

BENEATH THE MOONS OF KREGEN

H.K.BULMER'S KREGEN REVISITED

by

Tim Jones

For Ken and his Legion of Fans

Many thanks to Pete Smith and Steve Servello
for advice on Lohvian geography, fauna and flora

In Search of Dray Prescott

Volume One: Beneath the Moons of Kregen

Based on H.K.Bulmer's world of Kregen

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A FOREWORD BY HENRY KENNETH BULMER

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A FOREWORD BY HENRY KENNETH BULMER

You hold in your hands the first of a planned cycle of adventures taking place on the world of Kregen. It was written as a gift for both fans and myself alike to read as a continuation of my works concerning that world. This is fan fiction written by one of a new and younger generation of writers who seek to keep the tradition of Planetary Romance alive. Published by Vandah Books, it is hoped to be only the first of a series of loosely connected and entirely separate pastiches written by the fans for the fans. Here then is another story about Kregen, seen through the eyes of an Earthman other than Dray Prescott. Hai Jikai!

Ken Bulmer, December 2001.

PROLOGUE

Men such as he strode the decks of Lord Nelson's warships, hauling at the hemp lines, amongst the blood and the toil, the explosions and the bloodshed, and the death. Such as he followed Eric the Red, sharing the wonder of discovery of new lands, the grief of conquest. They attended Queen Elizabeth's court, Henry's many wives and Caesar's top Generals. They stood cheering at the quay as Columbus sailed away, and stood waving from the rigging on his return. Men such as he looked on as the arrow was taken from Harold's eye, as the sword was pulled from the stone, when London burned. They have lived and fought in the trenches of the Great War, they fought in the Battle of Britain and the Battle of Berlin.

Men such as he have no memories of childhood, none of family, or of love. They have fathered sons who reach maturity, the greyness of old age, and then finally, death. They have stood at the gravesides, yet are no older than on the day of the child's birth. Men such as he have had wives and daughters in ages past. Those sons, wives and daughters have long since passed and are all gone, yet, men such as he remain, unchanged, in the prime of existence. They recall no mother or father, no brothers or sisters. It has always been so, and they have existed, it would seem, always. Endless lives, eternal memories, fading to distortion, confusion, and then nothing.

Men such as he have been taken from the place of their existence countless times, deposited elsewhere, to start afresh, anew, naked as on the day of birth, if indeed there be such a day. Heralded by the golden lights, they are taken up and carried to new places, new lives, new existence. There have been so many, they are mostly lost in the mists of time and, whatever else forms our universe. Do not ask these men why; for they know not.

And then there are the Others, remaining unchanged through the years, the centuries, the lifetimes. They hail from the stars perhaps, the servants of some master plan, or the agents of some cunning game amongst gods.

There has never been explanation or reason given. Men such as he never ask for such. Each time they are re-born into some new time-frame, some new dimension, some new life, their previous memories fading almost to nothing, as do those preceding, and those to follow, no doubt. Of times past, they feel only oblivion at the edges of consciousness, flowing and merging with the past. Of the future, they know only that they must carry out the instructions or fate ordained.

They are Eternal Warriors. Of such there are but few. But they are, and they are forever. Acceptance is no mere choice, but a rule by which they survive. For them there can still be death, and it could arrive at any moment or time, for they are as mortal as the next man. They can die by the blade, or from flame or drowning. They, like you, cling to life and choose not to; like any living thing, they choose survival.

They are chosen amongst men. Why, they do not know. And each time they are cast afresh into the endless void of life, the memories of *why* and *how* fade as rapidly as the new experiences unfold.

All this they could tell you, not so much from memory, but from belief; building up a picture of their many existences, a canvas washed clean with each new life, and painted afresh each time.

One such is known as Blake, John Blake. It is not a name he has possessed always, but an appellation simply given; so he recalled, though the memory rapidly fades. He is a pawn in some game of the gods, a piece to be played at the whim of those gods, as they battle amongst themselves for control or for domination of the many domains. He knows little more than this, except that he is a man blessed, or cursed, with a life or lives they ultimately control. He is, in truth, an Eternal Warrior.

It matters not to me whether the story to follow is believed or not, for I am merely the medium through which it must pass to reach you, the reader. How or why this is so, matters not either. Here then, in the words of John Blake himself, is his continuing chronicle.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BOXER

His eyes glazed over and I knew the fight was won before his sagging knees ever hit the dirty canvas.

My latest opponent keeled over and the crowd, few though they were, caused what pandemonium they could. I felt the callused hand of the referee on my shoulder as a camera flash blinded me and someone from my corner took my right hand and raised it above my head. This was the sixth bout I had won in as many days with a KO since I had been deposited back onto civvie street at the close of World War Two. A terrible gut-feeling told me it would be my last.

I was ushered away into the far corner as the ring filled up, suddenly no longer the centre of attention. My opponent had not got up yet, and, as dead men in my experience never do, this latest hopeful never would either. I knew I had killed him the moment my left hook had landed on the point of his chin. Call it instinct if you will. I had seen too many men die that last couple of years not to know in the relentless march across the scarred fields of Europe which had finally brought the war to a close

The hubbub increased as the ringside doctor became swamped amongst the vultures and sensation seekers as he attended to the fallen loser.

"Get back! Give 'im air!" someone shouted amongst the din.

Cameras flashed far more now than they ever would for the victor.

It was the way he was lying that sticks in my memory. Flat on his back, one arm trapped in the ropes, his head at an unnatural angle, blank eyes staring up unseeing. I had broken his neck!

As the ring continued to fill, and the awful truth began to sink in, the reporters and camera men taking full advantage of this potential back page news, my corner man, Jimmy, came over to me and began removing my gloves. The look he gave me told me all without the need of the oddly sympathetic words his gravely voice whispered into my ear.

"Well, boy. That's the last time you get in a ring; 'e's a gonna."

I looked back at him, saying nothing. Of course, Jimmy had been a hardened pro himself, years before, he had seen this sort of thing from time to time. To him, it was an injustice that such a good left hook be forever wasted. The fact that a man lay dead in the ring meant little to him.

"The Law will get here soon, boy," he said, throwing the gloves to the deck and taking me by the shoulders. "'Course, it's not for me to say, but no one's looking your way right now."

His eyes shifted in the direction of the vacant entrance doorway at the far side of the hall.

"You don't mean....." I managed to stutter.

He shook his head gravely. "Now or never, lad. You'll be thrown in the clink and the key melted down for bullets if you 'ang about 'ere much longer."

The crush of bodies in the ring was becoming unbearable. The main lights came on overhead, and heads were beginning to turn in my direction. One last glance through the sea of smoke, hats and sweat and the decision was made.

Whether it was the right one or not, I never found out.

I slowly lifted the top rope and eased out of the melee. Jimmy threw a towel over my head and I simply walked out of there without a backward glance, through the changing rooms, grabbing my clothes and shoes, and on out of the side entrance into the dimly-lit alley beyond. It was the last time in my life I ever left a boxing venue, victor or otherwise.

I pulled on my clothes like a fool, fumbling with reluctant shoe laces and heading for the main street simultaneously. Just by chance, across the street, a taxi pulled up outside one of many shabby hotels lining the curb. The passenger got out, and I, running with desperation, flagged it down before it pulled off. The door slammed behind me as I pulled my coat on.

I felt sick and nearly lost my dinner all over the driver's back.

"In 'an 'urry?" he asked, dryly.

"You could say that, mate," I replied, feeling through the inside pocket of my top coat for my wallet.

"Where to, then?"

I thrust a ten shilling note over his shoulder. "The docks."

"What, all of 'em?"

