

DRAY PRESCOT: 6

**MANHOUNDS
OF ANTARES**

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writing as

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A Mushroom eBook

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Dray Prescott #6

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A NOTE ON THE HAVILFAR CYCLE

With this volume of his Saga, Dray Prescott is launched headlong into a brand-new series of adventures upon the planet of Kregen, that marvelous and beautiful, mystical and terrible world four hundred light-years away beneath the Suns of Scorpio.

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

Through the machinations of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, mortal but superhuman men dedicated to the aid of humanity, and of the Star Lords, he has been taken to Kregen many times. In his early years he rose to become Zorcander among the Clansmen of Segesthes, and Lord of Strombor in Zenicce, and then a member of

the mystic and martial Order of Krozairs of Zy. Against all odds Prescott won his way to the attainment of his single highest desire upon Kregen and in that immortal battle at The Dragon's Bones he claimed his Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains, as his own. And — Delia claimed him, in the face of her father, the dread Emperor of the Empire of Vallia, and before the rolling thunder of Prescott's men and comrades in the acclamations of Hai Jikai.

As Prince Majister, Prescott sailed aboard the Emperor's airboat back to Vondium, capital of Vallia, and his eyes and imagination were filled with the glories to come, for he has no need to tell us that he felt all his dreams had come true. Under his old scarlet and yellow flag, standing proudly at his side, with him sailed Delia, Princess Majestrix.

Thus ends "The Delian Cycle." This volume, *Manhounds of Antares*, opens "The Havilfar Cycle," and, as you will discover in the following pages, a new life does open for Dray Prescott on Kregen beneath the Suns of Scorpio; but that new life is cruelly different from all he expected and dreamed, hurling him into fresh adventure and danger among peoples and places far removed from those he knows and loves.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter One

Delia

Delia and I were married.

Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains, Princess Majestrix of Vallia, and I, Dray Prescott, were married.

If that sounds to you like the end of the story, then you are as deceived as I was. Many and many foolish young lovers have imagined, on Kregen no less than on Earth, that in the merry ringing of wedding bells lies the happy end of their adventures.

Oh, I knew the shadowy presence of the Star Lords might again manifest itself in the scarlet and golden shape of a mighty raptor, the Gdoinye, or the Savanti might decide out of their mortal but superhuman wisdom to make use of my services again.

But that was of the future, the might-be. Who reckons of the future when he is in love and newly wedded and all of Kregen glows and beckons before him?

But, just before we could be married, there was one other item of unfinished business. All the way back to

the capital I felt strongly that I was moving into a new era of my life. That this was so, although not in the way I expected, you shall hear.

After we had returned from that immortal battle at The Dragon's Bones and life took its new turn, I felt I might be able to relax. The idea that Dray Prescott could ever relax may strike you as strange. But sometimes I can, and occasionally I have been able to throw off the cares of the world for a short time and follow my own inclinations. My relationship with the Emperor would remain on a strange footing, and I know that for all his own intemperate hauteur and pride, he feared me a little, even with armed men of his own choosing about him.

We flew down to land in the square before the Emperor's palace. So impatient had he been to return that he had driven his airboat ahead of those following. I jumped down onto the hot stones of the square and looked about, surprised at the absence of people where normally one could see chattering citizens, Koters about their business, strings of calsanys, zorca chariots with their tall wheels flickering, all the brilliant hurly-burly of everyday life in Vondium.

A group of men rushed from the open gateways leading into the outer palace courtyards.

They wore garish green and purple rosettes pinned to their buff leather tunics, and flaunting green and purple feathers in their wide-brimmed Vallian hats.

With a curse I ripped out my rapier and dagger and thrust myself forward to stand before Delia.

She pushed me aside in the shoulder, and stepped up to stand boldly alongside me.

“Third party!” she said. “So there are more of them.”

“Aye, my love,” I said. “And you get back aboard the flier and take off — you and your father.”

“If you think just because we are to be married I will meekly take orders from you, Dray Prescot, you hairy great graint, and fly away and leave you in peril—”

“Delia!”

“Come away, daughter! Let the warriors fight—”

“Yes, my father. Here is one warrior who will never run away, and I will never run from his side.”

Well, that is my Delia. I had no time to argue with her. The men of the third party who had in secret infiltrated the other political parties of Vallia and sought to overthrow the Emperor rushed down upon me.

With a breath-wasting shout — for I wished to draw all their attention to me — I leaped forward, brandishing my weapons. You who have listened to my story this far will know I ordinarily never shout in action, and as for brandishing weapons, that is a waste of energy. But as I ran headlong at these oncoming killers I knew I must meet them and keep them in play well away from Delia until the remainder of our fliers arrived bringing with them my men of Felschraung and Longuelm, of Strombor, and Delia’s Blue Mountain Boys.

Footsteps and the rasp of weapons at my back told me the handful of men aboard our flier had run to join me.

That made the odds a little better, but it was still something like a hundred to twenty.

That we should be thus caught up in this petty struggle right at the end! We had been victorious and had crushed the third-party conspiracy and now Naghan Furtway, Kov of Falinur, and his nephew Jenbar, who had aspired to Delia's hand, had fled the country. And now this! Truly, I cursed at the stupid and senseless danger my Delia had run into here in the great square outside her own palace.

In a screech of blades the two parties met.

I fought. I had been fighting on and off for many burs past. I had been wounded — slightly, it is true — and now despite all those years of Earthly sailor training, the years with my clansmen of the plains, and as a swifter captain on the Eye of the World, I felt that I was tired.

But while hostile men sought to slay Delia, tiredness in my rapier arm and fatigue in my dagger arm and rubbery feebleness in my legs were sins, all sins, mortal sins!

So I fought and my rapier slashed down faces, and spitted guts, and my main-gauche weaved its silver net of protection, and I held the front cluster of whooping men racing in for the kill. The crew from the airboat joined in, and, for a space, we halted that fierce onward surge.

But I knew we could not hold out very much longer.

These men attacking us with their flaunting green and purple third-party colors wore in banded rings about their sleeves the colors of yellow and blue.

Now blue is a most unusual color to be found in insignia in Vallia, for blue is the color of the nations of Pandahem, and between Pandahem and Vallia lay an old enmity.

But I knew these colors of blue and yellow belonged to a certain Kov of Zamra, one Ortyg Larghos, a relative of Nath Larghos, who had tried to suborn me into the ranks of the third party, and whose eye I had put out with a stone, and who had now, presumably, run overseas with his accomplices.

I could see Ortyg Larghos leaping about at the rear of his men, urging them on. He was a fat paunchy man, with a saturnine face in which all the healthy brown hair had fallen away to leave a greasy ring of fuzz around his head and a face as smooth as a loloo's egg.

There was no opportunity for me to bring my great Lohvian longbow into action, which was a pity, for I fancied if I feathered the rast his men might run away. As it was, they looked to be a bunch of mercenary desperadoes, fighting for money. Among them there were Rapas and Ochs, a Brokelsh, even a Womox, but I saw no Chuliks. From this I took heart. It is notorious that the Chuliks, regarding themselves as the most expensive of mercenaries, are choosy as to their employers.

"Hai!" I yelled, and pressed, and nicked crimson drops from my rapier across the faces of a bunch that

sought to rush me together. They blinked as the blood splashed them, and in that blinking I spitted them, one, two, three, and the fourth took my dagger through his heart.

A screaming lifted at my back.

Letting the Kov of Zamra go hang I swung about, jumping agilely the while in a frantic zigzag, and stared back at the flier.

A group had brushed past the Emperor's bodyguards, those few men who had descended with us on the bloody ropes from the shattered tower in the circle of The Dragon's Bones, and were carrying him off. I could not see Delia. My heart thumped so that I had to fight for breath.

Not now! Not so close to the end!

The way back lay over spilled blood and cumbering bodies.

At the flier I saw Delia.

She stood with a sword in her hand, a Rapa at her feet coughing his guts out, with his beaked bird's head all twisted askew. She waved the sword at me.

"My father! Dray — they've taken my father!"

"Stay here, Delia!" I yelled it at her with a force that drove her back as she started to run with me. "Go back!" Now I could see, slanting down into the square, the welcome sight of fliers planing in. "Here come Seg and Inch! Get them, my heart, for the sake of your father!"

She knew exactly what I meant.

I did not mean that she would run to the fliers and fetch Seg and Inch and Hap Loder and Varden and

Vomanus for the sake of her father the Emperor at all. I meant that she should run there for my sake, for our sakes.

She would have none of it.

I couldn't stop.

The descending fliers had been spotted by the men of Kov Ortyg of Zamra, and they yelled in fear, and scattered, and ran. The group with the Emperor hared off away from the palace, and running with them, angling in from the side, ran Ortyg Larghos himself.

I ran.

That faintness overpowering me must not be allowed to interfere now. I loved Delia and Delia loved me, but if her father died now and my aid proved ineffectual there would be a shadow between us, a shadow never mentioned, never alluded to, but a shadow nevertheless.

The hot stones of the square burned up at me.

I caught them easily enough, for the Emperor was struggling. He was still a powerful man, and well-fed, and filled with the innate majesty of his position, so that he gave them some trouble. I truly believe that this manhandling with its attendant physical exercise changed something about that man, that dread Emperor, the father of Delia. He had never been handled so for years. So that when I caught them and laid about me, he could snatch up a sword and stand at my side.

He was no great shakes as a swordsman, and I had my work cut out to guard him as well as myself, but he kept pressing on, shouting fiercely, through his teeth: "Vallia! Vallia! By the Invisible Twins!" and, when a

deflected lunge from me toppled a hapless wight into his path and he could slash down, he yelled: "Opaz the all-glorious! Vallia! Vallia! Drak of Vallia!"

Kov Larghos shrieked at his men.

'Take him, you fools! Cut down the barbarian! Take the Emperor!"

