

DRAY PRESCOT: 11

**ARMADA OF
ANTARES**

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writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

ARMADA OF ANTARES

Dray Prescot #11

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a Mushroom eBooks sample

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A Note on Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott is a man above medium height, with straight brown hair and brown eyes that are level and dominating. His shoulders are immensely wide and there is about him an abrasive honesty and a fearless courage. He moves like a great hunting cat, quiet and deadly. Born in 1775 and educated in the inhumanly harsh conditions of the late eighteenth century English navy, he presents a picture of himself that, the more we learn of him, grows no less enigmatic.

Through the machinations of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe — mortal but superhuman men dedicated to the aid of humanity — and of the Star Lords, the Everoinye, he has been taken to Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio many times. On that savage and beautiful, marvelous and terrible world he rose to become Zorcander of the Clansmen of Segesthes, and Lord of Strombor in Zenicce, and a member of the mystic and martial Order of Krozairs of Zy.

Against all odds Prescott won his highest desire and in that immortal battle at The Dragon's Bones claimed his Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains. And

Delia claimed him in the face of her father, the dread Emperor of Vallia. Amid the rolling thunder of the acclamations of "Hai Jikai!" Prescott became Prince Majister of Vallia, and wed his Delia, the Princess Majestrix. One of their favorite homes is in Valkanium, capital city of the island of Valka of which Prescott is Strom.

Prescot is plunged headlong into fresh adventures on Kregen in the continent of Havilfar. Outwitting the Manhounds of Antares, ghastly parodies of humans used as hunting dogs, and fighting as a hyr-kaidur in the arena of the Jikhorkdun in Huringa in Hyrklana, he becomes King of Djanduin, idolized by his incredibly ferocious four-armed Djangs. But Hamal, the greatest power in Havilfar, ruled by Queen Thyllis, is bent on conquest; Prescott acting as a spy under cover of the alias of Hamun ham Farthytu, has discovered half the secrets of the airboats that give Hamal so much of her power. Now Prescott must bend every effort into thwarting the egomaniacal plans of Queen Thyllis and her iron Empire of Hamal with whatever weapons he can find . . .

This volume, *Armada of Antares*, sees the conclusion of the second cycle in the saga of Dray Prescott, the "Havilfar Cycle." With the next book, tentatively titled *The Tides of Kregen*, we are launched onto the third cycle of Prescott's adventures under the Suns of Scorpio which, because of the locale and the mystic order of which Prescott is so valued a member, I have called the "Krozair Cycle."

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter 1

Swordplay in a garden

“Drak!” said the Princess Majestrix of Vallia, walking unhurriedly across the grass to the pool’s edge. “If you insist on climbing the tree I shall be cross.” She put one bare toe into the water and shook her head, looking so gorgeously lovely that I marveled anew at her beauty. “Of course, Drak, if you fall in I shall be more than cross. You are wearing your best clothes.”

“I’m not wearing my best clothes,” said Lela, higher in the tree. She looked down at her brother, giggled, and threw a leafy twig at him. “Silly boy! All dressed up to see his soldiers.”

“I will climb up,” said Drak, with the solemn ferociousness of extreme youth. “And pull your hair.”

Delia’s smile vanished. Her face took on a most purposeful look as she stared up into the missal tree which overhung this small private pool in a walled garden of Esser Rarioch. The garden rioted with flowers, their colors and scents filling the air with brilliant beauty and sweet perfumes. And, over all, the high blue

sky of Kregen smiled down, fluffed with cloud. From that sky shone the twin suns, the Suns of Scorpio, Zim and Genodras, the red and the green, streaming down their glorious mingled opaz radiance.

Well, I was home. Home in my island Stromnate of Valka, off the coast of Vallia, and my Delia had very quickly led me to understand that bringing up twins, a boy demon and a girl demoness, was a far cry from racing off into adventure with my red cloak flaring and the glitter of a rapier in my eyes.

I looked up at young Drak, whose vigorous body swung from the tree branch as he hauled himself up with a determination of which I approved despite his mother's stern admonishments about his best clothes. "Drak," I said, speaking in my relaxed at-home voice. "Drak, my lad. If you fall into the water you will not please your mother. If you fall at all you will not please me. And, anyway, if you fall into the water you will hardly be ready to present the standards to your regiment."

"I will *not* fall, Father."

"Humph," I said. But he was right. The little devil could climb like a grundal, one of those rock-apes of the inner sea.

No doubt some deep realization that his mother meant what she said penetrated at last, making him heed her rather than his desire to scare his sister. For I had noticed that for all the bloodthirsty threats young Drak made against Lela, he did not carry them out — or not many of them and only very briefly. I had, like any

parent, a deep concern and apprehension over the relationship of my children and, thank Zair, I saw they loved each other. Now he began to shinny down the tree, with a careless, casual abandonment that masked his exquisite care over his bright buff clothes and the red and white sash.

I smiled.

Delia, I saw, contained a tremble at the corner of her mouth, that mouth which in its soft ripe redness held the whole universe of beauty, and she half turned away so that her twins should not see how easily they could move her. She wore a brief white tunic, flowing free, and I would have stepped forward and taken her in my arms.

The little wicket gate in the angle of the old red brick wall, drowned in white and purple flowers, opened with a smash. A Valkan archer stumbled through. He wore the usual Vallian buff, bedecked with the brave red and white Valkan favor. His bow was broken in two, dangling by the string. He had lost his wide-brimmed hat and his fair hair tumbled about his face. He opened his mouth and tried to speak, one hand groping before him, the fingers outspread. Speaking was difficult, for a thick spear had passed between his ribs, and I did not think he had long to live. But, before he died, this guard tried to cry out his warning.

The comfortable little family scene had been ripped apart.

“Largan!” cried Delia, and her hand went not to her mouth but groped emptily at her side. She was not

wearing a belt and there was no long slender dagger scabbarded there.

“Go up into the tree, Drak!”

I spoke quickly. I must have used something of that old command voice, for Drak jumped and instantly began to climb again.

“Do not worry about your clothes, Drak! Climb up high, with Lela. Hide in the leaves! Climb quickly, my son.”

“We will buy you new clothes if you tear them, Drak!” Delia spoke firmly, but I heard the choked sob in her voice.

“And you, too, wife,” I said. “Get inside and—”

“There is no time, Dray.”

They walked into the cool scented garden, arrogant, confident, vicious. There were four of them. They came like executioners into a schoolroom.

