

**DRAY PRESCOT: 24**

**REBEL OF  
ANTARES**

**KENNETH BULMER**

writing as

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**A Mushroom eBook**



**REBEL OF ANTARES**

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**a Mushroom eBooks sample**

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## The Suns of Scorpio

Dray Prescott is a man scarred by a destiny that has hurled him four hundred light-years from Earth to the exotic world of Kregen orbiting the double star Antares. Assured of long life and vigorous health by the well-meaning Savanti nal Aphrasöe, now he is entrusted with the task of reuniting the island empire of Vallia and resisting the ambitions of the Empire of Hamal. From time to time he is called upon by the superhuman Star Lords to serve their mysterious purposes, and his relationship with them is entering upon a new phase.

To survive on Kregen Dray Prescott needed to be strong, resourceful, cunning and courageous. Yet there are more profound depths to his character than are called for by mere savage survival, and the tasks set to his hands and his experiences have changed him markedly. Educated in the harsh environment of Nelson's Navy, he is a man above middle height, with brown hair and eyes, the quiet movements of a hunting cat and a physique of exceptional power. Although he describes his face as "an ugly old beakhead," other sources state that his face is "noble and fierce." Expert with weapons and a master swordsman, he knows his

own limitations. That he so often transcends them is a testament to his attitude toward life.

Prescot's loyalty to his friends is unbreakable. In the island realm of Hyrklana, off the east coast of the southern continent of Havilfar, he may now return home to Vallia. Many of the incidents of his varied career on Kregen are now falling into place in the grand design, and the reasons for his involvement are becoming clearer. At once, as is the happy way on Kregen, he is hurled headlong into new adventures under the Suns of Scorpio.

# Chapter one

## Sorcerers in the Souk

I have often been in two places at once; the superhuman powers of the Star Lords can arrange that little trick without trouble. Less frequently have there been two different versions of myself in the same place at the same time.

Walking along in the bustle of the city of Huringa, I was under the impression that to solve half of the problems confronting me I had only to bid farewell to my comrades Tyfar and Jaezila, secure an airboat and fly home to Vallia. The other half of the problems limped along spryly at my side, chattering away, and without a doubt presented the much more intractable half.

Unmok the Nets and I had become partners in the wild-animal business, dealing fairly with each other, and he expected us to set off on a new voyage to collect a fresh selection of savage beasts for the Arena. If ever

there had been an occasion for two of me to be in the same place at the same time — then it was now.

As we passed under a balcony from which a cascade of multicolored flowers scented the air, I said, “Don’t look back, Unmok. There is an unpleasant-looking fellow dogging our footsteps and I think he means us a mischief.”

That, then, was an extra little problem for the evening.

Presently Unmok contrived a glance back as we neared the arched entrance to the Souk of Trifles. The twin Suns of Scorpio were almost gone and the sky blazed in cloud-banded jade and ruby.

“A nasty, devilish-looking customer, Jak.”

“Just walk along quietly. We’ll dodge into the Souk of Trifles. It might be interesting to play this fellow. Find out why he follows us like a burr in a blanket.”

“Aye, it will be fun to bedevil him—”

“I said nothing about fun.”

Unmok had no need to laugh. He might be a little six-limbed Och not above four feet six inches tall, and with a stump in place of his middle left limb; he was accustomed to handling the ferocious beasts employed in the Arena here.

“I know you, Jak the Shot,” he said, sidestepping a man rolling an amphora along, single-mindedly concentrating on his rhythm. “You will play him and suck him dry, aye, and have fun in the doing of it.”

“And if he is an assassin?”

“You have your sword, as I have mine.”

Torches threw ragged light into the shadows cast by the declining suns. People bustled everywhere, intent at this time on finishing up their labors and enjoying themselves, and on offering a multitude of services to entertain and to relieve their customers of their cash. The Arena had, this day, remained empty and silent. People were dry-throat thirsty for sensation. At the entrance of the Souk, situated between three-story buildings of gray brick, the nearest stall furnished, as it were, a foretaste of what lay beyond. This stall, partially covered by a striped awning, piled with ankle-bells whose qualities were touted in un-bell-like bellowings by a woman whose bodice strained with lung power, offered us concealment as we struck off down the Souk. At once we were engulfed in a jostling tide of humanity.

“Perhaps,” said Unmok as we edged our way through the throngs, “there are others with him.”

“The thought is in my mind.”

The noise of hundreds of people shouting and laughing, chaffering and bartering, bounced from the crystal roof. With the last of the daylight, the mineral-oil lamps were lit. They depended on brass chains, high above, and as the agile monkeylike girls and boys clambered among the girders and chains with nerveless skill, the light within the Souk brightened. The vista of those long lines of light, the hanging chains, brought a vivid image of the Swinging City of Aphasoe to my mind.

“Well, I can’t see anyone else with the rast.”

“They’ll hang back and await his signal — if there are any more assassins with him.” I could feel the soreness

of the wounds I had taken still on me. I would not welcome another fight. All day Unmok and I had spent resting at our camp well outside the city walls, and we needed that rest. Froshak the Shine and the slaves waited for us, and Unmok had insisted he would go with me into Huringa. As for our gold, that was buried just outside the camp. If these assassins dogging our footsteps wanted that, they would be unlucky.

“So,” I said, continuing the thought, “what does this fellow want of us?”

Unmok dodged a blundering Gon carrying a tray filled with sweetmeats. His little Och face screwed up. “Rather, who would want us killed?”

“Noran, for one. Vad Noran, for falsely taking the credit for fighting the schrepims in his private arena yesterday. His honor was very touchy on the matter.”

“Perhaps. I was convinced when he paid us, for the animals and for the fight, that was the end of it. But you never can tell with these nobles.”

“Aye.”

This Vad Noran, a puffed-up bladder, but a bladder with much power, had bought many of the animals Unmok and I had brought into Huringa. When the schrepims, fearsome scaled warriors, had broken free and sought to slay anyone in their path and we had been forced to put them down, Vad Noran had, willy-nilly, been credited with the victory. It had been called a Jikai, a warrior triumph. Perhaps he wanted to shut our mouths, in case we talked and revealed the hollowness of his claims.

An excited bunch of people wearing blue favors crowded in a rowdy uproar, laughing, already very merry, a whole mixture of races united in their partisanship for the Sapphire Grait. The blues rode at the highest point of the victory totems just now, their prianum filled with trophies of triumph. This mob was celebrating and didn't mind who knew.

"The Sapphire Grait! Kaidur!" they yodeled, reeling along, shouting, waving bottles, pushing people out of the way. It was all good-natured fun, and nothing untoward. I looked back.

The man who followed us so tenaciously persisted, waiting by a booth, crossing to the other side of the Souk, forcing his way through folk who, after one look, gave him plenty of room. He was an apim, a member of Homo sapiens, wearing nondescript brown clothes, a brass-studded jerkin and pleated kilt and with a Hyrklanian hat pulled low. I caught only the jut of a dark beard. He wore sword belts strapped diagonally over his shoulders.

"He sticks with us." Unmok's middle left stump gave that small characteristic twitch, a reflex he could not control, a pointer to his state of mind. That limb, the middle, set between the upper and the lower, is used as either a leg or an arm by Ochs, who are sprightly, agile folk. Unmok's middle left had been chewed off by a wild animal — before he earned the sobriquet of Unmok the Nets.

"He knows his trade."

"And I know mine. He is ripe for netting, that one."

Along each side of the Souk extended arcades, each a heaped treasure-house of Trifles. Extending the illumination of the high suspended lamps, myriad torches and cheap mineral lamps cast ruddy light upon the scene. Multicolored clothes, the glint of jewelry, the massy banks of hanging carpets, the furtive glitter of teeth and eyes, the smile that concealed, the merry jingle of coins, the uproar of bartering, all the normal everyday chaos of a busy bazaar flowed about us. The smells were quite comfortable, spicy, tangy, quite unlike some of the more odiferous of the Souks of Huringa.

“Out at the other end, Unmok, then double back and—”

“And find out what his tripes look like.”

