

**DRAY PRESCOT: 17**

**CAPTIVE  
SCORPIO**

**KENNETH BULMER**

writing as

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**A Mushroom eBook**



CAPTIVE SCORPIO

ALAN BURT AKERS

**a Mushroom eBooks sample**

Copyright © 1978, Kenneth Bulmer

Alan Burt Akers has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, to be identified as the Author of this work.

First published by Daw Books, Inc. in 1978.

This Edition published in 2007 by Mushroom eBooks, an imprint of Mushroom Publishing, Bath, BA1 4EB, United Kingdom

[www.mushroom-ebooks.com](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

# Contents

A note on Dray Prescot .....	1
1 Before the Dawn .....	3
2 An Aerial Reception .....	33
3 Barty Vessler, Strom of Calimbrev.....	48
4 Knavery in Drak's City .....	65
5 I Drop in on a Great Lady .....	85
6 The Black and Whites Make a Promise.....	112
7 News of Dayra .....	129
8 Queen Lushfymi of Lome .....	141
9 Into Hawkwa Country .....	149
10 Of the Pride of a Rapa Paktun .....	163
11 Zankov.....	178
12 Concerning the Throne of Vallia .....	189

13 The Battle Maidens Squabble .....	196
14 "You May Choose the Manner of Your Death." .....	208
15 Of San Guiskwain the Witherer.....	219
16 The Fight Below the Voller .....	232
17 The Gathering of Shadows.....	250
18 The Hand of Phu-Si-Yantong.....	260
19 Vondium Burns .....	279
20 Delia of Vallia .....	292
Notes .....	306
About the author.....	307

## A note on Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott is an enigmatic figure. Reared in the inhumanly harsh conditions of Nelson's navy, he has been transported many times through the agencies of the Star Lords and the Savanti nal Aphrasöe to the beautiful and brutal world of Kregen, four hundred light years from Earth. A coherent design underlies all his headlong adventures; but so far the pattern remains indecipherable.

His appearance as described by one who has seen him is of a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage. He moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly. On the exotic and perilous world of Kregen he has fought his way to become Vovedeer and Zorcander of his wild Clansmen of Segesthes, Lord of Strombor, Strom of Valka, King of Djanduin, Prince Majister of Vallia — and a member of the Order of Krozairs of Zy. To this plethora of titles he confesses with a wryness and an irony I am sure masks much deeper feelings at which we can only guess.

Prescot's happiness with Delia, the Princess Majestrix of Vallia, is threatened as the notorious Wizard of Loh, Phu-si-Yantong, seeks to destroy Delia's father, the emperor. Together with their friends, Delia and Prescot save the emperor from a poison attempt by other factions and return him to power in Vondium, the capital. But their comrades are scattered over the face of Kregen. Now, blood-splashed from the last fight in the palace, Prescot is determined to seek the whereabouts of his daughters, alienated from him during a forced absence on Earth. But the brilliant world of Kregen under Antares will always challenge Prescot with new problems and adventures. Dray Prescot knows only too well that he must continue to struggle against himself as well as the malignant fates that pursue him in the mingled streaming lights of the Suns of Scorpio.

*Alan Burt Akers*

# One

## Before the Dawn

“Oh, yes, it is common knowledge,” said Travok Ott expansively, leaning back, sipping his light white wine with a most delicate air. “Delia, the Princess Majestrix, is continually indulging in affairs. Why, her latest inamorato is this muscular wrestler, Turko. Oh, yes, a lovely man. Who can blame her?”

The perfumed currents of warmed air moved caressingly about the group of men sitting in the ord chamber of the Baths of the Nine. The chamber presented a comfortable, modish, relaxing atmosphere. Young girl slaves carried wine and parclear in glazed ceramic flagons, and bronze trays of sweetmeats and tempting cakes. No lady bathers were allowed here, their establishment was separated off by a stout masonry wall. The scented air cloyed.

“Surely, this is just rumor, Travok?” said Urban the Gloves, popping a paline into his mouth.

“Hardly.” Travok Ott, a slender man with the brown hair of Vallia cut into a curled bang, sipped his wine

with a knowing smile. He, like them all, was naked, covered only by a small yellow towel. "Have you seen this Turko? A Khamorro, so I am told, from somewhere outlandish deep in southwestern Havilfar. But a lovely man. Oh, yes, beautiful—"

"I hold no brief for the emperor," cut in the overfed man with the three chins and swag belly, all quivering as he shook his head warningly. "But he'd have your head if—"

"Of a certainty, Ortyg — perhaps!" Travok cast a sliding glance at the shadowed alcove where a yellow towel draped down from the arm of a bronze faun, prancing, abandoned, garlanded with loomins. "But I mean him no disrespect. He understands business, and that is good enough for me."

They were all businessmen here, traders, merchants, shopkeepers to whom war and country-wide distress could bring profit, for they were shrewd in the mysteries of bargaining and gaining a corner and of stocks and the human frailties of supply and demand. This particular establishment of the Baths of the Nine stood at a crossroads in the southern part of the great city of Vondium, the capital of the Empire of Vallia. It was not one of the enormously luxurious first-rank establishments; but its entrance fees were high and it catered to a certain clientele of the middle rank, merchants and traders who could afford to pay for a night's comfort.

These men were habitués of the place, they knew one another, had been coming here for years to relax and gossip. The fellow who sat somewhat removed from

them along a marble bench on pink and yellow towels smiled and nodded and joined in the conversation and listened with due respect; but he was a stranger. So the talk was more circumspect than normally the case in these secluded, sybaritic and seductive surroundings.

A beautifully formed Fristle fifi glided forward to refill Travok Ott's glass, for he found the flagons tiresomely too heavy. The Fristle's fur was of that deep plum color that limned her lissom form, made of her a sprite of beauty in that place. Travok grunted as the wine reached a whisker below the rim, and trembled, and stilled. Had the Fristle spilled any it would have gone hard for her.

"I've always stood by the emperor," Travok went on. "Did I not give thanks to Opaz when he recovered from his illness? Did I not put up the shutters on my shops when those Opaz-forsaken Chyyanists went on the rampage with their Black Feathers? Have I not a son at sea?" The wine gleamed on his lips. "Vallia is built of men like me."

"You say this Turko is the princess's inamorato," said Ortyg. "But is she his inamorata? That is a conundrum."

A low, fruity chuckle ran around the circle of men lounging in their chairs or on the benches, warmed and caressed by the scented air.

"The princess owns men's hearts — but I wager Turko has his own little inamorata tucked away somewhere safe in Valka."

Ortyg leaned a little forward, his belly bulging. "The princess does not own my heart."

The shrimp of a fellow in the corner where the warmest breezes blew puckered up his lips, his little tuft of goat's beard blowing. His brown Vallian eyes were deeply sunken under sandpapery brows. He hitched up his yellow towel and said: "Of a certainty, Travok, Vallia is built of men like you — and of Kov Layco."

The words might mean what the listener cared to put into them. This Travok Ott construed them as a compliment.

"Kov Layco Jhansi is the emperor's right-hand man, Vandrop, true. It is said he slew Ashti Melekhi with his own hand. The guards—"

Ortyg laughed, wagging his chins. "Those guards will not be seen in Vondium again."

"All the same, he, too, is aware of the Princess Majestrix's infidelity. She is becoming notorious—"

"And this shaggy clansman, her husband. He knows nothing?"

"He knows nothing of Vallia, that is sooth, by Vox!"

They appeared to be in general agreement about this.

Vandrop put a hand to his shaggy tuft of goat's beard. He stroked reflectively. "This shaggy clansman is shaggy. It is said he has a beard to his navel."

A young fellow on the other side of Travok shouted: "And that's quite long enough for a barbarian."

Travok nodded. "By Vox! A great hairy clansman from far Segesthes has the impudence to barge in and carry off our princess like a graint or a cramph or a leem—"

“But,” persisted Vandrop, “was he not there, in the palace, last night? The stories are confused, garbled, but—”

“He was there, Vandrop,” Ortyg told him. “I had the news red hot from my freedman who got it from the palace — a shishi there who saw much — and this Dray Prescott was in the palace. How he got there no one knows. But Kov Layco saved the emperor from Ashti Melekhi—”

A babble of voices broke in, and so Ortyg was persuaded to tell them the story as he had heard it. He made the most of it, how the Vadnicha Ashti Melekhi sought to poison the emperor and of how Layco Jhansi had slain her with his dagger. There were dead guards and blood everywhere; but Ortyg’s information offered no explanation for them, even though, it was whispered, they were Jiktars of the Chulik mercenary guard — aye — and their Chuktar, also.

The talk wended on in the scented air. With the long night to get through men and women sought rest and relaxation before bed at the Baths of the Nine. Soon these men would rise and then, each to his whim, either dress and go home or partake of the Ninth Chamber. Strangers might elect to sleep in the establishment in the tastefully appointed hostelry. The stranger, a well-built young man with hair darker than the normal Vallian brown, would probably sleep in. Vandrop yawned.

“By Vox!” he said, his goat’s-beard tuft quivering. “What you say about Delia, the Princess Majestrix, is hard to believe. I think I shall not believe it.”

“You always were a credulous old fool, Vandrop,” bellowed Ortyg, slapping his gut, reaching for his towel.

“Anyway,” said Travok. “When Queen Lushfymi gets here she will soon find out—”

“—Aye, a sharp queen, that,” said Urban the Gloves.

“—And she’ll have this Turko’s head off and the princess packed off back to Valka, or Delphond.”

“D’you think Queen Lushfymi will marry the emperor?”

“If she has any sense, Urban.”

They spoke of the Queen of Lome as Queen Lushfymi. The emperor had intemperately threatened to have off the heads of all those who blasphemously called her Queen Lush.

With two strangers present in the ord chamber these men spoke with more restraint than usual. Without clothes their allegiances were not at once apparent, and their words hid what they did not wish revealed. As middling tradesmen and merchants they were probably of the Racter party, some perhaps of the Vondium Khanders, those who looked to the business community for combined strength. The Racters were the most powerful party in Vallia, formed of aristocrats and nobles, and the merchants looked to them for the continuance of the status quo and a stable economy. But without the colored sleeves, without symbols and favors,

they were simply men, naked in the flesh, so much alike and each one different in his own personal ways.

They spoke with a caution. But they had said a great deal, also. They were of the general opinion that it was high time the emperor married again and got himself a son to carry on the line, if the prince could hold in his hands what would come to him, and dispatched his daughter Delia and her grizzly graint of a clansman husband back to the Great Plains of Segesthes. One or two even said the Prince and Princess Majestrix could even go to the Ice Floes of Sicce for all they cared.

In these last moments before they left they talked again of the interests most pressing to them, as businessmen do: the prices and sources of supply, trading prospects, the cost of money, the laziness of slaves, the prospects of renewed war with the Empire of Hamal, the hedging against future disasters.

They even spoke of Income Tax; but obscenities found little favor in the Baths of the Nine — at least, of that kind.

Travok Ott, genial, yawning, looked across at the stranger.

“You put up here tonight, Koter? You have not told us your name.”

“Yes, I think I shall. And my name is Nath Delity.”

The others nodded. Their thoughts were transparent. A provincial, seeing the sights of Vondium, the greatest city of Paz.

Nath Delity half smiled. “I am from Evir, and I find Vondium a trifle warm.”

They laughed at this, proud of their city, half-contemptuous of any provincial place and particularly of Evir, the northernmost province of Vallia.

“You should have been here when the emperor lay dying, or the Chyyanists were rampaging or the Third Party was active, Koter Delity. You would have been more than warm then.”

Vandrop tweaked his goat’s-beard tuft and looked across at the alcove where the yellow towel lay draped across the bronze statue of the faun. “And you, Koter,” he spoke civilly, smiling. “You have said not a word. We would not wish you to think we are unsociable here. It is just that we know one another so well. Your name, Koter — if you wish to tell us.”

Some of the others had already risen to leave and now while some pushed on, laughing and shouting, others hung back to listen. No doubt they wanted reassurance. Perhaps, their thoughts probably went, perhaps they might have said something less than wise. Spies from anywhere and serving any cause could cause troubles. . .

“My name is Jak Jakhan,” I said, speaking smoothly and just quickly enough so that they would not know I lied. “From Zamra. And I have enjoyed your conversation, Koters.”

“Zamra?” said Travok Ott.

“Zamra?” said Ortyg. His three chins wobbled.