I could understand what Kov Larghos must be thinking. He had been a party to the plots hatched by his relative, Nath Larghos, the Trylon of the Black Mountains, and I guessed Naghan Furtway had promised him the position of Pallan of Vondium itself. Now, with no knowledge of the utter defeat of the third party, he sought to capture the Emperor and use him as a bargaining counter.

"Keep behind me, Majister," I said. "I'll spit you by mistake if you insist on skipping out ahead of me."

I did not speak overpolitely to this emperor.

"This is warm work, Dray Prescot—" He slashed at an Och and the little four-armed halfling interposed his shield and the rapier bounced and clanged. The Och thrust with his lower right arm wielding a spear and I had to skip and slice and jump to avoid the sweep of the sword in his upper right. But he went down, screeching.

"By the Black Chunkrah!" I said. "Emperor, get back or I'll drag you back by your hair!"

"By Vox!" he yelped, swishing his sword about. "I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years!"

He had no idea of the number of times he ought to have been killed. Left to his own devices he would have rolled on the stones of the square with a half dozen

rapier thrusts in his belly or his head hanging off by gristle. I beat down a fresh attack and reached out my left hand, thrust the dagger all bloody as it was between my teeth, and took a good grip of the Emperor's hair.

I yanked.

He yelled, as much in pain and injured dignity as fear, and toppled back, whereat I pushed myself in front of him, took the dagger back into my left hand, smashed away a fresh developing attack, and so flung forward with my rapier nickering in and out, very evilly, like the tongues of risslaca.

The Emperor was growing annoyed,

“Just like all my Pallans, Dray Prescott!” he shouted at my back. “Denying me any fun in life.”

I had time to yell back, most savagely: “If you think fighting and killing is fun, then you're still a child!”

Ortyg Larghos, Kov of Zamra, had not given up.

He made a last and as he thought final effort to take the Emperor. A solid wedge of his remaining men hurled themselves upon me. I had to use all my skill with the Jiktar and the Hikdar to fend them off. Two Rapas there were, very fierce, with their predatory beaked faces leering down upon me, who hurled themselves forefront of the others. They were not to be dismissed and spitted as easily as those who were coughing their guts out on the dusty stones around the fight.

While engaged with them I saw the Emperor, with his rapier up and out in a most ungainly stance, run at the bunch of men from the side. His face looked then —

and Zair forgive me if I felt a tiny spark of joy — very much as my Delia’s looked when she stood by me, shoulder to shoulder, against ravening foemen.

Larghos saw his chance. His final chance.

“Take him!” he screeched.

Green and purple feathers bobbed above the Emperor. Yellow and blue arms reached out for him.

I yelled.

The Rapas before me whickered their rapiers about in most professional passes, making me use skill and strength on them, and I could feel my strength slowly seeping away.

Ortyg Larghos was jubilant.

“Stick him, Rapas!” he was yelling.

I fended a thrust on my main-gauche, essayed a pass, took the other rapier rather too low and so had to give and bend to let the blade hiss past my side. I brought my wrist around for the next pass and a steel-tipped clothyard shaft sprouted clear through the Rapa’s long roosterish neck. His companion had no time to make a sound as a second arrow feathered itself through his own scrawny neck.

Without turning around I shouted and I leaped for the men surrounding the Emperor.

I shouted just one word: “*Seg!*”

And then followed as marvelous an exhibition of shooting as any man can ever have performed and any man can have had the privilege of witnessing. For as I fought those remaining third-party men in their green and purple, slicing them, spitting them, so Seg shot out

anyone who sought to close with me. His arrows sped silently above my shoulders and feathered themselves into the breasts of the men facing me. They could not stand against this whispering death, and they turned, and ran, and they were all dead men, for now the shorter arrows from my clansmen's bows fell among them.

Ortyg Larghos, Kov of Zamra, staggered across the stones of the square to fall at his Emperor's feet. His chest and back sprouted the steel heads and the bright feathers of many arrows.

"You pulled my hair, Dray Prescott."

"Aye," I said viciously. "And I'll pull it again if you rush upon naked steel like that again!"

He lowered his strong square face upon me. "I am the Emperor," he said, but he was not boasting, he was not trying to overawe me. Come to that, he had crawled out of the thicket of dinosaur bones to face my victorious men, and so he could never really boast of being emperor in quite the same way again. He was trying to explain something that saddened him. "I am never allowed to enjoy myself," he said. "Never. It is always inexpedient, bad politics, unsafe."

This was the man who had intemperately ordered my head cut off. I was to marry his daughter, and so that must have made some change in his attitude. I could understand him a little now, and, anyway, some emperors feel that ordering heads cut off is all a part of their function.

I turned away from him, not smiling, letting him see I was not impressed, to greet my men.

Seg had collected arrows from the battlefield as any frugal Bowman does, and he and my wild clansmen marched up with all the swing and panache of the immortal fight at The Dragon's Bones still clinging to them. Inch swung his long Saxon ax with an air. Korf Aighos swung his Great Sword of War of the Blue Mountains and I caught some of the pride he and his Blue Mountain Boys felt in thus resurrecting their ancient weapon. Varden stared about with a city-bred eye.

Hap Loder and Vomanus were talking together, and I wondered what deviltry they were cooking up. Vomanus was handling Hap's broadsword, and I hazarded a guess Vomanus was telling my Zorcander of the longswords of the inner sea, the Eye of the World.

Delia said: "If you do that again, Dray Prescott, I may be a widow before I'm married!"

I held her right arm with my left, and turned her, and so, together, side by side, we walked through the main entrance-way of the Emperor's palace in Vondium, capital of Vallia.

"I may do anything for you, Delia," I said. "Anything."

On that beautiful and terrible world of Kregen under Antares there exist a number of forms of contract by which a man and a woman may agree to marry. When the bokkertu for our betrothal and marriage was being drawn up, Delia and I, without really having to discuss

the matter, instinctively chose that form by which the two, the man and the woman, are bound the closest together. There were three separate ceremonies. The first two, the religious and the secular, were essentially private in character. I will say little of these, apart from the undeniable fact that I was profoundly moved. They took place a Kregan week — what I translate out as a sennight, for all that it is six days — after our arrival back in the capital. We were, after the two ceremonies, man and wife.

The third ceremony, the public festival and procession about the capital city, pleased me little.

“Oh, Dray, you great grizzly graint! I am supremely fortunate that the people of Vallia love me. And they will love you, too! So they want to see us happy, they want to see us drive in procession to all the temples and the holy places and the various districts of the city. You’ll—”

“I’ll become used to it all, I suppose. But being a Prince Majister is something I didn’t count on.”

“Oh, you’ll learn.”

After the attempted coup had been put down there was a considerable amount of clearing up to be done. Kov Furtway had stirred up as part of his plan one county or province to attack its neighbor. I was not settled in my mind until I had had a flier message from Tharu ti Valkanium that my Stromnate of Valka was safe. Led by my old freedom fighters they had successfully held off the treacherous attack mounted from the neighboring island to the west, Can-thirda, by its

inhabitants, the porcupine-like Qua'voils. Tharu said they'd had to invade after they'd smashed the first attacks, and march to the north to help the colony of Relts there, who had remained loyal to the Emperor. I told the Emperor that Can-thirda should be settled properly, and, to my amazement, he simply said: "Then settle it, Dray, and have done with it."

Later, Delia said: "You silly woflo!" Which is, as we might say on Earth: "You silly goose."

"How so?"

"Why — that is how the great lords manipulate my father. He just assumed since you are now a most powerful and puissant lord in Vallia — the Prince Majister no less! — that you wished to add Can-thirda to your holdings. He has given the island to you."

"Can he do that? I mean, just like that?"

"Why not? He is the Emperor."

"Um," I said, and went off to sort out one or two items that had annoyed me.

Seg Segutorio, than whom no man ever had a finer comrade on two worlds, had been made a Hikdar of the Crimson Bowmen of Loh.

This infuriated me.

I said: "Look, Emperor: who was it stuck loyally by you in the ruins in The Dragon's Bones? Who fought for you? Who feathered those rasts of Kov Zamra's men when they were about to do you a mischief? Seg Segutorio, that's who."

He was slowly coming back to his usual pomp and mystique of being the Emperor, and I knew I must strike

quickly before he took once again the full reins into his hands. With the dispatch of his enemies, or their flight abroad, he was now in a stronger position than he had ever been. If he wanted to repudiate all the bargains he had struck with me, he might seek to do so, and slay me, as he had once ordered. From Seg and Inch I knew I could count on absolutely dedicated loyalty. Hap Loder and my clansmen and Gloag with the men of Strombor would have to return home soon, although they were staying on for the great public ceremonies marking my wedding. I was safe for a time. I did not forget the way King Nemo of Tomboram in Pandahem had served me.

I never did trust kings and emperors, and I was not about to begin now, for all that this emperor was the father of Delia of Delphond.

“What is it you want of me, Dray?”

“Me? It’s Seg Segutorio I am talking of! Of your personal bodyguard, the Crimson Bowmen of Loh, half betrayed you, with their Chuktar in the lead. The other half fought to the end and a remnant now serve you—”

“I have sent to Loh for more Bowmen mercenaries.”

“Very well and fine. And who is to lead them?”

“I have asked for a certain Chuktar Wong-si-tuogan. I am told he is a most excellent officer.”

“Fine, just fine.” We were seated in a private chamber of the palace, and the Emperor sipped a purple wine of Wenhartdrin, a small island off the south coast. The Emperor offered me a glass. It was exceedingly good, and I guessed he drank it as much for its quality as through any nationalistic pride. The wines of Jholaix are

very hard to excel. "If you believe you are doing the right thing, then so be it. But I would have thought that Seg Segutorio, as a master Bowman, could not be bettered as Chuktar of your Crimson Bowmen of Loh."

The Emperor sipped. On the morrow Delia and I would drive about the city in a gaily decorated zorca chariot, and the bands would play and the flags fly and the twin suns would shed their opaline radiance upon us, and all would be merriment and laughter and joy. This night sitting closeted with the Emperor, I had the conviction I must saddle a few zhantils before it was too late.