A sharp-toothed angerim, all hair and ears, spat at us for jostling his stall, where an untidy mixture of pots and pans and cutlery rang and chimed together. Angerims as a race of people are singularly messy in their life-style.

“Easy, dom,” said Unmok quickly. “No harm done.”

“Fuddled Ochs, clumsy apims,” said the angerim. And then: “Buy a pot — here is a fine brass pot chased in Cervantern style, cheap for you, doms, a quality piece for your fire.”

We walked on past hanging drapes of cheap cloth of brash color and pattern festooning the next stall. The angerim spat after us, wiping swatches of hair across his ears. The man who patiently dogged our footsteps padded on, keeping to the shadows.

The uproar within the Souk of Trifles continued and increased. A multitude of people from many of the fabulous races of Kregen presented an unforgettable spectacle, vivid with life and energy, laughing, bartering, quarreling, shouting, but alive, alive! At the far end the Souk opened out onto the Street of Running Werstings. Other bazaars riddled this area with noise and color and confusion. We passed under an overhanging balcony protruding from the level over the arcades, which are often called Monhan terraces. A woman leaned over and emptied a pot. To her evident disappointment, the pot's contents missed us. The splash cleared a circle.

A mob of people running wildly and screaming in fear scattered back from the exit to the Souk. They were all a mixture of races and colored favors and they pushed on blindly, their faces contorted, their eyes staring, their mouths open, screaming. The throngs picked up the panic. They began to recoil, and turn, and join in the flight. An enormous Rapa whose beaked face stuck up, surrounded by bristling feathers, blundered past and knocked Unmok flying. The little Och skidded back into a confusion of basket-protected amphorae. He flailed about, trying to get his balance, as the crowds streamed past. I had to skip smartly to get out of the line of stampede, and hitched myself up under a beam from the arcade.

“Hold on, Unmok! Stop thrashing about like a stranded fish.”

“That Rapa — I’ll—”

Unmok got his feet under him and staggered up and was immediately knocked over again by a fleeing Rhaclaw, whose immense domed head tried pathetically to twist on the pitiful plate of gristle that passed for its neck to stare back. The Rhaclaw wore armor and swords, and he ran with the rest, ran in blind panic.

The words the crowd was shouting spurted up mingled with the shrieking.

“Sorcerers! Wizards! Run! Flee! *Sorcerers!*”

Well, I generally steered clear of sorcerers myself, unless they were friendly.

The scattering of basket-protected amphorae dislodged by Unmok at last made a kind of breastwork. He staggered out, wild, flailing his arms about. When folk with three or four arms do that it makes you blink. He looked down the Souk and then up at me as I dropped down to join him.

“The rast is still there, Jak. Crouched in a doorway on this side—”

“I saw him. And his fellows are with him now.”

“Aye.”

“Do you fancy assassins or sorcerers?”

“You give a man a hard choice. If there is nothing else for it—”

“Unless you can batter a way through the walls.”

He took the suggestion seriously, in that dour way some Ochs have, but he knew the thickness of the walls needed to uphold the overarching crystal. “Unless we find a door, we’ll never knock a hole through in time.”

“I judge the same.”

The rout streaming past thinned and a last few crazed individuals fled past, sobbing, casting agonized glances back. We looked along the Souk under the lights and the crystal roof toward the end that gave egress onto the Street of Running Werstings.

Two beings stood there in the puddled light, facing each other. It was a Confrontation.

One of the figures stood tall and robust and encased in a solidly glittering robe. A splendid figure, a dominating figure, one who commanded and knew nothing of disobedience, one who wore splendid vestments of silk and gems and gold thread, this one was a Sorcerer of the Cult of Almuensis. For the briefest of moments I fancied he was San Yagno, who had disappeared down the Moder, but he was not. His face, lined with the seasons of knowledge and power, bore a fierce, predatory look as he intoned the spells from the great book in his beringed fingers. The book was covered in lizard skin, gold-bound, gold-locked and fastened to his belt by golden chains. From this book, this *hyr-lif*, came the sorcerer's very real powers.

The Sorcerer of the Cult of Almuensis sparkled with the radiance of power within the lights of the bazaar.

The other figure presented the most marked contrast.

This was an Adept of the Doxology of San Destinakon. His gown swathed his figure in a drab but bewildering array of brown and black lozenges. The hood peaked to his right, for a woflovol perched on his left shoulder, the little batlike animal's membranous wings now extended and fluttering in echo of the rage suffusing his master.

The woflovol was chained to the Adept's waist by a slender bronze linkage. In the sorcerer's right hand, a hand devoid of ornamentation, a wooden-hafted bronze flail, a scourge, was uplifted, for the followers of San Destinakon are not above the outrage of physical chastisement. Now the bronze flail hung limp, but it quivered with the passions of the Adept.

Two figures in marked contrast, yes. But they held and controlled power, undeniably. Between them, shimmering and sparkling, grew a dish-shaped circle of light. Constantly changing in color and texture, shooting forth rays of brilliance, the center of the conflict between the two sorcerers shifted back and forth and spat fire, crackling with the dissipation of energy.

Unmok gulped.

"An Almuensin and a Destinakon! This is no place for an honest man, Jak. Let us—"

"Loosen your sword and let us hit the damned assassins first—"

"Yes! As Ochenshum is my witness, let us die by an assassin's hand as by the malignancy of a wizard!"

Just like Unmok the Nets. I knew him to be brave and loyal, but brave only when he had to be and loyal only to those he valued. If he could have paid some of his good red gold to a fine gang of cutthroats to insure his safety out of here, he would have done so, faster without another thought. Well, and wasn't that the sensible course?

“Sink me!” I said. “We won’t get ourselves killed. Come on. Let us hit them fast and break through and then—”

“*Run!*”

“Aye!”

Then a noise broke about our heads like the last trump. The colossal smash of sound bore in on us and made our heads jump on our shoulders. I thought the sound more like a battery of thirty-pounder Parrotts all firing together right beside us than a battery of twelve-pounder Napoleons. The air in the Souk was thick and the noise bellowed along, amplified and channeled and directed personally, so it seemed, at every individual’s eardrums. But, on Kregen, they had not yet developed gunpowder or guns. This was no battery of cannon firing, this was sorcery venting in deafening discharges the overflowing plasma of thaumaturgy. I glanced up.

The crystal roof split.

In spinning sheets of crystal, in razor-edged plates of shimmering fireglass, the roof collapsed. It rippled as though shaken. The metal supports buckled. Over an area a full hundred paces long and the full width of the Souk, the roof fell in.

Unmok let out a screech and dived for the upended barrow that had contained the amphorae. I wasted no time in joining him. Together, heads down, we crouched in the hellish din.

Sharp slivers of crystal slashed into the paving. Chips flew like shrapnel. The uproar smashed at us so that we gasped for air. The barrow and the amphorae clattered

with the scattering crystal chips. Amphorae exploded. Wine gushed forth, staining the basketwork and the straw and running gleaming red across the paving. The whole place quivered as though in the grip of an earthquake.

The avalanche of crystal thundered down for what seemed an eternity of Kregan nights and days. At last in a final clashing of shining slivers the noise ceased. Unmok lifted his head.

“If that is what the end of the world is going to be like, I do not believe I will wait around to see it.”

“Sensible,” I said, brushing dust from my clothes.

We crawled out from under the barrow and shook our heads, bloated with sound.

The order in which we took stock of the situation might have reflected a mutual dependence in a coming battle; it could just as easily have revealed our nervous preoccupations. Unmok peered through the swirls of dust toward the two wizards. I looked back into the Souk for the assassins.

Assassins are hardy souls, the stikitches’ trade being of a demanding nature, and two leather- and bronze-clad men still sheltered in an arcade opening, peering out at us. Their beards showed black against the pallor of their skin. The rest of the gang had fled; at least, they were nowhere in sight. Leaving my observation of the assassins and that problem, I turned to look where Unmok stared, rigid with a terror he made valiant attempts to conceal.

The two sorcerers had by no means finished their altercation. The disc of light spun between them, coruscating and throwing off streams of radiant matter as though a Catherine Wheel spun to a crazy destruction. The shards of light struck the walls of the Souk with thunderclap noises. Chunks of masonry were blasted away. Dust sifted among the wreaths of smoke.