“Zamra is, I believe,” said Vandrop, “a Kovnate of the Prince Majister’s?”

“Oh,” I said. “I have not been there since I was a child—”

They visibly relaxed at this. I ought to have said I was from some damned Racter province, or, better still, have said nothing of my origins. Anyway, I am fond of Zamra.

As we went out through the different doors, some to debauchery, some to a night's sleep, others to the many amusements afforded to the night owls of Vondium, I fell into step beside Vandrop. We entered the robing room together and I hung back, for I did not wish Vandrop — just yet — to see my clothes.

“Is it true, Koter Vandrop — about the Princess Majestrix, I mean?”

He squinted up at me.

“I have never seen this Dray Prescot — well, few of us here would have, although Travok claims he was within spitting distance of him at the wedding — still, that is like Travok. But as to the Princess Delia, the Princess Majestrix — I do not know. There are rumors—”

“And who would have told Travok Ott?”

Vandrop edged along to his locker with the key handed to him by the robing slave in attendance on him.

“By Opaz, I do not know. He likes to keep abreast of things.”

The slave unlocked the cabinet and began to fuss around Vandrop, whereat he pushed him away and dressed himself in his evening clothes. Typical of Vallia, a lounging robe in a dark rich hue of plum color, with silver embroidery, the clothes at once gave him a dignity, a measure of command, more in keeping with his character. It is said that clothes make the man. I

looked at the favor pinned to his left breast. It was not black and white, the colors of the Racters, nor white and green, the colors of the Panvals. Shaped like an opened book, with an ancient abacus and a writing pen, it was stitched in white, green and yellow. The favor was that of the Vondium Khanders.

He saw my glance.

“I believe we businessmen must stand together. You may be a Racter, for all I know, Koter Jakhan; but the Racters will hold for themselves, for the nobles, I think.”

“And the emperor and his family?”

He frowned.

At once I said: “I have overstepped the bounds of common usage, Koter Vandrop. Put it down to a stranger’s uncouthness.”

His frown remained and he sighed, “No, no, Koter Jakhan. Rather, put it down to the evil days that have fallen on Vallia and Vondium. Once, we would all have shouted for the emperor. And for his daughter. But there are forces at work — you may know of some, and there are others I know nothing of, but can sense, can feel. I am almost a hundred and seventy-five. So I know about these things. Put it down to this strange and unpleasant new world in which we live.”

The slave handed him a belt with a few tasteful jewels studding its length, and with lockets from which swung the long thin dagger of Vallia. He buckled up the belt, sighed again, and said: “If you are not staying the night, here in the Bower of the Scented Lotus, perhaps—?”

About to say I would walk with him for a space, I checked.

I had things to do. The blood had been washed away. But I still had things — urgent things — to do before I could rest.

And, could I ever rest?

In Zair's truth, could I ever rest?

I said: "Could you direct me to the house of Travok Ott?"

His goat's-beard tuft quivered. But he said: "He is a good man, Koter, do not forget that. He has labored hard for what he has, here in Vondium. He is an ivory merchant, and may be found in the Souk of Chem."

"I give you thanks." I turned to go and, as Vandrop moved away, said: "Remberee, Koter Vandrop."

"Remberee, Koter Jakhan."

I caught a quick glimpse of the stranger, Nath Delity, going past as Vandrop went away to his respectable bed.

The robing slave — he was a little Och and his middle left limb was withered — fussed over me as I reached the cabinet assigned to me and unlocked it. My suit of decent Vallian buff looked the worse for wear. It had come from the wardrobe I kept up in the Palazzo of the Four Winds in Djanguraj. But I shrugged it on, philosophically, and drew on the tall black Vallian boots. The weaponry was rolled in the cloak. I held the cloak and did not unroll it, standing ready to leave as I had entered here, after the fracas at the emperor's palace.

When the Och saw I gave him a silver stiver he babbled his thanks; but I merely nodded and stepped out

along the marble floor, over the geometric tessellations, to the doors. Outside, the night of Vondium pressed down, and wayfarers were only too pleased to hear the link men's calls of: "Loxo! Loxo!" and see them come hurrying up with their torches and lanterns.

One of the lesser moons of Kregen went hurtling past, low, casting down a thin scattering of light. Shadows lay heavy and dark, pierced by lanterns at corners and the winking sparks of the link men's torches as they guided their customers home — or, given the nature of a Kregan's desires and expectancies of the good life — to the gaming halls, the theatres, the dancing places, that would carry on right through to what on Earth would be called the small hours.

The palace of the emperor dominated its island between the canals and the River — She of the Fecundity. I passed along, not caring to employ a link man, moving fast. The emperor was safe now. Kov Layco Jhansi, the chief minister, had slain Ashti Melekhi who had sought to kill the emperor, and that particular plot had misfired.

Of course, there would be other plots against the emperor.

That was natural.

But the old devil was now possessed of a thousand years of life, because he had bathed in the sorcerous waters of the Sacred Pool of Baptism. I did not think he knew that fact. Not yet. But the thought had made me laugh, which is a rare occurrence, Zair knows.

A little wind flickered awnings half-seen in the erratic light. Leaves scuttered across the pavings. Vondium is indeed a magical city, fit to be the capital of an empire. The palace reared ahead, a monstrous pile, and I was comfortably aware that I would now be able to enter freely, instead of either having to creep in by a secret stair or bash my way in by brute force, as I had been constrained to do up until the events of this very night.

The guards let me pass. I noticed that the numbers of Chuliks had materially reduced. Just how Jhansi had contrived that I did not then know; but the guards were still alert, and halted me, and then, obsequiously, let me through.

It is a strange and observable fact that most wizards prefer to have their chambers in a tower. One would think they would prefer the deepest cellars, since most of them appear to have truck with the powers who are alleged to lie in that direction, rather than those in the other. But it is so.

High up the winding stair of the Tower of Incense lay the bronze-studded door. No guards were posted here. Some folk say a Wizard of Loh needs no human guards; but although that is a popular belief, it is not so. The Wizards of Loh are famed, feared, formidable; but they remain still mortal men.

A coldness appeared to cling about that door. I say appeared to cling; this was an irrational feeling and I brushed it off testily and bashed the door open with my boot.

Dimly lit, hung with macabre artifacts, the chambers of the Wizard of Loh lowered down. A lamp burned in the corner beside the skull of a risslaca. The skeleton of a chavonth had been wired in a leaping posture facing the doorway. Solemn black drapes swathed the walls. The arrow-slit windows were swathed in long blood-red curtains. A sturm-wood table supported weird objects — human heads, animal bones, bottles of blood, fetuses, jars of colored powder, strangely shaped instruments.

This whole mish-mash was designed to impress the credulous.

This anteroom resembled the working chamber of a common sorcerer. I had never met a Wizard of Loh who put much store by this kind of rubbish.

The Wizard of Loh at the court of the Emperor of Vallia had been Deb-so-Parang; but he had died some seasons ago. The Wizard of Loh who had taken his place was, so I was led to understand, some kind of sibling, and was called Deb-sa-Chiu.

He looked up from a table in the inner room. A thing writhed and screamed on the table, and Deb-sa-Chiu's hands were green.

He frowned.

The shadows threw my face into darkness, and so my form bulked in the doorway, startling him.

“You come hard upon your fate, rast!” he said. He spoke with that harsh Lohvian hiss that some of the redheaded folk of Loh cannot control. His hands flew up. Whether or not he could fashion a spell to blast me, turn me into a toad, do anything particularly unpleas-

ant, I was not prepared to find out. Men credit the Wizards of Loh with supernatural powers and, by Vox, I have seen a few weird happenings in my time on Kregen.

So, quickly, I said: “Lahal, Deb-sa-Chiu. I have come to talk privily with you, San, and to seek your assistance.”

He dropped the green-oozing thing onto the worktable.

“You try my patience—”

“Then let me try to untry your patience, San.”

I gave him the honored title of San — dominie, sage, master — for although already I had my doubts of this one, I did not wish to prejudice my chances of finding out what I must know. Time was wasting. Perhaps I ought to have come here directly instead of going to the Bower of the Scented Lotus to wash away the blood.

He peered under his hand at me, and then motioned me to stand to the side so that the samphron oil lamp’s gleam might fall upon my face. His own face was smooth, unmarked, crowned with that red Lohvian hair. His eyes were wary. He affected the black moustache arranged in two long drooping tails down the sides of his mouth, a fashion I find ludicrous and offensive, for all the chill menace it invariably creates.

Moving to stand where he might see me plain, I said in a voice I knew grated out harshly: “You would do me a favor, San, if you will tell me the whereabouts of the Princess Majestrix.”

His smooth and knowing face lifted at my tone.

“And who are you who seeks this knowledge? I have warned you that you try my patience at your peril. I shall see you cast down to the dungeons. Naghan the Pinch will show you the error of your ways—”

He stopped speaking abruptly.

The light fell upon my face.

For a moment he stood, unmoving, his eyes black buttons revealing his thoughts. Then: “I have seen the court portrait of you, hung in the Gallery of Princes. What you ask—”

“I have beforetime asked a Wizard of Loh to go into lupu for me and to discover the whereabouts of Delia, the Princess Majestrix.” My regard held him transfixed. “I have not asked them to go unrequited for the service.”

If I admit to a guilty twinge of conscience here over the Wizard of Loh Que-si-Rening of Ruathytu in distant and hostile Hamal, it was surely merited, for I had done precious little for him in recompense for his assistance in tracking down Saffi the golden lion-maid. I brushed the thought away and glared at this Deb-sa-Chiu, prepared to be extremely nasty to him if necessary, although heartily wishing that unpleasant necessity would not arise.

“It is said that the Princess Majestrix and a great crowd of her friends left Vondium secretly and in a great hurry.”

“It is said?” I forced myself not to mock him. “Surely a mighty Wizard of Loh has sources of more precise information?”

“We have, we have. But information is not cheap.”

So ho, I said to myself. A greedy one. Well, we know how they may be manipulated.

I could not smile; but I tried to make myself relax. This would take a little time, for when a Wizard of Loh goes into lupu it seems the very forces of nature are distorted, denied, turned aside from their normal courses to the ends of wizardry.

“You must know I have means of recompensing you.”

He inclined his head — a fraction, by a fraction only, for they are haughty and proud in their wisdom — and said: “Then let us come to an arrangement” He gestured with a finger and thumb touching, his other fingers stiffly outspread. “For there have been apparitions within the palace, appearances, specters—”

Tell me.”

“You have the honor to receive the assistance of Khe-Hi-Bjanching. He has made himself a power among the Wizards of Loh who render assistance to princes. The emperor, who is honored to be favored by my assistance, speaks highly of him. You are indeed fortunate.”

I said nothing but simply glared.

He went on a little hurriedly.

“Khe-Hi-Bjanching has discussed with me a certain Wizard of Loh who seeks to maintain an observation upon you—”

“Phu-si-Yantong.”

He swallowed and moved away toward a side table of sturm wood upon which stood glistening flagons and linen-covered trays. He busied himself pouring wine. I

shook my head when he lifted an eyebrow at me. If he wanted to go through this flummery and play-acting, all very well; but my patience was running out.

“Phu-si-Yantong. A most powerful, most puissant Wizard of Loh. His appearances have been observed in the palace. I myself have seen them. Khe-Hi-Bjanching, also. We are concerned.”

“So am I. What has this to do with the whereabouts of the Princess Majestrix?”

“She returned alone from wherever she had been.” As he said this, Chiu’s face shadowed and he took a quick gulp of wine. I knew the fellow knew where Delia had gone with our friends. Aphrasöe, the city of the Savanti, the Swinging City — that was where Delia had taken the emperor to be cured of the poison administered by the bitch Ashti Melekhi — who was now dead — and I knew, further, that the Savanti nal Aphrasöe threw a most dread horror into the hearts of even the greatest of the Wizards of Loh.

So I said: “She returned. I wish to know where she is *now!*”

He smoothed down his silk robe, liberally embroidered with symbols and runes, archaic signs that would daunt the credulous who sought his help. He paced across the chamber, careful to place his curled brown slippers upon the rugs and carpets and not upon the harsh stone. He carried the wine in one claw-like hand. At last he stopped and eyed me.

“I will go into lupu for you, prince, and seek the whereabouts of the Princess Majestrix. The price—”

Almost, I smiled. That was a crude word for so haughty a fellow.

