

DRAY PRESCOT: 51

**MURDER ON
KREGEN**

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writing as
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A Mushroom eBook

MURDER ON KREGEN

Dray Prescott 51

Alan Burt Akers

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A NOTE ON THE SPECTRE CYCLE

A new page turns in the unruly life of Dray Prescott and all his strengths and inner resources will be required to confront fresh problems and perils. For those readers who have not hitherto encountered the story of Dray Prescott, this volume, *Murder on Kregen*, the first book of the Spectre Cycle, is an admirable place to begin making Prescott's acquaintance.

He has been described as a man above middle height with immensely broad shoulders who moves like a hunting cat, silent and lethal. There is about him an abrasive honesty and indomitable courage. At the same time he presents an enigmatic figure for there is much about him we do not yet know. Educated in the harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy he managed to gain the quarterdeck but after that his career waned. Only when he transited to Kregen under the twin suns of Antares were his true qualities given expression. The Star Lords, furthering their mysterious ends, demand that he unite all the continents and islands of Paz as an emperor. This task is beset with innumerable difficulties. He and the divine Delia have abdicated as Emperor and Empress of Vallia—and we believe one of the chief reasons was simply so they could go adventuring abroad on the cruel yet beautiful world of Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio.

The early parts of this book contain events that Prescott could not have known about at the time but learned later. They have been placed here for the sake of clarity.

So, join Dray Prescott as he rides south from the port city of Zandikar on the inner sea of the continent of Turismond, the Eye of the World, with his blade comrade Seg Segutorio and the Princesses Velia and Didi of Vallia. Of course, as is the nature of Kregen, they face unexpected peril.

But first...

Alan Burt Akers

CHAPTER ONE

A wild dark streak haunted the reputation of the Vorner family down through the generations and many times in their turbulent history dishonor stained their family name. Young Tralgan, son of Lord Nalgre Vorner, radiated a sunny disposition that charmed all who came into contact with him, so that folk said perhaps the black blood had at last all been drained away.

Here, under the battlements of the gate leading up to the castle, Tralgan stared sickly upon the dozen crossbows aimed for his heart.

“Do not move, Tralgan! The Judge will have no compunction in ordering the crossbowmen to loose.”

The saturnine features of the Judge confirmed with chilling authority what Ormol Lodermair said was true. He and the Judge stood side by side under the shadows of the arched gateway. The glee and raw triumph in Lodermair’s voice struck through Tralgan like a hurled javelin.

His full lips trembled with a despair he tried to mask with rage. This fellow, this Ormol Lodermair, a cousin detested all Tralgan’s life, now arrogantly laid claim to the castle and lands of Culvensax. Lord Nalgre Vorner, Elten of Culvensax, had died as all men die in Opaz’s good time. His son, grieving at the news, hurried home to be met by this debacle.

“I am the true Lord of Culvensax!” Tralgan spoke stoutly; but he could hear the quaver in his voice. “You usurp my rights at your peril, Orno!”

Lodermair sneered at this, dismissing Tralgan’s words out of hand. The Judge said sharply: “The papers are all in order. The late Elten Nalgre’s Will is testified and witnessed. Kyr Orno Lodermair is now legally the Elten of Culvensax.”

The twin Suns of Scorpio struck ruby and emerald fires from the steel heads of the crossbow bolts. The suns shine glinted off the silver pakmort at Tralgan’s throat. Until the death of his father had brought him home to claim his inheritance his sole ambition in life was to take the next step up the mercenary hierarchy and to wear the golden pakzhan at his throat, to be a zhanpaktun.

The tableau at the gate appeared to him to be divorced from reality. Many of the citizens of the town gazed with wide eyes upon the scene, held back by the spears of the town’s militia. A dry smell of dust hung on the air; the crowd made little noise. The dark color mounted in Tralgan’s cheeks. His heavy face with the full lips and curled nostrils of the Vorner family gave a sudden shocking reminder that Elten Nalgre was indeed Tralgan’s father, the stain of the black blood unmistakable.

His right hand curled into a fist around the hilt of the sword hanging on his right side. Those who understood these things noticed this, and that Tralgan did not grasp the rapier scabbarded to his left. He wore light armor, suitable for travel. His groom with the animals, detained by spearmen a little way off, looked on with an expression compounded of horror, alarm and pity.

Tralgan stared up past the arched gate, up and up to where the castle of Vornherhold soared against the sky. He knew every one of those pinnacles and towers, every embrasure, every room, every hiding place. Here he had spent his childhood. His arguments with his father usually ended in raucous laughter as they embraced and made up—what son had not quarreled with his father? His mother he did not remember. Now this blood-sucking leech Ormol Lodermair intended to steal all away from him. His fist tightened.

“Draw your sword, Tralgan, and you are a dead man.” The thick passion in Lodermair’s words disgusted Tralgan. But he relaxed his grip. He was bold and reckless, yes; he was not stupid.

When he spoke he surprised himself at the steadiness and calmness in his words. “That Will is forged. My father left—”

“Your father left all to me, his favorite nephew!”

Tralgan turned to stare at the Judge. That subservient person blinked, although he did not flinch back. “I claim my right to be heard by the nazabni. She rules Urn Vennar for Princess Didi under the hand of the Emperor. I am a loyal subject and will be heard. You cannot stop—”

“I can do what—” began Lodermair with ferocious passion.

The Judge halted him, hand on arm. “What Kyr Tralgan says is sooth. The case can be taken to the nazabni.”

Watching them with hatred suffusing every particle of his body, Tralgan saw the Judge whisper swiftly. Lodermair nodded.

“Very well.” Lodermair raised his voice. “All can see I am a just lord. All must be done legally. The case will be taken to Nazabni Ulana Farlan at the capital.”

Yes, there he stood, this Ormol Lodermair, plump, full-fleshed, hands on hips, jaw jutting, triumphant. He wore the

buff clothes of Vallia as though, Tralgan considered through the rage and contempt, as though he were a respectable Vallian. His curly-brimmed hat sported a bunch of feathers in ochre and silver, the old colors of Vennar before the province was split. He lifted his left hand and gestured impatiently to the guard captain. Three rings glinted on the fingers of that fat hand. As the guard captain gave orders to the Deldar, Tralgan wondered with a sudden and devastating switch of mood to gloom and despair, how many of those rings belonged to his father.

The Deldar, like most Deldars, creaked in his armor as he bellowed, as all Deldars bellow, commands that brought a detail of spearmen up to surround Tralgan. He saw the chain. They actually had a chain with which to imprison him. That dark blood rose again, chokingly, and once more his mood switched.

Sparks of red and green fire bounced from the chain as the twin suns, Zim and Genodras, streamed down their mingled radiance.

The chain with dangling manacles lifted in the Deldar's fists.

Tralgan struck the fellow once, a clean blow to the jaw.

The unfortunate officer staggered back, collided with a couple of his spearmen and they all fell down in a tangle. Tralgan bellowed louder than the Deldar: "No man chains me! That affront to my dignity will not be tolerated. By Vox, Ormol, you're a cramph among cramphs!"

Turmoil ensued. Lodermair yelled something about rasts and cramphs, tapos and squirms, waving his arms. The Judge stepped back smartly. The spearmen waited for orders. The cadade, as a competent captain of the guard, crisply told the fallen Deldar to stand up. He eyed Tralgan. "Very well, Kyr

Tralgan. No chains. Just walk with us to the castle—if you please.”