“Let us—” said Unmok, and he swallowed and wet his lips before he could continue. “Let us get away!”

I nodded. The wizards’ quarrel was no concern of ours and we were like to be harmed by its side effects. The assassins presented a simpler and more approachable problem, for all that I had looked their way first. I have no truck with sorcerers unless I count them as friends or must use them despite all.

We began to move back down the Souk.

The crackle of splintered crystal under our feet sounded like mahogany leaves. The assassins eased out from their arcade.

“Two,” said Unmok. “I think we will be able.”

The assassins bared their swords, the weapons glinting in the light of the sorcerer’s quarrel.

The Souk presented a melancholy spectacle, empty of people apart from us four, with the paving strewn with smashed Trifles, stalls overturned, bales of cloth unrolled and abandoned in serpentine meanderings, smashed glass and pottery, feathers and ivory and knickknacks scattered everywhere. The noise and light at our backs persisted. We moved on.

“Are they assassins?” asked Unmok, as the two men ahead of us hesitated. They began to withdraw, steadily, their weapons lifted, going slowly, but they drew back before us as we advanced.

Without looking back, and just to cheer up Unmok’s little Och heart, I said, “They need not be retreating because of us.”

Unmok burst out with a comment that almost made me smile. He whirled to look back.

“The sorcerers still fight, Jak — you devil! You had me going then...”

“True.”

“Tell me why I shouldn’t throw you into one of my wild-beast cages.”

“Riddles were never one of my easiest marks.”

The assassins — if they were stikitches — halted again and then once more drew off. They moved with purpose.

“It could be they seek to lure us on—”

“On to our doom!” Unmok cast another look back. “Well, there is no getting out that way.”

Keeping a very sharp lookout in all the nooks and crannies of the Souk, bathed in that supernatural fire, we pressed on.

The occult radiance drove our shadows ahead of us, long and dark and leaping, seeming to draw us on as the fires forced flames and smoke into the Souk. The mineral-oil lamps cast gobbets of flame as they fell in the continuing crashing destruction of the roof. We were running now, leaping obstacles and diving past

overtaken stalls as the crystal burst and the lamps showered down and the fires raged.

We must have looked like two phantom figures bursting through veils of smoke from some time of forbidden lore, some realm of ancient magic. The assassins hovered, their steel glinting. Then they swung away, looking back for only heartbeats; Unmok ripped out his sword and waved it — and the assassins fled.

“That,” said Unmok with immense satisfaction, “has seen them off.”

“By Harg!” I said, leaping forward. “I want to know more about this — who sent them — what the hell they’re up to!”

“Jak—”

The backs of the assassins leaped and dived among the Trifles scattered over the Souk. The roof fell in successive crashings. The fire crackled. Smoke streamered in long layers, stinging the eyes and making us cough. I roared after the fleeing assassins.

The whole area had been cleared of people, and any thoughts that the first roof-falls had finished the business were now seen to be ill-founded. What the sorcerers had begun the fire and the domino effect along the roof would finish.

One of the men running ahead of us skidded on a mess of squishes upended from a basket. His arms flailed. He staggered into a rack of cheap zorca trappings, and before he could recover I put my fist around his neck. He squeaked like a rabbit.

“Let me go!” he shrieked. “The sorcerers—”

I let my dagger make an acquaintance with the space between his third and fourth ribs. “Do not fret over the wizards, dom. They quarrel between themselves. You should rather fear for your fate—” the dagger twitched “—here and now.”

He gasped, twisting, trying to kick, trying to bite. I moved the dagger.

“Tell me who sent you, and I will let you live.”

“I cannot—”

“Very well. You have your stikitche honor. You may adhere to your code and die, here and now. I do not care. I will find your comrades. One will tell me.”

“You devil!”

“So I am told.”

“I cannot tell you!”

“You mean that for a short moment you will not.”

“Listen, dom — take that dagger away. It is sharp!”

“A blunt dagger is like a grave without a corpse.”

He knew that old Kregish saying, which may be taken in two ways, both of them apposite. He went limp in my fist.

“If—”

“Just speak up.”

“I am no stikitche.”

Unmok arrived then and made a disgusted sound.

“We guessed as much. As assassins you would make passable dung-sweepers.”

“So,” I said, “Vad Noran sent you. And you’ve failed him.”

I felt the quiver of him in my grip. “I did not tell you that! I did not! As Havil is my witness, I did not speak!”

I gave him a resounding kick up the backside and let him go. He had merely confirmed what we suspected. I bellowed after him as he scampered off.

“If you dare to face Noran, tell him we will keep our silence. We will keep that and the gold. Tell him.”

He did not answer, did not look back. He just ran.

Unmok rubbed his middle right across his face; his upper right still gripped his sword. “Now that I’ve seen him close to, I do recognize him. He’s one of Noran’s men, all right. They call him Hue the Grasshopper. But the others with him...”

“Of a tougher frame of mind, I would think. But if they are not assassins, I, for one, am profoundly grateful.”

There was no need for me to elaborate. Once stickitches take out a contract, they will, within the framework of their so-called honor codes, fulfill it, or arrange the recompense on annulment. If I was to do what I had to do in Huringa, I did not want a horde of hairy, unwashed assassins breathing down my neck all the time.

What I had to do now was to find some way of taking my leave of Unmok the Nets so that I could bid farewell to Tyfar and Jaezila. If one problem had been resolved the rest remained.

All the same...

“I wonder—” I said as we dusted ourselves off and started off toward the far end of the Souk. “I wonder what the quarrel was between the two sorcerers.”

Unmok gave a little cluck of sound, a dutifully respectful and at the same time dismissive appraisal of all wizardly doings.

“Who can say? They are unto themselves — thank all the gods.”

People began to move about at the far end, creeping out of hiding places, standing up to look with bewildered horror upon the catastrophe. The fires burned fiercely at our backs. We went on and found an arcade with an opening onto a narrow side alley. One or two people evidenced a desire to talk to us; we had no wish to engage them in conversation. By Krun, no!

The fires burst through between the empty walls and threw orange and crimson weals against the evening sky. We dodged along the alley and turned right and then left between shuttered buildings and came out onto the Street of Condiments where people stood about, staring up, talking among themselves, watching the fires. The conflagration would be brought under control by fat Queen Fahia’s officials, for like most monarchs of important cities, Fahia kept up services to deal with emergencies of this kind.

Ashes blew on the evening breeze. We went through the throngs, their eternal chatter about the Arena for the moment forgotten, and thought about a wet.

“My throat is as dry as a Herrelldrin Hell,” said Unmok.

“There’s a swinging flagon.”

We went into the low-arched opening and sat at a wooden table, and the Fristle fifi brought us a jug and

two flagons. Unmok poured and we drank. By Vox! I was thirsty. My Och companion scattered a few copper coins on the table, a handful of obs, and we refilled the flagons.

“Talking of money,” said Unmok, which was a perfectly logical process of thought for him, “I am in poor case to see Avec. He will think my talk of gold a cod to catch him.” He started again to bang at his clothes and to pull and tweak them about to make them fit better.

“We have the gold now, Unmok, and no man will quibble when his hand jingles the bag of yellows. Just tell him straight out.”

“I will. You are right.”

Unmok the Nets was a wily enough fellow when it came to money matters, and his banking connections with Avec Parlin, I fancied, would not altogether favor the banker. Unmok’s burning desire now was to buy a cage voller, an airboat fitted for the carriage of wild beasts. With such an airboat in his possession, with his connections, he ought to make money like wildfire.

The Fristle fifi in her yellow apron — for she was not a slave — came over with a wooden tray filled with odds and ends of munchables, and we popped a few into our mouths and chewed as we talked. The wine, a middling Stuvan, lowered in the jug.

“Avec will know the best bargains,” said Unmok, with confidence. “We need a large vessel, but she must be economical to run. A few deldys more on the initial costs to insure that will pay dividends.”

