

DRAY PRESCOT: 16

**SAVAGE
SCORPIO**

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

SAVAGE SCORPIO

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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A Note on Dray Prescott

Savage Scorpio chronicles the headlong adventures of Dray Prescott on the marvelous and mystical, beautiful and terrible world of Kregen, beneath the Suns of Scorpio, four hundred light years from Earth.

Dray Prescott himself is an enigmatic figure. Reared in the inhumanly harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy, he has been transported to Kregen many times through the agencies of the Star Lords and also of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, mortal but superhuman men and women of the Swinging City. There is a discernible pattern underlying all his breathtaking adventures, he is sure of that; but the pattern and its meanings remain veiled and unguessable.

His appearance as described by one who has seen him is of a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage and he moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly. On the dangerous and exotic world of Kregen he has at various times and for various reasons become a Vovedeer and Zorcander of his wild Clansmen of Segesthes, the Lord of Strombor, Strom of Valka, Prince Majister of Vallia, King of Djanuain — and a member of the Order of Krozairs of Zy, a plethora of titles to which he confesses with a wryness and an

irony I am sure masks much deeper feelings at which we can only guess.

The volumes chronicling his life are arranged to be read as individual books. Now Dray Prescott is plunged headlong into fresh adventures beneath the hurtling Moons of Kregen, in the streaming mingled lights of Antares, under the Suns of Scorpio.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter One

The Brotherhood Rides Out.

Shrill laughter broke excitedly over the Fair of Arial. The deep hum of many voices bartering, chaffering, driving hard bargains mingled with the roars and snarls from the wild-beast cages, the yells of barkers fronting their gaudily striped stalls, the tinkling of bells, the braying of calsanys. The exotic smells of a myriad different foods being cooked and served, the pervasive aromas of wines, the pungent fumes of dopa, coiled above the sweating happy throngs among the stalls and booths in the broad open space cresting Arial's Mound. A living breathing tapestry of noise and movement and color proclaimed the holiday atmosphere of the Fair.

The two half-naked ragamuffins, scratched by briars and panting from a long run, who ran fleetly from the forest into the outskirts of the throngs where hundreds of people haggled and drank and sweated and enjoyed themselves, attracted no attention.

The boys were shouting. Above the din only a few grizzled zorcahandlers near them heard much, and these men, anxious about selling to a credulous fop a zorca whose single spiral horn had cracked and been expertly pinned and varnished over, shooed the boys away impatiently.

Quickly the boys ran on and tried to attract the attention of others; but everyone was too intent about the business of the pleasures of the Day, too self-engrossed to pay any heed to two dirty ragged lads, acting up a mischief. A group of men who by their equipment and rugged looks were tazzl mercenaries, men at the moment without employment, gawped and joked before a brilliant tent where feather-clad maidens swayed and danced, clinking silver bells, flashing white teeth, kohled eyes very inviting as their puce-faced barker waved his arms and shouted hoarsely, jingling silver coins, wheedling the tazzl mercenaries to enter and enjoy the dancing. The mercenaries sent the boys off with fleas in their ears.

Along the rows of stalls where all the varied produce of the Czarín Sea was displayed for sale the boys rushed, grabbing tunics, pulling decorated sleeves, shouting, and being cuffed and pushed away. Through the packed throngs and the noise moved vendors carrying heaped trays of delicacies, steaming mouth-wateringly. Cutpurses were active and a man must lief keep his eyes open and a hand closed over his purse. A few late Elders, solemn and grave with the importance of the coming ceremony, moved toward the central dais. Priests of many cults and religions walked sedately in the blended gorgeous suns shine of Antares, moving in spaces that opened magically for them and closed as magically after they had passed by. Mostly they were priests of Opaz. There was not one priest of the Great Chyyan, for the last apostle of the Black Feathers had been hanged, very high and very thoroughly from the tallest tree on the island of Nikzm, two of the months of the Maiden with the Many Smiles ago.

The Fair of Arial on the island of Nikzm in the Czarín Sea was, in this guise, only a recent institution. Previously it had been the marketplace for the pirates who thronged the busy sea-lanes. From the island of Zamra just over the horizon to the north through the islands fringing Vallia to the west, from past the twin

islands of Arlton and Meltzer to the south and Vetal to the east, the people sailed for this seasonal event. Now most of the renders had been destroyed, the pirates rendered harmless. Now the hullabaloo of commerce and pleasure gave joy and holidays to the good folk of the Czarín Sea.

Even from south of Arlton and Meltzer, from Veliadrin and from Valka, the people would sail in a grotesque variety of ships and unseaworthy boats to the Fair of Arial.

Then, when this fair was over for the season, the folk who followed the Fairs would pack up and travel to the next venue, hoping for richer pickings, perhaps, for more adventure, for a fresh zest and spice to life. For not all of Kregen, that mysterious and ominous planet four hundred light years from Earth is grim and cruel; among the beauty and the splendor there is room and more for fun and frolic and the enjoyment of living.

The two boys, bare of foot, scratched of legs and arms, red of face, continually tried to attract attention and were as continually rejected. A fat woman in a red skirt and black bodice, all wobbling chins and bust and stomach, dropped a wicker basket of loloo's eggs, well packed with straw and moss. Her hands flew up in horror as the two boys caught at her red skirt, shrieking in her ear, dragging her forcibly to make her listen.

The straw and moss proved woefully insufficient. Loloo's eggs rolled and cracked and splashed under the feet of the crowds. The woman threw her apron over her head, concealing her glistening face, and although her face was thus hidden and her screams lost in the merry uproar, by her lurching movements it was clear the boys had caused her the utmost terror. She staggered away. The corner tent pole into which she blundered supported an awning giving welcome shade from the twin suns. The awning collapsed. It billowed inward upon rows of men, dedicated drinkers all assiduously practicing their craft, quaffing good Vallian ale from glazed ceramic jugs.

Through all the bedlam of the Fair, belching out like an erupting volcano, the furious uproar from the devotees of Beng Dikkane, the patron saint of all the ale drinkers of Paz, bellowed and burst with the impassioned fervor of men interrupted at their worship. Flushed-faced men fought the tangles of cloth. Billows and humps of the gaudy material disgorged men raging with fury. Ale jugs flew, cascading their foaming contents over the drinkers, over passersby, over the trampled grass indiscriminately, in a wanton paroxysm of involuntary libations. The two boys, who made no attempt to run away and who — amazingly — did not laugh, would be chastised now for a certainty.

Seg nudged me.

“Brassud, my old dom! Here comes the Chief Elder.” Seg shot me a wary glance from those fey blue eyes of his, his strong tanned face beneath the mop of dark hair very merry as he prepared to mock me in his usual way. “Where are your wits wandering? This is the islanders’ great moment, and here you are, gawping into the air like a loon.”

“I was watching those two lads, Seg. They’ve disappeared in the confusion — but they’re in for a bit of stick, I fancy. Anyone who gets between an ale-drinker’s ale and his stomach has only himself to blame.”

“I’ll allow that,” said Inch, standing up so that his full seven feet of height gave him some advantage in peering over the heads of the jostling thousands. “They’re having themselves a good time down there. The tent’s right over now and there are ale barrels a-rolling every which way.”

The confusion really was rather splendid. But my attention had to be directed to the portly, stiff, embarrassed form of doughty old Dolan Pyvorr. The Chief Elder, caparisoned in a blaze of finery, glistening and glittering in the mingled rays of the twin suns, advanced ponderously upon the steps leading up to the dais. He carried his Balass Rod with great ceremony. The Rod was

all of two feet in length, banded by nine silver rings, and topped by a silver hirvel head, all fashioned superbly in Vandayha, the city of silversmiths in Valka.

Seg and Inch and the others of my friends and comrades upon the dais stood up to welcome the Chief Elder of Nikzm. I, too, stood up, for the protocol of princes means less than nothing beside the simple virtues of good manners.

A little scuffle of shoe leather at my rear took my attention. Turko the Shield used always to stand solidly at my back, in peace as in war. Now I heard his voice, low, saying: “By Morro the Muscle, Tarek, tread with care—”

And Tarek Dredd Pylvorr’s answering voice, low, passionate: “You think I seek to harm the prince, Turko the Shield? Are you mad? Have you lost your senses? I, who owe everything to him? He meets my father, and he has asked that I stand with him at that time.”

I took no notice. Turko might be overly officious about caring for my person — that is a great comfort on Kregen, believe me.

A little more shuffling and arrangements went on, and Balass the Hawk and Oby would have to shift along, I guessed. I killed my smile. Yes, we were a real bunch of tearaways, right villains all, comrades in arms, and here we were, dressed up like popinjays and standing on an overly-ornately decorated dais beneath a pavilion of cloth of silver, the focus of attention and — as they say — the cynosure of all eyes, waiting for the great moment, a great inaugural moment, in the Fair of Arial.

Among that group on the dais were others of my friends, some of whom you have met before in my narrative, others who, comrades in arms, have not yet found a personal mention. We were here expressly at the invitation of the Elders and People of Nikzm to take part in the ceremony about to begin. That was the official explanation for our presence. The true reason we were here was to meet in privacy, away from the prying eyes and ears

of the capital — from which, anyway, I was banished — and all other teeming cities, to take further steps in the formation of the new Brotherhood.

Dredd Pylvorr stood a half-pace to the rear and to my left. He was garbed resplendently, as we all were, out of honor to the Elders and People of this tiny island of Nikzm. Now as his father climbed the steps to the dais, Dredd Pylvorr whispered his thanks anew to me.

“You have made me a Tarek, my prince. My father has been raised to become an Elder of our island, and to be Chief Elder—”

“I did not make him Chief Elder, Dredd. That he achieved himself, elected by his peers, out of his honesty and courage.”