Now Tralgan didn't recognize any of these jurukkers of the guard. They were all new employees, for he'd been away adventuring for longer than, perhaps, he should. He did recognize the quality of this cadade, though, this Jiktar Claydoin Ma-Le, who was a Pachak with two left arms and a very brisk manner with him, after the way of Pachak diffs. So he merely nodded and started off through the gateway on the ascent to the castle—to his castle, as soon as Princess Didi's nazabni, ruling in her name, saw the truth of the matter.

There was no doubt the Vorner family had committed many dark and bloody deeds over the seasons. His father, Nalgre, had—well, decided Tralgan, better to push all that aside. He intended to bring lightness and joy to Culvensax. Some of the mercenary guards his father employed proved unworthy of trust. Perhaps this new lot were cast in a different and better mold. The Jiktar, Claydoin Ma-Le, had given his Pachak nikobi and would serve faithfully. Tralgan was fully aware of the quality of Pachaks; his father had never employed them. As a youngster why that was so had never occurred to Tralgan. He hoped his father had changed in his later years.

The castle fortress of Vornerhold contained extensive dungeons, a testament to the bad old days. They didn't put Tralgan in a cell; he was ushered into a small suite of rooms in the Thoth Tower. The cadade, a hint stiffly, said: “I am instructed to allow you to keep your rapier and main gauche. The rest of your weapons must be surrendered.” He gestured with his upper left. “A matter of form.”

There did not seem much else for it; so Tralgan stripped off the fighting sword, the short-hafted axe, the terchicks strapped over his right shoulder. The long Vallian dagger was taken. The Pachak told him that he had not served two months of the Maiden with the Many Smiles. He hesitated, and Tralgan obtained the clear impression that Jiktar Ma-Le was not altogether happy serving in his new post.

“Elten Ormol Lodermair—” he started.

He was chopped off abruptly. “I am the Elten!”

“That is not my province, Kyr. I serve my nikobi.”

After that a meal was served up and Tralgan ate as any paktun will eat when the opportunity affords. He prowled around the chamber restlessly. How long would the nazabni take to rectify this treachery?

A shaven-headed Gon arrived to say he was required in the Elten’s chambers. Controlling himself, Tralgan followed the Gon upstairs where he’d played as a child into the suite of rooms once occupied by his father. Sneeringly, with heavily-armed guards to hand, Lodermair informed him that word had been sent to the nazabni. “As you and all the world can see, I am a just lord.”

The Judge was not present and Tralgan hoped he’d fly as fast as he could. He was confident that Princess Didi would never allow injustice in her province of Urn Vennar. The nazabni was the daughter of old Nazab Erinor Farlan, who’d been appointed to run Princess Didi’s province by the emperor. There was a new Emperor of Vallia now, Drak, and his wife Silda was the new empress. Tralgan reposed every confidence in the swift course of justice in Vallia.

The Gon, very obsequious in his servitor's uniform, took him back down the stairs. He did not speak. He pushed the door open and Tralgan walked into the chamber.

He stopped stock still. At once, he saw it all. He'd been duped like any green coy. The Judge and the cadade lay sprawled in the center of the room. A great deal of their blood had been spilt to sink into the carpet of Walfarg weave. The coarse smell of blood stank in the room. Tralgan's fighting sword stuck up from the chest of the Judge. His axe was embedded in the cadade's skull. The murder scene could not have been more explicit.

Making a stupendous effort to keep control of himself, Tralgan swung around. The Gon and his bald buttered head were gone. The heavy beat of metal-studded boots thudded along the corridor and a group of soldiers marched into view.

At their head a ferociously-feathered Rapa urged them on.

"Stand still!" The Rapa's voice held a crisp note of authority. He wore the rank badges of a Hikdar, so he was probably the second in command, the shal-cadade, to the poor devil of a Pachak with his head cleft in by Tralgan's axe. "What is the cause of the commotion?"

"You should know!" spat out Tralgan. He felt physically sick. He'd been gulled, trapped, and he was only too well aware that nothing he could say or do would get him out of this mess.

Events brisked along after that. The charade was played out to the last full stop. Lodermaid arraigned him, judged him, condemned him. He would be sent to wait in prison until the nazabni pronounced on his fate.

Even then, even at this low stage in his fortunes, Tralgan still had the greatest hope of Vallian justice. He would explain everything. The Will could be proved a forgery. There was not a

drop of blood on his clothes. How explain that when those two poor devils had spouted blood everywhere? Tralgan began to breathe more easily. He'd get out of this imbroglio and take up his inheritance. By Vox, he would! There was justice in Vallia.

After all, a nazab, the governor of an imperial province, was equal to a Kov, the highest rank of the nobility. A nazabni was equal to a Kovneva. These folk held dread powers in their hands.

Thus confident of his own future, Tralgan was not so far gone in blind hatred as not to feel compassion for the cadade, Jiktar Claydoin Ma-Le. Everyone knew Pachaks served with loyalty. He most certainly had not deserved this hideous fate. As for the Judge, his name, Tralgan gathered, had been Nath the Righteous, well, perhaps he did deserve his fate. Righteous he certainly was not.

They took him off in a well-guarded narrow boat along the canals to the new capital. Since the Times of Troubles a new sense of freedom and enterprise flourished in Vallia. Gafarden bus-tled with business and commerce. The city, named by Princess Didi in remembrance, might be new, expanding around a small town situated on a promising site, it was prosperous and the Gafarden folk fully intended to be more prosperous still in the future. Tralgan was flung into the dungeons below the ancient fortress that dominated the old town. In the rooms above lay the quarters of the town dignitaries. Here Nazabni Ulana Farlan lived and ruled the province of Urn Vennar.

A small-boned woman, who habitually wore her hair tied into a bun, she had only recently taken over the reins of government when her father, the nazab, died. She was still in mourning. There was no automatic transfer of power for the nazabs and justicars who administered the imperial provinces. Ulana Farlan

must be confirmed in her post by Princess Didi and receive the blessing of Didi's uncle, the Emperor Drak of Vallia.

She relied completely on her chief pellan, Nath Swantram. He, as the chief minister of the province, knew everything there was to know worth knowing. A one-time soldier who now had many irons in a multitude of businesses and was, thereby, wealthy, he harbored the desires obvious to a person of his rank, wealth and ruthlessness.

His nose and left side of his mouth were disfigured by a sword slash in a long-ago battle. The scar remained, both physical and mental. Sometimes he was called Nath the Clis. He did not care for this, and, anyway, there were many men called Nath the Clis on Kregen. His robes were sumptuous, much bedecked with gold, although he had toned down the gorgeousness of his attire during this time of mourning.

Coming into the nazab's office on the bright, breezy morning following Kyr Tralgan's incarceration in the dungeons below, he felt in a particularly good mood. The drinking session last night in his private quarters had left him with a purse heavy with gold. His thoughts centered on the prim little woman seated at the desk, her dark hair tied just so. No, this was no longer the nazab's office. This was now the nazabni's office. Well, if his plans bore fruit, as, by Klass the Reiver, they would! he'd be the nazab and this would be his own office.

The two discussed the business of the day in matter of fact tones until Nath the Clis said: "There is a matter of a murder—two murders—at Culvensax." He related the grim details of the story and added: "There is no doubt of Kyr Tralgan's guilt. The decision of his execution is a mere matter of form. It would not be wise to trouble Princess Didi. Anyway," he waved

a beringed hand: “She is away visiting King Zeg in the Eye of the World.”

