

SECRET SCORPIO

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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Contents

A Note On The Vallian Cycle	1
1 Black Feathers of the Great Chyyan	3
2 “It is Dray Prescott, the devil himself!”	30
3 Burning eyes of a pagan idol.....	51
4 Eggs of evil.....	66
5 The Stromni of Valka explains	81
6 At the Temple of Delia in Delphond	90
7 Koter Rafik Avandil, lion-man.....	104
8 A disrobing at the Running Sleeth	115
9 Nath the Gnat misses the Princess Majestrix.....	126
10 Of an independent girl of Vallia.....	138
11 We sing the songs of Kregen.....	147
12 A message via the Sisters of the Rose.....	159
13 I displease the Emperor of Vallia.....	172

14	The racters intrigue with the Prince Majister	182
15	Of Natyzha Fampheon's chavonths, and her son	194
16	Kadar the Hammer rides north to Seg Segutorio.....	208
17	What chanced during the bath of Katrin Rashumin ..	227
18	The Sisters of the Rose are kind to me	242
19	In the Cavern of Abominations	254
20	Makfaril's sacrifice.....	274
	Notes.....	295
	About the author.....	296
	The Dray Prescot Series	298

A Note On The Vallian Cycle

Secret Scorpio is the first book of Dray Prescott's adventures in the Vallian Cycle on that marvelous and exotic world of Kregen he has made his home.

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 agency of the Star Lords and of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, those 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 of above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, with enormously broad shoulders and powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage and he moves like a great hunting cat, quiet and deadly. On the savage and beautiful world of Kregen he has at various times and for various reasons risen to become a Vovedeer and Zorcander of his Clansmen of Segesthes, the Lord of

Strombor, Strom of Valka, Prince Majister of Vallia, King of Djanduin and a Krozair 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.

Now a new page of action turns in his life. The volumes chronicling his life are arranged to be read as individual books. Now he 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

One

Black Feathers of the Great Chyyan

A foot scraped in the shadows. Instantly we seven came to a dead halt in the blackness of the alley. Ahead the darkness lowered down as mufflingly as in the alleyway, for massy clouds covered the night sky of Kregen, concealing the glitter of the stars and the radiance of the moons.

My left hand gripped Roybin's shoulder and I could feel the fine tremble as he waited, poised like a wild leem, savage, suspicious, ready to leap out in perfect and deadly silence if that scraping foot heralded a murderous enemy.

In single file we seven stood, half-crouched, stock-still, invisible. The foot scuffed the slimy cobbles again and then the disappearing patter of feet told us that the wayfarer of the night was about his business. Seg's left hand on my shoulder pressed, but in the same instant Roybin moved ahead again. We followed, silently. Behind Seg, Turko the Shield fretted, I knew, that he did not stand at my back, a place he considered his by right.

Inch, stooped to bring his great height beneath the evil-smelling brick overhang, prowled after Turko, and our rear was brought up by Young Oby, young and a boy no more, who perforce clasped Inch's belt, and by Balass the Hawk whose dark skin blended perfectly with the shadows.

In single file we stole out from the mouth of the alley, aware of the vanishment of the pressing walls and the feeling of greater space about us. The tiny square lay shrouded about us. Yes, I suppose on reflection, we were a pretty ferocious bunch. I know I would not like to stumble upon such a crew as that on a pitchy night when all manner of deviltries are afoot.

Roybin led. We were experienced enough to know when to follow a man who had knowledge of the terrain. This alley led around the back of the fish market in the town of Autonne, on the island of Veliadrin that had lately been Can-Thirda, and our objective lay across the fish-scaled cobbles of the square.

No one spoke. Here, in the pressing darkness before the first of Kregen's seven moons made an appearance, there was no need for words to know what we were about.

Soundlessly we emerged from the mouth of the alleyway, feeling that cloying pressure of pent-up air give way to the freer sense of the square, small though it might be. Water ran between the cobbles and there would be fish scales and heads and tails aplenty strewn about. A scattered rain could not decide whether to

cease altogether or to drench down in the long shafting downpour of a Kregan storm.

We inched ahead and cleared a brick buttress, our right hands trailing along the crumbling mortar. A spark of light jumped into life ahead.

We froze instantly.

The light shone from a small lantern set outside an arched gateway closed by a moldering lenken door. That wooden door blended with the decay and dissolution of this tumbledown section of the fish market. In the crazily leaning brick walls stained with the patina of time, in the powdery and splintered timbering, in the gap-tiled roofs queasily lurching at incongruous angles, the archway and door betrayed nothing unusual.

Yet Roybin had certain information so we were here, prowling like wild leem, and the night ahead of us might soon explode with fury and action.

A long running roll of thunder boomed distantly away to the east in the interior of the island.

On the tail of the rumbling echoes Roybin whispered, "Lookouts."

We had expected a sentry. Peering across the darkened square into the isolated pool of radiance shed by the lantern, we made out the forms of three men. An edged weapon caught the light and glittered. They were quiet over there, probably talking desultorily together, resentful at their watch. But they would keep a lookout. All Roybin had told us convinced me that whoever these people were that we intended to spy on this night, they were ruthless and efficient.

For we knew why we were here, creeping like villains along vile, fish-stinking alleyways in Autonne, a city of the western coast of the island of Veliadrin. Veliadrin, of which I was still High Kov, that large island between Vallia and my own wonderful island of Valka, had once been called Can-Thirda. The name had been changed for certain reasons. The island had at one time, in the long ago, been a kingdom, before the Empire of Vallia had obtained the supreme power over all the islands fringing the coasts of the main island of Vallia. Veliadrin was still split into distinct regions. Over on the west coast the people were mostly fisherfolk, given to wild boasting of the old days, not overly rich or well-endowed, but sturdy and resourceful and also, as we had discovered, too prone to superstition.

Oh, yes, we knew why we were here, stalking the shadows like leems.

Rumors and suspicions, malicious gossip and ugly conjectures had at last come together to make a picture that displeased me greatly. That picture spelled evil days ahead if we did not act at once. There are many and varied religions on Kregen, and some are fine and worthy of the utmost effort in a man or woman. And some there are dark and secretive and baleful in their influence.

From the main island of Vallia a new creed was attempting to make a lodgment in Veliadrin. The west coast, a port, a poor and credulous people — the new creed found fertile ground.

Mind you, I knew who must take the full blame.

We had known for some time there were deep stirrings from Vallia, long ground swells of troubles to come, and the emperor was once more a worried man. Many forces, many ambitious men and women, many fanatics, sought to topple him. I had been told that there were far more potential insurrectionists these days than there had been when I had last spoken to the emperor in any privacy and confidence, before my absence on Earth and my adventurings in the inner sea, the Eye of the World.

Now this new creed threatened close to home.

As I had said to Seg Segutorio back in Valka before we left: “My Freedom Fighters did not clear Valka of the slavers and the aragorn and make of it an island where they might bring up their children in pride and justice and freedom, for some Opaz-forsaken devils to worm their way in and overturn all we have accomplished.” And I had slammed a dagger into the sturmwood table beneath a mullioned window overlooking a stupendous view of Valkanium and the bay.

Seg Segutorio, the Kov of Falinur, a Bowman of Loh, and the truest comrade a man could hope to find in two worlds, had replied, “Valka is indeed a paradise, Dray. Falinur, well, I try, and hard it is, by the Veiled Froyvill! The people there do not forget the old times, when their kov went up against the emperor and they followed, exultant, and they cast a deal of blame on me, the new kov, for the old kov’s failure.”

Delia had told me some of Seg’s problems with the recalcitrants in his province, and he seemed to be

having a worse time of convincing them that he was their new leader than was Inch in his Black Mountains, a province which had also been involved in that old revolution against the emperor.

Seg had gone on, staring moodily across the sun-lit expanse of the bay: “But as Inch and I are here in Valka, we think prevention in Veliadrin may aid us in our own kovnates.”

Thus spake Seg and I warmed to him.

There was no need for fulsome words between us. I understood him — and, by Vox, he understood some of me — for, because he was Seg Segutorio, a black-haired, blue-eyed fey maniac from the wild hills of Erthydrin, he had added: “Mind you, my old dom, I can tell you a kovnate goes to rack and ruin if you aren’t there to keep an eye on things.”

He was right.

At least, he was right if an absentee noble could not find a loyal and trustworthy person to run an estate in the absence of the owner. I, to my shame, own I am probably the greatest absentee landlord of two worlds. But then blame the Star Lords, blame the Savanti — blame also, if you will, my own accursed facility in picking up titles and the possessions that go with them on Kregen. I already had a plan to deal with these problems, plans you shall hear of in due course, and already I had consciously begun the hazy opening moves to unite all of Paz.

“Veliadrin is not Valka,” I had said. “Here in Valka, Tharu and Tom and the Elders run things, with Drak. In

my kingdom of Djanuin, Kytun and Ortyg handle affairs perfectly. In Strombor Gloag rules the roost. And as for my clansmen, well, Hap has them so well organized we took over another clan without bloodshed, all through obi.”

In his dry way, Seg had said, “You’re really a Vovedeer as well as a Zorcander, now.”

“Aye.” He knows when and how to puncture complacency, does Seg Segutorio. “I’ve been more than lucky in having found good friends to run affairs whilst I’m away. But Veliadrin is split up, occupied by diffs and apims who don’t really get on, for the damned Qua’voils still resent their defeat.”

“But the Pachaks you have settled in Veliadrin.”

