”

He did not reply; but I saw the muscles along his arms bunch and roll.

Andrinos, with his keen foxy face concerned, said, “Then this ship full of armed men could be enemies going to join their friends?”

I shook my head. “It is a possibility, and a risk we must take.” I did not say that I considered Quienyin would have acted differently had this been a shipfull of enemies. Andrinos and Saenci shared the respect and caution accorded Wizards of Loh. Feeling my reply to be somewhat abrupt, and, into the bargain, hardly reassuring, I added, “I am convinced they are not friendly toward the enemies of Vallia. On the contrary, if I am right they have sailed here to fight for us.”

“We pray Pandrite and Horata the Bounteous you are right, pantor,”[\[6\]](#)said Saenci.

We were almost clear of the point. Beyond the crags the water ceased its frantic turmoil and smoothed into placidity. Once there the argenter could drift gently toward that muddy shore and ground without a fuss. After that, in due course of the seasons, she could molder to ruination.

At that point the hawser snapped.

Turko moved. One instant he was checking the tension and calling to me, the next he was flat on the deck, yelling a warning.

The end of the line snapped over our heads and came down like a sjambok, thwack, across the cabin roof.

With a frantic snatch at the control levers, I halted the mad onward leap of the voller. She swung about and soared back over the argenter. The men down there stared up. The seas took the ship into their grip and remorselessly pushed her down onto the rocky crags.

“There’s only one thing for it, now!” I yelled at Turko. The voller swerved and descended. We felt the force of the breeze. With finicky movements I brought her low over the sea, to leeward of the argenter. As we passed that high, ornate poop the name leaped up, gilded and carved, *Mancha of Tlinganden*. Tlinganden was one of the Free Cities left after the collapse of the old Empire of Loh, situated on the east coast opposite the country of Yumapan in Pandahem. This ship had successfully fought her way through the renders infesting the Hobolings. Now she was going to come to grief with all her people, if we could not save her.

Gently I eased the voller in until we nudged the surging bulk of the argenter. It was touchy business. I had to maintain the same rhythm as the sea, lifting and lowering the flier, and at the same time maintain a steady pressure against the bulky hull.

“By Morro the Muscle!” exclaimed Turko, joining me forward and craning out over the coaming. “You’re going to push her free!”

“It’s the only way left. Just hope we don’t stove her in.”

The voller rose and fell and rolled and the argenter was like a sodden souse refusing to move along.

“Or she doesn’t drag us down.”

Water sluiced inboard, drenching us.

The pressure kept up. The black crags ringed with creamy foam seemed to be racing up toward us as we went careering down, forced by wind and sea. But the silver boxes of the voller exerted their power as I forced the levers over. Slowly, we saw the angles widen, slowly we saw the bows creep past the last disturbed confusion of water, slowly the argenter, *Mancha of Tlinganden*, rolled and sagged and pitched clear of the last fangy outcrop.

“We’ve done it!” shouted Andrinós. His hands were clasped together. Saenci clung to his arm. “Never have I seen such flying!”

Spray burst over us. The argenter rolled uglily. Men clung to her, like bees on a honeypot. And we weren’t done with her yet. She had to be turned, now, turned poop on to the run of the sea, so that she would ground less forcefully.

And then disaster struck. One moment I was beginning to think that we had successfully done it, the next a brute of a sea surged in, crisscrossing the current, the towering sterncastle punched at us, the poop swung shrewdly, and the voller was caught and flung and toppled end over end into the sea.

Chapter sixteen

Homecoming

The water felt like a brick wall.

Spread-eagled, cartwheeling, I crashed into that brick wall and burst through it with all the breath knocked out of me. Water buried me.

To struggle back to the surface and to gulp air... To struggle, never to give in, to go on fighting and clawing even as they shovel the grave sods over your face. That is the way of Dray Prescott, and often and often I wonder just how far it has got him. As the sea smashed into me and water clogged my nostrils I gave a few erratic strokes with my legs, turning and twisting upright, forcing myself to rise. Up. Up I went and my head broke the silver sky and the Suns of Scorpio blazed in my face.

Light blinded me. Shimmer of wavetops, spray cutting across, all a liquid movement of colors and radiance. I spat. I shook my head. I forced my eyes to remain open. I felt, I admit, like a side of beef must feel after it has been corned and stuffed into a tin.

The situation was quite other than I had expected, for the voller floated. Amazingly, the flier sat on the water, upright, rising and falling with the motion of the sea. Just beyond her the argenter *Mancha of Tlinganden* rolled and wavered in my vision, surging on like a runaway temple to Kranlil the Reaper, shedding bits and pieces, falling apart, scattering timber as she lurched and shuddered to her doom.

A few strokes took me to the voller. I handed myself up and felt the sluggishness. The canvas had been ripped and most of her starboard side stove in. She would sink in a few murs. There was no sign of my companions.

Standing on the splintered deck of the voller, I looked about. The advantage of vision afforded by that little extra height proved sufficient. Two heads showed in the sea, among white splashes, and then a third. Saenci's reddish foxy hair drifted on the water and I dived in first for her. She was swimming well; but going the wrong way.

Spitting, I gasped out, "Steady, Saenci. It's all right now. Just relax and let me—"

"Where is Andrinós?"

"He's all right. We must reach the argenter."

I held her in the prescribed fashion for lifesaving and swam across to the drifting ship. Turko and Andrinós swam across. We trod water and looked up and they threw ropes down for us and helped us inboard. Like half-drowned gyps we crawled aboard.

Being your ruffianly kind of mercenary, I knew I had not much time left before the voller sank to act as any proper hyrpaktun would act now. I dived back and swam to the flier.

I left the hubbub and howls of protest. Clambering onto the warped deck and working very rapidly, very rapidly indeed, by Krun! I snatched up my weapons and that superb harness of mesh links. Swimming back with the bundle was not too difficult although not a sport I'd take up for pleasure, and once again they hauled me inboard. This time I was content to lie on the deck and let my battered old carcass recover.

"You're a right maniac, dom!" quoth a cheerful voice. I looked up.

He stood, his thick legs spread apart, his hands on his hips, stark naked but for the weapons belted to him. His face was plug-ugly, scarred, with prominent eyebrows and a mass of thick brown hair, plastered into shiny flatness by spray.

“Aye,” I said. And then, “Llahal.”

“Llahal, dom. I am Clardo the Clis. I thank you for saving us—” A gleam of gold at his belt caught my eye. He had taken his pakzhan, the little golden zhantil head that is the mark of the hyrpaktun, from around his neck and twisted the silken cords tightly around his belt.

About to reply that, Llahal, I was Jak, a sudden shadow fell over me as I sat up and a fierce, excited, bubbling voice burst about us and brought instant silence from everyone.

“Lahal!” said this voice. “Lahal and Lahal, Strom Drak! It’s me, Torn Tomor. And you are now Emperor of Vallia. Lahal, majister, Lahal!”

I stood up and looked at him.

Yes, he had the virile toughness of his father and the slim agility of his mother, and if he had a tithe of their strengths he would be a most puissant young man. I smiled.

“Lahal, Torn Tomor. And your father and mother are well and thrive, thanks be to Opaz. And, as for you, your faith was too fragile, for the murderer confessed.” He started at this, a young, eager, alive man with all his life to lead. “Yes, Torn, you ran off to be a paktun when we all knew you would not strike down a man from the shadows, with steel between his shoulder blades.”

“But,” he stammered, “majister — everyone said — it looked black—”

“It is black no more. Do I need to ask why you return to Vallia?”

“By Vox, no!” spoke up Clardo the Clis. “But—” And here his scarred face swung toward Torn Tomor. “—is this really the emperor, Torn? How can he be, seeing the emperor sits in Vondium and waits for us to fight and win his battles for him?”

The argenter gave a lurching heave that made us all brace ourselves to the sway of her. The muddy shore was not far off and soon the ship would splinter to flinders. Turko stood at my side. Andrinus was holding Saenci. I looked at the crowding men, hardened men, professional fighting men, tough and ruthless in combat, easy and reckless in camp. Yes, they were mercenaries, going to Vallia to find employment. A few quick words established what I had instantly guessed, and what had made Deb-Lu-Quienyin direct me here. Every man was a Vallian. Each man had gone off from his own country as a lad, seeing that Vallia had no army but employed paktuns to fight for gold. And, now the mother country was in dire danger, beset by enemies, her sons were returning home. But they were not the country bumpkins, the smart townies, who had left. Now they were paktuns and hyrpaktuns. Now they were professionals. I sighed. What I could do with a hundred thousand like this!

The voller had taken with her the secrets of her silver boxes, and I had to quell the spurt of anger. All that had chanced to me since leaving Vallia for the Dawn Lands formed a part of a pattern, that was clear. Prince Tyfar and Quienyin; well, Quienyin was actively assisting me now and Tyfar was going to have a much more prominent part to play in my plans than he dreamed of. By Zair! He had a much bigger part to play than I dreamed of! How fate does throw the knucklebones, and sits back, giggling. And that Vajikry fanatic, Trylon Nath Orscop, had afforded me a voller able to pull. No Vajikry, no

voller. No voller, no ship of fighting men for Vallia.

Turko said, “We’re going to hit any mur — and that company you spoke of. They’re waiting.”

Along the edge of the surf the lines of totrixmen cantered. They looked hard and sharp. They were waiting for us. As we staggered up out of the clutch of the sea they would ride forward and spear us. The Vallians in the ship were shouting and waving. They thought these riders were waiting to succor them. And that was the sensible thought to any Vallian who had left the country before the Time of Troubles.

I shouted, hard and high, in an ugly voice.

“Those jutmen are our mortal foes! They will spear us as we wade ashore through the mud. Each man must be ready to resist them. They are a parcel of the cramphs who are eating up your homeland.”

Well, that changed the demeanor of the returning mercenaries wonderfully.

A staff-slinger stepped forward. “Lahal, majister. I am Larghos the Sko-handed.” He spread his left hand. “My men will loose, seeing all the bowstrings will be wet.”

Larghos had a long, narrow chin, and a slinger’s shoulders. A squatter, fiery-faced man stepped forward, spluttering.

“Lahal, majister! I am Drill the Eye.” He waved an oilskin pouch. “Give me a few murs to string our bows and we will see!”

I did not laugh. But the vivid image of Barkindrar the Bullet and Nath the Shaft flashed up before me. By Krun! But they do love a fine professional argument, these slingers and these bowmen of Kregen!

I eyed the surf. It was not too dangerous; but it would knock a fellow over unless he was well-braced and not too far out.

“Stand back, you missile men, and give the swordsmen a chance. Loose over them.” Again I eyed the narrowing distance between us and the shore. “If she grounds close enough, best you remain aboard for as long as you can and shoot from here.”

“Aye, majister!” they shouted. “Until she falls to pieces!”

That was the moment the keel of the argenter touched bottom. We held our breaths. Some of that luxurious stern ornamentation, all gingerbread work, fell off with a roar and a splash. She lifted up with the surge of the waves and shuddered on. Thrice more she touched and thrice more she lifted and rolled nearer the shore.

The breeze blew our hair forward and chilled our skins. The smell of brine and mud grew more pungent. Turko had found a shield — I saw him talking to a swarthy fellow who nodded and handed his shield over without a fuss. I marked him. The shield was the rectangular cylindrical shield of Havilfar. Efficient.

When a vessel marked for destruction touches the shore always, I think, a man must mourn for another hostage lost to the implacable elements. *Mancha of Tlinganden* struck at last, and her keel scraped through slimy mud, and the black stuff swirled up in the water alongside. She shuddered on for a few more paces, and then stuck, slewing slightly, canting over, coming to her final rest with a kind of peace we had bought for her. She did not fly into flinders, as I had feared. But her doom was certain. We

plunged down into the sea and struck out for the shore.

Andrinos swam with me and Turko was there also, the shield almost like a surfboard.

The surf crashed about us and men yelled and were knocked flying, and surfaced, spluttering and going doggedly on. With an increase of pace I managed to get ahead. I did not wear the mesh-link iron harness. I held the thraxter, and the sword glimmered wet with running water. Jumping the retreating waves, I crashed on up that muddy beach, feeling the gluey muck clinging and trying to haul me back. Like a mud-devil I reached forward with the water around my waist, and the muck did not wash off.

The riders on the beach turned their mounts to face us.

They rode down, the six legs of the totrixes splaying out, their heads high against the commotion of wind and water. The spear points twitched down. They cantered on, full of confidence that they would spear us poor half-drowned rats before we could stagger clear of the waterline.

Two of them came for me. I braced myself with the tug of the sea about me. The first abruptly switched from his saddle as though jerked by puppet cords. A long arrow sprouted from his neck. The second had no time to puzzle over his comrade's fate. I leaped for him, brushed the spear aside, sank the thraxter in.

After that as the paktuns roared up out of the sea, naked, shining with mud and water, half-crazed, yelling, we tore into the totrixmen. Leaden bullets flew. Shafts pierced. Swords glinted and ran red. We had the beating of them in the first half-dozen murs. We fought as men fight coming up out of their graves. Only a dozen or so survived to gallop off wildly.

Panting, the Vallians gathered, and stared balefully after the fleeing riders.

“Hai, Jikai! Emperor!” someone shouted.

I quieted the hubbub.

“I think we are on the island of Wenhartdrin. It is a rich land, and the best wines of Vallia, some say, come from here. But the whole land here is in the grip of our enemies. We are Vallians!”

“Aye!”

“Let us then see what honest Vallians may do, by Vox, and in the radiance of the Invisible Twins made manifest through the light of Opaz, let us go forward!”

And, by Vox, forward we went!

Chapter seventeen

Emperor's Yellow Jackets

The captain and first lieutenant of the argenter had been killed in an accident, and this in part accounted for her doomed course of destruction toward the rocks. Most of the crew were Hobolings who are among the finest of topmen. These and the other deckhands had no part of our fight. I did not inquire how the arrangements for the passage had been made. We agreed to leave these folk on the island and see to it that they were repatriated.

Ashore, we busied ourselves scrubbing off the mud. The ship broke apart slowly. I marked the spot. On a more auspicious occasion I'd return here and see if I could salvage those silver boxes from the sunken voller.

Boxes and bales and barrels floated ashore, mingled with the sad detritus of a destroyed ship. There were many fat bales of a good quality cloth, all of that bright, strong, yellow color called tromp. There was food, also, that was not contaminated by sea water and we soon had fires going and tea brewing and food sizzling. To clothe our nakedness we cut up squares of the tromp cloth and made holes and so put them over our heads. We cinched our belts tight, and we looked a fine rousing rabble under the suns.

Some few remnants of the paktuns' original clothes drifted ashore, and a few pairs of boots. But, in general, we were a band of yellow brigands to all intents as we set off.

The old emperor, Delia's father, had always liked the wines from Wenhartdrin. We marched on and soon passed signs of viticulture, most of it blackened and ruined. Houses had burned. We saw no one for some time until, reaching a tumbledown village, we found a few poor people who told us the news. This was simple. Strom Rosil Yasi, being a damned Kataki and therefore by nature a slavemaster, was more interested in human merchandise. These folk were left free and alive because they were too ill, too weak, or could till just enough land to provide food for the conquering invaders. Well, by Zair, we sorted out that local problem.

The band of yellow-clad comrades fought like men possessed. As we progressed into the island and saw the evidences of what being occupied meant, they grew hard and fierce even above all their mercenary habits. We found the aragorn, slavers who occupy an area and from a strong point terrorize and suck dry everything of value, and we slew them in battle and drove them into the sea. Wenhartdrin is not above fifteen dwaburs long and ten wide, shaped rather like two triangles apex to apex. We discovered that Strom Rosil Yasi, known as the Kataki Strom, had left but two squadrons of cavalry and a half regiment of infantry to hold the island. These men were all mercenaries of various races.

Military organization varies from country to country on Kregen, that stands to reason; but hereabouts the regiment of infantry very often consisted of six pastangs of eighty or so men each, giving four eighty men to a regiment. So there were around two hundred to two hundred and forty mercenaries swanning about Wenhartdrin that we had to deal with. Cavalry regiments varied more widely in numbers and composition and we had seen off one squadron on the beach and the second squadron, some hundred or so, we caught in a pretty little ambush along a defile crowded with tufa trees. By this time a portion of our force was mounted; but what with sickness and casualties, we now numbered not much more than a hundred and seventy-five or so.

We had shaken out into a loose organization, all wearing those tromp-colored uniforms which, gradually and against all expectations, smartened up and grew into proper uniforms. Larghos the Sko-handed commanded a group of expert staff-slingers. Drill the Eye commanded his bowmen — they used the compound reflex bow, not the great Lohvian longbow. The bulk of the force consisted of swordsmen, many of them sword and shield men, churgurs, and these were handled by Clardo the Clis. Although these people had gathered together relatively recently to return to Vallia, many of them had served as groups in one war or another, and in general their names and reputations were known among themselves.

On the evening when we knew on the morrow we would have to go up against that half regiment, I stood talking quietly to Torn Tomor. The campfires burned and the viands sizzled and the wine passed around companionably. We talked of his parents, Tom Tomor ti Vulheim, the Elten of Avamar and his wife, Bibi, who were comrades of the Strom of Valka and Elders of the high assembly of Valka.

“And you will wear the orange of the high assembly in due course, Torn,” I said. “Be very sure of that.”

“Before that, majister, I will serve in the Strom’s Sacred Life Guard.”

He saw my instinctive frown, a twist of irritation to my lips I could not halt. I have mentioned before my equivocal feelings regarding these bodyguards. When we had been clearing out the island of Valka, before I was fetched to be the strom — which is grandly recorded in the famous song “The Fetching of Drak na Valka” — they had put together a devoted band of blade comrades to stand watch and ward over my person, in battle and camp and wherever the blade of an assassin might strike. They had served nobly, even though I had still managed to find a few adventures on my own account, as you have heard.

As I struggled to find the right words, a man passed us. He was, as I thought, talking to himself. Torn Tomor glanced across. The fellow’s head was turned to his left shoulder and his right hand gestured vehemently as though he spoke to someone who walked at his side. He was a swordsman, with thick brown mustachios and that swagger of your true hyrpaktun.

“Oh,” said Torn, “that’s old Frandor the Altrak.”

“He looks—” I began cautiously.

“Don’t bother your head about old Frandor. He lost his twin brother in a battle seasons ago and still fancies he is with him. He talks to him all the time. Watch him at meals. He takes a phantom plate and fills it with phantom food and offers it to his brother — who lies moldering somewhere in Loh, and his ib is wandering the Ice Floes of Sicce seeking the sunny uplands beyond.”

“He is not makib,” I said. I guessed Frandor was not insane. He just had one of those little funny habits fighting men are prone to.