"Rank your Deldars," said the Emperor, referring to an opening move in Jikaida which can be translated out something like our "put your cards on the table," although with the suggestion that this is an opening bet of a protracted bargaining session.

I duly ranked my Deldars.

"You should forthwith make Seg your personal bodyguard Chuktar. He is intensely loyal, to you and to Delia. You should reward him and Inch — and I suggest you bestow on them the titles and estates of the men who so foully betrayed you. You can have suitable presents made up for others of the men who saved your throne — aye! — and saved your life, too."

"And for yourself?"

"I need nothing beyond Delia. It seems I've acquired Can-thirda . . . I shall rename it, for that name has baleful associations to my people of Valka, and it will serve as a useful sister state to Valka."

“Nothing else?”

“We are talking of other people—”

“Your friends.”

He sipped more wine, and looked at me. He had mellowed. I’ll give the old devil that. He was the most powerful man in this part of Kregen, make no mistake about that. I had a hold on him only through his daughter. For all that I had done for him personally he would discount, put it down to what any person ought to do, must do, to preserve the life of the Emperor. But — he had fleshed out a little, he had lost that abstracted look, as though waiting for the dagger thrust in his back. I had made him far more secure than he had ever been.

“Aye. My friends.”

“So they will become powerful. And loyal to you. But I—”

“Do you think I could possibly countenance — let alone take a part in — any plan or plot that would harm you? You are Delia’s father. Although,” I said, and, Zair forgive me, took a pleasure in the saying, “your wife, Delia’s mother, must have been a wonderful person. No, Majister, from me you are safer than if you wore armor even a gros-varter could not penetrate.”

I think, looking back, that he half believed me.

Being a prudent man, he would never wholly trust another person. I am prudent, or I think I am, yet I have committed the folly of trusting other people wholly. As you have heard — and if these cassettes last out will hear more — sometimes I have paid for that folly of trust, paid for it in agony and blood and slavery. But I

did trust Seg, and Inch, and Gloag, and Varden, and Hap Loder, and having removed valuables from his reach, I trusted Korf Aighos. Trusting these men meant I trusted the men under their command. I had no doubts of Valka.

And, too, now that I knew Vomanus was Delia's half-brother, I could trust Vomanus again, too.

"I believe you, Dray." He had already made up his mind what he would do. "I shall make Seg Segutorio Chuktar of the Crimson Bowmen of Loh. In addition, the estates of Kov Furtway have been confiscated. I shall give them to Seg and create him Kov of Falinur."

"That is indeed munificent—" I began. He held up a hand.

"Furthermore, since the long man Inch roused the Blue Mountains on our behalf, and the Black Mountains are now vacant, by reason of Nath Larghos' treason, I shall give them to Inch and create him Trylon of the Black Mountains."

Now I had to think about this. There are many ranks in the nobility of Vallia which are not at all complicated once one grasps the essential pecking order. A Kov approximates out to a duke, as I have said, and a Strom to a count. Between these there come a number of ranks — some I know I have already mentioned. A Vad, a Trylon. By creating Seg and Inch of unequal ranks, I felt unease.

I said: "I think Kov of the Black Mountains sounds a richer note."

He chuckled and poured wine.

“You will find titles are grabbed after and fought for, Dray. They mean nothing. It is land that counts. Land! Canals, corn, cattle, wine, timber, minerals. Make Inch Kov, if it pleases you.”

“It will please Seg.” That was true.

Seg and Inch had become firm friends. I own I felt a thump of relief at that.

The Emperor drank and swallowed and wiped his lips. He cocked his head at me. “As for you, Dray Prescott. My poor daughter has caught a tartar in you.” He said “clansman,” but his meaning was as I have translated it out. “You mentioned Valka and Can-thirda. That fool Kov Larghos of Zamra set himself up as Pallan of Vondium. He is dead. Zamra is yours, and the title of Kov, if you want it, Prince Majister.”

The old devil could be sarcastic, too, when he liked.

I thanked him. I did not stutter in surprise this time. I had an eye to the future.

He said: “With all the titles you have collected, Dray Prescott, I think we will need an extra-special sheet of vellum to write them all down on the marriage contract.”

Face-to-face, I said: “All I want is to be the husband of Delia.”

Then I retired for the night. Tomorrow was the great day.

Chapter Two

Marriage

The great day dawned.

On this day Delia and I would be truly wed.

As I watched Zim and Genodras rise into the Kregan sky over Vondium I found it hard to understand my own feelings. Long and long had I fought and struggled for this day. I had traveled many dwaburs over this world of Kregen. I had fought men, and half-men, half-beasts, and monsters. I had been slave. I had owned vast lands and many men had looked to me as their leader. Much I had seen and done and all of it, really, aimed at this outcome.

There is much I could say of that day.

Some parts of it I remember with the absolute clarity of vision that cherishes every moment; other parts are cast in a vaguer shadow. Here on this Earth the people of China wear white in mourning, whereas my own country chooses to regard white as the color of purity and bridal happiness, of virginity. The Vallians hew to the latter custom, which I think gives brides the

opportunity to glow and radiate a special kind of happiness of their wedding day.

When I saw Delia clad in her white gown, with white shoes, a white veil, and — with the happy superstitions that mean everything and nothing on these days — tiny specks of color here and there — a flower posy, a scarlet-edged hem, a yellow curlicue to her wrists — I could only stand like a great buffoon and stare.

They had decked me out in some fantastic rig — all gold lace, brilliants, feathers, silks, and satins — and when I saw myself in a mirror I was shatteringly reminded of that rig I had worn in the opal palace of Zenicce, when the Princess Natema had unavailingly attempted her wiles. I ripped the lot off. Memory of Natema, who was now happily married to Prince Varden, my good comrade, brought back unbidden memories of other great ladies I had known in my career on Kregen. The Princess Susheeng, Sosie na Arkasson, Queen Lilah, Tilda the Beautiful, Viridia the Render, even Katrin Rashumin, who would, as Kovneva of Rahartdrin, be among the brilliant throng at the wedding. I thought of Mayfwy, widow of my oar comrade Zorg of Felteraz, and I sighed, for I dearly wished for Mayfwy and Delia to be friends. I must say that Varden had sent a flier to Zenicce and brought back Princess Natema.

I had greeted her kindly, if feeling a trifle of the strangeness of the situation. She was just as beautiful, and, I knew, just as willful. She was a little more voluptuous, a little more superb in her carriage, for she

had had two children. But she and Varden had made a match, and they were happy, at which I was much cheered.

So I ripped off the gaudy clothes that turned me into a popinjay. I wrapped a long length of brilliant scarlet silk about me, and donned the plain buff tunic of a Koter of Vallia, with the wide shoulders and the nipped-in waist and the flared skirt. Long black boots I wore, and a broad-brimmed hat. In the hat I wore the red and white colors of Valka. My sleeves were white silk of Pandahem, for despite the intense rivalry between the islands, Vallia is not foolish enough to refuse to buy best Pandahem silk.

From Valka had come all my notables and those friends at whose side I had fought clearing the island of the aragorn and the slave-masters. They brought with them the superb sword from Aphrasöe that had been Alex Hunter's. This I buckled on to my belt with a thrill I could not deny. With this marvelous Savanti sword I could go up against rapier, longsword, broadsword, shortsword, with absolute confidence. Even then, in that moment, I admit, like the greedy weapons man I am, I longed for a great Krozair longsword to swing at my side.

But that, like Nath and Zolta, my two oar comrades and ruffianly rascals, could not be.

What they would say — what Mayfwy would say — away there in the Eye of the World when they heard that I had married and they not there to dance at my wedding, I shriveled to think.

There would be much calling on Mother Zinzu the Blessed, that I could be perfectly sure of.

When, in casual conversation, I had mentioned to the Emperor, turning what I said into a light remark, careful not to inflame, that a flier might perhaps be sent to Tomboram, he replied in such furious terms as to dispel the notion. His fury was not directed toward me, for I have cunning of a low kind in this area of elementary conversation-tactics, but against all the nations of the island of Pandahem. I mentioned this to Inch and Seg, for I had in mind asking Tilda the Beautiful and her son, Pando, the Kov of Bormark, to my wedding and, also, if she could be found in time, Viridia the Render. The general opinion was that the thing could not be done.

Only that week news had come in of a vicious raid by ships from Pandahem upon a Vallian overseas colony port. I could imagine the hatreds of the spot; they might be of a different kind, they could not be more intense than those festering in the capital. This saddened me. But I refused to be sad on my wedding day, and so with a last draft of best Jholaix, went down to the waiting zorca chariot.

Delia looked stunningly marvelous — I refuse to attempt any description. We sat in the chariot and Old Starkey the coachman clicked to the eight zorcas, and they leaned into the harness, the tall wheels with their thin spokes spun, reflecting blindingly the opaz brilliance of the twin Suns of Scorpio, and we were off on our wedding procession.

The Crimson Bowmen of Loh with Seg as their new Chuktar rode escort. And — an innovation, a thing I dearly wanted and had spoken hard and short to the Emperor to gain — an honor guard of Valkan Archers rode with us also. I had spoken to Seg about this thing, and we both knew what we knew about bows, but he had agreed, for my sake.

In the procession rode all the nobles of the land high in the Emperor's favor.

There, too, rode Hap Loder and my clansmen. Inch as the new Kov of the Black Mountains rode, talking animatedly with Korf Aighos, and, again, I wondered what the rascally Blue Mountain Boy was hatching.

Between the Korf and Nath the Thief from Zenicce there was little to choose.

I said to Delia, leaning close: "We must keep a sharp eye on the wedding presents, my love. Nath, I am sure, has a lesten-hide bag under his tunic."

Those wedding presents meant a great deal, for it had been through manipulation of them as symbols that Delia had managed to remain so long unwed. Now I had scoured Valka for the best and finest presents the hand and brain of my people could devise. I had brushed aside poor Kov Vektor's presents. The Blue Mountain Boys had them in good keeping, but I scorned to use a beaten rival's gifts. Truly, I had been amazed at the wealth and beauty that had poured from Valka. Ancient treasures had been unearthed from where they had been hidden against the aragorn. Such treasures! Such beauty! And all given freely and with love to Delia.