“Ah!” I had said, feeling pleased. “I have great hopes for my Pachaks of Veliadrin.” This was true. “And the Pachaks of Zamra have finally freed all the slaves. That is progress.”

“But this damned new creed.” Seg had run his eye along the true shaft of an arrow, brushed his fingertips lightly over the brilliant blue fletchings. “Chyyanists, is it?”

“Aye. Roybin is a first-class spy and he has received a certain report. A preacher or a priest or some devil of that kind is loose in Autonne. He holds meetings. I think a little firsthand information will prove of value.”

“There’s nothing like seeing for yourself,” said Seg.

So that was why we were here, creeping like a gang of piratical cutthroats through the rain-swept darkness,

toward the speck of light over the gateway leading on to what unknown horrors we could only conjecture.

Inch had refused to stay behind, swinging his enormous two-handed ax absently as he told me that if Seg and I were going off for some fun he wasn't going to be left out. Turko the Shield considered the matter closed. Oby was raging for adventure and Balass the Hawk deserved some fun. So they all came.

"As to fun," I had said just before we ventured out into the rain from our secluded inn, a place where the attention we attracted had been mitigated by pretenses and stratagems, "this Chyyanist nonsense is likely to lead to a few smashed skulls. At least, that is what I feel in my bones."

"All reports speak of the creed as evil," said Roybin sagely, nodding his head. "But they are all outside observations. No one really knows."

As I padded forward through a few opening flurries of rain toward the gateway and the moldering lenken door, I wondered just how much we could hope to discover in there. The center of the new religion lay in Vallia, or so we believed. It had been brought here by a priest or preacher who sought to rouse the simple fisherfolk hereabouts. As an absentee landlord I had no right to criticize my tenants if they rose up against me, in a just cause.

However intolerant and objectionable I may be, I do not think I had given any cause to these people to rise up in justice. Maybe that is just another facet of my supposed megalomania. But the fisherfolk of Autonne

made a living and did not starve and were housed. I had ordered the freeing of their slaves. This Opaz-forsaken priest of Chyyan sought to stir up trouble out of willful spite, a sullen resentment, a sense of ill-treatment, and if I could not understand and sympathize with feelings like these then no one else in two worlds could do so. And, too, there were far weightier reasons for Chyyanism, as you shall hear. . .

Not one of my six comrades appeared to think it strange that Roybin no longer led on, that I had pushed on in the front to take the three guards. I mention this to indicate that my thoughts had allowed me to act without thinking about the action I was taking. A bad habit. A nasty habit. A habit that had brought me into dire trouble in the past and was to pitch me headlong into further horrors, a habit that was just one against which I continually strove.

My guard went to leaning sleep with a tap of a dagger-hilt along his skull.

Turko's lolled unconscious from cunning finger pressures.

Roybin's collapsed with a dagger through his throat.

I looked at my spy. Well, Roybin had dealt with these people before, so he should most likely know. The guards were cloaked heavily, but they wore armor and carried weapons and were not of Autonne. I put my mouth to Roybin's ear.

"The roof?"

He nodded.

That cleared up the protocol over the local man leading.

Roybin, who was called Roybin Ararsnet ti Autonne, had served me before, in various dubious capacities. I do not mince matters where brave men are concerned. Roybin was a spy. I gave him credit for that, for credit was due.

Around the side of the building the rain spattered more strongly against the corroded brick, lashed on by a rising wind. The darkness was not as absolute now, for the clouds were piling away invisibly above and every now and again a sliver of the Maiden with the Many Smiles, who shines forth most bravely in the night sky of Kregen, glimmered through the rack. Inch wore a tightly fitting leather helmet and not a scrap of his yellow hair was visible.

I looked back at him as I set my hands to the climb. In the fragmentary light his incredibly tall frame looked angular and sinister with the immense long-handled Saxon ax swinging handily from his wrist-thong. Yes, it was a great comfort to have Inch of Ng'grogga at my side.

Seg's Lohvian longbow was unstrung and the string safely in the dry of his belt pouch along with the spares. We all wore decent Vallian buff tunics and breeches, with rapiers and daggers strapped about us and, therefore, looked like perfectly ordinary Vallian koters, although, of necessity, being marked as apim, for we were all *Homo sapiens*.

The crumbling brickwork afforded good handholds and in no time we were all on the roof. I had no

intention of leaving any one of these bonny fighters alone, below, as a lookout.

It behooved others to look out when we wandered along.

Megalomania, maniacal, vicious, I know, I know. But I harbored frightful suspicions concerning this new creed of Chyyan. Nothing must hinder us tonight.

Over the roof where the rain blustered and then fell away, only to return with just that little extra edge in its sting, we crept cautiously. Roybin led us to the skylight. The iron was new, replacing worn-down bronze.

Young Oby pushed forward, taking a slender tool from his pocket. Opaz knew what deviltry he had been practicing in my absences, but the lock snicked open and with a single heave Turko hauled the iron bars up and out. He placed their weight down as though replacing one of Delia's priceless cups of Linkiang porcelain on its saucer.

I looked down. Only darkness, until my eyes picked up a faint glimmer, the merest wraith of an orange glow, and I made out three-quarters of the outline of a door. A well-made and tight fitting door sealing off the lower portions.

One after the other we dropped down onto a loft floor where stinking fishnets tangled beneath our feet, and where no doubt the scales clumsily brushed into the corners might once have graced a coelacanth. The door yielded to the forensic ministrations of Oby. I did not shove it open, as a soldier might, the sword mighty in his fist.

Gently, I eased the door inward. The orange glow brightened. I put an eye to the crack. For a moment the world consisted of orange whorls of fire, and then I saw that the door opened onto a narrow gallery surrounding the central area. Here was where the fishermen hung their nets. A low drone of voices lifted. Lights threw orange reflections upon the far wall and struck in slivers of radiance up through the warped planks of the gallery.

Chances were that we could open the door and sneak out onto the gallery before the people gathered on the floor below might look up and see us. It was the kind of chance that always attracts.

I might have listened to Roybin when he made his first report and simply ordered out a detachment of guards. We would have surrounded this odiferous place and swept up all who worshiped here. But then we would catch men and women who had come here out of mere curiosity. We would have taken the priest of Chyyan. But it was my guess that he would say nothing.

So we went about our work nefariously, like criminals.

Like wraiths we seven slid out onto the gallery. Not a board creaked, not a single item of harness chingled. We were old hands, feral as leems, deadly as Manhounds.

We each found a crack in the planking and set an eye to observe what went on below.

My first fears vanished the instant I clapped eye on that scene. Gathered in a mass at the end of the room a crowd of people were in the act of rising from a deep genuflection — we had chosen our time well, the chance swiftly and surely taken — and the priest himself, clad

all in black vestments, lifted his arms high, leading the congregation in the opening bars of a chant. The chant proved to be a moaning, miserable, oafish thing, and most of the people did not know it. But the priest raised his voice to lead them. At all this I glanced with the swift calculating eye of the fighting man, seeking to weigh possible odds. The words of the chant came so garbled they were practically impossible to make out. Over it all I glanced up and to the wall behind the priest. And I let out a soundless puff, and felt vastly relieved.

For, set against that back wall draped in its rich cloths and golden tassels, there stood no pagan silver idol of a leem.

A calmness came over me. Whatever vileness this new creed of Chyyan might bring, I did not think it could be as vile as that of the cult of Lem the Silver Leem.

Against the rich cloths of the back alcove lifted a bold image of a heavy-winged bird, an image as tall as a man, with feathered wings spread to encompass a full twenty feet. All a rusty black, this bird, save for its scarlet eyes and scarlet claws and scarlet beak. Four wings the chyyan possesses, like its distant cousin, the zhyan. The four wings were undersize in this image for the body size, but the whole effect was at once impressive and ominous.

At once surmises sprang into my brain. Native saddle-birds were unknown in Vallia and Loh, being, at the time, generally confined to the hostile territories of Turismond and to Havilfar and islands thereabouts. The mighty continent of Havilfar, south of the equator, was

the home of zhyan and chyyan. I frowned. This bore a little more investigation. Havilfar boasted as its most powerful nation the Empire of Hamal, and the mad Empress Thyllis was sworn to destroy the Empire of Vallia. Was this creed of Chyyan a gambit in that game?

Incense rose, stinking and abominable. The chant ceased. The crowd stood to listen as the priest spoke. As I listened I watched their faces as well as I could, and some lapped up the ranting words, but others were more critical. A couple of trident-men near the door came as close as may be to openly jeering. I marked them.

This priest had journeyed to Veliadrin from Vallia, and no doubt Autonne was his marked target town. I tried to size him up, wondering from which city, country or continent, even, he hailed. A full-fleshed man, with the bright staring eyes of the fanatic — or the diseased — he presented an imposing figure. His robes were all of black, relieved by embroidered motifs in golden thread and imitation jewels, motifs mainly of chyans doing unmentionable things to their victims.

Chyans have not yet been generally tamed to the saddle. They remain unbroken, wild, flying freely over the wide spaces of Havilfar, a dread and a terror to lesser animals and to man. The white-plumaged zhyan is notorious for the uncertainty of its temper, for all that the bird is valued above ten fluttrells, and yet the zhyan in its power and mastery has been curbed to the rein and the bit and the flying harness.

Not so the chyyan. Its rusty black plumage shares none of the brilliant sheening highlights of the impiter of the hostile territories of Turismond. The chyyan is a bird to steer well clear of when you ride the level wastes of the air, astride a saddle-bird, or piloting a small model voller.