Many of the most renowned of fighting men had peculiarities that would, on this Earth, have landed them in lunatic asylums. Nath the Flimcop, when his name was shouted out at roll call, would answer with a roar: “Gone fishing!” No punishments could break him of the habit; and now that he was a paktun he could get away with that very mild example of irrational behavior. Some of the near nut cases among seasoned fighting men would shrivel your hair. Naghan the Thumb collected the right thumbs of those he defeated and he wore a belt of the shriveled things around his waist. He had swum ashore with the thumb belt. It had grown considerably since, and he was debating how best to loop it up into a double thickness.

Talk of the Strom’s Sacred Life Guard — Torn had said En Luxis Bliem Juruk, and Sacred Life Guard is a near enough translation. Kregish is particularly rich as a language, filled with colorful words. Bliem, for life, is merely one word, and the one chosen here. These fellows had fought well and loyally and I had thought the Praetorian Guard, the Imperial Guard, idea had died when I became emperor. But then, as you know, the Sword Watch had been formed. So, what with Frandor the Altrak wandering past carrying on an animated conversation with his dead twin, I was spared the embarrassment of stumbling out some words or other to Torn about my feelings on bodyguards.

And, by Vox! Bodyguards are a delightful invention when some of the crampths trying to kill me on Kregen take action!

On the next day my seasoned veterans caught that half regiment and tumbled the three pastangs into bloody ruin. When it was all over and we turned over the loot, as all good paktuns do, sharing one with

another, we were able to outfit our whole little force with armor. And, over the armor, these men wore their old yellow homemade jackets, still.

On the way back to our camp our outriders spotted a flier cruising over the island. Instantly we all faded into the bushes. Down here any air-service boats were operated by adherents of Strom Rosil. Peering up through the leaves, I studied the craft as she flitted past. She was a very small single-place job, and no doubt before the Time of Troubles had been some sporty fellow's pride and joy. Then I stared again, harder.

"Keep your heads down, you famblys!" Clardo the Clis rumbled the words. He had no need to, for these men were kampeons^[7]; but Clardo no doubt felt the need of expressing his feelings about cowering in the bushes.

I stood up. I walked out from the bushes. Lifting my arms and waving, I shouted.

"The emperor!" someone yelled from the bushes.

"Shastum!" came Clardo's irate voice. "The emperor knows what he is doing. But, by Vox, I do not!"

The flier circled and dropped down. With a sweet swoop of precise piloting she landed ten paces from me.

I knew that a score of bows were aimed for the pilot's heart.

He stepped out and threw up an arm in salute.

"Lahal, majister! Well met!"

"Lahal, Quardon," I said. "Well met indeed." I half turned and bellowed at the bushes. "Come on out. We have been found."

From the short flagstaff in the stern of the voller flew the union flag of Vallia. That yellow cross superimposed on a yellow saltire, all on a red field, had told me the airboat was friendly. Down here, she could only be looking for us on the advice of Quienyin. And, as you will readily perceive, none of these paktuns freshly returned to their native land would know that the flag they saw was their new flag of Vallia.

The splendid upshot of this meeting appeared a few burs after young Quardon, a rip-roaring lad of the Sword Watch, shot off in the voller. Soaring in over the trees, all her sails set, one of our flying ships from Vondium threw her long shadow from the suns. The paktuns gathered with me stared up and it was a wonderful sight to see their faces. The sails came in smartly and the ship let down through thin air, upheld and supported by her silver boxes that were, alas, in nowise as efficient as the silver boxes of the powered vollers.

Flags of Vondium flew from her, and men's heads dotted along the bulwarks. She was a fine craft, three-decked and with proper accommodation, and armed with varters and gros-varters. I own to a thrill, myself, as she touched down.

Well, the Lahals rang out and there was much clasping of hands and back-thumping. Many of the new Second Regiment of the Sword Watch were there. These fighting men had come ahunting me when Quienyin in lupu had sussed out our whereabouts.

“She is a fine, large craft, majister,” said Torn. “Finer, I daresay, than those with which Vallia thrashed Hamal at the Battle of Jholaix.”

“As good, Torn,” I said. “As good. Now let us all board and catch the breeze for home.”

Only two men looked glum. These were the brothers Niklaardu — for their home was Wenhartdrin itself.

“Have faith,” I said, speaking the easy words, but meaning them, and demanding a response in kind. “We will free all Vallia. You will return to your home in Wenhartdrin. Believe that.”

“Aye, majister. We believe it. But it will be a hard road.”

Sheer common sense and the practicalities of government told me that during my absence many changes must have taken place at home. I asked questions, an endless stream of them, and digested the answers. I preferred this method to allowing my comrades to babble on haphazardly telling me what jumped into their memories. All the relevant information I will retail as and when it affects this my narrative; suffice it to say now that Vallia was still an island sundered and divided, with factions warring for power, and the capital city of Vondium, still in our hands, standing like a rock in a raging sea.

With those silver boxes we had made ourselves in Vondium uplifting the ship, we sailed on. The boxes gave us no forward motive power, as the complete boxes did for the vollers; but they extended gripping, invisible holds into what the wise men called the ethero-magnetic lines of force and thus afforded the ship a kind of keel so that we could tack and make boards against the wind. Leaving Wenhartdrin, we sailed east over the sea with the lovely coastline of Vallia passing to the northward.

One item of news gave me an itchy feeling up the spine. Delia and I had discussed the designs of Queen Lushfymi of Lome upon our splendid son Drak. Drak was our eldest, the stern, sober, competent one of our sons. Queen Lush had been sent by Phu-Si-Yantong from her country in Pandahem to seduce, suborn, and destroy the old emperor. Instead, she had turned to us Vallians, and stood at our side against the Wizard of Loh. Now that the emperor was dead, Queen Lush was set on marrying Prince Drak, well knowing that one day she would thus become Empress of Vallia. Delia and I felt that Seg’s daughter, Silda, was the proper mate for Drak. Nothing openly had been said. This was one of those fractious knots of problems that bedevil men and women, whether they be puffed-up emperors or empresses, or shopkeepers with a business to care for.

By Zair! How I was looking forward to the day when I could throw down the burden of empire, and become once again plain Dray Prescott, of Esser Rarioch in Valka!

And, of course, Lord of Strombor and King of Djanduin and all manner of other splendid and sometimes mocking titles and estates.

The flutsmen circled out of the suns’ glare as I pondered the problems facing me. The trumpets pealed the alarm.

How marvelous to see the Sword Watch and these new comrades in their yellow jackets work together! Shafts rose from the flying ship, leaden bullets flew. The flutsmen, screeching, their mottled clumps of feathers flying, their weapons glittering, swooped upon us. It was a pretty set to. The flying argosy was called *Challenger*, registered in Vondium, and as she coursed through thin air with all her canvas pulling and the flutsmen spun and darted in to attack, I felt that here we had a microcosm of the evils inflicting

Vallia with agony, a prophecy of the struggles to come.

When the flutsmen saw their attacks were fruitless, what remained of them drew off. Their wings bright in the suns' light, the fluttrells swerved away. They sped in a long, defeated string northward for the coast.

“We are within a few dwaburs of Delphond, are we not?” I said to Captain Hando, the master.

A thin, razor-nosed man with a tufty chin beard, he screwed up his eyes. He had been a galleon captain, and had transferred to the new flying ships service.

“Aye, majister. Devil take the flutsmen. So near the capital! It is beyond bearing.”

I learned that implacable frontiers had been drawn between Delia's province of Delphond and Venavito, just to the west. Venavito was an Imperial Province. I should say, had been an Imperial Province. The Imperial Province of Vond, just to the north of Delphond, was in our hands; but Thadelm, to the west, was a battleground. I frowned at this news. We had fought battles in that part of the country and I had hoped we had cleared the enemy out.

“It is mostly a matter of border raids, majister,” I was told.

This area of action was altogether too close to the capital. Plans had been laid before I was summoned away by the Star Lords to my adventures in the Dawn Lands of Havilfar for an army to march to the southwest and liberate all that corner of the island. Why had not that been done? Why had the plans not been acted on? I could obtain no satisfactory answers to my questions on that score.

The answer that I guessed, at the time, to be near the truth, reflected my own caution and anxiety. The Lord Farris and the Presidio well knew my concern for dissipating our forces. We had the raging armies of clansmen in the northeast to deal with. We had Layco Jhansi and the Racters in the northwest. We had to pivot on a center to face all ways at once. If we committed too much in a single lone thrust, we exposed our backs. Yet, I was now convinced, we must strike, make a decisive move in one direction or another, and so begin the final campaigns.

When Captain Hando used the word “implacable” to describe the new frontier between Delphond and Venavito, I understood exactly what he meant. It was not an incongruous word. I stared after the fluttrells. But I did not give the order to swing the ship after them. Challenger continued on her course, sailing the sky, and the suns shone and the flutsmen vanished back to their camps and fortresses in Venavito.

Too much awaited me in Vondium. The state of the country had to be seen to first, before I could go harum-scarum after a pack of miserable sky-reivers, much as I would have liked to have done.

Even after all this time I know I have not done justice to the splendor, the beauty, the grandeur of Vondium. It is a human city, filled with warmth and light, and the brilliance of the vegetation, the silver-gleaming canals, the traceries of bridges, all the spires and towers, complement and enhance the city's welcome. At this time much of the proud city lay in ruins. Rebuilding went on spasmodically, when we could spare workmen and materials. So as Challenger came slanting down out of the sky and the topmen swarmed aloft to furl her canvas and Captain Hando brought her nearly in to a landing in her berth in the admiralty complex alongside the Varmondsweay Canal, I felt the shiver of appreciation for the great city despite her scars and dilapidations. Here, in the capital of the empire, was the place where I worked.

There is a word in Kregish — diashum — which I suppose can be translated as magnificent. Certainly, in those days of travail and struggle for the island empire, it was diashum to be a Vallian. And, while that was true, it was also remarkably easy to join the ranks of the diashum dead.

For me, this homecoming turned out to be dust and ashes.

Practically no one was left in the city of those to whom I wished so urgently to talk. Prince Drak and most of the army had flown and marched north to deal with a new and serious incursion of the clansmen. He had taken with him the majority of the Sword Watch, which explained, as I knew, why those who had flown for me in Challenger were from the Second Regiment. Seg Segutorio was already up there, locked in combat. Nath Nazabhan and the Phalanx were fully engaged. The Lord Farris had taken his air along. My son Jaidur, as usual, was missing. As for my daughters — Lela was Opaz knew where, and, likewise, Dayra was off conducting more mischief, I did not doubt. Inch sent news from the Black Mountains of violent affrays and ambushes and of a gradual clearance of his kovnate.

Filbarrka kept busy in the Filbarrka regions of the Blue Mountains. A number of my Valkan regiments had arrived in the city and had incontinently gone north. Jilian had taken her Battle Maidens off to the wars again. Many another fine comrade you have met in my narrative had gone.

So, as you can see, I felt down.

Yet, despite all this, I was fully conscious of the fact that I could not go haring up north after them. I had been accused by Tyfar of being overhasty in running on a leem's tracks. Those people up there, they could handle the problems. I was firmly convinced that all that had happened to me since I had left Vondium bore most strongly on what was afoot. Very little, if anything, had happened by chance. Everything was all a part of that master plan I now knew to be guiding my footsteps on Kregen.

Even Deb-Lu-Quienyin had gone. I was cheered to hear that Khe-Hi-Bjanching had returned, and the two Wizards of Loh, so I gathered from the palace staff, had warmed one to the other. Khe-Hi knew of Deb-Lu's reputation. They would work together.

So... In all this... Yes. Delia. Where the hell had she gone to this time?

Chapter eighteen

Silda

The pouch containing the brooch and the baubles I had retrieved from the Moder and which I had retained through my adventures now lay on the desk before me. I sat in that small room in the imperial palace and I glowered at the brooch, at the shelves of books, and the maps that, as ever, mocked me from the walls, at the arms rack. In this room I had done a deal of work and, by Vox, was to do a damned deal more.

“Yes, yes,” I said to Chuktar Naroku, “you have taken employment with the Prince Majister and I shall honor the pledge.”

Chuktar Naroku rubbed his thumb along his right tusk. His three-inch-long tusks, thrusting up arrogantly from the corners of his mouth, were banded in gold. His oily yellow skin glistened in the radiance of the samphron-oil lamps. His pigtail hung down his back. He filled his armor. He sweated. He was not apim like me, he was a diff, a Chulik out of the Chulik islands off the east coast of Balintol. Reared from birth

to the handling of weapons, Chuliks are justly respected and feared as mercenaries. Of humanity...? Well, they do have a modicum more of that precious commodity than, say, the damned Katakis.

The diff at Naroku's side coughed. He had a long-nosed canine face, and his air of eternal supercilious superiority was guaranteed to get up the snub nose of diff and apim alike.

"My archers, majister—" began this Chuktar Unstabi.

"The same goes for you, too," I said. I own my voice snapped a trifle pettishly. Chuktar Unstabi was an Undurker, from the Undurkor islands south of the huge promontory of Persinia. Both these Chuktars, which is a rank something like junior general, brigadier, were hyrpaktuns. They were costing my treasury good red gold.

My son, Prince Drak, had contracted to hire mercenaries to wage the war against the mercenaries hired by our enemies.

Fume though I might, I had to honor his pledge. But, by the Black Chunkrah! I said to myself. I'll have something to say to that son of mine when I see him, by Krun!

I looked sharply at the man who stood silently a little to one side of the two hyrpaktuns. He was a Vallian. He wore a fancy new uniform, all buff and red, with a solid iron breastplate. His shrewd, weather-beaten face conveyed the sense of a man of gravitas, and the brown Vallian eyes were partially hidden by down-drooping lids. He wore a rapier and main gauche. The two mercenaries also wore their weapons.

"And now you feel you are fit to march to the southwest, Kov Vodun?"

"Yes, majister, with your blessing." Kov Vodun Alloran had lost his kovnate of Kaldi, right in the toe of southwest Vallia, to that rast Strom Rosil Yasi. Kov Vodun kept up an unceasing barrage of contumely against our enemies, and lusted after returning and hanging every last one from the tallest tree branches he could find.

A number of invasions had been launched through his province. We had resisted and now, with Kov Vodun to prod us into action, we felt the time was ripe for us to return in strength and kick Yasi and his foul henchmen out of our land. The trouble was, and this trouble explained our experiences after *Mancha of Tlinganden* had been wrecked, our army had been forced to march north. The strength left in the capital was now rather too weak for my liking. But, still and all, that southwest rankled...

"If we can clear all the southwest," I said, "it will free our hands for the sterner tasks ahead."

Kov Vodun snapped erect. "Stern tasks, majister?"

I sighed. Trust me to say the wrong thing.

"Only in matters of number, kov; not in anything else."

"I see."

A prickly customer, Kov Vodun Alloran. Very popular with the ladies, with his tales of guerrilla action from the hills. Alloran had done well at the Battle of Kanarsmot, and afterwards in that fraught action to take the fortress where Inch had rejoined us. Kov Vodun Alloran had been chosen by the Presidio, with

the blessings of Prince Drak and the Lord Farris, to lead the Army of the Southwest to liberate that area of our land.

“Very well,” I said. “My mind is made up. You have the nucleus of the forces earmarked for you—”

“The most of which were taken away!” said Alloran, with a prickly nastiness. He had regained a very great measure of his own self-esteem since escaping from his kovnate and fighting with us here. I nodded.

“That is true. And, no doubt, that is why the Prince Majister contracted to engage paktuns. You will have a tidy army, Kov Vodun, to lead into your kovnate.”

He moved his shoulders under the armor and the polished iron caught the light and glittered. “There is the matter of the Fourth Phalanx, majister. I was promised the Fourth, and one wing was taken from me and flown north. I now have only one Kerchuri, and it is in my mind I should take a Kerchuri from the Fifth.”

My old blade comrade Nath Nazabhan had been busy, and besides finishing the raising of the Fourth, he had started the Fifth. Now a phalanx is a wonderful engine of destruction and the pikemen in the files, the brumbytes, of whom there are 10,368, are flanked by the axe and halberd men, the Hakkodin, of whom there are 1,728. There are also strong bodies of archers, and lads to strew caltrops and run with chevaux de frises. A whole lot of men are locked up in a phalanx.

I stirred the piece of paper on my desk. In Drak’s handwriting the composition of the proposed Army of the SW stared me in the face. Drak had written down: “One Kerchuri.” A Kerchuri is a wing of the phalanx, one-half. I looked up at Alloran.

“Two Kerchuris, kov?”

“Aye, majister, two.”

“But the Fifth Phalanx is green raw.”

“Their Ninth Kerchuri is ready. And, by Vox, by the time I have marched them a sennight or so they’ll smarten up!”

“You would leave Vondium with only the Tenth Kerchuri?”

“You need, with your permission, majister, archers to defend city walls.”

That was only half true.

I wondered if he was going to bargain his paktun archers, these Undurkers, for the Ninth Kerchuri. It was, in my view, no bargain at all.

I said, “What do your spies report of the strength and composition of Strom Rosil’s army?”

“Scattered,” he said at once. “He will have time to scrape his men together before I reach him, of course, after the initial breakthrough battles. He has something of the order of thirty thousand he can concentrate with reasonable speed.

Give him two of the Moons of the Twins and he will have fifty or more.”

I stirred Drak's list again.

"If you move with speed, you can catch him before he concentrates his full strength."

"That is my plan."

"And the composition?"

Alloran smiled. "Mercenaries of varying quality. A normal mix of infantry and cavalry. He has also masichieri and aragorn. They hardly count."

I looked up suspiciously. "Never underrate those rasts."

"I am thinking, majister, of First Kanarsmot."

"We surprised them there."

"And I," said Kov Vodun, "shall surprise the cramphs again."

The decision I was being called on to make was your everyday, normal, ulcer-breeding decision facing emperors. If I allowed Kov Vodun to take the army as listed by Drak, less those units detached for duty in the north, plus the Ninth Kerchuri, there would be a skeletal force left in the city. I looked up. I know my face must have looked like a chunk of granite dredged from a thousand-season-old wreck.

The Southwest had to be cleared, the risk accepted. He could take a full phalanx, the Eighth and Ninth Kerchuris. The commands would mesh. Get the job done fast. I told him my decision. Then I said, "Very well. You will take upwards of forty thousand. That should suffice."

His down-drooping lids lifted, then he smiled, and nodded his satisfaction with what he had salvaged.

"The original army was to have been upwards of sixty thousand, majister. But I will do what I must with these straitened circumstances."

Just as I was thinking this was a damned boorish way of carrying on, he added, "And I give you my thanks, majister."

"May Opaz go with you and guide you in the forthcoming battles."

So off he went with his paktuns and in came Enevon Ob-Eye, my chief staylor, a man whom I trusted and who had a head for figures and lists, and the warrants were prepared.

"You leave the city perilously undefended, majis."

"Aye, Enevon. But while we attack in the north and attack in the southwest, we have the cramphs off balance. They'll be too busy defending themselves to attack us here."