I put my hand to my waist. I wore a white shirt and buff Vallian breeches and black boots. I did not wear a sword. I cursed then, deep in my throat. Here. Here! In my own walled garden of Esser Rarioch overlooking my capital city Valkanium and the Bay! This was incredible. It was obscene.

The four carried rapiers in their right hands, and left-hand daggers, and they walked forward without haste. They were men who knew their work. They had been hired to do this. They were men accustomed to the quick and efficient dispatch of their business.

Each of the assassins wore a steel domino-mask beneath the wide Vallian hat. Their clothes were

unremarkable: good solid Vallian buff. They spread out a little as they advanced. I wondered how much they knew of me, how much they had been told.

Delia began to shout. She did not scream. She shouted, a high ringing call that should bring attendants, guards, and friends running.

The first assassin's mouth widened beneath the mask.

"You are too late, lady," he said. His voice sounded perfectly normal. To me, he said: "You are the Strom of Valka?"

"It is clear you do not know me," I said. "Else a mere four of you, with rapiers and daggers, only, would never have taken the gold."

He laughed.

"Brave words, from a man about to die."

He was clever in his trade. Even as he spoke he sprang. He thought he would catch me completely unprepared.

The rapier lunged for my midriff. I leaned to my left and I swayed; I thrust my leg forward and struck him a cruel blow between wind and water. As his face turned green and his eyes popped I took the rapier away, jumped his collapsing body, and circled number two, spitting him through the guts. I saw number three's dagger spin and glitter and extend into a streaking silver blaze as he hurled it at me. The old Krozair disciplines brought the rapier up; the dagger chingled against the blade and flew to splash into the pool.

Number four yelled in a shocked voice: "The man is a devil!"

Number three tried to meet my attack, but fell away with his face slashed open. I knocked him down, and I said to this number four, who backed away, the rapier circling: "Yes, you poor onker. I am a very devil!"

He tried to run and I thrust him through his kidneys. There is no chivalry in me when a man tries to slay my Delia. None whatsoever.

Number one was holding himself and trying to get enough breath to gasp, making a most distressing groaning and hissing. I hit him on the head, enough to put him to sleep, and then the little garden filled with servants and guards.

I shouted so that at once everyone fell silent.

"Take this offal away. Chain up the one who lives. I shall question him later. See to poor Largan."

Delia was halfway up the tree. I tilted my head back and called up: "Take your time, my Delia."

"Yes, Dray. But the little devils will have seen all, through the leaves—"

"Yes." This was true. "They live on Kregen. The quicker they understand what that means, the better." But I felt a soreness at my heart. Innocence of youth should be continued for as long as possible, in an ideal world. Kregen, under the Suns of Scorpio, is not ideal, even if there is much in that beautiful and terrible world I prefer to my own Earth, four hundred light-years away.

Delia glanced down, about to say something, but called up to the children instead.

I knew I had spoken thoughtlessly, even after all the time I had lived on Kregen under Antares. How do you explain to your wife that you were never born on the world she was born on, that you came from a distant speck among the stars of heaven?

Like any weakling I had been putting off and putting off the time when I must explain to Delia. I had been brought from Earth to Kregen many times through the agency of the Scorpion, through that mysterious blue radiance that encompassed everything and which transported me from one world to another. The Star Lords, those unknown, aloof, supernal beings manipulated me from time to time, to carry out their wishes. Certainly I had been able to manufacture a crazy kind of strength that had given me some opposition to them; but I was always conscious that their purposes, dark and unknowable at that time, demanded more from me than I was prepared to give. As for the Savanti, those mortal but superhuman men and women of Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, their purposes were altogether more direct, for they wished to make the world of Kregen a fit place for men and women to live, in friendship and peace, with dignity and honor.

The four corpses and the unconscious would-be assassin had been removed. As stikitches these four must have been high in their trade. They had successfully penetrated the high fortress of Esser Rarioch overlooking Valkanium, and managed to make their evil way right to the target. It had been their misfortune that

their potential victim had been a ruffian called Dray Prescott.

No stikitcher would go around wearing a special kind of fancy dress proclaiming him an assassin, of course, for his days would be smartly numbered if he was so foolish. I bent and picked up one of the steel dominoes. There was blood clotting around the milled edges. This came from the fellow who, before he died, must have pondered the lack of half a face. The metal was still warm. It was merely an artifact, a lump of metal, fashioned into a mask with two eye-pieces, a swell for the nose, with straps to secure it in place. I had worn a similar steel domino during that fracas in Smerdislad.

At once impatient urgings closed on me. I threw the mask to the grass. Today a newly raised regiment of archers was to be given new standards. The important thing to remember here was that in Valka, an island Stromnate which prided itself on its own Valkan archers, armed with the compound reflex bow, this new regiment had been raised and armed with the great Lohvian longbow. The men had practiced religiously with this great bow and I had received tremendous help and encouragement from that master bowman, Seg Segutorio, the Kov of Falinur.

He had said in his feckless way: "To make a long-bowman you must start training with his grandfather!"

To which I had replied. "But these Valkans of mine, Seg, are used to drawing the bow. They only have to draw that extra notch, to snug the string under their ear,

and to feel the extra power across their shoulders. They will grow into it far quicker than you would credit.”

And he had said, “I’ll train ’em for you, Dray. Aye, by the Veiled Froyvil! I’ll run ’em in little circles until they can shoot out the chunkrah’s eye!”

He had been as good as his word. But then, I never expect anything less from Seg Segutorio, a good companion and a friend.

So, with the honor of Hyr-Jiktar going to my son Drak, the regiment would receive the new standards today.

I bellowed up: “Come on, Drak! You must learn never to keep honest soldiers waiting on parade. Least of all bowmen, who are a rough lot at best.”

“I am coming down, Father.”

And down he came. He did not come down as he had expected.

Delia let out a little ladylike shriek. Lela let rip an enormous laugh from so dainty a little maid. For Drak went down headlong from his high branch, a fluttering, yelling bundle that hit the water with an almighty splash.

We stood on the poolside as he swam across and climbed out, lily pads hanging around his ears.

“Drak!” said his mother.

Lela giggled.

Drak tried to get at his sister to push her into the water; but I took him up into my arms, all wet as he was, and carried him off for one of the fastest dryings and changings of clothes he had ever endured.

The urgency in me was not just to have the standards presented to the longbow regiment. Thoughts of Smerdislad, where I had overheard much that still puzzled me, thoughts of the airboats that my country of Vallia must acquire for the coming struggle with the overweening Empire of Hamal — these were the imperatives urging me on.