“Name it”

As must be clearly evident to you who listen to my story as the tapes spin through your heads, I reasoned that after all my friends had been flung by magical power back to their points of origin about Kregen, Delia would have been hurled back to Vondium. Knowing her, I knew she would instantly take flier and hare off back to Aphrasöe to find me. But, I had the sense to realize she might have gone to Valka, to the east, first. I did not wish to fly all the way to the island of Ba-Domek, in which stands Aphrasöe, and miss her. And I did not wish to waste time flying to Valka if she had not gone there. I wanted — I hungered — to know where she was at this precise moment.

“Gold,” said Chiu, and allowed a smile to crimp that thin mouth of his. “Wizards of Loh are always in need of gold, for we have not so far unraveled the secret of its manufacture.” He waved airily. “But gold is only a small part of the price.”

He was telling me nothing that was not generally known over Kregen. I looked at him, and he went on quickly.

“The Vadnicha Ashti Melekhi has been foiled in her plans to slay the emperor—”

Here I cut in brutally, rapidly growing tired of his procrastinations. “And no thanks to you. Your duty was to warn him. Why should he clothe and feed you if you fail him?”

He drew himself up at this, a flush creeping under the smooth skin of his cheeks. He looked savage. “You should speak with more care to a Wizard of Loh, prince. Do you forget—”

“I will forget that you failed in your duty to the emperor if you instantly tell me where the Princess Majestrix is. As to payment — gold, you may have gold.” I let the swaddling cloak unroll, letting the covered weapons glint suddenly in the samphron oil lamps’ gleam as they came free. “And as for further payment I fancy that can be arranged.”

His face looked murderous. But he nodded, as though coming to a decision. He squatted down on the floor. There was no need to acquaint him with the person whom he sought; he had met Delia in the palace. He put his hands to his eyes and began to rock backwards and forwards, keening a note that rose and rose until it shrilled into an unheard vibration.

Clearly, Chiu was a very powerful wizard, or he knew more than he had said. He had started on the third phase of going into lupu, bypassing that first long silent struggling with the bonds of the spirit — the *ib* — when the constraints are loosened and reality and the forces beyond reality strain and merge.

He stood up. His hands dragged away from before his face. He began to rotate, slowly at first, his arms outflung, then faster and faster. There are different disciplines within the Wizards of Loh, and adepts go into lupu in different ways. But the results are very similar. I knew that the *ib* of Chiu had broken free from

his corporeal body, was drifting, was seeking the whereabouts of Delia.

Abruptly, he dropped to the ground, crouched, his hands pressed flat against the rugs. He threw his head back. His eyes slowly opened, and once again I saw that drugged, eerie, *knowing* look.

I waited.

“Yes, prince,” he breathed. He spoke chokingly. “Yes. The Princess Majestrix rides an airboat. The wind blows. She flies west.”

“Across the Sunset Sea?”

“No.”

“Across Vallia?”

“Yes.”

So she *had* gone to Valka first, then. . .

“Tell me more.”

“The Princess Majestrix flies to Vondium. I feel the wind. The air cuts. She is alone.”

I jumped at this. I didn’t like the sound of this at all.

Then this great San, this puissant Wizard of Loh, this Deb-sa-Chiu said: “She is in great distress. And there is a shadow — I see a shadow, dark, hovering—” His drugged eyes opened wide and he clasped his hands together, lifting up from the rug. He glared at me and the knowingness on his face sickened me. “Phu-si-Yantong! He it is. . . It is he. . . But the powers fail, the ib grows fragile and must return — Phu-si-Yantong’s kharrna overbears all—”

The wizard clutched abruptly at his throat, choking. His eyes rolled up and this time they did not show white

half-moon crescents as he went into lupu, rather they showed the awful terror of a man being strangled. I took a step forward and grasped his shoulder, roughly, and shook him.

“Chiu! Chiu! Wake up, man!”

He shuddered and writhed away; but I held him, and shook him again, shaking a potent and devilish Wizard of Loh as one might shake an angry willful child.

Then, seeing this was doing no good I hooked my fingers inside his and dragged his clutching hands away from his throat. So stiffly did his arms move, so much like sere winter branches, I thought they would snap off. But I forced his hands apart and wrenched away those lethal fingers. He choked and blubbered and whooped in great draughts of air. Tears ran down his smooth cheeks. He closed his eyes and a shudder wracked his whole body. He shook in those fine silken clothes with the runes of power embroidered in gold thread.

Presently he had recovered sufficiently to take a glass of wine. He gulped. Then he looked at me over the crystal rim, shaking still; but gathering command of himself.

“Phu-Si-Yantong,” he whispered, “The power! The power!”

“All right, San. Tell me.”

“The strength of his kharrna overpowered all my lore, my arts, my own devices. I would have choked myself to death — at his command.”

“I saw that.”

Truth to tell, the notion was eerie and mind-wrenchingly scary; the idea that a man a great distance away could so control another that he would take his own life. It was frightening. I still clung to that scrap of knowledge I had gathered, overheard as I felt by the command of the Star Lords, that Phu-si-Yantong would not order my assassination. He would have no need of paid assassins, stikitches out to earn their gold by stealthy murder. Ashti Melekhi had set her assassins on me and I was not free of them yet. But Phu-si-Yantong — then the thought occurred to me that perhaps one had to be in lupu to be thus attacked at a distance. I sincerely hoped so.

“And you can tell me no more?”

“You have saved my life, prince. But I wonder how long I shall retain it, if—”

“Yantong has no quarrel with you.”

He gave me a long pitying look, recovering his composure, getting back to the serious business of being a Wizard of Loh. It is strange but true that these famous Wizards are seldom called merely wizards; usually they are given their full name of Wizards of Loh. The other wizards of Kregen, also, favor those from Loh with the full name. It is a measure of their importance in the eyes of other sorcerers.

“The Princess Majestrix will arrive in Vondium when the suns rise.” He puffed out his cheeks, getting his color back. “Now, prince, we must talk about the balance of your payment to me.”

I glared at him. I should have listened. I should have waited for him to say what he wanted. It might have saved a few thousand lives, saved a torrent of blood, saved a few burning, looted towns. But, onker that I am, I said bluffly: “As to payment, San, you may have your gold. But I think if you believe I have saved your life you are fully requited and I no longer stand in your debt.”

Anyway, at the time it struck me as fair.

But fairness and justice do not go hand in hand with expediency and cleverness and the saving of pride. So, onker of onkers that I am, I nodded to him, scooped up the weapons in their cloak, and stomped out.

Get onker!

I can say that, now, looking back. I was, indeed, still very much of an idiot in those days.

But, of course, as you will perceive I was in a turmoil of fear for Delia. If that bastard Phu-si-Yantong was up to more mischief, and my Delia flying all alone — I sweated and shook and went off running toward the high aerial landing platform where her airboat would touch down.

Any sensible fellow would have waited. I had been up and about for a long spell. I had fought a combat in the emperor’s bedroom that some would put down as a Jikai, although I did not vaunt myself that far. The Chuliks who had come to slay the emperor had been dealt with by me, and their employer, Ashti Melekhi, had been stabbed to death by Kov Layco Jhansi. I was tired. But tiredness is a mortal sin.

So I roused out the guard and yelled and bellowed and acted like a high and mighty prince and secured an airboat and went leaping away into the star-studded night.

Due east I headed, on course for Valka, trusting that Delia's flier would be on the reciprocal of my course, and I would see her airboat in the bright star glitter. She of the Veils, Kregen's fourth moon, was hidden by cloud, but as I flew on eastward of the great circle of the city, so the clouds dissipated and cleared and pink and golden moonshine flooded down. I could see better then. The land fled past below. The wind buffeted my face and roared in my ears. On and on I flew, searching the heavens for the first glimpse of the airboat.

As I flew on searching the sky for that flitting sharp-prowed form, Deb-sa-Chiu's words recurred to me. I puzzled over one word. He had said: "kharrna." I did not know what that was. I would have to ask my own Wizard, Khe-Hi-Bjanching.

Then I checked.

After my friends had dipped the emperor and themselves in the Sacred Pool of Baptism on the River Zelfh in far Aphrasöe, the Guardian of the Pool, Vanti, had dispatched them all willy-nilly to their places of origin. That meant that Bjanching was somewhere in Loh, that veiled and mysterious continent to the southwest of Vallia. It meant that Seg Segutorio was back home in Erthydrin, the mountainous promontory at the northern tip of Loh. It meant that Inch was home in Ng'grogga, in the southeast of Loh. Odd how they all

came from Loh, a fact I had been barely conscious of. And my other friends, all my comrades on the expedition, were back home. Gloag was in Mehzta. Hap Loder was back on the Great Plains of Segesthes. Turko the Shield in Herrelldrin in distant Havilfar. Tilly, Oby, Naghan the Gnat, back in Hyrklana. And Balass the Hawk in Xuntal.

There was no help from them in the coming struggle.

Many of these friends had made a new home for themselves with Delia and me in Valka. I made up my mind I would make the most strenuous efforts to assist them if they wished to return, as I felt they would — as, indeed, knowing the comradeship between us, I was absolutely certain they would.

But, first things first.

By the wheeling movements of the stars and the onward progression of She of the Veils I counted the passing hours. Each bur is roughly forty terrestrial minutes, and as another of the little catapulting lesser moons of Kregen vaulted across the sky I knew the burs were rattling away. The good graces of Five-handed Eos-Bakchi, that chuckling Vallian spirit of luck and good fortune, were passing me by, too.

When I reached the point at which it was fruitless to hurry on farther I slowed the voller in its headlong rush. If Deb-sa-Chiu spoke the truth and Delia was due to reach Vondium at dawn, then she must have passed a circumferential line around the capital city by now. So I had missed her.

She was vectoring in on a different approach line.

Instantly, I swung the voller about and slammed the speed lever over full. It jarred against the stop. Well, as you know, that was a bad habit I'd been getting into more and more of late. As to whether or not driving a voller at top speed all the time through thin air materially affected its performance, I did not at the time know. I cared. Airboats still broke down at distressingly frequent intervals in Vallia. We bought our fliers from Hamal, and they continued to sell us inferior models, that broke down, despite the drubbing we'd given them at the Battle of Jholaix. I brooded as the night wind whipped at my face, hurtling back to Vondium under the Moons of Kregen, brooded on the mighty and proud Empire of Hamal and what must be done about that place and its mad and cruel Empress Thyllis.

So many schemes and mischiefs needed attention on Kregen. Four hundred light years from Earth, the planet of my birth, Kregen is a marvelous world, peopled by wonderful beings, filled with light and clamor and furor of life lived to the hilt. But Kregen has its darker side, where horror and terror batten on innocent people, where sorceries rend reason, where injustice denies light.

Yes, there was much still to be done on Kregen.

I am but a simple, ordinary, mortal man — despite that I have been vouchsafed a thousand years of life — and although my shoulders are accounted broad, they can only seek to bear the load I can carry. I was despairingly conscious of all those things I had left

undone. But, by Zim-Zair! I would do them. Aye, by the Black Chunkrah, all of them!

The hurtling headlong pace of the voller faltered.

The wind-swept spaces of the sky extended all about. The star glitter above, the pink wash of moonlight, the drifting shadow clouds, all coalesced.

The flier was falling.

Screaming with wind-bluster the flier fell toward the dark earth below.

Many philosophies and religions of Kregen seek to give guidance and reassurance to those at the last extremity. I have spoken little of these things. Each to his own. If I turn to Zair — because I am on Kregen — and, also, to Opaz, this is only natural. Djan, too, holds importance in my scheme of things. If I was to be denied a last long lingering look at my Delia before I died I would curse and rave and then, at the end, perhaps accept that harsh decree. Certainly, I'd do my damnedest to claw back up out of my coffin to bash the skulls of those rasts in Hamal who sold us faulty vollers.

The wind blustered at me, screaming past the fragile wood and canvas of the little two-place flier. She twisted and turned, toppling through the air. Down and down we went, headlong, screeching for the final impact.

The controls appeared to be useless. I juggled the levers and then, intoxicatingly, fancied I caught a spark of response. The cover ripped away over the silver boxes that upheld and powered the voller in flight, I probed in, trying to figure out what the damage might be. If the silver boxes had turned black then that would be the

end, for their power would all have leached away. They gleamed dully silver back at me. I began frantically to search back along the linkages of bronze and balass, the orbits that controlled the movements of the two silver boxes, the vaol and paol boxes.