“Ah, yes.” Ulana Farlan relied on this man, yet she was well aware she must rule herself, and be seen to rule. She must make decisions. All the same, Nath Swantram understood affairs of state. His advice was sound. If she went running to the princess at every little problem her credibility would soon be in doubt.

“There is no doubt of Kyr Tralgan’s guilt?”

“None whatsoever.”

Nath the Clis placed the death warrant on the desk.

“This is a part of my work I can never grow accustomed to. I remember how my father hated signing death warrants.”

Very smoothly, the chief pallan said: “Yes, justice and duty are hard taskmasters.”

Nazabni Ulana Farlan, governor of Princess Didi’s imperial province of Urn Vennar, signed Kyr Tralgan Vorner’s death warrant with a firm hand.

CHAPTER TWO

For the period of a few grains of sand dropping down either side of the hour of mid a faint wash of red and green light drifted across the topmost iron bar. For the rest of the time the barred window remained shrouded in shadow. They allowed him a lamp in the cell and had even enquired if he was one of those folk who could not bear to live under a single light but must have two sources of illumination mimicking Zim and Genodras.

The bed was hard, the floor carpetless and the ablutions primitive. Stone walls and iron bars were no novelty to Tralgan. This cell was by many moons vastly superior to the disgusting pit those Opaz-forsaken drikingers had stuffed him in when he was employed as a paktun by Kov Panral over there in Pandahem.

After the first few days the smell ceased to trouble him. This was only because he grew used to it, not because it improved. The food, coarse and not plentiful, kept him alive.

Kyr Tralgan Vornor, rightful Elten of Culvensax, needed to live, to stay alive, hungrily waiting for news from Princess Didi.

Sure she would not fail him, Tralgan was yet fully prepared for hesitation, and determined to carry his complaint to the emperor himself in Vondium.

The jailer, a stunted Fristle whose hair had been burned almost all off his left side, brought the food. He was taciturn. On the next day in his slurred sing-song voice he informed Tralgan

that Pallan Nath Swantram would visit him tomorrow. Between that announcement and the Pallan's appearance, blazing hope and black despair alternated, shaking Tralgan in their grip as a leem shakes a ponsho.

Swantram entered with a perfumed kerchief to his nose. He spread his hands. He was polite. He sympathized deeply with Tralgan's plight. The spreading of his hands convinced Tralgan the man was attempting to be sincere, in that he had to take the perfumed kerchief away from his nose. "The news is not good, Kyr Tralgan."

"Tell me."

"Princess Didi declines to intervene in the case on your behalf."

The shattering tide of despair overwhelmed Tralgan. He sagged back on the bed. He put his hands to his face and rocked backwards and forwards. Hope—all dashed!

"No!" He started up. Despair had to be overcome. "The Emperor!"

"I have, of course, my dear Kyr, immediately applied to his gracious eminence the Emperor Drak."

Fresh hope burst up in Tralgan. "Then the emperor must see the justice of my case! He must!"

"Yes. I have the utmost sympathy for you. I have—" here Nath the Clis's voice took on a confidential tone—"I have personally expended a considerable sum in furtherance of your cause. Gaining access to the emperor in these matters is seldom simple."

Tralgan's experiences abroad had given him an insight into the ways of corruption. He understood the high ones of Kregen demanded tribute to assist unfortunates. Mind you, he'd been

given to understand that since the emperor's father's time bribery was no longer rife in Vallia. Still, this pallan understood politics.

“Thank you, pallan.”

Nath Swantram stared about the cell, kerchief well up to his scarred nose. “I had not realized, my dear Kyr, that they had placed you in such a dolorous situation. I shall have this rectified immediately. A person of your quality should not be confined here.”

“You are very kind.” Tralgan coughed. “In the matter of—ah—expenses in connection with the emperor—”

Swantram held up his hand. “When you have your estates we can talk about expenses.” After a few more pleasantries the pallan took himself off. The next day Tralgan was moved to an upper room where the twin Suns of Scorpio shone radiantly through the barred window most of the afternoon. The food improved remarkably. The bed was soft and the ablutions most satisfactory.

The effect of having someone of the pallan's position and power on his side lifted Tralgan's spirits. Swantram believed him! All would yet be well.

A sennight passed in which time the pallan visited every other day. He was solicitous to the extreme. His servants installed a splendid paline bush in a ceramic pot. The lush yellow berries themselves did much to cheer the prisoner up. There was no news from the emperor. Swantram counseled patience and radiated hope.

He informed Tralgan that Nalgre Lodermair strutted importantly in Culvensax, as the Elten. “I can prove the Will

is forged, my dear Kyr. You shall, in any event, come into your inheritance.”

“I want to see that cramp punished for his treachery.”

“You shall, my dear Kyr, you shall.”

“The thought of him, there, where my father—” Tralgan’s heavy face flushed with all the dark blood of the Vorners. “I’ll have him punished if it’s the last thing I do.”

The pallan coughed a trifle uncomfortably. “Ah—h’m—if the murders are proved, they are of necessity outside the scope of your inheritance.”

Tralgan wanted to know—by Vox!—what the pallan meant.

“Only, my dear Kyr, that whatever happens—whatever happens—your resolve should be to deny Lodermair the fruits of his treachery.”

Tralgan Vornor swore by the Sword of Kurin that if he was damned to hell he’d stop Lodermair and see him beggared and ruined.

“If I’m stalking through the mists of the Ice Floes of Sicce I’ll have Lodermair out of Culvensax! By Opaz, I’ll have him!”

On that the pallan, professing great respect for Tralgan’s resolution, took his leave. His scarred face held an expression of satisfaction. Only later, when Tralgan had calmed down a trifle, was the import of the pallan’s words borne in on him. He mulled them over. Well, then! By Vox! He would. Confident of the emperor making a decision in his favor, Tralgan yet formed an icy resolve that whatever happened he’d dislodge the usurping bastard Elten Ormol Lodermair from Culvensax.

Vornor believed that the officials would not be negligent. The Emperor Drak and his father had instilled an understanding into the various officials of the new Vallia that justice, truth and

mercy must govern the land. Corruption would not be tolerated. If any of the High Ones ruling Vallia contravened those precepts, then Tralgan would have no mercy on them either. His revenge would encompass all.

The visits the pallas made to the comfortable cell increased. He would sit in one of the two chairs as Tralgan strode about the floor ranting and raving, calling upon All the Names, foaming at the injustice he had suffered. A polite, almost distant look, made the scarred face a mask through which Tralgan, far too obsessed with his own passions, had no thought to penetrate.

The mental pressure, cunningly worked on and enhanced by Pallas Nath the Clis, wrought mischief within Tralgan. He felt himself being brought low. Surely, he would abruptly burst out, time after time, surely the emperor must have sent word by now!

When that day came, when the pallas entered the cell, flanked by three pairs of Fristle guards, Tralgan Vorner's world came to an end.

"He refuses!" Tralgan screamed. He could feel his lips writhing, his body burned, sweat varnished his face. He shook. He collapsed on the bed. This, then, was the end.

Nath the Clis said: "I have spent considerable treasure to help you. I grieve at your misfortune. But you are a man, a noble, of courage. You will see what needs to be done."

"You're going to kill me." Tralgan's words sounded like dry gravel crunched underfoot. "How?" This was, suddenly, the most important information he must learn.

"Swiftly and easily, I assure you, my dear Kyr."