So we rode in stately procession through the boulevards and avenues of Vondium. The Koters and the Koterias turned out in their thousands to wave and cheer and shout their good wishes. Vondium is not as large nor does it hold as many people as Zenicce, whose population must be a million souls, but I guessed very few people remained indoors on this day of days.

Delia's fingers lay in mine and every now and then she would squeeze my hand. She waved and acknowledged the cheering. Flower petals showered down on us from balconies from which gay shawls and banners and silks streamed. The noise dizzied us with the incessant volleys of good wishes.

Delia said: "I have spoken to Seg, and Inch, and they will free all the slaves in their provinces. It will be hard—"

"Aye, my love, it will be hard. But already my men have been working on Can-thirda. And now Zamra, too, will be cleansed of the evil."

"Oh, yes!"

"Then," I said, with a mischievousness somewhat out of place, perhaps, given the subject and the day, "we will have many more free Koters and Koterias to cheer for us!"

"And aren't they cheering!"

Delia drew back that shimmer of veil from her face. The veil, I knew, had been the gift of her grandmother, laid by in a scented cedar-wood chest against the day when it would frame the glorious face of my beloved. Her eyes regarded her people of Vallia with a warm

affection, and her cheeks flushed with a rosy tint that, however naive it may make me sound, captivated me again. And her hair! That glorious chestnut hair with those outrageous tints of auburn, her hair glowed and shone against the whiteness of the veil.

“You are happy, my Delia?”

“Yes, my Dray, yes. Oh, yes!”

We performed the necessary functions at the sacred places and we did not miss a single fantamyrrh. The people lined the streets and boulevards as we passed at a slow zorca pace. I saw flowers, and ribbons, flags and banners, many silks and shawls depending from the open balconies. Petals showered upon us in a scented rain. The Suns of Scorpio shone magnificently upon us. Truly, then, as we drove to the acclamations of the multitudes, I had grown into a real Kregan!

At my special request — which Delia, with a regal lift of her chin, had instantly translated into a command — we drove past the Great Northern Cut and past *The Rose of Valka*. There had been wild moments in this inn, and the raftered ceilings had witnessed many a scene of joyful carouse. Even with the crisp and concise stanza form adopted for that song, *The Fetching of Drak na Valka*, it takes a deucedly long time to sing it in its entirety, and usually we sang a shortened version. The old friends of Valka were there, hanging out of the windows, cheering and shouting and waving, and then someone — it was Young Bargom for an ob! — started up the song, and they were singing it out as we drove

past. I knew they'd go on singing and drinking all day and all night, for that is the Valkan way.

As was proper we were to finish our promenade of the city by narrow boat.

The water glittered cleanly as we stepped from the zorca carriage and went aboard a narrow boat so bedecked with flowers and colors, with flags and banners, I wondered where we were to sit. The barge-masters had everything organized, and soon Delia and I found ourselves sitting on golden cushions high on a platform in the bows, sumptuously decorated, with a side table bearing tasty snacks, miscils, various wines, gregarians, squishes, and, of course, heaping silver and golden dishes of palines.

No happy function of Kregen is complete without as many palines as may be managed.

The water chuckled past the bows. I knew that water. Sweet is the canalwater of Vallia — sweet and deadly. I felt a comfort to know that through the immersion in the pool of baptism in that far-off River Zelfh of Aphrasöe, my Delia was, as I was, assured of a thousand years of life as well as being protected from the fearful effects of the canalwater.

And now it was the turn of the canalfolk to cheer and shout and wave. The Vens and the Venas turned out on their freshly painted narrow boats, lining the banks of the cut as we passed. We had a specially picked body of haulers to draw us, for I had — rudely, viciously, intemperately — refused the Emperor's offer of a gang of his slave haulers. We did not see a single slave that

glorious day, and although we knew the poor devils were hidden away in their barracks and bagnios, we could take comfort from our determination to end the evil, once and forever.

All day we traveled about Vondium, and as the twin suns sank we saw the monstrous pile of the imperial palace rearing against the last suns-glow and knew we were going home.

“I am so happy, my love, happy and not at all tired,” said Delia, and then yawned so hugely her slender white hand looked more slender and moth-white in the dusk than ever.

“Yawning, my Delia, on your wedding day?”

She laughed and I laughed, and we watched as the narrow boat was drawn through the rising portcullis of the palace’s water-port. We stepped down from the high platform and the Crimson Bowmen of Loh surrounded us and the Archers of Valka were there, too, and the Pallans, and the nobles and the high Koters, and we went up the marble stairs into the palace.

It had been a perfect day.

A girl’s wedding day ought to be, should be — must be — a perfect day.

I was taken off by Seg and Inch and Hap, by Varden and Gloag, by Korf Aighos and Vomanus. We spent some time drinking amicably, but in low key, for none of us subscribed to the barbaric code that demands a groom become stupidly intoxicated on his wedding night. Grooms who do that have scarce love for their new brides.

The room was low-ceilinged and comfortable, with softly upholstered chairs and sturm-wood tables, with Walfarg-weave rugs upon the floor, and with an endless supply of the best of Jholaix and all the other superlative wines of Kregen. Even so, as the Prince Majister, I could order up Kregen tea, than which there is no better drink in two worlds.

Off in a corner I was able to have a few words with Vomanus.

“So you’re my brother-in-law now, Vomanus.”

He cocked an eye at me, lifting his glass, and drinking.

“Half-brother-in-law, Dray.”

“Aye. I doubted you, when the racters told me you sought the hand of Delia.” I am a man who never apologizes and never begs forgiveness — at least, almost never. Now I said: “Do you forgive me for doubting you, Vomanus?”

He laughed in his careless way and tossed back the wine. He was a rapscaillon, careless, lighthearted, but a good comrade.

“There is nothing to forgive. I know how I would feel toward a man who tried to take a girl like Delia from me.”

“You are engaged — no, that is not the word — you have a girl of your own?”

“A girl, Dray? Of course not.” He yelled for more wine. “I have girls, Dray — hundreds of them!”

Hap Loder came across, bringing more tea for me, and a handful of palines on a golden dish. We talked of

the clans and of the new chunkrah herds he had been building up. He was now the power in the Clans of Felschraung and Longuelm, but he had given obi to me and I was his lord and so he would remain faithful to me forever. I knew that he was my friend, and that was more important than mere loyalty.

Tharu of Valkanium and Tom ti Vulheim were there, and I was joyed to see they had brought Erithor of Valkanium. I shouted across: "Erithor! Will you honor us with a song?"

"Right willingly, Strom Drak," he began, bringing his harp forward, and then halting, and, striking a chord, said: "Right willingly, Prince Majister."

"Strom Drak," I said. "Well, it is Strom Dray, now, in Valka for me. But the great song will never change."

Others broke in, begging Erithor to sing, for he was a bard renowned throughout all of Vallia. I recalled the song Erithor had been making, after we had cleansed Valka, and the girls of Esser Rarioch, the high fortress overlooking Valkanium, had unavailingly badgered and teased him into revealing its words and melodies. He might sing that song now. If he did, this would be another historical mark to go down beside the other great songs he had made that would live forever.

He saw me looking at him, and lifting his head, he said: "No, Prince Majister. I will sing the marriage song of Prince Dray and Princess Delia only when both are there to hear it together."

Someone — I do not know who it was to this day — roared out: "Then you won't sing it this night, Erithor!"

They all shouted at this, and Erithor struck a chord, and broke into *Naghan the Wily*, which tells how Naghan, a rich and ugly silversmith of Vandayha, was trapped into marriage by the saucy Hefi, daughter of the local bosk herder.

Everyone roared. Kregans have a warped sense of humor, it seems to me, at times.

How wonderful it was to be here, in this comfortable room, drinking and singing with my friends! I am a man who does not make friends easily. I can always rouse men to follow me, to do as I order, and joy in the doing of it . . . but friendship. That, to me, is a rare and precious thing I seek without even acknowledging I seek it, except in moments of weakness like this.

Seg's Thelda would be busily clucking about Delia now, and knowing Thelda, I knew she would be full of her own importance as a married woman with a fine young son — called Dray — and with all the good will in the world exasperating by her own importance and knowledge of the marriage state.

It was time I rescued Delia.

I stood up.

Everyone fell silent.

Erithor had been singing on — the time passes incredibly quickly when a skald of such power sings — and now he finished up an episode from *The Canticles of the Rose City* wherein the half-man, half-god Drak sought for his divine mistress through perils that made the listeners grip the edges of their chairs. The thrumming strings fell silent.

I cleared my throat.

“I thank you all, my friends. I cannot say more.”

I believe they understood.

They escorted me up the marble stairs where the torchlight threw orange and ruby colors across the walls and the tapestries and the silks, where the shadows all fled from us.

Delia was waiting.

Thelda bobbed her head and Seg put his arm around her and everyone carried out the prescribed gestures and spoke the words that would ensure long and happy life to Delia and me. Then, already laughing and singing and feeling thirsty again, they all trooped downstairs and left Delia and me alone.

The bedchamber was hung with costly tapestries and tall candles burned unwaveringly. Refreshments had been tastefully laid out on a side table. Delia sat up in the bed with that outrageous hair combed out by Thelda gleaming upon her shoulders. I confess I was gawping at her.

“Oh, Dray! You look as though you’ve eaten too much bosk and taylyne soup!”

“Delia—” I whispered. “I—”

I took an unsteady step forward. I felt my sword swinging at my side, that wonderful Savanti sword, and I reached down to take it out and throw it upon the table, out of the way — and so, with the sword in my hand, I saw the tapestries at the side of the bed rustle. There was no wind in the bedchamber.

They must have waited until they heard everyone else depart, and only Delia's voice — and then my voice. That had been the signal.

Six of them there were.

Six men clad all in black with black face-masks and hoods, and wielding daggers.