The heavy atmosphere in the room during the interview with Alloran seemed to have gone with him. Enevon reported that the swarths I had ordered collected were stabled in the sleeth's stables at the merezo, and the lads of the racing track were caring for their new charges. My experiences in the Humped Land with those damned swarthen had convinced me a few regiments of swarth-mounted

cavalry would not come amiss.

So, as you will see, I was in the thick of this paperwork and caring for it only insofar as I worked for Vallia and Delia. I just could not twine my thoughts around the whereabouts and well-being of Delia. She was off with the Sisters of the Rose, doing marvelous and secret wonders, and no doubt having a tremendous time. As ever, unless I felt that peculiar sense of urgency and disaster, I would not request a Wizard of Loh to go into lupu and spy out Delia's whereabouts.

During this period both Quienyin and Bjanching paid a courtesy call on me. Oh, they were both up north; but their ghostly apparitions showed up in my room, and this comforted me considerably, as you may well imagine. Paying polite visits by these supernatural means, and taking it all as a matter of course, came with an all-standing kind of refresher to me, even if to them it was all in the day's business.

One visit gave me immense pleasure. Silda, Seg's daughter, called on me. She couldn't stop, she said; she was on her way through. I did not inquire. She was about business for the SoR, that was clear.

Silda had grown more beautiful than ever, a bright, charming, happy girl who mentioned the death of her mother just the once. She was also very strong-minded. I could see that. There was in her much of Seg's greatness of character, and also a deal of her mother's outgoing warmth which in Silda was not inevitably brought to disaster. If I had to choose a daughter-in-law — and, by Vox, I did not have to, not with Drak making up his own mind! — there was no one I could think of to surpass Silda Segutorio.

She said her brother, Dray Segutorio, was now a hyrpaktun and had only just learned of the troubles afflicting us. He was on his way home.

"The quicker he gets here the better. We need every trained professional we can lay hands on. And I'm not talking about mercenaries. Young Drak has—" And I stopped. I would not too openly criticize Drak in front of Silda. I had seen the way her eyebrows went up, and the purse to those delectable lips, the flush of color along her cheeks. Silda would fight for Drak, aye, fight against his own father! And the luck of Opaz with her!

Then she said, with an abrupt switch of mood, "Have you seen Queen Lushfymi of Lome since you got back, Uncle Dray?"

"I have not. And it's about time you stopped calling me Uncle Dray. By Zair! It makes me feel a million years old."

"I beg your pardon, majister. Of course—"

"Silda, Silda! Just knock it off."

Her eyebrows flicked up again. Damned attractive, those eyebrows, like the rest of her.

"I mean, knock off the uncle bit. As for Queen Lush — I wish she'd go home to Lome. But of course, poor woman, she can't. Not with Yantong ready to put her down if she does."

"Poor woman!" flared Silda. Then, calmly: "It must be hard for her. Aunt Delia's father meant a great deal to Queen Lushfymi. But do you really think Yantong is in Pandahem?"

"I do not know and I wonder if I really do want to know. No. No, I'd like to know. Then perhaps we could — well, all that is wishful thinking. Even Quienyin doesn't know where Yantong hides out and tries

to run the world.”

Then we talked of more personal matters. When she left with my good wishes and the last Remberees and her refusal of any aid in particular she might need — independent girl — I reflected that not once had she called Lushfymi Queen Lush.

What she had told me, and been at pains to tell me without acknowledging that she had told me, was that Delia was all right, was safe and well, and was chafing to get home. So I could draw a deep breath and soldier on alone. The passing on of that information, I saw, had been the reason for Silda’s visit.

I wondered, with a pang, if Delia knew, or if Silda had brought me the news of her own volition. That would be like Silda.

Kov Vodun was burning to be about his business of clearing up the southwest. I rode faithful old Grumbleknees out to Voxyri Drinnik to see the advance guard off. They were flying out. They would be reinforced as fast as the ships of the air could turn around. The breeze, the Todalpheme had told us, would stay fair, giving a good stiff-sailing course to be steered out and back.

Apart from the Eighth Kerchuri of the Fourth Phalanx and the Ninth Kerchuri of the Fifth, Kov Vodun was taking five thousand churgurs, three thousand archers and five thousand kreutzin, the light infantry and skirmishers. Many of these infantry were mercenaries. For cavalry I had let him have three regiments of totrix heavies, and five divisions of a mixed force of totrix and zorca lancers and archers. He took forty vartars, the efficient ballistae of Kregen, wheeled and drawn by a variety of draught animals.

Enevon Ob-Eye rode with me and wore a gloomy face.

“All these fine men leaving the city,” he said. He shook his head. “Pray Opaz nothing untoward occurs.”

“Long before the enemy can even think of reacting and mounting an attack on us,” I told him, “the armies will be victorious and return. You’ll see.”

I was thinking of the foemen we knew, up in the north and east and down in the southwest.

The life of the city roared on, even though to me the place appeared empty. There were many folk who were still civilians, going about their daily tasks and providing the sinews to keep the army moving and supplied and fed. Every day men would march in having toiled for many dwaburs out of the invaded territories. Most of them simply wanted to get into a uniform and take up a weapon and go right back and have a bash at the occupiers. We had to instill in them the notion that they must be trained and drilled and hardened before they could even think of returning.

Turko took a large hand in the hardening of the men. He might be a Khamorro and therefore far more deadly with empty hands than with a weapon; but he ran these raw recruits ragged and built them up not only in physique but in spiritual confidence.

Many men saw me every day over matters touching every part of daily life, and of these, some you have met and many there are whom I grew to know better and who feature in later episodes. And then, one day, a voller appeared over the palace. She was a large craft, and she flew the Vallian tresh, blazing under the suns, and also my own battle flag, Old Superb. I looked up and I frowned. I had a good idea of what this was all about, I had expected it, and I knew what course I was going to take and how confoundedly angry that was going to make everyone. I was not looking forward at all to the coming scene.

But, I admit, I did look with great joy upon the tough, fierce men who crowded from the valler and advanced upon me as I stood upon the high landing platform to greet them.

You know them, you know their lineaments and much of their history. These men were the Emperor's Sword Watch. They were the ruffianly spirits of my Choice Band. Cleitar the Standard stepped forward.

“Majister!” he bellowed. “They have elected me as spokesman.”

I gave him no further time. “Lahal to you all!” I know I looked fierce. These men and I had been through perilous times together. “I understood there was fighting in the north. Battles against our foemen. What? Have you deserted in the face of the foe?”

Their faces, wreathed in smiles, brilliant at seeing me again, were cast down in an instant. They looked puzzled and hurt.

“Majister!” stammered Cleitar. “Us? Run away...?”

Dorgo the Clis stepped forward, his scar a vivid slash across his face. “Majister! We return to where we belong!”

“Aye!” bellowed Targon the Tapster. “We are the Emperor's Sword Watch!”

“We stand always at your side, majister!” roared Naghan ti Lodkwara. “You cannot send us away!”

The others joined in then and the air filled with protests and lurid oaths. They were all incensed at my obtuseness. So I had to explain.

“Prince Drak, the Prince Majister, commands the Army of the Northeast. He is in the forefront of the battle. Your duty is to him at this time.”

Well, as I say, I had not relished the scene and it turned out as I had gloomily suspected. In the end they saw that I meant what I said. They shuffled. They protested. But at last they all returned to the valler and observed the fantamyrh and so took off to return to Drak. But they did not do this right away. Oh, no. We spent a raucous night drinking and singing and telling the old stories before they left bright and early and mostly hung over. That, at the least, gave me a single bright spot to put alongside the visit from Silda — and one or two other timely interruptions to the everyday slog of work.

And, in a sense, that decided me on a project I had long contemplated. The Second Regiment of the Sword Watch, mainly brave and brilliant young men still under training, were all very well. There were the paktuns from the sea in their tromp-colored uniforms. Now they were called the Emperor's Yellow Jackets. But I looked at the empty barracks and the thinness of the morning parades. So, I went to see the Chief Assassin of Vondium.

Chapter nineteen

Of Assassins, Dynasties, and Invasions

Perhaps I had been over-hasty in sending the Sword Watch back to keep an eye on my son Drak.

“I did warn you, majister, that contracts had been placed for you. We have had to deal with two such

attempts — but you were not in the city at the time, and that made it easier.”

Nath the Knife, the chief of assassins, styled the Aleygyn of the Stikitches, studied me through the eyeholes of his steel mask. We both sat at the table under the arch of the Gate of Skulls this time, and there was no need for either of us to attempt to gain stature by sitting or standing.

“Have the builders been working as I promised?”

“Yes, majister.” His words were plain enough; but his meaning was difficult to judge. “They work well. Our houses grow.”

Drak’s City, the oldest part of Vondium, was a law unto itself. Here the rascals, the scalawags, the thieves, and the disaffected lived. The aid from the rest of the city might have been aimed at preventing disease; but it was in a very real sense a humanitarian gesture. Within the walls life bustled along. Everybody scratched a living somehow. Nath the Knife had positioned his bodyguard in the Kyro of Lost Souls, as men of the Sword Watch and the Yellow Jackets waited on me on the outside.

“You will not tell me who is letting out these contracts, Aleygyn? That would be against your code of honor?”

“You know it would.”

We talked for a space of the city and the rebuilding and skirted the tricky business of the payment to kill me, and then I said, “If I mention the word kreutzin, Aleygyn, you, as an educated man, will know what I mean, even if some vosk-skulls might not.”

“I understand.” The kreutzin are the light infantry, the voltigeurs, who skirmish ahead of the line. “I promised to send some of my young men to join your army—”

“Not my army, Aleygyn. The Army of Vallia.”

“I think not. You cannot but my young men for Vallia with bricks and mortar, or with medicines.”

I looked at him and I kept the fury out of my face.

“Some idiots might call you an old warrior, Nath the Knife. I think you are—”

“I am not foresworn. My honor is a stikiche’s honor!” He spoke up briskly. Damned difficult to carry on a conversation with a fellow who wears a steel mask over his face! “I will send my young men to serve you. They will serve the Emperor of Vallia. There is a difference. And, as you see, there are reasons for this nicety in our arrangements.”

I could see that, all right. By the disgusting diseased right eyeball of Makki Grodno! And then I laughed. The thought struck me that if Drak sat here, in conversation with an assassin, his rectitude and composure would fight like merry hell with all his natural fighting instincts. But, he’d learn. By Krun, but he’d learn what being an emperor meant.

“You mean,” I said, when I’d had my laugh out, “you are a pack of rogues in here, hulus, rascals and fools, thieves, stikitches — and the rest of respectable Vondium—”

“Precisely. They would burn us out if they could.”

“They could, Nath the Knife. They could. But not while you and I talk, man to man.”

That shook him. For centuries the sanctity of Drak’s City as a Kingdom of Thieves had been unwritten law.

“Go on, Aleygyn. You will send your young men to serve me? I need them. We are overstrained—”

“You told me you would not hire mercenaries. Yet paktuns walk the streets of Vondium and march with the army.” The steel mask glittered. “We are pleased. Their pockets are full.” If he smiled that confounded mask hid all. “You changed your tune there, majister.”

“Temporarily only. A matter of policy.” I was not prepared to admit to this stikitch that my son Drak had done this thing.

“I have made arrangements. The young men will report to you and your Deldars at the barracks you appoint.”

“My Deldars are intolerant drill masters. But your young men will rise to become Deldars, in their turn. Even kreutzin must learn drill and discipline in my army.”

“Agreed. I will tell them so.”

After a few more words I rose to go. Grumbleknees waited, his single spiral horn jutting proudly. I turned back, my fists gripping the reins, my booted foot in the stirrup.

“These contracts, Aleygyn. If I was in the habit of letting contracts with stikitches, I think the names of Kov Colun Mogper of Mursham, and Zankov, illegitimate son of the High Kov of Sakwara, might prove lucrative.”

That steel mask went back. His gloved hand, with the ornate ring outside the glove, clenched.

I swung up into the saddle and Grumbleknees walked gently forward out of the shadow of the Gate of Skulls.

“Remberree, Aleygyn.”

“Remberree, majister.”

Yes, I reflected as, followed by my men, we trotted back to the palace, that laugh had been worth it. What, indeed, would Drak have made of his father the emperor talking to a damned assassin? Yet I felt sure Drak would see the difference between using Vallian assassins in our army and hiring mercenaries. I do not care over much for stikitches, having had one or two sprightly measures with them; but by the time my Deldars got through with them, they’d know they’d been punched, drilled, and bored, by Vox! Then, they’d be soldiers first, and I could hope would never return to their despicable trade — if they lived.

There are people who say, and I go some way in agreement with them, that a soldier’s trade is despicable. But if your home is about to be burned down and your family butchered, a fellow tends to want to do something about that — at least on Kregen.

Despite my big talk of drill sergeants, we were still short of veterans who could train up the new armies

we needed. The Emperor's Yellow Jackets were hardened professionals. They had many military skills in their ranks. They took the newly arrived young men from Drak's City and trained them up. Many of these limber young rascals were not assassins, of course, many being thieves and swearing by Diproo the Nimble-Fingered. Many were simply poor lads with no prospects in life. We fed them and clothed them in the yellow jackets and made full use of their special skills. I didn't give a fig about training them merely as light infantry. They would learn to handle all the weapons a fighting man may manipulate, and would be employed as we saw fit. They welcomed that as a proof of their own quality.

Thankfully, my tough paktuns expressed no aversion to serving alongside these newcomers. Truth to tell, many an old friendship was renewed...

And, also, old enmities. But only three men were found dead in a ditch or in their quarters; two from Drak's City and one paktun. That seemed to let the spleen of the force out for good, thanks be to Opaz.

News was received from Alloran that he had fought a skirmish and cleared his front. I wished I had more men to dispatch to secure the rear areas; and managed to scrape up two regiments of spearmen. On the next day different news came in.

Enevon Ob-Eye walked into my room very quietly. He made no great fuss about it. He was entitled to rave and accuse.

He said, "Majister, news has just arrived of an army marching and flying south out of Vindelka. They press over the borders of Orvendel. The land is being put to the torch. The people cry out for help. Orvendel, majister," he said, and turned the blade in the wound, "is an Imperial Province. They are your people. And the southern border of Orvendel is but forty dwaburs from Vondium."

By this time I knew the map of Vallia; it was not so much engraved on my brain as burned on my heart.

Despite that, my gaze fastened on those infuriating maps adorning the walls. Oh, yes, he had worked it beautifully, the cramp.

"Layco Jhansi?"

"No, majis. We do not think so. The scouts have him located still in his own kovnate."

That made me think. Layco Jhansi, the old emperor's chief minister, had proved a traitor. Now he fought the Racters, the one-time most powerful political party, who were penned up in the northwest, north of Jhansi. But, if he had not sent this army to attack us while we were weak, who had?

"The scouts report the presence in this army of those we know. Tarek Malervo Norgoth — you remember him, majis. He headed the deputation from Jhansi you sent packing with a zorca hoof up their rumps?"

"I remember, Enevon." A Tarek is a rank of the minor nobility. I guessed this fat and pompous Norgoth with the spindly legs was bucking for an increase in his patents of nobility. But the news reassured me even as I raged at the iniquities being committed up there by Jhansi's men. Orvendel is a pretty province. Many of her sons served in the army. I could not allow the destruction to go on unchecked, could I?

When my comrades of the Sword Watch had flown in to Vondium, they had left forces still with Drak. Volodu the Lungs, the chief trumpeter, and Korero the Shield, had remained. The expected confrontation of Korero and Turko had not taken place. I suddenly felt a pang, a hunger for my blade comrades to be

with me now. And — I had been on the point of going off to Hyrklana to fetch out Balass and Oby and Tilly! Just as well the Hyrklanian trip had been postponed...

These weakling thoughts must be pushed aside. What I had to do was perfectly clear to me. Even if, like King Harold of England, it led to disaster, I could not halt myself. And, anyway, the situations were not quite the same. A last voller to Drak would bring in fighting men to garrison Vondium. And I knew, as is obvious, that the time would not allow that simple a solution. I had to face up to Malervo Norgoth with what men I had, and we would fight. Win or lose we would halt this raid. After that, if we moldered in our graves, time would have been bought.

“Jhansi would not, I think, place an army into the hands of Norgoth without a general to guide him?”

Enevon nodded. “There is a Kapt with them. A Kapt Hangrol. He has the command. Naghan Vanki’s spies are sure.” He paused. Naghan Vanki was the empire’s chief spy-master. But Enevon went on with a bite in his voice. “His name is Hangrol ham Thanoth.”

I glared. I felt the fury rising. “A damned Hamalese!”

“Aye, majis.”

“Well, that settles it. Write the orders. We’ll call out everyone who is able to march instanter.” I stabbed the map with a fierce finger. “Ovalia. Every ship that will fly will take us to Ovalia. That’s the key. The city must be held.”

“Quidang, majis!” Enevon grasped essentials at once.

The map glowed with color. It showed the River of Shining Spears running southeast from the Blue Mountains to join the Great River, She of the Fecundity. To the north of the fork my Imperial Province of Bryvondrin stretched broad and rich and in our hands. Northwest of Bryvondrin lay Orvendel. If Jhansi’s men broke through, overwhelmed the city of Ovalia, the raid would turn into a major attack, a dagger thrust at Vondium, the proud city herself. We had to muster our forces, what we had of them, fly to Ovalia, set down, and smash the living daylights out of this Opaz-forsaken cramp of a Hamalese general and his army. As for Malervo Norgoth, he was quite obviously Jhansi’s man of the spot, a kind of commissar, and we’d hang him high with his toes all adangle if we caught him...

Because the majestic canal system of Vallia is so efficient and extensive, roads in the island were atrocious at this time. We’d have to fly out with what we could. A reserve force could follow. They might be there to continue the victorious pursuit. They might have to fight a stern rearguard action.

As to the forces available... Just about everybody had gone north to fight with the Army of the Northeast. It appeared to me to be the fashionable thing, the in thing, to serve in that army alongside the Prince Majister. Some of the people up there, well, when I heard their names I had to smile my bleak old grimace that passes for a smile. By Zair! But some right popinjays had ridden off gallantly to be seen with the Prince Majister. Men who had contumed me as a hairy unwashed clansman now thronged about my son. My own pride in Drak told me that he would be level-headed enough to see through all the flattery and the flummery. At least, by Krun, I hoped so!

And, to be truthful, there was far more of trust in Drak than could be expressed by mere hope.

On the same day that the news of Layco Jhansi’s raid reached us our vanguard flew off for Ovalia.

They flew in all the vollers we had. A regiment of churgurs, sword and shield men, and a regiment of archers, almost one thousand men. The swods in the ranks of these regiments were old hands, they had served with me before and would have to form one of the hard cores of the little force. The other hard core, it goes without saying, would be the Tenth Kerchuri. The pikes would have to stand, and hold, and charge, as they had been trained, and no one must allow doubt to creep in that these men, these brumbytes wielding their pikes in the files, were green, raw, and had seen no action.