The Pylvorrs were hard-working, simple folk, the salt of the Earth — or of Kregen — and once the pirates had been cleared away and their markets closed to make way for the Fair of Arial, the island needed to be handled afresh. Situated just south of the island of Zamra, of which I am kov, Nikzm needed a council of Elders. Also, because he had fought well for us, and because he pleased me in his forthrightness and gallantry, Dredd Pylvorr had been made a Tarek, a rank of the minor nobility and within the gifting of a kov. Seg had made his Tareks in his kovnate of Falinur, and Inch his in his kovnate of the Black Mountains, both in Vallia.

“My loyalty to you is unshakable, my prince. And my gratitude eternal.” In some mouths these words would have raised my hackles, made me think, created suspicion. They did nothing of the kind when spoken by Dredd Pylvorr.

His father climbed up the last few steps, puffing, broad and scarlet, and he bowed. He knew enough of my ways not to go into the incline or the full incline. I bowed in return and held out my hand.

“Well met, Elder Pylvorr. The Fair is a great success.” We could hear ourselves speak, up here on the dais, with the bumblebee

murmuring of the crowds around us. The fun over at the upset ale tent continued, and I fancied two small ragged forms would be, eel-like, squirming to avoid capture and chastisement.

“Lahal, my prince! Lahal and Lahal! Indeed—!” and here Pyvorr turned himself ponderously around to survey the magnitude of the Fair with the noise and color and jollity. “Indeed this is an auspicious day.”

I did not know why the invitation to attend this Fair had been sent me in the form it had. But Seg and Inch and the others seemed to know, and had prevailed upon me to attend. Anyway, I wanted to know how the island was prospering, now that it no longer had piracy to depend on for a living. The economy ran well, and the crops grew and the fishermen reported bumper catches, and copper had been discovered in the rolling hills that centered the tiny island. A tiny breeze licked in and flicked lazily at the banners and guidons, at the standards and flags. My old scarlet and yellow flag flew up there, and the red and white of Valka, and the red and yellow of Vallia, and the blue and yellow of Zamra. And, surrounded by panoply, we stood like peacocks in our glittering clothes.

Pyvorr gestured to his Council of Elders, all standing gravely to one side, waiting for the proceedings to open. The few guards needed to keep the more importunate of the crowds away from the railed off space at the foot of the dais had no trouble. They were Pachaks, and they were every one a picked man, and they were the first bodyguard of the Brotherhood, not as yet fully inducted into the secrets of the Order; but devoted and loyal and soon to become acolytes. They were not mercenaries, having homes and steadings on Zamra.

The Council Elders all lifted their right hands.

Pyvorr turned heavily back to face me and lifted his own right hand. He glanced across at the rank of nine Womox trumpeters. Their horns were gilded and garlanded with roses above the

fierce bull-like faces. Their tabards shone with silver thread. They lifted the long straight silver trumpets.

Each massive chest expanded with air sucked into powerful lungs. The trumpets caught the streaming mingled lights of the suns and glittered with silver starpoints.

The trumpeters pealed their fanfare. High and ringing, shrill, imperative, demanding, the silver notes pierced above the hubbub.

Silence did not fall at once. Rather, gradually and with ebbing and flowing disturbances, the uproar slowly faded. People ceased what they were doing — bargaining, buying, selling, eating, drinking, skylarking, testing their strength, having their fortunes told — and drifted out from the booths and tents into the open spaces and alleyways where they might see and hear what went on upon the high dais. The noise persisted as the people settled down in the suns shine for the ceremony.

Two dirty, raggedy figures darted out from the mass, pushing and shoving to make their way through to the front where the Pachaks stood on guard with the steel winking in their tail hands, upflung past their shoulders.

The boys shouted; but their shouts were lost in the bellows of outraged anger from some of the crowd. Others in the crowd began to shout, but in a different key, and to push and shove away, trying to escape the pressing throngs.

The boys burst out into the little cleared space at the foot of the dais. The Pachaks, veterans all, eyed them cautiously.

Amid the confusion of shout and counter shout some words jumped up from those in the crowd trying to push away.

“... all riding sleeths!” and “... leaving us defenseless, open to massacre or enslavement!”

And, coinciding with the two boys' impassioned shrieks as they darted past the Pachaks and halfway up the steps, a word that

grew and rolled about the Fairground and drew into itself much of the dark evil that festers on Kregen—

“Katakis! *Katakis!*”

“Slavers! *Slavers!*”

Somehow, my sword was in my fist.

Not all slavers are Katakis, that tailed race of devils, but almost all Katakis are slavers — given half a chance.

I swung about to face that band of brothers there on the high dais. Resplendent nincompoops we looked, decked out in all our finery. But each man wore a sword — except Turko — and each man was a comrade in arms, a bonny fighter, a veteran.

“Brothers!” I bellowed. I lifted the sword in a deliberately theatrical gesture, the long slender rapier blade glittering high. “This is work for the Order! For this we are created.” I yelled at Turko direct. “Turko — fetch me up those two lads — and treat them gently. Oby — the zorcas. Seg, Inch, Balass—”

But my friends were already running, leaping down the steps four at a time, pouring out to belt across the flattened grass to the zorca lines. And Young Oby raced ahead of them all.

Turko appeared with a squirming tattered figure under each arm.

“And keep silent until the prince speaks to you, you Imps of Sicce!”

They slammed onto their feet, and Turko held a scruff of the neck in each ferociously powerful fist. I bent down.

“You have done well,” I said. I spoke evenly but firmly, well knowing the kind of impression I could make if I was clumsy. “Where away are these Opaz-forsaken Katakis? You will lead us?”

“Yes, koter—”

Turko shook them.

Koter is the equivalent of gentleman, mister, and it was clear these two ragamuffins had encountered koters as the highest

form of life. Not that I put store by ranks and titles, as you know, except as artifices to get things done.

“Address the prince as prince, famblys!”

“Yes, prince—”

As useful to ask these two if they could ride a zorca as ask them if they had a pocket full of golden talens.

“You take one, Turko. I’ll take this rascal.”

Seizing up my lad, who had a shock of brown hair that was probably more alive than many a languid noble of the court, I leaped off down the steps. Turko followed. Tom Tomor ti Vulheim reined past on his zorca, kicking dust as he slewed around and so pushed back the crowd. Vangar ti Valkanium did the same on the other side. Dredd Pyvorr appeared leading a zorca and Turko would have given her to me; but I waved him on and caught at the reins Oby flung at me. Up went my urchin across the saddle, my left boot went into the stirrup, and with a flick of my hand I was seated. My lad squirmed around, for the zorca may be the most beautiful of mounts, with four tall spindly legs, a marvel of grace and stamina; but the zorca is remarkably close-coupled and there is barely room for two.

“Your name, lad?”

“Tim, if it please you, ko— prince.”

“Right, Tim. Which way?”

He pointed.

The wide expanse of Arial’s Mound covered with the booths and stalls and wild-beast pens and stabling lines, with the now more than a little ludicrous high dais at the center, was rapidly clearing of people. They were running off in all directions. Some, at least, must be heading straight for the viciously-waiting arms of the Katakis slavers.

Tim pointed to the east, a direction that paralleled the coast, distant some two ulms.

Dredd Pylvorr reined across, his face furious, highly colored, intense.

“Briar’s Cove, lad? Am I right?”

“Yes, prince, you are right!” sang out the lad with Turko.

“Fambly!” said Turko, incensed. “Only the prince is the prince.”

“For the Order!” I bellowed. As of its own volition, it seemed, my rapier had appeared in a twinkling at the first mention of the Katakis, and had scabbarded itself when the lads had run up, so now, once more, the glittering blade snapped out. I waved it high and pointed forward. “*Ride!*”

As a group we rode out, past the last scattering fugitives, screaming and wailing, out along the narrow track that led through this neck of the forest, to curve down to Briar’s Cove.

It appeared to me the Katakis, with the Fair as cover, had struck inland to take the chief town of Nikzm by surprise. Once they had possession of that, they could sweep up the people as they arrived. Long memories of pirate raids, of slavers and aragorn snatching away whole families, dictated that only those villages that needs must, say by reason of the fishing, would be built on the coast. In this, this section of the Outer Oceans resembled the Inner Sea, the Eye of the World of Kregen.

As we rode furiously along, a fresh thought rose to torment me. The Katakis are a race strong and powerful, with a tail that, equipped with bladed steel, makes of them formidable opponents. They are also low-browed, dark, with thick black hair, oiled and curled, with gape-jawed mouths fanged with snaggly teeth, and generally of an evil, pestiferous nature. But we had met and bested them before. The thought that occasioned me some agony was simply this; no force of Katakis slavers would raid here, in the very shadow of the puissant empire of Vallia, for all the empire’s internal problems, unless they raided in strength. They must be a strong and determined band.

And we were few.

I led my men into a battle that could easily end with us all dead or enslaved.

Yet no one had thought to count the cost. No one had thought to reckon the consequences. Katakis had had the nerve to land on one of my islands to raid and enslave; therefore my band of brothers followed me into headlong action.

Through the coldness of these thoughts the warmth flowed that we were a band of brothers, we fought together as comrades in arms. This would be the first real test of the Order, for every man who rode with me had been invited to become a member, and had joyfully accepted. He had accepted the strictures laid on him, the demands that membership of the Order would entail. The simple, pure-minded and naive chivalry of the first rules of the Order may make me smile now; but they remain as true as ever, despite all that has happened since. We were idealistic, believing that too much violence on Kregen was being used by the wrong people, that we should do what we could to redress the balance. And these Opaz-forsaken Katakis slavers had turned up, right on our doorstep, to present us with our first challenge, our first test.