The flier lifted a little, flew straight. I stood up with the wind in my face, gasping, and the flier lurched and slid sideways.

In the pinkly golden rays of the moon I saw another flier, below me, heading west. She was a largish craft, with an upflung poop, and so I knew she was not Delia's voller.

The moonlight ran glittering along her coaming, sparkling from ornamentation there. Flags flew, mere featureless tufts of cloth in that erratic light. My flier lurched again, and slid sideways, and then, recovering, skewed the other way. We wallowed through the air like a reveler reeling from a tavern in Sanurkazz, celebrating the capture of a Magdaggian swifter.

More frenzied bashing of the controls brought me up level again. But it was a mere matter of time before my voller gave up completely and down to the hard earth we plunged, to make a pretty hole in the ground of Kregen.

The flier below flew parallel, surging on surely. By her lines she was a first-class Hamalian-built vessel. I could see no sign of life aboard her; doubtless her passengers were asleep in the cabin aft and her crew snugged down along the bulwarks.

There was a chance.

A slender chance — true; but it was all I had.

I let my voller down as gently as I could, gentling the controls now, handling her like a fractious zorca, light on the bit.

Sink me! I said. Was I not an old sailorman? Did I or did I not have the skill?

Putting my trust in myself is no new sensation for me; but always I do so with a trembling uncertainty. I can never be sure. With a muttered prayer to Zair — and to Opaz and Djan — I let the voller drift down, fighting the controls, feeling the rush of wind, feeling the sinking bottomless sensation of the gulfs of emptiness under me.

Down we plunged, down to a chance in a thousand.

In a thousand?

In a million. . .

## Two

### An Aerial Reception

That chance in a million came off, of course, otherwise I would not be here to tell you of it.

The crippled voller responded lurchingly to the controls. There was little time left as I brought her in over the flier's foredeck. Judging distance was tricky. I was for a crazy moment reminded of the time when I swung from a long rope slung to a corth whose wide wings beat the air above me, swinging down to land clawingly on the tower of Umgar Stro. So, now, I swung the airboat down and hit the deck and bounced. We nearly went over the rail. The wind tried to lift us off, and then was miraculously stilled, so that I knew this large flier was of that kind that creates its own little biosphere in which the wind has no power to force an entrance.

The stillness settled and I took a deep breath and put a leg over the wooden coaming of my airboat.

Now, I own my sudden arrival was unceremonious. Out of the night sky a voller had come swooping in to

land on this airboat's foredeck. Kregen is a world where abrupt actions of that sort almost invariably herald mischief. So as I jumped down to the deck I called out in a most pleasant voice.

"Llahal!" I called, using the double L of the familiar greeting for those one does not yet know. "Llahal. I crave your indulgence for my flier—"

I was allowed to go no farther.

The airboat was not deserted, as the stray thought had crossed my mind. As though conjured magically from the sleeping decks men sprang up, hard and dark against the last of the moonlight. The bright wink of weapons ringed me in.

Those weapons drove forward with purpose, unhesitating, sword and spear points aimed at my heart.

As I say, my arrival had been unceremonious.

But even so, even on Kregen, a little of pappattu might have been made, a little time taken to sort put the situation, to understand why I had dropped out of the night sky.

But no.

The spears lanced toward me, the swords flashed down. With the instinct a fighting man must needs have or perish very quickly, I was leaping away, my rapier whipping out, the main gauche flicking up out of its scabbard.

These sudden devils trying to degut me were Chuliks. Their oiled yellow skin glistened in the radiance of She of the Veils. Their upthrust tusks glinted. They bore in,

silently, ferociously, and I had to skip and jump and beat away those murderous brands.

“Listen, you bunch of onkers!” I yelled, prancing away, scrambling across the deck, around my voller, flicking and flashing swords and spears away. “I’m no stikitcher! I haven’t come to assassinate anyone!”

But they bore on silently. I own their very silence gave me pause; even a Chulik will give vent to a war cry every now and then, when he fights.

The rapier and left-hand dagger flamed under the moon and I had to exert myself smartly. So far I had not spitted any of them or slit anyone’s throat; but they pressed and the cramped conditions hampered free movement. Pretty soon now someone was going to get his fool self killed, and I did not intend that someone to be me. And then, when the explanations followed, there would be a pretty pickle.

“Listen, you stupid onkers!” I bellowed, and slid a blow and my rapier winked out of its own accord, or so it seemed, and I had the devil of a time merely slicing down the Chulik’s cheek instead of his throat. He staggered back, and I kicked his companion betwixt wind and water, and bellowed again. I was beginning to become annoyed.

One of them rushed in headlong, attempting to overbear me by sheer bulk and speed. I bent. He went over me, his arms flailing, letting out no sound, no surprised whoofle, simply somersaulting on to fetch up with a rib-cracking thunk against the bulwarks.

These fellows wore dark harnesses, black belts and leathers, and I could see no signs of favors or insignia, no colors. Their swords and spears were the badges of their trade.

A light bloomed from the poop rail. The radiance fell on the man holding up the lamp. He was a Fristle and his cat's face showed hard and angular in the light. At his side stood a bulky figure clad in a black cloak, with a bronze helmet jammed on his head, a bronze helmet with a tall cockscomb of gold and white feathers. Only the deep-set eyes of this person glittered out over a fold of cloth, drawn up over the face.

“Do not kill him!” The words were harsh, fierce, with a rattling, hissing viciousness. They commanded immediate respect from the Chulik mercenaries. I saw the way the swords twitched in the yellow hands. They would use the flats, now. . .

“Take him alive! The rascals who kills him will be flung overboard.”

Again the words battered the mercenaries. The man in the concealing black cloak and face cloth clearly handled these Chuliks with the proverbial rod of iron.

Two Och bowmen on the deck of the poop lowered their bows. They might have done for me had they loosed on me unawares. Now they would not chance a shot, under the interdiction of their lord, even though the bows were mere small flat short-bows. I leaped away from the coming attack and bellowed up at the black-cloaked figure.

“Tell these nurdling rasts of yours I come as a friend! I am not—”

“What you are and what you are not are of no concern of mine,” came the hoarse, hissing, rattling voice. I fancied I heard a distant resemblance in that voice to a scoundrel I had known on the inner sea, the Eye of the World; but I could not be sure. And what with keeping the swords away from me and skipping about and bellowing at them to desist, I thought no more about it at the time.

How that little scene would have ended I do not care to dwell on — or, rather, how it should have ended with the lot of them pitched overboard — but in the event the black-cloaked figure turned abruptly half-about. He stood in a strained, attentive, silent pose for a moment and I surmised he was listening to someone whom I could not see. After a moment or two in which I came perilously close to sinking the rapier between the ribs of a Chunk who wanted to finish matters, the man turned back.

His hard outline bulked against the last of the moon-glow, for She of the Veils sank into the west and flooded the flier with a roseate light. So we had turned in mid air and were heading east. Why, I did not know. He flung up a commanding hand, and something about the gesture, some awkwardness, tugged at my memory.

“Hold!” he bellowed. Then: “Take the flier down. Let that man stand free, do not harm him.”

The swords glittered as they lowered.

“Well,” I said. “By Vox! You took your time.”

The flier slanted toward the shadowed earth. The tableau held. The eeriness of it was not lost on me. If anyone of those Chulik mercenaries made a wrong move, this time he might not be so lucky, and might, indeed, take six inches of good Vallian steel through his guts.

The airboat touched down. A tiny pre-dawn wind sang in the trees. The shadows loomed. The land spread, dotted with tree clumps, with not a light in evidence anywhere.

“Over with you!” shouted the man in the cloak. He pointed with his sword at my voller. “Throw that after him.”

The Chuliks stood back, for they were fighting men and the volmen of the flier would handle details like casting a voller over the side. These sailors of the skies were men like me, apim, some of them; others were Brokelsh and Womoxes, diffs whose racial animosities were not too blatant. There were no Fristles that I could see apart from the one on the poop with the lantern, for as a rule, although not always, Chuliks and Fristles do not get along too easily, one race with the other.

My voller was incontinently heaved up and chucked over the side. I heard the breaking and splintering of wood, the ripping of canvas.

“By Vox!” I yelled. “Who’s going to pay for that?”

That harsh hissing voice carried not the slightest trace of amusement. “You are a man with much gold. The trifle of a smashed voller will not trouble you.”

He said voller, which is the word for an airboat most often heard in Havilfar, where they are manufactured.

I said: "And do you then know me?"

"Aye."

I pondered. He was very sure of himself, then. . .

He turned his head again, and listened, and when he swung back to face me he held the cloth even higher so that only those dark, narrow, widely set eyes glittered out upon me.

"Now go. Take yourself off. And give thanks to your gods that you still live."

Pondering, I walked to the rail. Of course, I could have bounced up the ladder onto the poop, taken him by the throat, choked a little politeness into him. I might have cowed the crew and done something along similar lines with the mercenaries. But my first concern was Delia, and as these thoughts sprang into my head I saw a light go on half an ulm away. That would be a farm awakening to the daily labors. There I could find transport.

It would take more time than I wished to spare to deal with these rasts and commandeer their flier. All the same, I was conscious of the indignity — no, that is not true. Dignity and I share little in the harsh realities of life. Pride had nothing to do with it. The cardinal rule for me upon Kregen has been and remains always the concern for Delia. Only she concerned me.

At the rail I started to jump over, then turned. A Chulik stood near, lowering down on me. Many apims say, with a casual laugh, that they cannot tell one Chulik from another. They say this about Fristles, and about

many other of the wonderful races of people, called diffs, upon the world of Kregen. I saw this big bulky fellow and I would know him again. I saw his sword. It was a rapier, for he was in Vallia, and the hilt and pommel were fashioned into the likeness of a mortil, very fancy. I nodded to him as I went over the side.

He did not speak.

None of the confounded Chulik mercenaries had spoken or cried out.

I had taken a bare half-dozen steps away from the flier before it lifted up, quickly, going low over the ground toward the east. It vanished past a copse of trees. Wherever that cramph in his concealing black cloak and the person from whom he had taken his orders were going, they were going there in the devil of a hurry.

I set off for the farm.

That mysterious lot had been flying west when I'd first seen them and managed to land on their deck. Then, during the fight, they'd changed course a hundred and eighty degrees. Now they had taken off, going low, heading east. I fancied that they had kept low so that once out of my sight they could turn again and head back onto their original course.

They were flying to Vondium. And they had not wished me to know that.

Then I banished them from my thoughts and walked up to the farm and thundered on the door.

Half a dozen stavvers started barking.

"Quiet you famblys," I said, making my voice as soothing as possible.

The stavrer with his fierce wolf-head, his eight legs, the rear six all articulated the same way, with his stumpy tail, is an enormously loyal watchdog of Kregen. He can put in a sudden charge that will leave a chavonth standing for sheer acceleration; but the loyal stavrer has no long-distance legs to him. In a dash to take the seat of the pants off importunate strangers at the door he is hard to fault; but if they get a head start they can usually get away scot-free. I just hoped the stavrers at this farm were all securely chained up for the night.

Lights showed at the windows and the door was cautiously opened. There had been troubles in Vallia of late. I saw the gleam of weapons beyond the edge of the door so, quickly, I sang out: "Llahal and Llahal. My airboat has broken down and I would crave your help, Koters."

After that it was relatively easy. I was in the Vadvarate of Valhotra, of which Genal Arclay was Vad. The province lay immediately to the east of Vondium and, most sensibly, was always held by a family loyal to the emperor. It was rich farming land, filled with fat cattle and good, fruitful earth, bringing forth abundance. I knew Vad Genal as an easy-going likable fellow, with a weakness for riding sleeths in fast races on which he would bet far more than he should. But these people made me welcome, offering refreshment and the use of their best airboat — indeed, their only airboat. She was an ancient craft, much used, and very much a symbol of the farm's prosperity in the surrounding district. The farmer, Larghos Nilner, and his wife and family were

clearly loyal to their Vad and through him to the emperor.

I reflected that not all of Kregen is vicious and hostile, and not all of Vallia made furtive and strenuous attempts to get rid of the emperor. He had his friends.

Making proper arrangements for the use of the flier, I bid them Remberee and took off, heading back to Vondium.

The colors of Valhotra are red, brown and green, with a diagonal slash of white. They were painted up on the airboat in the private style, to indicate that the airboat's owner was a Valhotran but not of the retainers of the Vad.

Before the ancient airboat reached Vondium the suns rose.