"Just drive," I snapped, leaning back, "I'll tell you when we get there."

He tucked the note into his hat and got on with earning his living. Like all taxi drivers, he was as hard-faced and as tough as a bull dog chewing a wasp.

"Victoria Drive," I said, as the bridge receded behind us.

"Well, well," taunted the driver, his grim face peering into the rear view mirror to better catch the hoped for expression on my face as he said: "rich kid, eh?"

"Just drive!"

"Yes, sir," he mocked, his voice almost like acid, but the glint in his eyes giving away the fact that he made sport with his less-courteous passengers to pass away his miserable existence.

I had looked down gloomily into the grimy waters of the Thames on a previous occasion not so long before from the back of a truck, as we had marched back through the capital, triumphant but weary. Never before had London looked so bleak to me though, as it did that day I fought my last semi-pro fight.

I had taken the position since my decommission from the army of a clerk down in the docks with an export company. It had been an ex-squady pal of mine, I forget his name, who had given me the tip:

"Better than standing in a cue," he had said, referring to the labour exchanges of nineteen forties Great Britain in the aftermath of war.

I was not cut out for office work, that was for sure. But, it got me food tokens and paid for my board and lodgings. I had always been the athlete, the sportsman, the adventurer. Academic qualifications, even though I passed out of University with an honours degree, I have little value for. Give me a ball to run with, a bat to swing, a javelin to throw. That's me, always has been, always will be. A fascination with swordsmanship had led to Barney, that old wag from college days, getting pinked on the shoulder many a time by my foil. I can still see hear his words to this day, a fellow officer in later days, looking up at me from the bomb crater and saying: "Good Lord, old chap, bloody legs have gone walk about on their own."

Many like him had died. Young officer material, thrown into the mincer with the infantry and artillery lads, given a company to command, and marched them to their deaths one and all.

Bloody fools!

The driver snapped me out of my reveries: "Where now?"

I looked out of the window and saw the familiar water front apartments of Victoria Drive. "Next left," I said, "and keep going down Fraser street until you reach the warehouses. I'll tell you when to stop."

"Bin to the Fight tonight, 'av' you?" he enquired in reply. "Not like one uv you lot to go darn there, not wiv the way fings are, an' all."

I had no idea what he was driving at.

"Fight? Oh yes." I spotted the front gates of the yard where the buildings I worked in stood. "Right here will be fine," I said.

"Right ho, Guv. Tell me, 'av you 'eard of this new geeser they say's got a bloody good left 'ook? 'E was fightin' tonight."

"How much do I owe you?" I asked, ignoring his increased questioning. Doubtless he wanted to get as much fun out of me before he dropped me off.

"You give me ten bob, squire, that you did. Three'n'tuppence'l do. Here's yer change."

"Keep it," I said, opening the door and stepping out into the cold night air.

"OK, Guvnor, yer the boss."

I closed the door shut and he drove off, a wry grin written all over his stubbly face.

The main gate and railings belonging to the warehouse yard had long since been taken away to be melted down for the war effort, and so I was able to make my way across the open yard immediately for the side entrance. I knew it might be locked, but Dora, the cleaning woman might still be there. Sure enough, as I came closer to the entrance beneath the fire escape, I could see the dim light in the kitchen. She would be drinking tea in there, for sure. So, reaching the door, I tested the handle. It turned and the door swung open slowly. A creak of metal trim against the concrete floor caused me to wince.

Standing in the dimly-lit entrance, I strained my ears for a sign of Dora's enquiring voice.

Silence.

Good!

Carefully, I crossed the warehouse floor and headed for the wooden stairway leading up to the offices on the first floor. A short corridor opened onto several small rooms on either side, and a dim light came from the room at the far end. A moment later I stood in the familiar little corner of the office I had spent ten or so hours at almost every day for about a month.

For several long moments I stood pondering my situation. The minutes ticked by. Suddenly, I became aware of the sound of padded footsteps approaching along the corridor without. Dora!

Without a second thought I crouched down behind the desk and practically held my breath. I could plainly hear her harsh breathing by then, and the occasional cigarette induced cough.

Her footsteps stopped dead.

In the gloom, I clearly saw her silhouetted outline against the entrance as she stuck her head around the open door and peered within.

"Who's there?" came her enquiring, yet unconvinced voice.

She paused in the entrance quite a while longer, but presently withdrew, pulling the door shut and carrying on down the corridor. Her mumbling voice reached my ears and then trailed away to nothing as her slippared footsteps receded and a smile crossed my face.

"Bloomin' haunted it is. I told 'em, plenty of times. Bloomin' haunted...."

For what seemed like ages, her laboured coughing accompanied her footsteps down to the ground floor.

The sound of a car pulling up out on the road dimly reached my ears, but thinking nothing of this I emerged from my hiding place and took the key to my private drawer in the desk from my overcoat pocket. A short moment later and I held what I had come for in my hand. This I tucked safely away back in my pocket, and the key I simply left on the desk.

Turning back for the office door, I was brought suddenly to a standstill by the sound of booted footsteps coming across the front yard. A quick step to the window and I was gazing out onto the helmeted heads of several police officers rapidly approaching the building. At the main gate, the lone figure of a man leaned against one of the brick entrance posts. Beyond him stood a black London cab and two police cars.

That it was the taxi driver who had dropped me off at the warehouse a short while before I did not doubt for one moment.

The scab!

He must have returned straight to the rank across the road from the boxing hall, heard the news of a dead boxer, figured out who I was, put two and two together, and gone straight for the police. He had been a boxing enthusiast, after all, and gossip travelled like wildfire in these parts and amongst such folk who lived there.

Now I was in a fix indeed, and as I was deliberating what to do, I clearly heard the sounds of men's voices coming from the ground floor of the warehouse. A muffled scream then reached my ears, and Dora's quite obvious surprise at this latest intrusion to her evening's work was made evident.

I moved to the closed door and pulled it ajar.

The sounds of hushed conversation reached my ears intermingled with the excited and now high-pitched voice of the excited cleaning lady. Other sounds came to me as well, and I realised that the building was being searched.

I stepped out into the corridor.

Just then, the heavy sound of boots hit the wooden steps Dora had just descended to the ground floor.

I was trapped!

Scanning the outside yard, I quickly opened the window. The time for stealth was past; now was time for action, and that soonish before the police inevitably reached the room I was in.

I climbed out onto the sill, took one last glance over my shoulder, and leapt outwards. It had not been a moment too soon, because the last thing I saw in the room was a black-gloved set of fingers holding the truncheon rounding the door edge. The fifteen foot drop caused me no hurt. I rolled over onto my side, just like we had, not that long before during parachute training. Continuing through the roll, I came to my feet moving.

Before the taxi driver knew what was happening, I had exited the yard and passed him by. I heard him call out: "'E's 'ere, lads! 'E's 'ere!"

Taking the shortest route to the river I could find, I passed through a grimy area of run-down warehouses, police whistles echoing around my ears in the chill of a clear-skied and cloudless night. Quite where I proposed going, I had no idea at all, except to put as much distance as I could between myself and the chasing police. I would have to get out of London after that, as soon as possible, and then take my chances at some port and try and leave the country. Not easy for anyone, let alone an ex-soldier, in those troubled times of post-war Britain. All ports would be carefully watched anyway, now a *killer* was on the loose.

Killer!

Surely any man who steps into the ring takes his own chances and, to a certain extent, his life into his own hands.

"If you don't want to get 'urt," had said Jimmy, "then don't be a boxer."

I questioned my recent trainer's wisdom in advising me to run for it in that moment as I ran across an open space towards the relative cover of a dockside shed. Stopping for breath, I listened intently for sounds of pursuit. Yes, they were coming, and by the sounds of it, many of them, for a chorus of painfully out-of-tune tin whistles cut the clean night air.