So this priest, who may have come from Hamal to wreak the Empress Thyllis's vengeance upon Vallia, lifted up his voice and harangued the simple fisherfolk of Autonne, which is a town under my care.

"It is not for the distant future when you are dead and gone to the Ice Floes of Sicce! No, my children, I tell you in the sacred name of the Great Chyyan, upon whose black breast is taken every arrow that seeks your heart, I tell you that the Great Chyyan brings hope and comfort, delight and joy, prosperity and wealth to you in this life. Do not wait until you are dead to enjoy yourselves! Listen to my words, for they are words from our leader, he who has been chosen in the divine twinning by the Great Chyyan to lead us into the new darkness of the Black Feathers, in which is there light beyond our meager understanding."

At this guffaws broke from the two trident-men. Not for them the finicky parsing of metaphysics. They heard words that appeared to contradict, and they brayed their derision.

"By the silver flukes of Shalash the Shining!" bellowed one, clapping a bronzed hand onto his thigh. "Your riddles make no sense to a coy, Himet the Mak!"

“Hush!” and “Quiet, impious onker!” broke from those standing near the two trident-men, who I guessed were brothers.

The priest, this Himet the Mak, lifted a hand. I saw his black robes stretch over the hilt of a sword belted to his waist.

“The blasphemers speak their own destruction! The word of the leader twinned with the Great Chyyan is to be obeyed. The leader is the spirit of the One made Two, spirit and flesh, spirit made manifest to men. Our leader and the Great Chyyan are in duo, twins, radiant with the Black Feathers, leading us to light. And the word of our leader tells us we must wait for a sign. He will come among us. He will tell us when to lift the banners of the Black Feathers. Then, my children, then all that you do not have will be yours. When Makfaril our leader gives the divine word you will gain all, not when you are dead and rotting in the ground, but here and now, in this life, soon!”

People were dancing up and down and the two trident-men had fallen silent. It was mumbo jumbo, but the promise, the passion, the pride of purpose, these drove home keenly into everyone present.

“Listen to me, my children, to Himet the Mak, who comes to tell you of the Great Chyyan and of our leader, Makfaril. You must do all the things necessary and pray for guidance, that in the Black Day you will be spared and live to enjoy the fruits of luxury handed to us by him of the four wings, Chyyan of the Black Feathers. In that glorious day will you find resurrection in the here

and now. All will be yours. Only believe! Believe and pray to our leader that he may intercede for you with his divine twin, in spirit and in flesh, pray for your salvation in the day from the Great Chyyan.”

One or two shrill yells broke from the embryonic congregation. Again and again the priest harped on the desirability of achieving one’s heart’s desires in the here and now. He gave only a sketchy metaphysical plan for life after death, for salvation, for the delights of paradise, of being reborn higher in the circle of vaol-paol, or for the joys of Valhalla; he hammered home his message that the Great Chyyan and Makfaril the leader sought to reward their devotees *now*.

When he reverted to supernatural arguments they were all cant phrases, rolling rodomontade mixed with elements culled from many minor creeds of Kregen. I have made a little study of the beliefs of Kregen — vastly edifying! — and could recognize this curious mixture as an artificial construct, alien, almost thrown together. The priest had skill. I wondered who had trained him.

And yet, despite his skill, despite the lure of grabbing it all now, the two trident-men grew restive, so that Himet the Mak was forced to take notice of them.

From the resplendent cloths draped over the alcove at the back of the statue of the rusty black chyyan stepped forth armed men. They appeared, suddenly, between the tall drapes. I eyed them.

First I looked at their faces and the way they stood and held themselves, next at their weapons and then at their uniforms.

They were all apims, like me, and their faces were all of that low-browed, brutal cast that does not in any way invariably mean brutality in the possessor. I rather fancied these men would be hard and merciless and take more than a trifle of joy in sinking their weapons into the guts of any who opposed them. They stood alertly, poised, and I knew that at a signal from Himet they would kill and go on killing until he called a halt.

Their weapons remained scabbarded. They wore rapiers and daggers, but as I looked at the way they were belted up I frowned. It seemed to me the thraxters and the parrying-sticks belted to their waists were their prime weapons.

Their uniforms were black, beneath boiled leather armor, well oiled, and they wore profuse ornamentations of black feathers. Their iron helmets carried tufts of rusty black feathers from chyyans. All in all, they looked a formidable bunch. I judged them to be masichieri mercenaries who had never aspired to the quality of paktuns — for paktuns are in general finicky about questions of honor — and who combined a little thievery and assassination and slaving into their mercenary way of life as the opportunity offered, without reaching the power of the aragorn. There were twenty of them, led by a hikdar.

My instinctive reaction was that I wished I had taken up my Krozair longsword when we'd first ventured on this escapade.

The two trident-men eyed the guards uneasily, and their taunts fell away. They were tough and wiry, but they carried only their fishing tridents and degutting knives in their belts. They wore old buff breeches with frayed and unlaced ends, singlets of a coarse weave, and they were barefoot.

Balass the Hawk at his crack in the boards began to stir himself around, reaching for his sword. I turned my head toward him and he stilled. Of us all, perhaps, Balass was less accustomed to stealth in his fighting, being a hyr-kaidur and master of the ritual combats of the arena.

Silently Oby drew his vicious knife. Seg had already strung his bow, all done simply and silently and with enormous professional skill. Inch's ax glittered in a shaft of the orange light. If there were to be handstrokes, we were ready.

Turko, who could rip a fully armed man to pieces with his bare hands, had grumbled and cursed when I'd told him to leave the great shield. Now Turko the Shield flexed his muscles. Oh, yes, if it came to a fight those twenty hard men down there would be in for a surprise.

But I wanted no fighting.

I wanted to observe, to fathom out just what lay behind this new and evil creed of Chyyanism, and then to withdraw and debate, calmly, what best to do.

With a tiny gesture of my left hand I indicated to Roybin that he should retire, and we would follow, one by one.

No one questioned my right to leave last.

Himet the Mak was shouting again, lifting his voice, and I detected a strained hoarseness there, very surprising to me considering the circumstances and the clear power he had been exercising over these credulous people.

“I speak to you and tell you the great words, the great words given to us from Makfaril, the leader, directly from the Great Chyyan. Yet you seek to mock me, to deny the great words. Do you not desire salvation and wealth and luxury in the here and now?”

His voice sharpened, took on an undisguised note of contempt and anger — and a tinge of fear? My comrades withdrew from the little rickety gallery, but I stayed, listening.

“You two, trident-men, brothers, you have been tainted with the falsehoods put about in the island. You know your island is called Can-thirda. Whatever it was called in the ancient days of the kingdom, ever since your island has been part of Vallia it has been called Can-thirda. Yet now you must call it Veliadrin. Why?”

A certain grumbling rumble from his listeners brought a wolfish smile to his lips.

“Aye! I well tell you why! Because the power-mad incubus, the Prince Majister of Vallia, decrees it! That is why. Some unknown master from no man knows where tells you your fate. He holds your future in his hand.

Has he visited you? Have you seen him? No, and you have not seen his bitch of a wife, the Princess Majestrix, either!”

My muscles jumped. I took a breath. But I remained lying still, watching and listening. Yes! Well may you who have followed my story marvel. But I remained still and did not leap down and choke this fellow’s throat a trifle to induce him to show proper respect for the most perfect woman in two worlds. And, I confess, I not only marveled at my own iron self-control, I actually relished it, as showing how I had matured and grown wise.

“Some forgotten child they had, spawned from their evil union, this Princess Velia, dead and abandoned in some foreign country debarred from honest men’s knowledge. Who knows where she died? Who cares? Why should your island be called after the slut?”

My fists gripped and my muscles trembled as a leem’s flanks tremble in the instant before he charges. But, despite all, I remained still.

Through the confusion roaring away in my head I understood that my own private problems, my own petty pride, must not interfere or injure the interests of my people, their lands or the intangible debt I owe all those who look to me. If this is pride, so be it; if it is duty, so be it. To me, a simple sailor and fighting man, it was and remains a mere matter of common decency.

So I batted down the hatches on my anger and made myself listen to what this fellow was saying. After all, there was more than a grain of truth in his rantings. .

If, because this priest of Chyyan insulted my Delia and our dead daughter Velia, I acted as I was wont and hurled myself down to choke him a little and bash the skulls of his ugly-faced guards, then I would forfeit the advantage of listening and learning in secret. Whoever had sent him would know that much of their designs were privy no more. I must force myself to swallow all that intolerant choler which makes of me a laughing stock, a fighting man and, sometimes, makes me do the right thing.

“Look around you in your island of Can-thirda! Where are the slaves that once did your bidding, that worked for you and made the days light? Gone, all gone. And why? Because your new High Kov, this high and mighty Prince Majister of Vallia, this Strom of Valka, this Kov of Zamra, decrees that you honest working people shall no longer run slaves. Is this fair? Is this justice? Why should a man do his own hard labor, why should a woman slave in the kitchen when she might buy and thrash a slave to do the work for her? Tell me, brethren in the Great Chyyan, if this is a sample of the usage to which this so-puissant Dray Prescott puts you, then will you lie down beneath it? Will you give the tyrant the full incline? Will you be slave?”

They yelled it back at him.

“No!” And, “No! We will not bow down to Dray Prescott!”