Certainly, as we thundered along the forest trail, kicking dust and twigs, a bright and colorful company, I did not count the discomfiture of the Black Feathers of the Great Chyyan. That evil creed had been bested in Vallia, for the time being, and the beating of it had not been at the hands of the Order as an Order. If I am a credulous man, that is understandable, seeing the marvels I have witnessed in my life. But I detected a fundamental and powerful current of fate in this meeting between slavers and the Brotherhood.

Ahead the track twisted around a giant lenk, the oak-like tree growing to an enormous girth and shedding a deep and somber shadow upon the trail. We roared around the angle and beyond a sharp declivity the trees ended and a long greensward opened up. I reined in, my hand upflung, my zorca skidding and sliding.

Slowly, I cantered out into the open.

The others followed.

We stared.

The ground was littered with color, with steel, with bodies and with blood.

Slowly, we walked our zorcas through the shambles, the animals restive, not liking the stink of fresh-spilled blood, but obedient and going on, well-trained to the stark realities of war.

“So here are your Katakis, Tim.”

Tim was being sick.

The ground was littered with bodies and with blood — Katakis bodies and Katakis blood.

I dismounted. As I looked up I saw for the first time that Young Oby had snatched up the scarlet flag with the great yellow cross upon it, my flag, the battle flag that fighting men call Old Superb. It shone in the mingled suns-light.

“These devils have been killed handsomely,” observed Seg. He bent over a corpse, kicking the limp tail away so that the bladed steel strapped to the tip clinked against a fallen helmet. He picked up a bow. Oh, it was not a great Lohvian long bow; being of a compound reflex construction; but in Seg Segutorio’s hands any bow is a deadly weapon par excellence. He smiled up at me. “I feel only half naked now.”

The Katakis had fought hard. They lay in windrows at the end, piled high. Their wounds were all in front. But they were all dead, methodically butchered.

“Who could have done this?” said Dredd Pylvor. He looked pinched of face. “Katakis are notorious — Chuliks?”

Chuliks and Pachaks command the highest fees as mercenaries, for different reasons. Our small guard of Pachaks remained mounted, instinctively carrying out soldier’s work, scouting ahead, sniffing out the devils who had slain devils.

The body of one Katakai intrigued me. He was a big fellow, although Katakis are as a rule not overly tall. His helmet had fallen off. His face reminded me of that of Rukker. The arrow had punched through his bronze-studded scaled corselet.

At my side, Seg whistled.

“A goodly shaft. . .”

He bent to pull it out.

I said: “You’ll find it will come hard. As a wager, I’ll venture there are six or seven barbs a side. That’s no Lohvian shaft, Seg.”

“But it is as long — what bow is there that — oh!”

“Yes,” I said. And I nodded and felt the anger in me, and the despair, the sorrow, and the vengeful fury.

“I have never met an archer who can best a Bowman of Loh,” said Seg Segutorio, speaking softly. “But you have told me of these devils, and it seems we are to meet them, now.”

“They must be devils indeed to destroy these Katakis, who are devils spawned from Cottmer’s Caverns,” said Dredd Pylvorr, feelingly.

“From around the curve of the world,” I said. “From whence no man knows. They sail in their swift, magical ships, raiding, destroying, looting, burning. They are diffs unlike any in the whole of Paz. They are not men like us. They are the Shanks, the Shants, the Shtarkins, Leem Lovers, vile, to be destroyed, vermin — and yet, and yet, I know they are courageous to sail their ships all those untold dwaburs across the open seas. They are not men like us; but they are men.”

“And they’ll slay us all as soon as look,” said Inch, sourly.

Dredd Pylvorr gripped onto the hilt of his rapier. His pinched mouth shook; then he had control of himself.

“I know of whom you speak, prince. We call them Shkanes — they have many names, all vile. Fish-Heads — yes, their horror goes before them.”

I turned to young Tim, who had recovered and was now busily plundering the dead bodies, a most sensible occupation.

“You said they rode sleeths, Tim.”

“So they did, prince,” Tim looked up, his hands full of rings and chains and brooches, with a wicked-looking dagger stuck into his breechclout. I winced. He could do himself a permanent and most unfortunate injury if he were injudicious.

“There are no sleeths here, you imp of Sicce!” roared Balass the Hawk. He was prowling about looking for a sword more to his liking than a rapier, and hoping vainly to come across a shield. “Sleeths are stupid reptiles, at best, but they’d stick to their dead masters.”

“That means, brothers, that the Shanks have ridden off on the Katakis’ sleeths.”

Oby ran off.

The sleeth is a saddle dinosaur, variously scaled and marked, which runs on two legs, the fore claws stunted and in a way pathetically stupid, and with the long thick tail outstretched to the rear to provide balance. They are an uncomfortable ride and I have nothing to do with them. I am a Zorca and a Vove man. I ride a Nikvove when I cannot saddle a Vove, and I like the superb joats of my Djangs, and I have some time for a few other of the riding mounts of Kregen. But sleeths — no, I do not fancy them.

From just over the brow of the slope Oby screeched and waved his arms, so we trotted over there. He pointed down.

The unmistakable tracks of sleeth claws showed in a muddy patch where water trickled past the grasses. The tracks pointed downslope and to the farther side of the greensward where the forest closed in again. The forest did not, at that moment, look in the least inviting.

“Find yourselves battle weapons more suitable than rapiers,” I shouted. “Then we ride to deal with the Fish-Heads.”

No one passed a comment on our riding to deal with men who had already dealt with the Katakis for us. For all their horrific reputation, the Katakis were small beer beside the Shanks, the Fish-Heads, from over the curve of the world.

Our Pachaks trotted in from their scouting duty and dismounted to search for weapons. The choices were plentiful. If the Shanks had taken any weapons from the shambles of the battlefield it made little impression on the numbers remaining. I selected a good stout cut and thruster, a version of the Havil-farese thraxter or the Vallian clanxer, and buckled it on scabbarded to its own belt. Its owner no longer possessed a face, besides now losing his sword.

Because I had steeled myself to go through with the ceremony at the Fair of Arial, a function whose purpose appeared to be known to all my friends and not to myself, I had donned the bright foppish clothes and had forced myself to ignore them, to grow accustomed to them. Now, and, I confess, with some relief and also somewhat pettishly, I stripped off the belts and ripped away the gaudy silks and sensils, threw down the brocaded pelisse and the feathered mazilla — the thing had been irritating and itching at me all day — and so stood forth clad only in the old scarlet breechclout.

In a battle a man needs protection from the blow he does not see. With resignation, then, I found pieces of armor that would fit and so donned a semblance of a breast and back, finding a reasonable fit over a padded vest. The scaled armor was flexible enough, the bronze studs barbaric against the black. Also, I took up a bow and four quivers, filling them from other, half-emptied quivers. As for the helmets of the Katakis, these are small and round and completely without embellishment, save for what may be painted on or engraved. The Pachaks are the same about their helmets. No fighting man who uses a bladed tail wants gaudy

ornaments in his helmet to interfere with the lean lethal sweep of that deadly tail.

Finding one that fit I strapped it up. At the least, it might save my old vosk-skull from a terminal crack.

Inch appeared in high delight, tempered only by the fact that the axe he had found was not a true danheim axe, being double-bitted and short in the haft; but, as he said, it would serve to lop a few Fish-Heads' heads, it would serve. . .

There were no shields, for, as you know, the fighting men of this part of Kregen regarded the shield as a coward's accoutrement, a stupidity that Balass and I had been doing something to rectify. So Balass had to content himself with a good cut and thruster, and a powerful main-gauche built to mammoth proportions. As for Turko, the Khamster who could rip a warrior apart with his bare hands, the Khamorro who disdained all edged and pointed weapons, he still had his balass and steel parrying stick, a decadence of belief shocking and yet reassuring to me, for he, too, Turko the Shield, could not carry his great shield into battle at my back.

Oby took up Old Superb, and with the old battle flag floating above us, we rode from that scene of destruction and plunged into the gloomy defiles of the forest.

Turning in my saddle I saw the two lads, Tim and his friend, still hard at work. I sighed. Children learn the facts of life hard on Kregen — a phenomenon not unfamiliar to children on this Earth — but the facts they learn on Kregen are altogether more harsh and lurid. Turned in my saddle I noticed the tall whipcord tough body of the tazll mercenary who had been the only one to ride with us when we'd galloped from the Fair. He was a diff, a Khibil, with the hard, sharp, fox-like face of that people, with bristling whiskers and proud dark eyes. He had not dismounted to collect weapons. He carried a long lance, a rapier and main gauche and a cut and thruster. I had not failed to notice the silver

mortil-head looped on its silver silken cord at his throat. He was a Paktun, a famed mercenary. He was not of the Order, not one of the Brotherhood, and so I had been wrong when I had so enthusiastically enjoined on us all as a band of brothers that we rode about the Order's business. But, all the same, he looked competent and tough and a useful man to have in such a fight as we would soon encounter.

Just ahead of him rode half a dozen of the minor nobility created by Seg and Inch, Tareks all, young men devoted to their lords and to the ideals of the Order.

Foleanor Arc, the young Strom of Meltzer, rode next ahead, brilliant, laughing, his guitar slung to his saddle bow and, I knew, causing him great anguish that he could not strum the strings and then give us a rousing song to help us on our way. With him rode Kenli ti Valkanium, straight and lean and grim.

They followed Nath Dangorn, called Totrix, who rode a zorca and would have preferred an ugly, six-legged totrix as a mount, and with him Nev ti Drakanium, who owed his loyalty to the Lady of Delphond.

Oh, yes, we were a goodly company, for there were others who rode with us along the forest trails in the somber shadows of the trees, with only the occasional chink of sunlight falling through, burning red when the ruby sun Zim shone down and lambent green when the emerald sun Genodras caught shafts of viridian light through the tracery of leaves. But we were few, pitifully few. Inch and Seg had counted at least a hundred and seventy-five Katakis corpses.