I made a break for it again, this time right down on the edge of the river banking that replaced the dockside concrete and buildings the old collection of warehouses bordered.

The sound of gruff voices calling out orders, and the grunted replies of running men were coming closer.

"There he goes!"

"After him!"

I was keeping my eyes peeled, quite what for, I knew not; but an opportunity to get more distance between myself and my pursuers would definitely have sufficed right then. Presently, and with the pounding of footsteps coming ever closer, I began to notice the odd barge here and there, tied up to the tow path or private berths cut into the bank.

I increased my pace. This was getting too close for comfort.

From ahead, I then heard the tell-tale sound of a police whistle, followed moments later by the sight of two shadowy forms running in my direction.

Yet again, my escape path was blocked.

To my left flowed the cold, and sluggish Thames; to my right, the bank had risen steeply; and now from in front as well as behind came my pursuers.

Coming to a halt, and making a rapid decision, I climbed aboard one of the barges, a canal narrow boat by the looks of it in the gloom, and untied the tie rope.

I then took cover behind the wheelhouse and drew from my pocket the thing I had gone to the warehouse to collect.

My army-issue revolver felt cold in my hand. I was supposed to have handed it back, of course, but along with a few others of my kind, I had escaped that duty and retained the thing as a memento.

Taking the small box of ammunition from my pocket, I loaded the gun and crouched down, waiting.

This was desperation itself!

The police, closing in from both directions converged on the tow path right next to the barge. A hurried parley and they began to board the very boat I was hiding on.

I lifted the revolver and readied myself.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONSEQUENCES OF A TIMELY LEFT HOOK

Whether I would have used the gun or not I do not really know. But, hiding was useless and it seemed to me at the time that the best thing to do was take the initiative. After all, I had a gun, they probably did not. And so, I stood up, holding the said weapon out before me.

The light that suddenly lit up the scene had about it a quality most weird indeed. It seemed to be coming from all around, yet the uniformed men before me didn't seem to notice it at all, for they simply continued standing there looking their surprise at my sudden appearance.

Moments passed, and still they stood there, the expressions on their faces ranging from shock and fear to consternation and astonishment.

And still they just stood there, unmoving, and seemingly terrorised into a state of frozen immobility.

A voice reached my ears, calling out my name: "Blake. John Blake."

I looked up to see a figure standing just inside the periphery of the ring of light surrounding the boat. He was dressed in a dark trench coat and trousers, wearing a trilby and dark glasses on his head, and a pair of very shiny shoes on his feet. He was tall, slim, and had about him a most sinister appearance altogether.

I stood there, looking first at him, then at the police, standing stock still before me, and then back to this mysterious dark stranger. He was then joined by another and then another who looked exactly like him in every detail. Simultaneously they stepped forward toward the boat and stood looking up at me from the bank.

The same man addressed me again: "John Blake."

"Who in Hell are you?" I asked, completely baffled, and not a little bit in awe of the situation either, I can assure you.

"That doesn't matter now, John Blake." The other two stood at his side, as weird-looking and incomprehensible as he. They struck me as odd, most odd indeed, like a trilogy of undertakers' sons or suchlike, dressing up for the first time in their funeral suits.

"There is nothing to fear," continued the speaker in a thin and metallic, expressionless voice, as he raising a black-gloved hand in invitation for me to leave the boat and join them on the path.

I looked back at my would-be pursuers. They just stood there, stock still. Frozen to the spot. I then noticed that the mild rocking of the boat had ceased altogether, and looking down, the incredible sight looking back at me was of a river stopped dead in its flow. Despite the fact that I had untied the boat, it remained where it was. I looked up at the sky, and the few thin clouds half obscuring the waning, Winter night crescent moon, had ceased all motion as well.

My legs went weak beneath me, but I stepped forward nonetheless, and took a closer look at the first of the officers before me. The gun slipped from my fingers to the deck as I reached out an enquiring hand and touched his brow.

Cold!

Like ice.

He didn't flinch, as I knew he would not. Frightening reality, nightmare, dream, call it what you will, the relentless march of Time had come to a stop as a consequence of it. I knew it was real, and that I was not dreaming. I shook my head, squeezed past the inert policemen cramming the narrow deck, and alighted on the path. Somehow, I didn't fall down.

"It is quite alright, Blake," said he who seemed to be the spokesman of this strange group, "they cannot see or hear you."

"I noticed," I replied dryly.

"Come with us," was all I got in reply, and they turned and began to walk to the edge of the light.

I followed, quite why I don't really know to this day, but probably because I knew resistance would be useless, and presently my eyes adjusted to the darkness outside the ring of illumination. There, as black as onyx, stood a long wheelbase limousine of American manufacture, its coachwork as black and dull as its paintwork, as were the windscreens, windows, door handles and wheel trims.

Three of the four doors stood open, and two of the men got into the car; one in the front passenger side, the other at the rear passenger side, while the speaker stood and indicated I enter the rear driver side door. I did so, in a state of half-stunned shock by then, and unable to do anything at all but obey most meekly. I thought momentarily to ask if I could go back for my gun, but decided against that immediately. I no longer needed it.

I got in, he followed me, and the doors slammed shut with quiet, well-oiled clicks. The interior of the vehicle was as dark and sinister as the exterior, and another like-garbed man in the driver's seat, his black-gloved hands on the wheel, engaged the drive, and we pulled off silently. I could hear no engine sounds or tyre noise at all, thus matching the reticence of my hosts.

Off we went, in deathly, utter silence, like a ghost carriage in the night carrying its grisly burden.

The man who had first spoken turned his head and addressed me again: "There is much to explain," he said, his voice as monotone and accentless as it had been from the first word I had heard him speak. The others just sat there, looking straight ahead.

"You know my name," I said.

"We know a lot more than that about you, John Blake," replied the speaker.

"How? Why?"

"You will see, in due course."

"Oh," I replied, feeling a strange calm overcoming me. "Who are you people?"

"You will learn all that it is necessary for you learn, later. For now, relax, and rest."

The car passed out of the dock area, and then gathered speed as it reached more open areas of road. We travelled on through the suburbs, along the way passing a world asleep and as motionless as had been the river and the policemen on the deck of the boat.

I saw people, as if frozen, in mid-step on the pavements. I saw a few cars, their drivers' blank expressions seeming evidence that they too were oblivious to all that was happening, or not happening, depending on how you want to look at it, their journeys terminated as surely as had been the flow of the Thames.

A bird, in flight, hovered just short of a chimney stack.

A cat, leaping from a wall, floated above the pavement, unmoving.

The calmness that had come over me battled in tandem with the fear building within my chest. I felt my heart racing, but my mind was dulled in comparison. I doubted not that this was some influence induced upon me for my own benefit, for my own protection. Damn it! Any rational man in full possession of all his senses would surely die of fright in such circumstances.

The limousine presently came to a broad, leafy lane on the outskirts of the suburb. Here it reduced speed and pulled up in the private courtyard of a large, Tudor-style mansion residing in its own grounds.

I was ushered from the vehicle with two words and two actions: The man who had spoken to me until then opened the door and pointing to the large house, said: "In there." He got out and I followed, as did two of the others. The doors slammed shut again, and the driver took the car around the back of the house while we walked up to the front entrance.

The front door simply seemed to open by itself, and I followed the speaker within as the other two followed. Within, a magnificent but gloomy hall greeted us. Once inside, I was taken to a small equally gloomy anti-chamber leading off the main entrance hall. Here we paused as one of the dark-clad men rapped on another door within.