I fumed up there on the gallery. I didn't want the fambllys to bow to me. I'd already cut out all this fawning and inclining nonsense in Valka. But, equally, I

did not want them buying and selling and flogging slaves either. This is the old conundrum, with an answer, and I brushed it aside as I peered through the crack between the sagging boards.

The mood of the embryo congregation had turned ugly. They were sucked in. They saw a hope before them that not only might they return to the slave-holding of the past but might aspire to a seizure of the goodness of life, now.

Useless for me to condemn them. Had I spent more time in Can-thirda, had I even consulted some of the people about the change of name, had these folk seen me more clearly, instead of hearing about their High Kov only by hearsay, then, perhaps, I might have prevented all this, have nipped in the bud the horrors to come. For I knew well and made no mistake that far more lay behind this artificial religion of Chyyan than ever Himet the Mak would tell these poor fambllys.

“If he were here now! If this infamous Dray Prescot, Prince Majister of Vallia, were standing before you, what would you do?”

The answering yells bounced in ugly echoes in that tall net-room below the gallery.

“Chop the cramp!” “Cut the rast down!” “Feather the tape!” And, “Make him slave and run him for the good of us all!”

Things had gone to rack and ruin indeed, in Veliadrin, since I had been away. Seg Segutorio spoke the true word. I swiveled an eye back. Seg’s face showed in the crack of the doorway. He looked vexed. Clearly, since we

had obtained information, he was wondering why I did not join the rest of the party.

I made a face at him, and he smiled, amazingly, in return, as I looked back at the scene below. The people were waving their fists and many brandished degutting knives and tridents. The leather-clad guards in their black feathers stared watchfully on. Himet the Mak gesticulated for silence. “Not so! It is the express command of the leader, of Makfaril himself, that only in the last resort shall Prescott be slain. Make him slave at your peril also. Deliver him up to me so that I may take him to Makfaril. Yes, my children, leave the fate of the wild leem to me and my guards here, my bonny masichieri, to take him to the leader.”

One of the trident-men shouted, his voice shrill and cutting through Himet’s words to the listening people. “Dray Prescott has a fearsome reputation as a fight—” No doubt he was going to say as a fighting man: Himet chopped him off with, “A fearsome reputation! Yes. Truly, by the Great Chyyan, a horrendous reputation!” That is true, by Vox.

Howls spurted up, execrations against the name of Dray Prescott and dire promises of what would befall him should he be foolish enough to fall into their hands. Himet bellowed.

“You would do well to heed my words and deliver him up for the judgment of Makfaril! Hearken! The torments Prescott would then suffer are beyond mortal men’s comprehension.”

They had not missed the neat turning of what reputation I had in Vallia from that of a warrior prince to that of a villain. Oh, yes, I am a villain. But only in certain matters.

There was little more to be gained here. We would have to think on what best to do about this new creed of Chyyanism. We were now acutely aware of the problem and its methods.

I cast a regretful glance at the two brothers, the trident-men who stood near the far door. Although uneasy, they showed no more signs of being cowed by words. But their glances at the guards, the masichieri, spoke eloquently enough. One brother shouted above the hubbub.

“And if the Prince Majister were here, among us now, who would know him?”

“Aye!” bawled his brother, red of face. “Who would know?”

Himet quieted conflicting answering yells. He smiled, a slow evil smirk that informed his listeners of his own importance.

“I have seen his representation. I would know. I would know the evil-hearted cramp among a thousand!”

The way the priest phrased this interested me. But it was time to go. The two brothers were scarcely likely to come to serious harm. The thought occurred to me that perhaps Himet had planted them, shills to give him arguments from which to strike sparks. If so, they were consummate actors.

“To the Great Chyyan with Dray Prescott!”

The chant from below grew in volume. I took no notice. What they wanted to do with me sounded highly unpleasant. What I intended to do with them might be highly unpleasant, at first; afterward they would see clearer. At the very least, this new creed had brought to my attention disquiet in Veliadrin, a disquiet I would see was dealt with fairly and rectified, so that the people of Veliadrin might be as happy as the people of Valka, as was their right.

So, still more confused than I probably realized, still holding down my anger, still blanking out what had been said about Delia and our dead daughter, I took my eye away from the crack in the floorboards and prepared to wriggle soundlessly back to the doorway. Seg had gone and the gap showed only a dark slit.

The boards beneath me creaked. They groaned. A spurt of ancient dust puffed past my face. I froze.

The gallery moved.

They were bellowing on about what they would like to do to Dray Prescott, making a hell of a noise, shrieking the most bloodcurdling threats. The groan of the ancient timber might be lost in all the uproar.

The rotten timbers under me sagged. Even to this day I do not know if the pure welling of savage satisfaction justified or condemned me.

The whole wooden structure shrieked as rusted nails gave way, as wooden pins snapped, as corroded bronze linchpins bent and parted. Rotten wood powdered to dust. A miasmatic stench of long-dead fish gusted over me. I was falling.

The yells of hatred for the Prince Majister of Vallia belching up from below, the shrieks of venom for Dray Prescott, changed to a shocked chorus of surprised screams as the wooden gallery collapsed in a weltering smother of dust and chips and flailing timbers upon the mob.

Head over heels, I, that same Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, pitched down onto the heads of the blood-crazed rabble beneath.

Two

“It is Dray Prescot, the devil himself!”

For an instant I lay flat on my back amid the splintered wreckage of the gallery. A damned infernal chunk of wood jabbed sharply into my back. The people broke away in a circle, yelling, struggling to tear themselves free from the descending debris. The noise and confusion, the spouting dust from the ancient building, the struggles of men and women, I suppose all the furor was rather splendid.

But I had an eye out for the black feathers and leather armor of Himet’s masichieri. They’d recover more rapidly from the shock of surprise than the fisherfolk.

I sprang up. I did not draw my weapons.

People were turning to stare back at me. Broken planks slipped beneath our feet and the dust made us cough. Dust and muck festooned my hair and shoulders, and my face, I suppose, knowing my own weaknesses, revealed the struggle between laughter and downright

cussing fury possessing me. To be thus chucked down like a loon among a mob yelling for my blood — well, it was funny rather than not.

Himet stood with arms uplifted, his mouth open, glaring as though a demon from Cottmer's caverns had miraculously appeared before him.

Oh, yes, the cramph recognized me.

Whoever his leader was, this Makfaril, that rast would not be pleased with his priest. For, forgetting what he had been enjoining the folk around, Himet pointed a rigid forefinger at me. His wide-eyed stare blanked into stupefaction.

"It is Dray Prescott, the devil himself!"

After the thunder of the gallery smashing into the floor a silent moment expanded. Himet's voice shocked out. The fisherfolk understood the enormity of what the priest of the Great Chyyan had said.

"Dray Prescott!"

They repeated the name. A quick babblement flowed through the crowd. They stared at me. Like a monstrous tidal wave growing and surging landward from the wastes of the sea, like a tsunami running from continent to continent, their hatred burst up and broke. In the next instant they roared upon me in a shrieking mob.

A skip and a jump cleared the wreckage. Somehow, the rapier and dagger leaped into my hands. I beat away a reaching trident. A knife whistled past my ear and thunked into a shattered upright. These people were out for blood. These fisherfolk, wrought upon, forgetting

what Himet had warned, were out to lay me flat on the floor, to slay me, to kill me stone cold dead.

“Do not kill him!” screeched Himet the Mak. He might as well have shouted into a Cape Horner.

With a shout of rage Himet turned and violently gesticulated, a savage, unmistakable gesture of command. At once his guards, his bonny masichieri, leaped down into the press, their weapons glittering.

Then began as weird a military dance as you could desire. For I had no wish to be forced to kill these simple duped fisherfolk, yet they sought to slay me. I did not mind if a few of the masichieri were cut down, but the guards were under orders not to slay me. And the fisherfolk would not willingly kill the guards of the priest but, as I quickly saw, the guards would slay the townspeople if necessary. This was a ludicrous three-sided encounter with each of the three sides willing to slay one of the other sides but not the third, and therefore, it must follow, to be slain and not reply. I saw a guard run his thraxter through a burly fisherman who poised to hurl his trident at me. So the preservation of my life for the future evil intentions of Makfaril had already cost the life of one fisherman of Veliadrin, and was like to cost more if I did not act now to stop this blasphemy.

I let out a yell. I bellowed over the hubbub as I had been wont to hail the foretop in a gale.

“Yes! I am Dray Prescott! I am your lawful High Kov. I wish you no harm. I have listened to your grievances

and they will be redressed in justice. On this you have my word as a Prince of Vallia!”

I might as well have saved my breath.

The business about listening to them provoked only the shrieked response: “He has been spying on us! Slay the rascals! Kill Dray Prescott!”

“No! No!” bawled Himet. “He must be taken before our leader. Makfaril demanded him for his own justice!”

Enough of the congregation in the hall had not been fully persuaded by Himet’s exhortations and promises to obey blindly the dictates of the priest of the new creed. They had been roused to a sense of injustice. They had been cruelly treated by their new High Kov, and here he was, alone, ready to be chopped down in the violent way of Kregen and thus prove the justice of their own ends.

There followed a bout of confused struggle, wherein I found myself backed up against the far wall, beating away the crude implements of the fisherfolk and ever and anon striking with more deadly intent at a black-feathered guard. To defend oneself and not to slay the attacker — yes, there is a skill in that. It was not too easy in the press. A bulky lad staggered back with red blood pouring from his cheek where my main gauche, in whipping back to parry a trident, had gashed his flesh. Weapons flashed before my eyes. The guards were having difficulty in breaking through the fishermen to get at me, and when they did they died. The masichieri tumbled the fishermen away and advanced with scowls to an unwelcome task.