Like that half-blinded man standing on the center and seeking to strike out in all directions at those who attacked him, we of Vondium had lashed out northeast and southwest. And Layco Jhansi had seized his chance to raid us from the northwest. It was perfectly clear by the presence of a Hamalese Kapt with his forces that the dirty finger of Hamal was busy stirring up this pot. The fight would be tough; we'd be facing regulars, possibly some of the iron legions of Hamal, as well as the screaming fanatical irregulars of Jhansi's cowed provinces.

The regiments from the Fifth Brigade of churgurs and the Ninth Brigade of archers who had flown off had served with me at the Battles of Kanarsmot. They were good men. The remaining two regiments of each Brigade, together with a motley bunch of spearmen, slingers, and axemen waited transportation. The flying ships of the air gathered on Voxyri Drinnik and that broad space of open land seethed with all the commotion of an army embarking. I call it an army; well, yes, it was in spirit and composition and determination if not in numbers.

The Presidio met to deliberate, as was their wont, and I spent a couple of precious burs speaking to them from the rostrum, impressing on these grave senators the need for cool heads in this time of crisis. They ran the country and knew of my dreams of the kind of country I had been asked to bring into being by the people who had called me. There was a little of the wheeling and dealing that had characterized the reign of the old emperor still in evidence; but these men were a new breed of senator. Naghan Strandar, whom I trusted, stood up to reply, and he astonished me.

"Majister! You have made us, and we are mindful of that." The council chamber in the Villa of Vennar echoed to his words, and the rows of soberly clad men listened with composed faces. "The old emperor is dead and with him died the Valhan Dynasty. You are the first of the Prescott Dynasty of Vallia. We shall serve you and the country no matter what transpires."

I sat in the seat reserved for the emperor and listened as he went on for a short space in these terms. I own I found this idea amazing. Of course, I had begun a new dynasty in Vallia. It was something I had scarcely even acknowledged. And, as you who understand the Kregish will perceive, Valhan had a special meaning. The upshot of that was a vow of total allegiance to Vallia, and a determination to bring every last ounce of energy and will to the struggle.

Going back to see the leathery swods boarding the vessels, I reflected that great words do, very often, deserve great deeds. And, as Erithor, the great poet of Valka, would have said, the opposite holds true, also.

Two men attempted to desert and were caught and dragged before me as I sat Grumbleknees with the dust blowing and the pandemonium bellowing up all over the Drinnik.

"Let them go," I said. "Put them to work baking bread, or cleaning sewers, or forging weapons."

"But, majister!" said Chuktar Vogan, commanding the Ninth Brigade of archers. "They should be hanged up high so that all men may see the miserable cramphs!"

“Then they would be dead, Vogan. Mayhap, after a dwabur or so of sewers, they might rescind their decision to desert.”

Chuktar Vogan saw only the obvious, brutal side of that. He guffawed, and slapped his thigh, and allowed the emperor was blessed with brains from Opaz himself.

I had no time to try to explain that any man had the right to feel fear at battles to come, that running away was a natural and healthy thing to do if you wanted to keep your skin intact, that simple brutal warfare was a horrendous thing which no civilized man should have to endure. He would not have grasped those concepts, not with a raging pack of Hamalese coming down to burn his home and slay his family. I could see both sides of this pathetic human problem, and sighed, and could see no way out for me other than doing what I was doing, and hoping for the best in the sweet light of the Invisible Twins.

I suppose that the agonies a woman suffers in anticipation of childbirth, and then in the birth itself, are analogous to the agonies a man suffers in the anticipation of battle, and the ghastly event itself. Something like, perhaps...

“My Val!” said Orlon Sangar ti Deliasmot. “Majister, I’m delighted to get the chance of showing you what my lads can do. By Vox, I thought I’d rot in Vondium forever.”

Orlon Sangar came from Delphond. He was the Kerchurivax in command of the Tenth Kerchuri. He had risen through the ranks in the Third, and the Third was by way of being a special phalanx to Nath Nazabhan and me. I nodded.

“Your lads will do well, Orlon. I just wish we had more of you.”

He made the expected reply. Well, that answer has been given many and many a time before a battle, on two worlds...

The brumbytes handed in their pikes as they boarded. These long weapons were bundled and then lashed to the ships. The men kept their shields, and they hung them on the bulwarks in fine style. There was a deal of the horseplay and raucous coarse humor inevitably surrounding the movement of green troops. These men had been trained hard; but only the faxuls of the front ranks, and not all of them, had seen active service. A wisp of nerves can be concealed beneath a huge guffaw and a practical joke.

Essential though the religious ceremony honoring and imploring Opaz most certainly was, I own — a coarse, profane, swearing kind of fellow as I am — I chafed to have it over with and get the troops airborne. When the prayers for the safekeeping of the men and for the victory were offered up and the voice of the chief priest rang to silence, a deep stillness held all Voxyri Drinnik. Absolute quiet for ten long heartbeats proved how wrong I was, how much the feelings of the soldiers had been affected, how needful this was. Then a cough, the scrape of a boot, and the Deldars yelling, the shrill notes of trumpets.

Even the flags began to rustle again.

One of the texts chosen as suitable for the service was the well-known advice from the Instructions to Novices. This says, in effect: “Be Brave, Bold, and Resourceful; Fret not on the Hazard.” A fair comparison may be made with Aristophanes in *The Frogs*, where he uses words of similar meaning and intent. Easy to give advice and harder than keeping warm on the Ice Floes of Sicce to take it. I had accepted the risk and, in theory, should now push all thoughts of the hazard from my mind and go forward in bold confidence. But, while that might be fine for your valiant and daring prince, for me, plain Dray Prescott, the doubts and premonitions of disaster remained. Weak, of course; but in my usual

fashion I put a tough face on my ugly old beakhead and concealed the torture and turmoil in my head from my comrades.

Then an event occurred which the doubter would take merely as a trifle from a Fairy Story. One of the new regiments of zorca archers was loading. The animals were being led up the gangplanks, and the cavalymen were in the usual lather, yelling, pushing, pulling, cajoling the zorcas into the ship. A commotion greater than usual began as I cantered by. I was riding Fango, a fine bay zorca, who had lost a hand-breadth of his spiral horn at some time in his career. The imperial stables had fashioned a new horn tip for him from Chemnite ivory, neatly banded with gold. Grumbleknees and Snowy were having the day off.

“Catch him!” The shouts spurted up. “Grab the beast!”

Cavalrymen went spinning every which way, their red uniforms dusty and stained already. A monstrous black shape reared high, hooves lashing, nostrils crimson, seeming to breathe fire. His eyes glittered in the light of the suns. Down he came, roaring down the ramp, scattering folk like ninepins. Straight up to me he galloped, horn up, tail flying, mane splendid. Fango backed off, alarmed, thinking he was being attacked.

“Majister!” They were yelling. “The emperor is in danger from a wild beast! Shoot the zorca down!”

“Hold!” I bellowed. I really let go a shout that rattled the teeth in their heads. I gentled Fango and as the huge black zorca crashed alongside I laid a hand on his head.

“Shadow!”

And Shadow threw up his head and whinnied, glorious in his shining splendor.

Shadow... A great-hearted zorca with whom I had built a special relationship of trust and affection, and whom I had thought lost in Vondium, and yet, and yet... Always I had known we would meet again.

That was quickly sorted out. I was told Shadow had been found in Vond, dwaburs away from Vondium, and in our eternal quest for quality zorcas had been brought into the army. He had always given trouble, being highly independent-minded. The Jiktar to whom he had been issued sighed with relief when I said, “He is my zorca, Jiktar.” I dismounted. “Take Fango. He is a first-class animal and you will joy in him.”

“Quidang, majister!”

The saddles were swiftly changed and I stuck my boot into the stirrup and mounted up on Shadow. He showed his pleasure. We had been through many adventures together; we would go through many more. But in the heady moment of reunion all those perils could wait.

Then another little crisis developed. Long lines of yellow-clad men marched toward the gangplanks. I frowned.

“Larghos the Sko-Handed!” I bellowed.

Larghos came over, beaming. His shoulder wings stuck out far more than regulations allowed. He looked fit and tough.

“Where, Larghos, do you think you are going with those coys?” A coy is a recruit, a greenhorn.

“Coys, majister! Are not they damned assassins? They will fight! By Vox! I will see to that!”

I sighed. What would you do with these fellows?

Nath the Knife had sent us an initial seven hundred young men. They could fight, of course. But they weren't swods.

Larghos saw my face. “You would not deny them the glory?”

About to break out into bitter invective against this stupid, shuddery, bloody idea of glory, I held my tongue. If our country was in the dire danger we all knew her to be, why should not these fine young men go off to fight? Why should they? Because it was their duty? Because they would be less than men if they did not? No — the reasons lay deeper than that...

Larghos's slingers went on boarding. Drill the Eye shouted at his bowmen to carry on and rolled over, spluttering, to join his comrade. When Clardo the Clis, his scar burning, nudged his zorca across, I knew I was beaten.

“You are taking the Sword Watch,” pointed out Clardo, with consummate cunning. “They are coys, also—”

“Not quite,” I said.

“Nor neither are we!”

“Very well. You'll have to skirmish forward. Your drill is not up to formed standards yet.”

“Aye, majister. We'll skirmish the zigging Hamalian tripes out!”

So that was settled. The Emperor's Yellow Jackets, the EYJ, joined the Second Regiment of the Emperor's Sword Watch, the 2ESW, aboard the flying ships. Both men and swods would be created out of the lads embarking. That is life.

The return of the vollers enabled me to send off part of a regiment of totrix heavies. They would still arrive ahead of the sailing fliers. Other units went up to the northwest. Regular reports told me Ovalia was filling up, and the locals were helping with energy.

Consigning the rest of the paperwork to Enevon, confiding the city once again to Naghan Strandar and the Presidio, I collected the last of the troops we were taking and with Turko stepped aboard the voller, observing the fantamyrrh, and took off for Ovalia and destiny.

Chapter twenty

The Depths of Deb-Lu-Quienyin's Eyes

The messenger stood before me in the Tower of Avoxdon in Ovalia where I had set up headquarters. His flying leathers were stained and travel worn. He looked exhausted. But before he would allow himself to sit down, this merker would deliver his message from Drak.

“The armies of the Prince Majister are fully committed. He has sent a number of provisional regiments to Vondium, mostly walking wounded and invalids. A brigade of churgurs is on the way to you and is following me within a day.”

Instead of saying anything I indicated the chair and the merker sat with a flummox. His bird was being cared for by the flutswods of my single squadron of flutduins. I stared at him.

“And cavalry?”

“Three squadrons of totrix javelinmen.”

We were short of cavalry, of the land and of the aerial kind. Well, all commanders are always short of cavalry, unless they be barbarian chieftains of a savage host of jutmen, as admirals are always short of frigates. Most of the force sent by Jhansi on this raid into our land consisted of jutmen; many were cavalry, some were mounted infantry riding a variety of animals. The balance of his infantry was carried in airboats. He had mirvols, powerful flying animals, with experienced flutswods to fly them, as his aerial cavalry component. Kapt Hangrol ham Thanoth commanded a powerful and fast-moving force.

We had been operating out of Ovalia for three days now and our initial dispositions had been made. As I sat brooding on this travel-weary merker I thought back to that smart little dust-up Prince Tyfar, Quienyin and our comrades had gone through in the Humped Land. It all added up. Those damned swarthenmen had ridden on, confidently, and we had enticed them and tricked them and dazzled them before we'd seen them off. What a fellow may do with half a dozen staunch comrades against superior numbers, surely the same fellow could do with a small army against a larger?

Sipping the wine poured by Deft-Fingered Minch, a crusty, bearded veteran who ran my field quarters, the merker answered questions and conveyed news. Kov Seg Segutorio fought in the vaward, as usual, and commanded the Second Army. His daughter had visited him and gone on to see Prince Drak, commanding the First Army. This numbering of armies was new to me, and, to my ears, smacked of magniloquence. The Presidio had dished out the numbers, following Drak's instructions. Kov Vodun Alloran had marched into the West Country with the Fifth Army. Other numbered armies guarded our other provinces and frontiers. I gathered my little lot were the Eighth Army.

All that flummery meant nothing, of course. You could call yourselves what you liked; what counted was your strength and tenacity, physical and moral.

The merker, he was a Hikdar and his name was Ortyg Lovin, an honored name in Vallia, went on with his news. Our enemies fought obsessively but we pushed them back. An assassination attempt on Prince Drak had been frustrated by the Sword Watch. At this I sat up straight and felt anger, and horror, and sickness. Zankov, the arch enemy, had not been seen in the enemy camps. Kov Inch of the Black Mountains made slow progress. Filbarrka was in the thick of it. There was more, much more, and I looked at the maps spread on the camp table and pondered. The red tide of war engulfed Vallia. Had I not been called by the people to lead them out of these miasmatic shadows, I believe I would have thrown it all in and flown off to Strombor to see Velia and Didi. As it was — we had a damned raid to see off and to see off, by Vox, with far too few men.

Ovalia was the key to campaigning hereabouts. Had we not garrisoned the city first, Kapt Hangrol would have seized it and controlled the route for his onward march. As it was, daily we had small-scale aerial combats, and my single squadron of flutduinim would be worn down before long at this rate. As for our airboats, we had a weyver, which is a wide, flat, barge-like affair and which we had adapted to carry two hundred men. We had two vollers each carrying a hundred. And we had ten which could take fifty

or so at a pinch. Of them all, only four of the latter were real fighting vollers.

There were also a handful of smaller vollers for scouting and messenger duty.

When the merker left and Turko and my Chuktars came in, I pointed to the maps and very simply said, "We do it the thorn-ivy way." At their gapes of non-comprehension I explained the plan in detail. And, to say plan is to dignify the harebrained scheme. But they nodded, bright-eyed, and vowed that it would work and that, by Vox, they'd have the tripes out of these Hamalese rasts in a twinkling.

Our air component left at once to set about the enticement part of the scheme. The three squadrons of totrix javelinmen came in and their transport, under orders to return at once, I would not touch. And, as you will see, stupid parental pride and dignity came in here! I would not let Drak see how hard-pressed we were, well-knowing the complexities of the problems he faced.

There was no question in my mind of sitting tight in Ovalia and allowing Kapt Hangrol to open a formal siege. He could hold us down quite adequately with a part of his force and, collecting up the rest, fly on. But we needed him to hold still just long enough for our forces, which had to move piecemeal, to reach their start lines. After that — thorn-ivy!

And, as though the gods joined in the scheme, I was apprised of the spirit of the army. One of the wide avenues of the city with its cobblestones was being torn up. Those stones were being loaded into carts, drawn by Quoffas, and would eventually be discharged against the Hamalese. Gangs of men worked with pick and crowbar. A number of taverns were well patronized by the thirsty off-duty.

They gave me a yell as I cantered by.

One group of men attracted my attention. I knew who they were, of course. A stoutly formed, scarlet-faced man with shining black hair — unusual in a Vallian — bellowed his lads to attention. He was smiling, his face dimpled, good-humored, sweating a little, and as he saluted with his right hand, his left still clasped his tankard.

"When do we march out, majister?"

"As soon as you lot have drunk the taverns dry, Brad."

His men chorused their appreciation of this. Brad the Berry was a publican of Vondium. But he was much more than that, by Vox! It was rumored he'd been a wizard in his time; certainly his magic tricks astonished all who witnessed them. He was also rumored to be the son of a prince, who had cleared off because he preferred the life of wizardry and pubs to that of the courts. He'd raised and equipped a regiment at his own expense, mainly recruited from the regulars of his establishment, the Hagli Bush. They were titled the Hagli Bush Irregulars. I glanced at the covered wagons parked nearby.

"And, Brad, I would take a bet that there is more beer than bows, more ale than arrows, more wine than weapons, in those carefully packed wagons."

He laughed, cheerful and happy, supping along with his men.

"We'll have 'em, you'll see, majister," he said. That was sufficiently obscure to cover the points raised. I had Brad the Berry marked out for high office. He was the Jiktar of his regiment now; he would prove of more use in other areas of life than that of going off to be a soldier. Much more use...

The Hagli Bush Irregulars diligently went about their sworn duty of drinking every tavern in Ovalia dry — in between laboring mightily to help the army along.

It ought to be said, in addition, that the uniform designed for the Hagli Bush Irregulars by Brad the Berry was a marvel of practicality and ornateness. It was rumored he had once served an apprenticeship to a goldsmith in his wizardry search for the secret of making gold out of straw. Like many and many another sorcerer and wise man, he might not have discovered that particular secret; but he could bring to anything he set his hands to, a wonderful felicity of invention. We needed men like Brad the Berry.

Riding Shadow back toward the Tower of Avoxdon I looked up and saw a magnificent scarlet and golden bird, circling in the upper air, blinding in the mingled streaming radiance of the Suns of Scorpio. I sucked in my breath. But I rode on. No one else could see that gorgeous raptor. He was the Gdoinye, the messenger and spy of the Star Lords, and I wondered if I was about to be dramatically transported to some other part of Kregen on business of the Star Lords. So I rode on and took no notice of the bird. He eyed me for a space, winging wide above my head; then he flicked a wing and soared away, vanishing in the suns' glare.

Well, now... Just keep the old cranium down and get on with the job in hand. That was the way of it, by Zair! The only way.

Jiktar Travok Ramplon, to whom I had given Fango in exchange for Shadow, led his zorca archers out to trail his skirts before the enemy. He would raise the dust and lure Hangrol on.

We had no Battle Maidens, no Jikai Vuvushis, with us, for which I was profoundly thankful.

The local people rallied round wonderfully and scraped up a wild assortment of riding animals. These were apportioned among the infantry, for neither men nor beasts would be fit to act as cavalry against the kind of opposition we were facing.

Our two regiments of swarthenmen were weak, only around three hundred each; but they were going to have to take the brunt of it when the cavalry came to handstrokes. The totrixmen were good quality, and Drak's three squadrons would help. But...

We marched out of Ovalia, heading for our start lines, and news came in that Hangrol had turned like a maddened graint to follow Jiktar Travok Ramplon and his zorca bows. Turko nodded in satisfaction. "Grapple him, Dray, like any ordinary wrestler. Then throw him and twist his neck!"

"Aye."

Very rapidly becoming accustomed to being addressed as a kov, our Turko the Shield. "Yes, kov," and, "Certainly, kov." Oh, yes, Kov Turko of Falinur — living very high on the vosk, our Turko!

The flags flew in the light of the suns, the men marched, the dust rose, and as we of the Eighth Army swung along so the swods in the ranks sang. They sang old songs and new songs, sprightly ditties and scurrilous comments on their officers. They sang sickly love ballads like "She Lived by the Lily Canal." This was the song sung almost obsessively by the men on the night before that resounding affray, the Battle of Kochwold. Of a similar sentimental nature was "Wedding Dirge of Hondor Elaina."