I took deep breaths of air, the sweet, limpid air of Kregen. Bursting over the horizon, filling the world with light and glory, the Suns of Scorpio drove away the shadows and drenched all the marvelous world of Kregen in light and color. Zim, the great red sun, and Genodras, the small green sun, poured down their floods of radiance. I basked in the warmth and brightness. Over in Havilfar they call Zim Far and Genodras Havil. The suns have many and many names over Kregen. But they remain the Suns of Scorpio, Antares, blazing, superb.

So, if Deb-sa-Chiu had spoken the truth, Delia would be settling down to a landing on the high platforms of the palace at this moment. I fancied she would quickly learn I had returned. But I did not relish the idea that,

further learning I had taken a voller, she would at once start the long journey to Ba-Domek and Aphrasöe. I drove the flier on mercilessly; but she was a slow old tub at best and we made poor progress. So I raved and cursed, as is my wont, and attempted to calm myself, as always, and, as nearly always, lamentably failing.

Below the trundling flier the ground passed in a swirl of greens and browns and blues, with the silver-glittering canals of Vallia cutting their lordly way across the landscape. Magnificent are the canals of Vallia. True, their water is a nasty poison to anyone not of the canalfolk. In Vondium there are many canals fed by the waters of the Great River, and these canals are safe for ordinary folk, not of the canals.

The canalfolk of Vallia are a people apart. As far as I knew up to that time they had kept themselves strictly separate from the intrigues and struggles for power within the Empire. Now that the emperor was assured of a thousand years of life, vouchsafed him because his daughter Delia possessed the courage and fire to take him to the Sacred Pool of Baptism, he was most firmly seated on his throne. He could outlast his enemies, and guide and control those who followed after. Oh, yes, there were still plots against him, and factions seeking to topple him. But he had only to last out the current crop of troubles, and then, by Vox, he was safe.

So I thought.

As for myself, after my own problems, I was concerned to discover who it was who had been controlling Ashti Melekhi.

Some shadowy figure of great power had been giving her orders. She had attempted to poison the emperor and been foiled. Then she had brought Chulik guards to slay him, and been foiled.

Now that she was dead the menacing shadow at her back would have to find fresh tools for his nefarious purposes.

I knew, as I winged back to Vondium the Splendid in the mingled streaming radiance of the Suns of Scorpio, that I was in for a few hectic bouts of action. And, so I was. As you shall hear.

Poison is not often a favored instrument of murder on Kregen and the abhorrence of just about everyone concerned at the imminent death by poison of the emperor gave a true indication of that kind of morality. But death by hired assassin — well, now. . . In that department of murder the stikitches of Kregen have few peers. Which, I suppose, reflects badly upon the morality of those who employ them. My friends and I had been set upon by stikitches, and we had tumbled them into a handy canal; I recalled the promise Ashti Melekhi had made and knew her promise would be kept. Her stikitches would be after me, still.

In that, thinking that her malignance persisted from the grave, I misjudged the niceties of protocol and honor of the stikitches of Kregen.

In the growing light the land spread bountifully. Truly, Vallia is a rich and rosy island. Away on my right hand the lofting twin pinnacles of rock spearing up from the land showed me Vondium was very close. That

curious double formation of rock and crag is called Drak's Seat. From its slopes ice is brought down to the city.

The Great River — Mother of Waters, She of the Fecundity — glimmered ahead. And Vondium — ah! Vondium, the proud city. I have spoken but little of that splendid city, and to think of it now brings a pang. The slanting mingled rays of the suns smote full upon the serried array of domes and towers, of spires and roofs, caught gleams from the gilt, struck sparks from the ranked windows. The long granite walls ringed the city, and the buildings spilled out beyond their ancient circumference. Here and there the dots of early fliers spun up into the morning brightness. Across the long-reaching arms of the aqueducts the clear, clean water flowed down from the hills. Smoke from breakfast fires coiled into the limpid air. The boulevards already thronged with people and carriages, a steady traffic that would continue all day. Narrow boats and barges glided silently along the canals. Movement, color, life — all were spread below me as I slanted in over the seeming metropolis of Vondium the Proud, heading for the palace of the emperor.

A number of tributaries of varying size and importance empty into the Great River at or near Vondium. Combined with the meanderings of the River at that point a couple of tributaries contrive to isolate a section of the city, with the adjacent canal forming an aloof enclave. This is the Old City, called Drak's City. A warren, festering in places, sumptuous in others, it

attracts both disreputable elements and free spirits, artists, poets, thinkers, students, and provides them with a kind of security. I say a kind of security, for Vondium herself offers that kind of security a man of the cities can understand.

As I sped toward the palace I gave but scant thought to Drak's City, for I then knew little of Vondium. In Ruathytu, which I knew much better, the Sacred Quarter in its way served for the purposes of Drak's City in Vondium. But the two were not the same — very far from the same.

Old and ancient and steeped in the mysteries of its past is Drak's City. Here men first built their camp when they came to the Great River, gradually enlarging their buildings and walls, until what is now the Old City dominated the surrounding countryside. The light picked out the colors along the tall walls of the higher palace. Each fluttering from its own flagstaff, every province flag of the empire flew. The long rows of flagstaffs and their gorgeously colored treshes passed below as I turned to slide in for a landing.

Drak's City sank from sight as I lowered in the air. The Old City completely surrounded by the modern metropolis carried on its own life, had its own mores, gave scant attention to what went on in Greater Vondium. The flier touched down.

The guards were duly obsequious. The Vallian Air Service patrols above had let me through because the Valhotran colors marked me as a friend. Unmarked boats would be challenged.

Because she understands me passing well, Delia had waited for me. The moment she learned I had returned to the palace and of the collapse of the latest plot against her father, she had said something — which I will not repeat — and had gone up to the landing platforms with a picnic basket and a good book. How she does these things amazes me still.

So, clad in my worn and travel-stained old buff, I stomped across the platform.

She looked up and marked her place in the book with a slim finger — I know that gesture well. Then she saw who it was. The book went up in the air. The picnic basket flew the other way spilling palines and delicious fruits and sandwiches and bottles of wine. She flew at me.

Time after time I have come home to my Delia. It is always the same and it is always different. Close, we held each other, close. My Delia — my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains!

## Three

### Barty Vessler, Strom of Calimbrev

I hitched up the huge brown beard on its silver wires over my ears, and smoothed down the golden plates of the helmet. I turned to let Delia see me.

She lay on an elbow, her white gown voluptuous in its curves and lines, and started to laugh so that the little gilt sofa shook.

“Dray! Dray! You look—”

“I look like a shaggy graint of a clansman. If that is the way the good folk of Vondium imagine me — then that is the way they can see me.”

Much had happened since yesterday, when Delia had met me on the high landing platform. Now we prepared in our own private apartments for the great thanksgiving ceremony. Much of what had happened was talk. There were other things; but they remain between Delia and me. Now we put on fine fancy clothes, readying ourselves for the dismal prospect of a state function.

“But you can’t go out looking like that.”

“Why not?”

“Well — for one thing, you’re hardly recognizable and absolutely not respectable.”

I laughed at her. “True. And two more admirable qualities I have yet to find. I do not wish to be recognized, and if ever I was respectable, I fancy I’d—”

“I know you, Dray Prescot. If you were respectable you’d die of boredom.”

“True.”

She sat up. Those soft red lips pouted at me.

“Very well. Wear the beard. But at least have Tilly trim — oh!”

“Yes. Our friends are scattered all over Kregen. Tilly will be back in Hyrklana.”

“We must help them — I’m sure Tilly would wish to come home. Valka is her home now.”

“We will. As soon as the emperor has given thanks to the Invisible Twins through Opaz the All-Glorious, we can start.”

A shadow passed across that face, that face that is the most beautiful in two worlds.

“What is it, my heart?”

“Dayra—”

Now I frowned.

“We have lost our daughter Velia—” The pang this caused both of us had to be endured; neither of us could forget Velia. I went doggedly on. “Our three sons are making their ways in the world. But our daughters, Lela and Dayra — do you know, since I returned from—” Here I checked, and stammered.

“Yes?”

I had been about to say “from Earth.” But that would mean nothing to Delia, and I had not yet nerved myself to explain to her that I was born on a world that had only one sun, only one moon, and had only apims as people. So I fished around and then said: “Since I had to leave you on the island of Lower Kairfowen—”

“In the village of Panashti—”

“Yes. I’ve spent most of the time in the Eye of the World. We have managed to save your father. But in all this time I have not seen my two daughters.”

Delia made a small, not so much helpless as resigned, gesture. “It is a matter for the Sisters of the Rose. I have told you much. Lela is very much the grand lady now. She goes her own way. She stubbornly refuses all offers of marriage.”

I nodded. “If she gets married and I’m not there, I’ll—”

“You no doubt would, you great grizzly graint. But Lela is like Drak. They are twins. Drak can run affairs while you are — away—”

“I know. They call him the Younger Strom and me the Old Strom, in Valka.”

“He does not want Valka. You know what he has said. He is a fine man now, my heart. As for Zeg, you did well when you made him the King of Zandikar, and Queen Miam will be good for him.”

“I didn’t make him. Miam did that.”

“That may be. And our third son, Jaidur—”

“Jaidur.” Jaidur, sometimes called Vax, Vax Neemusjid, was Dayra’s twin. “He hasn’t made up his mind about me, yet. But Dayra—”

“Jaidur and Dayra. They were born when you were away. It was a hard time for me.”

I could not look at her. The Star Lords who had callously hurled me back to rot on Earth for twenty-one years had a great deal to answer for. I ploughed on.

“Jaidur still doesn’t believe I can possibly be his real father — yet, I think, he does know and will not acknowledge it. If I were a true Vallian father I’d take a whip to him if he continued on that tack.”

“But as you are a savage and barbarian clansman, you will not.”

“So Dayra hates my guts. Well, that is fair. I deserve that. But I shall find a way of making her see — I have to — as I owe it to you and the children.”

“She ran away from the Sisters of the Rose. I saw the — I saw the necessary people there and smoothed things over. But she joined up with a rascally gang. Seg and Inch found out about them, or as much as they could. Seg’s daughter, Silda, was also mixed up with them at one time. But Seg was there and he sorted that out.”

I had turned to look at her and as she spoke a flush mantled up onto her cheeks, and she looked away, and went on speaking very quickly, very quickly indeed.

“And as Inch couldn’t wed his lady Sasha from Ng’grogga for some reason connected with their taboos he was making further investigations but it was all very

difficult and kept most secret and I can say that Dayra fancied herself in love with this man who calls himself by any name that takes his fancy and as the whim strikes him and no one knows who he is although I expect Dayra does.” She finished a little bitterly, on a sigh.

I felt the fury mounting.

Calmly, I said: “And this was the problem you had to go away to attend to? You and Lela?”

“Oh, no.” She looked up. “That was settled. Well, more or less. Dayra has been led astray. That is what I meant when I spoke of her when you talked of going to Hyrklana to fetch Tilly and Oby and Naghan the Gnat.”

“Aye, and we’ll bring the others. But I see.” I took off the ridiculous golden helmet and scratched the false beard. “We must find Dayra first — and this fellow, what’s-his-name — and then we can see about our friends.”

“I think — Dray — I think — yes.”

“Well then, Delia my lovely, we must dress ourselves up and attend the emperor and see your father right. Have you any idea where we should start looking for Dayra?”

“They used to go around smashing up the taverns.”

“Right.”

“And Barty Vessler is here in Vondium and desperately unhappy, wanting to help.”

“Who,” I said, “in Zair’s name, is Barty Vessler?”

Delia shook her head so that those gorgeous chestnut tints in her rich brown hair caught the light, dancing, enchanting.

“You knew the old strom, Naghan Vessler? Strom of Calimbrev?”

“Oh. Oh, yes. So this Barty Vessler is the Strom of Calimbrev. How does he come to be so desperately unhappy?”

But I could guess. Calimbrev is an island of about the same size as Valka situated off the southeast coast of Vallia, just to the southwest of Veliadrin. If this Vessler was unhappy and wanted to help it could only mean he and Dayra had been friends. Probably the loon wanted to marry her. I cocked an eyebrow at Delia, and she smiled, and confirmed the suspicion.

“He is a charming young man. Very well thought of. You mind you are nice to him.”

“And he has nothing to do with Dayra’s running off? Her running with this wild bunch? He’s just a good friend?”