Truly, I had never before been of two minds over the numbers of dead Katakis there might be scattered about. Well, by Zair, to be honest, perhaps only when Rukker had been involved.

The way ahead showed a streaming mass of golden light as the commingled shafts from the suns drenched the end of the trail in radiance. We rode out from the forest onto a broad sweep of

greensward. Small white flowers grew in clumps among the green. The little breeze tufted the grasses. Away before us the trail, which was in truth only a narrow beaten way where the grass struggled to cling to life, trended through a copse and then rose to skirt a hillside and so round the bend and, presumably, descend to Briar's Cove. The sound of the sea reached us in long murmured susurrations. Birds wheeled above, but their wheelings soon ceased as they set course for the shambles in our rear. At this sign we all knew the Shanks could not be far off.

I held up my right hand and made chopping motions left and right. The column formed out and we rode abreast. The flowers and the grasses and the breeze, the high blue sky and, over all, the streaming mingled radiance of Zim and Genodras, created an unforgettable picture. We rode on.

The long swelling sound of the sea reached us from the right and on our left the small hill was crowned by a ruin from the olden time. White columns leaned, splotched with lichen. The corner of an architrave hung perilously over nothing. Insects murmured among the tall grasses and flowers bowering the ruin. We rode on.

The greenness of the grass was a greenness that held nothing of menace, lush and bright and soothing. Clumps of red flowers grew here and there, mingled with the white star-like blooms. Blue flowers, perfumed, delicate, drifted above tall stems in the little breeze. A few clouds, white against the blue, drifted in counterpoint to the blue flowers starring the grasses.

Truly, there are times and places on Kregen that are heart-breakingly beautiful. But we grim men, panoplied for war, rode on.

The Shanks rode out from the copse fronting us, a dense column that debouched like a dark river in flood, formed a thickly ranked line that extended to flank us left and right, and

sat, waiting, their weapons all a-glitter in the light of the Suns of Scorpio.

We had no trumpeter.

There was no need to sound the charge.

If men exist who prey on other men, looting and destroying and killing, then the victims must either perish or resist. To perish is not always easy, if nonresistance is part of a creed. To resist is sometimes the easier course, even if it does, in the end, lead to total destruction. Then, perhaps, it were better not to have resisted at all.

Who could say that these Fish-Heads did not have the right to sail over the curve of the world from their own lands, and burn and loot and destroy our lands?

These questions are imponderables, particularly when you are pounding along at full gallop, the sword in your fist, the suns light of Scorpio beating on your helmet, feeling the jolting lunge of your zorca, seeing the onrushing blur of Fish-Faces, the glitter of hostile weapons, readying yourself for the scarlet moment of impact.

The Brotherhood hit the thick ranks of Shanks and burst through in a welter of flashing blades and spurting blood, of screaming sleaths and zorcas, of men going down and of Fish-Heads being ridden into the turf.

It was all a blur of action. The sword thrust and cut, parried, leaped, slicked with the greasy green ichor of the Shanks, a live brand in my hand.

We were surrounded. The Shanks closed in. Seg's arrows cut them down as fast as he could draw the string and let fly. Inch's axe slashed with metronomic regularity, cutting swathes through the fishy bodies. Icy eyes glared at us, the abominable stink of fishy bodies clammied in with a foul miasma. We fought. Balass showed all the skill of the hyr kaidur, fighting with professional skill tempered now with the berserk rage of the warrior. Oby,

using men's weapons, hewed and hacked and drove down his opponents. The clangor of sword against sword beat across that pleasant grassy sward. Blood dropped upon the flowers, the red blood of Paz and the green ichor of the Fish-Heads.

The Shanks wore bronzen armor, fashioned into fish scales. They possessed man-like bodies, but their heads were the heads of fish. Many varieties of fish, there were, I suppose. But we slew those we could and did not stop to reckon the differences. In their fishy eyes no doubt we looked alike, although a Pachak and a Khibil do not look much alike, and diffs differ from apims like me. And apims differ, too, as Inch's seven foot of height marks him out from Oby's lithe youth.

The crowds of stinking Fish-Heads pressed in. Our zorcas reared as we fought, struggling to find space. We were hard pressed. Swords cut and slashed. Over and over again a man would be saved in the last moment by a comrade's blade. Our brands ran thick with green ichor. Soon our arms would tire. We were all fighting men, warriors of Kregen, men who were inured to hardship and suffering and the clangor of war.

But humanity is frail. Muscles and blood, sinews and breath, can only sustain a man for so long. Then strength will fail and breath come hard. Then muscles will fail to bring the sword up in time, to deliver the terminal blow. And there were many Fish-Heads, over twice as many as in the Brotherhood.

We fought magnificently.

But we were pressed in and back. The Pachaks found a weak link in the circle and we smashed our way through. I lifted in the stirrups and waved the dripping sword.

"To the trees!" I yelled. I took the responsibility. I ordered the retreat. I, it was, who took my men away from that death trap.

We galloped hard for the trees and we passed the little ruin atop its hill. There were fewer of us who thus retreated than there had been who so valiantly charged.

At the tree line we reformed. Our zorcas were tiring. We were all panting. Most of us were wounded. Blood shone red upon our armor. And, over all, the sticky green ichor clung, stinking, foul, like a vomit to revolt us all and remind us of the inevitable end.

The dark mass of the Shanks with those evil glittering points of light from point and edge of weapons waited at the far end of the greensward slope. Banners fluttered above them, a multi-colored display that meant much to them and nothing save as targets for destruction to us. I looked at the Brotherhood, panting but determined still. We were few.

“We will chew them up piecemeal and spit them out as one spits out gregarian pips,” I shouted. “We hit the left flank and break clean through and retire. Understood?”

“Aye, prince. Understood.” The cries came bluffly, strong, confident despite wounds and tiredness. I shook my zorca’s reins and led out.

We hit them like a rapier lunge, chopping off the left flank. We lost men, yes, we lost good men; but we trampled down and slew more of them than they of us.

The Shanks — the Shkanes as Pylvorr called them — handled their tridents with superb efficiency. The wicked barbs would degut a man as neatly as a fishmonger deguts a cod. But the wicked tridents had their disadvantages. Seg deflected one with the bowstave in his left hand, his sword blurred down and sliced away an icy Fish-Face, and Inch, the barbs of a trident caught in his saddle, slashed his axe in a merciless horizontal sweep that sprayed bits of fish everywhere.

We reformed back upslope and turned, and hit them again.

Four, five, six times we regrouped and charged.

At each charge we were less. The zorca, as we all believed then, was not the animal for the solid shoulder-to-shoulder, knee-to-knee charge, bodyweight and mass of metal counting more than fleetness and agility. Times change — but that is for later.

Seven times we raced fleetly over the slope, angling the direction of our lunge, trying to chew and chop at the mass of Fish-Heads as a man hews and cuts at a stubborn log of wood to shape it to his satisfaction. The fight was of great intensity during the action; the compass might be small but of individual prowess the battle was of epic proportions.

The arrow storm I had expected to greet us from the Shanks' asymmetrical bows stormed only once. We lost men; but I shouted and lifted my sword and beat away the glancing shafts, and others bent their heads into the sleet. We charged through that ordeal, losing men — the Pachaks suffered here — and so came to hand strokes, again. After that the arrows fell sparingly and I guessed the Shanks were running low.

If ever the relative merits of the reptilian two-legged sleeth and the close-coupled four-legged zorca could be proved, then this battle matched them and proved decisively the zorca as the master. Pirouetting, dancing nimbly sideways, circling, the zorcas outran and outmaneuvered the clumsy sleeths. This gave us one tremendous advantage. We could drive in, deliver our blows and spin away before the sleeth riders could form front to receive our onslaught.

The grasses stained red and green with dropped blood. Men and Fish-Heads lay upon the stained grass, some howling, some screeching, most dead.

Eight times we roared in, and on the eighth time we were fractionally slow through tiredness and so were nearly surrounded and trapped. We fought free. Sword against serrated sword and trident, we hewed and savaged our way through the pressing ranks, rode with bent heads for the tree line past the white columns of the ancient ruin. We were nearly exhausted. All were wounded. We gasped for breath. Our superb zorcas were near the end.

I rode a few paces before the brothers of the Order — with the Pachaks and the Khibil there in the line with us — and I lifted in the stirrups. I surveyed my men from under the helmet rim.

“If any man wishes to withdraw through the forest, he is free to do so. I shall not think any the worse of him for that. If any one of you wishes to go, then go now, and may Opaz guide your footsteps.”

There were gaps in the ranks, and the gaps closed up.

No man moved back.

The zorcas shifted on their polished hooves. Oby held the scarlet and yellow banner high.

I let out my breath.

“Then let us all go forward, together, as a band of brothers.”

“They fight hard, by Erthyr the Bow,” said Seg. He shook his bow at the dark ranks of Shanks, speckled with the cruel glitter from their weapons. “But we’ll have ’em!”

“We’ll take a few with us to the Ice Floes of Sicce,” said Inch. “By Ngrangi, this old axe will lop a few fishy heads.”

“By Xurrhuk of the Curved Sword,” spat out Balass the Hawk. “We can lick them yet.”

“Aye!” sang out Oby. He used an oath of the Jikhorkdun, in remembrance of other days. “You speak sooth, Balass, by the glass eye and brass sword of Beng Thrax!”