They handled their parrying-sticks with a fine free skill. As for their thraxters, the thraxter is a weapon of Havilfar, the straight cut and thrust sword, and these masichieri preferred it to the rapier in work of this nature.

The wall at my back was not altogether a good idea. No one was going to sneak up behind me and chop my knees off, but I could not skip and jump with the freedom I prefer in this kind of bash and batter fighting. I began to angle around and a trident passed perilously close under my left arm as I leaned away to flick a neat rapier slash that unhitched the belt from a portly fisherman's waist. His breeches started to slide down. He let out a furious yell and tried to degut me with a knife so admirably adapted for the purpose, and the breeches tangled while he staggered, purple-faced, enraged, striking ineffectually at me. I did not laugh. Truth to tell, this whole fracas smacked of the ludicrous and I was in no mood for petty levity.

I leaped away and one masichier tried to be clever and earn his hire. He brought his thraxter around, flat, a blow aimed to stun. I slid the blow and bashed him with the hilt of the rapier. Instantly I had to duck a savage sweep from a parrying-stick from a fellow masichier. I almost ducked into a wickedly unstabbing trident.

"By the Black Chunkrah!" I bellowed at them all. "Must I break all your heads to make you see sense?"

They snarled and roared at this, pressing in as I foined them off.

“You are not wanted in Can-thirda!” “Go home, Dray Prescott!” “Go back to your palace and your bitch wife!”

The fellow who said this, leathern-faced, scarred of jaw, abruptly somersaulted backward. My fist in the rapier guard tingled with the force of the blow.

“Kill him! Kill him!”

It was all a flurry of blade and tine and parrying-stick, and I smashed them back, beginning to feel my frustrated fury working on me. Soon the guards would tire of their fruitless attempts to take me alive. Then the fighting would begin.

“Slay the tapo!” screeched a lean and emaciated fisherman, hurling his trident. My rapier angled up and flicked the thing away. But the weapon was a trident, three-tined, and the sharp tines caught in my blade. Like the jaws of a shark the trident wrapped around the slender blade. I did not let go of the hilt, but my rapier was angled up and deflected, uselessly pointing to the cobwebby ceiling and the smoking lamps.

A fat and sweating man wearing more ornate clothes than the others, with a narrow gold chain about his neck and embroidered sleeves, even though silver fish scales caught in folds of the cloth glittered as marks of his trade, cursed with joy and thrust his trident hard for my guts.

I wriggled away at the last moment, striking a guard with the main gauche, wrenching it free in a gout of blood. I swung back to meet the next attack of the fat and wealthy trident-man. His sweating face showed a grimace of fierce joy, of that awful crazed desire to kill. I

do not think he would have had me. But he would have come close.

He was not given the chance.

One of the two brothers who had mocked Himet the Mak stepped in and wrapped a burly forearm around the fellow's neck. With a chopped off squeal the crazed man was hauled bodily backward.

There was no time to gasp out thanks, for with a swish my rapier came down into line and extended into a bar of gleaming red-stained steel and the guard who had decided it was time finally to deal with me shrieked and spun away, claspng his neck where the long blade had kissed him above the edge of his leather armor.

"Take him, you fools!" Himet the Mak danced about frenziedly, well back of his guards, yelling orders and curses. His fanatical obsession with the instructions given him by Makfaril did not induce him to step forward and take an active part in the fray. Steel scraped and men yelled and bodies fell.

The pressure at least gave me some chance, for the fishermen maintained their yelling and their desperate attempts to get at me, and the masichieri continued to belt them away and so preserve my miserable hide. The rapier smeared with blood and the main gauche a similar reeking blade darting and flashing before me, I hacked and cut and kept them off. The rapier glistened before the eyes of a guard, distracting him, cut back viciously. He fell. As he fell so the dagger in my left fist sliced at a precise angle under the chin of his fellow. He staggered away as the rapier went in, slickly, withdrew,

and a third guard spun away, shrieking, coughing out his life blood.

Now the masichieri were finished with this tomfoolery. Now these hired guards were out for blood.

A masichier stepped up, bulky in creaking leather armor, bold and confident, his thraxter held in a practiced grip, the parrying-stick slanting and catching runnels of jagged orange light. He thrust. He began his thrust as I whirled away from thumping a fisherman over the head and kicking another off.

The masichier halted his thrust in mid-action.

His shaggy hair beneath the iron helmet fluttered as his head lolled. Blood and spittle began to dribble foolishly from the corner of his mouth. He slid slowly sideways, upsetting a fisherman and his trident. As the guard toppled slowly to the fish-stinking floor I saw the long Lohvian arrow sprouting from his back, driven clean through his boiled leather armor, driven with exquisite force so that it did its business and no more, for it had not burst on through the man's chest.

I did not look up.

Another arrow punched through the neck of the nearest guard.

Oh, yes, you who have read accounts of my life on Kregen, that marvelous and horrible, beautiful and savage world four hundred light-years from the world of my birth, will understand. For Seg Segutorio, the master Bowman of Loh, had shot over me more than once in the past, had preserved my skin with superb displays of archery.

The guards' yelling changed in tone. The viciousness I had known could not be batted down for much longer broke and brought them surging forward with all the old hateful, expected, demonic desire to slay.

A fisherman sailed up into the air from the back of the ruck. He went spinning up like a Catherine wheel and he landed plump on the heads of a group of others trying to get in at me and they all collapsed like ninepins. I saw Turko grasp another unfortunate wight and hurl him like a bag of beans. Turko, the famed Khamster, a high Kham, a man who had reached very high levels of achievement within the syles of the Khamorros, disdained edged and pointed weapons. Now he bore through the throng like a snowplow through six-foot high drifts.

Inch's long Saxon-pattern ax removed the head of a masichier. No one who wishes to retain their anatomy entire is advised to stand within the sweep of Inch's great danheim ax. His leather cap was slightly askew, and a long braid of brilliant yellow hair swung wildly as he fought.

That meant trouble.

Balass the Hawk, matched as a swordsman without his usual shield against a thraxter and parrying-stick man, made nothing of the disadvantage. The guard's parrying stick was a klattar model, of balass and steel, and suddenly it slanted where he had no intention of allowing it to go. His thraxter swirled as Balass's own superb Valkan sword slid in. Himet was short another guard.

As for young Oby, his wicked long-knife did nasty things to a guard who thought that he, at least, stood a chance.

The fisherfolk fell back, gasping, dazed.

Himet the Mak . . . I whirled, for the moment freed from immediate opposition. The priest was nowhere to be seen. He had fled. Well, that was sensible. It was all of a piece with the man, with the artificial religion he sought to introduce to Veliadrin, and with the warped morals of the situation.

“Himet the Mak!” I bellowed up to Seg, who stood braced in the doorway above the vanished gallery. His bow was spanned, ready, and a stray gleam of light from the lamps struck a glittering spark from the steel arrow-point, most comforting to me, but most disconcerting to the poor wights huddled below, I daresay.

Seg spoke clearly, barely lifting his voice. “He vanished beyond the curtains behind the idol after the first shots.”

There was no need for me to ask why Seg had not feathered him. Seg had loosed to clear away the guards pressing in on me. He had taken what he regarded as the prime objective. There is no use arguing with Seg Segutorio on these matters. As well argue with me, for I would have done the same had Seg been down there in that riot instead of me.

As Inch said, “Let us go and chase him, for he has made me break a taboo, and I shall have to perform unsightly things hereafter,” Oby ran off with a whoop.

Again, there is no profit in laughing at Inch's taboos, which embroil him in ludicrous situations, at least, not too much laughter, for we could always make Inch stand on his head with the mere scent of squish pie. I hauled a guard toward me by his harness. I used my left hand, for my right held the main gauche as well as the rapier in a somewhat awkward grip. Now had I been a Djang, or a Pachak, I could have done that little trick without trouble.

I glared on the guard who rolled his eyes and flinched away.

"Tell me of Himet the Mak, my friend," I said, quite pleasantly, staring on the fellow. He blanched at this and his wild eyes went wilder still. He considered himself a dead man, that was certain, yet he had only been wounded, a long cut down his cheek. He made no attempt to lick at the blood. "Where has the arch-devil gone? Tell me that and you may live, dom."

Whether he believed me or not I do not know. He opened his mouth, slobbering, and I saw the stump of tongue there and felt the disgust in me. Had Himet done this? Did he employ dumb guards? But some had shouted as they fought.

"Can you write?" demanded Roybin.

A rolling, lolling shake of the head.

That was to be expected. Illiterates, even if through no fault of their own, tended to end up in the lower levels of whatever trade they entered. I had no desire to play dwazn questions with him. Vallia, Havilfar, the islands, there were far too many bolt holes to go through even if

this dumb devil knew. And, if Hamal was the homeland of the masichieri, I might ask all night and not get the right answer.

Balass, cleaning his sword, said, "They use the thraxter and parrying-stick. That is not of Vallia."

"They wear rapiers and daggers," said Roybin, fingering his chin. "Yet they left them in their scabbards and chose thraxters. It adds up. Hamal it must be."

Seg had jumped down to join us and we talked, taking no notice of the fisherfolk. I wanted these people of Veliadrin to see the picture and use their common sense. "Not Hamal, Roybin, surely?" Seg's bow gleamed in the orange light. "Shields there. More likely the Dawn Lands of Havilfar, or over to the west. . .