Quite simply Hamal, the greatest power on the continent of Havilfar, which lay south of us below the equator, was bent on a road of conquest; abandoning her attempts to fight on three fronts simultaneously, she had concentrated her strength for the thrust north against Pandahem. Pandahem was the island to the north of Havilfar and to the south of us in Vallia. Vallia and Pandahem were old-time adversaries on the oceans of Kregen. If all the countries of Pandahem went down in ruin there was nothing to stop the ambitions of Hamal from turning against us in Vallia. And Hamal possessed fleets of superb flying ships, airboats which they manufactured, which we did not. I had discovered some of the secrets of the air-boats and I wished to put through a big program of building. The Emperor of Vallia, Delia's father, had promised to make up his mind. The parade this afternoon would provide a good opportunity to force him to give his consent, I had thought, for he was flying in to see his daughter and his son-in-law and, no doubt, to find out what I had been up to in Havilfar.

“Who were those men, Father?”

“They were foolish fellows, Drak, paying a visit without telling us first they were arriving.”

“But you hit them — you hit them hard.”

By the lice-infested scaled hair of Makki-Grodno! How did you tell a little boy that men had come to slay his father, and his father had slain them instead? In cold words? Drak had seen. Maybe he thought this was a game in which one thumped a playmate over the head and fell down, shouting out that he was dead, and the next minute jumped up ready for further mischief.

I said, “Sometimes you have to do that, and you will find out when to do it and when not to do it. I promise you, Drak, you will know. For now, you must always listen to your mother and do as she says—”

“I know, I know! But, Father, why do you have to go away? Dray’s father doesn’t.”

“And if you don’t hurry up Dray’s father will not be pleased.” That was true. Like myself, Seg Segutorio, the father of young Dray, intensely disliked keeping bowmen waiting on parade.

So, spruced up, young Drak was hauled off to do his part in the presentation of the standards to the First Regiment of Valkan Longbowmen.

We met this same Seg Segutorio riding up at break-neck speed as we wound down the narrow path from Esser Rarioch. The fortress pile reared stark above our heads, dominating Valkanium with its ordered streets of neat houses, the parks, the boulevards, the shops, the docks, all spread out below. The industrial sections were over on the other side. Seg reined his zorca in, so that

the animal scattered sparks from his four dainty steel-shod hooves. Seg looked extremely upset.

“Dray! Delia! By the Veiled Froyvil, my old dom! I heard — I thought—”

“We do not yet know who it was. But one did not die.”

“I give thanks to Erthyr the Bow you are unharmed.”

The streaming mingled light of the twin suns cast those familiar and dear double shadows as we trotted on, going down from the high fortress and out onto the paved kyro with colonnaded shops all around. People there were, honest Koters and Koterias of Valka, who set up a shout as their Strom appeared. I waved a hand to them, knowing some of them by sight, able to recall the lusty days when together we had fought the slavers and the aragorn for this rich and beautiful island Stromnate of Valka. Seg and my other friends, Inch in particular, had learned to accept the puzzling aspects of my life, and I had made a half-promise to tell them all one day. We trotted on, a brave cavalcade, out through the new walls and so over the ditches and onto the wide and dusty plain called Vorgar’s Drinnik. This Mars Field now held a splendid array of bowmen, lined up in impeccable and yet not rigid ranks. Despite all our attempts at knocking some kind of discipline into these rough and hairy fighters of Valka they set up a hullaballooing cheer as their Strom rode out onto the field.

A knot of zorcamen waited at the saluting base, and many orderlies stood ready. The new standards, cased, stood planted by the piled drums. Colors and panoply

blazed everywhere. A trumpet blew and flags and banners unfurled from staffs set in ranks along the edge of Vorgar's Drinnik.

Among that small group of waiting zorcamen I saw Lykon Crimahan staring at me beneath the brim of his helmet. I did not much care for the expression on his face. This Crimahan was the Kov of Forli — often called the Blessed Forli — and he had been one of that company with whom I had supped when first presenting myself as the Strom of Valka to his Majister the Emperor of Vallia. During the time of troubles Lykon Crimahan had been fortuitously absent on his estates of Forli, which lay on one of the eastern tributaries of Vallia's marvelous central water, She of Fecundity. His allegiances might lie with the powerful Racter party, with the panvals, with any other of the many smaller political and territorial parties. I did not know. He had managed to retain both his head and his estates. Now he stared at me with a bright and merry look of evil that made my back go up and made me sit straighter in the saddle.

“Lahal, Prince Majister.”

“Lahal, Kov Lykon.”

Others of the group made their greetings, and Lykon Crimahan sidled his zorca closer. The zorca, with that close-coupled muscled body and those four spindly tall legs of wind-blown fleetness, is a superb animal; I did not much care for the tightness of rein, the curb, the whole way this Crimahan had harnessed his animal — a superb specimen, full of fire and spirit.

“The Emperor is delayed,” said this Lykon Cri-mahan. His whole demeanor showed the zest he took from conveying this news to me, Dray Prescot, the upstart barbarian clansman who had dared to woo and win the Emperor’s daughter. This Kov Lykon’s face grew a thin fuzz of dark beard beneath his jaws, and his mouth rat-trapped shut when he stopped speaking. He was gaunt with prominent cheekbones and eyes as malicious as those of any pagan idol of Balintol. He kicked his zorca and instantly kicked again as the animal objected.

“Quiet, you rast of a beast!” he said. Then, to me, and as though the words were a mere continuation of his thoughts: “The Emperor will arrive late, after the ceremony.”

About to blast and curse, I halted as Kov Lykon went on, speaking smoothly, with the expressive pleasure he might feel as he drove his rapier into the guts of an opponent.

“There has been much discussion in the Presidio about your plans to build a great fleet of fliers. Your information from Havilfar has been laid before our wisest men. They express doubts—”

“Doubts! By Vox! There is no time for doubts.”

“Nevertheless, Prince, the Emperor is not convinced. There will be no program to build an air fleet.”

Give the rast his due. He probably believed what he was doing was for the good of his country. But his country was my country now. And I knew a damn sight

more than he did. I could say that in all humility, knowing it to be true.

“Vallia *must* have an air fleet!”

“You may shout and bluster all you will, Prince, but it will avail you nothing. The Presidio is firm on this decision. You must resign yourself.”

He could not leave well alone.

“After all, Prince, a clansman from the wastes of Segesthes is hardly in a position to understand the high politics of a great empire like Vallia.”