Other oaths rose as men swore on their honor. These men would fight to death, however nonsensical that might be. And yet — and yet? Could I detect a wavering among some of those with us? A very slight, an almost imperceptible, reluctance? Some of the shouts and cries carried overtones of hysteria. Some of these men might waver. They could see quite plainly that this affair could end only in their deaths. Where was the sense in that? Yet these men were brothers, of the Order — yet the Order was new, unfledged, with no long-rooted traditions to inspire and uplift

and enable men to act beyond their own resources. Could I blame them?

“The island of Nikzm is small,” I shouted. “Since we dispersed the pirates there has been no fighting. There is no garrison to speak of. All that lies between these Fish-Heads and the defenseless people — is us — the Order.” I did not wave my sword. I sat hard and upright and glared upon these, my men, the brothers of the Order I hoped would achieve so much. “But that is not the whole reason why we fight on. Yes, it is the ultimate reason for our being. For the people of Nikzm represent all the peoples of Paz. All the continents and islands here. But we fight for our own honor. We fight in our own eyes, we are our own judges. It is to us, and us alone, that this Jikai belongs. And in honor we must redeem our pledges so freely given.”

The line, so shrunken now, quivered. Zorcas began to sidle. The men were dispirited, despite their words. In only moments one man might break, and with his desertion the whole line could crumble. Was this how my own vaunting ambitions were to end? On a tiny island, destroyed by stinking Fish-Heads? Was my own pride so vainglorious that I would condemn to death this fine company of men, young and proud in their strength, laughing and merry, send them remorselessly to destruction? For myself? For my overweening pride and ambition?

In that dark moment, I, too, I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, came very close to despair.

A voice, an anonymous voice, rose from the ranks.

“Let us ride from hence and gather reinforcements. Let us save ourselves so that we may fight another day.”

I looked.

I confess it, I looked to mark the man.

It was Dredd Pylvorr, Tarek, created by me, given honor and rank, his father uplifted, an Elder, the Chief Elder of this island we fought to save.

“If this is your will—” I started to say, not thinking, not even savage, but resigned. I, Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor, Krozair of Zy, resigned to running from my foes!

Another voice bellowed, hard and fierce.

“They charge! See, the Shanks attack!”

I swung about, lowering, hating, filled with anger and remorse and fury and shame.

The Fish-Heads bore down on us, a long dark breaking wave of beasts and mounts, tipped with steel, riding knee to knee, hard and savage and utterly without mercy, riding to crush us and smash us into utter destruction.

“Now are we doomed!” The shriek rose and shattered in despair.

The line began to break.

Chapter Two

Kroveres of Iztar

As that dark and glittering onrushing mass bore down on us I cursed my own stupidity and pig-headed vanity and folly. I, Dray Prescott, had led these men to their deaths. The horrid clicking and scratching of many sleeth claws reached us with hypnotic intensity. The tridents glittered red in the light of the Suns of Scorpio — glittered red with our blood.

The line at my back moved and snaked, restively. The zorcas were tired. The men were exhausted. Fool! Onker! I should have retreated at the first, sought what assistance there was in Nikzm; small though it was, it would have made the difference. All the mercenaries at the Fair, the stout country-folk, the fishermen — with what weapons we could have gathered up for them, we would have fought — and I realized even as I thus castigated myself that no simple countryman, no fisherman, was going to meet and best in battle these supremely warlike Shanks. The Shanks lived for battle. It was a creed with them, some divine right given to them by their own dark and fishy gods, driving them on, egging them on to plunder and conquest and eternal battle.

The truth was the Brotherhood had achieved against the Shanks what few groups of men of Paz had ever achieved before.

And the cost was high, the payment dear, the final reckoning written in blood and spelling death.

“Brotherhood of Paz!” I bellowed, turning in the saddle, glaring back at the shuffling line. “Those of you who will, go! Flee! Save yourselves. Raise the island, carry word to Zamra, rouse the garrisons. And those that will — follow me!”

Lumpily turning in the saddle and ready to clap in heels — no man who is a rider uses spurs to a zorca — I hesitated, and turned back. My face must have borne that old intolerant, savage, devil’s look. I bellowed.

“Seg! Inch! Balass! Turko! Oby!” I shouted, loud, intemperately, viciously. “Tom! Vangar! Nath! Kenli! Naghan! You do not ride with me. Your duty lies in other places closer to your hearts! I order you to ride and seek succor! *Ride!*”

They left it to Seg to speak for them all.

Seg Segutorio lifted his bow. He smiled that raffish, fey grin of his, his blue eyes very bright and merry in that tanned face beneath the shock of black hair.

“Oh, aye, my old dom. We’ll ride. We’ll obey your damned high-handed orders. Only it happens that the quickest way for us to ride to do your bidding — *prince* — is to ride straight ahead. Straight ahead!”

“And if any lumpen Fish-Face happens to get in the way, let him look out,” Inch finished.

“Famblys!” I shouted, feeling the gush of warmth, the anger, the pride at their folly, the agony and the shame. “Idiots! Onkers! It is my duty and mine alone — it falls to me—”

“Sometimes you take too much on your shoulders,” said Turko. His magnificent muscles bulged. I blinked. In Turko’s left hand a green-dripping sword caught the lights of the twin suns. “Turko? A sword?”

He laughed. “They broke my parrying stick. This serves in its stead. Had I my great shield, now, then—”

The clicking scrape of the advancing sleeths bore down on us.

The line shifted and yet, and yet they would not ride off. For a space the tension hung. Now I knew that they must ride. I had been wrong, criminally wrong, in thus dragging these men to their deaths. In my own folly and pride I thought I had been doing the right, the noble, thing. But nobility can be bought at too high a price. It was folly to have these men slain to no purpose now. If we all died here — as we would, as we would! — how would that help this tiny island of Nikzm, let alone the mighty empire of Vallia?

No thoughts of my Delia must be allowed to enter my stubborn old vosk-skull of a head. None.

“Go!” I bellowed. “Save yourselves!”

A few men shook out their reins, they would not look at me. But I did not blame them as they began to turn their zorcas’ heads, ready to ride back through the dark defiles of the forest.

So this was how all my brave dreams for a great Brotherhood had foundered! The Order was finished. It had never even begun.

I turned back to face the oncoming mass of Shkanes, and I wished I could have had my old Krozair longsword with me, and I kicked in my heels and the zorca lunged forward for the last time.

Headlong I belted for the black and silver glittering mass of Fish-Heads.

A shrill and shocked shrieking began — began to my rear.

I did not look back. The zorca flew fleetly over the grass where the blue and red and white flowers starred the green, where drops of red blood stained across the flowers. The shouting at my back increased and voices mingled in shocked disbelief. I looked up to my left, toward the white ruins.

I stared, disbelieving.

A light glowed among the white tumbled columns.

A golden yellow light, lambent, blazing, growing in color and luminosity, swelling. And at the heart of that refulgent radiance

the figure of a woman astride a zorca. A woman wearing golden armor, astride a white zorca whose single spiral horn blazed with golden light. I stared and the mount beneath me ran loose. I stared at the apparition. She wore golden armor and carried a great banner which flowed freely outspread in a breeze no one else could feel, an unearthly breeze from a land beyond the senses of normal men.

“Zena Izta!” I screamed it out, shaken, dazed, wondering.
“*Zena Izta!*”

This was the supernatural woman who had visited me on Earth when I had been banished there for twenty-one miserable years. Then she had used the fashionable name of Madam Ivanovna. She had appeared to me before, using supernatural means, and I believed she had helped me. She was not, as far as I then knew, aligned either with the Savanti or with the Star Lords. I gaped and the zorca eased up, and slowed down. Zena Izta lifted the great banner so that all could see the device coruscating upon the crimson surface.

Outlined in white upon the glowing crimson banner the deep royal blue of her cogwheel device forced itself upon my own senses, yet I had never grasped the significance of that emblem. Always before Zena Izta had appeared to me alone, with those around us frozen in a timeless sleep. Yet now — now from the shouts and excited and shocked exclamations that broke from the brothers of the Order, she could be seen by us all.

Her voice reached us. Golden, ringing, full-bodied, her voice floated above all the sounds of coming battle, over the shouts and yells of the men, over the clicking scraping advance of the sleeths and the hissing malevolence of the Fish-Heads, over the mingled jingling of war harness.

“Men of Paz! Brothers of the Order! Comrades in blood! Those you call Fish-Heads must be shown the error of their ways. The Order demands sacrifice, loyalty, utter devotion, unswerving

purpose, obedience.” She lifted the banner in her left hand and golden coruscating sparks shot from her armor. In her right hand a sword — a sword! A sword like unto a Savanti sword — lifted high and pointed. The brand pointed at the Shanks. “Death is a small price to pay for honor! Brothers of the Order! Your duty in honor is to be true to yourselves and to Paz and to the Order.”

The light began to fade.

I shook my head. There was much she had said with which I would not, could not, agree. But a great deal summed up something of what I struggled for.

But, in the name of Zair! How did she know the Order existed at all?

But, then, she was no mortal woman. She understood many secrets I longed to know, could see into the hearts of men, must surely comprehend the doings of Kregen and attempt to mold them to her own ends.

The Shanks pressed nearer. They were confident now. They had withstood all we could throw at them. They had suffered and had lost a goodly number from their ranks. But they could see how we had suffered. They shrilled their hideous screeching war cries and they came on, fishy, stinking, scaly, repulsive, deadly.

They had not seen the golden glowing apparition of Zena Iztar.

Her chiming voice rang out for one last time before the vision disappeared.

“Fight for what you believe to be true, Men of Paz. And, remember, never speak to anyone not of the Order of my presence, for I am sacrosanct. This is a stricture laid on you as members of the Order — and a privilege. Follow Dray Prescott. *Jikai!*”

The first man to move was Dredd Pylvorr.

With a high lifting shriek he set his zorca in a straight dead run at the oncoming Shanks.