"Wherever they come from," I said, "and this Himet the Mak, their target is Veliadrin. Right. Tell me, how far have they infiltrated Vallia to venture out here?"

The question was the obvious one, of course. Why bother over an island off the east coast of Vallia, an island moreover split into different provinces, when the main island remained?

Roybin looked worried. "You mean, my Prince, they have already completed their foul work in Vallia?"

Now that he phrased it like that I realized I didn't mean it . . . quite.

Perhaps I was growing paranoid. The word is of this later time and my thoughts then were more earthy. I had thought that Himet the Mak was after me personally. All this business about capturing me and taking me to the leader and torturing me was pedestrian stuff. I had

thought, perhaps, the Star Lords might be taking up again their interest in me or, perhaps, the Savanti. But this kind of rowdy fracas was not their style, never had been so far. If they wanted me they could reach down and by means of a gigantic and ghostly representation of a Scorpion they could snatch me up from wherever I happened to be on Kregen and dump me down anywhere else they desired. Aye, and they could send me packing back to Earth four hundred light-years off through space.

The Star Lords and the Savanti between them had caused me great grief in my life, as you know, but I was no longer the same blind, ignorant, gasping puppet I had once been. Yet I was still painfully aware that at the whim of forces I did not understand and the dictates of superhuman men and women I might be flung willy-nilly into fights and adventures, into danger and unwelcome distractions, at any moment of any day.

I would not again struggle against the Star Lords in the same stupid way I had done the time they had summoned me and, because Delia and my friends were in peril, I had refused them. Then they had flung me back to Earth for twenty-one miserable years. No. This was not the handiwork of the Star Lords, who sought to work out a destiny for Kregen I could not comprehend.

The fisherfolk were growing restless. We were, as I have indicated, a right tearaway bunch of fearsome fighting men. But once we had seen off the black-feathered masichieri, why, there we stood, all talking and arguing away together as though the fisher people

of Autonne did not exist. What were those good folk to make of that?

They had heard of Dray Prescot, their new High Kov, and they did not like him or his high-handed ways in renaming their island or of freeing their slaves. Fingering their tridents, shuffling their feet, they began to edge toward us.

Their faces hardened with determination ousting shock. They formed a half circle about us with their women safely in the rear. Their feet shuffled with more purpose as they advanced.

The way the orange lights caught on the sharp tines of their tridents and flashed sparks about the lofty room reminded us that perhaps we had not finished here yet.

Seg was saying, “More news would have come out of Vallia about them if the Chyyanists had grown really strong. In Falinur there have been rumors only, with nothing positive. This is the furthest I’ve gone yet in discovering—”

“They’re a secretive bunch,” observed Inch, who had come back in after chasing after Oby. Now the tall man was carefully winding his braid of yellow hair and stuffing it up under the leather cap. He looked more than a trifle put out, adding, “Secretive. And they preach revolution.”

Casually, unhurriedly, Seg Segutorio turned around. His superb muscles put out their awful power and the bow string drew back. The arrow cast cleanly. The sharp steel point struck fiercely into the floorboards before that advancing semicircle of men determined to slay us

out of ignorance and folly and hatred. The blazing blue feathers with which the arrow was fletched quivered as the shaft thrummed in the floor.

Seg turned back and answered Inch. "We'd have known something, you long streak."

It was magnificently done.

Instantly the forward shuffle of those desperate men stopped as though each man had been stricken with paralysis.

I said, "There is no profit, really, in running after Himet. Oby is on a fruitless errand. He will seek us out, all in due course. He will come to us, of that I feel sure."

As though on cue Oby walked back in looking disgruntled. He shook a few raindrops from him and the wind gusted in through the rotting doorway, half sagging from broken hinges.

"He took a flier and went — whoosh — and I can tell you, my Prince, the voller was a good one. Made in Hamal for a damned Hamalese."

If anybody would know about airboats, Oby would.

As Oby spoke I was fretting away about my response to Roybin and my insistence that Himet would seek me out. Were these the responses of a megalomaniac? Did I see conspiracy everywhere, plots to drag me down to destruction in every unusual occurrence?

I just was not sure.

"I believe this Himet the Mak will seek us out again. This is not just a fresh religious creed, which is open and exultant about its origins. If Hamal is involved, and that certainly seems to be so, we all know that Hamal

has not been crushed but only halted in her aggressions. So it makes sense to strike at us in this new way. When this Himet returns we will deal with him. And, Roybin, I did not exactly mean what you suggested about Vallia. . .

Seg and Inch and Turko!

Oh, yes, I caught their delighted mocking smiles. Each one of my true comrades favored me, each in his own way, with that secret, mocking, almost indulgent smile each one reserves for me. I sometimes think they humor me as they would a little child. Clearly they must have been thinking something along the lines that this so-puissant Dray Prescott, who was Prince of this and Kov of that and Strom of somewhere else, needed a little of the old headlong action to bring his addled senses back.

Since when, it seemed to me their sly and good-humored smiles were saying, since when has the high and mighty and great Dray Prescott not been sure of anything? Ah! If they only knew! If they only knew of the torments of indecision I suffered then — and still do suffer, by Zair! — then they would revise their opinions drastically.

I supposed they thought of me as a rough and ready soldier of fortune who had won through to great wealth and power — as indeed, with their help I had — and so therefore a man fit to be gently mocked. So I thought them. This amiable irony, this cheerful mockery of my comrades is returned by me, and it is never hurtful or cruel between us. Rather, it adds a zest to our comradeship, a spice, for each one of us knows that if he does a

foolish thing — as who does not, by Vox! — the others will remind him of it, from time to time, gently.

So, being a cunning old leem-hunter after my own fashion, I pointed at the two brothers in the pressing crowd halted by Seg's single arrow standing in the floor as though held back by a solid wall of granite.

“You two. Step forth.”

They stepped out, apprehensively, and other men near them hurriedly drew away to give a clear path as though afraid of contamination or the plague. What the two trident-men thought, or what the people thought lay in store, Opaz alone knew.

“You two. Brothers. Twins. Names?”

They swallowed, alike as twins, alike as twins ought to be and so often are not.

“Please, your honor, I am Tarbil the Brown.”

“And, if it pleases your worship, I am Tarbil the Gray.”

“It pleases me, Tarbils both,” I said. “I saw. And I heard. Why did you attend this meeting tonight?”

Both spoke at once, then Tarbil the Gray yielded to Tarbil the Brown. “Our lives are poor, your honor. We thought there might be a little. . . fun.”

“I would like to know why you did not shout for Chyyan with the rest.”

“These people, your honor, would bring back slavery.”

“Ah!” I said, understanding. I looked at the mob. “And that sweaty one whom you dragged back. He was your master?”

“Aye, your honor. We were slaves from childhood until the High Kov said all slaves must go free.”

He looked at me under his eyebrows, his head ducked, this stalwart, muscled, hardy fisherman. He would go out in his little dory all night with a light, spearing fish. He was whipcord tough. Now he swallowed and shuffled his feet and wet his lips. "And, your honor, you are really him? You really are, your honor, you really are the new High Kov, Dray Prescott?"

"Yes."

I did not add, as I might unthinkingly have done once upon a time: "For my sins."

That was true enough, Zair knew. But they would have misunderstood, believing the words rather than the oblique thought behind them, an altogether too common failing, and a false word could have spread. I was hated enough in Veliadrin as it was.

Both brothers began the full incline until I stopped them, somewhat roughly, with a word, and then bade them stand up like men.

"There is no slavery in any place where the people look to me," I told them, trying not to give the impression of smugness or of righteousness. That never wears with simple folk. "You who once were slave are now free. It is your right. And I would thank you for your help."

I did not, there and then, in view of some of the murderous looks bestowed on the Tarbil brothers, give them a gold piece each, or a ring or any other trifle. That would come later, when I confided the details to Panshi, my Great Chamberlain. He had remained at his post in the palace fortress of Esser Rarioch overlooking the bay

and my capital city of Valkanium in Valka. And it would be no trifle. The Tarbil brothers would be useful.

Yes, I own it. Already I was thinking how they would fit into my schemes to free all the slaves of Vallia.

The Tarbils bobbed again and then drew back. They were given plenty of room. I looked questioningly at Roybin.

“They will be safe, my Prince. I believe you have put such a fright into these folk they will be quiet for a space, to the glory of Opaz and the Invisible Twins.”

Oby and Balass were busy picking up the scattered weapons dropped by the black-feathered masichieri. They knew my ways. I did not give the Tarbils a rapier or a thraxter. Giving a man a weapon he does not know how to use is no act of friendship, and is a good way of getting him killed. But Roybin, who would stay in his home town of Autonne for a space, would see to the Tarbils before they were brought to Valka for the greater work.

I lifted my voice so all could hear.

“And we have more work to do.” I spoke to the fisher-folk of Autonne. “Go to your homes. Ponder on what you have seen. Remember that the spirit of the Invisible Twins made manifest in the heavens above us is a beneficent spirit; but remember also that Opaz will strike down the wrongdoer. Put away from your thoughts this evil creed of Chyyanism. It is a fallacy to dream that each one of us may have exactly what he wants in this life, all at the same time, without effort. You must work, I must work. You will say I am your

High Kov, and so I am and may be. The burdens laid on me are different from those laid on you, but they chafe no less harshly. But if any one of you wishes to take that task upon himself he knows the ways, both in law as elsewhere, and I warn you, he will grieve mightily.”