I did not hit him.

Chapter 2

We argue in Esser Rarioch

I had risked my life — for what that was worth — to steal the secrets of the fliers from Havilfar and send them to Vallia. I had expected the Emperor and the Presidio which guided him to leap at the opportunity to construct fliers that would not break down, vollers we must have to counter the threat from Hamal.

And now, calmly, maliciously, evilly, they refused the opportunity. They sat in their pride and arrogance and said I had wasted my time and efforts, that this was no concern of mine, that they ran the country, not me.

Well, that last was true, Zair knows.

This was a matter of far greater importance than that four stupid stikitches had tried to assassinate me.

I caught up my zorca's reins and even then, through my rage, I refrained from jamming my heels in hard. The zorca was Snowy, a priceless animal, a mount with whom I had a great relationship. At my urging he trotted away from Lykon Crimahan, turning his hind

quarters on him, and with this fitting gesture I trotted over to Seg.

I spoke loudly. Many men in the ranks heard me. The news would circulate, scuttlebutt that would explain what was happening.

“The Emperor has been delayed, Kov,” I said in a penetrating bellow. “And, by Vox, I won’t have these lads hanging around waiting! And they have a right to have the Emperor on parade when they receive their standards. So if you’ll have their Jiktat dismiss them and tell him to order them a double ration of wine tonight, I will be much obliged.”

Seg understood some of my ways. He responded in fine style.

“At once, my Prince!” he bellowed and swung away, riding with a light rein, shouting the orders to the regiment’s Jiktat, its commanding officer.

There followed a most unpleasant few murs with young Drak, highly incensed that he had been all dressed up and promised much — for nothing.

“When your grandfather arrives, Drak, you will present the standards. It is important for the regiment. Do you see that, lad?”

“If you say so, Father.”

About to say: “It’s not if I say so!” I held my tongue as Delia trotted her zorca across and leaned down to speak to this young limb of Satan. Well, I’d had dealings with young limbs of Satan before — notably Pando, a real rapsallion who was now the Kov of Bormark, and Oby who had once dreamed of becoming a kaidur, and

even the son of Rees the Numim, young Roban to whom I had given a dagger in time of trouble. If I cared to think that far back I could recall to mind some regular roasters who had been powder monkeys with me and had run on bleeding feet across the scarred decks to bring the leather buckets of cartridges as the great guns thundered. But the most confoundedly odd thing about it all now was that this particular young limb of Satan, whose lower lip stuck out so threateningly, was my own limb — making me the Satan of the piece. I admit I am one of the biggest rogues in two worlds, but I wouldn't father that on young Drak.

“We shall have squish pie for tea,” I said very firmly. “And if Inch was here he would eat some, because he cannot resist squish pie. Then, my lad — you tell me — what would happen then?”

Drak turned his face up from the cub-zorca he rode, a delightful little animal which could carry the child even though not fully grown itself. Drak's face betrayed conflicting emotions, then his trembling lips parted and he laughed.

“Why, Father, Inch would stand on his head!”

“Aye, lad!” I said, feeling relieved. “And I need at least six cups of tea, not one less will suffice.”

So we trotted back to the promise of that rich Kregan tea which is priceless above all wines of two worlds.

If you, listening to these tapes spinning through the heads of your machine, now reflect that the Dray Prescott of whom you hear is a very different person from the Dray Prescott of his earlier days on Kregen —

you are absolutely right. And yet if, say, that Dray Prescott who had so intemperately refused to bow his knee to the Princess Natema had lived through the scene on the parade ground on Vorgar's Drinnik, would not Kov Lykon be lying on that dusty ground with a mouthful of smashed teeth? And, that being so, what of my fine and fancy plans for Valka and Vallia?

Four armed men had tried to slay me. Well, there was nothing new in that. I did not think Kov Lykon had sent them. He might have, of course. But if I had acted as that old lusty, headstrong and foolish Dray Prescott would have, I'm absolutely sure that more than four stikitches would be assigned my death.

That was an eventuality I would have to face one day. But I had no intention of allowing my Delia to face any unnecessary danger. Nor would I allow danger to touch my twins if it was humanly possible. Now, of course, I recognize that I'm speaking like a bumbling, impractical parent, anxious to keep the world away from his family. As I have said, those children of mine led me as many a merry dance as ever I led when I was that old headstrong, willful Dray Prescott — as indeed I still am, to my shame, when the need arises.

There was no need to take vove to catch a ponsho.

So, filled with the self-satisfaction of the piously righteous, I walked into the Great Hall of Esser Rarioch with the carved beams and the banners and the weapons along the walls and, like any idiot stuffed up with pride, I was to fall long and heavily, headfirst, into disastrous troubles. Wild alarms and frantic action lay before me,

and I sat at my ease with my friends, sipping fragrant Kregan tea all unknowing!

But, first, there were important secrets to be unveiled.

Naghan the Gnat, that crafty armorer, thin and wiry and full of sly humor, drank his tea down and said: "I have chained him up so that he does not even feel the kiss of the iron. Oh yes, my Prince. He will be in good shape."

A bit of a savage, the good Naghan the Gnat. He and I had shared a few scarlet moments in the arena of Hyrklana. Now with his invaluable assistance we fashioned weapons for the men of Valka in the coming struggle with Hamal.

Balass the Hawk, fierce and predatory, laughed. "By Kaidun, my Prince! I think he will sing so that all the shishis in Xanachang will yearn for him and his song."

"You are a bloodthirsty devil, Balass," I said.

"Aye! If a stikitche tries to kill me I serve him as I serve a stupid coy in the arena."

This Balass the Hawk had improved the burs in Valka by trying to organize a Jikhorkdun and had been most put out when I had, very firmly, told him to desist. He might practice his skill, and teach Oby and the others, but the weapons must be of wood, and it must be practice only. The itch to step out of the red's corner and stand once again on the silver sand, clad in the armor of the kaidur, and face his fate as thousands upon thousands roared from the stands of the amphitheater

— yes, that passion had got into the blood of Balass the Hawk.

He was a black-skinned man from Xuntal, with fierce predatory features and brilliant eyes, and he was a fine fighter, a kaidur.

The friendship we had been unable to allow full rein in the Jikhorkdun had grown since our escape. Now Balass was in command of the training of recruits to the army. Oh, yes. I was in the business of forming an army. I will speak of this later, at the proper time. Now, as we sat drinking Kregan tea, our conversation revolved around the fate to be meted out to the captured stikitche.

The matter was important.