"There will be no torture?"

“Those days in Vallia are long gone. Now I want you to concentrate your mind on what to do about your great enemy Lodermair.”

“You know what I have said.”

“Yes. But he remains in possession of your estates—”

“Then he must be dispossessed. You have a plan?”

Nath Swantram explained in a smooth, even, most reasonable tone of voice. The plan was, in essence, simple. Nath the Clis would benefit from Tralgan’s Will, the spurious Will would be proved forged, Nalgre Lodermair would be expelled from Culvensax. Arrangements could be made for his early demise. Tralgan would have his revenge.

Such was the hatred suffusing all Tralgan’s thoughts, the rage burning in his body, he agreed. The papers were brought, the bokkertu completed, Tralgan signed. The Fristle guards witnessed.

The guards wore the insignia of Urn Vennar, their banded sleeves bright with Didi’s new colors. Their furred bewhiskered cat faces remained blank. They were paid handsomely.

The death warrant having been signed by the nazabni some time ago, explained Nath Swantram, the execution must be secret, else the strict little lady would want to know the cause of the delay. The disposal of his body concerned Tralgan. Now he was en route to the circumambient Mists where he would fight his way through the Ice Floes of Sicce to the sunny uplands beyond, he became calm. He became resolute. “You will give me proper burial?”

“Assuredly.” What the pallan did not say was that he could not possibly take the slightest risk in disposing of Tralgan. The usual means of getting rid of executed criminals was no longer

open to him. The nazabni would ask damned awkward questions, for sure.

“There is a secret passage.” The pallan touched his lips with his kerchief. “You will see. Let us go.”

They went out, the guards surrounding them, and they went down.

They went down a long, long way.

“This castle is old, yet it was built upon a site even more ancient. There are no records. The builders must have been a nation old before the time of Delia, the Mother Goddess.”

That, reflected Tralgan, was a damn long time ago.

They reached eventually a corridor of rough-hewn masonry. An alcove to one side, eerily shadowed by the torches and the lamp carried by the Fristles, revealed a trapdoor, also of stone. The guards hauled on the bronze ring and with a screech that, uncomfortably, sounded far too eldritch for Tralgan’s liking, the slab lifted.

The lamp was lowered on a rope. The rope paid out a considerable length before the lamp reached the floor below. They looked down. The place was an oubliette, a gourd shaped hole in the ground, walled in by masonry. The brief circle of illumination down there revealed scattered bones and an indistinct floor. A rope ladder was thrown down. “Through there.” Nath the Clis pointed. “You, Fenrio, go down. Take the provisions and release the rope.”

“Quidang, lord,” snapped out one of the guards with a rush basket over his shoulder. He descended smartly enough and presently the empty rope’s end came up. The Fristle reappeared at the lip of the trapdoor and the pallan motioned to Tralgan.

That young man took a deep breath. If this was the way out—this was the way out. So be it, by Vox! Knowledge that Lodermaid would be destroyed nerved him. He went down the ladder.

Two rungs down, he stopped, stared up, and said: “You know, pallan, I did not murder the Judge and the cadade.”

Nath the Clis made a vague gesture. Tralgan went on down.

He reached the bottom, stepped off the ladder which, instantly, whisked away aloft. “I am to go forward alone?” shouted up Tralgan.

“Of course. I know you did not kill those two. But it is too late now.” The pallan’s words bounced eerily about the oubliette. “You have your burial, as I promised you.” With a crash like the last trump, the trapdoor smashed down.

Only then Tralgan Vornier realized how he had been gulled.

The gray blank walls of the oubliette appeared to crush in on him. The stones sparkled with nitre in the light, dark streaks of moisture ran down, and he stepped upon brittle bones that snapped with the finality of death.

No clean swift execution awaited him. He would finish the provisions so mockingly provided, the lamp would gutter and be extinguished, and Tralgan Vornier, rightful Elten of Culvensax, would die the hideous death of thirst and starvation.

All that dominated his mind in that moment of awful realization was hatred. Absolute and remorseless hatred for all those who had tricked and betrayed him and brought him to this fate convulsed him with the single purpose of revenge.

CHAPTER THREE

The arrow did not miss. Well, by Krun, that is a supremely superfluous remark! Of course the arrow did not miss. The shaft had been loosed by Seg Segutorio, the finest bowman of two worlds. With perfect calmness and precision he selected another arrow, nocked it, drew and loosed all in that marvelous flowing rhythm that is the hallmark of the warriors of Erthydrin, the finest of all the many Bowmen of Loh.

Rollo the Runner, his red Lohvian hair afire under the twin suns, loosed and struck his mark. “That’s three more of the shints gone.” Although no longer the hot-tempered young fellow-me-lad he’d been, wearing now the sterner face of maturity, he was clearly as pleased with his shooting as any youngster at the butts might be.

“Aye.” Seg checked his next shot and stared calculatingly across the grassy valley. Clumps of bushes concealed some of the attackers. A shrill and most unpleasant howling caterwauled on the air. “That leaves around thirty of ’em, Rollo.”

“And those dreadful sand-leems!” Didi spoke without a tremble as befitted a Princess of Vallia and a Sister of the Rose. “I declare, their racket is worse than the drums and bagpipes of the Yinfitter people.” She glanced across at Velia. “Would you say?”

Princess Velia lifted her bow, shot, hit her man, and said: “Oh, aye. Infinitely.”

Seg laughed, his fey blue eyes bright, his shock of black hair sheening in the sun's light. He delighted in these two Sisters of the Rose, and if they sometimes called him ‘Uncle Seg’ he joyed in their mutual love for one another. “You ladies have seen the world.”

What was abundantly and horrifically clear was that if these desert tribesmen, the Ancidoins, with their half-tamed sand-leems, succeeded in the attack, nobody in the little hunting party would see much more of the world. They'd be groping their way through the Mists of Sicce. The thought was not refreshing.

To the rear stretched the last of the forest. Ahead the grassy valley and plain led to the dry dunes of the desert. This area was the last outpost of the Kingdom of Zandikar to the south. The hunting party had left their camp among the trees and ridden south to find suitable game for the evening's supper. They were not the contemptible kind of hunting party that rode out to kill anything they ran across. King Zeg and Queen Miam, in the port city of Zandikar on the shores of the inner sea, the Eye of the World, up north, recognized that their sway to the south ended where the desert began.

The lean, lethal shapes of the sand-leems appeared to slither across the ground. Leems are dangerous wild animals. They come in various types including volleem, snow-leem, and here, the sand-leems who acted as surrogate hunting dogs for the Ancidoins only because in their feral minds they understood this would bring them food more easily than fending for themselves in a poor land.

So far the desert-leems had not been released from their leashes. The tribesmen wanted to shoot us up first. They saw how few we were, even including the handful of guards Zeg had insisted we take with us. If they could shoot most of us, then the leems would not suffer too much from our shafts as they charged in. If this puts a gloss on the character of the desert tribesmen, so be it. They were only doing what they always did when times were hard down south. News was that the oases were not as fruitful this season. The River Zinkara, running into the Eye of the World from the Mountains of Ilkenesk, over to the west, would support some of the wandering desert folk. Some ventured north into civilized lands to see what they could lay their reiving hands on.

The position of the party, half-concealed in a little gully, was not too promising. A few straggly bushes afforded cover. Arrows fletched in a variety of birds' feathers fletched in, to thunk into the ground or tangle up in a bush.