I fretted within myself, for I had more or less promised Unmok I would ship out with him on his next voyage, and yet I could not in all conscience do so. I knew that, although my own country of Vallia was in good and capable hands, I wanted to return there and finish up the business of uniting the land and turning out the villains who had so destroyed and brought low the Empire of Vallia. I sipped wine to conceal the turmoil of my thoughts, and Unmok burred cheerfully on, already in command of his famous cage voller and soaring through the skies with a full cargo of fearsome, snarling, savage beasts.

Then he stopped talking, and his jowly Och face changed, a frown of concentration drawing down his brows.

“Hue the Grasshopper — Vad Noran’s man you lifted up to inspect — may not have been a stikitche, being at best a stable hand. But the man who followed us, dogging our footsteps — he was an altogether more ugly customer.”

So I guessed Unmok had seen this altogether more ugly customer pass outside the tavern, still seeking us, no doubt.

I felt relief.

The persistence of this tracker afforded me a chance to postpone telling Unmok that I would not be shipping out with him, that our partnership was ended unless he chose to go with me. I stood up.

“Jak?”

“You go and see Avec Parlin. Make sure he lays his hands on the very best cage voller we can afford. All the gold is yours. I may not be able to ship out with you—”

“Jak!”

“—But I will see you again. You know you have my word on that. Now, which way did this ugly customer go? I will sort him out—”

“*Jak!*”

“—So there is no good arguing, there’s a good fellow.”

Unmok swelled out those jowly Och chops and tilted his head back to look at me. He did not stand up, and in that I felt the smaller of the two of us.

“He went along toward the Avenue of Sleeths. No, there is no profit in arguing with you. You have secrets, that I do know. I will see Avec and arrange the cage voller. After that — you must decide. As for me, we are partners, and remain so.”

Little, are Ochs, puffy and with six limbs, and not apims like me at all. But in that moment Unmok the Nets displayed a dignity surpassing many and many a blowhard apim lout I have known. And that thought should surprise no one in two worlds.

“Although—” and here Unmok shivered his whole body, as though gripped by a vampire spider of Chem. “Although if you go away I will take it hard. We have been partners for only a small length of time, as these things are measured, and yet in that time we have been through much together. It is of value to me to think of that, and those times...”

“It is of value to me, also. I think you know that.” The lamplight glittered on the bronze studs of Unmok’s jerkin beneath the opened fold of his tunic. “Secrets — yes, we all have secrets. It is difficult for me to explain. I believe you would find it well-nigh impossible to credit. But explain I will. I will.”

His regard of me did not waver.

“May the hands of all the gods rest lightly on you, Jak the Shot, and may Ochenshum have you in his keeping.”

I nodded and without the usual remberrees on parting, I went out and along the street toward the Avenue of Sleeths.

After all, as I tried to tell myself with some hollow vehemence, how could a partnership with a little Och wild-beast catcher and a half-promise to him possibly weigh in the balance against the preoccupations of an emperor and the fate of an empire?

## Chapter two

### A Rapier Twinkles at Dinner

The quarrel between the two sorcerers and the resultant disastrous fire forced animation on the people of the city. Parties of the queen's guards galloped along the streets. The flames continued to light the night sky. People talked of the catastrophe, agog, joying that their premises had not been consumed. I walked along at a good pace, heading west out and along the street toward the Avenue of Sleeths.

Huringa, the capital city of Hyrklana, is not one of the largest capitals of Kregen, but it is impressive in its own way, dominated by the imposing pile of the queen's palace, the Hakal, with the ominous bulk of the Arena, called the Jikhorkdun, alongside. From the Arena the four main boulevards, lighted by gas, stretch toward the cardinal points of the compass. I saw no sign of the man who had been following us and whom I now followed in order, as I had told Unmok, to settle this business. I did not know, myself, if this were true...

Anyway, if I did not find him I was going in the right direction for the promised meeting with Tyfar and Jaezila.

The idea that I ought to take a part in the fire-fighting occurred to me. I dismissed it immediately. The authorities, charged by fat Queen Fahia with fire-fighting duties would be adequately capable. She'd have them thrown to her pet neemus if they were not.

Moving along among the folk out strolling in this early evening preparation period for the night's entertainments, I kept a wary lookout. The fourth moon of Kregen, She of the Veils, sent down smoky pinkish rays, wavering and erratic in the smoke pall, paling beside the lurid glow of the fire. Keeping out of the way of sorcerers had always seemed a sound practice, and this latest imbroglio merely confirmed that. The disc of radiance balanced between the two opposed powers of the wizards and casting off the chunks of incendiary material was in itself a potent force. That occult disc of light is called The Quern of Gramarye. When it grinds opposed magics the very fabric of time and space is distorted and fractured.

The Avenue of Sleeths ran straight between private houses fronted by gardens for over five hundred paces. Here lived some of those inhabitants of Huringa who were bracketed in the middling wealthy class, with slaves and carriages and fine clothes, whose tables were well-laden. Down at the far end, a crossing place where the Street of Sleeths joined the east boulevard was always crowded with idlers and ruffians patronizing the

taverns and inns there. So it was from gentility into abandonment I walked. And still no sign of the fellow who had dogged our footsteps.

Many torches and lanterns lit up the crossing place which formed a kind of square or kyro, and the taverns stood cheek by jowl. Most strollers approached this place, the Kyro of the Happy Calsany, along the boulevard. When the amphitheater turned out after the games, the place became choked. Amid all the uproar I fancied there would be little chance of spotting my man, so I set off directly for the tavern, the Faerling's Feathers, where I was to meet Jaezila and Tyfar.

The great cross of the boulevards, with the Jikhorkdun and the high fortress of the Hakal at the center, imposed a certain order on Huringa's street planning, but the mixtilinear walls made of the alleys and streets in the outer portions of the quarters a mass of interconnected labyrinths. A general assault on this city would be held up there unless airborne troops could land in rear of the defenses.

Wondering why that particular thought had crossed my mind just then, I walked up to The Faerling's Feathers. We of Vallia had no wish to go to war with Hyrklana; quite the reverse. Tyfar and Jaezila were talking together, engrossed in each other's company. I looked at them with great pleasure. And I was come to say good-bye!

They sat at a small table under a climbing vine smothered in blue flowers; above their heads a balcony depended silken shawls and tasseled scarves. The light

from She of the Veils glowed warmly from the stucco wall. The table was set for three; the empty chair waited for me.

I shook my head as though to clear away cobwebs. I knew that saying good-bye to these two would be a wrench, and now that I watched them as they talked so closely, I realized afresh just how much I did not want to part from them. Blade comrades are rare, and I have been blessed and more than blessed with true blade comrades on the wonderful and terrible world of Kregen. For a true blade comrade one would lay down one's own life without a second thought, and for these two, for Jazila and Tyfar, I would — with only the first thought for my Delia to halt me — go through the fire. Delia, Delia of the Blue Mountains, Delia of Delphond, always stood foremost in my thoughts, and against our love I measured all my actions.

The task of saying good-bye would not be easy for another reason. Prince Tyfar, with his shining honor and ideas of upright dealing with all men and women, and Jazila, with her willful ways and quick bright grasp on living, would certainly attempt to detain me. They had work to do here in Huringa for their own country of Hamal. Hamal was at war with my own country of Vallia, and that was all a stupid nonsense; these two were comrades and we had lived and walked close to the edge of death together.

Jazila tossed her head back so that her brown hair rippled all gleaming in the moonlight. She laughed full-throated. And, so laughing, saw me.

“Jak!”

“Well, Jak,” said Tyfar, scraping his chair back and standing up to greet me, “and have you freed yourself of your entanglement outside the city? Do you come to stay with us?”

“Lahal, you two,” I said, walking up and grasping Tyfar’s hand, leaning down to kiss Jaezila. “No. I’m not clear yet.” I sat down and the wine was poured as I pulled the chair forward. “But I joy to see you—”

I had told them only the most superficial account of my true life and circumstances out of necessity. They knew I was happily married, although I had — prudently — given Delia a different name. I had said — and I would not want Delia to learn this too swiftly — that her name was Thylda. That was a good name in Hamal. You see what petty shifts one is driven to when friendship is sullied by these monumentally idiotic politics of war! So they knew that my entanglement outside the city was not with a woman.