Then the veteran swods of the Fifth Churgurs struck up "Paktuns's Promenade" and sang their own repeatable words, and when that was done they warbled out many a ditty I have mentioned to you. At last I half-turned in the saddle and glared at the Second Regiment of the Sword Watch. In my fruity old

bellow I started to yodel out “The Bowmen of Loh.”

And, soon, the whole army bellowed out that brave old song and the imbalances of echoes as the words rolled down the lines sent tiny birds scurrying for shelter.

Seg Segutorio was not with me. Many of my fine Archer regiments of Valka, who used the Lohvian longbow, were with Drak. But we raggle-taggle bobtail of any army sang as we marched.

Continually I rode up and down the lines, observing the men. And, in their turn, they observed me. Many were the comradely greetings flung to and fro. And, as we marched, my thoughts insisted on dwelling on Prince Tyfar and our comrades and our experiences in Moderdrin. It seemed to me I had learned something there and I did not know what it could be. Certainly, a mere trick of thorn-ivy and its escalation into army scale could not be the reason I had found my way to the Humped Land. If Quienyin knew, I fancied he would tell me.

Marking how the Tenth Kerchuri marched, their pikes at ease, the Hakkodin with their axes or halberds over their shoulders, the attached Chodku of archers singing lustily, I thought of other times when we had marched singing into battle. Well, this time would be different and yet just the same. The differences became apparent as, wheeling to meet an attempt to flank us, I realized afresh the frightening smallness of our company. Kapt Hangrol was a seasoned campaigner, and he sought to pin and crush us. We had to work on him, out-march him — for all his aerial strength would avail him nothing if he could not put troops on the ground — and whittle away both his strength and his confidence.

We lost men in skirmishes. I raged and grieved; but we went on with the words of Clardo the Clis to sustain us.

“If one man dies for what he believes in — would you deny him that right? We all chose to be here!”

The maneuvers were complicated and pretty. We kept to good cover, making the utmost use of woods and darkness. The pace told on us and the men grew lean and hungry. The quoffa-drawn wagons caught up with us from time to time and yielded provisions and provender. Brad the Berry disgorged an amazing quantity of first-class food from his wagons, the Hagli Bush Irregulars delighting in showing how well they could provide. And we played Kapt Hangrol and his army, and in one classic attack we cut off and destroyed four full regiments of the iron legions of Hamal. With them went a shrieking collection of Layco Jhansi’s hoodwinked adherents, spearmen, savage, almost barbaric fanatics.

As a few miserable and shaking prisoners were interrogated, I reached the conclusion that Jhansi must be using sorcery to control and enflame these men. Only a few seasons ago, before the Time of Troubles, these same shrieking savages had been sober, industrious citizens of Vallia. It was not just civil war and all its attendant horrors that had brought this travesty into being.

“That rast Hangrol draws near,” said Turko, most cheerfully, on the day when the maps and the scouts’ reports showed the raiding army to be within a day’s march. All ideas of raiding farther into Orvendel had been abandoned by Layco Jhansi’s men. I could guess that Kapt Hangrol and Malervo Norgoth had been exchanging acrimonious words. That cheered me up, since I was a malignant sort of fellow. We had trailed the red rag and they were bedazzled and enflamed.

“Right, Turko — or should I say, Kov Turko?”

“And I say to you — do you wish to try a few falls?”

We laughed companionably together. For all the seriousness with which Turko took his new status as a kov, he, like my comrades and myself blessed or cursed with these noble titles, could see the ludicrousness, the pompous jackass nonsense, of putting too much store by rank and title. Estates, now — ah! That was a different matter.

These intricate maneuvers were of absorbing interest. We pivoted so as to maintain the Tenth Kerchuri with its solid mass of pikes as our fulcrum. And, of course, the local folk of Orvendel were extremely severe on any raiders who fell into their clutches.

Absorbingly interesting or not, the purely maneuvering phase had to come to an end.

“You are right, Turko. Tomorrow should see them nicely positioned.”

“The spot you have chosen and worked them to is perfect. Now all that remains is for them to go in like idiot dermiflons, braying and charging full pelt.”

“I think they will. Empress Thyllis has sent men up here in a desperate attempt to recover her losses in Vallia. Hangrol knows his head is forfeit if he loses.”

My knowledge of mad Empress Thyllis encompassed her macabre Hall of Notor Zan where the wretches she deemed had failed her were thrown to the slaving fangs of her pet Manhounds.[\[8\]](#)

Everything was in order and to hand. The men sat around their campfires and a few songs lifted; but in the main they got their heads down and tried to sleep. I fancy that most of them did not, not being veterans. So the morning dawned. Palest rose and apple green, the Suns of Scorpio, Zim and Genodras, rose into a dappled sky. The air tanged with a morning bite. Food was eaten by those whose appetites remained. The final polish to weapons, the last adjustment to harness, the bilious shouts of the Deldars bellowing the men into their ranks — so we raggedy little bunch, so magniloquently styled the Eighth Army, fell in.

The lay of the land was simple and all important. Not being sufficiently strong to meet Hangrol in open battle, we must perforce make him attack piecemeal, which, being a skillful general, he would not do unless hoodwinked. The plain was here cut by a wide gash, the bed of an ancient stream long since lost to the Canals of Vallia. Vegetation clothed its flanks. Here were posted the archers. At the end of the depression the Tenth Kerchuri stood, formed, solid, a glittering array of crimson and bronze. They were withdrawn just enough to be out of sight of the distant end. Our cavalry waited my orders on the flanks. Scouts and skirmishers moved forward in clouds to deny the enemy clear observation. The churgurs waited just inboard of the archers. It was a simple arrangement to all seeming, and not a particularly military layout, either. I knew a fair old number of princes and generals who would blanch at the mere sight of the formations we adopted.

Our total aerial force went whirling off to put into effect the final dazzlement. Even the lumbering old weyver went, with a rascally gang of cutthroats concealed behind her low bulwarks and a dozen varters ready to spew out chunks of Ovalia's fine street paving.

“You'll never dupe all that cramph Hangrol's aerial forces, Dray!” Turko rested his massive shield on his saddle. “By Morro the Muscle! We'll have the hornets around our ears—”

“Difficult to say.” I spoke seriously, for this was a tactical and psychological problem. “If our fellows can draw off a goodly part, our archers can deal with the rest.”

“I just wish Seg was here,” said Turko, and gentled his zorca between his knees.

By Zair! And didn't I! And Inch, too, and all the others!

We watched the lads of the Tenth Kerchuri running back down the dry, ancient riverbed scattering their caltrops. If you question — if you condemn — the use of youngsters here, I sympathize. But they were born on Kregen, Vallians, and they burned to do what they could. The chevaux de frise were unloaded from the krahnik carts and carried forward ready to be run out where needed. I lifted in the stirrups to survey the scene. There was no fleet voller for me now to oversee the dispositions. Our men melted into the shadows of the bushes, and were still. A lazy breeze tufted the leaves, which was most useful and was taken by many men as a sign of the direct assistance we had from Opaz and Vox.

Into that ravine trotted Jiktar Travok Ramplon's regiment. The zorcas looked marvelous. The men had smartened themselves and their mounts up for the occasion, and wore their brightest uniforms. Red and gold glittered in the light. They rode forward and they suddenly seemed, despite their trim appearance and martial order, very small and lonely and isolated trotting up that dusty defile.

They trotted on and the hooves of the zorcas glittered through the dust, the spiral horns jutted proudly, the tails switched impatiently. Each trooper held his bow in his left hand, straight down his left leg, and his right hand gripped the nocked arrow. Jogging along in the trot, guiding their mounts with knees and body movement and voice, the swods of the zorca bows rode forward.

At the far end of the defile appeared the scouts from Hangrol's forces. Overhead a bunch of mirvols flew up ready to swoop down. I held my breath. You can see the tricky situation. Too soon and Hangrol would never follow. Too late, and that fine zorca regiment would be a mangled ruin.

With faithful Fango between his knees, confident, exalted, Jiktar Ramplon judged it to a nicety.

His men loosed at the mirvols. The flying animals swerved away, preferring to leave to the advance guard of land cavalry the sweeping away of this troublesome zorca unit. Remember, Ramplon had been baiting these adversaries for the past days. They had blood in their eye. The leading units of enemy zorcas simply let rip a yell of rage and anger and charged like leems. Jiktar Ramplon gave his orders, his trumpeter blew, the regiment pivoted and pulled back, building up their speed into a fine, free gallop.

Around that kink in the defile Ramplon sent on his regiment, for he had chosen to ride last, for which I marked him. He had the Twenty-seventh Regiment of zorca archers. They raced around that bend, and the following cavalry roared around after them. Dust smoked into the air. When the pursuing cavalry were out of sight of their following main body, our archers let fly. Ramplon's men hauled up, skidding, turned, and those bows came up and showered shafts into the abruptly huddled, terror-stricken mass.

Shot to pieces, the enemy zorcas tried to flee back, and ran full tilt into a wall of steel that closed as though on a hinge across the defile. The Tenth Kerchuri received the fleeing cavalry as though they received a charge. Perhaps half a dozen zorcamen survived to scramble around the edges and run for it — and each one of that half-dozen was brought down by a marksman.

The noise was such, I hoped, as to convince Hangrol that his advance cavalry had successfully chased off the annoying hornets who had been stinging him so unmercifully. The first elements of his main body came into sight, and I judged that Hangrol did think so. Apart from those early mirvols, there was no sign of his aerial support.

I looked back to where the 2ESW and the EYJ lay waiting in the runnels in the ground. All our men

waited in concealment. Hangrol's forces advanced, led by more cavalry, with bunches of irregulars following, and backed by regiments of the iron legions of Hamal. I counted quickly. Ten regiments... They were the hard nut we had to crack. Like the other troops in Hangrol's force, the Hamalese swods were mounted up; they would dismount to go into action.

The moment approached and nothing was going to stop it now.

The Jiktars of the Archers awaited the signal. The churgurs gathered themselves. The kreutzin strained to get in among those brilliant adversaries. Close they came, nearer and nearer, riding with all the aplomb and confidence of men sure of themselves.

Any minute now...

Deb-Lu-Quienyin appeared at my side.

He was standing and leaning back, with his left hand pressed flat against thin air, as though he supported himself against an invisible wall. His clothes were filthy, torn, and tattered, and his turban was hanging over an ear. His face worked with passion and near despair, and he glared upon me with frightful meaning.

I bent from Shadow's back to peer more closely.

With an effort, Quienyin motioned.

Not understanding what he wanted, and aware that Turko was taking no notice whatsoever, I for a moment thought I was hallucinating and imagining I saw the Wizard of Loh. Hangrol's army marched on and the distance lessened. The giving of the signal could not be long delayed. I looked back at Quienyin, and he was still there, an apparition bold in the light of the suns.

He lifted his right hand with a gesture of weariness. The short sword in his fist was broken in half.

He dropped the sword. The moment it left his hand it vanished.

He pointed. He pointed with his right forefinger. He pointed at his eyes. I leaned from the zorca, staring. I stared into the eyes of the Wizard of Loh...

I was looking into a stone-walled chamber pierced by tall windows through which the suns light streamed in emerald and ruby. Silda Segutorio, half-naked, blood staining her shoulder, was staggering up distraught and trying to wield a blood-crusted rapier. Crumpled in a corner lay the body of a man in clothes splashed with blood. I stared. I felt the sickness rising. The man's fist rested on a sword, flat on the straw-covered stone.

My vision swung to the doorway. Men crowded in, fierce, bright, savage men, exulting. They were clansmen. Their weapons flickered in the brilliant light. They kicked aside the dreadful evidences of their handiwork. They trod contemptuously over the shattered corpses of men wearing the red-and-yellow uniforms of the Emperor's Sword Watch. Clansmen, savage, horrific, far more lethal than any barbarian, they jostled in to be the first to slay the Wizard and Silda and the man who lay crumpled in the corner.

I knew that man. His fist made a sudden spasmodic attempt to seize the sword, and fell away, limp. I knew the sword.

That was a great Krozair longsword.

That man was my son Drak.

Chapter twenty-one

Victories for Vallia

Turko said, “Almost time, Dray! Another hundred paces or so, and then...”

He spoke, Turko the Shield, and I could not see him. I could hear the susurration of the breeze, hear the ominous drumroll of that advancing army; I could feel Shadow between my knees and the warmth of the suns, but I glared with awful fury into a stone chamber where some of the most ferocious warriors of all Kregen stalked down with bloodied weapons upon the helpless form of my son.

The vision’s view shifted again and I saw Silda drawing herself up. Her blood-spattered body glowed through her ripped russet leathers. The rapier trembled in her fist. But she staggered up, her face pallid and distraught, her eyes fierce, her brows downbent, and I knew she would hurl herself forward. Seg’s daughter would fling herself to destruction to protect my son!

The feral, bearded mouths of the clansmen opened and I knew they roared their appreciation of the gallantry of it, shouted compliments of the High Jikai; yet I could hear nothing of them, only the onward tramp of an enemy army dinning in my ears.

How could I give the signal to loose when I could not see Hangrol’s forces? How could I assist Drak and Silda when I was miles and miles away from them?

In my nostrils blew the sweet-scented breeze of Kregen. I could not smell the dust in that stone chamber or the raw stink of spilled blood. Among the refuse of swords scattered from the shattered Sword Watch lay a drexer, one of those swords we in Valka had designed and forged to make a superior weapon. It stirred.

The sword moved of itself.

Jerkily, it lifted into the air and the hilt dropped down and the blood-smearred point snouted up.

I knew. This, I had witnessed before. Gladiomancy! Swordomancy! Deb-Lu-Quienyin was exercising his powers, putting forth his kharna, and manipulating that sword through the force of his mind. The sword trembled.

So, at once, near-instinctively, I understood what the Wizard of Loh required of me.

The clansmen hauled up. Soundless, that ghastly scene. The clanners stared at the sword floating unsupported in midair. But they did not run away. They were Clansmen of the Great Plains of Segesthes. They had little truck with sorcerers. One leaped. He was a Zorcander, one of the chiefs, and his broadsword struck like a sliver of silver fire.

“Dray! What—? What ails you?”

The drexer parried the first flashing blows.

“Nothing, Turko.” Still keeping my gaze fastened on the eyes of Quienyin and through them that scene within the stone chamber, I dismounted from Shadow. I gripped the saddle. “My eyes — tell me when Hangrol’s advance reaches the second down-drooping missal tree.”

“Hai!” Turko started to yell, prepared to rouse our men to my aid.

“Shastum! Silence! Listen, Turko. You must be my eyes. Keep talking, tell me what goes forward, but speak quietly. Let no one know. You understand?”

“I understand. And the cramphs have reached the first missal.”

“Then it will not be long delayed.”

The drexer was beaten aside and the Zorcander, with a soundless yell of triumph, burst past. A discarded rapier lifted and struck and drove deeply into his side. He staggered back, and between the fingers of his left hand the bright blood seeped.

The rapier hovered in the air. And then — and then it was as though I gripped the hilt of that rapier in my fist. I could feel it, silver-wound and ridged, hard in my fingers. And I knew I gripped Shadow’s saddle!

The rapier twitched up, and my body and arm did what bodies and arms with rapiers attached are accustomed to do on Kregen. The Zorcander fell, and the next clansman, leaping, silently roaring, fell also. But a rapier is no weapon with which to go up against Clansmen of Segesthes, by the Black Chunkrah, no!

Quienyin, through his kharma, controlled the weapons. His strength had been taxed to the utmost. His skill would not avail him in swordplay against these supreme warriors. So he stretched out the powers of his mind and brought me in to wield the weapons through him. Uncanny, weird, spirit-shaking — but the only chance left in all the cruel and exotic world of Kregen for Silda and Drak.

The Wizard had to channel my skill at swordplay through his control. The rapier was a flashing blur of bloodied silver, and the broadswords beat and slashed. They had to knock that slender sliver of steel away before they could pass, and when they thrust they pierced thin air. But they drove on and I felt the shifting, sliding movement of my feet on the straw-covered stone, and yet I knew I stood braced on the ground beside my zorca and gripping onto his saddle.

The smashing power of the clansmen’s blows forced me back, and the rapier slicing and thrusting unsupported in the air drew back. Had I been there in the flesh, I would have been sore wounded by now. Back and back, until I stood a few paces only before Drak and Silda. A single comprehensive glance showed me Drak sprawled unconscious and Silda crouched over him with her rapier half-lifted. She panted and her eyes were wide and wild. She would spring up at the last and fight until the end over the body of Drak.

The chamber spun about me as Quienyin turned once more to face the clansmen, for I realized I saw through his eyes. Stubbornly I tried to move back. I let go of Shadow’s saddle and the dizziness caught me and I staggered. I felt Turko’s Khamorro arm wrap about me and support me. But as I released my grip on the saddle so the rapier fell soundlessly on the stone.

This lack of communication baffling us infuriated me. It was like shouting into fog and receiving nothing in return. But Deb-Lu-Quienyin had been with me through the Moder where in that subterranean hellhole he had seen me battling with a longsword. The Wizard understood instantly. The Krozair brand under

Drak's limp fingers twitched. It shivered. It lifted. It seemed to me I reached out with both fists and took the hilt into my grasp, and I turned in Turko's arm and so once again gripped onto Shadow's saddle. This time I gripped with both hands.

"They have reached the second missal, Dray."

"Then — loose! And Opaz have us in his keeping."

The noise of the battle I could hear; the sounds of the combat within the stone chamber remained cut off. In two places at once, I fought.

The battle I could hear and smell but not see roared on as our archers and slingers loosed and the Tenth stepped into view to block the ravine and entice Hangrol on. The combat I could see but not hear or taste flowered in the stone chamber as the clansmen smashed on to strike down the Krozair blade and have done. The battle was of vital importance to the welfare of the country. The combat was of excruciating agony for me, for through wizardly powers I sought to save the life of Drak.

"They go on! They go on!" roared Turko.

I switched the Krozair brand in a blur and chopped and sliced and thrust.

"Their cavalry, Turko?"

"Cannot maneuver for the shafts pinning them."

"Tell me when they charge — if they charge."

"The Hamalese have dismounted and are formed — the skirmishers run like rasts — our fellows are in among them now—"

A clansman dropped to a knee and brought two blades, a broadsword and a shortsword, up in a cross of glittering steel. That was a cunning and brave trick, for he sought to trap my blade in the neck of the cross and so wrench it free. With supple Krozair skill the longsword looped and hummed and the clansman fell back, silently.

Hangrol had over twice our force. We had to remain in cover and shoot and shoot. The Tenth Kerchuri did not entirely fill the width of the ravine where once a river had flowed. The Hakkodin spread out and the Chodku of archers shot with their comrades along the bushy heights each side. Turko kept up a ceaseless flow of reports and I swirled the Krozair longsword and, by the Light of Opaz, did not move a hairsbreadth!

The trumpeter of the Second Sword Watch on that day was Vardon the Cheeks. I said, "Bid Vardon stand ready."

Turko yelled, and then said, "The Hamalese are formed, their shields are up. They advance. They charge!"