Yes, all right. I know that was double-edged. I damned well meant it to be double-edged.

On Kregen land and wealth and titles are for the taking, but only by due process of law after the battle, despite a forest of dead bodies. I was legally the High Kov of Veliadrin. I could give the title to whosoever I wished, obtaining the emperor’s agreement. Anyone could fight me for it and, if he won, have the emperor ratify his success if he could. That battle might be harder than the preceding one. A man might marry into lands and wealth and, perhaps, into a title. The system is not the same as those obtaining on this Earth. On Kregen it is far more what a man is and what he does that makes a man, and not what a man is born into.

As for women — the whole gorgeous world of Kregen is their oyster.

The famblys shuffled out, still dazed, and some, as I was very well aware, still resentful. We desperadoes were left in the deserted hall, with the shattered gallery and the stink of ancient fish and the four-winged black idol of the Chyyan.

Turko bent and picked up a parrying-stick. He turned it over in his hands, weighing it, studying it. “A klattar,” he said.

I recalled how in Mungul Sidrath Turko had bent and picked up a shield.

Roybin coughed and began to say, "I will arrange for everything to be cleared up here," when Oby let out a strangled screech that snapped us all about to glare at him.

"Dray! My Prince, *look!*"

We all stared where his rigid finger pointed.

The black idol against the rich cloths glowered down somberly upon us, the four wings black and seeming to span the heavens. And the idol's eyes glowed! Twin pits of emerald fire, they shone down with an eerie, baleful flame of malefic evil.

Three

Burning eyes of a pagan idol

Glowing with baleful fires, the eyes of the idol poured out a malevolent radiance. Twin pits of flame beside the arrogantly beaked nose, the eyes smoked greenly with a sense of contained horror most unnerving.

Impossible to say which one of us moved first.

As one we rushed toward the idol in its alcove.

What we shouted, what we said, I do not know. I think each one of us wanted to get a grip on the bird-idol and rip away the masked face to discover just what trickery was at work. The emerald fire blossomed into a fierce blaze of green fire. Then it vanished. As we reached the statue only cold lusterless glass eyeballs gazed dispassionately down on us.

“Sink me!” I burst out. “Here’s a task for Khe-Hi and old Evold!”

We prowled around the idol, glaring at it, hitting it experimentally with our sword hilts. It sounded hard almost everywhere save for the center of the back, where it gonged with a hollow note. Those tearaways of mine

would have pried the back open there and then, but I halted them.

“Let the wizards deal with this. There is bound to be trickery here, protection against opening.”

They grumbled, but they saw the sense of what I said. We all knew a little of the powers of the Wizards of Loh, although no man not a wizard could comprehend them fully, I judged, and it seemed likely it might need a wizard to open the idol without disaster. Inch, hefting his ax, was mauling on about an idol of deepest Murn-Chem that had opened to let loose a flood of poisonous insects. Oby, eager to display learning, could cap that with the story of Rosala and the Eye of Imladrion. Seg and Inch stood back and Inch lowered his ax. I fancied a blow in the right place would open the idol of the chyyan easily enough, but we might not welcome what emerged.

Only later, thinking back, do I realize that the horrific appearance of those eyes suddenly glowing with sentient light, gleaming emerald pits of fire glowering down upon us, had not scared us witless as, doubtless, had been intended.

We'd simply yelled and charged straight for the idol.

I fancied that was behavior the manipulator of the idol was unaccustomed to.

Truth to tell, this whole affair of the Great Chyyan was a most serious business, but levity kept intruding. I'd fallen head over heels into a secret meeting. A horrific light had flashed from the glass eyeballs of an idol, and we'd simply gone for the thing baldheaded instead of

shrieking and running off. When one gets into low company, one's habits tend to lower also. Like Oby having to be told to take his damned great long-knife out of the idol's eyesockets.

"If there are demons and poisonous insects or what not in there, Young Oby, you'll let the things out if you pry its eyeballs out, will you not?"

He jumped down agilely, saying with some resentment, "I've always wanted to prod out the fabulous gems from the eyesockets of a pagan idol."

So, sharpish, I said, "Then you can help the wizards when they dismember this thing, you imp of Sicce."

Whereat he scowled and fingered his knife and then, when Balass whispered to him, perked up. Balass had hinted that the fabulous gems might accrue to a light-fingered young scamp, when the wizards were otherwise occupied. . .

As you will readily perceive, after a little exercise and for all their forebodings, my comrades did not take the new creed of the Great Chyyan with overmuch seriousness. I hardly think it necessary to remark that in that they made a grave mistake.

There would be much to do, I considered, to stamp out Chyyanism. I would stamp it out, for it posed a threat to Vallia, my adopted country. Had the creed been genuine I would not have interfered. Religions originate and take root and flourish when there is a need for them. Changes of religion occur when the times cry out for new vessels for old wine. But this Chyyanism was artificial, a hodgepodge, a deliberate throwing

together of ideas culled from the deepest recesses of the wish-fulfillment sections of the human mind. Chyyanism had been created as a weapon, for a far deeper purpose than merely to stir up credulous men and women resentful that their slaves had been taken from them.

In all this I tried to remember that my own origins were those of the rebel. I detested authority imposed by brute force without concern for evil results. Despite my friends in whom I joy, I am a loner. I have resisted authority all my life, often enough to my sorrow. Now that I had certain responsibilities I could see the other side, but, even so, I knew that Chyyanism merely used resentment against authority as a weapon, that the glib promises of luxury and paradise now were hollow, false and could only lead to ruination for all.

“Very good, Roybin, then you will see to this. Before I leave for Valka you must have a settlement. We owe you much.”

“My thanks, my Prince.”

So we left Roybin to summon his own people to clear up the mess and we took ourselves off to our secluded inn. The innkeeper was Roybin’s cousin, and he asked no questions of these strangers recommended to him. But we all knew the word that the High Kov of Veliadrin was in Autonne would be all over the town by morning. It was high time to pack our traps and leave.

We had discovered certain things about Chyyanism and our agents would continue to burrow and pry and we would discover more. We had the great black idol.

And I still felt convinced that this Makfaril, the leader of the Chyyanists, was aware of my interest and would take steps to counter the threat.

All this would make life interesting, as though life on Kregen can ever be anything other than fascinating!

We had flown here in small, inconspicuous fliers. Even so, airboats are rare enough in the backcountry of any nation of this continental grouping of Paz, with the natural exceptions of those countries where vollers are manufactured. So folk would still look up from their work on their nets or in the long tended rows of their fields when the shadow of an airboat skipped over them.

Seg would be leaving for his province of Falinur and Inch would be leaving for his province of the Black Mountains, both in Vallia. They would be flying west and north; I would be flying east.

We made our partings brief, with a compact to meet up again shortly.

The twin suns were just lifting above the eastern horizon as our fliers took off, the last shouted Remberees ringing in the limpid dawn air. Well, Seg and Inch are the finest company a man can wish for, and at every parting I sorrowed, but all the same, acknowledging that I am a loner, I could look ahead with some fascination to the future.

The journey to Valka proved uneventful, although we spotted a flier which contrarily kept pace with us for a time and then vanished behind clouds. Oby, who was piloting, looked at me enquiringly. But I shook my head.

“The fellow may be something to do with the Chyyan-ists, and he may not. Our task is to get home and have the wizards inspect the idol.”

Oby’s face expressed a certain disappointment.

“Don’t fret! By Vox! Makfaril and Himet and their crowd will cause us enough strife to keep you well occupied, you bloodthirsty leem.”

Only a little mollified, Oby drove us on through the morning as the mingled lights of Antares fell about us, streaming in jade and crimson across the volder and the fleeting countryside below.

By Zair! But it was good to be alive and on Kregen!

Turko kept twitching his new parrying stick about and Balass sat out of the slipstream methodically polishing up his sword blade with an oily rag.

A few seasons ago I would have gone blindly off charging after that elusive flier and thereby dropping myself headlong into fresh adventure or, most likely, failing to find him in the scattered clouds, so my present conduct gave some small indication of maturing. I wanted to chase the fellow. But the mystery of the idol fascinated me more.

So we bore on steadily through the levels, homeward-bound for Valkanium, the capital city of Valka, and the high fortress therein of Esser Rarioch.

Since my return from Earth and the adventures in the Eye of the World I had a deal to do in catching up with events on Kregen. Things had changed. The sparkling vista of the Bay and the city opened up as we flew down in a beeline for the high landing platform of the castle. I

did not sigh. The sound of a sigh in that bright scene would have been out of place. Just as I felt out of place. My son Drak, Prince of Vallia, appeared to be running Valka very nicely, thank you.

He was called the young strom, and I had heard men refer to me, unaffectedly, as the old strom. This was an eventuality I had not entertained, for despite what might happen on Kregen I had always thought of Valka as my home.

Oh, yes, I had other homes on Kregen, there was Strombor and Djanduin and the wide plains of Seges-thes where my clansmen roamed. There was even Paline Valley in hostile Hamal. But Valka. . . Well, as Oby brought the airboat around in a sweeping line for the landing platform and touched down with that perfect sweetness of touch of the master flyer, I choked back that ridiculous sigh and hopped over the voller's coaming with a riotous bellow for the guards and attendants.

For a space it was all yelling and Lahals and rejoicings, and then Delia appeared and everyone fell respectfully back, and we touched hands. I looked into her eyes and, as always, saw there the amused wonder at these carryings on, the deep love between us and also that damned mocking smile which told me, clearly enough, that she had a word or two to say to me when we were alone.