I asked after the fliers they had come here to buy, and heard that the work proceeded slowly, for the people of Hyrklana deeply resented having to build airboats for Hamal. Only fear of that great empire on the mainland opposite, and its mad Empress Thyllis, kept the Hyrklanians polite to Hamalese in their midst.

“Although,” said Tyfar, looking flushed and annoyed, “a factory was burned to the ground today — ten fliers were lost. They go in for fires in Huringa, I see.”

I told them that the fire in the Souk of Trifles had been started by two sorcerers quarreling.

“Their damned Quern of Gramarye, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

Now that I had joined them, the slaves could bring the food. One thing was sure, despite the enormous difficulties, when Vallia had triumphed over Hamal — as we would! — we’d stop all this slavery. The transformation of a slave-owning society into a free society was causing difficulties in Vallia, and the problems would be worse in Hamal. But in Opaz’s good time, the task would be done.

Jaezila wore a deep crimson evening robe, just such a gown as Delia had once worn here in Huringa, and with a narrow golden belt from which swung not a silly ornate curved dagger but a solid workmanlike rapier and main gauche. She looked stunning. And yet still she teased Tyfar, and tweaked him and, as I looked at them and saw, she was more attached to him that she probably realized. As for Tyfar, his dark blue evening robe concealed a harness of mesh link, I did not doubt; his rapier and main gauche swung from his belts outside the robe. Under the folds of cloth I also did not doubt he had his axe about him. He was not willingly parted from that axe, was Prince Tyfar of Hamal.

Toward the end of the meal he kept darting puzzled looks over my left shoulder. A wary expression crossed his face and then he returned to the squish pie. But again he looked up. Open and frank, bold and fearless — these words describe Tyfar as he carried himself with us, for we were comrades. With his father, Prince Nedfar, and the high notables, Tyfar tended to the

withdrawn, the aloof. A bookish man, he had taken up the axe as a kind of defiance of those forces seeking to mold him into the run-of-the-mill Hamalese prince. A good man in a library and a good man to have at your back in a fight, Prince Tyfar.

He said, “I think—”

Then he stood up, very quickly, overturning his glass of wine. His rapier snicked out and thrust past my ear as he flung himself forward. I was off my chair and rolling on the ground, without thought. I heard the scream of surprised pain and then I was up, rapier in hand, to see that damned assassin fellow who had been following Unmok and me writhing with Tyfar’s rapier through his guts.

Jaezila’s own sword flicked about, checking the sudden surge of interest from other diners at adjoining tables.

The wretch skewered so neatly fell down. Tyfar withdrew.

“Friend of yours, Jak?”

“My thanks, Tyfar — not exactly. He’s been following us — me — around Huringa tonight. I’m glad I know where he is now.”

“He’s on his way to the Ice Floes of Sicce, that’s where.”

“May his ib rest in peace — although I do not think that likely.”

“Pay the reckoning, Ty, and let’s go.” Jaezila spoke evenly.

“Agreed.”

I started to shuffle coins out and the prince checked me, as he always did in these matters. He was a real prince.

The landlord waddled up, protesting, but a dead man who might or might not be an assassin was no new thing in this Kyro of the Happy Calsany. A few gold coins jingling, a smile and a word or two, and the matter was settled. We were known to be strangers, and rotten damned Hamalese at that, but gold was gold.

We walked away, and Jaezila picked up a ripe shonage to eat as we went along.

So I told them about my dealings with Vad Noran.

“Unmok the Nets and I sold Noran a parcel of wild beasts. We were up at his villa when the slaves broke out.” I didn’t tell him why the slaves had escaped. “Some schrepims were released from their cage and the reptilian warriors went berserk.”

“Schrepims,” said Tyfar. He pursed his lips. “Nasty.”

“Quite. Unmok and I managed to beat them off with the aid of a lion-man, and this great Vad Noran appeared and was given the credit for the fight. We did not care. Unmok just wanted his money and to get out, and the numim escaped, for he had been a slave there. So now, I think, Noran wants to shut our mouths in case we spread the true story. He has been dubbed a great Jikai because of his supposed fight—”

Jaezila laughed, striding along, munching shonage, the juices running down her chin. “It is strange, for we have heard of the Jikai Vad Noran performed. And it was like that!”

“We heard more about this Noran, also,” said Tyfar, and he spoke seriously.

“He builds vollers and no doubt sells the airboats to you?”

“Yes. It was not his factory that was burned to the ground. But—”

“But he seemed most pleased that the vollers had been destroyed.” Jazila wiped juice. “No. Not seemed. He was damned pleased — and it is easy to see why.”

These two blade comrades of mine believed that I worked in secret for the Empress Thyllis — a lie I had been forced to for the sake of friendship and a whole skin — and that I was Hamalese as they were. At least, as Tyfar was. Jazila might not be Hamalese but she labored for that evil empire just the same. So I could say, with a grimace, “Because they hate us.”

“They do hate us. And again, it is easy to see why.”

Once more we were on thin ice. I guessed that Tyfar’s father, Prince Nedfar, did not share the grandiose ideas of conquest harbored by Thyllis. Hamal had extended out to north and south, laying waste lands and islands, sending her iron legions to destroy all the might sent against them. Well, we in Vallia were checking that onward march. But south of Hamal, in the Dawn Lands, the Iron Legions of Hamal surged on in blood and death. The invasion to the west of Hamal into the Wild Lands had been halted some time ago. To the east, across the sea to the island of Hyrklana... Well, would not Hamal seek to conquer Hyrklana in the fullness of time? Unless mad Empress Thyllis was stopped? There

must be many men in Hamal who wished to check the empress and could not. And I had said — or implied — that I worked secretly for Thyllis. Tyfar’s father opposed Thyllis — again in secret. Yes, thin ice, damned thin ice...

“The empress is like a dark center of contagion,” said Jaezila. I looked at her sharply. Tyfar’s face remained wooden. I guessed they had talked long and deeply on this. Now, how was I supposed to react?

“I once said that revolution might not be the way. I once said—”

“Yes, Jak the Sturr?”

“I do not like wars and killing and all the horrors they bring in train. If they could be halted... “ I paused. “If they could, the world would smile again.”

“But Thyllis is strong. My father extends feelers, but he must move cautiously.” Tyfar looked at me and his brows drew down. “We are blade comrades, Jak. Yet you work for the empress, personally—”

“We are blade comrades. You are aware that my opinion of your father is that he is a great man. I would like—” Again I paused. “Prince Nedfar is a man among men.” Was the idea so ridiculous, so impossible? Would it be beyond the bounds of reason to imagine the Empress Thyllis deposed and Prince Nedfar installed as king and emperor? The war would end then, instantly. Vallia and Hamal could shake the right hand of friendship and turn to the more pressing problems of the reivers from over the curve of the world, the dark

cloud of horror that threatened all these bright lands of Paz on this side of Kregen.

I harbored the suspicion that Tyfar's sense of honor would prevent him from raising his hand against his empress.

Feeling cautious, I said, "It is said in many of the old writings that a man's allegiance to his country must outweigh any friendship for an individual." Tyfar remained unresponsive. "Other wise men say that friendship overrides all other considerations. Does loyalty without friendship constitute reason enough?"

"Loyalty—" Tyfar would have gone on, but Jazila burst out passionately: "I hate this stupid war. Thyllis should have had her backside slapped when she was younger, been made to realize a few things."

"Now, Zila..." Tyfar was not so much outraged as amused. I perked up. For a high and mighty prince of Hamal that was a good sign. And Tyfar was no high and mighty prince in that petty and world-weary way; he was alive and eager and filled with the conviction that, as the gods had seen fit to make him a prince, he was obliged to honor that position of trust.

We had talked up the east boulevard heading west, toward the somber bulk of the Arena. The outer courts of the Jikhorkdun would at this hour still be crammed with throngs seeking a continuation of the thrills of blood and death, catching a glimpse of their favorite kaidur, seeing an animal trainer, doing business with a slaver, organizing the eternal wagers, perhaps taking up

swords and venturing into small practice rings to pit strength and skill against professionals.