“Yes. I am sure. He had a struggle to hold onto the Stromnate when his father died. But he did.”

“Well, good for him.”

All my hackles had risen at the thought of a man sniffing around my daughter. I thought of Gafard, Sea Zhantil, the King’s Striker, who had wed Velia, and I sighed. . .

“If he’s half the man Gafard was then he’ll do, I suppose, providing you approve.”

“For the sweet sake of Opaz, my heart! It is not as definite as that yet. Not by a long way.”

So, bristling more than a trifle, I set about putting on all the ridiculous fancy clothes a state occasion warranted. As was often my custom I deliberately loaded myself down with bright gewgaws, lengths of cloth-of-gold, brilliant silks, tasseled scarves, bracelets, necklaces, and under all a shirt of that marvelously supple mesh-steel they manufacture down in the Dawn Lands of Havilfar.

The mazilla was a thing of wondrous beauty or downright irritation, depending on your point of view. Truth to tell, as it jutted up at the back of my head, gaudy with feathers and sensil and gold, it was both. Only the noblest may wear an aristo-sized mazilla. So, adding this to my calculated insult in the whole stupid finery I wore, my mazilla towered, flaunting, arrogant, insolent.

I stroked the luxurious brown beard and felt that, at the very least, it should upset more than a few of the best-born of Vallia.

Which seemed to me a delicious and highly desirable achievement.

Delia — well, Delia was simply superb.

Dressed in white, with discreet jewels, with feathers and sensils, she floated like a — well, I will say it and be damned to all and sundry — she floated like a goddess as we sallied out to take our place in the procession.

A long Vallian dagger with the hilt fashioned from rosy jewels swung from golden locketts at her side.

As for me, I belted on a veritable armory, well-knowing the frowns such wanton display would provoke. How Delia put up with my contempt for the nobles of Vallia escaped me.

Besides a rapier and dagger I belted on a clanxer, a djangir and a small double-bitted axe. Over my back and hidden by the crimson trimmed cloak and the feathers of the mazilla, went my Krozair longsword. I drew the line at a Lohvian longbow. After all, there are limits, and to push beyond them would have been counter-productive.

The procession was gorgeous and immense. Everyone was there. The nobles lined out in order of precedence and a splendid array they made. The whole sumptuous proceeding went off well. Due thanks were offered up at various temples for the safety of the emperor. He, the old devil, strode through it all with a face like a granite block, hard and yet haughty, lapping up the plaudits of the crowds, conscious of the looks and feelings of those who fawned on him, sorting them out in his shrewd old head, those for, those against, those who might be bought by gold.

The stinks of incense blew everywhere. Perfumes covered the smells that might have proved intrusive. The noise blossomed as the crowds huzzahed and screeched. It was all a terrible ordeal, yet an ordeal that had to be gone through so that Vondium might witness that the emperor was safe and in full health.

Those of my few friends among the nobility — like the Lord Farris — knew that on these occasions I was like a

graint with a thorn in his foot, and so they merely acknowledged my presence and smiled and went on with the business. As for my enemies, they ignored me, which suited me.

Kov Layco Jhansi, the emperor's chief minister, was there and looking mightily pleased with himself. High in favor, now, Layco Jhansi, after his valiant defense of the sacred person of the emperor. I nodded to him, and then turned away, and the proceedings ground on.

When they were over and I headed off at once for the palace to strip off the ridiculous outfit, Delia held me back.

A young man, slender, supple, his brown Vallian hair stylishly though decently cut, wearing ornate robes — as we all did — approached. His face looked freshly scrubbed, bright, cheerful, yet with an anxious dint between the eyebrows he manfully tried to conceal.

He wore the colors of gray, red and green, with a black bar, and his emblem was a leaping swordfish. By these I knew he was of Calimbrev. So this must be Barty Vessler, the Strom of Calimbrev.

He made a deep obeisance. Delia gripped my arm. She knows how I dislike this crawling and bowing; but we were still in public and were watched.

“Majestrix, Majister,” said Strom Barty.

“Strom, how nice to see you,” said Delia.

We stood on a marble platform with the crowds yelling below and the pillars and statues of the Temple of Lio am Donarb at our backs. Lio am Donarb, although a minor religious figure attracting a relatively

small following, was considered worthy of a visit of thanks. To one side a group of nobles prepared, like us, to take to their palanquins or zorca chariots to return to their villas set upon the Hills. Among all their blazing heraldry of color the black and white favors showed starkly, proud, defiant, arrogant.

I nodded at the group who watched us avidly.

“You do yourself no good with the Racters by talking to me, young Barty. But you are welcome.”

He looked up, quickly, taken aback. He must have heard what a crude clansman I was; he had not expected this. And I piled on the agony, despite Delia’s fierce grip.

“The black and whites would like to tear down the emperor and his family. And whatever I may feel about the emperor, he is my father-in-law. You would run a similar risk?”

The flush along his cheeks betrayed him; but he spoke up civilly enough — aye, and stoutly.

“I am prepared for much worse than that, prince. My concern is only for the princess Dayra.”

I did not say: “Well spoken, lad,” as I might have done in the old days.

He would have to perform deeds, and not just prate about them, if he aspired to the hand of my daughter.

When Delia invited him back to the palace I had no objection. On the journey — and we took a zorca chariot with Sarfi the Whip as coachman — Barty indulged in polite conversation, inquiring after all the members of the family. Drak must be in Valka still, for Delia had seen him there when she’d raced there to find

me. Her distress, which Deb-sa-Chiu had so graphically described, had been all for me. She had by now become a little used to my disappearances and was prepared to search across to Segesthes, aware that in the past she had found me against what must have seemed to her all odds. Barty inquired after Jaidur, and Delia told him that that young rip had decided to return to a place he knew well and where he would visit his brother Zeg. So Jaidur had gone back to the inner sea and a few casual questions elicited the unsurprising fact that Barty had heard of the place but that was about all.

Our youngest daughter, Velia, was well and thriving, looked after by Aunt Katri, who was also caring for little Didi, the daughter of Velia and Gafard. Lela, well, she was about her own life in Vallia. And Dayra. . . ?

“I have had some news, princess,” said Barty, hesitantly, as the zorca chariot rounded the corner past the Kyro of Spendthrifts.

Delia leaned forward. I frowned. Barty sat opposite us and he shifted about, nerving himself. At last he got it out.

“She was seen traveling through Thengelsax. A party left the Great River and hired zorcas. She was recognized by a groom who once served in the palace and had returned home to a posting station in the town.”

I held down the instant leap of anxiety — an anxiety akin to fear. The whole northeast of Vallia resented being a part of the empire, still, although their animosity was being fanned by agitators. They raided down, real border raids, and one of the towns around which

their activities had centered was Thengelsax. Its lord had complained bitterly. Was my Dayra mixed up with these border reivers?

That did not seem likely; but it was a possibility and I could not discount it, much though I would have liked to.

“Nothing else, Barty?”

“Nothing, prince. The troubles of the northeast are well known. The lords up there do not like us down here.”

“It is more likely,” said Delia, with calm firmness, as when she demanded one take a foul medicine, “far more likely that Dayra has gone up there with her — friends — to stir up trouble. It pains me to say that; but it is sooth.”

Barty threw her a reproachful look; but he knew enough of Dayra to understand the truth of the remark.

“Listen, Barty.” I paused and looked at him, whereat he grew red in the face and his eyes widened. It is odd how a simple calculating look from me will change a person’s appearance. Most odd. “I’ve had dealings with the Trylon of Thengelsax. He was there today, as squat and bluff and foul as ever. Ered Imlien — he nurses a grudge against me because I broke his riding crop. He had told me what you are telling me now — only he was less tactful.”

Delia was looking at me. Barty swallowed.

“If Dayra is mixed up with this Liberty for the North-east rot, then, all right, so be it. We will hoick her out of it and if I have to tan her bottom for her, that I will do.”

I took a breath and saw the streets passing, the wink of sunlight from a canal, the bunting and flowers and brilliant shawls. “Do you know I have never even seen my daughter Dayra?”

“You are being rather — hard — on her, prince.” Barty spoke slowly, softly; but he did not stammer and he came right out with it. I warmed to him.

“Of course I am. That is natural. It does not mean—”

I stopped speaking and threw my arms around Delia, hurling her to the floor between the seats.

“Get down, Barty!”

The long Lohvian arrow quivered in the lenken wood pillar where it had split the crimson curtains and severed a golden tasseled cord. The feathers were all shivering with the violence of the cast. Those feathers were dyed a deep and somber purple.

“Keep down! Sarfi the Whip!” I bellowed out at full lung-stretch. “Give the zorcas their heads! *Gallop!*”

The chariot lurched and bounced on the leather straps of the springing. The sharp, hard clitter-clatter of the zorcas’ polished hooves on the flags of the street beat into a staccato rhythm. With Delia safely on the floor and Barty off the opposite seat, I could peer up. People were leaping left and right as we careered along. Sarfi was wailing away with his whip, sharp cracking flecks of sound through the uproar. We hurtled past a shandishalah booth and the stink whipped past to be swallowed by the fishy smells from the next stall.

“Where the hell are you taking us, Sarfi?”

He didn't answer; but plied his whip. I looked back. A train of destruction lay wasted in our wake for Sarfi had belted the chariot left-handed off the main street and taken us hell for leather down a narrow souk. Overturned stalls, spilled amphorae, crates and boxes splintered and strewing their silver-glinting fish across the flags, torn awnings and smashed awning-posts, and people — people crawling away, people staggering about like Sanurkazzian drunks, people dancing with rage and shaking their fists after us.

The smells, the sounds, the colors were wonderfully zestful to a man who has just had an arrow past his ear.

Whoever had loosed at us had had no chance of a second shot — and then I checked my foolish thoughts. This was a Lohvian arrow. Before I'd yelled, before Sarfi had ever laid a single strand of his whip to the zorcas — a practice I abhor and will not tolerate — a Bowman of Loh could have loosed three shafts — Seg Segutorio could have loosed four and possibly five.

So the one arrow had been enough.

Delia said: "I will resume my seat now, and then we can look at the message."

Barty and I helped her up — a quite unnecessary act for she is as lithe as an earthy puma or a Kregan chavonth — and we pulled out the arrow and unrolled the scrap of paper wrapped around the shaft.

Sarfi slowed down. The uproar subsided and we turned right-handed into the Boulevard of Yellow Risslacas and so sat staring at the message written on the paper. The writing was in that beautiful flowing

Kregish script. A cultured hand had penned those lines. But the paper was ordinary Vallian paper, of good quality, yes — but it was not that superb and mysterious paper made by the Savanti nal Aphrasöe.

The message was addressed: “Dray Prescott, Prince Majister of Vallia, Hyr Kov of Veliadrin, Kov of Zamra, Strom of Valka.”

I give all this gaudy nonsense of titles because they at once afforded two clues to the identities of those who had had a bowman deliver the message.

One: the island of Veliadrin was called that and not Can-Thirda, which had been its name until Delia and I changed it in memory of our beloved daughter.

Two: only Vallian titles were listed. Not one of the razzmatazz of titles in the rest of Kregen I had acquired appeared.

The salutation read: “Llahal-pattu. Prince Majister.”

Llahal with the double L is the usual greeting for a stranger — the usual friendly greeting, that is — and when written the pattu is appended because Kregish grammatical and polite conventional usage demand it.

The message went on: “You, as the kitchew in a properly drawn-up and witnessed contract, the bokkertu being ably written and attested, are appraised of an irregularity. It is needful that you, Prince Majister, have an audience of Nath Trerhagen, the Aleygyn, Hyr Stikitche, Pallan of the Stikitche Khand of Vondium.”

“By Vox!” exploded Barty. “The nerve of the rast. I have heard of him. Nath the Knife. Quoting his spurious and stupid titles at us!”

“Stupid they may be, as most titles are,” I said mildly. “But spurious? I doubt it. Is he not the most renowned assassin in Vallia?”

A Pallan is a minister or secretary of state, and this assassin — a high and mighty assassin — was the chief man of his khand, or guild, brotherhood or caste. I guessed he had some fugitive lawyer drafting out this rhetoric for him.

I was to meet him at a tavern called The Ball and Chain (as I have said, Kregans have a warped sense of humor which can greatly infuriate those not attuned to its niceties) and this unsavory hostelry was situated a stone’s throw from the Gate of Skulls.

“The Gate of Skulls,” said Delia. “Well, you aren’t going there. That is inside Drak’s City.”