They leaped for the bed in so silent and feral a charge from their concealed passage behind the arras that almost they slew my Delia before I could reach them.

With a cry so bestial, so vile, so vicious, so horrible they flinched back from me, I hurled myself full upon them.

Their six daggers could not meet that brand.

The Savanti sword is a terrible weapon of destruction.

Had they been wearing plate armor and wielding Krozair longswords I do not think they would have stood before me.

So furious, so ugly, so absolutely destructive was my attack that I had slashed down the first two, driven the sword through the guts of the third, and turned to strike at the fourth before they could swivel their advance to face — instead of the beautiful girl in the bed — me.

“Dray!” said Delia.

She did not scream.

In a lithe smother of naked flashing legs and yards and yards of white lace she was out of the bed, snatching up a fallen dagger, hurling herself upon the sixth man. He stood, horrified. I chopped the fourth, caught the

fifth through an eye — the mask could not hope to halt the marvelous alloy-steel of the Savanti blade — and swung about to see Delia stepping back from her man.

The six would-be assassins lay sprawled on the priceless Walfarg-weave rugs.

“Oh, Dray!” said Delia, dropping the bloody dagger and running to me, her arms outstretched. “They might have slain you!”

“Not with you to protect me, my Delia,” I said, and I laughed, and caught her up close to me, breast to breast, and so gazed down upon her glorious face upturned to my ugly old figurehead. “Sink me! I feel sorry for the poor fools!”

Later I carried the six out to the door and dumping them in the passage roared for the guard and half a dozen Crimson Bowmen appeared. The Hikdar wanted to rouse the palace, but I said: “Not so, good Fenrak.” He was a loyal Bowman who had fought with us at The Dragon’s Bones and had been promoted, to his joy. “This is my wedding night!”

He shook his head.

“I will see to this offal, my Prince. And in the morning, then . . .” He started his men into action. He was a rough tough Bowman of Loh, and thus dear to me. “I wish you all joy, my Prince, and eternal happiness to the Princess Majestrix.”

“Thank you, Fenrak. There is wine for you and your men — drink well tonight, my friend.”

As they carted the black-clad assassins off, I went back to Delia and closed the door on the outside world.

I must admit, knowing what I do of Kregen, that this was a typical ending to a wedding day. It had roused the blood, though, set a sparkle into Delia's eyes, a rose in her cheeks. How she had fought for me, like a zhantil for her cubs!

In the morning — and I a married man! — we made inquiries. The story was simple and pathetic. The would-be assassins, being dead, could not tell us what we wanted to know, but one of them was recognized by Vomanus as being a retainer of the Kov of Falinur, who had fled. This had been his last throw. This is what I believed at the time. Then, the truth did not matter; later I was to wish I had prosecuted more earnest inquiries, for what Vomanus told us was correct. What he could not then know was that this assassin had left the employ of Naghan Furtway, Kov of Falinur.

When we talked of this, and used the name, Thelda pushed up very wroth, her face flushed. "I am the Kovneva of Falinur! And my husband Seg is the Kov! Do not speak of the Kov of Falinur as a traitor!"

Delia soothed her down. Being a Kovneva was greatly to Thelda's liking, although Seg had laughed and said that being a Kov would not drive his shafts any the straighter when he was hunting in his hills of Er-thydrin.

Naghan Furtway had been stripped of his titles and estates. Henceforth I knew we must think of him as Furtway, and he would seek to injure us in some way. And this was the man, together with his nephew Jenbar,

whom I had rescued from the icy Mountains of the North at the behest of the Star Lords!

* * * *

I will not go into details of my life after that in Vondium, the capital city of Vallia. That life was remarkable in its activity, for I had much to do, and in its uneventfulness. I took the palace architect, one Largan the Rule, and we went ferreting about in the secret passages. I have mentioned the usual custom in great palaces of having secondary passageways between the walls. These I inspected, and found many fresh alleyways of which even Largan the Rule had no knowledge, and so had those that would be weak spots bricked up.

It seems I had the knack of poking my beaked nose into all the places I was able to investigate and find some way of improving what went on. High on my list of priorities was organizing the canals better, in such a way that arguments over rights-of-way need not take place at crossings. Until a great program of canal building could be undertaken to create overways and underways on the cuts, I instituted a country wardens service, which provided for families of men and women to live near the crossings and superintend the traffic.

As was to be expected I spent a great deal of time at the dockyards and slipways making myself thoroughly familiar with the great race-built galleons of Vallia. I looked into their artillery, the catapults, the varters, and the gros-varters which Vallia herself had developed.

As for the Vallian Air Service, a body of fliers I had always held in the highest respect, we discovered that Naghan Furtway had contrived through his contacts to disperse the Air Service during the time of his abortive coup. I met again Chuktar Farris, the Lord of Voman-soir, who aboard *Lorenztone* had plucked Delia and me from midair where we flew astride Umgar Stro's giant coal-black impiter. I thought I detected about his exquisite politeness an edged air of pleasure, as though his love for Delia found equal pleasure that she had at last married the great ruffianly barbarian she had chosen — against all common sense.

“We searched for you, Prince Majister, and found instead the Kov of Falinur and his Kovneva.”

I saw Delia smile at this, and had to chuckle myself.

How high and mighty we all were with our titles these days, and then we had been a draggle-tailed bunch running and hiding across the Hostile Territories!

I asked after Tele Karkis, the young Hikdar of the Air Service, and Farris frowned and said: “He left the Air Service. He — disappointed us in that. I have not seen or heard of him for a long time.”

Naghan Vanki, he of the sarcastic tongue and the silver and black outfit — an approximation to Racter colors, those — was still active, although away in Evir in the north at the time.

My sojourn in Vallia had already given me a feeling that blue was the color of Pandahem and therefore of an enemy. I was able to instantly quell this irrational feeling my own way by thinking of Tilda of the Many

Veils, and her son young Pando — a right little limb of Satan if ever there was one. But, still, it was strange to see the Vallian Air Service men clad in their smart dark blue, with the short orange capes. The blue was so dark as almost to be black, and I guessed had been given that blue tinge to take away the odd dusty shabby look unrelieved black gives.

Delia and I flew a considerable amount of the time on our journeys to the Blue Mountains and to Delphond. Court officials worried over this, for the airboats were always giving trouble and were not to be relied upon. We visited Inch in the Black Mountains, and soon found he had palled up with the Blue Mountain Boys, and he and Korf Aighos, who ran the place from that eerie and cloud-capped mountain city of High Zorcady, were hatching plans that would further unite in friendship the whole mountain area. We flew all over Vallia. We went up to Falinur where Seg had betaken himself, with Thelda, to take charge. Seg had chosen an ord-Kiktar to run the Crimson Bowmen of Loh in his stead when he was away on his estates. This man, a veteran, intensely loyal, was called Dag Dagutorio — I believe I have not mentioned the system in Erthydrin over names and what the *torio* means, but that must wait for now — and I saw the Emperor felt more at ease when Dag was around and Seg was away up in Falinur. That must have been the motive of the munificent gift of a Kovnate to Seg.

An ord-Jiktar meant Dag had risen eight stages in the rank structure as a Jiktar. Two more and then he

might become a Chuktar. I doubted if the Emperor would employ two Chuktars to command his Crimson Bowmen; and I surmised that Seg would be not too unhappy to let the job go to Dag.

Certainly, I had insisted that a Chuktar be appointed to command the new Vallian Imperial Honor Guard of Valkan Archers. The Emperor had smiled at this, and said: "Then, since you love Valka so much, son-in-law, and since you insist on creating the Valkan Archers as a bodyguard, you may pay the Chuktar his wages. For me, I can only pay a Jiktar."

I fumed, but I paid.

Anyway, what was mere money? Valka, Can-thirda, and Zamra brought in immense amounts. And Delia's Delphond and the Blue Mountains brought in more. We could have employed an army of Chuktars.

One man of the court surrounding the Emperor I should mention at this time: the Wizard of Loh, whom men called Deb-so-Parang. I spoke with him a number of times, and told him of Lu-si-Yuong, the Wizard of Loh to Queen Lilah of Hiclantung. Deb-so-Parang nodded, and stroked his beard — like all Wizards of Loh he was strong on the artifices of his craft, but I could not underestimate their powers — and said that he was not acquainted with him personally, although since the fall of the Empire of Loh the Wizards, by the seven arcades, had spread all over Kregen. He was a pleasant old buffer and, a mark against him, he had not forewarned the Emperor of the plot against his life and his throne.

I had, of course, questioned the Todalpheme in Vondium, who monitored the tides, about Aphrasöe. All they could say was for me to ask the Emperor. This I did and he said, simply enough, that when Delia had been crippled from her fall from a zorca he had heard the Todalpheme of Hamal — where the Vallians bought their airboats — knew of a mysterious place where cures might be affected, miracle cures. So now I knew.

I think you will not be surprised when I say that I did not, as I most certainly would have done a few seasons ago, immediately call for a flier and take off for Hamal. I had become so much more settled than I ever had been before. I did not recognize myself as the same man who had swung a great Krozair longsword and set off across the Hostile Territories on foot to reach my Delia, the man who had vowed that nothing and no one would stand in his way. It had always been Delia first and then the quest for the Savanti of Aphrasöe, those mortal but superhuman men who had thrown me out of paradise.

But, for me, Vallia and Valka and my Delia were paradise. Paradise enough.

So I stored the information away and went busily about my business. We honeymooned on Valka, my marvelous island with its wealth and its beauty, and we sang songs in the high hall of Esser Rarioch and we had a tremendous time. We traveled to Strombor. My emotions when once again I beheld the enclave city of Zenicce and strode the opal palace and thought of all the things that had happened there — they defy description.

And Gloag, who had become grand chamberlain and the strong right hand to Great-Aunt Shusha — who still lived — could not do enough for us. We rode out onto the Great Plains of Segesthes and I caroused once more with my clansmen, and they roared out the great Jikai for Delia and me. Oh, yes, I lived very high off the vosk in those rousing days!