We saw him galloping madly into the thickest of them. We saw his sword swirling and smiting left and right, saw him engulfed as

a stone is engulfed in a pool. In the same instant we were all once more in motion, roaring down, headlong belting down into the repulsively stinking mass of Fish-Heads.

Dredd Pylvorr had shouted as he charged for the last time.

Over and over he had shouted as he roared to his death.

“For the Brotherhood of Iztar! For the Order! For Dray Prescott! Iztar! Iztar!”

I felt the coldness running through me.

There were manipulations here, superhuman twistings of normal human men to supernatural ends.

Then we hit.

The red roaring madness of battle descended on us. I am contemptuous of that notorious red curtain that falls before the fighting man’s eyes — so it is said — but it is a thing that transcends humanity and must be used and manipulated in its turn so far as a man may. We fought. We fought.

I think, now, as I thought then, that Zena Iztar brought some of her magical powers to our assistance. Nothing else, in all sanity, serves to explain what happened.

The few of us, the few Brothers of the Order of Iztar, smashed and beat and routed the confident might of the Shanks from around the curve of the world. We destroyed them. The survivors ran. The sleeths poured blood as the Shkanes poured blood. Green ichor fuming onto the grass, smoking under the suns.

We pursued them.

Down the long slope and through the copse and so down the last curve of the trail into Briar’s Cove we pursued them, slaying all the way.

Memories are scarlet and monstrous and do not pass.

Our arms did not tire. We were possessed of superhuman strength. Tireless, we smote and slew and drove them down to the beach where we slew them in the water as they tried to reach their ships. Those ships with their clumsy square upperworks and the

sleek fishlike lines below water, with the tall banded aerodynamic sails, pushed off with the last few remnants. The black and amber sails slid up the tall masts, curving to the breeze. The ships pulled away, sliding easily through the water, and we stood on the beach and shook our fists at the Shanks, and cursed them, and jeered them, and felt, perhaps, as no men of Paz had ever felt before.

We did not attempt to sail the ships in which the Katakis had landed after the Shkanes. I knew that no ship of Paz, not even the superb race-built galleons of Vallia, could catch a Shank ship.

Some of the very best galleons built in Valka might almost match a Shank vessel, and we were working all the time on improvements; but these Katakis vessels were mere small editions of argenters, broad and squat and with a pitiful sail plan. They were broad-beamed and capacious and designed to hold slaves.

We stood and jeered and fumed until the last Shank vessel vanished from sight, and then we turned back to the dolorous business of clearing up after the battle.

There was much talk, and much to talk about; but one single topic dominated every conversation.

Zena Iztar.

Dredd Pyvorr had been the first to drive into battle at her instigation. He, it was soon apparent, was the original martyr of the Order. His name would live enshrined.

Traditions were built in this fashion.

And, too, I detected a difference about these men. Some inner strength had been vouchsafed them. They were not the same men who had agreed to join the Order. They had been refined, refined in the crucible of agony and battle, and now they gleamed with a luster of spirit I found mightily reassuring — and also worrying in that nagging anxious way I have when events pour past without due design and thought spent upon them.

As with my membership of the Order of Krozairs of Zy upon the Eye of the World, I will not speak of much of our discipline.

Much had been taken from the Krozairs, for their Orders are justly famed, and workmanlike, martial and mystic, devoted to Zair, and designed to sustain morale and spirit in the deepest of adversities. So I will content myself with a few remarks only. In the old days of Valka, when that island of which I am Strom was its own kingdom, they had their own knights, men of high-caliber, renowned, given the honor prefix of Ver to their names. This, we chose to resurrect, and members of the Order of Iztar were called, among ourselves, Ver Seg and Ver Inch, and so on.

Ver Seg Segutorio was the High Archbold.

This I welcomed and refused to take on any particular position for myself, preferring to be a plain member, a simple Ver of the Order.

We called ourselves Kroveres.[\[1\]](#)

Kroveres.

The name rang and reverberated, as the name Krozair rings and reverberates.

We were the Kroveres of Iztar.

Also, and at the time much to my displeasure, another name was also used, and I asked questions and was told. Was told.

Seg said to me: “We are the Order of Kroveres of Iztar, Dray. Now we must build. This little Island has witnessed a miracle.”

“Surely,” I said as we rode lumpily for the Mound of Arial. “And you still haven’t given me any idea why we came here in the first place — except to check up on progress.”

He laughed.

“Why, you may as well know now. I think Elder Pyvorr will be mourning his son—” All the laughter fled. “It was a great deed, Dredd Pyvorr’s. We shall remember him in the Kroveres.”

“Yes, that is so. And?”

“And, my old dom, you were asked here to be given the new name of the island as a gifting. You are the Kov of Zamra. Zamra

is just over the horizon to the north, and this little island is called Nikzm—”

“I know!” Nik as a prefix means half and as a suffix means small. In the names of lands and islands, however, the prefix often carries the meaning of small, for Zamra was by many times more than twice the size of Small Zamra, Nikzamra, Nikzm.

“The Elders and people of the island have decided and issued the necessary patents and the bokkertu has been concluded to call the island Drayzm. Drayzm. So, my old dom, we are also the Kroveres of Drayzm.”

So, as you can well imagine, I was not overly pleased.

I passed it off; but Seg gave me a hard look, and said a word or two about thick-headed, vosk-skulled ingrates, and how Delia was muchly pleased—

“Did Delia know about this, then?”

“Oh, aye. You don’t think we’d go behind your back without consulting Delia, do you? You’ve told me how they made you Strom of Valka — well! This is no new title — and I know how you feel about them, as I do. They are useful in this world.”

“That is sooth, by Vox!”

And Inch leaned forward to say, waspishly: “And if the Kov of Falinur lost that one, he’d not give a damn, hey?”

“Too right!” snapped back Seg. He had had great trouble in his kovnate of Falinur. “Except — except Thelda would—”

“Aye,” I said. “Thelda likes mightily to be a kovneva. And so she should. She deserves it.”

Inch laughed and chick-chicked his zorca and we rode on. But I began to think how best to relieve Seg of Falinur and find him a kovnate where he was not regarded with hatred, through no fault of his own but because of the ingrained animosity of the people to anyone who deprived them of slaves.

Then, of course, the problem would arise that the new kov would almost certainly approve of slavery, as did most ordinary

men and women of Vallia. Slavery, Delia and I had sworn, was going to be rooted out of Vallia. I looked beyond that, as did Delia, I know now, until it was finally uprooted from all of Paz.

As we rode back this kind of talk naturally led on to the problems of Vallia, the huge island Empire. Delia's father, the emperor, had once more gained a breathing space with the destruction of the Chyyanists; but there were always fresh factions seeking to drag him down and install the puppet of their own choice as emperor.

"Mind you, Dray," said Seg, reflectively as we cantered gently into a defile ready to begin the last ascent to Arial's Mound in the last of the suns shine. "The nobles loyal to the emperor remain loyal, or most of them. He couldn't rule without them."

"But the opposition parties still continue, also," pointed out Inch. "They keep changing alliance and pattern; but they are still against the emperor, the whole family." Here he looked at me.

I nodded somberly. Vallia is an enormous patchwork of many different sized estates, run by nobles — by kovs and vads and trylons and Stroms and all the others — and there are many parties and factions, not all of whom seek to destroy the emperor. At this time the main party was the Racter Party, and the second the Panval Party. The Fegters were growing in strength and there was always the North East of Vallia, an area traditionally troublesome. But when Inch mentioned the family of the emperor, he was thinking of Delia and me and our family.

"And, to cap it all," said Seg, "there's this Queen Lush. Thelda is still captivated by the woman. I fancy this queen has her eyeballs firmly set on the emperor. You'll have to have a say there, Dray."

"Sink me!" I burst out. "If the old devil wants to get married again I won't stop him." I added, nastily: "Give him something else to think about."

"Well, my old dom, you're still banished from Vondium."

I grumped in the saddle, and we rode on. By Zair! But I was anxious to see Delia again and find out about our erring daughter Dayra. And even Lela still had not put in an appearance. I'd not seen them for years and years. It was just not good enough. So I was not in the happiest of moods as the final rites were gone through, the Kroveres of Izstar dispersed to their homes, the island was renamed Drayzm, and, at last, at blessedly last, we could take off for Valka and home — and Delia.

Chapter Three

Of Processions and Mercenary Guards

The airboat swung in a wide graceful arc over the glittering sea and the dancing wavelets of the Bay of Valkanium threw back splintered shards of ruby and emerald, merging into a deepening golden-speckled radiance as the Suns of Scorpio sank beyond the bulk of the Heart Heights of Central Valka. The sight was gorgeous and nostalgic and always, invariably, awakes in me vast and moving memories. I slanted the boat down toward the high palace and fortress of Esser Rarioch, and joyed that I was coming home.

There was much work to be done. With a premonition I tried unsuccessfully to shake off, I faced a future in which the harsh clangor of strife, the wicked scrape of assassins' steel and the devious and vicious intrigues around an emperor's court held no lure for me whatsoever, and to the Ice Floes of Sicce with the headlong adventure of it all. But I would face danger and the most deadly peril, as I knew, as I knew, and as you shall hear.

The world of Kregen, four hundred light years from Earth, is indeed a beautiful world. It is also a horrific world. It is real. And yet I was more and more convinced that the beauty and horror cloaked far deeper truths. If the Star Lords, who had brought me here from Earth many and many a time, alone were responsible,

as I had once thought, with the Savanti attempting to combat them, then how could I either resist or support so powerful a group of — a group of what? Were they men? Were they superhuman beings, divine in origin, godlike in power? I did not know. The Savanti, the superhuman but mortal men of the Swinging City of Aphrasöe seemed, at least to me, to have more easily understood aims. The Savanti wanted to make of Kregen a better and more civilized world, and they supported apims to do that work for them. Apims, that is, people like *Homo sapiens*, formed a goodly proportion of the various peoples I had so far met on Kregen. But whose word was it? Did it belong to *diff* or *apim*? Or neither? I did not know.