No answer came, but the door opened anyway, again by unseen hands, and I was escorted within, this time by only the one man; he who had so far spoken.

The door closed behind us.

Within, another slightly less gloomy, lamp-lit room greeted me. The only furniture was a large desk, next to which, and on opposite sides, two chairs stood. The one nearest the door was empty, the other occupied by yet another man such as those who had escorted me, except that he was obviously older, since grey hair showed at his temples, and his figure was portly.

He wore no hat, but retained the dark glasses. Apart from the grey hair mentioned, the rest was jet black, short-cropped, and receding at the front and on top.

On the desktop, a small but bright hooded lamp burned, casting shadows on the face of he who sat.

"You will sit." The voice came from the far side of the desk.

I sat.

"John Blake," came the voice again, presumably from the mouth of the man on the other side of the desk, but as the lamp shone in my eyes, I could not see his mouth move to know that.

"Yes," I replied, completely resigned now to the fact that I was probably wise to cooperate and that my fate looked like being in the hands of these weird chaps.

"We meet again," again from the far side of the desk.

"I don't think so," I replied.

"Maybe not, but it is a fact nonetheless."

I shrugged my shoulders. No use arguing with these boys. I took an uneasy look over my shoulder, and the other man just stood there, as if he was in a trance. He did not react to my attention whatsoever.

Turning back front I said: "What do you want with me?"

"That will become evident, in time," came the reply.

"Is the lamp necessary?" I asked, a little sarcastically.

No reply.

"Is *everything* out there stopped still?" I asked, beginning to feel impatient. "The whole of London? The world?"

"The world? Time. Space. The Universe. It is all one thing in one place.

That made no sense to me at all. I asked: "But what about them, the policemen on the boat, the people in the street, the bird, the God Damned cat, even! and the whole world? They will notice!"

"If Time is arrested, and then resumed, then surely for believers in the concept of Time, no time has passed at all, and therefore there was no pause for them at all," he replied.

"So, they won't even notice," I said, doubting the whole idea completely.

"That is correct. To them, since Time cannot be stopped, it will simply not stop. Have you considered that this state of timelessness is perpetual anyway, and that it is your state that is altered now and not the rest of the world's? Consider if you will, that it is far more likely that your state has changed, and not that of the entire Universe."

"Hm, that makes sense, at least," I said, shaking my head. I thought a moment. "And you said we had met before. Who are you?"

"I can answer all your questions, and more. Much more But to do so, it is necessary that you co-operate fully."

I peered across the desk, trying to make out his features. "Co-operate! I have little choice in this matter. I was brought here against my will! A Captive!"

"You would rather be taken back to the boat and put back into the time-frame location we interrupted? That would not be wise. You would then be at the mercy of those who pursued you."

"True," I replied, rubbing my chin.

"It is your choice," he said, his voice revealing no emotion, no accent, nothing at all but even, metallic-sounding, efficient and logical statements.

"You would take me back if I wanted to go?"

"Yes."

"OK. So I will co-operate with you. What do you want to know?"

"We need to know nothing more than we know already. It is you who needs to learn. The equipment suspended above your head will achieve that exact aim."

I glanced up. Some four feet above my head, a large metal box hung suspended. Attached to it were various cables of various thickness and colours leading off to a flat, metallic panel on the ceiling above it. Underneath the box, a helmet-type arrangement, obviously designed to fit on someone's head, hung on spring-like supports.

"You want to put that thing on my head?" I asked.

"If you require answers to your many questions, then that is your choice."

"What is it?" I asked.

"That is something I cannot explain to you, because you would not understand. I can say however that it will answer your questions, in time and, will supply you with the information you are going to need to survive."

"Fine. So, let's begin," I said, not really taking stock of what he had just said.

"Then sit quite still. You will feel no pain, but perhaps, initially, a not unpleasant tingling. That is all."

I sat still.

The man behind me stepped forward. I heard his shoes on the carpet. I glanced over my shoulder to see him immediately behind me and reaching up and grasping the helmet arrangement. He pulled it down, the springs either side expanding.

"Face front, John Blake," said the man at the desk.

I did so, and felt the padded helmet come down over my head. Next, a strap was fixed under my chin.

I waited.

The room slowly filled with the same strange light that had lit-up the scene back at the river. A strange, vibrating sensation began to fill my head. My eyes began to feel extremely heavy.

I passed out.

The next thing I knew, was the slight rocking sensation as of a car passing over rough ground

I opened my eyes.

Sure enough, I was sat in the back seat of the limousine once again, along with my dark-clad escorts, and through the window I could just about make out the sight of several police officers standing stock-still upon the open deck of a long boat. It had still not drifted. The same weird light shrouded the scene most eerily. Patches of thin ground mist blanketed the bank here and there and the reflection of the partly-obscured crescent moon shone from the surface of the Thames.

The car came to a halt.

No one said anything as the man to my right opened his door and got out. He raised a hand indicating I should follow.

Once I was out of the car the man turned to me. "You know what to do," was all he said.

"What?" I mumbled, trying to orientate myself with this latest turn of events.

He got back in the car without a backward glance or anything more, and the car pulled off, its near-silent humming engine revving slightly.

I turned to look at the boat, dumbfounded.

Before me, stood an arch of stone, within it, a mist so dense my eyes could not penetrate it. I glanced over to the boat, and it was then I realised that the light had gone, and that the normal animation of life had resumed.

"E's not 'ere," I heard a police officer shout out loud.

Just then, one of the officers glanced over in my direction and pointed. "There, over on the bank. I see something."

They all turned and looked directly in my direction.

"You're seein' fings 'Arry." Came another voice. There's no one there."

But three of them had already alighted from the boat and were coming to investigate.

I glanced back at the portal, realising that the mist was now oozing out and enveloping me.

I suddenly knew exactly what I should do.

Whether it was from instinct, or whether it was because of something implanted in my subconscious mind, I don't know, but without further ado, I simply stepped into the thick mist and passed through the stone aperture before me. The stygian void of the eternal pit of space claimed me.

CHAPTER THREE

GATEWAY TO ANOTHER WORLD

I had opened my eyes upon a familiar, yet, somehow strange world. The foliage of the trees reaching up above where I lay was for all intents and purposes Earthly to my Earthly eyes, as were the patches of blue sky visible beyond, the straggling lines of white cloud, and the feel of the damp ground upon which I lay. Yet. Yet I knew I was no longer on the Earth of my birth.

The sounds of birds chattering in the trees merging with the singing brook away to the left lulled my mind. Slowly, I sat up, looking about, expecting to see next to me the stone-framed entrance through which I had just a moment before passed. It was not there!

I looked down at myself.

I was naked! Stark naked!

My bare feet sank up to the ankles in the mulch of the forest floor.

I shook my head.

Perhaps, I thought, perhaps someone is playing a prank here. I knew I clung to a forlorn hope. No. I had passed through the portal, reached the other side, and it no longer existed. Turning slowly, my hands pressing against my temples, I scanned the only too real details of the world into which I had passed.

Something within knew I was no longer on Earth!

The utter horror of my predicament suddenly hit me. Falling to my knees I began almost to weep.

Suddenly, the sound of movement somewhere close by caused me to go rigid.

Something was definitely moving!

The sound of laboured breathing came to my ears. Whatever it was, it was very near, for the sounds of decaying leaves and rotting vegetation being heaved aside were all too plainly obvious.

I leapt to my feet again. Turning, I scanned the immediate vicinity. Trunks of vast trees grew so close together that vision was restricted to a few yards at most. Over by the brook, a small beach of pebbles formed a small bay. There, a stout stick lay. Crossing to it, I snatched it up, feeling the weight of the thing in my grasp, and turning back to face the thick vegetation from where I had last heard the shuffling sounds emanating.