So much, I had. So great a wealth of everything that when I said to Delia I wanted to go to Zamra and sort out some problems arising out of the freeing of the slaves, and she said, “I think, dear heart, I will wait another week before I know,” my heart leaped and I consigned everything else to the Ice Floes of Sicce. There are stories on Kregen as well as on Earth wherein a man does not know his wife is expecting a baby until she tells him. It is a poor husband who is not at once aware of the possibility of a child by reason of nature’s interruption, and proof positive is what is awaited. The proof came.

“You will wish to be with your own people, Delia. Thelda will be useful, although I fear a sore trial to you. And there is Aunt Katri. We leave for Vondium at once.”

Aunt Katri was the Emperor’s sister, childless now, her offspring having perished one way and another, and she was a kind and warmhearted soul. And, in Vondium, there would be the greatest doctors of the land with their acupuncture needles at the ready. I would call in Nath the Needle, for I had a high regard for that particular doctor. So, in the fullness of time, Delia bore twins. A boy and a girl. The boy was to be Drak.

The girl was to be Lela. She was named for Delia's mother.

I walked about like a loon. Any onker had a brain twice as big as mine in those days, and nothing in two worlds held more foolish pride. How could an ugly lump like me produce two such marvelous children? Delia, of course, with her superlative beauty, was solely responsible for the babies' gloriousness. The twinned principle is strong on Kregen, by reason of the twin suns in the sky. Very early on, on Kregen, twins were regarded as lucky and means were devised of keeping both children alive and well, whereas here on Earth twins were regarded as bad luck, and very often would be killed off — or one of them. Twins! A boy and a girl! By Zair, but I was a lucky fellow!

A summit of happiness had been reached.

Further problems arose in Zamra, and Delia was nursing well and everything was fine and wonderful in the palace of Vondium, and at last she said to me: "You great onker, Dray! I know the slave problem on Zamra is worrying you. You'll have to go there. I shall be perfectly all right, here in my father's palace."

"Tell Thelda to get Seg down here, and I shall send for Inch. Then I will go to Zamra."

So it was done, and I bid them Remberree and took off.

I called at Valka first, and then flew north. We touched down on a small island for the night and I wandered about the camp, restless, fretful, feeling the hilt of the Savanti sword swinging at my hip. I was a

great man, now. A Prince Majister, married to the most beautiful and glorious girl in two worlds. I owned vast tracts of land. Money by the sackful was mine. And I was the father of two perfect children.

Pride, pride!

The blue glow grew swiftly, treacherously — and I all unprepared. I stared in a horror made all the more horrible by my complete unpreparedness. I felt the blue radiance calling me and the gigantic outlines of the Scorpion beckoned and enfolded me and then I was lying on harsh and stinking dirt, stark naked, with the smell and groan of slaves all about me, and a harsh boot kicking me in the ribs, and a voice snarling:

“Get up, rast! Get up, you stinking cramp!”

Chapter Three

The Scorpion sets a task to my hands

I was naked.

I was unarmed.

I was a slave in a slave bagnio.

My only hope was that I was still on Kregen.

You may judge of the shock of this transition when I tell you I did not instantly grab that cruel kicking boot and topple the fellow down and twist his neck.

I lay there, choking with the horror of it, shaking, feeling waves of nausea rush and flutter over me as though, once again, I sped down the great glacier of the Mountains of the North. But this transition into another part of Kregen struck home with shrewder intensity. I had waited while Delia had been delivered of our children, and I had wanted to suffer along with her, uselessly, of course, for the techniques of acupuncture ensured the birth should be painless. She had smiled up at me and reached out her arms to me, and I leaned

down and kissed her dear face, and together we joyed in an experience that she alone had to bear, and I alone had to wait in useless suffering. The boot smashed into my ribs again.

“Get up, you stinking yetch!”

Perhaps I had been feeling that this was my punishment for being so high and mighty, for letting Delia bear our children — although, Zair knew, I had done everything a mere man can do on these occasions — perhaps the pride that comes before a fall had humbled me. But that second series of savage kicks made me take stock of my new situation.

I had been a slave before. I had been dumped down unarmed and naked before on Kregen. I knew the Star Lords had picked me out once again to perform some task for them, and if this task bore any resemblance to those that had gone before I must sort myself out quickly.

The boot felt warm and slick in my hands.

I pulled.

The slave-master fell.

I took his throat in my hands and choked him a bit, and leaned over him and snarled into his ear: “Kick me again, rast, and your neck will snap.” Then I threw him from me.

I stood up.

Around me the groan and moan of naked slaves ceased.

They stood cramped up in a small chamber hewn from soft rock, crumbling, with the ceiling threatening

to fall at any moment. Condensation on the walls and drops of niter glittered in the radiance of the twin suns pouring in the barred opening to the cave.

The slave-master scabbled up.

He tried to lash me with the whip.

I caught the lash and pulled and took the slave-master again by the throat and lifted him up.

“I told you, kleesh—” I began.

A little Fristle female, all furry and curved, with her tail lashing in frenzy, caught my arm.

“Do not kill him, dom! They will be cruel to us all if he is found dead.”

Well, I had no love for Fristles, those cat-faced half-men I had known before. But I remembered Sheemiff of the warrens of Magdag, and so I did not break the slave-master’s neck. I choked him a little and then threw him against the wall. He fell and lay limply.

A big barky Brokelsh shouldered up, angry.

“Now we are in trouble!” All the slaves were naked. There were about a dozen of them. The Brokelsh started off for a black hole in the back wall. “I’m off.”

The other slaves ran after him, including the little Fristle woman, who chattered in her fear as she ran.

I went over to the barred opening. The bars were solid logs of lenk. Outside I could see a clearing with papishin-leaved huts, a backing of jungle unfamiliar to me, and guards patrolling with ready weapons. There were some unusual circumstances about the slave compound, something I couldn’t then put my finger on. I shook the lenk logs in fruitless anger, raging against

the fate that dragged me from Vallia and Delia and hurled me contemptuously somewhere else on Kregen, summarily bidden to do the dictates of the Star Lords.

A sound at the back of the cave brought me around, snarling. Being weaponless I lifted my hands in the discipline of unarmed combat of the Krozairs of Zy. Any man without a weapon on Kregen is at a disadvantage, but the Krozairs of Zy as part of their mystic devotions practice their own brand of hand-fighting, and very deadly it is, to be sure.

“Come away, dom,” said the girl who faced me.

She was young, filthy, dirty with long and tangled black hair. Her face showed the gaunt look of the half-starved, but her body was firm and supple, and she looked fierce and wild.

“Why do the guards come here alone?” I pointed to the unconscious slave-master.

She shrugged her dirt-caked shoulders.

“He wanted pleasure, and would clear all but one out of here for that, into the other cells and passages.”

I did not need to be told that this girl was the one the slave-master sought.

She nodded. “I am Tulema. But come away, quickly—” She pointed into the clearing. A couple of guards were walking toward the barred opening. They could not see into the cell, or so I fancied, but very quickly they would, and then there would be trouble. I nodded and followed Tulema.

There must be absolutely no pining after Delia. I must not think of Vallia, or of Valka, until I was safely

out of this mess. I had to do the bidding of the Star Lords, and then get myself back home as quickly as may be.

Then I cursed.

It was crystal clear why the Star Lords had brought me here.

I had to rescue a slave from these pens.

There had been at least a dozen in this cell when I arrived. Now they had hurried out. I followed after Tulema, ducking my head beneath the rocky overhang, and found myself in a corridor that led to a maze of passageways and so on to a wider cave in which hundreds of slaves sat and squatted or paced about.

Which one was I expected to rescue?

The Fristle woman, the Brokelsh, and now Tulema — from these three I must find out who had been in that cell when the slave-master was knocked unconscious. I must not let them out of my sight.

I did notice, looking about the vast prison-cave, that there were a large number of halflings here. In general, on Kregen, there are to be found usually far more human beings than halflings, and the halflings, too, are not just one race but many. Here, the balance was quite otherwise.

A sudden commotion went up and then all the slaves were racing down toward a large opening cut in the cave. Tulema looked at me, shouted, “Feeding time!” and was off.

Perforce, I ran after her.

High in the rocky ceiling wide crystal facets showed the gleam of fire. I knew that crystal. It comes from Loh — exactly where is a closely guarded secret — and on it a fire may be kindled and it will not crack or distort. It is much used for holding heat and light above ceilings . . . I was to find that this crystal did *not* come from Loh, and thereby was cheap enough to light slave quarters — but I run ahead of my story.

That crystal is known as fireglass.

So it was that plenty of light in the cave allowed me to keep the supple form of Tulema in sight. Through the opening the cave passage debouched into a series of openings, each one walled off from its neighbor. Each cell was strongly barred off from the clearing, also. The slaves ran past these cells and on into another spacious cave where food had been left spread out over the floor.

The scene that followed, given the circumstances, should not have sickened me. The slaves fell on the food with cries and fought and struggled over the choicest portions. Coarse stuff, it was, plentiful, belly-filling. A kind of maize grows on Kregen, dilse, that can be mixed with milk and water and pounded, salted, and served up in a variety of ways. It is cheap where it grows freely, for it needs little cultivation. Great tureens of dilse stood about, the carrying poles all carefully removed from the handles of the tureens. It steamed. Also there was a little Kregan bread — those long fluffy rolls, although this stuff was stale and hard — sacks of onions, a few rounds of cheese, and what was clearly a single vosk cut into portions and cooked. By the time Tulema and I reached

the feeding cave all the vosk was claimed, the bread was vanishing, the onions were rolling about with frantic figures in pursuit of them, but there was plenty of dilse for those unable to secure the better food, those too weak and feeble to fight for it.

Now I understood why Tulema's face showed a thinness her body did not reveal. That is the blight of dilse.

A large and somewhat ferocious Rapa was striding past me. He held a thick rasher of vosk, a piece of bread, and no less than four onions. He knocked an Och away, who attempted with one of his four arms to steal the vosk rasher. The Och tumbled against the wall, screeching. Tulema shrank back.