“I’ve never been there. It might prove instructive.”

“But, majister!” said Barty. “You can’t just go walking in on a bunch of rascally assassins just because they send an invitation! It—” He spluttered a little, his cheeks red. “It just isn’t done!”

Delia was looking at me with that look upon her face that gets right inside my craggy old skin, coiling in my thick vosk-skull of a head, itching me all along my limbs, making the blood pump around fast and faster. But she knew.

“I think, Barty . . . No — I know — that there is nothing you can say. The prince is going and that is all there is to it.”

That was not all, and well she knew it. If Delia said to me you are not going, I would not have gone. But, all

fooling aside, we both knew that there were weighty reasons for acceptance of the summons from the assassins. Had they wished to slay me the arrow would have driven straight.

“Well, prince,” said young Barty, and his fist gripped around the hilt of his rapier. “In that case, I shall go with you!”

So ho, I said to myself — maybe Dayra has found herself a man here. Well, the proof of that would not be long delayed.

## Four

### Knavery in Drak's City

There are many Naths on Kregen, partly because of the affection felt for the myth hero Nath, who bears to Kregen much the same kind of physical prowess as the terrestrial Hercules does to us here on Earth, and among that number are good men and rogues, heroes and cowards, ordinary folk and men with the charisma about them that transcends goodness and evil. Also, among the many Naths there are many called Nath the Knife.

This particular Nath the Knife bore a reputation at once unsavory and yet respected, a blemished fruit, feared, of course, and yet still remaining very much the man of mystery.

As, indeed, he must. No assassins are going to put on fancy uniforms with favors proclaiming their trade and go off about their business. The community into which one such came with the avowed intent of committing stealthy murder would get together to deal with him. If anyone of the community refused, then it would surely

be reasonable to suppose he had hired the damned stikitché in the first place. So, once that was established, the community could dispose of them both. I say reasonable. Of course, it might be the case that the community would not be sensible, or be frightened, or for some reason or another not collaborate. But that would scarcely happen on Kregen, where folk are hardier than most despite the weaker ones and the revolting aspects of slavery and all that that entails, no matter what pundits speculate may occur on other less-favored planets.

In the event I managed to persuade Barty to remain at the Gate of Skulls. I put it to him that he was on watch. He fingered his rapier and shuffled restlessly. We were both dressed roughly, with old brown blanket-coats, our weapons hidden. Around us swirled the never-ending stream of humanity going and coming, busy, screeching, quarreling, thieving, living.

“But I said—”

“And I thank you for it, Barty. But I truly think I will fare better on my own.”

As you can see, I was very tender with this young man.

“Well. . .”

“So that is settled. You stay here and keep watch.” With that I marched off through the bedlam at the gate without risking another word. For — what was he watching for?

If I did not reappear within a few burs what could he do? The soldiers and mercenaries would eventually venture into the Old City; but they would do so by

mounting a proper battle-group. It was not that they were over-hated by the denizens of Drak's City or that they, in their turn, ever created wanton destruction. It was just that the law of Vondium did not run within the Old City and people preferred to let that lie, and not to disturb the sleeping leem.

The fly in this ointment was that Barty might take it into his head to go in after me if I did not return after a seemly interval.

The bedlam assumed a more bedlamish proportion within the Old City. People still jostled and pushed and shoved, yelling their wares, trying to thieve from the stalls and booths, trying to buy or sell at a profit. The stinks increased. People lived here jammed together. The ancient buildings tottered. Lath and plaster and moldering brick were far more in evidence than honest stone. The noise, the shoving, the stinks, all blended, as they so often do, into a picture that — seen and heard and smelled at a distance — presented a scene of great romantic attraction. This, one would think, was how a glittering barbaric city would carry on, heedless, drinking, wenching, laughing, uncaring, filled with cutpurses and daring cat-burglars and fences and shrill-voiced women and avaricious thief-takers on the prowl and grimy naked-limbed urchins learning all the tricks to take over when their elders went a-sailing down to the Ice Floes of Sicce.

Pushing through the throngs along the Kyro of Lost Souls, which extends within the Gate of Skulls, I kept

myself out of mischief and out of trouble and headed for the tavern called The Ball and Chain.

If you wish to call the place a Thieves' Kitchen, I shall not prevent that description.

A straggle of ponshos wandered about, bunching, baaing, getting in everyone's way. Their fleeces were white. It is a fact that Vallians are a cleanly people, and even here in this run-down, brawling, odoriferous stewpot of a wen, and despite the spilled cabbages and rotting fruits and discarded skins, the place and people were surprisingly clean. There are towns on Kregen where even the aristocracy are clean, as there are towns where everyone is filthy. But Vallians take a pride in themselves and their country.

The Ball and Chain looked as though if the loafers moved away from the pillars of the front porch the whole lot would tumble down onto the heads of the throngs in the street.

I stopped under the awning of a man selling second-hand sandals and fingered a pair of curly-toed foofray slippers. They must have been stolen from some luxury-loving lord. The proprietor eyed me and prepared to sidle up to extol his wares. So, looking at the tavern, I became aware of two things.

A thin and incredibly dexterous hand was fingering delicately along my belt seeking the strings of the leather purse. And Barty heaved up, red faced, panting, shoving through, opening his mouth to yell over the hubbub. First things first.

I took the thin and sinewy hand in my fist and pulled. An urchin flew out before me, swinging around the elbow socket, starting to yell, rags and tatters of clothes fluttering. It was a young girl, scrawny, with a mass of brown hair, with grimy streaks down her cheeks. I eyed her with some severity.

“Diproo the Nimble-Fingered abandoned you, it seems, shishi.”

“Let me go! Let me go!”

“Oh, aye. I’ll let you go. And I will not even box your ears.”

“Get away! Get away you hulu!” screeched the owner of the sandal stall.

I felt the second hand stealing around the leather purse strings, and I stepped back, dragging the girl, and took the lad — who was probably her younger brother — with my other hand.

I surveyed the pair of them, and shook my head. Products of a city, living by thieving of any description, free and not slave, well — what were their futures to be? What the futures of a thousand or more like them in the Old City? A thousand — there must be thousand upon thousand of half-naked urchins like this running wild in Drak’s City.

“Let us go,” panted the girl, her brown hair falling across her thin face. She’d be about twelve or thirteen. “We’ll be thrashed.”

The lad tried to kick my shins.

Then Barty arrived, almost losing his brown blanket which he was totally unaccustomed to wearing. He wanted to hand over the cutpurses to the authorities.

“The only authorities in Drak’s City are the people who employ the fellow who employs these two,” I told him.

He was a Vallian and so would know that; but it was not a fact easily digestible. The Laws of Hamal are notorious. The law runs differently, more quietly, in Vallia. Here in the Old City of Vondium the law ran as a mere trickle, the greater torrent passing outside the walls.

I managed to get the girl’s raggedy collar jammed up under her ear, and with the lad picked up and stuffed under my other arm I had a hand free. I pulled out a silver sinver. Awkwardly, for the little devil was kicking and squawking — and no one was taking the blind bit of notice of all this — I gave the sinver to the girl. I released the collar of her tunic and let her go. I looked steadily into her face. She did not run away. Then I dumped the lad on his feet, and gave him another sinver. The two coins, here, were like spitting twice into the middle of a vast and burning desert — but it seemed to me there was little else in truth to be done. I had once fought a duel over seven copper obs.

“Now be off with you, you scamps, and next time Diproo may smile upon you.”

The girl looked back at me. Her brown Vallian hair, her brown Vallian eyes — her gauntness could not conceal the beauty she would one day become.

“I give you thanks, dom. And would you be telling your name to any who inquire?”

“I am Jak Jakhan. It is not important.”

Barty, wheezing alongside me, tried not to think. He eased closer and whispered. “Should we not ask them about The Ball and Chain — about Nath the Knife? They could give us useful information.”

As I say, Barty was trying to think.

“I think not.” I glared with great sorrow on the girl and her brother, doomed urchins of Drak’s City. The silver had vanished from sight somewhere inside their raggedy clothes. “Be off. Get a decent meal. And may Opaz shine upon you.”

The girl said: “My name is Ashti and my brother is Naghan and — and we give thanks. May Corg bring you fair winds.”

They ran off and in a twinkling were lost among the crowds past the ponsho flock.

Barty was a Strom, which is, I suppose, as near an earthly count as anything, and a noble and he felt like a stranded whale in these rumbustious surroundings. He gawked about at the spectacle and kept his right hand down inside his blanket coat. That particular gesture was so common as to be unremarked.

“Come on,” I said. “You can’t just stand around here. Half the urchins will be queuing up for their silver sinvers and the other half of the varmints will be out to pinch the lot.”

We kept to the wall and walked along toward the tavern. Once we left the Kyro of Lost Souls the press became less thick. What to do about Barty puzzled me.

He said: "I wanted to ask what I was supposed to keep watch for, prince—"

"Jak Jakhan."

"What?"

I did not laugh. "You have not done this sort of thing before? Not even when you succeeded to your father's stromnate?"

"No, pri — Oh. No, Jak."

"It is sometimes necessary. It amuses me. At the least, it is vastly different from those popinjays at court."

"I do not believe there is any need to remind me of that."

A sway-backed cart stood outside the tavern. Cages of ducks were being unloaded. The racket squawked away and there was no need to inquire what the specialty of the house was going to be this day.

"Look," I said. "Do go into that tavern across the way and buy yourself some good ale and sit in a window seat. And, for the sweet sake of Opaz, don't get into trouble. Keep yourself to yourself. And if you are invited to dice — remember you will lose everything you stake."

"Everything?"

"They can make dice sit up and beg here, that's certain."

"You said you had never been into Drak's City before."

“No more I have. But these places have a character. There are many in the countries of Paz.”

The tavern across the way was called The Yellow Rose. Barty took a hitch to his length of rope that held in his blanket coat and started across. He was almost run down by a Quoffa cart which lumbered along, lurching from side to side, scattering chickens every which way. A thin and pimply youth had a go at his purse as he reached the tavern porch but he must have felt the feather-touch, for he swung about, shouting, and pimple-face ran off. I let out a breath. I should never have brought him. But — he was here. I put that old imbecilic look on my face, hunched over, let my body sag, and so went into The Ball and Chain.

There is a keen and, I suppose, a vindictive delight in me whenever I adopt that particular disguise. I can make myself look a right stupid cretin. There are those who say the task is not too difficult. With the old brown blanket coat clutched about me, the frayed rope threatening to burst at any moment, I shuffled across the sawdusted floor.

The room was low-ceiled, not over-filled with patrons as yet. Tables and benches stood about. A balcony ran around two sides, the doors opening off at regular intervals to the back premises. A few slave girls moved about replenishing the ale tankards. It was too early for wine. I sat near the door, with my back to the wall, and contrived to hitch myself about so the longsword at my side did not make itself too obtrusive.

Outside in the street rain started to drift down, a fine drizzle that quickly spread a shining patina across everything.

A girl brought across a jug of ale and filled a tankard for me. I gave her a copper ob. I stretched my feet out and prepared to relax and then jerked my boots back quickly. They were first-quality leather boots and someone would have them off me sharply, with or without my consent, if I advertised them so blatantly. I was a stranger. Therefore I was ripe game. I fretted about Barty. I should have run him back to the Gate of Skulls first.

This Nath the Knife, the chief assassin, had arranged to meet me here, so close to the walls of the Old City, clearly as a gesture of trust. His bolt-holes would all be deeper in Drak's City. He ventured within a stone's throw of the walls and this gate so as to show me he meant to talk. That, I understood. If they were going to try to assassinate me, they would not have requested this meeting.

My plan, a usual one in the circumstances, misfired.

Before I could get into conversation and so ease my way in and then seek a back entrance to the upper floor, the serving wench pattered across. Already, this early in the day, she looked tired.

"Koter Laygon the Strigicaw is waiting for you upstairs, master." She looked nervous. "The third door."

My imbecilic expression altered. I had put on a medium-sized beard. Now I stroked it and looked at her owlshly.

“Koter Laygon is waiting, master.”

“Then he can wait until I have finished the tankard.”

“He is — he will have your skin off, master—”

“You are sure it is me he is waiting for?”

“Oh, yes. He was sure.”

“Who is he? What is he like? Tell me about him?”

I started to pull out a silver sinver. Her face went white. She drew back, trembling, terrified.