Already two of these confounded arrows had found targets, and two of Zeg's guardsmen were wounded.

The Suns of Scorpio slanted past the hour of mid. Once night fell the tribesmen would sneak up, their curvy daggers hungry.

A wide-winged shadow fletched undulatingly across the valley, a twin shadow, red and green. A raucous squawk screeched down. No one in the hunting party looked up.

"You great nurdling onker!" The itchy voice from above irritated like fingernails scratched across glass. "Onker of onkers!"

Nobody in the party spoke; but several of them loosed at quickly-glimpsed shapes hiding behind bushes and rising to shoot.

“Well, Emperor of Onkers! Speak up! The Star Lords are mightily displeased with you.”

At this I did look up. I shouted: “What’s new, you bird of ill omen?”

“You need not take that tone with me, Dray Prescott! You are not on a specific task for the Everoinye. Yet you wantonly place your life in danger.”

The damn bird up there, circling, peering down with a heady eye, clad magnificently in golden and scarlet feathers, had banded words with me before, aye, by Zair, many times! I’d thought we were getting on a trifle better in these latter days. Now it appeared just because I was in danger from these pestiferous desert folk the Star Lords had become cross with me.

I yelled up: “You mean if I’m in danger because the Everoinye put me in peril, that’s all right. Is that it, you scrawny bird?”

“You obey their orders, Dray Prescott! Never forget that!”

The spy and messenger of the Star Lords curved splendidly up aloft, riding the air. No, he couldn’t be called scrawny. All the same, by Vox, he’d get the rough edge of my tongue.

Then, in that instant, blinding terror engulfed me.

If I disobeyed the Star Lords they could banish me four hundred light years back to Earth, the planet where I’d been born. They’d once kept me there for twenty-one miserable, horrendous years. Should they do that now, then my people here would be left alone to face what would come. Seg would struggle to the last, the truest blade comrade a man could ever have. My daughter Velia and her niece Didi might suffer beyond comprehension. Rollo—well, Rollo was a Wizard of Loh. He, at least, might fashion something from this imbroglio.

So, cringing in my ib, I called up: “The position here is as you see it. Chance ordained it.” I drew a breath. “What is your suggestion, Gdoinye, to extricate us safely?”

Now I had far too much experience of the Star Lords to expect them to whisk us all up and out of it. They didn’t work like that. Their delicate hands—for they had once been as human as me—attempted to guide the destiny of Kregen in subtle ways beyond the full cognizance of a mere mortal human being. Sometimes they made mistakes. Well, now, if they wanted me alive—as I understood was their desire—then perhaps they might reveal a little more of their hand. I doubted it. But, by Krun, it was worth a try!

The Ancidoins used short bows. Their range, naturally, fell far short of the Great Lohvian Longbows in our fists. The word Great is here used correctly in context. The tribesmen were, however, within the range of their smaller bows. In not only range does the Lohvian Longbow excel; in the hands of a master archer like Seg it is deadly accurate.

We had two casualties. The tribesmen had at least a dozen by this time, and more damage continued to be inflicted on them as the Lohvian Longbows sang.

Naturally, as the Gdoinye wished, none of the other members of the hunting party could see or hear him. In addition, on this occasion at least, he arranged things so they didn’t hear me, either.

After my question the Gdoinye continued to circle. He did not squawk down an insult. He remained as silent as one of those poor devils of self-mutilated monks of Caneldrin. So, thus, as I waited for the flying oracle to solve the riddle, the tribesmen, no longer relishing our shooting, released their pet sand-leems.

Didi said: “If I am to die, I do not regret the pilgrimage to my parents’ tomb. But I am deeply sorry that we must all suffer death because of my wishes—”

Seg said: “This Gafard was a man, as I hear. And Velia—”

“Seg.” I spoke quietly. Seg shut up at once.

The Velia of whom my blade comrade spoke, twin to Zeg who now ruled in Zandikar, mother of Didi, wife of Gafard, had died in my arms across the sea in the land of the Green Grodnim. As we waited, bracing ourselves to shoot fast and accurately, my thoughts went to Velia. Oh, yes, we had found her and Gafard a fine plot in which to lie. Their memorial was not elaborate, being dignified with many flowers. Inscriptions detailed all Gafard’s titles, Sea Zhantil and all the rest. Yes, and the name ‘My Lady of the Stars’ was inscribed there, also.

The time was short. Leems run fast. In a matter of moments the ochre hides would be upon us.

A dull overcast spread across the land. Along the valley from the flank a wide low cloud billowed, dun colored, the color of the leems, the color of the desert.

Rollo exclaimed: “A sand storm!”

The swirling particles of dust and grit hurled low over the ground. Ruby and emerald shadows entwined in the folds of sand, rolling over, tumbling, throwing a ghastly hue across the ground.

So swiftly the sand storm arose it reached along the valley and struck the howling, racing leems in full cry. Between that confrontation and our party, ready in the gully, lay an open stretch perhaps twenty paces wide.

Half a dozen lean lethal shapes broke free of the cloud and, screeching, charged full at us.

There was no need for orders. Seg took out two of the horrors, the princesses and I took one each. My bow went into the dirt, the Krozair longsword came out of the scabbard with oiled sweetness, and swept around in a cunning stroke that cleft the last leem in two.

“H’m,” remarked Seg. “Is that it, then, my old dom?”

“It would appear so.”

“Well, by the Veiled Froyvil!” Seg spoke in huge disgust. “And we did not have a wager on it!”

The two princesses laughed at this, for the wagers on shooting in dire situations between Seg and me were famous in Vallia—aye, and through the books and plays, notorious throughout Paz.

Reasonably enough, given the circumstances, it was Rollo, very seriously, who had to say: “A sand storm? Over this grassy valley? I did nothing. But I fancy there was thaumaturgy at work.”

I kept my old black-fanged winespout fast shut.

Could it be? By the diseased left eyeball and rotting teeth of Makki Grodno! Could it be? Could the Star Lords have intervened and sent this unnatural sand storm to save my hide?

CHAPTER FOUR

The insidious effects of blind hatred corroded Tralgan Vorner's vitals. His skin burned. His eyes felt as though they protruded on stalks. He shook. He sweated in the dank chill of the oubliette.

Brown decaying bones crunched underfoot. He glared about as a hunted escaping prisoner glares upon the werstings who are about to leap on him and tear him to bloody fragments.

The light of the lamp, so mellow and normal, revolted him at its incongruousness in this place of horror. The oubliette engulfed him. The incurving walls in the gourd shape prevented any attempt at climbing out.

"By Chunformo the Shatterer of Chains!" He choked on bile. "This is not the finish of me!" The corroding hatred bit away at him.

Glaring about, he saw a place in the masonry where someone had been picking the stones away, leaving a dark opening. That someone must once have owned some of the skeletal bones strewn in this place. Whoever it might have been, the tools used still lay there; tools fashioned from the bones of a poor wight thrown down here, what?—centuries ago. Such was his rage and hunger for revenge, Tralgan seized up a bone and threw himself furiously at the walling stones.

He worked frenziedly, stupidly, gasping for breath in the dank stagnant air, clawing at the recalcitrant stones. Some long

dead prisoner had begun this painful escape—and had failed, had died before the escape route had been completed. Tralgan Vorner, sweating, obsessed, burning with malignant passion, determined that he would not fail. He would not, by the corrupt entrails of Benga Shuna!