These wider problems of Kregen stayed with me as the flier landed on that high upflung landing platform and we stepped down to be greeted by my High Chamberlain, old Panshi. He looked grave. He bowed formally, his wand of office held just so in the prescribed position of welcome and warning.

“My prince! Messengers from Vondium came for the princess; they left sealed packets and have departed these three days.”

Well, Delia was off with her Sisters of the Rose, hunting up information on our wayward daughter Dayra. I trusted she was being assisted by our eldest daughter Lela.

“Thank you, Panshi.” We walked swiftly in the last of the suns sets glow toward the outer chambers. “I will see the packets. First I will see the princesses — Velia and Didi.”

As I stood by the cots and looked at the two tiny forms, cherubic, sleeping, tiny fists closed, puckered mouths breathing gently, I sighed. What future lay in store for them, on this harsh and hostile planet of Kregen? Delia and I had been blessed by our daughter Velia, when our first daughter Velia had been so cruelly slain. But she had given us little Didi, the daughter of Velia, my Lady of the Stars, and of Gafard, the king’s Striker, Sea Zhantil, renegade and man. I sighed again and bent and kissed them and

so left them to the capable hands of the nurses and of Aunt Katri, who shooed me away with a fine air of hustle. As the emperor's sister, she spent more of her time with the emperor's daughter and her children than she did in the capital of Vallia, Vondium the Proud.

Panshi handed me the packets as I sipped the first light wine of the evening.

Heavily sealed, they bore the stamps of Lord Farris of Voman-soir, Chuktar in the Vallian Air Service, a great man, utterly loyal to the emperor, who looked upon Delia as a daughter.

With a brutal tug I broke the fastenings and took out the letter.

It was circumlocutory, filled with respect and devotion; but its message was more brutal than the gesture I had used to unseal it.

Briefly; the emperor was gravely ill. No one could fathom out the nature of his illness. There were new doctors who promised much but could find no cure. The presence of the Princess Majestrix was requested.

Turko walked in and saw my face.

"Aye, Turko. Bad news. The emperor is like to die."

"Delia—" said Turko, on a breath. His magnificently muscled body and his handsome face reassured me. He understood.

"He may be an old devil. But he is Delia's father. He once ordered his guards to take off my head, instantly, but—"

Turko half laughed. "Aye! Seg has told us often enough. He has said your surprise when you saw him will last the rest of his life." Sharply, he added: "When do we leave? Now?"

"Aye."

"Remember, you are banished, by the emperor's strict decree."

"To the Ice Floes of Sicce with the old devil's decrees. Delia will have other messages, so she will know. She will go. And there is danger in a capital city of an empire when the emperor dies. We will pack up and leave at once."

Panshi was summoned and ran instantly to do my bidding. I felt that grim chill of premonition again. There were many forces conspiring to drag down the emperor, Delia's father. I was an old sea-leem, a render, a paktun, a buccaneer prince, the king of a fabled far-off land — I admit it freely. I wanted to be in at the death — if there was to be a death. I must add, not for myself alone. Delia must be supported. The emperor's grandchildren must be apportioned their rights. I knew my Delia would think only of her father's health and life; and I being that same Dray Prescott who is more of a rogue than he appears, thought also of what might follow the death of the emperor.

One thing appeared to me certain at the time. I did not then want to be the Emperor of Vallia. I was sincere in that. But what was to happen would be in the hands of the various doctors, the wizards and the gods of Kregen, each acting his part, each with his own rapier to sharpen — or, in the case of the doctors, with his own needle to sharpen — and, as always, I took as my guiding light through the maze of conflicting loyalties and treacheries the single dominant fact of my life. The well-being of Delia alone mattered. For her I would throw over kingships, kovnates, prinedoms. They mean little, anyway, apart from the obvious comforts and the powers to alleviate suffering. Even, I would cast aside all I worked for with the Kroveres of Iztar. Even — and I shudder to confess this, for it is a horrendous crime — even I would disavow the Krozairs of Zy for the sake of my Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains.

Banishment from Vondium still hung over me like a cloud. It seemed sensible to land first at my own Valkan villa at the crest of one of the reserved hills of the capital, and equip myself suitably for admission to the palace. So I donned decent Vallian buff, with tall black boots, and slung a rapier and main gauche at my sides. I clapped on one of those peculiar Vallian wide-brimmed hats, with the two oblong slots cut in the front brim.

The raffish curling feather was red and white, the colors of Valka. Also, I wore a red and yellow favor on my left shoulder, to tell any inquisitive rast who wanted to know that my sympathies lay with the emperor. For Vallia's colors are red and yellow, as are mine, except that the Vallian cross of yellow on the red flag is a saltire. So dressed, and carrying a heavy pouch filled with tied leather bags of gold talens, I took a zorca-ride up to the palace.

Turko, Balass, Oby and Naghan the Gnat refused any orders from me to remain in the villa. They said they'd go with me, even if they had to hang about outside the palace, and go they would and that was that.

"If Tilly was here, she'd go as well," said Oby, stoutly.

The little Fristle fifi, Tilly, was away with Delia.

I nodded. "Very well. But we don't want any swordplay."

"We do not want it," said Balass, evilly. "But we may get it, by the carbuncle on Beng Thrax's posterior."

At the time I knew little of Vondium. It is a great and wonderful city, split by many wide boulevards and by the canals that are the glory of Vallia. I knew more of Ruathytu, the capital of the Empire of Hamal, arch-enemy to Vallia. I knew the way to and from the palace from various points within the city — from the villas we possessed, from Young Bargom's inn, from some of the gates, from the prison of the angels. We rode out sedately, taking the broadest ways, determined not to get into trouble.

We came to an intersection, where a wide avenue passed over a canal — it was the Samphron Cut — by one of the myriad bridges of Vondium. This bridge, of ancient and weathered stone, had been decorated with sculpted heads of zhantil and mortil. The fierce old faces had worn away until now they looked merely pathetic, savage fangs blunted and broken, mighty jaws crumbling and lean. Across the intersection passed a long procession, chanting. Many and many a time have I seen these processions, garlanded, brilliant with colors, bright with banners, carrying the

sacred images proudly aloft, sprinkling the holy dew-drops, winding in long sinuous trails through the streets and avenues of Vondium. They changed as they walked, the long rolling mesmeric singsong of “Oolie Opaz, Oolie Opaz, Oolie Opaz.”

Usually the emphasis falls on the first syllable of each word, so that the long chant goes on and on and on: “*OO-lie OH-paz, OO-lie OH-paz, OO-lie OH-paz.*” Up and down, up and down, a hypnotic singsong chant in time with the shuffle of many feet.

But now all the emphasis, although apparently the same, rolled into a melancholy dirge. Effigies of the emperor were being carried along, heavily draped in black. The yellow and red of Vallia was fringed with heavy black tassels. Many tall poles were entwined with symbolic leaves and flowers, and topped with gilded and silvered skulls. These people, devout, devoted to Opaz, mourned the emperor already. The signs of passionate intercession broke spontaneously from the long columns, men and women flinging themselves into ecstasies of supplication, impassioned bursts of oratory and prayer to preserve the life of the emperor. But the dominant impression remained of a funeral procession, of the pious regrets and observances for a departed monarch.

“By Vox!” I said. “The old devil isn’t dead yet!”

We rode on toward the palace and the traffic flow thickened with many riders and palankeens and chairs, with the zorchariots flickering their tall spindly wheels, varnish and paint and gilding catching the light of the suns. At the time the palace in Vondium always caught at my throat by its sheer size, its grandeur — as always I reflected that this beauty and glory and power would have been flung aside as nothing by Delia when she would have fled by night with me, a penniless outcast.

Up to the various guard details we rode and, at first, a chingle of the golden talens and the swift transference of a bag procured our passage. These guards did not know me — as I did not know

them. They were mainly apims; but a few diffs of the kinds most favored in Vondium stood their duty.

Further into the warren of courts the going became tougher.

Here were stationed the first details of the emperor's personal bodyguard, the Crimson Bowmen of Loh.

"No way through here, koter," observed a matoc, a non-commissioned rank, anxious to be promoted to Deldar and put his foot on the first rung of the long ladder of advancement.

The gold worked with him.

At the next court, where flower sellers waited in long lines, their flowers all blue — a color not favored in Vallia — the guard detail was commanded by a dwa-Deldar. He looked at me. The gold did not move him. We dismounted.

I said to my friends: "Wait here and do not cause mischief."

"But—"

"Wait!"

I took the Deldar aside confidentially. I showed him the gold. He started to shake his head in the shadow of the marble column and I put a dagger into the small of his back, twisted it so he could feel the point, and said gently: "It's the gold or the steel, dom. The alternatives are open to you, the choice yours alone."

He made the sensible man's choice.

When we went back I said to Turko and the others: "Do you go back to the main square. I shall not return this way." I spoke forcefully. "If you do not leave now you will be taken up."

Such was the evil nature of my face that they went, albeit grumbling.

Past the next courtyard I found myself in a portion of the palace I knew slightly, and so could duck through a small door and enter the more somber shadows of the inner precincts unobserved. There would be more guards yet I did not think I would have skewered the Deldar; but it was no certainty.

Mind you, I did not recollect the Crimson Bowmen being stationed so far out of the main bulk of the palace before. They usually stood duty inside the palace.