"And the ground between?"

"Cumbered with dead men and fugitives still running."

“The cavalry?”

“They mill. It looks as though they will recover in a mur or so.”

“And the skirmishers and their mercenaries?”

“Some press on with the Hamalese. Some wait the outcome.”

Three clansmen came for that disembodied longsword together and now two of them swirled cloaks in a valiant effort to entrap that ghostly brand. I sliced and — without moving! — leaped away and so launched myself at them from the side. Quienyin’s powers flowed through my arms and fists and the Krozair brand slashed in a vivid bar of light.

“The distance left?”

“Five hundred paces, no more, and narrowing all the time,” Turko’s voice rasped. “But the bowmen bring them down.”

“Tell Vardon the Cheeks to blow the Tenth Kerchuri Prepare.”

The silver notes ran out, swirling and skyrocketing in the air. And the clansmen drew back a space, panting, and their weapons glittered in the light of the slanting rays of the suns.

Two murs, three...

“Bid Vardon blow, Turko. Blow the Charge!”

“Quidang!”

And over the field and floating free and lilting with blood-quickenings, the Charge blew in ringing imperative.

As the clansmen came on again and the Krozair brand leaped and flashed I could imagine I saw the Tenth Kerchuri. I could see their pikes come down, down, pointing, their sharp steel heads a bristle of menace. The crimson shields would all slant together. Down would go the bronze-fitted helmets. The plumes would ruffle bravely. And then the brumbytes, formed, solid in their crimson and bronze, would charge. Blind to that sight, I could yet see it all, and hear and taste and smell the blood-thumping excitement of it.

Yet the clansmen would not leave off their attacks upon this eerie sword that floated in midair and chopped them as they charged.

“They meet!” yelled Turko. “By Morro the Muscle! You have created a veritable weapon in this phalanx, Dray!”

Very little can stand and survive in the path of a charging phalanx. We had proved that before. I had not really believed. But here, in what came to be known as the Battle of Ovalia, the pikes in their steel-crested fervor charged and overthrew the iron legions of Hamal. Raging, like a bursting dam that spills destruction in the path of its waters, the Tenth Kerchuri swept everything away before that intemperate onslaught.

And I did not see it!

Raw, green, they might be, these brumbytes wielding their pikes. But their helmets were down and their shields were slanted and their pikes went in and they rolled on and on and nothing could stand before them.

Silda was standing now, gripping her rapier. She had overcome the first tremor of horror when swords swirled with no visible hands to wield them. She stepped forward. I brought the longsword across in a vicious defending blow and smashed a clansman away.

“Stand clear, Silda!” I shouted.

“What?” Turko’s voice reached me, alarmed. “What’s that, Dray?”

“How goes the battle?”

“The Hakkodin are in among their cavalry and the cavalry do not like it — they run — they flee...”

“Blow for the churgurs — blow for everything! General Advance!”

The General Advance rang out over the roar of the battle.

The Tenth would be rolling down the ravine like a tidal wave of destruction, and now the sword and shield men would rage from the bushes crowning the slopes and hit the bewildered enemy from both flanks. And, all the time, I knew, the archers and staff slingers would be loosing into the huddled masses.

Kapt Hangrol had been sucked into the thorn-ivy trap. And now he was paying the price.

Many clansmen littered the stone floor. Their blood ran greasily in the cracks between the flags. And still they sought to pass that disembodied sword and slay the Prince Majister of Vallia.

The next Clanner struck at the sword seeking by main force to beat it down. The enormous leverage exercised by the Krozair two-handed grip brought the sword in a neat curve around the clansman’s blade. The longsword twitched and the clansman’s broadsword struck it square. I felt the shock, like liquid fire, jolt all up my arms. By Zair! Slow — slow and weak...

With a spurt of passion I slashed the clansman away and swung to the next and his blade clashed down on mine. I felt the shock, shuddering through me, and I smashed back.

I knew what was happening. Deb-Lu-Quienyin was weakening. What he had accomplished already was a miracle. But his kharna was not limitless. The fight raging in the stone chamber became fraught with its inevitable end.

With the sounds of a greater battle ringing in my ears, I faced defeat in this contemptible little fracas, and knew it to be by far the more important, the vital, of the two — for with Quienyin’s exhaustion the Krozair brand would fall, and Silda would hurl forward with her rapier blurring, and would die and then would die also my son Drak.

Still Quienyin upheld me. Still I continued to battle.

Turko yelled that the pikes rolled on like the millstones of the gods. The churgurs welted into the flanks

of the foemen. Our irregulars were in there, smiting and dodging and smiting again.

Drooping now, the Krozair brand, drooping like a victim of the black lotus-flowers of Hodan-Set. Useless my exerting all the bestial and savage power pent within me by civilization. I fought only through the wizardry of gladiomancy. With the slipping away of Quienyin's powers so dropped away all the Krozair skill.

The longsword slashed and slashed again, and at every blow I could feel the lessening of force. The chamber blurred, the stones merging as though melting in some supernal heat. The stone flags of the floor pitched beneath me like the deck of a swifter. I knew I was grasping onto Shadow's saddle with fists in which the knuckles ridged into skulls. Turko was yelling; but I did not hear him clearly, could see nothing in the world but the next opponent and do nothing in all Kregen but strike on.

Two clansmen battered their broadswords down on my sword, and the blade slithered. I strained of myself to bring it up, and could feel no life, no response, could feel only a deadly leaden lumpiness of total fatigue. A six-inch-long sliver of steel appeared from the floor. It was grasped in a fist. It drove smartly into the left-hand Clanner and a second, precisely similar steel blade, gripped in a fist of precisely the same nature, struck the right-hand clansman. Both fell away.

Two Pachaks raged into the fight. With them, glorious in their red and yellow, men of the Sword Watch drove on. But, ahead of them, the Pachak twins, Modo and Logu Fre-Da, smashed on in defense of the Wizard of Loh to whom they had given their nikobi in all honor.

Then I let out a harsh snort of sound, a breathy explosion that might in Cottmer's Caverns be taken for a laugh.

"What?" said Turko somewhere a million miles away.

Nodgen and Hunch pranced into the stone chamber, and Nodgen's spear was darkly stained, and Hunch's bill bore the marks of hard blows given and taken.

The First Sword Watch did not waste time on the clansmen. And, to be truthful, those clanners had fought heroically against sorcery. Very few other hardy warriors would have stood, let alone fought so determinedly, against wizardry like this. The 1ESW cleared out the clansmen, and arrows brought down those who sought to flee. But these four, the Pachak twins and Nodgen and Hunch, ran across toward me.

Their mouths were opening and closing and their eyes were popping and they were giving every indication of extreme animation. My viewpoint changed, and I was looking at the ceiling, with these four faces ringing the perimeter of vision. So I knew they were caring for Quienyin, all unknowing that Jak the Sturr stared through the wizard's eyes!

In the next instant I was staring at the polished leather of Shadow's saddle, twisting, and Turko was hauling me up, and saying, "Dray! Dray! For the sweet sake of Opaz—"

"I am all right, Turko — now. Let me see the battle."

"Your eyes—?"

"Perfectly all right now. I will explain. Are there any of our vollers in sight?"

“Not one. I trust they are all safe.” He looked at me with all his old quizzical mockery; but he’d been shaken up, all right, no mistake about that!

All along that ravine of death the dead lay. The Tenth had stormed on with their pikes level and left nothing living in their wake. The rest of our little army, our Eighth Army, pushed on and Kapt Hangrol’s forces fled.

“They won’t come araiding over the borders again in a hurry, Dray.”

“That is what I would like to think. By Vox! But it is a melancholy sight. Pull Jiktar Brad the Berry and his Hagli Bush Irregulars out and get them to tend the wounded. Brad will understand.”

“Aye, he will. We are light on medical services.”

A battery of krahnik-drawn varters went rumbling past. They had limbered up the ballistae in record time, and the krahniks, powerful, deep-chested, full of fire, hauled with a will. They were off to try to take up new positions and harry the rout. Their darts and rocks had wrought fearful execution in that blood-soaked ravine.

Well, the aftermath of a battle is always a messy business, and we had to make sure Hangrol kept running and did not stop to try to regroup. Our little cavalry force swept out in pursuit. The Tenth Kerchuri halted and I sent word to Kervax^[9]Orlon Sangar telling him of my pride in his men and my congratulations. All the units involved had done well. There would be bobs^[10]aplenty in the wake of the Battle of Ovalia...

In all decency I could not leave at once. Some reassurance could be allowed in that the Sword Watch and Quienyin’s comrades had burst in to the rescue. But I vowed I wanted to know what had gone wrong over in the Northeast. By Krun, yes!

A Kerchuri of the phalanx, when arrayed in the normal formation of twelve men to a file, spreads out to cover a frontage of approximately three hundred and seventy paces. Drill movements can expand or contract this front, of course, containing as it does four hundred thirty-two pikes in each rank. The Tenth had swept up the ravine like a steel broom.

Turko and I and a few others of my officers walked slowly along the ravine. Everywhere our men were tending the wounded and carrying off the dead to be decently interred according to the rites suggested by the atras, the little amulets, the slain wore. Some of us made the usual trite observations about life and death. The scene was somber; but I did not feel — then — the chill I knew would near overwhelm me at all this waste.

I bent and picked up a shield from the phalanx. Its five-ply wooden construction was still intact, leather faced, bronze bound. The carrying strap was cinched tight; but the battle grips were broken. On the strip across the top the colors and symbols and numbers proclaimed this shield to have belonged to the Paltork — the second in command to the Relianchun — of the Sixty-fifth Relianch of the Eleventh Jodhri. In glowing yellow the stylized representation of the brumby, that long-horned, eight-legged, armored battering ram of destruction and an animal thought to be long extinct if not legendary, appeared on the face of the crimson shield. The brumby from which the brumbytes took their name was the symbol of the entire Phalanx Force. I put my finger alongside the painted symbol of the Tenth Kerchuri of the Fifth Phalanx, a Prychan grasping Thunderbolts, and I shook my head.

Yes, the Golden Prychan, the wrestlers inn, had yielded up the means to bring back Turko. But as I

stared on this shield, I realized I did not know the name of the Paltork who had carried it into battle. How could I? But this seemed to me wrong. I felt I should have known his name.

Tucked around the strap was a little cloth packet of cham. The Paltork no doubt chewed stoically as he marched forward; well, I fancied he would never return to claim his favorite chew.

The group of officers did not dwell overlong on that depressing scene. Having made sure that everything that could be done was being done, we trailed back to camp in a heavy silence. Of our volder force, nine returned. We had lost five. The flutduins had done well and had taken minimal casualties. As the returns came in I realized the thorn-ivy ambush had worked, and worked extraordinarily well. Our casualties were exceeding light.

I took Turko and Deft-Fingered Minch and one or two others, and left the Eighth Army under the command of Orlon Sangar, with orders to recoup and to clear the area, and flew direct for the northeast. No one expressed any surprise or chagrin that I should be leaving. It was taking me some time to realize that emperors could behave in this peremptory way without causing comment. After all, every man knew the emperor's concerns were wide, covering all of Vallia, and he was clearly needed elsewhere.

We caught up with the grandly named First Army at a bleak little town of Northern Jevuldrin called Ithieursmot. Its chief claim to fame until now was a mildewed mass of ruins left over from the Sunset People. Drak lay in his camp cot in his tent and fumed and swore and was in a thoroughly bad temper.

"The wound in itself was not serious," Quienyin told me as we stood looking down on the fractious Drak. The needlemen had worked well and Drak was in no pain. "But the prince had taken a savage knock on the head which Rendered Him Unconscious."

Silda sat on a low stool at the cot side, holding Drak's hand, and would not be moved. I thanked Opaz she was there, her own wound bandaged, and her ripped leathers replaced by a yellow gown. Had she not been, I think Drak would have blown up.

"Deb-Lu has explained it all to me, Father," said Drak. "It seems I owe my life to you."

"As to that, it is Deb-Lu-Quienyin in whose debt we both stand. And, Quienyin, you know my thanks is yours — aye! And I do not forget all we said in the Desolate Waste, and the Moder and the Humped Land. It is all coming together, now."

"Did I tell you," said the Wizard of Loh, "what your pair of rogues, Hunch and Nodgen said when they were apprised who you were?"

"I am not sure I wish to know that."

Drak looked suspiciously at me. He had not seen me smile overmuch when his mother was not present.

As to the fracas in the stone chamber, Drak had brought on a battle with superior forces, which was why he had been unable to spare me very many, in the complete conviction that Seg would come up with the Second Army. Seg had done so; but a flash flood had delayed his arrival by three burs. In that time Drak's army had fought devotedly, but a wing of clansmen had broken through. What I had witnessed had been the last dying attempt on the clansmen's part to slay the Prince Majister of Vallia before their whole force was broken and driven off. Seg's arrival and Quienyin's wizardry had saved us, and now the Second Army was hot-foot thrusting the minions of Zankov, cavalry, infantry, and air, farther north. The Hawkwas, a most savage bunch who were now devoted to the Emperor of Vallia, were swinging in to

crush the enemy between them and Seg. Altogether, a satisfactory day's work, if you omitted to dwell too long on what might have occurred.

Then a fast volder arrived to tell us that Kov Vodun Alloran had been victorious in the southwest and was marching strongly into his own kovnate in the corner of the island.

"It seems as though we are successful in the south," said Drak. He smiled at Silda as he spoke.

"There remains the southeast," I said. "And those rasts up north. And the islands—"

"Oh!" flamed Silda. "We will do it! We have to look on the bright side."

I put a hand to my jaw and stared at her. Her bright face stared back, defiant, challenging, and I felt a poignant stab of happiness for Drak. Now, if only he had the nous to take the happiness that was his, and forget all about Queen Lush...

With my old gravel-shifting voice I said, "We will win, in the end, Silda, because defeat is unthinkable." Then, to Drak, I said, "Have you seen your mother?"

"No. Nor anyone else of the family. But they are all right." He glanced up at Quienyin. "Otherwise we would have heard."

I grumped at this. But he was right.

"I would like to go after those rasts. But we must consolidate what we have and strengthen our new frontiers. The army will have to be looked at, too." My face, I think, must have looked its usual ugly self, for Drak lost a little of his fretfulness. "And as for hiring mercenaries—"

"They fought well and earned their hire."

"Maybe. But I want Vallia to be liberated by Vallians. Is that clear?"

"Why shed our blood when—?"

"Just because it is our blood and the prize is blood-worthy. If it is not, you will never secure peace in the land."

We might have wrangled then; but the needlemen insisted Prince Drak needed rest, and we were shepherded out. Silda did not accompany us. She was the best medicine Drak could have.

My comrades in camp and I decided we ought to hold a right roaring bender that night. We had done well. There was much to do. But for this night we could forget problems and carouse around the campfires and bellow out the old songs under the Moons of Kregen. And so we did. But for all the wild singing and drinking and dancing as the campfires spurted lurid highlights against flushed faces and feverish eyes — can one ever forget problems? I do not think so. A few moments of oblivion, dearly bought, look cheap and tawdry when the problems remain, as intransigent and menacing as ever with the pallid light of the suns.

Every man contains a scorpion within him. And every man is commanded by the Star Lords. My Scorpion had materialized itself and become real; my Star Lords had revealed a glimmer of themselves. In this, surely, I was more fortunate than the unhappy people who struggle uncomprehendingly against the

vagaries of their own nature and the vicissitudes of what, mistakenly, they call fate.

If it be true that men are born to rule and men are born to be slaves, then surely it is an onus placed on those who rule to command toward life and not toward death? The study of history tends to the belief that those with power abuse it because they understand only a tiny part of what power is. If individual people are as nothing before the great weight of destiny, and there is no reason in the universe, then a man has just the one single fact to which to cling: he is a man. Nothing more.

Unknown powers within and without ourselves — the Scorpion and the Everoinye — may overthrow us and we may go down to eternal ruin; but can we do any more, seeing we are but men?

We had won victories against what my people regarded as the powers of darkness, yet I knew we must all go forward together in the light of Opaz, against greater forces of evil. And who was to say that those other evil powers would not, in time, be reconciled?

“There is a magnificent golden Kildoi, there, Dray,” said Turko.

“Aye.” The firelight glinted from Korero’s golden beard and he smiled, lifting his two right arms. His tail hand wrapped around a silver goblet, and he drank.

I made the pappattu and I made it in a certain way.

“Korero the Shield — Turko, Kov of Falinur.”

A welling burst of song roared out then from the nearest group around their campfire, rollicking words that finished, “No idea at all, at all, no idea at all.”

We all half-turned to look and listen, and when I turned back — lo! Turko and Korero were gone.

What transpired between those two touched me nearly, and I, fallible human being that I am, trembled as vague rumors, laced with sly chuckles, reached me. Garbled stories of a fight that sprawled away into the moon shadows, a titanic conflict that roared over kools of land, made me imagine all manner of disasters. But, when I found them, the Kildoi and the Khamorro, they were sitting together and quaffing and not a bruise or a cut on either. They stood up as I approached, lithe, limber, superb men.

“You two—” I started. Then the ridiculousness of the situation overwhelmed me. How small my faith had been! “I need you both, in different ways. You are not Vallian born — well, no more am I — but our path is set out for us. Falinur is to be won back, for one thing.”

“The kov was saying—” spoke up Korero, his golden beard glinting, his tail hand curled around his jar.

“Korero expressed the view,” said Turko.

They paused and looked at each other. I took the measure of that look.

“Well, that’s settled, then.” I spoke briskly. “We’ll round up an army and no doubt Drak and the Presidio will bestow an imposing number on it, and we’ll see about Falinur.”

“It is in my mind, Dray, to ask Korero to march with us.”

“If the Prince Majister can spare him. When it’s done I’ll expect Falinur to be a model kovnate. As for

your taxes, Kov Turko, see they are paid promptly, and in full. And I shall call on you for a few regiments. See about raising a brigade of swarthenmen.”

They both looked puzzled. “But — you—?”

“When I get back we will have to think seriously about the rest of the island. This King of Urn Vallia, for example.”

“Get back?” they said together.

The first pastel tints of the new day lightened the horizon, the air smelled crisp and clear with a lingering trace of woodsmoke to spice the atmosphere with promise of breakfast, She of the Veils sank slowly wreathed in roseate clouds. This was a dawn on Kregen and there cannot be any other dawns in all the worlds among the stars to compare with that, by Zair!

“Get back,” I said firmly. “Much of Vallia has been freed from the maniacs who destroy all they touch. Prince Drak is fully competent to run the country. The army is in good heart with these victories under their belts. Where we have the land, the people prosper. The harvests are good. There is a spirit abroad that will not be denied. I shall not be long — at least, I trust I shall not be long.”

“But—” said Turko.

“Where—?” said Korero.

“You two sound like that mythical fellow from Balintol with two heads.”

“Mythical or not,” said a voice from the shadows at my back, “he is a fellow who stays at home for some of the time. Just where are you off to this time?”