Whoever the poor benighted soul might have been who'd hacked away here before, he—or, by Vox! she—had progressed well. The dislodged stones lay piled neatly to the side. Tralgan was able to insert his full length into the opening. Grunting with effort, he pulled himself out, brought the lamp across and took up the bone tool with fresh resolve. “Sweet Opaz!” he gasped. “Aid me now!”

Hauling out the next block, and dreading that the whole tunnel would collapse upon him to finish him for good, he struck earth. Dirt tumbled down at his frenzied blows. The bone broke.

Cursing as only a seasoned paktun can curse, he wriggled his way back. The lamp's yellow radiance revealed the bones scattered across the floor. Tralgan selected a stout-looking femur and went maniacally back, hacking at the face of the tunnel he was creating.

Yet through all this, like a tremulous candle flame set in a window, he remained aware that he was sane enough to know he was not insane. Perhaps he ought to have been driven makib by these experiences. He ought to be, as they say, barking mad. But he felt himself to be sane, driven by hatred and the thirst for vengeance.

A shoulder blade makes a handy digging tool. He was alert to the danger of driving into the earth; collapse of the tunnel would be inevitable. He must shore up. What to use? Tralgan Vorner, smothered with dirt and dust sticking to his sweat, his

eyes red-rimmed, laughed there in that place of horror. What to use indeed!

Bones.

Crawling back he blinked. That felt as though red hot sand paper had been rubbed across his eyes. His mouth was clogged with the ashes from the Furnace Fires of Inshurfraz, or, the way he choked, with detritus from far worse places in hell.

The rush basket contained standard oar-slave rations. A heel of dry bread, an onion—not too far gone—and a rind of cheese not too green. An orange colored gourd held brackish water. At the shape of the gourd Tralgan grimaced. The shape was the shape that imprisoned him down here. He felt no surprise at the food; it was absolutely normal for those in slavery or those condemned to death.

The water helped with the clinkers in his mouth.

Taking up a bone and the lantern he crawled back past the end of the masonry and attacked the tight-packed dirt.

At the third blow the earth puffed and moved of its own volition. For a moment of blind terror he imagined the whole roof collapsing upon him, to bury him for all eternity. The earth wall slid away from him. The noise reverberated like the sliding hiss of a tide receding across pebbles. Willy-nilly, unable to halt himself, he skidded forward with the falling earth. The lantern went over and went out. In blackness so intense he felt the darkness invading his soul, Tralgan pitched head first down the tumbling slope.

He hit bottom. Winded, flat on his back, he lay there trying to breathe evenly, trying to master himself. Dirt spattered down over him and he scrunched up and crawled away before he

was buried. One hand held before him feeling for what might obstruct him, he went on.

Opaz, he said to himself, The Hand of Opaz pushed the earthen wall away. Opaz held suffocation and burial apart from me. Now he felt a renewed faith, a firmer resolution. Now he knew his vengeance must be consummated.

Further proof that The Hand of Opaz was with him came with the faint glow ahead. Fire crystals embedded in the earth illuminated his surroundings in light, pallid and gruesome. To Vorner, the light shone with sweet promise.

As he went on, buoyed by new hope, masonry clothed the walls. No bricks had been used in this building. The walls exuded a palpable sense of ancientness. These were the foundations, far below the castle above, the very roots of the olden-time fortress long abandoned and forgotten. What stories these stones could tell!

“I’ll see that black-hearted villain Lodermaid into the jaws of hell yet!” he said to himself, pressing on. “And the rest of the traitorous crew with him!”

The thought of revenge on all those who had wronged him kept Tralgan Vorner sane, determined, and moving as fast as he could. He was tired, no doubt of it; but his hatred would not let him rest.

Abruptly, with the suddenness of a cataclysm, all his hopes were blown away as a hurricane whirls away the flimsy reed huts of the Shalaam river folk in their mud delta. He stopped, his mouth hanging open, panting. He felt a physical pain knife through him.

Before him rose an ebony-black door, blocking the way, shutting off the corridor. The blackness writhed with carvings. In

the eerie light, for the fire crystals were not the normal pure white, but of a cloudy grayish sheen, the fantastical images of beasts and monsters undulated as though mocking him.

The slab existed in front of him. There was no lintel, no architrave. Wall to wall and ceiling to floor, the balass-black impediment frustrated all further progress.

To Tralgan the words carved around the circumference of a circle upon the door, glimmering weirdly in the uncanny light, struck with a prosaic contempt. The words spelled out a curse.

Among the portrayed monsters and demons the words spelled out a curse of ultimate evil upon all those who attempted to venture beyond the forbidding portal.

“To a Herrelldrin Hell with your curse!” He flung himself at the black obstruction. He scabbled with stiff fingers at the edges, trying to find a gap, a slit, anything. He felt all across the obscene carvings, feeling for a protruding knob, a lever, some hidden device by which the door could be opened.

He found none.

For some time after that his will failed and he beat at the barrier with clenched fists, screaming, kicking, as perilously close to insanity as could be and yet retain a vestige of his own self.

Finally he collapsed in a huddle still feebly trying to beat on the door.

How long his exhausted stupor lasted he could not tell. The black and often brutal blood of the Vornor family began subtly to penetrate through his veins and arteries with a pulse that would not be denied. He lifted his head. He was Tralgan Vornor. He would not be beat. No, by Vox! There must be another way.

He pulled himself together, ignoring the aches and pains, the thirst, the rumblings in his guts. He stood up. He went back

along the corridor away from that thrice-damned door. Once more, as he now fervently believed, The Hand of Opaz lifted him up. He found the narrow crack slanting between the stones of the wall. Breathing as evenly as he could, trying to keep the dust from clogging his mouth and nostrils, he wormed his way through.

The Hand of Opaz might lift him up in a metaphorical sense; a pace into the crack he stepped upon nothing and fell straight down.

They had reclined in their sumptuous tombs whilst empires rose and fell, whilst religions waxed and waned. Nine of them there were, nine, the magical and mystical number of Kregen. The Nine Thaumaturges of Sodan, the nine wizards who in the long ago had tried to usurp all power and rule Vallia.

Their sarcophagi, arranged in a wide circle, feet pointing outwards, encrusted with inscriptions, gleamed. Not a spot of dust fouled their shining richness. King Rikto the All-Glorious, who by trickery had entombed the nine wizards here, at least allowed a little magic in their last resting place. A scrap of glamour kept all dust and decay away.

Deep beneath the earth the nine thaumaturges lay, yet their tomb's roof stretched above, clear, transparent, glassy. Fire crystals shed a mellow radiance into the elaborately furnished chamber. Deep purple drapes clothed the walls. Gold glittered everywhere. King Rikto, triumphant in his struggle, yet harbored a deep and uneasy sense of doom at what he had accomplished. These lavish surroundings, where treasure and

labor had been poured out without stint, should placate the restless wizardly spirits.

At the center, at the focal point where the nine heads pointed, rose a marble altar. This, again, had been placed there at King Rikto's bidding. Once it had adorned the Temple of Sodan where so many evil rites had been performed that folk said you could smell the devil stink fouling the air all about. That blasphemous object was safely buried with the Nine Thaumaturges of Sodan.

The ages had passed. King Rikto's name was now unknown, not a single reference in any of the hyr lifs so preciously guarded in libraries mentioned him. He, like his times, was forgotten.

The silence here had brooded for centuries. Nothing stirred. Kregen could roll around the twin Suns of Scorpio until at last the planet fell into the crimson fires of Zim; nothing changed here.