There it was again!

Frozen almost, I stared in utter disbelief as the *thing* crept slowly out from its cover. I then glanced down at the stick, and despite the desperation of my plight, a wry grin crossed my features. A four foot long club was not going to persuade the massive saurian beast that crept upon me to turn back.

Sensing that the beast, all twenty foot of it, possessed little in the way of speed, I turned and darted for the thickets and trees on the far bank of the stream. There, I was terribly mistaken. All naked and terrified, running crazily, ripping arms, legs and torso on the numerous thorns, the vast reptile thundered along in my wake. One horrified glance over my shoulder convinced me that the thing was gaining and would soon overhaul me.

Ahead, amongst the bushes and undergrowth, a vast tree stood. The lowest branch reached far out and sprouted from the trunk some way from the rotting floor of the forest. Without a second thought and dropping the useless staff, I leapt for the overhanging member. Fingers brushed bark and then grasped twigs and leaves. My grip held.

Painfully, I hauled myself up, while from beneath, a terrible roaring began. Moments later, I sat higher up the bole of the tree, panting with exertion and drenched in a cold sweat. Perhaps forgetting so soon that it had almost caught its quarry, the rage of the vast crocodile-like beast subsided and presently it ambled off back towards the brook. Moments later, it had disappeared altogether amongst the surrounding trees and vegetation.

I attempted to take stock of my situation. Several deep breaths steadied my overwrought nerves somewhat.

“Okay,” I said, out loud. “I came through the damned portal. But by Christ!” Looking about meekly, I decided it best not to yell in anger again. There could have been any manner of vicious hunting beasts nearby. Perhaps, unlike the reptile so narrowly eluded, some that could climb.

The portal was a gateway to another world. “Rubbish!” But there was no denying that I was no longer where I had been just prior to entering it. I reached up and rubbed my head. The answers were inside it somewhere, I knew. That helmet thing *they* had put on my head had done something to me, I just knew it. Don't ask me how, but I knew it.

What was it *he* had said? Ah, yes: “.....*it will answer your questions, in time and, will supply you with the information you are going to need to survive.*”

To survive!

The numerous sounds of the jungle increased and changed subtly as the day wore on and became evening. Nightfall found me still perched in my tree. The sounds of singing birds had disappeared to be replaced by the humming and chattering of insects and other sounds I could not identify. All manner of horrid manifestations crowded my fearful mind.

That, in its simple, sketchy way, is the best my memory can dredge up from my fear-crazed advent to this . . . *this other world*. It was all so long ago now. I spent the best part of the next three days searching that vicinity of the jungle for the portal, until, in due course, by moving in ever widening circles, I could no longer find the brook, or the place where I had awoken, or even the tree in which I had sheltered each night. Eventually, I decided that, wherever it was I had found myself, this other world, no such thing as a gateway back to my own world existed. The portal had been one-way! I was here to stay!

Or was I?

The fact that this is but the beginning of my story may suggest otherwise. I was to spend many years of my life searching for a way back as, bit by bit, painful lesson by painful lesson, the information imparted to my subconscious mind via the helmet device slowly revealed itself to me, and my purpose, my mission, my design on *that other world* became all too painfully clear. Then, and only then, to realise that . . . But, let me tell it from the beginning, as I recall it all, and as it happened.

I encountered many wild beasts on my journey through that forest-jungle, barely most times avoiding death by the narrowest of margins. Giant reptiles, cat-like beasts that would make a Bengal tiger look like a kitten, snakes, bears, and many others. Oh yes, many others.

I ate of fruit, nuts, seeds, tubers dug from the ground. I drank from the numerous streams and brooks. My nakedness I accepted. I fell ill once, sick, the result of a bad choice of cuisine. I learned. Watching the many Earth-like, and non-Earth-like creatures I encountered. There were monkeys, large and small, birds, small lizards. I observed, and left well alone the fruits and seeds they avoided. From a fine, straight branch I fashioned a spear of sorts. It stood as tall as myself, some six feet in all. Seven nights passed, and it

was there that I began to notch the spear haft with a nice flint-like piece of stone I had found by the bank of a stream. I did this each morning.

This was my other weapon, my knife, and I carried it in my right hand always. My spear I used as a staff as I walked, ready, always ready to be used in an instant should danger threaten. I say this now, and smile at myself as I was in those long-gone days. Firstly, man's best form of defence is to run; secondly to fight; lastly, to think. I was no exception to that rule that has governed our species since the dawn of Time itself.

The climate was always warm. The sky was always blue, when I could see it through the dense levels of the upper terraces of the jungle. However, at night, the chill air soon descended, and I would hold-up in some tree or under some bush, or once, in a small cave, shivering. At such times, I would remind myself that my ancient forebears had made fire, and hunted for meat to cook upon it, and for pelts to dry next to it.

I emerged from the jungle on the morning of the day when my spear shaft had twenty three notches on it all told. I emerged wearing the poorly cured skin of that first great kill I had made, a young deer. Upon the fire I had struggled to ignite, nurture and build, I had cooked the juicy steaks, hacked away with my crude knife, and felt the warm glow of satisfaction that Survival brings to all her children.

I emerged from the jungle on that twenty third day, and stood, my mouth agape, the now accustomed security of the forest all but swept away, at the vast plain that stretched away, seemingly for eternity.

It is here that my story truly begins.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUNS AND MOONS!

Oh Maria, if you could but see me now! That was the first thought that came into my head that long-gone day, so naive and new to this world was I then, as I stepped out onto the edge of the those vast plains of Central Loh. Maria Torres, had been the name of a girl I had been seeing as a young officer, and quite why her name had come to mind just then was likely because it was she who had made such a great fuss of my immaculate appearance on the evening of that proud day I had passed out on parade as an officer for the first time just prior to the outset of World War Two. A few years later, as a Captain in the British Army, after having crossed Europe and landed up in Germany, Maria had long since passed both from my life and my memories. I had last seen her back in 1942.

Whatever had become of her?

She had always seemed a little, well, strange would not be putting too fine a point on it, although quite why I had thought that at the time, I don't recall.

Her vivid green eyes stood out in my memory a moment, and then disappeared from my mind's eye. That was it! She had disappeared.

Simply disappeared.

A lot of people simply disappeared back in 1942.

Standing there in my barbaric costume, my flint knife and spear to hand, gazing out over the endless savannah, I was a long way removed from that young officer of those few years before.

Twenty three days after my advent on this world of Kregen, a period that seemed more like twenty three years at the time, my ordeal truly began.

The suns had just risen!

Yes, I say suns.

Suns!

This first sun to rise, was in no way like the sun beneath which I had lived on Earth. This sun of which I speak, on this other world, was a huge red orb of fire that climbed the sky and tinged the plain pink and gold before my very eyes. I looked out over an endless stretch of grassland, unbroken by tree, hill or mountain in all directions.

And then there was the smaller, green sun, and this too was in no way like the sun of my own world. Following up the sky the larger red sun, the green cast hues of light that mixed and folded the luminance of dawn with soft undertones most unearthly to see.

Two suns!

On no account had I survived those first three weeks and two days on the world of Kregen without constantly looking over my shoulder. I walked out onto the plain, the grasses reaching in places up to my waist. Yet, so daunted, so galled by the sheer extent of the plain was I, that I scarcely gave thought to the fact that at any given moment, some huge carnivorous beast could leap out upon me and destroy my puny human form in an instant.