I said to the Rapa: "I would be obliged if you would share that vosk rasher, and a piece of bread, and half the onions with this girl, here."

The Rapas are notorious in their treatment of women. Once my Delia had been threatened with the horrible fate of being tossed naked into the Rapa court. The Rapa leered.

"You may go to the Ice Floes of Sicce," he said, and went to push past.

Well — maybe I was some kind of Prince Majister — but here and now I was slave in a slave pen. I knew slave manners. I hit the Rapa in the guts and took the vosk, the bread, and two of the onions. The other two rolled over the floor and were instantly pounced on by an old Fristle woman.

The Rapa tried to straighten up, hissing, his beaked face vicious, his crest swelling. But I hit him again, with my free hand, and turned to Tulema.

“Eat.”

“But — you—”

“I am not hungry.”

That was true. Only moments ago I had risen from the campfire, replete with the finest delicacies Valka could offer.

She fell on the food ravenously.

If you were not strong and determined and ruthless here you would not die of starvation, for you could eat dilse, but you would slowly decline. Maybe, I thought even then, there was purpose in this. I had some inkling of slave-masters’ ways.

We walked away and I waited for Tulema to finish eating.

Then I said: “Tulema. Listen closely. I want to know the names and conditions of all the people who were with us in the cell when—” I hesitated. I could hardly say to her, “When I arrived,” for that would demand explanations I would not give, and if given, would not be believed. I finished: “When the slave-master was knocked down.”

The food inside her warmed her. She did not giggle — slaves only laugh and sing when something special happens, like the master falling down and breaking his neck — but she let me know she thought my remark highly apposite.

“I think I can remember. But why?”

Instinctively I had to quell my instant rush of bad language, my browbeating intolerance of any who would question an order. I said: "Does anyone escape from here, Tulema?"

"We believe so — we hope so — but I am frightened to go—"

That did make some kind of sense, but it was a tortuous thread. Tulema told me something of herself, and thereby something also of where we were. She came from a seaside town called Fellow, and she sounded sad when she told me of her home in Herrelldrin. She had every right to be sad. We were on the island of Faol, and she shivered as she told me. The island lay off the coast of Havilfar.

Havilfar!

So far on Kregen I had trod the land of the continents of Segesthes and of Turismond. I had touched at Erthyrdrin, in the continent of Loh. But the continent of Havilfar was all new and unexplored by me, virgin territory. I fancied I was in for some wild adventures and some seething action in the future, and, as you shall hear, I was not wrong.

After the meal a sudden shrilling of a stentor's horn made everyone jump and then rush madly for the exits. I stumbled along after Tulema, trying to keep her in sight in the frenzied rushing to and fro of slaves. Screams and cries rang out, people shouted for friends, and I saw the way the slaves kept darting frightened glances back, into the dimmer recesses of the caves.

We all pushed up against the lenk-wood bars.

I blinked against the glare of the twin suns and looked out. I knew we were in the southern hemisphere of Kregen now, and therefore the suns would cross the sky to the northward, but just where we were off Havilfar in relation to the equator I could not say. I guessed we were nearer that imaginary line than I had been in Vallia, nearer, even, than I had been in Pandahem. For the northern sweep of Havilfar rises out of the southern ocean east of southern Loh, below the rain forests of Chem. I fancied Inch's Ng'grogga would not be too far away, down to the southwest.

In the clearing cut from the jungle I saw guards strutting, banging their whips against gaitered legs, swaggering in their tunics of forest green. Among them a number of well-dressed men and women moved as though on a shopping expedition.

I say as though on a shopping expedition, but then I thought that was what they were doing — shopping for slaves. In that I was wrong.

A group advanced to the cage where we stood and Tulema shrank back. Other slaves with us pushed forward boldly. Tulema held my arm. Without any sense of rancor I guessed she saw in me a meal ticket and did not wish to lose me. My sentiments were not to lose her, for she could tell me of the people in the cell when I arrived.

In the mob of slaves pressing up against the bars one man stood out. He was dark-haired, and his hair was cropped. He looked lithe and bronzed and fit. He had about him an alertness, an air of competence, and I

saw the way he stood, loosely and limberly. The people with him pressed against the lenk-wood bars.

“A very fine bunch at the moment, Notor,”[\[1\]](#) a guard was saying to one of the customers. The guard I categorized in a moment: hard, arrogant, whip-wielding, a true slave-master, toadying now to the highborn of the land.

The man he had addressed as “Notor” also merited little attention, being fleshy, bulkily built, with a dark beard and moustaches. His eyes were like those of a leem. He wore a fine tunic of some fancy pale lavender silk, and boots, and at his side swung a sword. He carried a kerchief drenched in perfume. The party with him, other nobles and their ladies, were likewise attired in silks and satins against the heat. They were a chattering, laughing, carefree group of people — and my heart hardened against them, for all I had been as happy and carefree in what, although it was but a bur or so ago, now seemed another world.

“Yes, Nalgre,” said the lord. “I think so. What do you advise for this season? A dozen? Would that be enough for us?” He sniggered. “We are passable shots, Nalgre.”

“The finest shots, Notor Renka,” quoth Nalgre the slave-master. “I believe, with all due deference, you could easily accommodate a full score.”

Tulema tugged me back again.

“Do not press against the bars so, Dray!” I had told her my name, Dray Prescot, without so much as a Koter for title. I had had my fill of titles for the moment.

I shook her hand off, for I wanted to learn as much as might be of the situation in which I had been placed, a problem to solve and someone to save — someone, I had no idea who.

At that instant, when I was about to press forward and so join the mob, slightly separated from the others, clustered around the lithe dark-haired man, I saw beyond the bars a man I knew. He walked with the notables and laughed and glanced over the slaves, and waved a scented handkerchief airily.

The man was Berran, Vadvar of Rifuji, a noble of Vallia who had been a secret member of the third party, and who had led his men to the aid of Naghan Furtway to fight at The Dragon's Bones. I had thought him dead. Now he was here. I wondered how many others of the leaders of the abortive coup had fled to Havilfar.

Feeling it was prudent not to be recognized I stepped back away from the bars. I must have stepped smartly, for Tulema let out a squeal, and I realized I had trodden on her toes. I do not apologize, so I said: "Who is that man with the dark hair and handsome face? A slave who looks unlike a slave?"

She recovered quickly. From the corner of my eye I could see the Notor Renka and his party, and with them Berran, moving away with the slave-master, so that danger had passed.

"He is a guide. They are brave men — I wish—" She swallowed. Her face wore a drawn look of misery. "I am frightened to go with them. I can offer nothing — but everyone says they can save us."

Chapter Four

Manhunters of Faol

A few quick questions established just what was going on here on the island of Faol.

Slaves were taken from the cell and, now that I understood, I was not surprised to see the willingness with which they went. They tried to hide that eagerness, they tried to dissimulate, but for all that they fairly skipped out of the cell. They were not happy merely because they were being let out of a cell. Their joy ran in deeper channels.

The man Tulema had called a guide went with them, and I could see him trying to hush his companions, and for a space they would slouch along like dejected slaves, only to go pushing on toward the slave barracks at the far end of the clearing. Guards surrounded them, harsh, vicious men in the leaf-green tunics, with whips and swords and spears.

The notables who had done their shopping had gone.

They were not here on Faol buying slaves.

They were on holiday.

They might even — and I hoped Zair might have mercy on them for so abusing a great word — they might say they were on a Jikai.

For these slaves would be hunted.

They were quarry.

On the morrow, given clothes and a knife apiece, they would be let loose in the jungles of Faol, and then the nobles and their ladies, dressed up in fancy hunting clothes, would take after them. Oh, it would be great sport. They'd hunt the slaves right across the island, making great sport of it all, shouting "Hai, Jikai!" like as not.

I felt sick.

That human men and women could so debase themselves frightened me. No wonder the men of Aphrasöe so passionately wished to cleanse the planet Kregen, to give it honor and dignity, to remove forever the stain of slavery.

One tiny spark of hope there was, one ray of hope in all this morass of horror and ugliness.

That hope made the slaves walk out so eagerly on what would be a dreadful chase through the jungles, hunted and slain for sport.

For the guards had no way of knowing that the young men the slaves called guides would lead the hunted creatures to safety.

Tulema told me.

"The guides are very brave men, Dray! They can find their way through the jungles, and they can lead the

people out to safety! And then, they come back here, through the tunnels in the rock, at the back of the caves, they return to lead out more slaves to freedom!”

“They are brave, Tulema,” I said.

“Oh, yes! They take who they can, but they are promised rewards for their help, and I cannot reward anyone, for my parents are dead and I was a dancer in a dopa den, and I am afraid . . .”

A thought occurred to me.

“Why does not everyone escape out through the tunnels in the caves?”

She shook her head. “The ways are terrible and fraught with danger. The shafts are steep. The stone crumbles. Men can slide down, no one can climb up.”

Well, I could be sure that slaves had tried to get out that way, and had failed. Slaves do many things to escape. The fear of death will not stop them, only failure of a scheme will hold them back from escape.

An old crone wandered across the cell, sweeping with a rustly broom of twigs, cleaning up. Everyone moved out of her way. She was not a human being, and here I saw for the first time a member of the race of Miglish, the Miglas, who inhabit a large and important island off Havilfar.

“Get out of the way, you onker!” said one of the slaves, pushing the crone. She spat back at him and waved her broom, her long tangled hair about her face.

“May Migshaanu the All-Glorious turn your bones to jelly and your teeth black in your mouth and may she

strike you with the pestilence and your eyes dribble down your cheeks, you cowardly nulsh!”

The Miglish crone waved her broom, whose stiff twigs were no more wildly tangled than her dark hair. The slave fell back, but still he mocked, and, indeed, the Migla looked a strange and unwholesome sight. She wore a gray slave breech-clout and a gray sacking garment. Her words tumbled out in a torrent. Tulema pulled me back, saying, “She is an evil old witch, Dray!”