Inside, as I strode along and mingled with the many people hurrying to and fro, a common occurrence in these huge households so that I was for the moment not noticed, I spotted a distinct change. The guards stationed at doors leading to the various inner areas were Chuliks. I felt surprise. Chuliks do have two arms and two legs, two eyes, one nose and one mouth; but they are diffs of so savage and ferocious a nature that many diffs, let alone apims, hesitate to call them men. They habitually shave their heads save for a long pigtail, their skins are oily yellow, they have two three-inch long tusks thrusting up from the corners of their mouths, which are cruel rattraps. They are trained from birth as mercenary fighters, and can use many weapons with great skill. They will remain loyal when paid, and sometimes afterwards, if the prospects seem good.

A few nasty ideas began to circulate around my thick old head. The emperor, despite one nasty experience and a recent scotching of another, still reposed trust in his Crimson Bowmen. Why, then, should he replace them with most expensive mercenaries who were generally disliked?

Perhaps I should have used more guile getting in to see my father-in-law, and instead of taking the direct, golden-paved route, have broken in through one of the many secret passages.

Persevering, on I went, noticing the air of tension and gloom about the place, but ignoring that in my determination to get through. Long and overly-ornate corridors, mirror-faced, tiled with scenes of the chase and the hunt, led me on ways I knew. This was now the main corridor that led from the outer courts of the palace to the first of the succession of anterooms opening onto the emperor's private apartments. The thickness of the

scurrying crowds thinned. Soon, as I approached a tall balass door guarded by two Chuliks, I stood almost alone.

They regarded me as though I had crawled from under a stone.

“You had best begone from here, calsaney,” said one. He wore a most fancy uniform of red and black, lavishly garlanded with golden cords, with black belts studded with bronze. At his sides he carried scabbarded a rapier and main gauche and in his right hand a three-grained staff. The tassels were red and black, the colors of the emperor’s slave masters.

“Will gold unlock that door, dom?” I spoke up cheerily, most friendly. My hands hung limply at my sides. “I know it well, having passed through many times. The Chemzite Stairway lies beyond, and this door is seldom closed—”

The left-hand Chulik stopped my prattling.

“These are not normal times, rast. The emperor is dying. No one passes here save those with authority. *Schtump!*”

Schtump is a most abusive way of saying clear off, and in normal circumstances could never have been used by a Chulik mercenary to a koter of Vallia within the palace. But times they were a changing-oh.

“Since,” I told these two yellow-skinned, pigtailed mercenaries, “you will not take gold — take this.”

Oh, yes, it was foolish, vainglorious. Even as I twisted the left-hand one’s three-grained staff free and clouted his companion over the ear with it, and brought it back to drive the bronze butt hard into ridged gut muscle, I was ruefully thinking that I was becoming overly talkative in these latter days. But, by Zair, that would change!

I gave each one a thoughtful little tap alongside the helmet rim, just to make sure, and leaving them slumbering pushed the balass doors inward. I heard a gasp and twisted at once, fast, to see only the long golden furred legs and delightful tail of a Fristle fifi disappearing past a pilaster along the wall. Friezes of

strigicaws and shonages ran along the cove here, and the door slammed sharply. I made no attempt to follow. Instead, I pushed on through and ran up the weirdly deserted Chemzite Stairway. In normal times the balass doors were thrown back and the Stairway thronged with courtiers and supplicants and advocates and nobles, all going about their business with the emperor's personal staff.

Now all those highly-placed nobles with access to the emperor were confined to a few of the great halls. I passed along through narrower stairways, walking the marble of a balcony, and looked down at them as I went. From all over the Empire of Vallia the lords and ladies had come to Vondium to be in at the death. Each one had personal reasons of avarice or ambition or fear. As I walked along quietly, looking down at the assemblage of waiting nobility, my lips wrinkled up. A fine crew they were! Not a one, I daresay, spared a thought in sympathy for Delia, their Princess Majestrix. Not a one thought for an instant that it was a girl's father who lay dying.

But, then, that was not entirely true, for nobles like Farris would care. Many of them I recognized. Some of them I have already introduced to you in these tapes, and many more there were of that crew waiting to step onto the stage and strut their little part, before shuffling off, and, by Vox, a lot of them horizontal, too . . .

But, adhering to my plan, I will tell you of these high and mighty nobles of Vallia as and when they came into contact with me. And, too, I did not forget that I had vowed to myself to be the new Dray Prescott, the quiet, conciliatory peace-loving man who would talk first. If the emperor died then the streets of the capital might flow with blood. Everyone knew that factions waited for the moment to strike. And, as is the way with desperate men banded together waiting for a single event to strike, each party believed itself to be the most powerful, or the most advanta-

geously placed, or having the most moral force. A detached observer could see only tragedy ahead.

But, of course, there were few — if any — detached observers, for everyone had a zhantil to saddle. And I, Dray Prescot, I was not detached. Oh, I tried to be. I told myself I wanted none of it. But I knew if some hulking lout brandishing a sword and flaunting colors and feathers tried to steal what belonged to Delia, or what should rightfully belong to our children, then all my fine detachment would vanish and the old Dray Prescot, of the devil's face and intemperate manner and vicious determination, would jump in, sword swinging, as he had done long and long in the old days. . .

As was inevitable I was at last stopped by four Chulik guards before an ivory door banded in gold and emeralds. They wore the red and black and carried the three-grained staffs. They were less polite than the last. True to my desire to be the rational easy-going man I ought to be, I attempted to talk.

The polearm slashed toward me with deadly intent. They'd knock me senseless and hustle me down to the dungeons. The three-grained staff, very convoluted, very ornate, the black and red tassels swinging, the bright curved edges glittering with much honing against the solid olive of the metal head, struck for my skull.

I slid the blow, took the polearm, twisted it free and held it parallel with the ground. I pushed. The Chulik tumbled against the gold and emerald and ivory door. He went: "Whoof!" That was as much from surprise as from having the air knocked from his lungs.

His companions set on at once, so I had to twist the staffs free and, partially regretfully, tap their skulls. As the last slumped down I heard a hard, brittle voice say: "If you do not drop that staff this instant you are a dead man."

Without turning I knew what stood behind me. I dropped the staff. Without seeing the flight of an arrow it is damned difficult — nigh impossible — to judge which way to jump, which direction to use. Slowly, I turned around.

Yes — four Bowmen and an officer stood there, their bows fully drawn, and the lamplight glittered from the sharp steel heads. The odds were against me. I might have dodged, given the mystic disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy, had the occasion warranted. But I persevered in my peaceful overtures — here, in the palace of my father-in-law, for all that I was banished, here!

As it was, I said to the officer at the head of the four Crimson Bowmen: “I do not know you. It is clear you do not know me. I have pressing business—” I got no further.

“Take him to the cells,” said this officer, in his brittle voice. “Question him — Naghan the Pinch will know what to do. You know your orders.”

The officer in his trim Crimson was a Hikdar, a waso-Hikdar, and the pallid hardness of his face and blankness of the stare in his blue eyes would give any nefarious culprit wandering the palace a severe case of the frights. I looked at him. I thought I knew this type — always a dangerous assumption — and I stared past him at the four Bowmen.

One, I recognized.

I said: “Lahal, Neg Negutorio. Why do you stand in the ranks? You were an ord-Deldar the last time we met. I would have thought you a shiv-Hikdar by now—”

That was as far as the officer was going to allow me to prattle on. My attempt at distraction would not fool him. Furiously, he bellowed out: “Seize him up! I’ll have you all jikaidered, by Hlo-Hli! *Bratch!*”[\[2\]](#)

This was a threat no swod was fool enough to ignore.

Three of the Bowmen, taking their bows and arrows into their left hands, reached out with their right hands.

Neg Negutorio gaped at me.

“Dray Prescott!” he said. And: “The Prince Majister!”

The Hikdar took a step back. The hands of the three Bowmen fell away.

Neg shook his head. “Prince. Times have changed. There are many new faces in the Guard. Dag Dagutorio, our Chuktar, has been sent home, and replaced by Rog Rogutorio.” He wet his lips. “As for me — I was degraded — it was a trumped-up charge — and now I must obey orders I care not overmuch for—”

“Silence, cramp!” shouted the Hikdar. He stared at me with venom in his face and a twitch about his jaws. “If this is truly Dray Prescott, the Prince Majister of Vallia, then is he forsworn! He is banished from Vondium! Seize him! Chain him! Send word to Kov Layco we have taken up a rare prize. Bratch!”

For a second a paralysis gripped the Crimson Bowmen. Then the four Chuliks groaned, more or less together, and opened their eyes. Like the fierce fighting men they were they came to their feet, grasping their ripped-free rapiers, and the points glittered, centered on my chest. These diffs would have no hesitation in killing me if that proved more convenient than attempting to restrain me.

“The Prince Majister is banished from Vondium and sets foot within the city at his own peril!” howled the Hikdar. “Seize him! If he resists — slay him!”

The Chuliks stepped forward. My hand gripped the rapier hilt. In the next second blood would splash luridly across the golden and emerald and ivory door—

“Hold!” rang a clear, perfect voice. A voice I knew. A voice that means everything in two worlds. “Hold! The Princess Majestrix commands! Touch the Prince Majister at your peril!”

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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can buy the complete Mushroom eBook edition from
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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, and at wikipedia.org.

The Dray Prescott Series

The Delian Cycle:

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

Havilfar Cycle:

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

The Krozair Cycle:

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

Vallian cycle:

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

Jikaida cycle:

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

Spikatur cycle:

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

Pandahem cycle:

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

Witch War cycle:

33. *Werewolves of Kregen*
34. *Witches of Kregen*
35. *Storm over Vallia*
36. *Omens of Kregen*
37. *Warlord of Antares*

Lohvian cycle:

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

Balintol cycle:

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

Phantom cycle:

51. *Murder on Kregen*
52. *Turmoil on Kregen*