Balass, I noticed as we turned to go into the palace, was engaged in a very close conversation with a superb black girl, a maiden of Xuntal, and so I rejoiced for him.

As for Oby. . .

“Yes, Dray, he has to run very fast to keep ahead of all the girls who have matters to discuss with him!”

Delia smiled as she spoke, so I knew the matter was not serious.

For Oby had ducked down beneath the voller, crept around the other side, and the last I saw of him that day was a fleeting glimpse of his breechclout as he vanished down a back stairs. Hot on his heels ran half a dozen rosy-limbed girls, all yelling after him, waving their arms like a bunch of love-crazed nymphs. Well, they were, in a way. I found my craggy lips twisting into a smile.

“It seems Oby has made himself at home in Esser Rarioch.”

“Very much. Which,” added my Delia tartly, “is more than can be said for Esser Rarioch’s strom.”

But she smiled as she spoke. One day I would have to tell her about Earth and all the rest of that story, which she, dear girl, would find almost impossible to believe. How could any intelligent person believe in a world that had only one sun, only one moon, possessed only *Homo sapiens* as intelligent people to live on this fantastic world, did not have flying saddle-birds or any other of the everyday marvels of Kregen?

It would take a lot of belief to believe a story like that.

The only consolation I had was simply that there is no woman more perfect than Delia on two worlds. She, at least, would listen in her grave, lightly ironic way, half laughing and yet deadly serious, and would give me the

benefit of her love. She, at least, would not condemn me out of hand as a madman, makib, fit only for the ice-chains of Hegenor.

So, together, we went into the palace where everyone seemed pleased to see me back, and where we were soon served up a capital meal in a small private room. Melow the Supple, the ferocious Manhound who had dedicated her life to the care of Delia, as her two children cared for my first twins, prowled in, splitting her frightful muzzle in a grin of welcome.

We drank tea and ate miscils and other light pastries, and munched on fruits of all kinds, with the ever-present dish of palines to hand.

“And this new creed is then a serious menace?”

“Most serious, I judge. To tell simple folk that they can have all they want, here and now, for the asking, is ruinous folly. By Zair! Had I all I wanted, here and now—” And then I paused. I had so much. Was I then so greedy?

Delia had told me the news of our children. Each was about his or her business in the greater world of Kregen. I had seen my three sons in action, and in them I could feel content mingled with apprehension. Drak, as the eldest, handled my affairs for me. Zeg was now a famous Krozair in the inner sea, the King of Zandikar. Jaidur had remained in the inner sea to finalize his acceptance into the Krozairs of Zy. I value my membership of that order among the highest of the good things that have happened to me on Kregen. I had ideas to put the mystic disciplines and teachings of the Krozairs to a wider use.

So the lads were accounted for. Our daughter Velia was dead, but we had another new daughter, Velia, and she I looked upon with a dread joy, for the stories about lightning are not true.

As for the other two girls, Delia simply told me that Lela, Drak's twin, was busy with the Sisters of the Rose. And Dayra, Jaidur's twin, should — and then Delia corrected herself, and said was — also concerned with the Sisters of the Rose.

“But they are making arrangements to visit Valkanium to see their father. They have to call at Vondium first.”

I nodded, thinking. So with Delia and the children I had all I wanted. Why should I then cry out that I did not have all I wanted? Perhaps the thought of the perils and problems besetting Kregen prompted the remark. All I knew then was that I felt a gnawing sense of anticlimax, and a restless desire to be up and doing once again.

“As soon as the idol is here the Sans can probe and pry.” I munched palines, tasting the flavor, forcing myself to feel a content foreign to me. “To promise anyone instant success in the here and now rings false.”

“But there is more to it than that?”

“Yes, my heart.” Trust Delia to see through my mumblings. “The idea of this creed could be a new attack from Hamal.” I outlined some of my suspicions. “I shall have to go back there at some point. The devils still sell us inferior fliers, so I believe.”

“Oh, they do not fail so much as they used to do. But the silver boxes go black and fail much earlier. And they charge us greatly inflated costs. And—”

“If nothing else turns up, then I’ll go back to Hamal and this time rip the secrets from the very throats of the Nine Faceless Ones themselves.”

Delia did not say in an arch way: “You mean that too!” For she knew I meant it. But I caught her expression, and at once felt deflated, an idiot, a veritable onker. To talk about going away again so soon after so long an absence was thoughtless cruelty. I reached over and touched her arm.

“Let us open up the idol and see what we find. Then we can talk with more sense.”

She took the words as an apology. And then she said, “This time, I think I shall come with you.”

So I laughed and we drank more tea, and Panshi, the Great Chamberlain, came in to tell us that the black pagan idol bird had arrived. So up we went through the colonnades and passageways and along the long hall of the images to Evold Scavander’s laboratory. The black idol squatted against the wall opposite the windows, and dominated the room with an aura of evil. The thing looked just as impressive and malignant there as it had in the makeshift temple of the fisherman’s net-room.

Old Evold sniffed and hitched up his robes and fussed around his princess, bellowing for Ormol to find chairs and refreshments. Delia sat calmly, smoothing her trailing skirts, accepting the services with that delicacy that marks her as a true princess born.

Turko walked in with his loose limber prow and settled down quietly and watchfully by the door. I noticed the parrying-stick thrust through his belt, the jags turned out, and I fancied he'd have Balass foining away at him with a rudis in short order.

Evold Scavander, given the honorary title *San* — which means sage or master or dominie — was the wisest of the wise men of Valka. His wizardry extended into different spheres from those of the famed Wizards of Loh, who are, I must confess, real sorcerers. If they are not genuine, then they are the most consummate confidence tricksters of two worlds. Much remained to be learned of the Wizards of Loh. I was engaged in a long-drawn-out struggle with the master-wizard, Phu-si-Yantong, a man who was more evil than could be understood by mortal men, and yet who was not a cardboard villain without features that made him both darker and, contrariwise, human. Yantong had not bothered me in the inner sea. I surmised he knew I was back in Valka and therefore I must expect a visitation from him, a ghostly apparition that would spy on me.

The Wizard of Loh, Khe-Hi-Bjanching, whom I had brought out of danger to a position of importance in Esser Rarioch, had been erecting defenses against Yantong. I knew these defenses must be put to the test. I did not look forward to that time.

Evold, spluttering and blowing, prowled around the idol, peering up at it, tapping, feeling, prodding.

Once he would have started in to prize the back off without a second thought. But for all their arguments

and quarrels, Evold and Bjanching had come to a kind of understanding. I felt only a little surprise when Evold burst out: “Now where by Vox is Khe-Hi? He’s never here when he’s wanted, and always underfoot when he’s not.” So that salved some of Evold’s *amour propre*.

By my orders there were few people in the laboratory. The tables were loaded with the paraphernalia of Evold’s studies. Here we had broken some of the secrets of the silver boxes that powered airboats. Here we had sought to uncover the secrets of past ages, and to make experiments for the future well-being of Valka. But my concern now was for what might happen when the idol was opened.

When Khe-Hi-Bjanching came in I saw that look that flashed like two flung stuxes between the two wizards. Like two flying spears their looks clashed and crossed. But much had changed in Valka since I had been away, and I knew I would find much had changed as I took up once again the threads of life on Kregen, so I watched with a small sly inward approval as the two wizards prepared to cooperate. Young Khe-Hi and Old Evold, wasn’t that becoming the story of my homecoming?

“You have touched nothing, San?”

“Nothing, San.”

Their exquisite politeness one to the other tickled me. I remembered them yelling at each other and hurling scathing remarks about aptitudes and abilities. Now the two wizards walked together all around the black chyyan and cocked their heads back to stare up at the malignant eyes and drew long thoughtful expressions.

In short, they behaved as professional men consulted on a case of intricacy behave.

Finally, Khe-Hi said, "The idol is certainly sealed by sorcery. I know that."

We all understood. A wizard of Loh who deals all his life in sorcery knows when sorcery is being used, or, at least, knows most of the time.

"You say the eyeballs flamed emerald, my prince?"

"Aye."

"Yet they are plain glass with a yellowish tinge." Khe-Hi gestured and Ormol, Evold's assistant, brought across a ladder which was propped against the statue. Khe-Hi, hitching up his pure white robe cinctured by the crimson cord, mounted and peered closely at the eyes. I wondered what would happen if they blazed their incredible malignant green into his face.

Many men of the continent of Loh have red hair. Not all. Loh is a land of mystery and terror and remained locked away from exploration after the collapse of its famous empire. Khe-Hi's red hair shone darkly against the black of the statue. He peered this way and that. Then he descended and stood looking thoughtfully upon the back of the idol where a single light tap gonged a hollow note.

"There are preparations I must make," he said at last, coming to a decision. "San, I would value your help." Evold nodded without speaking.

"Will this take time?" I spoke calmly.

"Three burs only, my Prince."

A bur is forty Earthly minutes. There would be time for more tea and a slap-up meal in two hours. I nodded. "Then I leave the idol in your care." Then, because of reasons that remained too obscure to be articulated, I added: "And Oby has settled a lien on the eyeballs with his long-knife."

There was a laugh at this. Delia rose. We went out together and Turko followed. Like my return home, this first investigation of the idol had been an anticlimax.

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

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

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

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

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

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at www.mushroom-ebooks.com, and at wikipedia.org.

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9. Bladesman of Antares
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