Upon my feet I wore doeskin wrapped around nearly up to my knees, strapped tightly with thin strips of the hardier leather my one kill had supplied me with. The breechcloth I

had fashioned, a simple item that hung down at back and front was complemented by the tunic, or so I thought of it, a simple piece of hide that with a hole in the centre hung down over by back and my chest.

The young doe had been feeding of the soft grass in a clearing. The fact that she had been there at all suggested to me at the time that the forest was thinning out and that perhaps more open land lay beyond. Deer wouldn't normally inhabit dense jungle in my experience. I had roasted that first succulent cut of meat with ardour, upon my hard earned fire.

I decided to travel then in a direction that would take me never too far from the edge of the forest. The reason for that was simple: only in the forest could I reasonably expect to find water.

As I was then, in those far gone days, following my advent in Loh, a vast continent of which I will inform you more fully as this narrative unfolds, I suppose the shock of being there at all, of that sudden transition from Earth to this strange new world, had hardly even begun to wear off. I really did not know where I was at all, and still, to this day, as I relate my story, I can only truly guess as to where I have lived the last ten or so years of my life. But enough of that for now.

My wanderings took me over the following days on a seemingly endless sojourn along the southern periphery of those great plains. I ate of berries, tubers, dried deer meat, fruit, whatever I could find, and drank at the edges of small brooks that ran out of the forest and disappeared into occasional areas of marshy ground that I avoided. I assumed that the excess waters of the jungles collected and ran out onto the plains, and that further south, which I later learned was indeed the case, the jungle rose up into more mountainous land from where the water came, and where seasonal rains contributed to the balance necessary to sustain the humid jungle.

At night I would venture back into the forest, to find some tree in which to sleep. I would gaze up at the stars, trying to fathom their strange patterns. Not one of those familiar constellations of the world of my birth could I discern. Wherever I was, for I knew not at the time of course, wherever that portal had deposited me, it could not have been Earth in some other time, I was sure. I was on another world, somewhere out there in the cosmos, *somewhere else*.

Of the moons of this world of Kregen, that over the years I heard referred to by so many names, there were seven. Seven moons! hardly surprising then that I had arrived at the conclusion back then that I was no longer walking the lands of the world of my birth by this fact alone.

This account is written in retrospect, of course. And as I sit here writing down my adventures, it is easy to forget now that as a naked savage almost, I walked a world I knew absolutely nothing about.

Moons! Such moons. The Maiden with the Many Smiles is the largest moon of this world, upon whose mantle the tectonic continent of Loh floats, being almost twice the size of our Earthly satellite. Then there are The twins, orbiting about each other in their transit across the skies. She of the Blushes comes next, followed by three smaller bodies, racing low above the surface of Kregen.

Such moons!

As the days passed, the long, warm days with their occasional pleasant breezes that swayed the savannah grasses to-and-fro like some immense stratum sliding back and forth over the world, I adjusted mentally to my predicament. In fact, I no longer saw it so much a predicament, but instead, an opportunity. This feeling grew. An opportunity!

The nights were cold, bitterly so. I would sleep, huddled under some bush or other, wrapped in my poor garb, which smelled a little by then I must mention, praying for morning and the warm rays of that huge red sun to drive away the chill in my bones and flesh. It was in the darkness, those long, weary, worrying nights, it was then that the pain of my predicament once again became just that, and no longer the opportunity I have spoken of. It was at times like those that despair and grief took a hold of me, and that fear

and paranoia even, tore at my soul. I was very close to imminent death in those days, closer than I could have imagined in my worse nightmares of those long darknesses. The beasts of the night prowled, and by the Grace of God perhaps, passed me by all too often, likely while I slept mere feet from raking talons and fanged maws.

Above, I have referred to names for moons, and to the continent of Loh. The suns, as with the moons, have different names in different parts of Kregen, something I shall return to in a religious context at a later time. All this, you must have realised by now, is an indication that I eventually encountered more than mere beasts on my travels in the way of animated life, and that I encountered intelligent beings who used speech and possessed a language. But, of such things, I shall refrain in the most from telling you until they become a relevant part of this tale.

On I went, skirting the forest boundary, until, finally, the monotony of the landscape was broken when on the far horizon I spied the dim outline of low, purple hills in the dusk. Upon the sides of those hills, I spotted the all too familiar sign of life above the level of mere beasts, for campfires burnt in scattered clusters.

There is only one beast to my knowledge who utilises fire in day to day life.
Humankind!

Were there people there on those hills away in the distance? The next day I would find out.

I can scarcely describe the feeling of joy that flowed through my battered soul that late evening I saw the campfires of the Plains Nomads on those hills in the distance. It did not come as a surprise to me that I had encountered what must be signs of human, or at the very least, intelligent life, for I had never for one moment imagined that I was alone and would wander some prehistoric world devoid of mankind. But the sight of those fires, surely, this would be proof.

As for those last moments of my time on Earth, I could only speculate. What had it all meant? Why had I been taken up and cast away to another planet? Why me? Answers to those questions would slowly come to my dulled conscious mind as time passed, presumably from the depths of my subconscious mind, put there by that strange helmet device and those even more strange fellows who had got me out of a narrow squeak with the law. Obviously they had plans for me, why else send me to another world? What those plans would involve, at that time, I could not even speculate upon, but had I been able to even begin to imagine the extent of the task that lay before me, I would have been shocked at what it would ultimately involve.

No doubt, I thought then, as time passed, the details would filter through, and my mission would be spelled out for me. But who the Hell would want to have an agent on another world in the first place? And, who in blazes would be capable of sending one there?

My mind boggled over these issues, I can assure you, usually each night as darkness descended upon me. I would eventually fall asleep on such occasions, baffled, mystified, and afraid.

The following morning I arose from my place of concealment, ate sparingly of what Nature provided, took my fill of water, and then set out across the open plain in the direction of the hills. The red sun stood low on the opposite horizon to that on which I had seen the hills the night before. The direction of the rising of the sun I had already placed in my mind some time before, and called this *East*; although whether it was or not in truth, I had no way, then, of knowing. Therefore, according to Earthly navigational conventions, the hills lay to the west, the jungle to the south. In truth, the suns of Kregen do indeed dawn upon the world, as does the solitary sun of Earth, in the east. From this point in my narrative then, I shall use that standard convention you and I will understand without question.

All that day I walked the great plains of Central Loh, moving farther from the shelter and security of the trees of the forest than I had so far done up until then. It stirred a

feeling of great risk in my breast, but the reward lay out there, and I would not accede to the constant nagging of the negative half of my mind.

“Turn back,” I whispered to myself.

“No. Carry on!” demanded the positive part of me.

The day wore on, and the hills lay beckoning, still far in the distance, *West* as far as the eye could just about see. By nightfall, the shadows of the hills stretched far out over the plain as the two suns set in the west. I would not reach the mountains by sunrise, that was clear, even if I walked all night. Also, thirst was just about getting to me, for I had walked the whole day under the hot rays of two suns without a drink since morning. Truth to tell, I had thought I would have reached the hills by late afternoon. This dilemma, of whether to sleep or carry on walking in the darkness, was decided by the fact that the coolness of the night would stave off thirst until the morning. Then, I knew the chances of there being water running out of the hills in the form of a stream would be high. Too, I knew the morning dew could make the difference, perhaps between life and death if one stayed out here in the plain for long enough without an adequate water supply.

I had considered making a deerskin water bag from my tunic, but I had no idea if the water would become tainted, or worse still, poisoned by the poorly treated pelt. That was a chance I could not take.

I decided to walk on through the night-time darkness, accompanied now and then as during all nights by the passing of the moons. At least by keeping moving I would remain in some ways a lot warmer than where I to lie down amongst the grasses and pass by another shivering night. Too, the morning dew would be there to greet me where I out on the plains or at the foot of the hills. I walked on.