Seg sat very quietly, occasionally taking a piece of squish pie and, no doubt, thinking of Inch. He knew my mind better than the others. Even the Elders of Valka who ran the island for me in my many absences could not penetrate past the facade I put on for them.

Now Encar of the Fields shook his head and said, “What you do to this man will not affect the crops for next season.”

“But,” said Tom ti Vulheim, very intense, leaning forward on the table so that his tea spilled, “but what we do to him may have a very great effect on the life of our Strom!”

The others nodded, agreeing, hardly noticing that Tom had called me by the old title. I was the Strom of Valka first to these men of the island, Prince Majister of Vallia a long second after.

So we sat and drank tea and argued the pros and cons of torturing a man for information. Hard, fierce, intense talk. The assassin's life meant nothing. What he could tell us of who had sent him was the vital information. No one drank wine. Only pigs drink wine at all hours of the day. Our heads remained clear. I did not wish to hurt the man. He had been hired to do a certain thing and he had failed. That assassins are particularly loathsome forms of life is true. But the fellow was suffering how, hanging in his chains, waiting for what he must know would follow.

I said, "I think we can find out what we wish to know without touching him."

Some nodded, comprehending; others scowled and their fingers gripped up. They would take the hot iron and the pincers to the fellow, to make him talk.

I marked them all.

Vangar ti Valkanium, the captain of my personal airboat, poured milk ready for a fresh cup. "He will sing without a hair of his head being touched, if the Prince says so. For myself, I believe all this talk of the sanctity of human life. But when the life of the Prince is involved—"

"Not so, good Vangar!" I did not speak sharply, but they all looked at me, held in their actions, motionless. "No man can pretend to a position which allows him to deny the rights of another human. That is not my way. It is not the way of Opaz. What a man has is what a man fights for; nothing in this world is given free."

They laughed. “You may say that again, Prince!” said Naghan the Gnat, cunning in the ways of fashioning metal.

Delia walked in, having seen to the twins, and we all stood up, as was proper.

She sat at the table at my side, for we observed no high protocol here and the table was shoved into a paneled corner of the high hall, with the stained glass windows above opened to allow the full glory of the suns to shine on the opposite wall. Truly, I think that the Great Hall in Esser Rarioch is a wondrous place!

A heaping pile of sandwiches lay on a silver platter. They were covered by a pure white linen cloth. No one had touched this particular platter of sandwiches, although all the others had been plundered. The famous Kregan bread had been cut into extraordinarily thin slices, and that superb Kregan butter spread by a hand with the skill to spread evenly and not too thinly, not too thickly. The sandwiches contained crisp slices of banber, a kind of succulent cucumber. Delia lifted the cloth as I poured for her and took one of the banber sandwiches.

I did not look at her as she ate, for the sight of those lips . . . Well, I went back to what we were talking about, trying to carry on my policy — which I thought was approved of by the Savanti — of civilizing the barbaric men of Kregen.

The others were arguing the pros and cons and I half turned and looked past Delia to where that superbly

muscled, superbly built, superb man sat, unspeaking, a glowering look on his handsome face.

“Well, Turko!” I rallied him. “What do you say on this matter?”

Turko the Shield put down his cup. He looked directly at me. Those hands so gently holding the cup, a fine piece of porcelain from Rensmot in Vallia, could tear a man to pieces, could hurl him cunningly with a mere twitch of the wrists, in the dreaded disciplines of the Khamorros.

“What do I say on this, my Prince?” Turko was over his astonishment about the maniac Dray Prescott and his place in the scheme of things; but he always hesitated when he called me Prince, an echo of that mockery laughing behind his eyes. “I would say do as any sensible man would do. We Khamorros can make a man tell us all we wish to know without using clumsy instruments, blunt or sharp.”

Turko would still not use a weapon apart from his own body; the shield he habitually carried for me in battle hung on the high walls of the hall, dust motes dancing in the suns’ beams before its massive bulk.

Truly the Savanti in their civilizing task faced ingrained attitudes on Kregen.

But I had to try.

The Savanti had thrown me out of Paradise because I had failed them. I would do exactly the same thing over again, too! And this time I’d do it a damn sight more quickly! I stole a glance at my Delia, and she turned, caught my eye, and smiled. For Delia, Delia of

the Blue Mountains, Delia of Delphond, I'd be thrown out of every paradise in those four hundred light-years between the worlds of Earth and Kregen!

Still and all, the Savanti had set themselves the task of bringing order, civilization, and dignity to Kregen, and I saw it as a worthwhile task to which to set my hands. One day soon, I had promised myself, I'd go off to Hamal with the intention of finding the Todalpheme, those wise men and mathematicians, and ask them what they knew of Aphrasöe, the city of the Savanti, the Swinging City.

The Empire of Hamal had to be beaten in war first, or at least halted in the tide of conquest, some *modus vivendi* arrived at, before I could consider my own selfish ends.

So I said, "My friends, torture is not the answer. It may give us the information we seek, but think what it will do to us who practice it—"

"It'll keep us alive," said Balass the Hawk.

"Certainly. But, Balass, and all of you, the brands you use on your victim must surely brand you yourselves."

Some of them could see, most could not. They were all good-hearted fellows, prime companions, chosen comrades to have around me in battle or roister. But it is truly said that Kregen is a hard world.

I had gone through torments enough in the past to know that from bitter personal experience.

A rumbling bellow from the far end of the table made us all look that way, and some of us smile, and all

of us listen as Naghan Kholin Donamair burst out: "By Zodjuin of the Silver Stux! All this is emptiness, fit for Obdjangs! Take the cramp by the throat and choke it out of him!" N. Kholin Donamair had clearly been holding himself back from the conversation, for now, glaring around, his four fists clenched, he recollected himself and finished: "That is what I would do, my King."

I do not forget that I am king of Djanduin.

My Djangs are the most fearsome warriors in Havilfar, with their four perfectly matched arms and their proud heads and defiant step. With weapons no Khamorro can stand against them. There is a great deal more to tell of the relationships there, in southwestern Havilfar, far away down south below the swell of the equator; but for now here was the typical Dwadjang philosophy exemplified. The four-armed Dwadjangs are unexcelled fighting-men; but they are a trifle thick at affairs above a Chuktar's rank. The gerbil-faced and extraordinarily clever Obdjangs handle affairs of state and strategy in Djanduin.

I am king of Djanduin. I said: "Well spoken, Naghan. But the fellow is a professional stikitche. He will have steeled himself to being choked, even by a Djang."