As though Doomsday had at last arrived, the roof split open. Shards of glass flew to ring against the sarcophagi. The noise shocked into the aeons-old silence. A hurtling human figure smashed through the glass roof, twisting and turning, arms and legs flailing.

No doubt somewhere in the sunny uplands beyond the Ice Floes of Sicce, King Rikto the All-Glorious felt an abrupt pang of alarm.

Tralgan Vorner felt as though his body had been dismembered and scattered to the four corners of Kregen. A sliver of glass stuck into his thigh and he dragged it out with a sudden and savagely petty wrench. Dark blood welled from the cut. He cursed

and for the moment ignoring the blood—for as a paktun he'd taken worse wounds—he stared about.

Where in a Herrelldrin Hell was he? A glass roof, here, deep within the earth? Gold, lavish furnishings, nine sarcophagi, tombs of eye-blinking sumptuousness, a sacrificial altar? He ripped a shred of cloth from his already tattered clothing and wrapped it around his wounded leg. He stood up and tested his strength. Well, by Vox, he could still stand and walk—aye! and run too, if he had to.

The most important item in this weird chamber lay at the far end. Forcing his aches into the background of his mind, still wincing from the fall, he started off, limping slightly, towards the arched opening where the foot of a staircase showed the way up.

He thought, and then pushed the thought away, that perhaps this staircase led up to the other side of that thrice-damned black door. Well, if that was so, then he must use all the hatred and lust for revenge still burning brightly within him to go on.

He climbed the stairs one at a time. He reached the top. He went along the gold-encrusted passageway. He came to a golden door. He knew without a flicker of disbelief that this was the other side of the black door. He licked his lips. He gave the golden door a kick, which hurt him, turned around and went back down the stairs.

The thing was obvious. Whoever was buried down here had not been intended to be seen again. They'd been walled off. The door shut them in. Fini.

By the time he reached the burial chamber the frustration in him hurt worse than his wounds and his toe where he'd kicked the door. He could not allow himself to be buried here along

with these people. He had a task to do. His hatred must nerve him and his vengeance must be slaked.

He was hungry and thirsty; but above all he was tired. A paktun can sleep on an empty stomach and has to do so at distressingly frequent intervals. Tralgan found an upholstered couch among the plethora of furniture, flopped down, and was instantly asleep.

He awoke, still stiff and sore, a little refreshed and with his insides complaining. There was no food here, that was obvious. Had any nourishment been left for the ibs of these people on their journey through the Grey Mists, then it would surely have rotted away centuries ago. There was a great deal of gold and many many jewels. Tralgan Vorner was a mercenary, a mort-paktun. He would not leave without as many gems as he could carry, no, by Bonny Nath Makchun, the King of Reivers!

With a professional plunderer's meticulousness, Vorner inspected the chamber. The place was eerie. He would not allow the silence and the pressing purple drapes, the omnipresent tombs, to dampen his spirit. Take the gems and then escape! The central altar presented a splendid sight to a looter. The marble was encrusted with gems. A single superb emerald, situated at the top, where no doubt nubile virgins' throats had been slit, attracted him.

He touched it. The odd fact was, it was loose.

Now all during this fresh upsurge of his mercenary training he was aware that the treasure at his fingertips would immeasurably aid his vengeance. He could buy men and women. He could wreck his hatred upon those who had betrayed him. Greed mingled with hatred and, within the confines of the chamber, appeared almost to smoke upon the air.

Perhaps King Rikto's little magic to purify this place assisted. Perhaps it was only the outpouring of hatred from Vorner. There was, undeniably, magic in it. Tralgan took up the emerald.

He heard the creaking first. He was aware of a sharp tingling throughout his body, obliterating his pains. Streaks of green fire surrounded him, hissing, building a web that sparked and spat tongues of emerald flame.

He yelled and leaped upright, glaring about, staring with sick horror upon the ring of nine sarcophagi.

Brazen gongs beat stunningly within the chamber. The tombs moved. The tombs moved! Smoothly they revolved so that very quickly the heads were outwards, the feet pointing towards Tralgan.

The lids of the sarcophagi began to lift. They swung aside. A second lid appeared within each golden glowing sarcophagus, lifting up, revealing—Tralgan Vorner screamed.

Things rose into view from the tomb. Rotting corpses, men and women, trailing rotting vestments upon their rotting skin, the nine dead and decaying bodies of the Thaumaturges of Sodan rose up to confront Tralgan Vorner.

He dropped the emerald. He swung about, this way and that, shaking, seeing those ghastly eyeless skeletal faces that yet bore down on him with a gaze he knew picked out his every detail.

“No!” He choked it out, hands held before him. “No!”

The nine corpses grinned.

CHAPTER FIVE

“If,” said Rollo with a fine judicial air, “we’d brought the voller with us we would not have got into that unpleasant fight.”

Rollo the Runner hailed from Loh, where airboats were more uncommon than seeing the seven moons of Kregen turning blue. He had learned to pilot an airboat skillfully, yet it was interesting to note how he still pronounced the word voller with such meticulous care.

“Oh, aye,” said Seg in his fine free way, riding his zorca with the easy nonchalance of perfect knowledge and skill in zorca handling. “Oh, surely. But, Rollo, you’d have us miss that little scrap? And you so keen about your archery.”

Rollo, as a Wizard of Loh, had come on a great deal in the magical arts since he’d been tutored by our comrade Wizards of Loh.

Still, he hankered to be a great bowman, emulating Seg, practicing shooting when he should have been studying the arcane tomes and learning spells and going through the prescribed exercises that mages require to be able to practice their craft.

Our little hunting party cantered quietly through the forest heading north to Zandikar. The pack animals held our camping equipment, for we had decided to move on, and now we were looking forward to finding a good site where we might settle down for the night.

The two princesses were chattering away as they always were, always with something to talk about between them. Aunt and niece, they were heartbreakingly alike, for they bore the same blood. Yet Velia had the soft brown hair of Vallia, while Didi's hair bore a darker tone, the heritage of the black curly mop of Gafard her father. Ah, yes! Gafard! Rog of Guamelga, The King's Striker, Prince of the Central Sea, Sea Zhantil—and all the rest of his glorious titles that were now as ashes thrown upon a slagheap. He had been a man.

Now both these splendid young ladies were Sisters of the Rose, capable with rapier and main gauche, with whip and Claw. Oh, yes, time marches implacably on and children grow up and the world turns and they take their places, and neither the Savanti nor the Star Lords can halt a single second.

Well, to be truthful, the Everoinye can meddle with time, although I knew they made a mess of it from time to time. Ha! Dray Prescott, making a pun! Deplorable, by Krun!

Didi had made her pilgrimage to the memorial to her parents. We'd taken this short holiday break before flying back to Vallia. The excitement was now over, we'd say the remberees to Zeg and Miam, and then we'd be off.

Mind you, that oh so convenient sand storm posed me puzzles. Had the Star Lords intervened to assist us? I shook my head and geed up my zorca to keep up with the tail of our little group. If the Everoinye had taken a hand, then perhaps—as before—I'd reached a further plateau of understanding with them. The Gdoinye had vanished on the instant, flirting his wings and volplaning up into the blue vastness of the sky. I had carried out many of the tasks set to my hands by the Star Lords. Whilst their purposes remained unclear, individual missions

had to be accomplished. Otherwise...! So, now, riding along comfortably with this holiday group, I understood that another and fresh task was to befall me.