For two heartbeats I did not turn around. I felt all that glorious dawn of Kregen rush together and collide and burst into my stupid vosk skull of a head. I felt the dawn colors riot and coruscate and burn through my veins. Slowly, slowly, I turned.

She half-smiled, yet her face was serious and grave, pale and with the first hints of the exhaustion brought by long journeyings and too-intensive work. I barely noticed her clothes — black silk tights, black leathers, black boots, with her rapier and dagger depending from golden locketts and the wide black belt with the golden clasp. A scarlet cape swung from her shoulders. She stared at me and I stared at her, and, like two loons, we stood, not moving, staring with unappeased hunger one upon the other.

I took a breath. The fragrance of the dawn air, the subtle pastels of apple green and rose, the distant chorus of those marvelous birds of Kregen all — all swam about me. The morning radiance touched her hair and brought alive those glorious tints of auburn, making a halo about her face. I swallowed down — hard.

It occurred to me that I might have said, “So you have come home, then?” But, instead, all I could say was, “There is still much to do. We have made a beginning—”

She took a step forward.

“Yes, there is still much to be done. You great grizzly graint! And you are flying off again!”

“Hyrklana,” I said. “You know.”

“I know. And you will leave today?”

I took a step forward. We moved toward each other. She raised her arms and I saw the wonder of her face.

There was nothing else in all of Kregen.

I held her, held her close, and I felt her arms clasping me.

“Delia!”

“Dray!”

“I must go to Hyrklana, as you must go about the business of your Sisters of the Rose—”

“Only for Vallia—”

“We are driven—”

“But not for much longer. It will end, one day—”

“Yes, there is light at the end of the tunnel, at last.”

I held her close and I could feel the warmth of her and the tremble between us. All of Vallia, then, all of Kregen, seemed of small moment, tiny, insignificant, beside my Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains...

“And you will fly for Hyrklana today?”

I could feel the growing heat of the Suns of Scorpio burning upon me.

“No, my heart. I do not think I shall leave today.”

A Glossary to the Jikaida Cycle of the Saga of Dray Prescot

References to the four books of the cycle are given as:

LFK: A Life for Kregen

SFK: A Sword for Kregen

FFK: A Fortune for Kregen

VFK: A Victory for Kregen

NB: Previous glossaries covering entries not included here will be found in Volume 5:*Prince of Scorpio* ; Volume 7:*Arena of Antares* ; Volume 11:*Armada of Antares* ; Volume 14:*Krozair of Kregen* ; Volume 18:*Golden Scorpio* .

A

Absordur: A woodland trylonate of the Dawn Lands, rich in timber and minerals.

Aeilssa: Princess.

agate-winged jutmen of Hodan-Set: A mythical host of ghostly riders who scourge the nighted plains of Kregen.

Aidrin: Country of the Dawn Lands; Jikaida City is the capital.

Alloran, Vodun, Kov of Kaldi: A shrewd man who lost his lands in Vallia's Time of Troubles and who dreamed only of returning in triumph; commanded the Fifth Army, the Army of the Southwest.

Almuensis: A cult of Sorcerers of considerable powers.

alkwoin: A valuable mineral obtained by open-cast mining.

Amklana: A province of Hyrklana and its proud and beautiful city.

Andrinos: A Khibil wrestler brought with Turko and Saenci by Dray Prescott out of Pandahem. VFK

Araclains: City areas of confused alleys and covered souks and bazaars, teeming with commerce and villainy.

arbora trees: Called this because their flowers look like arbora feathers.

Archolax the Bones: A spare man of gravitas, appointed Pallan of the Treasury of Vallia.

Ariane nal Amklana: The chief lady of the city of Amklana who did not come too well out of her adventure down the Moder.

Astrashum: A city of the Dawn Lands from which expeditions set out for Moderdrin. Here Prescott, Nodgen, and Hunch were sold on the auction block to Tarkshur the Lash. FFK

B

Bakkar: A Brokelsh spirit or deity.

Balassmane: A superb nikvove charger ridden by Prescott at the opening of the Battle of Kochwold. LFK

Banje: A shop selling candies and trifles and trinkets for children.

Barkindrar the Bullet: A Brokelsh slinger from Hyrzibar's Finger; one of Prince Tyfar's retainers.

Battle of Irginian: In which the Army of Vondium overthrew Mogper's army under command of Kapt Hangreal. LFK

Battle of Kochwold: Traumatic fight in which the Phalanx of Vondium and other arms successfully resisted the great charge of ten divisions of Clansmen of Segesthes, and the zorcas of Filbarrka

triumphed. When Prescott left, command devolved on Seg Segutorio, commanding the vaward. LFK

Battle of Ovalia: Where Prescott sprang the thorn-ivy trap on Jhansi's army led by Kapt Hangrol, the Vallian Eighth Army winning despite being outnumbered over two to one. VFK

Battles of Kanarsmot, First and Second: In which Vallian forces held and threw back raiders over the Great River. SFK

Bellendur: Kovnate of the Dawn Lands.

Belzid's Belly, By: A Brokelsh oath.

Belzur the Aphorist, Master: A new and successful playwright of Vondium.

Beng Drudoj: Patron saint of wrestlers.

Beng Lomier: Patron saint of strolling players.

Beng Teabu: Martyr who was drawn many seasons ago in the chundrog of Jikaida City.

Bevon: A powerfully built yet gentle Brukaj, slave to Master Scatulo, who obtained freedom by acting a piece in Kazz Jikaida; good comrade to Prescott. SFK

Bilsley: A vadvarate of the Kingdom of Mandua in the Dawn Lands. Dav Olmes is vad.

Black Chunguj, By the: An oath indicating disapproval of an unjust act.

"Black is White and White is Black." A song about a Pandaheem who kissed the baker's wife and went floury white to see the sweep's wife, and so went home white and black.

Blind Archer, By the: Plea to the Bowman of Chance for a good shot when the mark is difficult and a hit uncertain.

Brad the Berry: Landlord of the Hagli Bush in Vondium, a cheerful, resourceful man around whom rumors cluster. Raised a regiment from his regulars; but marked out for high office.

Brince: Second cousin to Inch.

Brokkerim: Familiar form of address from one Brokelsh to another.

Brudstern: Sword mark shaped like open flower, whose magic is whispered rather than spoken. Usually punched on forte.

Brugheim: A kovnate of the Kingdom of Mandua in the Dawn Lands. Konec Yadviro is kov.

Brukaj: A diff with a bulldog face and powerful hunched shoulders, with somewhat short legs. They are determined and dogged.

Bruk-en-im: Brukaj spirit or deity of good will.

Brumbyte's elbow, By: A Vallian pikeman's oath.

“Brumbyte’s Love Potion”: Sentimental song created in Vondium out of regard for the new phalanx.

C

calsax: armored howdah containing warriors mounted on the backs of huge beasts such as dermiflons, boloths, and trompipluns.

Challenger: Flying sailing ship commanded by Captain Hando which took Prescott and the Vallian paktuns off Wenhartdrin. VFK

chavnik: A form of small pet Kregan cat.

Chodku: Archer component attached to the Kerchuri, consisting of two Lanchans each of 432 bowmen.

Chodkuvax: Commander of Chodku. Equivalent rank to Jiktat.

chundrog: dungeon.

churgur: heavy infantryman equipped with sword and shield as basic weapons.

Clardo the Clis: A Vallian hypaktun from Vomansoir, a pug-ugly man, scarred, with prominent eyebrows, returned to fight and joined 1EYJ in command of churgurs.

“Conundrum of the Hyrshiv”: Song concerning the comical efforts of a little Och maiden and a strapping Tlochu youth to sort out the twelve limbs they possess between them.

Covinglee: Small kovnate of the Dawn Lands.

D

Deb-Lu-Quienyin: Wizard of Loh.

Deft-Fingered Minch: A crusty, bearded veteran who ran Prescott’s field quarters in the Eighth Army. VFK

Desolate Wastes: Difficult area, not all barren, confining the eastern approaches to Lionard Den, Jikaida City.

diashum: magnificent.

Dogansmot: Town in the vadvarate of Thadelm in SW Vallia.

Dolardansmot: Town where lived the mother of the Fre-Da twins.

“Don’t dice with a four-armed fellow”: Saying cautioning against taking foreseeable and unnecessary risks.

Dottle’s Playhouse: A theater in Jikaida City.

drexa: Pattern of sword designed in Valka by Prescott and Naghan the Gnat sharing attributes of the

thraxter and clanxer with what of the Savanti Sword Prescott could incorporate.

Drill the Eye: A Vallian hyrpaktun from Vond, a squat, fiery-faced man, returned to fight and joined 1EYJ in command of archers.

drin: land; a division, usually of thirty-six squares, of the Jikaida board.

Drogo: A Kildoi who joined Prescott and Pompino in their attempt to steal an airboat and escape from Jikaida City. Bears a grudge against Mefto the Kazzur. FFK

Dromo the Benevolent: Spirit appealed to and given thanks for assistance in the Dawn Lands.

Durheim: Kovnate north of the Mountains of the North in Vallia, south and east of Evir.

E

Ender: Acts as Prescott's valet although more of a comrade; a quiet, deft, impeccable, invaluable man.

"Empty Wine Jar, The": A song popular in Vondium during the Time of Troubles.

Ennschafften: Diffs with delightful baby faces, naive and simple, the men very strong, the women very beautiful, most often employed as house servants. The name they are generally called is Syblians.

Erthanfydd The Meticulous: Spirit of Erthyrdrin under whose intolerant eye the warriors of the Erthyrrhim pass their weapons in metaphysical inspection before battle.

ESW: Emperor's Sword Watch; at this time two regiments strong, 1ESW has comrades of the Choice Band who created this bodyguard out of affection and concern for the safety of Prescott, and 2ESW mainly promising youngsters training for commands.

EYJ: Emperor's Yellow Jackets; at this time one regiment strong, 1EYJ formed from paktuns returning to Vallia and young men from Drak's City.

Execution Jikaida: Unpleasant form of Kazz Jikaida in which the pieces are taken by condemned criminals and slain on the board, in Jikaida City.

F

Fakal the Oivon: A Vallian paktun from Meltzer, swarthy-faced; returned to fight, and lent his shield to Turko as *Mancha of Tlinganden* ran aground on Wenhartdrin. VFK

Filbarrka na Filbarrka: Nazab of the blue-grass country of the Blue Mountains, a zorcaman, created the zorca archers and lancers that discomfited the clansmen in the Battle of Kochwold.

Flame Winds of Father Tolki: In the ancient, now repudiated, religion of Father Tolki, his Flame Winds would race across the land to avenge and destroy faster than a zorca could run.

Fiona: Brilliant, beautiful girl, handmaiden to Delia.

flutduinim: collective noun for men flying flutduins.

flutswod: Soldier flying any kind of bird or animal.

Fluttrhim: Flying people of various races of winged diffs.

flyer remained unsaddled: Saying indicating a problem was left unattempted.

“Forbenard and the Rokrell”: An unsophisticated ditty.

Frandu the Fanch: A Fristle who has a very high opinion of himself, hence his nickname, with a sharp tongue, a doughty fighter.

Fre-Da, Logu: Pachak, with all the Pachak virtues, gave his nikobi to Deb-Lu-Quienyin, while his twin ventured into the Moder.

Fre-Da, Modo: Pachak, twin to Logu who shared adventures.

Frelensmot: Town of Vallia in which Jilian Sweet-tooth was born.

freymul: Pleasant riding animal, often called the poor man’s zorca; one breed having vivid streaks of yellow below and a chocolate-colored coat. A willing mount and serves well within abilities.

Frorkehume: Kingdom of the Dawn Lands overrun by Hamal.

Fruningen: A small rocky island northwest of the island of Tezpor north of Rahartdrin. A harsh, inhospitable place despite the near perfect climate, home of the Wizards of Fruningen.

G

Game of Moons: A game of arguable simplicity much played by those to whom Jikaida, Jikalla, and Vajikry present problems.

Garfon the Staff: Majordomo in the palace of Vondium.

gauffrer: Diff with rodent features, usually a city-dweller.

Gertinlad: City of Dawn Lands, held by Kov Pastic.

gherimcal: Small carrying chair, sedan chair.

Gilma, Ford of: Leads to Songaslad, a town of thieves.

Glyfandrin: Kovnate of the Dawn Lands.

Gonells: Women of the Gon race of diffs, many of whom allow their beautiful silver hair to grow long, as the men all shave bald.

grascent: A risslaca of medium size, scaled, with powerful hind legs used for leaping, and a wedge-shaped head.

greesh: Term of contempt used by slaves and poor folk ripe for enslavement for slavers, aragorn, slavemasters. Formed from “grak!” and “kleesh.”

GrollenDen: City of Vallia, capital of Zaphoret, east of Mountains of the North.

Grumbleknees: A fine zorca, a gray, ridden by Prescott on a number of notable occasions.

Gursnigur: Spirit or deity used in oaths by Moltingurs.

H

hagli: ivy, not the thorn variety.

Half Moon: An old theater of Vondium, partially burned in the Time of Troubles but still in use; the audience gets wet when it rains.

Hall of Specters: One of the Nine Halls surrounding the Chamber of the Flame in the Moder of Ungovich, crammed with corpses.

Havandua the Green Wonder: A spirit of the Dawn Lands of Havilfar.

heasmons: Fragrant violet-yellow flowers.

Hikaidish: Rules and regulations of different styles of wrestling.

Himindur the Three-eyed: A Havilfarian spirit of luck and good fortune, equating with the Vallian Five-handed Eos-Bakchi.

Hiviku the Artful: The archetypal old sweat in Havilfar, equating with Vikatu the Dodger.

hiviku: one of the inferior pieces in Vajikry.

Horata the Bounteous: A Khibil female beneficent spirit.

Horato the Potent: A Khibil male beneficent spirit.

Humped Land: Colloquial name for Moderdrin, the Land of the Fifth Note.

Hunch: A Tryfant from the kovnate of Covinglee in the Dawn Lands, whose father, a brass founder, fell on evil times through spending all his time and money on Vajikry, and Hunch ended up slave. A good companion to Prescott who is not afraid to tell everyone that he is afraid. Went to Vallia with Nodgen.

Huvon the Lightning: A popular deity in Hyrklana.

Hyr Brun: Giant with straw-yellow hair, broad and bulky, seven inches taller than Prescott. Servant to Ros the Claw.

Hyr Flick: A very large variety of carnivorous flower, with green tendrils and orange cones, like enormous flick-flicks.

hyrkaida: in Jikaida, checkmate.

I

ibithses: one of the many purple flowers of Kregen.

Ibs of the Lily City: A Hyrklanian reference to the ghosts of the Lily City Klana, the ancient ruined capital of the island.

Infathon: Town of the province of Vazkardrin in NE Vallia.

Inshurfraz, the Furnace Fires of: One of the hotter legendary hells of Kregen.

Instructions to Novices: Precepts for those entering the service of Opaz, used to advise and guide all Vallians.

“In the Fair Arms of Thyllis”: A Hamalian song telling of the marvelous deeds of Thyllis the Munificent. Erithor made scurrilous words and Prescott entertained his comrades from Mandua with them during a Noumjiksirn after a game of Kazz Jikaida in Jikaida City. SFK

Irginian: Place in south Vallia, scene of the battle of that name.

Ithieursmot: Bleak little town of Northern Jevuldrin in Vallia.

J

Jehamnet: Spirit of harvest time associated with crop failures and other disasters. Known as Jevalnet in Vallia, Jegrodnet and Jezarnet in the Eye of the World, Jepannet in Pandahem and Jehavnet in most of Havilfar.

jibr: Pain.

Jikaida: The premier board game of Kregen. A brief description of Poron Jikaida is published as Appendix A to *A Sword for Kregen*.

Jikaida City: LionardDen.

Jikaida Dance: One of the dances of Vallia and most other countries of Paz, but not all, in which the dancers retire as they fail to adhere to the movements called for by the songs sung to the music of the dance.

Jikaidish Lore: A hyr lif containing the history, rules, comments, and games of Jikaida over the centuries. In Jikaida City the Jikaidish also contains rules concerning weapons and relative strengths of the humans acting as pieces.

Jilian: A brilliant girl, a Jikai Vuvushi, one of six children of a Banje shop keeper who failed. She was taken in by the Little Sisters of Opaz and taught sewing, then the Sisters of the Rose sent her to Lancival. She uses a whip and a claw like Ros the Claw. Formed a regiment of Jikai Vuvushis. A good comrade to Prescott and a friend and devoted adherent of Delia.

Jögen: A favorite old play from the Fifth Book of The Vicissitudes of Panadian the Ibreiver by Nalgre ti Liancesmot.

jutman: A word describing anyone riding an animal, the Kregish is juttim. It follows that a riding animal

must be a jut.

K

kaida: In Jikaida, check.

Kaldi: Lozenge-shaped kovnate in extreme southwest of main island of Vallia. Vodun Alloran was kov.

Kaldu: A large, powerful apim retained of Jaezila.

kalider: A dagger of Havilfar, sharply curved with a heavy hilt, the blade being very wide at the quillons, a Kregan knuckle (4.2", 106.68 mm), and curving keenly to a fine point, honed on both edges.

kampeon: A veteran who has achieved great renown and recognition.

Kanarsmot: A town of Bryvondrin on the northwest bank of the Great River opposite the boundary of Mai Makanar and Mai Yenizar to the southeast of the Great River.

kao: One of the many Kregan names for death.

kaochun: The Jaws of Death.

kaotim: The Undead, the living dead.

Karidge, Nath: A fine zorcaman and cavalry commander.

Kazz: Blood.

Kazz-Jikaida: Blood Jikaida, played with people who fight for the possession of the squares on the board.

Kervax: Abbreviation for Kerchurivax.

Khorundur: A country of the Dawn Lands of Havilfar.

Khorunlad: Capital of Khorundur.

King's Hand: Gambling game played with at least six dice.

Klaiton: Noble House of Zenicce, colors are gray and blue.

Kochwold: A sweep of moorland on the southern borders of Jevuldrin and the northern borders of Forli.

krad: A bronze coin of Vallia, newly minted and issued by the Presidio.

kraitch-ambur: Thunder.

Kranlil the Reaper: Horrific spirit of maleficent evil.

kregoinye: People employed by the Everoinye, the Star Lords, on their business about Kregen.

kreutzin: Light infantry acting as skirmishers, voltigeurs.

L

Lamdu: A form of Jikaida in which there are ninety pieces to a side.

Larghos the Sko-handed: A Vallian hyrpaktun from Gremivoh, with a long, narrow chin and slinger's shoulders, returned to fight and joined 1EYJ in command of staff slingers.

Lattice House: Decadent palace in Trakon's Pillars where Thelda Polista and her child were kept prisoner. LFK

Ling-li-Lwingling: A Witch of Loh.

LionardDen: Known as Jikaida City, situated very near the exact center of Havilfar.