Out on the plains, the chances of meeting some savage denizen of the wild were a good deal less, I surmised, than they were in the jungle. I set a steady pace, keeping a mind on my direction as a huge swathe of plain cut into the jungle to my south and took it from my view. The night was not that dark at this point, the four major moons cast their combined glow, but the three lesser moons were nowhere to be seen, although discerning their positions was hard to do after She of the Blushes, The Maiden of the Many Smiles and the twins, as the double satellites are called in some parts, had passed from the sky, even had they been present. The Night of Notor Zan!

The night passed by uneventful, and when Luz lit up the horizon behind me and rose slowly and magnificently into the sky, the low forms of the hills had changed dramatically. No longer were they mere mounds on the horizon, but the foothills of a mightier range beyond. Themselves, these mountains that had appeared as mere low hills, were a respectable size. Dotted the green and purple slopes, trees basked in the morning dawn light, and the due shone back the light of the now two risen suns, dazzling me and causing me to shield my eyes as I walked.

I paused then, scooping up palms full of dew-water from the grassy fronds all about me, and slaking my thirst. I was tired, but happy. Hunger too had taken a hold of me, yet I knew, somehow, that the wooded glades and copses on the hillsides would provide breakfast. Yet, I must go carefully now, since those who had built those fires, so gaudy across the distance of night, would not be far away. I was anxious that it would be I who cast eyes upon them before they did on me. Warily, I scanned the foothills, seeing that an arm of wooded meadow ran down onto the plain not far to the north. I made directly for the shelter of those trees, the grass high about my waist, confident that I would not be seen by those I sought.

An hour or so later I stood beneath the cover and security of the timberland. A brook ran by, again terminating in a quagmire on the plain's extremity. I picked fruit and nuts I had seen the denizens of the jungle to the south eating so many times before, sitting down on the grassy slope to relax and perchance rest a little after my long walk.

Without even realising it, the peace and serenity of the place had induced me to lie back and rest my head on the soft grassy earth. My eyes, tired and heavy, watched the

growing light as the suns rose higher into the heavens. What a picture they painted as they took command of the skies, casting a red panoply of illumination over the world.

I thought then of the world of my birth: the Earth.

Where was it in relation to this wonderful, yet deadly world upon which I lay looking up at an alien sky?

I wondered then at why none of my pursuers had followed me through the portal back in London. Perhaps those not requested to carry out missions on other worlds had not been able to see it. Perhaps, only I was able to see the portal. Me, a man cast across countless millions of miles of space, *at the behest of the gods!*

Lying there, thinking over old times, I eventually fell asleep. How long I dozed for, I don't know, but when I eventually opened my eyes, Luz, closely followed by Walig, stood directly overhead in the sky, so it must have been for several hours. What had awoken me? Ah yes, there it was again.

The sound of a twig snapping sounded abruptly behind me. I lay there, frozen, my rude spear in my grasp as always. I longed to turn my head and see what perhaps crept up behind me. I longed to stand up, take my spear in one hand, my crude knife in the other, and defend myself. But I could not, I just lay there, terrified!

CHAPTER FIVE

A YOUTH OF THE PLAINS

“Llhal. Lahal!”

These were literally the first sounds made by human lips other my own in this new world that ever came to my ears. A teenage boy stood looking down at me from some ten feet distance across the sward. He made the statement again. Needless to say, I do not have to mention the fact that it meant nothing to me except that I knew it was not a question because of the tone of voice he implied. It sounded like a welcome to my alien ears. Sitting up, I lay my spear aside, but not too far, and smiled. At any rate, he did not look hostile.

“I am Blake,” I said.

The boy, he appeared to my Earthly eyes to be in the region of twelve years of age, looked at me blankly. His face then twisted in a slight expression of humour.

I smiled back.

He stood there, garbed in a one piece, sleeveless tunic of blue that reached down to his knees and was tied about the waist by a stout leather belt supporting a sheath of colourful woven fabric. About his head he wore a blue band of cloth from beneath which a mass of raven-black hair fell about his slight shoulders. His feet were bare. The sheath I mention was empty, for in his hand he held a long, curved dagger.

And then I noticed something else. Upon his head, just behind the place where hair met forehead, and just below the headband, a small twisted horn stood erect!

I got slowly to my feet, and the boy backed off slightly, a look of uncertainty crossing his handsome, clean features. Again he made the same statement to which I raised my hands in a shrug and shook my head.

“Blake,” I said again, patting my chest.

“Pah!” came his reply, which at least, in the universal realm of human impatience meant something at least. His eyes narrowed, and he glanced about him quickly and then his eyes rested once again upon me, and noticeably, the flint knife in my hand. Again, he stepped back a pace.

“My name,” I said, touching my hand to my chest again, “is Blake. John Blake.” I then pointed at him, asking: “Your name?”

Of course he didn’t understand the words, but the actions, again universal amongst humans everywhere in my experience, he may have. Again the look of quizzical humour crossed his features, at which, he suddenly stepped forward and walked over to me, a look of absolute confidence written on his face. Stopping some three feet from me, he held out his hand, pointing at my stone blade.

I handed it to him, and he took it. After having inspected it carefully, a look of some concern clouding his eyes, he handed it back. I then indicated his knife, the blade of which alone was over twelve inches in length and appeared to be of fine steel. He raised the weapon for me to inspect, but not letting me actually touch it. It appeared to be lethally sharp. He then returned it to his side, but not, I noticed, to the sheath.

“Suresi,” he said suddenly, patting his own chest. His voice was level, sure, even.

Reaching down slowly to where I had lain upon the grass, not taking my eyes from the youth, I took up a handful of nuts and berries that I had collected earlier. I handed them to him, at which he made a wry grin. He inspected the food and handed it back.

“Eat,” I said, pointing to my mouth.

Suresi, for such I thought his name then, pointed off somewhere to my rear. I glanced behind me, but saw nothing other than bushes and trees and grass. He then indicated I stand aside by stepping forward and raising his hands in the air. He showed no wariness now, and obviously did not think me a threat in any way.

Suresi stood looking at me for one long moment, and I saw that he glanced more than once to the top of my head, where, unlike upon his, no horn resided. I too found it hard to avert my eyes from his head, for obvious reasons. As I stood taller than he, it was hard not to, as I had a better view than he. It was then that I noticed his ears were a little pointed, and that his fingers were adorned by nails heavier and more prominent than those of the average human being. His hands were chubby, and his arms were heavily covered with a course layer of hair I can describe no more accurately than being like that of a goat's coat, although not so thick.

Suresi smiled, nodding his head at me. “Apim,” he said.

I shrugged and he turned his attention to our surroundings..

His keen eyes scanned the foliage of the trees close by. He then raised his knife hand behind his head and threw the blade spinning end-over-end high up into the branches. Next moment it came back down to earth, carrying with it, impaled, a large red and green melon-shaped ball. Quickly he ran forward, took up his knife, and split the outer shell of the fruit he had so skilfully obtained. The two halves of the outer layer fell away and he handed me the soft inner kernel of a beash, as I later learned it to be named.

He pointed to his mouth and smiled.

Biting into the juicy beash, which was delicious and tasted like coconut, I handed the rest to him, but he shook his head and smiled. This I assumed meant he was not hungry and that I should eat the fruit in its entirety, which I did. The hard, inner-stone, I cast to the ground.

He looked disappointed at this casting aside of the stone. Taking it up, he inserted his knife into a seam of the inner shell and split this as he had the outer shell. He then handed the inner nut-kernel to me and I ate it without hesitation. It tasted a little like a hazel nut, but oilier and softer. It was about four times the size. He stood staring at me, his head shaking from side to side once or twice, as if he pitied me.