Now shouts lifted at our backs and we turned about, wary and alert to possible danger. It was just a miserable cofile of arena fodder, being prodded along toward their destinies.

“Klactails,” said Tyfar. His face expressed a distaste I knew to be for the institution of the Arena and which people who did not know him and reacted as the common run of folk react would have taken for disgust at these chalk-white Klactails. A strange kind of diff, the Klactail, parchment white, only around three feet tall, with a thick ridged array of spines down the backbone and a wallop great tail that could take your ankles off. There is a fishy look to a Klactail’s face quite different from most of the faces of Paz. They keep themselves to themselves in out-of-the-way places, ruins like the Lily City Klana were infested with them. It was said — and at the time I was not aware any more than anyone else of the truth of the saying — that they were either a decadent remnant of a marooned band of marauding Shanks from over the curve of the world or else and more darkly a product of miscegenation of Shanks and some doomed race now long extinct.

Whatever the truth of that, these Klactails were whipped and prodded along the boulevard headed for the Arena. The guards did not spare their whips. Most of the time I noticed that the lashes fell relatively harmlessly across that barrier ridge of spines along the diffs’ backbones.

“Let the bosks at them!” a fat man declaimed, licking his lips. “That’ll be rare sport!” He watched, safely away from them.

“No,” disagreed his companion, nudging him. “Let the chavonths chew them up.”

“If you ask me—” said a thin woman with a down-drawn mouth, one or other of the men being unfortunate enough to claim her for wife. “If you ask me, they should be tied two and two, and then tied two and two, until there is only one left.”

“Yes?”

“*Then* let your bosks or your chavonths at him.”

Jaezila made a disgusted sound, and we walked on. No, the institution of the Jikhorkdun in Huringa, the capital of Hyrklana, was not a pretty affair at all.

Of course, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that one of those Klactoils might succeed in the Arena, might win his victories, advancing from coy to apprentice, to kaidur, and then, if the gods smiled on him and he trusted in Beng Thrax, he might become a hyrkaidur. Then his fortune would be made. Of the fifty or so I did not think more than one percent would do that; which meant not one would succeed in the Jikhorkdun. The opposition would be just too fierce, from savage animals and giant beasts to extraordinary proficient and cunning kaidurs who’d have their tripes out as they stood on the silver sand gawping at the crowds and the color and the noise and the whole impressive and diabolical display.

The life of a hyr-kaidur could be alluring. I knew that. Once you had made your mark, achieved your victories, stayed alive, you were a man set apart. The life could suck you in and overwhelm you with sensory impressions, with the fierce surge of combat, with the ferocious partisanship and courage that sought victory for your color. The Mystique of the Arena might possibly transcend areas amenable to reasonable analysis; it existed. I had been a hyr-kaidur in Huringa at a time that, with the stink of the place in my nostrils, did not seem at all long ago... Yes, the Jikhorkdun possessed its aura, and between harshly defined limits the Arena did have a genuine feeling, a sense of passion in victory, an involvement with means which, in themselves, created a mystery above reason, even if the ends were despicable to me. I wanted nothing more of the Jikhorkdun, where I had been known as Drak the Sword.

Jaezila threw down the remnants of the shonage. "All the same," she said in her bright, no-nonsense voice, "the Jikhorkdun in Ruathytu is far more bloody than the one here in Huringa."

Tyfar hunched a shoulder. "True."

Ruathytu, the capital city of the Empire of Hamal, was well-known to me. I had visited the arena there, unwillingly.

"We were interrupted at table," I said. "Let us find a fresh bottle."

"And we can talk more about this Vad Noran. You know him well?"

“No, Jaezila. Only to sell wild beasts to.” I laughed, shaking off the dark mood. “Oh, and to provide him with a vicarious Jikai.” We jested, between ourselves, in an easy companionable way, and made light of ponderous matters. But the ponderous matters pressed in hard.

We found a small tavern that was not too congested and a bottle of red Corandian, very low in alcoholic content, and split it between us. “And did you see this mysterious swordsman, this Gochert with one eye and the other all covered with crusted diamonds and emeralds?” Jaezila lifted her glass and before she drank, added, “I am intrigued how a one-eyed man can be so sure with a blade.”

“As to his prowess as a bladesman, that I cannot say,” I said. “But, yes, I did see him. He moved with a deliberateness, rather like a stalking leem, very quiet and smooth. He wore good blades. He dressed austere. And he was thin, by Krun! At the time I remember I thought he looked like a starving ferret.”

Jaezila laughed. Tyfar nodded. “Such men are quick with a blade.”

“I’ll tell you one thing. He gave Vad Noran the Jikai<sup>[1]</sup> for the fight with the schrepims. But I don’t think he could believe Noran had really done what was claimed. He looked at me with his one eye, very fishy.”

“A Klactoil eye!”

“Precisely.”

“But he was apim, like us?”

“Assuredly. What do you know of him? For I confess, he intrigues me.”

“I know little and that little bodes ill for Hamal.” Tyfar lifted the bottle, which was empty, and signaled the serving girl, who was a Gonell slave with silver hair wound around her body three times. The fresh bottle opened, Tyfar said, “My people here keep their eyes and ears open. They tell me this Gochert is a part of a conspiracy against Hamal.”

This sounded promising. Maybe Gochert had been too harshly judged. Anyone willing to strike a blow against Hamal would, in Vallia’s present circumstances, be regarded as an ally. And then Jaezila put the question that was crucial for any decision.

“Against Hamal, Ty? Or against the empress?”

“That, by Krun, I do not know. My people have done well to discover what they have. There was a spymaster here in Huringa I could have called on for assistance. Unfortunately, he disappeared before we arrived. Our ambassador here is jolly and fat and sweaty, as you know, Zila, and more than a bit of a ninny.”

“Well,” I said, putting the boot in, “the empress chose him.”

“For a purpose, Jak. The Hyrklese hate us. Fat jolly Homan ham Ambath is a man difficult to detest. I think in this Thyllis chose wisely.”

So that chopped me down to size. But Tyfar was right. Thyllis might be mad and bad; she was also shrewd and cunning and utterly ruthless, and therefore uncaring of ways and means just so long as the ends were her ends. And then Prince Tyfar said something that made me

hold my glass motionless at my mouth just a little too long.

“It would solve many of our problems if only Hyrk-lana were a part of the Empire of Hamal.”

*Oh, no, my bonny prince, I said to myself, in that, my blade comrade, you are totally misguided.*

## Chapter three

### Unmok and I Agree to Quarrel

“Wriggled like a beetle stuck through with a pin, did he?” Unmok spoke with great satisfaction. He was not a bloodthirsty man, as I well knew, and he’d always avoid a fight and pay someone else to take the knocks if he could. If he had to fight, then he would take his part bravely. “Serve him good. Although, to be sure, Jak, I didn’t know you had friends in Huringa.”

“The capital is big enough to take in all kinds.”

“I didn’t mean that! And you know it, you hairy apim!”

“Well, that fellow may be gone. I wish we knew if Noran intends to send anyone else after us.”

We sat at the table in our camp with Froshak the Shine, Unmok’s big Fristle assistant, and now Froshak, who spoke so seldom as to be regarded as Froshak the Silent, leaned forward and spoke.

“We ought to slit Noran’s throat.”

“Ah — yes...” said Unmok. “But—”

The tame slaves set up a caterwauling by their fire, and Froshak turned his fierce bewhiskered cat face toward them, whereat they became silent on a sudden. A useful man with a knife, this Froshak, silent and swift and devoted to Unmok and bearing me no malice that I was the partner merely because of gold. Well, not merely. I was, after all, a working partner in the wild-beast business.

“I had some news that ought to get us out of this pickle,” said Unmok, scooping up the last of his vosk rashers. The fat shone on his lips. The suns were up, shedding their mingled ruby and jade lights, and the morning air smelled sweet with the fragrances of the countryside — ah! A dawn on Kregen, that marvelous and mysterious world four hundred light-years from Earth, is like no dawn on any other planet of the universe.

“News?”