“No, no, master! No money! They are watching — they know what you are asking—”

She backed off, her hands wide, and then she ran away, her naked feet making soft shushing sounds on the sawdust. I glanced up under my eyebrows at the balcony. Up there any one of a hundred knot holes could hold a spying eyeball.

I shifted on the settle against the wall. A tiny sound, no more than the furtive sounds a woflo makes scratching in the wainscoting, made me look down.

A small slot had opened in the wall. A pair of scissors on extending tongs probed from the slot. They moved gently sideways toward me. Had I not moved, the fellow operating the tongs would have snipped away to get at my purse. As I had now vanished from his gaze the tongs drew back, the scissors vanished and the slot closed. I waited, intrigued.

Presently another slot opened close to me. The scissors probed out again, silently, ready to snip most patiently.

I picked up the half-full ale tankard.

No doubt the cramp had a whole array of tools he could fix to the tongs. A curved knife would slice away leather clothing. With all the noise of the taproom that usually created such a massive sound barrier, he could probably even use a drill to get through armor, and not be heard.

With a smooth motion I swiveled and slung the ale clean through the slot.

A splash, a yell of surprise, a series of choked squishing gulplings gave me a more general feeling of well-being. Petty — of course. But it was all a part of the rich tapestry of life — or, as this was Kregen, of death.

I bent to the slot and said in that fierce old biting way: “Thank Opaz it was only ale and not a length of steel.”

With that I stood up, hitched the blanket coat around me, and stalked off to the blackwood stairway.

Over my left shoulder I had arranged snugly a quiver of six terchicks. The terchick, the little throwing knife of the clansmen, is often called the Deldar, and a clansman can hurl them right or left-handed from the back of a galloping zorca and hit the chunkrah’s eye. Of course, the women of the Great Plains of Segesthes use the terchick with unsurpassed skill.

The drinkers in the area below watched with some curiosity as I climbed up. This Ball and Chain might be situated close to the walls of the Old City and the Gate of Skulls; I fancied the Aleygyn of the Stikitches, Nath Trerhagen, had packed the place with his men. Deep rivalries no doubt split the people of Drak’s City, as they do in most places, unfortunately, and Nath the Knife

would have chosen the meeting place carefully. I went up and I was ready to leap aside, to draw and to go into action, or to fashion a smile and a Llahal and listen.

The third door opened onto a narrow corridor that led via a rain-swept open walkway to the next-door building.

I had not envisioned this.

Barty could watch The Ball and Chain to no avail.

I pressed on. I remained firmly convinced that the stikitches did not mean to kill me. All this rigmarole would not then have been necessary — I had dealt with assassins before.

Two men in tatty finery met me at the far door and I was able to duck in out of the rain. They wore three purple feathers, all curved the same way, ostentatiously pinned to the breasts of their tunics. They carried their rapiers loose in the scabbards. Their faces, dark and lowering, with strips of dark chin beard, were entirely unprepossessing; but they greeted me cheerfully enough, evidently assigned merely as guides.

“Laygon the Strigicaw?” I said.

“He is waiting, dom. This way.”

We went into the building and along dusty and unused passages to the far side. We descended a flight of stairs. The slope of the land here meant we were still one story above the street; but all the windows were covered with torn sacking.

Mineral oil lamps illuminated the dusty, half-wrecked room into which I was ushered. Houses were often left

to fall down in the Old City, or knocked down. Rebuilding was on an entirely casual basis.

The air smelled musty. Dust hung in the beams of the lamps.

A table had been pulled across a corner and a tall-backed chair positioned before it. At the table sat three men and one woman. All wore steel masks. Their clothes were unremarkable, save for the badge of the three purple feathers.

My two guides indicated the chair and I sat down.

For a moment a silence ensued.

Then the woman said: "Llahal, Dray Prescott."

I said: "I do not like stikitches. You have asked me here. I am to meet Nath the Knife. Is he here, hiding behind a mask?"

The man on the extreme left said in a voice like breaking iron: "I am here. But you will talk with Laygon the Strigicaw."

"Which one is he?"

The man on the right said: "Here." His voice sounded mellow, full of the rotundity of roast beef and old crusty port.

"Well, Laygon, speak up."

"You are the Prince Majister of Vallia. The writ of Vondium and Vallia does not run in Drak's City."

"I have never cared much for laws that cannot be enforced. Spit out what you want. I am due at the Temple of Opaz the Nantifer two burs after midday."

"We do not much go in for temples, here in the Old City," said the woman. Her voice gasped just a little, as

though she had difficulty in breathing. Maybe it was just the stale air. “And you had best keep a seemly tongue in your mouth—”

“Tell me what you want, now, and stop this shilly-shallying.”

Nath the Knife nodded his head, and the steel mask caught the lamplight. All the masks were perfectly plain, and covered the whole face. I looked at the other parts of the bodies of these four, studying their hands, the way they held themselves, the angles of their heads.

“Tell him, Koter Laygon.”

“The position is, Dray Prescott, the bokkertu has been signed and sealed upon you. You are accredited a dead man and due for the Ice Floes of Sicce.”

“I think twelve of you tried, and there were twelve holes in the canal. I, too, can write a fine bokkertu.” The word bokkertu, as you know, can mean any number of legal arrangements.

Laygon plunged on, and if he grew warm, I, for one, felt pleasure.

“I have taken out the assignment upon you. You are my kitchew. But—” He paused.

The chill menace of the situation was inescapable.

These men were assassins, dangerous, feral as leems. They would unhesitatingly kill — but they liked to get paid for their work.

Now Layton the Strigicaw said heavily: “Half the money was paid to me. So far I have not completed the assignment.” He paused again, as though expecting me to comment. Again I remained silent. “The irregularity

is that the person hiring us is dead. We will not be paid the balance of our fee.”

I shifted back in my chair and leaned to the side a little, so I could get the exact position of the two guides fixed.

“That is nothing to me. Stikitches can be killed like anyone else.”

He went on, and again I detected the note of suppressed anger. “The Aleygyn is not pleased with the situation. The Stikitches of Vondium possess the highest possible reputation. Our honor is in question.”

“I will not ask you with whom this precious reputation is held in such great esteem.” I waved a casual hand. “Probably the rasts of the dunghills.”

They did not react. I give them credit for that, at least.

“You are a dead man, Prince Majister—”

I interrupted. “Ashti Melekhi is dead. Would you work for nothing?”

Nath the Knife, clearly a most important man here, letting Laygon do the talking because it was Laygon who had taken the contract but prepared to step in with all his authority, said harshly, bending the mask toward me: “We do not mention names.”

“You may not. But the fact remains. You are working for nothing.”

“Precisely. The offer is this: Pay us the balance of the fee and the contract is then closed. If you do not pay, we shall fulfill it ourselves.”

The instant intemperate indignation that flooded me had to be squashed. I took a breath. I said: “You have not mentioned the amount.”

“Ten thousand gold talens.”

I didn’t know whether to be impressed by the value put on my life or insulted.

“My life is worth more than ten thousand.”

“We abide by the legal contract. Pay us five thousand in gold and the contract is fulfilled and you live. Otherwise—”

I shifted on the chair again. It seemed to have a spongy feel to the legs, as though it was not firmly anchored to the floor. Probably it was a trick chair, with a trapdoor below. I’d have to be quick.

“I am not in the habit of paying gold to crampths to save my life.”

“You can always start.”

This Nath the Knife was an intriguing fellow. He spoke evenly enough. He took no offense from my crude remarks. He wanted his money, or he would kill me.

“When do I pay?”

“At once.”

“I am due at the Temple of Opaz the Nantifer, as I told you—”

“Then immediately your kow-towing is done.”

With genuine curiosity, I said: “It is clear you know who I am, for your bowman delivered the message correctly. Yet I think perhaps you do not know me.”

This trembled on the brink of boasting; but I am who I am, Zair forgive me, and I was intrigued.

“We know your reputation is very high in certain quarters,” said the woman. She leaned forward and I caught the lamplight’s sparkle from her eyes in the eye-slots of the mask. “But we have certain information that this great reputation is a sham, a bolstered creation because you are the Prince Majister. Of course, the most puissant prince of Vallia must be a great warrior, a High Jikai, for anything less would demean the empire.”

“It’s a theory,” I said.

“So you will pay five thousand gold talens and you may live. It is settled.”

I pondered. It seemed clear they believed the story. They would never have taken out the contract to kill me if they did not. I have amassed a certain unsavory reputation, as you know, and there were places on Kregen where no one — not even a raving idiot — would even contemplate trying to kill me. But, here in Vondium, the capital of the Vallian Empire, I was not in one of those places.

The four people at the table believed this business was settled. They began to stir, ready to take their leave. The two guides shuffled their feet and stepped back. I put my feet under me, ready for the leap, and looked across the table.

“Settled? Why, you onkers, I wouldn’t pay you a single clipped toc!”

The four figures stiffened as though I’d jammed a polearm up each one of them. These four formed the High Council of the Assassins of Vondium. Their powers

were frighteningly great. For that single betraying heartbeat they could not believe they had heard aright.

The woman let out a gasp and leaned forward on her forearm and her hand splayed against me. Jewels flashed. Nath the Knife put a hand to her hand, and restrained her. Laygon the Strigicaw started to curse, his hand reaching to his belt. The fourth man, who had not spoken, yet remained silent.

It struck me then that these assassins couldn't see the funny side of all this. They didn't think it was funny. To me, Dray Prescot, Lord of Strombor and Krozair of Zy, it was hilarious.

What my ferocious Djangs would say of it — their King of Djanduin solemnly being asked to pay someone for being kind enough not to kill him! They would bellow their mirth!

In the instant of the ensuing silence, when everyone in the musty room remained fixed, static, enwrapped with their own personal turmoil of emotions, the heavy beating of rain pelted against the closed windows.

The mineral oil lamps nickered.

Then, and only then, speaking in that iron voice, Nath the Knife said: "You will pay. You will pay — or you are dead."

"Not," I said, "a single clipped toc."

As the instant action followed I commented to myself that my rhetoric was entirely false. A toc is a tiny coin, one sixth of an ob, and who was going to bother to clip that?

Then the chair groaned and grated and flapped back into a black and cavernous hole and I spring-heeled up and onto the floor, and naked steel flashed in the lamplights.

This, then, was more like it. . .

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.  
If you would like to find out what happens next, you  
can buy the complete Mushroom eBook edition from  
the usual online bookshops or through  
[www.mushroom-ebooks.com](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com).**

**For more information about Mushroom  
Publishing, please visit us at  
[www.mushroompublishing.com](http://www.mushroompublishing.com).**

## 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](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com), and at [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org).

# The Dray Prescott Series

## **The Delian Cycle:**

1. Transit to Scorpio
2. The Suns of Scorpio
3. Warrior of Scorpio
4. Swordships of Scorpio
5. Prince of Scorpio

## **Havilfar Cycle:**

6. Manhounds of Antares
7. Arena of Antares
8. Fliers of Antares
9. Bladesman of Antares
10. Avenger of Antares
11. Armada of Antares

## **The Krozair Cycle:**

12. The Tides of Kregen
13. Renegade of Kregen
14. Krozair of Kregen

**Vallian cycle:**

15. Secret Scorpio
16. Savage Scorpio
17. Captive Scorpio
18. Golden Scorpio

**Jikaida cycle:**

19. A Life for Kregen
20. A Sword for Kregen
21. A Fortune for Kregen
22. A Victory for Kregen

**Spikatur cycle:**

23. Beasts of Antares
24. Rebel of Antares
25. Legions of Antares
26. Allies of Antares

**Pandahem cycle:**

27. Mazes of Scorpio
28. Delia of Vallia
29. Fires of Scorpio
30. Talons of Scorpio
31. Masks of Scorpio
32. Seg the Bowman

**Witch War cycle:**

33. Werewolves of Kregen
34. Witches of Kregen

35. Storm over Vallia
36. Omens of Kregen
37. Warlord of Antares

**Lohvian cycle:**

38. Scorpio Reborn
39. Scorpio Assassin
40. Scorpio Invasion
41. Scorpio Ablaze
42. Scorpio Drums
43. Scorpio Triumph

**Balintol cycle:**

44. Intrigue of Antares
45. Gangs of Antares
46. Demons of Antares
47. Scourge of Antares
48. Challenge of Antares
49. Wrath of Antares
50. Shadows over Kregen

**Phantom cycle:**

51. Murder on Kregen
52. Turmoil on Kregen