"These affairs seem simple to me," said the Djang, and he reached his left lower arm for a vosk sandwich as his left upper brought the teacup to his lips. Both of his right hands fondled the little gyp sitting at the side of his chair, gobbling crumbs.

No one said to Naghan Donamair: “You stick to your flutduins and what you know, Naghan!”

The comment might have been apt; it would have been cruel, unnecessary, and boorish, and these are things I will not tolerate in my Great Hall of Esser Rarioch. This is known by my friends who sup with me there.

As for the flutduins, those marvelous saddle flyers from Djanduin, after their initial reticence the good folk of Valka were now agog with the idea of flying through the thin air astride the back of a giant bird. I was actively arranging for more flyers to be brought all the long way to Valka, and the recruiting Deldars were forming enormous lists of bright young Valkan lads who wished to join the aerial cavalry.

Seg, his black hair and blue eyes as always very reassuring to me now that I knew his feckless and yet deeply moving ways, laughed and said, “If Thelda were here instead of caring for young Dray and the twins back in Falinur, I think she would understand, Dray.”

“I am sure she would.” I am loyal to my friends.

So we talked on through that glorious afternoon tea, arguing whether or not a man should be tormented. The mingled lights of the suns glowed on the high walls. We laughed a lot and banged the old lenken table. Tilly, the glorious little golden-furred Fristle fifi, quite accidentally knocked her tea over the white robe of Elena, the matronly wife of Erdgar the Shipwright. Erdgar was away supervising the building of certain unusually shaped ships at this time. Elena made no great fuss,

Tilly was filled with contrition, and a fresh cup was poured. While no one laughed, we all felt the spirit of the occasion. Truly, those days of sunshine in Esser Rarioch provide rich memories in a crusty old shellback like me.

Delia suggested we go out to the high terrace where the mushk glowed yellow in the suns' light and the bees droned most contentedly among the perfumed flowers.

So it was that among my friends, on that high terrace with the radiant lights of Antares reflecting back in refulgent gleams from spire and pinnacle and tower, with Valkanium spread out below in a chiaroscuro of brilliance, bowered in greenery and flowers and mellow with the splash of fountains, I turned and held up my hand and said: "We will not torture this miserable stikitche. If he does not tell us who employed him we shall hand him over to the Emperor's justice."

"And is that all, my Prince?" That was Balass.

"Aye, that is all." I screwed up my eyes. "Do you relish the idea of the mercy of an emperor, if you had tried to slay his daughter?"

The others nodded, no doubt thinking their thoughts. I knew I had bungled. But, about to correct that slip, I was arrested by the sight of a voller skimming perilously low over the rooftops toward us.

Seg said, "Another attempt, do you think?"

"It could be. Roust out Jiktar Exand."

Seg nodded and ran back off the terrace. Exand, an old battle companion, had been appointed Jiktar of the fortress guard. Seg returned far too soon. With him

stomped Jiktar Exand, furious, beet-red of face, almost stuttering in his anger.

“Strom!” he burst out, enraged with himself. “The miserable cramp of a stikitche is dead! Assassinated while he hung in his chains! Strom, the fault is mine!”

So there was an end to all our academic arguments.

Chapter 3

Evold Scavander reads from Drozhimo the Lame

The voller, a swift and brightly painted craft, swirled up from that mad dash over the rooftops. It was headed for a landing platform three stories below the level of this high terrace.

Tom ti Vulheim let out a shout. “That is no stikiche, Strom! That is Lish! He always flies as though his tail is on fire.”

“The fault is mine, my Strom,” repeated Jiktar Exand. He crashed his right fist against his breastplate, rather as a housewife takes a rolling pin to a cheap steak. “The guards were in the act of changing when two were struck down; two others were lucky to escape with their lives, although wounded. The prisoner’s body was slashed to pieces.”

“Hum,” I said. Then: “Do not blame yourself, Exand. The fault is more truly mine. We did not realize that we were up against highly professional stikitches. Ordinary

swods of the guard could scarcely comprehend the villainous expertise of these hireling murderers.”

“The Strom takes upon himself the fault of his people,” shouted Exand. These tough old warrior birds all seem to shout in normal conversation about their business. “I understand the need. But, Strom, I failed you!”

This Jiktat Exand — broad, heavily boned, thickly muscled, with a gut that extended the massive arch of his chest — was of that breed of men who serve, it seems, in the armies of all countries of two worlds. His square face bristled under the helmet. The brave red and white slashed his sleeves. He wore the usual rapier and main-gauche, and his tall black boots gleamed with the loving polish administered by his batman.

I sighed. He wouldn't forgive himself, even if I did.

About to reason with him, I was arrested by a shocked gasp, a shout of horror, from the people on the terrace. I swirled around.

The airboat was falling. Like a tossed chip of wood it spun end over end, tumbling from the bright air. Everyone held rigid in a stasis of horrified anger as the voller struck a domed roof, bounced, turned over into a spire, rebounded, and so smashed into kindling and vanished into the slot of the street far below.

We had all seen the tiny dot of the pilot, arms and legs pinwheeling, pitch out and plunge to his death.

“Lish!” said Tom. He gripped his hands together.

Lish Sjame had been a battle comrade of ours when we cleansed Valka of the slavers and the aragorn. Now

that laughing man with the lean, intense face and the intellectual grasp of a problem, that man who had sung many a fine song with us, emptied many a filled flagon, was gone.

We stood looking down. And mingled with our sorrow ran an ugly murderous thread of anger: anger against the builders of airboats that failed; anger against the manufactories of Hamal which sold us vollers that murdered our friends.

“If ever we needed the secrets of the vollers, now is the time to show all men that truth!” said Seg.

“Aye!” I said. Then, in my old way I burst out: “Sink me! I’ll take that damned Presidio, one by one, and shake them by the scruff of the necks! Vallia *must* build her own vollers!”

We went down the long flights of stone stairs to the dungeons. Oh, yes, if you feel surprise that there should be dungeons you must have forgotten that the high fortress of Esser Rarioch had been built in the old times, in the days when dungeons featured as essential adjuncts to the gracious living of Stroms, and Kovs, and high nobles. Also, I think you may judge Valka better now if I tell you that the only occupant of this complex series of dungeons in the rock had been this same stikitché.

He hung in his chains, hacked to pieces.

Which made me ponder.