“I saw Avec, and the cage voller will take time. It seems all the shipyards are building as fast as they can for Hamal.”

“That is to be expected. A second-hand voller?”

Unmok wiped bread around his plate. “Difficult. But Avec is putting out inquiries. However, I heard — and this is in the strictest confidence — that Noran is mixed up in some plot against Queen Fahia. If he is, then his head will come off and we’ll hear no more of him. So — don’t worry!”

“If Avec Parlin knows and told you, then with all due respect, Unmok, the news is general. I mean—”

“I agree, Jak. If they are conspirators, then they conspire damned foolishly.”

“So Vad Noran’s head—”

“Will come off in the jaws of a leem in the Jikhork-dun!”

“Or she’ll toss him to her pet neemus.”

“But in the matter of my agreeing with your conclusions that the news is general — no. No, I do not think so.”

“Oh?”

“Avec is a good friend as well as a banker. He was approached to contribute financial assistance and refused, having a regard for his own head and no liking for the idea of walking out over the silver sand. He is safe, he assures me, for he holds papers against Noran and Dorval and others of that ilk. He knew I had done business with Noran and so he warned me in friendship. I agree the conspirators are foolish. I do not think that news is general knowledge.”

“For your sake, I hope not—”

“My sake, Jak! Have I not just explained—?”

“Noran strikes me as a weak man who vents his pettiness in vicious attacks against those weaker than himself. If Avec dies, the papers may burn.”

“Not Avec Parlin. He is too shrewd for that.” But I could see the notion did not please Unmok. He twitched his middle left stump and threw his plate at the slaves with his middle right, at the same time picking his teeth with his upper right. His upper left brushed worriedly over his forehead where the lines stood deeply incised.

“Slit his throat,” said Froshak the Shine.

This Froshak had been about to be put to the question, up at Vad Noran’s villa, when the schrepims escaped. I’d thrown him my knife and helped him escape, and in the subsequent action he had been exculpated of the crime of freeing the schrepims. I viewed him with favor, for we had fought shoulder-to-shoulder, and I think — I hope — that he bore me a certain fellow-feeling.

Where your normal camp boss might have stood up and said something like, “Well, time to be up and doing,” Froshak the Shine just stood up and got on with it. The cages stood about, empty. Our mercenary guards had been discharged and the few tame slaves, who had been with Unmok some time, had little to do. The institution of slavery is abhorrent to me, but in this instance of Unmok and his tame slaves, a relationship had developed that, while still unpleasant, is perhaps less of a blot on humanity than slavery as a whole. Certainly, this kind of valued family-retainer kind of slavery is often trumpeted in extenuation of the whole vile business. As far as my friends and I in Vallia were concerned, it wouldn’t wash. Slavery was going to be eradicated.”

And there spoke the great idealist with stars in his eyes and blood on his hands and mud on his boots, by Vox!

A pottery dish of palines afforded Unmok the chance to remain seated, looking at me. He popped a paline into his mouth and chewed. I followed his example,

savoring the taste. Chewing, he said, "I spent some time thinking over what passed when we first went to see Noran and sold him the thomplods. I think he believes you are employed in some secret capacity by Queen Fahia."

"I gave him that impression. It helped the bargaining."

"It did that all right. But Jak, if he is plotting against the queen then he will regard you even more as an enemy to be put down."

"You could have the right of it, Unmok! It could be that is why he sent those assassins, and not to silence our mouths about his vain claim to the Jikai!"

Solemnly, Unmok chewed and nodded.

"Then until this matter is settled, you and I must part company. He has no quarrel with you."

"If you think, you hairy apim, that I will—"

"I know. I had promised to introduce you to my friends this afternoon. But now, I think..."

Saying good-bye to Tyfar and Jaezila had been pushed from my head by what they had said. Huringa seethed with plots and moils, and now Unmok was telling me of another. If fat Queen Fahia could be brought down and I could play a part in that, then this was where I belonged. Vallia was in good hands, as I kept on telling myself, fretting that I was not there. Tyfar was expecting news this day, and from what he said the news might give us the chance to join in a plot that was, so Tyfar said, the most promising. The future filled with visions. There was much to be done here. But—

“If word is spread about that you and I have quarreled, and I have left the partnership, Noran should not trouble you further.”

Unmok stared at me in comical dismay.

“You — you — if only we had that damned cage voller!”

“You have all your equipment, the cages and the draught animals and the beast handlers. Froshak is a good man. You can start a fresh trip right away. Or,” I said, jocularly scathing at his funny ways, “you could take up the latest scheme you have to change your profession.”

“Jak! You wound me!”

“I intended to.”

“Well, you won’t break the partnership like that.”

“You are always talking about giving up the wild-beast business and going in for a new line. Or an old one. They are never the same two sennights running. Now is your chance.”

He clamped down on a handful of palines, the rich juice spurting, and he glared at me in his funny Och way.

I sighed.

“Look, Unmok... It makes sense.”

Suddenly he brightened. He swallowed. He jiggled with excited realization. “I have it! We spread the story of this quarrel and our parting. I take the cages back to the coast and there you join me and we sail off together! Capital! Capital!”

The immediate thought that shot into my head was vile. I couldn't do that to Unmok, could I? But, a little Och and a partnership, against the fate of empire? Could I?

I stood up. Emperors have to make decisions all the time, right or wrong, it is part of the job. Given the importance in material terms of the two conflicting courses open to me, I knew I was choosing the right one. In almost any other terms I chose wrong.

"A good idea, Unmok. I'll draw Noran off. He ought not to molest you and you can get the caravan down to the river and hire craft to take us to the coast. I'll meet you on the waterfront. And you mind you take care. Froshak—"

"It is in my mind to hire guards now. The caravan will be empty, worth nothing, but a few hired swords will afford a comfort to a five-limbed Och."

"Yes. I won't pick you up at Ingadot where you contract for the ship but at the mouth of the river. They always take on water last thing. It will be safer. And Unmok, watch out for the Forest of the Departed."

"I will. But it is caravans coming the other way that interest the bandits."

"And because of that, if you hire swords, keep them out of sight. They will make the bandits think you conceal wealth in what appears to be an empty caravan. Yes?"

"You are a good partner, Jak."

“Unless,” I said, continuing the thought, “being a little five-limbed Och, you hire so many guards they would frighten a queen’s regiment of crossbowmen away.”

He threw the paline dish at me, whereat I felt the enormity of my underhanded treatment of him, for, of course, I had no intention whatsoever of meeting him where the ships took on water.

Unmok remained very cheerful as we said the remberes. We thought it prudent to begin the deception at once; thus, when we went down into the city we went separately. Froshak the Shine was apprised of the plan, and he said, in his usual way, nothing. I left the camp which had been moved away by the officials from the transit area. Once a caravan discharged its cargo it must make way for a new. We were a thousand paces or so up the road, sheltered in a nice little nook between fragrant clarsian bushes and the next nearest camp a good five hundred paces off. A stream ran paralleling the road here. I looked back as I crossed the rustic wooden bridge, looking at the row of cages, the tethered draught animals, seeing the huge, patient old quoffas with their wise enormous faces, seeing the thin stream of smoke from the campfire, and Froshak busily polishing up a krahnik harness brass. Well, I was saying good-bye to all that, and damned unhappy about the way of saying it.

I nudged the urvivel between my knees and he clip-clopped on across the bridge. Unmok and I had decided not to buy expensive zorcas as mounts, and I’d left him the freymuls. So astride an urvivel I rode along the road toward Huringa. We’d felt that the preysany was, just a

little, not up to the impression we'd wished to create as businessmen. Kregen teems with splendid animals of all kinds, and all kinds are used, by Vox, for riding, flying, hunting and sport. For work the choice is just as vast.

My head was filled with jangling thoughts as I rode along, grandiose schemes to topple Queen Fahia and encourage the island realm of Hyrklana to resist the Empire of Hamal. Hamal's iron laws held sway over many lands, but by that token, resistance must exist. We in Vallia resisted, stubbornly and savagely. If Hyrklana could be coaxed into defying Hamal, one course of supply of the vital airboats would be cut off. If, then, Hyrklana would sell her vollers to Vallia...! That was an old dream. I knew my people in Vallia had tried to do business with Hyrklana, but the threat of Hamal had brutally snuffed out all hopes of that.