The Migla swiped her broom at the dusty floor and tottered across to the lenk-wood bars where a guard in the leaf-green opened the narrow, barred door for her. She went out, still complaining, her thin bent back hard and angular beneath the sackcloth. She was evidently a tame slave and employed to clean up. Truth to tell, cleaning up was always necessary in these slave pens of Faol.

The slave who had pushed her spat on the floor.

He was a fine upstanding young man, with a UMBER body on which the muscles showed long and supple, clear evidence that he could fight his way to the choicest parts of vosk, the fattest and juiciest onions, the best knuckle of bread. Tulema glanced at him, and away. He stared boldly at her, and walked over, moving with an arrogant lilt to him, a cock of the chin.

“I have not seen you before, shishi,” he said, and he smiled with the wide meaning smile of a young man who imagines he knows all there is to know of the world and its wicked ways.

Shishi is a word I do not much care for. It carries certain connotations when spoken in that way by a man to a girl, and is far from respectful. It had been used by various men to Delia when we were in captivity and most of the men who had so spoken to her were dead. I started to say something, in my usual intemperate way, but Tulema put a quick hand on my arm and spoke loudly over my words.

“There are many slaves here, dom. It is no wonder you have not seen me.” And then, with meaning, she added: “Why have you not gone with a guide to freedom? You are a strong man—”

“Yes, I am strong.”

And, there and then, to my amazement, he started in on a series of callisthenic exercises, bulging his muscles, striking poses, making his body an exhibition of muscular strength.

I did not laugh, for, as you know, I do not laugh often. Although, looking back, I see I seemed to do nothing else but laugh during that wonderful time in Vondium when Delia and I were first married.

“This man is a Khamorro of the land of Herrell,” Tulema whispered to me, her eyes wide and fearful. “They know a very terrible means of breaking men’s bones. Do not, Dray, I beg you, even think of fighting him.”

“Do not be frightened of him,” I said.

“You do not understand! I do not know what kham he may have reached, but if you touch him he will kill you.”

About to make some noncommittally brave and no doubt foolish reply, I stopped my wagging tongue. A girl had walked into our cell and approached the bars, and stood staring out in hopeless longing upon the mingled opaline rays of the twin suns. There can be no shame about nakedness among slaves, for between us we did not own so much as a pocket kerchief to cover ourselves, but this girl's stance, the way her arm reached up to clasp a lenken bar, the long line of her body, moved me. Her hair waved in a bright and genuine golden color about her shoulders, and her face, pallid and clear, revealed a beauty that seemed to light up the dank dark cave-cell.

I fancied I remembered the glorious golden hair shining as she ran from the cell on my arrival, when I had thrown the whip-wielding slave-master.

The Khamorro, after taking my measure, as he must have supposed, and seeing that hesitation on my part, thereafter ignored me and fell into conversation with Tulema. I looked at them both and, for the sake of an honor that has often been a sore trial to me, as you know, vowed that if he troubled her I would break his neck for him, despite his secret knowledge.

If I simply walked up to the golden-haired girl and began to talk to her, she might think my intentions were the same as the Khamorro's toward Tulema. I was saved a solution to that dilemma by the entry of another girl, beautiful and lithe, but with a yellow hair that in its dustiness and lack of shine could in nowise compare

with the golden glory of the first girl, who stood now so sadly at the lenken bars.

“A princess!” said this second girl, in a high and mocking voice. “The proud Lilah says she is a princess! Is not this a great joke?”

Slaves can relish a joke, if it suits their somber moods, as well as anyone else. And, too, most of these slaves knew that with the help of the guides they would win free of the chase and so escape with their lives and liberty. So they were in nowise as downcast a mood as are slaves who see before them only another day’s toil as hard and agonizing as today’s, and after that another, and another, and the only surcease in death.

The beautiful girl with the golden hair did not turn around. She spoke in a low musical voice that gave full expression to the beauty of language universal Kregish undeniably possesses.

“I am a princess, Tosie, in all truth. But what good that will do me I cannot say.”

“You cunning liar!” This Tosie was furious, now, her head thrown back, her hands on hips, her whole stance indicative of intense personal anger and frustration. “You promise the guides much money and great rewards if they will guide you out, pretending to be a princess. Well, then!” Tosie’s face took on a triumphant look as she screamed: “If you are the Princess Lilah, then I am the Queen Tosie! You should bow and scrape to me! I’ll promise the guides anything to take me away from this awful place!”

Tosie was no queen, that appeared certain. But if this Lilah was a princess, then she was the one the Star Lords wished me to rescue. What their ends might be I did not know, but the rescue of this glorious Princess Lilah was a task to which they had set my hands. I would not fail them; I must not, for until I had completed their mission I would not be allowed to return to Vallia and my Delia, my Delia of Delphond.

“It is because I am Princess of Hyrklana that I may not do as you intend, Tosie. I can only offer rewards to the guides when I return home to my father’s palace.”

“And I shall offer rewards, too! Money! Lands! Zorcas! Totrixes! Women — and money again! Whatever you offer I will double. If you think you will escape and leave me here to be hunted, alone and without a guide, you think wrongly!”

A blast on the stentors’ horns cut into the argument. The sound was different from the call that had driven everyone in such great panic out of the feeding hall and into the cells to crowd up against the lenken bars. The slaves began that surging movement, shouting and pushing, and all rushed off toward the feeding cave. By this time I fancied a juicy chunk of vosk would not come amiss, so I started off, too.

I looked back.

Tosie, who called herself a queen and was probably a dancing girl in a dopa den like Tulema, had gone. Tulema herself was just running out, assisted by the Khamorro. I would find her again, if necessary, but now,

with the knowledge that it was the Princess Lilah I must rescue, I could let Tulema go.

Lilah turned listlessly from the bars.

“Come, Princess,” I said. “If you would eat we must hurry to the feeding cave.”

She looked at me.

Her eyes were blue, and though I could guess they would normally be bright and clear and frank, now they were clouded with suspicion.

Before she could say what so clearly lay in her mind, I said swiftly, “There will be a struggle for the food, Princess. We must hurry.”

She stood there, drooping and defenseless, and the thought occurred to me that if ever my Delia found herself in this position again — which Zair forbid! — there would be a man ready to protect her without thought of reward.

“You — call me *princess*—”

“I see you are. Now, come.”

She went with me through the barred cells and passageways and so into the feeding cave. We were too late. Most of the other slaves had already taken what they could snatch and the remainder were clustered about the dilse tureens.

My instincts were to knock down the nearest person eating a hunk of vosk and chewing on onions and snatch the food away. Perhaps I was growing weak and feeble, but I did not. I said, “We must eat dilse today, Princess. At the next feeding time you must run very swiftly.”

She made a small dismissive gesture with her hand. I noticed her fingers, very long and slender, and I tried to imagine them plunging into the heaped food on the floor and bunching into tiny fists to strike away those who would snatch the food first. She would not starve, but she would grow lean of face and listless on dilse.

We were fed at regular intervals, I guessed every five burs or so — something like three and a half hours — and the reason for this lavish expenditure of food was quite clear. Whoever owned this island of Faol, where slaves were run and hunted as quarry, had to please his customers; and these came from many islands and lands even from beyond Havilfar, so the slaves must be well fed and active to furnish good sport.

I would relish a short interview with this fellow.

At the next feeding call, when the stentor horns boomed and clamored through the passageways and cells cut in the rocks, I grabbed Lilah's hand and fairly dragged her along. Many slaves clustered about the entrance to the feeding hall, of course, just before they guessed the call would come, and these rushed in first. I plowed my way through them and halfway to the mess of food let Lilah go and lunged on.

How had my pride been humbled!

Here I was, a naked slave grubbing and fighting for food scattered on a filthy floor, when only a day ago I had eaten all the delicacies my heart could desire — and then I shut all self-pity from my mind. I hardened — and I am only too prone to being a soft man in many things, as you know.

Lilah accepted the food. She might have thought to stand on her dignity, but when she saw the dripping hunk of vosk I snatched up, and felt the firm lusciousness of the onions, smelled the cheese — it was a dreadful smell, in truth, but it was food — she could not hold back. She ate with a strange pathetic mixture of ravenous hunger and a finicky set of table manners. I just wolfed the stuff down.

And then, again, that clamoring of stentor horns broke out afresh and with wild cries all the slaves ran out of the feeding cave to press themselves against the lenken bars.

But I had not quite finished the chunk of hard bread, for in my lazy, wealthy way back in Vallia I had grown used to the finest food, and so was slow with this lenklike loaf.

Lilah said, “Dray — we must run! It is the call for the jiklos! Hurry!”

She might know what in hell a jiklo was; I did not, and I wanted to finish this confounded chunk of iron-hard bread. Lilah was terrified. She did not catch my arm, as Tulema would have done, to drag me away. She started for the exit, and turned, her golden hair swirling, and cried, “Hurry, Dray! Hurry!”

Chewing on the bread I walked after her.

Truly, pride is a foolish item in a man’s baggage!

I heard the jiklos, then.

I heard an eerie, spine-chilling, frightful, and obscene hissing and howling, a scrabbling of claws, the

rush of bodies. Lilah screamed and ran. I turned to look back.

A glimpse, I had, a glimpse back through a freshly opened entrance to the cave. Ruby light spilled out from the space beyond.

Through that bloody radiance dreadful forms ran on all fours over the filthy floor. I saw matted hair crested into upswept combs, and trailing out to the rear. I saw flashing eyes. Teeth glinted like rows of daggers. Hands and feet pounded the dust and filth of the floor. Red tongues lolled. The jiklos howled at sight of me — and then Lilah was there, pulling me on. We stumbled back through the entrance to the feeding cave and iron bars clashed down, almost crushing us.

The leading jiklo threw himself against those bars, slavering. His eyes regarded me with the utmost malevolence.

I looked at him.

And I saw what he was.

I felt the sick nausea welling up.

So I first made the acquaintance of the Manhounds of Antares.

Sorry, but 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.

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