The two dead guards had been carried away. The wounded two had been treated. Bound up in clean yellow bandages, acupuncture needles cunningly

inserted to take away their pain, they awaited the Strom's verdict of their crime. For, make no mistake about it, they had sinned. Their dereliction of duty could very possibly cause severe problems for the future.

The two swods braced themselves up the moment I appeared. They stood to attention as best they could, so that my first words were: "Stand at ease, you couple of famblys." I looked at them, cast a single glance at the hunk of bloodied meat hanging in the chains, and said, "You, Larghos. Tell me."

"Yes, my Strom." He swallowed. A youngster, newly appointed to the fortress guard, he was now clearly appalled at what had happened and what he had been part of. "We were changing guard. I saw Nath and Pergon set upon and I attacked the nearest of the men and he whickered his blade and—"

"Steady, lad." His lorica had been unbuckled so the doctor could more easily get at the thrust that had gone cleanly through above the top segment, above the collarbone. These stikitches are fine swordsmen. "Now, who did you attack?"

"The assassins, my Strom."

"Yes. Yes. Tell me what they looked like."

"Dressed in black, Strom. All in black. With steel faces."

And that, I knew, was as fair a description as I would get.

His comrade, Yaldy, was in worse case, the rapier having thrust through his cheek, scraping the bone. It had missed his eye, the target; but for the acupuncture

needles Yaldy would have been in great pain. He leaned on his glaive as he spoke. I pondered the wisdom of the glaive, that wicked bayonet-blade splined into a five-foot ash shaft, and yet the Valkans normally have no fear of a rapier man with the glaive in their hands.

“No more to add, my Strom!” bellowed this Yaldy. His parade ground shout whispered out weakly. I nodded. There was nothing more to learn here except, perhaps . . .

I spoke with a forceful presence of urgency and importance.

“Did either of you hear the stikitches say a word? Anything?”

They shook their heads, and then Larghos checked, his head going up.

“Well?”

“The assassins did not say a word. I do not know how many of them there were. But this one here—” He gestured vaguely to the hunk of meat hanging in the chains. “This one cried out as they went up to him.”

“Ah!”

“He shouted in mortal terror. He shouted, ‘I did not say a word!’ Then he swore by a name I do now know. He said: ‘As Lem is my witness, Traga, as Lem—’ Then they cut him.”

Although it seemed to me Kregen exploded around my head, I felt it expedient to keep the shock from my face and voice.

Lem!

That evil cult of Lem the Silver Leem had found its vile way to my own home of Valka. Well, I made a most solemn vow that I would never allow that evil superstition of Lem the Silver Leem to sully Valka. I would uproot the whole foul practice, root and branch. By Zair! This was a matter of supreme importance, far outweighing the mere stikitches' attacks.

Now I asked, "Traga? Does that mean anything to anyone?"

They all shook their heads. The name was not common, but there had been a Traga in Valka, that Traga ti Vandayha, the city of silversmiths. I thought this was merely coincidence, nothing more. The Traga we knew had perished when the aragorn's fortress above Findle's Crossing had burned.

"Jiktar Exand."

"Strom!"

"Fetch me a man from the city who swears by Diproo the Nimble-Fingered."

"Aye, my Strom." He knew exactly what I meant.

His red and white banded sleeve, made from first quality humespack, bashed across his breastplate as he clanged off, his booted feet loud on the unyielding stones of the dungeon floor.

With a few further words to the guards, for they were brave young men and had been woefully overmatched in their encounter with the stikitches, I led the way back into the upper terraces of Esser Rarioch.

The remains of Lish Sjame had been brought in and I saw to it that he was given a decent funeral, with all the

proper rites accompanying the burial, as was proper. His wife had long since died, victim of one of the diseases that, notwithstanding the skill of Kregen's doctors, still carry off far too many of her people. The remains of the airboat were taken up to that long and lofty room with the tall windows I had set aside as a laboratory. Here I had been carrying out experiments, with the help of the man who was, I fancied, the wisest wise man of Valka.

"Ha! My Prince!" he cried as I came in, and then he sneezed. He was smothered in fine dust, and he kept sneezing. I kept upwind of him.

"You seem to be immersed in your work, San," I said.

I called Evold Scavander, the wise man, San. As you know, San is the respectful title given to a dominie or sage, and how well San Evold Scavander earned this mark of respect.

But, for all that, sneezing, he had to say: "Nothing, my Prince. Not a movement, not a sign. And the bags grow less with every trial."

A spluttery, bewhiskered, round-faced man, with crab-apple cheeks and snapping brown eyes, he wore an old stained smock and a pair of decrepit foofray satin slippers. I always had the feeling that, with his contempt for the Wizards of Loh, he missed something of their dark power. But he refused to adorn his clothes with archaic symbols or wear the tall conical hat, and he used his long sensitive fingers to good purpose in the many

schemes to improve Vallia and Valka I put forward. His temper was of the same order as a leem's.

On a scarred bench lay a number of silver boxes. I felt my heart go thump at the sight. These were boxes we had made up here, in Valka, in imitation of those silver boxes made in Havilfar that powered and lifted fliers. I had uncovered many of the secrets of the various minerals that went into the vaol boxes, at some discomfort to myself, as you know. With a mix of five minerals of certain kinds of voller would fly and might be pushed by the wind, with the effect of gripping the subetheric forces of the structure of the universe, of sliding against these forces as the wind pushed. With a mix of nine minerals a voller would fly independently of the wind.

As for the paol boxes, those boxes that for so long I had thought contained only air, there lay the heartbreak.

"Dirt and air!" I said, somewhat heavily, I fear.

"Aye, Prince! The minerals would seem to operate well enough, and I have that lazy scamp Ormol out searching for them in the Heart Heights. I feel confident they will be found." His brown eyes snapped at me. "If they are not, Ormol will get a striping, by Vox!"

"Yes, but, San, what of the paol boxes? What of cay-ferm?"

He crowed his triumph.

I stared at him, willing it to be true, willing that he had discovered what that mysterious immaterial substance truly was, if substance it was at all.

He reached down a monstrous old hyr-lif, massively bound with brass bands and with a brass lock. He produced a key from under his clothes, a key of brass hanging on a brass chain. With this and much creaking and groaning, he turned the lock and opened the book. I swear I expected a black cloud of bats to fly forth. He blew away dust and sneezed again.

“Here, Prince, in *The Secret Lore of San Drozhimo the Lame* is to be found the only reference I have run across to cayferm.”

He turned the pages, ancient and stained and yet supple still in that perfect atmosphere of Valka. A little spider crept out and ran across the lines of black writing, and Evold Scavander leaned down and gently blew to help the spider on its way.