Jade and rose shafts of light fell dappled through the leaves above. The sweet air of Kregen breathed all about us. The way trended down to a clearing and a burbling brook. The wonderful world of Kregen can be a most marvelous place for any soul alive to take delight in and relish every tingling second.

Hikdar Frazan ti Relzana spoke to his Deldar, Landi the Harness—for there was a scurrilous anecdote about Landi's nickname—telling him to send a couple of outriders down to scout the stream. The two jurukkers speeded up their zorcas and cantered down towards the grassy slope. King Zeg in providing this little guard—an audo of eight men commanded by Landi the Harness—had given overall command to Hikdar Frazan who was by way of being your dashing and handsome cavalry officer. His ferociously brushed-up moustaches were the envy of his comrades and the despair of swooning young ladies.

Now he turned his zorca and waited for me to catch up. His bright, open face with the wonderful blue eyes and those moustaches expressed a genial good humor, finding joy in life.

“Majister. Would you wish to camp here?”

“Looks a good spot, Frazan.”

He nodded respectfully, chivvied up his mount and rode off to organize our resting place for the night. A fine, upstanding lad, whose grandfather was a roz, the term in the inner sea for kov, duke; one day he'd come into his inheritance and take over the rozmate.

He passed the two princesses, giving them a courteous wave from the saddle, and with Deldar Landi rode down towards the

stream. Princess Velia trotted her zorca over to ride alongside Seg.

Princess Didi trotted over to ride alongside me.

Her face, gloriously beautiful at any time, now shone with the high color of the setting sun Zim.

We talked amiably and easily as we rode along. There existed between us thankfully little of any embarrassing generation gap. Remember, these two serene yet fiery princesses were no empty-headed girls. They'd been thoroughly educated at Lancival, the secret headquarters of the SoR. They were well able to run their own provinces of Urn and Thoth Vennar. Of course, they far preferred to be off around the world adventuring. So our conversation was no idle babble, far from it.

One point Didi raised, that was to have far reaching consequences, by Vox!—concerned her unease about her new nazabni, Ulana Farlan. “She tries to be like her father was. I am not sure.”

“Her father I knew well, a fine man. The daughter—I've little information. Anyway it is a matter for you and Drak.”

“Yes. If it comes to it, I shall act for the good of Urn Vennar. Ulana will have a generous pension.”

Seg swung about in his saddle, lifting a hand. “A gold on it, my old dom. First to the water! Hai!”

“Hai!” I hallooed back to him and instantly set my zorca to pelting along with the breeze flowing past and the rattle and creak of harness and the soft pounding of hooves.

Inevitably, the two princesses joined in the race. Well, they would, wouldn't they, seeing they were Ladies of Vallia.

Very difficult to judge out of the two ladies who reached the water first, very difficult, by Krun! Seg and I reined up. The four

zorcas had earned their drink. We all dismounted. Velia went across to Seg, holding her hand out. Didi stood by me.

“Well, Uncle Seg? And where is my gold piece?”

My blade comrade laughed his great laugh and hauled out a coin that winked in the declining suns’ rays. It was a gold Zo piece, named after the king who’d reined in Sanurkazz all those long seasons ago. “Here, you saucy imp.” The coin flipped up, spinning, and Velia’s pink palm closed over it unerringly.

Didi said absolutely nothing.

Very quickly the preparations for camp were well underway. The two princesses, as seasoned campaigners, took their share. They appeared to find tasks well separated one from the other. Hikdar Frazan ti Relzana superintended, lending a hand here and there. He, too, seemed to find work away from the ladies.

Seg strolled over, already polishing up the new bowstave he was building. Well, when wasn’t Seg Segutorio building a new bow?

“We were well beaten in the race, my old dom.”

“Aye.”

“You’ve noticed the girls?”

“Aye.”

We sat comfortably under the branches of a tree for a while, not speaking. Seg polished his bowstave. I got on with thoroughly cleaning my Krozair longsword.

“Romance,” said Seg, at last. He shook his head. “It’s a real devil at times.”

“Aye.”

He gave me a quick glance from under the eyebrows, his blue eyes fey and knowing. “You can’t blame young Frazan.”

“No.”

Again, we sat in silence.

The cleaning rag in my fist, working smoothly over that remarkable blade, I looked at Seg. “It’s going to be a right moil if the girls won’t speak to each other. It’s all come on rather fast.” I own, by Krun, my voice carried an edge of testiness.

“I’m prepared to wager,” said Seg, casually and yet with meaning, “that neither of ’em’ll make a go of it with Frazan.” He turned the bowstave over, looking at it critically. “Anyway, I would wager young Frazan has a girl in Zandikar.”

“Probably.”

Deldar Landi the Harness walked across. “Jernus—dinner is ready, if it please you.”

Seg leaped up, gripping the bowstave. “It pleases me, Del Landi. I could eat three wild leems and look for three sweets.”

So that was how the matter of the two princesses and the Hikdar of the moustaches was left for the moment.

The meal was good. We all tucked in. Velia sat at one end of the table; Didi at the other. Frazan sat in the middle. Rollo, next to me, sensibly said nothing. Seg, affably, said: “If Inch was with us now that long streak would be happier than where he is at the moment.”

“Aye.” We missed Inch—and, for that matter, we missed all our comrades. Delia was off somewhere, either on behalf of the Sisters of the Rose or the Star Lords. What that divine lady got up to when not with me gave me nightmares. Still, she was capable of anything. That was the only comfort I could glean from her absence.

Rollo, lifting his goblet of wine, abruptly gasped. He sat upright, stiff, eyes staring. The wine spilled red upon the cloth.

“Khe-Hi!”

Instantly, Seg and I turned to stare narrowly upon the young Wizard of Loh.

Rollo nodded. He was now under perfect control. “Yes, Khe-Hi. I understand.” He nodded again. “I will, san, at once.”

We knew what had just taken place. Through that uncanny other plane where wizards spent a deal of their time, our comrade Wizard of Loh, Khe-Hi-Bjanching, had just gone into lupu and communicated with Rollo. The last whereabouts of Khe-Hi which I knew, he’d been visiting Deb-Lu-Quienyin in Vondium, capital of Vallia.

Rollo took a sip of the wine. “Deb-Lu sends his regards. He and Khe-Hi have become aware of—” He paused, sorting out the right words to try to explain arcane lore to folk who were not mages. “There have been unexplained sorcerous—ripples, waves, in Vallia. They are investigating. The power of the thaumaturgy is very great.”

Now it was frighteningly clear to me that two Wizards of Loh so far advanced in the arcane arts as our two comrades would not trifle to warn us in far away Zandikar unless they suspected grave danger. After all, Drak was Emperor of Vallia now. Still, he would have been warned first. Ling-Li-Lwingling, Khe-Hi’s wife, would most certainly be aware of this new situation. I shivered with a sudden and totally unwelcome premonition of evil days to come.

As though Lexarm the Black Bastard, the spirit of evil who enjoys piling misery upon misery, chose us for his disgusting sport, a wild whooping started up all about us. Under the last rays of Zim and Genodras lithe forms burst from the shadows, racing towards us. Schnarlars, squamous, toad-like creatures, they threw themselves at our peaceful dinner party. Steel

glittered. In the next second they were upon us, screeching, fanatically determined to slay us all.

**That's the end of the sample. Thank you for reading.
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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.

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