The rounded hill which obscured sight of Huringa from the transit camp unrolled its dusty road and gradually the city came into view. The fires were out. Queen Fahia had been extremely wroth at the two sorcerers, Unmok had learned, and had they been persons of ordinary quality who had become such wanton incendiaries, they would have been roasted alive. As it was, they had been asked to leave the city. The glittering, imposing figure of the Sorcerer of the Cult of Almuensis, high-powered and haughty in his book-magics, had been indisputably humbled, so the story going the rounds said. The Adept of the Doxology of San Destinakon, by contrast, had been scornful, uncaring of the destruction, threatening retribution

against the Almuensian, and of being told that the queen's court wizards would have to intervene if he did not obey. Fahia had gone in for sorcerers of late.

The urvivel was a good strong beast, brownish with yellow splotches and pricked ears, and he was called Snowdrop — why, I do not know. His saddle was cheap and a trifle uncomfortable and my gear in saddlebags and knapsacks dangled alarmingly between his legs. As for weapons for what might befall me, I had the rapier and main gauche, still unfamiliar weapons in Hyrklana, and a Havilfarese thraxter, a good stout cut and thruster that had seen useful service. Froshak had returned my sailor knife. The small wardrobe Unmok had provided had, in the nature of things, expanded, but I took only a few clothes. I had the feeling that I would be involved in more than a little hop, skip and jumping and wanted to be encumbered as little as possible. On Earth there used to be a saying: "Clothes maketh the man." On Kregen you would be fully entitled to imagine that the equivalent saying might be: "Weapons maketh the man." But Kregans are more subtle than that. They are aware that clothes can make a man look what he is not but weapons speak a truer tale when it comes to the test.

These jangling thoughts of mine veered away from clothes and weapons and sorcerers. The concerns over my country of Vallia never lay very far below the surface. If only...! If only all this grouping of islands and continents called Paz could join together in friendship, then the menace of the Shanks from over the rim of the world could be met and fronted as a union. But the

Empire of Hamal sought personal aggrandizement, and many other lands were at each other's throats. Hamal had to be dealt with first. And very first of all, Vallia had to be made safe.

My son Drak, my eldest, stern and serious, could run the empire; I knew that, his mother knew that, he knew that. But he stubbornly insisted he would not take over while Delia and I lived. Well, I'd as pig-headedly made up my mind that I would renounce the throne and crown and hand it all over to Drak when Vallia was once again in a fit state. That was settled, at least in my mind. My middle son, Zeg, was now king in Zandikar, miles and miles away in the Eye of the World. And my youngest son, that right tearaway Jaidur, was Opaz knew where, gallivanting around at the behest of his mother and the Sisters of the Rose. That secret organization of women ran far more damned things than many a mere male would credit.

The Sisters of the Rose had educated the three twin sisters of those three strapping sons of mine. Zeg's twin, Velia, had died away there in the Eye of the World, and her husband too, Gafard, the King's Striker, Sea Zhantil. The black agony tortured me still, whenever my thoughts turned toward them.

As for Dayra, Jaidur's twin, I fancied the problems she presented would solve themselves in time. She was called Ros the Claw, as she wore a razored steel claw on her left hand. At Lancival they had taught her how to employ those talons to shocking purpose.

So that left my eldest daughter, Lela, to worry me, for I had not seen her for long and long. Zair knew where she was now. All I knew was that she was away adventuring for the Sisters of the Rose. Her twin, Drak, had failed to recognize me when we'd met again, and I did not think Lela would know me, as I was confident, to my remorse, I would not recognize her now that she was grown up.

What it is to be a father separated from his children and hurled four hundred light-years across the gulfs between the stars!

People moved along the road toward the city, and I gave them all a wide berth. I was in no mood for idle chatter. Among the farm carts and peddlers and business folk and those pressing forward eagerly for the Games, marched formed bodies of troops returning to barracks after the night's patrolling. No caravans of wild beasts were in sight. The suns of Antares shone, the air smelled sweet, music and laughter sounded all about me and I wore a blackly hating look and down-drawn brows, and, by the disgusting diseased liver and lights of Makki Grodno, I was in a right turmoil.

Unmok the Nets, stump left middle and all, could fend for himself, couldn't he? Of course he could. He had Froshak. He'd done it before we'd met and formed our partnership. And Vallia could fend for herself, couldn't she? Even with the outrages daily committed by reiving mercenaries and slavers? With great-hearted men like Seg and Inch, and Turko and Korero, and all the others, surely my Vallia could be trusted to them?

I hauled on Snowdrop's reins.

By Zair! Was I or was I not the Emperor of Vallia? Well, then, if I was, couldn't I trust my blade comrades there? I knew I could. Each one knew what was at stake. Each one would give his life for me and for each other. I sat humped on Snowdrop's back and twitched the rapier in and out of the scabbard, and scowled. A passing Relt squeaked and stumbled on, his beaked face averted, the features quivering. I must have looked a sight!

"Sink me!" I burst out. And: "By the Black Chunkrah!" And: "By Zim Zair!" How could a little crippled Och beast-handler stand between me and my manifest destiny as an emperor? How?

As I hauled on the reins and swung Snowdrop back the way we had come, I knew how — too damned easily how.

I'd given Unmok my pledge. Even an empire couldn't stand before that, could it? Well, of course it could. My pledge given to a foeman, or under duress, is broken as swiftly as a faulty blade in battle... Even my pledge to a friend, if greater forces supervene, would be broken. Regretfully. But then, I do not pretend to be your gallant gentleman. The only real regret I suffered as I started off back to the camp and Unmok was that I was delaying seeing Delia. But even then, you see, she'd probably be off about some derring-do for the Sisters of the Rose...

As I rode back to the camp quite expecting to see Unmok riding toward me on his way to Huringa to settle accounts and to hire mercenaries, I decided what I would do. It was a simple statement of alternatives, something I had been unable to do before. Unmok could

make up his own mind. He could choose to carry on in the beast-handling business. Or he could choose to go to Vallia. I would not have to explain everything, merely indicate that my secret was of sufficient size to encompass his well-being for the future. Unmok and Froshak, both. Yes.

Feeling the weight of indecision sloughing away made me brisk up wonderfully. Shilly-shallying about was a sin to which I owned, and detested, recognizing the symptoms. Now that I'd made up my mind, the world took on brighter colors and the air smelled even sweeter and the laughter and music from the bands of people going toward the city fell on my ears most melodiously.

Even my urvivel, Snowdrop, welcomed this early return and he trotted along cheerfully.

The wooden bridge over the stream clattered a welcome as Snowdrop trotted across. But it was not quite the welcome I expected. One of Unmok's tame slaves lay on his face on the farther bank, with a tall brown-fledged arrow protruding from the middle of his back.

Even as I looked up from the slave's dead body toward the camp past the edge of the bushes, a cacophony of sadistic yells shivered into the air.

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

Alan Burt Akers was a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer, who died in December 2005 aged eighty-four.

Bulmer wrote over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction, both under his real name and numerous pseudonyms, including Alan Burt Akers, Frank Brandon, Rupert Clinton, Ernest Corley, Peter Green, Adam Hardy, Philip Kent, Bruno Krauss, Karl Maras, Manning Norvil, Chesman Scot, Nelson Sherwood, Richard Silver, H. Philip Stratford, and Tully Zetford. Kenneth Johns was a collective pseudonym used for a collaboration with author John Newman. Some of Bulmer's works were published along with the works of other authors under "house names" (collective pseudonyms) such as Ken Blake (for a series of tie-ins with the 1970s television programme *The Professionals*), Arthur Frazier, Neil Langholm, Charles R. Pike, and Andrew Quiller.

Bulmer was also active in science fiction fandom, and in the 1970s he edited nine issues of the *New Writings* in

Science Fiction anthology series in succession to John Carnell, who originated the series.

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at [www.mushroom-ebooks.com](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com), and at [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org).

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