Llunyush the Juice: One of the many spirits of catering sworn on by the chefs of Paz.

Lobur the Dagger: Name used by Lobur ham Hufadet, a Hamalese horter, aide-de-camp to Prince Nedfar.

Longweill: A fluttrhim and thief, who came to a glutinous end down the Moder. FFK

Loriman the Hunter, Kov: A full, fleshy, choleric noble whose passion is hunting. In his own intemperate, bash-on, bully-boy way he was a tower of strength down the Moder. What he sought down there among the horrors and the Monsters, Prescott suggests, was of use to his cult of Spikatur Hunting Sword and far outweighed in value mere gold or gems. FFK

“Lucili the Radiant”: A popular song in Vondium.

Lucrina, Yasuri, Vadni of Cremorra: The Lady Yasuri, a small woman who dressed in shiny black bombazine, employed Pompino and Prescott as paktuns, and they were bound to her protection as kregoinye on orders from the Star Lords. When she became champion in Jikaida City after Prescott fought Mefto the Kazzur she lost a deal of her sharpness, most of the lines on her face, and the razor-edged nose softened. The king of her country was slain and her vadvarate overrun. SFK, FFK

lumop: Term of abuse.

Luxis Bliem Juruk nalen Strom, En: The Strom's Sacred Life Guard. Formed in Valka when Prescott Fetched the island back to the people and was Fetched to be their strom. Known as SSLG.

lynxter: A Lohvian sword.

M

Mahendrasmot: A town of Southern Pandahem.

Mai Makanar: A kovnate on the southeast coast of Vallia.

Mai Yenizar: A kovnate on the southeast coast of Vallia.

majis: Short form of majister, used only by close intimates.

Mancha of Tlinganden: Argenter in which the returning paktuns took passage to Vallia, wrecked on Wenhartdrin. VFK

Mandanillo: A stately dance.

Mandua: Kingdom of Dawn Lands hostile to Hamal.

“March of the Skeletons”’: A song in which a brilliant and charming girl, just returned from a boat holiday, recounts how the skeletons marched from the graveyard in search of their missing flesh and blood. The song is an example of that inscrutable Kregan humor.

marlque: A riding animal.

Mausoleum of the Flame: Chamber of the Flame at the heart of the Nine Halls filled with their corpses in the Moder. FFK

Mazdo the Splandu: A superb golden numim, great-hearted and generous, deadly with all kinds of weapons.

Measure of Princesses: The Jikaida Dance.

Mefto the Kazzur: Cognomen of Mefto A’Shanofero, Prince of Shanodrin, a Kildoi. An exceptional swordsman who fought through to the principedom of Shanodrin in blood and death, devoted to Kazz-Jikaida, involved in intrigues to further the cause of Hamal in the Dawn Lands. Is now minus his tail hand, which was a left hand. SFK

Mists of Sicce: Confusing fogs circumjacent to the Ice Floes of Sicce.

Moder: A large artificial mountain, a kind of tell, containing tombs, sepulchers, and vaults, corpses, Undead, treasure, traps, and monsters and magic. FFK

Moderdrin: The Humped Land, the Land of the Fifth Note, where the Moders cover the ground as far as the eye can see.

Mogper, Colun, Kov of Mursham: A brilliant-seeming but vicious and depraved kov of a province in Menaham, marked for retribution by Jilian. He slew Barty Vessler by stabbing him in the back.

Moltingur: Diff of apim size with horny carapace across shoulders, eating proboscis, feelers, faceted eyes, a tunnel mouth with rows of needle-like teeth to tear food for proboscis to masticate and swallow. Speaks with a hiss, chillingly.

mon: Right (as distinct from left).

Mountains of Thirda: Situated on the western end of the border between Jevuldrin and Forli in eastern Vallia.

Muzzard: A diff something like a Chulik, but without tusks, with skin of a leaden hue and exuding a musky odor.

Myer, Pallan: Minister of Education, Learning, appointed by Prescott in Vondium. Walks everywhere reading a book.

“My Love is like a Moon Bloom”: Popular song of Paz.

mytzer: Low-slung, ten-legged, docile draught animal, inexpensive but of excellent pulling power much used by tradesmen and poor folk who cannot afford the more expensive breeds of draught animals abounding on Kregen.

N

Naghan the Doom: One of Ariane nal Amklana’s retainers, a numim.

Nath the Shaft: An apim from Ruathytu, expert archer, one of Prince Tyfar’s retainers.

Neagrom: City famous for beautiful ceramic ware.

Nedfar, Prince: Prince of Hamal, second cousin to the Empress Thyllis, father of Tyfar and Thefi, a man of high courage and honor.

Nierdrik: Diff with coarse-skinned, high-beaked, hooded-eyed face like killer-turtle, hard and gritty, with compact muscular body, with two arms, two legs and no tail.

Niklaardu: Family name of twin Vallian paktuns from Wenhartdrin returned to fight and joined 1EYJ.

Ngrozyan the Axe: Spirit from myths of Ng’grogā.

Nodgen: A Brokelsh who has been a mercenary, a cutpurse in Jikaida City, and much else, handy with a spear, became slave with Hunch and Prescott. Good companion to Prescott, went with Hunch to Vallia.

Norgoth, Tarek Malervo: A man with thin legs and bulky body, sent as Ambassador to Prescott from Layco Jhansi, acted as commissar in army commanded by Kapt Hangrol defeated at Battle of Ovalia. A man whose self-importance expands or recedes with the company he keeps. LFK, VFK

Norhan the Flame: A useful fellow who likes to hurl blazing pots of combustibles.

Notor Shorthush of the Waves: One of the mythical Sea Lords of Kregen who send gales to sink men’s ships out of spite.

Noumjiksirn: A wake, an uproarious yet serious celebration in which warriors mourn their vanished comrades.

O

Olmes, Dav, Vad of Bilsley: A good-natured noble with long yellow hair, a round, cheerful, pugnacious face, an expert swordsman. Vad of a province in Mandua hostile to Hamal. Befriended Prescott, Bevon, and Pompino in Jikaida City. SFK

“Only Zair knows the cleanliness of a human heart”: A saying from the Eye of the World suggesting that all men have secrets they do not want, and act differently from the way they would wish to act, yet make attempts to overcome their failings.

Orscop, Nath, Trylon of Absordur: A noble of the Dawn Lands whose ruling passion was Vajikry. VFK

Ortyg the Tresh: Standard Bearer with 1ESW who carries the Union flag of Vallia.

Ovalia: Town of the Imperial Province of Orvendel in Vallia.

P

Panachreem: Mythical home of the gods and spirits of Pandahem.

pantor: The word in Pandahem for the Hamalian notor and Vallian jen — lord.

Phrutius, Strom: Bought Prescott as slave from Jikaida City, was eaten by a Laughing Shadow down the Moder. FFK

Polisto: Tyr Lol, ti Sygurd: Fine, limber man who lost his farming estate during Vallia's Time of Troubles, fought back as the leader of the local guerrillas and rescued and married Thelda.

Pompino, Scauro, ti Tuscursmot: A Khibil, powerful and shrewd, with scars tracing over his body, sometimes called Pompino the Iarvin. A kregoinye. From South Pandahem. Worked with Prescott for the Star Lords protecting the Lady Yasuri. Like most Khibils somewhat contemptuous of everybody else, but a good comrade to Prescott. SFK

Prado, En: A later playwright than Nalgre ti Liancesmot whose work En Prado often comments on.

Prince Larghos and the Demons: A legend of Kregen containing the story of Gilma, a water sprite, and Nafti, the potter's son.

propt: Support; given by Deldar to swod in Jikaida.

Pypor: Deity of some clans of the Great Plains of Segesthes, and a Devil Deity to other clans.

Q

Quardon: Young voller pilot of 2ESW.

Queltar: Of Queltar, Deb-Lu-Quienyin says: "Some hellhole in Queltar where no man should have to exist."

Queyd-arn-tung!: No more need be said on the subject.

R

Ralton Daw-Erentor, Tyr: Seconds on of a minor noble of North Vallia, hewed to Layco Jhansi's party because of his father, a keen sleeth racer, uncomfortable over confrontation with Prescott during Norgoth's embassy, potentially a fine man. LFK

Ravenshal and Rashenka: A gentle Relt stylor and his wife of Mahendrasmot, who invited Prescott to their home and treated him with kindness, two of the ordinary nice people of Kregen. VFK

reed-laurium: Reed — headband. Laurium — rank. Any headband bedecked with symbols, feathers, colors denoting rank. In this instance worn by people in Kazz-Jikaida to indicate the pieces they represent.

Renko the Murais: A Valkan axeman, member of the SSLG, saved from being hanged for a murder he did not commit by Prescott in Vondium, subsequently joined 1ESW. LFK

Risslaca Ichor: Wine; a rosé with the addition of dopa which adulterates it or fortifies it according to taste.

Rodiflor, Kov Erclan the Critchoith: Square, hard noble, savage to his subordinates, devoted to Kazz-Jikaida, a man of harsh authority and power.

Rokveil: King.

Rorvring the Vakka! By: A strong cavalryman's oath.

Rosala: Beautiful, brilliant girl, handmaiden to Delia.

Rovard the Murvish: An initiate of the Brotherhood of the Sorcerers of Murcroinim, an ascetic, dressed in skins and skulls, smells offensively, an adept with the morntarch.

“Run over-hastily on a leem's tracks”: Presuming too early to confidences in a relationship.

Ruthmayern: A country of Hamal.

S

Saenci: Pretty Khibil girl, fiancée of Andrinis, brought safely out of Mahendrasmot by Prescott. VFK

Sakkora Stones: Ruined star-shaped buildings of the Sunset People.

Sangar, Orlon, ti Deliasmot: Kerchurivax of the Tenth Kerchuri of the Fifth Phalanx at the Battle of Ovalia. VFK

Sasco! By: An oath so far of obscure provenance used by Kov Loriman, the Hunting Kov.

Scarron Necklace, The: A new play by Master Belzur the Aphorist, produced in Vondium during the troublous times.

Scatulo, Master: A Jikaidast of repute, with too high an opinion of himself, who once owned Bevon as slave. SFK

schrafter: One of the many types of animal infesting dungeons, where they sharpen their teeth on the bones of corpses.

schturval: Any kind of badge, symbol, color, denoting allegiances.

screetz: Sword.

Shanodrin: Princedom of the Dawn Lands.

shansili: A white-flowered creeper with sweet scent grown on trellises.

“She Lived by the Lily Canal”: A sentimental song, much sung by the troops on the night before the Battle of Kochwold.

sherissa: A lady’s filmy veil.

Shirrerdrin: A country of the Dawn Lands heavily forested with oak trees.

Sicce’s Gates: Here an eons-old crack leads down deeply into the crust of the world; place in Vallia where the Vallian Army was overthrown by clansmen. LFK

sko: Left (as distinct from right).

Skull and Crossbones: A game of Kregen.

“Smoke blown with the wind”: Water under the bridge.

Sorcerers of Murcroinim: A brotherhood of thaumaturges of some real powers.

Songaslad: A town of thieves in the Dawn Lands where caravans form for the journey across the Desolate Wastes to Jikaida City.

Spag the June! By: The favorite oath of Dav Olmes, referring to a spirit causing confusion to honest travelers.

Spikatur Hunting Sword: A secret cult of which, at the moment, little is revealed by Prescott.

Spikatur Cycle, The: The Sixth Cycle of the Saga of Dray Prescott.

Springs of Beng Jasto: Hot mineral springs in Vallia where hides are cured to an exceeding toughness.

Spurs of Lasal the Vakka! By: A mild cavalryman’s oath.

Stony Korf: A forbidding fortress in the kovnate of Falinur.

strandja: A feared weapon of Chem, six-foot-long haft, ten-inch-long steel head of holly-leaf shape, nine spikes aside set alternately forward and back, the lowest pair curving downward into hooks.

strebe: Silver coin of Western Dawn Lands, of two kinds, the broad and the short strebe. It is important in business to know which kind you are bargaining in.

Stroxals: A race of diffs of Kregen.

sturr: A fellow who is mostly silent, a trifle boorish, not particularly favored in handsomeness, louche, maladroit.

swarth: A four-legged risslaca with a cruel, wedge-shaped head sloping into a humped scaled body, clawed feet, not very fast. Has a muscular bulk that carries his rider well and is a saddle animal that

jutmen are coming to favor more in Vallia.

Sweet Ibroi: Herb; the burned twigs give off aromatic smoke which invigorates and is used to revive victims of faintness.

Sweet Ordums: Small octagonal biscuits.

Sygyrd: Small farming estate in Falinur; Lol Polisto is the squire.

T

Tardalvoh: A bracing dry wine, tart and invigorating.

Tarkshur the Lash: A Katakai from Klardimoin, bought Hunch, Nodgen, and Prescott on the slave auction block, a ferocious slaver, came to a gripping end down the Moder. FFK

“Teach a Wizard to Catch a Fly”: Teach your grandmother to suck eggs.

tenash: A large, blundering, grazing animal with a strong hide, which when cured becomes extraordinarily tough and light.

Tezpor: Island of Vallia due north of Rahartdrin.

Thangal: A Trylonate of Hamal northwest of Ruthmayern.

Thefi, Princess: Daughter of Prince Nedfar, a charming and strong-willed girl, with no malice in her but that occasioned by her exalted status and unthinking acceptance of service.

Thrangulf, Kov: Of Hamal, calls himself a plain man, successfully held his kovnate despite his father's animosity because the old kov, Thrangulf's grandfather, lived too long, no ham in his name, generally disliked by people who did not trouble to consider his position, loyal to the Empress Thyllis. FFK

Tipp the Thrax, Kyr: A Huringan cheldur favored by Queen Fahia but lacking the powers of a Roman lanista.

Tlinganden: Free City of the east coast of Loh.

Tlochu: A diff of Kregen with six limbs.

Tomor, Torn: Son of Tom Tomor and Bibi of Valka, a paktun, returned to fight for Vallia, joined the 1EYJ.

Trakon's niksuth: Boggy area surrounding Trakon's Pillars.

Trakon's Pillars: In Falinur, built around the hill rising from the bogs, a decadent place of many palaces with Jikaida as the most prominent architectural and decorative motif.

Trefimlad: A wealthy city of Hamal.

Trip-Tails! By the: A Katakai oath.

tromp: A bright, warm, pleasant yellow color.

Tryflor: A Tryfant spirit or deity.

Tuscursmot: A town of Southern Pandahem.

Tyfar, Prince: Son of Prince Nedfar of Hamal, studious and intelligent, a lover of books, is a superb axemen, honorable and upright, dealing fairly with all, a good comrade to Prescott down the Moder and across the Humped Land and the Dawn Lands.

U

Ungovich, Tyr: The Lord or Wizard of the Moder down which the expedition including Prescott ventured. FFK

urron: Crimson.

V

Vajikry: A board game of Kregen.

Valhan: Name of the last dynasty of Vallia; Dray Prescott began the new dynasty of Prescott.

Vardon the Cheeks: Trumpeter of the 2ESW at the Battle of Ovalia.

Varmondsweay Canal: An Admiralty yard for the flying sailing ships of the Vallian air sailing service in Vondium located by this canal.

Vazkardrin: A vadvarate of Vallia between the east coast and the Kwan Hills.

Vilaha's Tripes: An incident of legend used in oaths.

Villa of Vennar: Layco Jhansi's villa in Vondium, confiscated, used as meeting place of the Presidio in the Time of Troubles.

voinsh: Happy.

Vond: Rich Imperial Province west of Vondium.

W

Wayfarer's Drinnik: Wide, dusty area outside most cities and towns of Paz where the caravans form up or disband.

"Wedding Dirge of Hondor Elaina": A sentimental song.

Wend: A dance accompanied by popular songs, in which the singers form long lines and prance through every nook and cranny of palace, villa, kyro, and avenue of their city they can reach before either the ending of the songs or exhaustion sets in.

Wenhardttrin: Small island off south coast of Vallia, produces first-quality wines, an Imperial Province.

Werven: A small place in the kovnate of Falinur.

“When Zair crooks his finger, then up you go, my friend, and nothing will detain you on Kregen”: A saying in the Eye of the World indicating that individual fate will not be balked.

Wizards of Fruningen: A small sect of religious thaumaturges, regarding Opaz as a single entity, with some claims to serious consideration.

Y

Yadivro, Konec, Kov of Brugheim: An upright, determined, not-too-brilliant kov of a province in Mandua hostile to Hamal.

Yagno, San: A Sorcerer of the Cult of Almuensis, foppish, a show-off, drew power from hyr-lifs, vanished in the lowest zone of the Moder. FFK

Yervismot: Town of Vallia taken by Prescott, where he was reunited with Seg Segutorio. LFK

Z

zeunt: The unique vault in Jikaida.

zhantilla: Female zhantil.

zoid: Trap.

zygodont: A reptile with fangs, claws, membranous wings, and barbed tail; can grow to the size of a small zorca excluding the serpent-like neck.

Notes

[1]jid: bane.

[2]General name for city areas of confused alleys and covered souks and bazaars, teeming with commerce and villainy.*A.B.A.*

[3]Beng Dikkane: The patron saint of all the ale drinkers in Paz.*A.B.A.*

[4]Schturval: Color-coded badge, symbol, banded sleeve, and figurative representation of animal or plant or abstract design, forming insignia denominating allegiances in Vallia.

[5]db: dwaburs per bur.

[6]pantor: The Pandahem word for lord, equating with the Havilfarian notor and the Vallian jen.

[7]kampeon: veteran who has received recognition and won renown.

[8]See Dray Prescott #11, *Armada of Antares* .

[9]Kervax: Abbreviation for Kerchurivax.

[10]bobs: phalerae, medals.

About the author

Alan Burt Akers was a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer, who died in December 2005 aged eighty-four.

Bulmer wrote over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction, both under his real name and numerous pseudonyms, including Alan Burt Akers, Frank Brandon, Rupert Clinton, Ernest Corley, Peter Green, Adam Hardy, Philip Kent, Bruno Krauss, Karl Maras, Manning Norvil, Chesman Scot, Nelson Sherwood, Richard Silver, H. Philip Stratford, and Tully Zetford. Kenneth Johns was a collective pseudonym used for a collaboration with author John Newman. Some of Bulmer's works were published along with the works of other authors under "house names" (collective pseudonyms) such as Ken Blake (for a series of tie-ins with the 1970s television programme *The Professionals*), Arthur Frazier, Neil Langholm, Charles R. Pike, and Andrew Quiller.

Bulmer was also active in science fiction fandom, and in the 1970s he edited nine issues of the *New Writings in Science Fiction* anthology series in succession to John Carnell, who originated the series.

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at www.mushroom-ebooks.com, and at wikipedia.org.

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4. Swordships of Scorpio
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7. Arena of Antares
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9. Bladesman of Antares
10. Avenger of Antares
11. Armada of Antares

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13. Renegade of Kregen

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45. Gangs of Antares

46. Demons of Antares

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