I was fully aware of the gravity of the moment. Dirt and air! How they had mocked me in my struggles in distant Havilfar! But I had come through in the end to an understanding of the names and the compositions of the minerals. We might not find all of them in Valka; we must find them all in Vallia! And cayferm! That mysterious substance, cayferm that was supposed to be steam, when all of Kregen knew steam as kish; could old San Scavander have found the secret in this musty book?

He found a page very nearly at the end. I breathed more easily when I saw the page was untorn. How often at the end of a book a torn page has destroyed all hope .

..

He cleared his throat, sneezed a mighty sneeze, and peered close.

“Listen, my Prince, to the words of a sage dead these thousand seasons and more!”

“I listen.”

“Then this is what Drozhimo the Lame has to say.” He read in a loud wheezing voice, and I felt the shadows come closer in that high ceilinged room with the tall windows and all the splendor of the Suns of Scorpio flooding in.

“ ‘The Freeing of an Ib from a Mortal Body Undiluted.’ ”

He looked up. “The spirits of the dead do not always leave the body the moment men are killed. Sometimes a man retains his ib, to his own mortification in the blessed light of the Twins.”

“Aye. Read on.”

“ ‘Take the body and wash in the water taken from a maiden’s first bath after the marriage night. Place the body undried in a brazen coffin above a fire heated seven times, and with bellows pumped by a dwarf. A dwarf with red hair ensures complete success; if a red-haired dwarf is not to be found then a black-haired dwarf will suffice, or a brown-haired dwarf; but then the fire must be pumped over twice. Into the coffin over the body pour the water used in the bathing. To this add the same weight of squishes. The fruits may be used entire, but they must be scrupulously clean. Add in double-handfuls so that the spirit may boil from them into the water and the cayferm enter the submerged body and so remove from it the ib. When all has boiled away the body may be taken up and given due burial; it is wise to

place a tuffa wand at the head and feet until the first night of Notor Zan passes.’ ”

He looked up, resting one hand on the open hydrant. His eyes wrinkled up, regarding me. I was aware of a flick-flick plant snaking out a six-foot tendril, taking a fly on the wing, and popping it into one of its orange cone-shaped flowers. The shadow of the plant in its pot on the windowsill, the sound of laughter from outside, high and shrill, meant nothing; the sight and sounds were as distant as the planet of my birth.

“Cayferm,” I said.

“Aye, Prince. I think after treatment like that any body would be willing to go down into burial, aye, and be glad to.”

“Yes, that would be the way of it. But, Evold, it must be! Don’t you see? Steam! If you boil water you must get steam!”

“Steam,” he said. We used the Kregish word, the most common word for steam, *kish*. “I can find no other mention of cayferm in all my library.”

“You have done well.”

“I remembered one horrific time in the Heavenly Mines where I had sweated, as number eight two eight one, to dig and tunnel for minerals. And how a little Och stolor, writing in his notebook, had jumped with alarm, deep in a tunnel through a seam, and called to the Rapa guard to prod the slaves out fast. We had not gone back to the seam. And now I recalled that over the smell of the cheap oil lamp I had sniffed the scent of squishes. I

had thought of Inch, and then the little Och had near-panicked.

Now I thought I knew why.

“Steam made up with boiled squishes,” I said. “Cay-ferm.”

Evoid sneezed. “Maybe, maybe. But we must test it first. We can only talk now, we must—”

“Yes!” I bellowed. “Everyone must gather squishes! Every perishing soul, by Vox!”

Evoid Scavander nodded, the excitement getting to him.

“Although . . .” I said. And I felt a chill. “Although this cannot be so. It is against nature.”

“Many things are against nature, my Prince. Every time you put on a hat to go out into the rain, it is against nature.”

“I grant that. But I mean that boiling will produce a purity; the steam cannot possibly contain any part of the squishes! This is a matter of common knowledge.”

He put a yellowish finger alongside his nose, which had a large brown lump on the larboard side.

“Maybe nature winks, my Prince. For a man to fly through the air using boxes filled with dirt and air — surely that is so against nature as to make all the rest simple.”

“Oh, the vollers work. There is no doubt of that. Aye,” I added viciously, “and they crash, also.”

We looked at the pathetic pile of wreckage. Lish’s voller had come down hard at the end. The two silver boxes had been taken from the smashed jumble of

sturm-wood and bronze orbits. They lay on the table, separated from those we had made ourselves.

They were also well separated from each other. I walked across and gently pushed one of the boxes toward the other, along the lenken tabletop. I could feel nothing at first. And then like a thrilling of rubbed amber, like a million warrior ants of the hostile territories marching over my skin, I felt the tremble, the vibration. When the two boxes came within that certain special distance from each other they both, together, sprang into the air. Up they went, glittering in the light of Antares. We stared upward, knowing what would happen.

The boxes flew up together until wind pressure divided them. They curved out and away and so, separated, plummeted back to the floor. One hit so heavily that the corner split. I cursed.

Evoid Scavander scuttled for the box, lifted it, and stuck it under that lumpy nose of his. His mad old eyes snapped with intelligence, with baffled intelligence.

“Ha, my Prince! Squishes! When I was a small boy, cleaning the retorts and collecting the frogs’ legs and sweeping the floor, aye, and being well beaten by the old San, I remember a piece of squish pie as a direct gift from Oolie Opaz himself.”

I sniffed. Squish, without a doubt.

“It has gone, drifted into the air and gone.”

“True. But we will do as you command, and boil many squishes. The whole fortress will be perfumed with squishes.”

“But,” I said, fretful, seeing that first quick flash of hope utterly ruined, “if we boil squishes and put the steam in a silver box, why, then, the steam will condense and we will merely have a box of water.”

San Evold shook his head. What I said was true. But he had no other suggestion.

“Let me first try, my Prince. Afterward, if it does not work, we must think again.”

“You see about the squishes and the boiling. Inform me and I shall come at the right time. Meanwhile, there are the other minerals to be found.”

“Ornol will be back by nightfall, my Prince.”

So, with a few cheerfully intended words which sounded dismal even to me, I took myself off. Seg met me in the long hall of the images where, in ivory and chemzite and bronze and marble, the ancient ones of Valka stared endlessly out upon the blue sky of Kregen. His face was reassuring and refreshing to me, but he said, “Dray! The Emperor has arrived and is in a foul temper!”

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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About the author

Alan Burt Akers is a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer. Bulmer has published over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction.

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