By my worn and haggard appearance at that time, following my long ordeal in the jungle and out on the plain, which contrasted sharply the youth's healthy and vibrant appearance, it was no wonder he offered me the food. It didn't occur to me until much later that I must have seemed helpless, or perhaps even simple to that young man of those people of the plains I was soon going to know so well.

He raised his left hand and indicated I follow him. He then sheathed his dagger, turned, and walked off into the woods. After ten paces or so, he looked over his shoulder. I had remained motionless. Where would this young lad lead me? I thought. Truth to tell, I was badly out of condition by this time, and the arduous effort of that long walk coupled with the constant terror of my predicament since my advent had finally taken its toll.

The boy shrugged and walked back to me. He picked up my spear and placed it in my hand. He uttered one sharp syllable then and began to walk off again. Slowly, my head whirling, I followed. This was the first person I had come across on this world. A man of another world! The realisation of that had finally sunk in and shock was taking a hold of me.

I collapsed! My head swam, and the world, that strange new world, suddenly went spinning around me. I knew the youth had come back to check on me, for although I was on the verge of passing out, I could feel his strong palm on my forehead. Lying there on my back, too weak to stand up and walk, I tried to explain to this young lad what was the matter with me. He shrugged, looking concerned.

To him, of course, I was some strange man who had obviously wandered in off the plains. And apart from trying to converse in what, to him, was a weird language, if he thought it a language at all, I must have seemed at the very least, stupid, despite my obvious sickness. I could not stand, I seemed not to be able to find myself food, or look after myself, and I carried inferior, almost useless weapons. To him, I was not a man from another world, for perhaps he knew of no such thing, but I was obviously different, regardless of the fact I was devoid of a horn, pointy ears and heavily-haired arms. I heard the grass rustle as he walked off, doubtless, a look of concern, if not pity, written all over his young face.

I then passed out completely.

When I awoke, darkness had again fallen. I felt most refreshed. The warmth from the fire was also most comforting.

Fire!

Opening my eyes I could just about make out the face of the youth sitting on the far side of the crackling red-orange glow. I sat up, feeling a lot stronger, and he came to me and passed me a small bowl. I drank without question. The water was cool, rejuvenating.

"Thank you," I said, my voice as steady as my head now felt.

He shrugged, smiled, and sat back down by the fire. He handed me a piece of what looked like, and proved to be, succulent meat, warm and recently roasted. I gobbled it down while all the time his steady eyes regarded me in earnest.

Again he said the same words he had before.

I shrugged, shaking my head.

"Blake," he said awkwardly.

"Yes. Blake," I confirmed. "John Blake." He had remembered.

"Jan Blak," he replied, smiling.

"Blake."

"Blak."

"Near enough," I replied. "Jan Blak will do for starters."

The youth then pointed to himself. "Suresi," he said, his voice a little guttural, and more than a little proud I thought.

"Sursi," I said.

"Suresi," he confirmed. The pronunciation was sharp, strong, the 'ur' formed in the throat, the 'es' softer, less pronounced.

“Suresi,” I said, trying to use a harsh Arabic tone.

He smiled, looking up across the small clearing amongst the grove of trees. My eyes followed his, and I could not but help catch the look of anguish and despair fleeting across his fine features. Looking back to me, that haunted expression had all but been replaced by the carefree shrug he exhibited. I must have looked my concern then, for he smiled, but I knew he was deeply concerned about something.

A sound came from way off through the trees, a low moaning sound. Suresi, for so I thought him named, looked across to me again. This time, he didn't bother to hide his fears. There was something out there, something bad, and it scared young Suresi. He knew I had sensed his discomfort, and now that he could no longer hide it, he fidgeted with the hilt of his dagger. I could not but help notice the beads of sweat glistening on his forehead in the light of the fire.

Suddenly he stood up, a smooth, flowing motion that bespoke of great suppleness and agility. He motioned for me to do likewise, and somewhat jerkily, my legs stiff from long inactivity, I did so. I too grasped my knife. Leaning down again, I scooped up my spear.

Suresi stood very still for some time, as if sniffing the very air. He then took up a small deerskin bag and slung it over his shoulder. In the light of our blaze, the muscles rippled on his lithe limbs. Here was a creature, a boy, used to living in the wild. I felt more than just a little inadequate. Pushing my flint knife into the waist of my breechcloth, I grasped my spear in two hands.

Slowly, without making any sound at all, the boy led the way from the small clearing, in directly the opposite direction from where the menacing noises had come. Trying to emulate this stealth, not so successfully as I would have liked, for my feet simply would not move in utter silence through the undergrowth, I followed on. We entered the forest again, leaving the fire and the small clearing behind. The fire would burn out in time.

Occasionally, this youth of another world I followed, he who had aided me a great deal it must be said, stopped in his tracks to listen intently, his nose twitching. Once he pointed at my feet, placing a grubby finger to his lips and twisting his face up as if to say: *ssh!* Obviously, to have made such a noise was beyond the accepted level of sound we could be permitted to make, and from then on I took greater notice of Suresi's manner of progress, in particular, the movement of his feet through the brush and the sward. His weight he carried mainly on his toes, I perceived, and I tried to travel likewise.

We came to another clearing. The woods were thinning out here, and upwards to the dark horizon the hills rose. The first moon made her regal procession above us, the others not yet risen. The world was still shrouded in darkness to an extent. Ahead, a small stand of trees stood out in the gloom. Beyond, only the occasional bush offered cover. The youth hesitated now.

I had heard an occasional repeat of the moaning, that which I assumed came from some mighty hunter of the night, and although it seemed to be getting no closer, neither did the menacing low rumble from the carnivore's throat get any further away. This suggested one thing only: whatever was out there, had taken our scent and was stalking us warily. For some reason, I pictured an immense lion stalking us.

It is a funny thing, is it not, but when one considers that the art of hunting should be carried out in absolute silence, Nature has always handed the quarry a slim lifeline by the sheer fact that many hunters of the night occasionally announce their presence with throaty rumblings. Again, I consider that perhaps this would be to chill the blood of the intended victim, lending the stalker the advantage in another way.

We had stood now for some time at the edge of the trees. I touched Suresi's shoulder. Turning to look at me I could plainly see the apparent terror he did his best to hide, it played at the features of his young face. His lips were drawn back, tight, his teeth clenched, his eyes were wide, fearful. I shrugged, trying to put it to this youth of the wild that I did not know what it was that hunted us. Again he placed a finger to his lips.

For some time more we stood hovering on the threshold of the open sward, and then the boy turned again to me and pointed up the slope of the hill. It could not be mistaken

that he intended for us to make our way in that direction, communication by words, signs, or otherwise. I nodded, again using a time-worn example of human sign language that would be understood anywhere, between two people of any nation, race or world.

The problem here, I thought, is that we are not safe if we leave the cover of the trees. The creature hunting us, if indeed such was the case, would then be able to see us, I surmised. Yet, we could not remain where we were, for obviously, as the moaning and rumbling sounds were getting louder, and therefore nearer, our present position was getting less safe with each passing moment. I looked at that young fellow who I believed to be named Suresi. There I was, sneaking around under the cover of the darkness and the trees, putting my life it seemed, in the hands of a mere boy who cannot have been any more than thirteen years of age at most.

“Suresi,” I said, in a mere whisper, a little firmness in my tone.

He looked at me, taken aback a little.

I tapped him on the shoulder and pointed up the hill, meaningfully. I then raised my spear a little and pointed back in the direction from where the sounds of stealthy approach grew yet nearer. A faint breathing could be heard now, like the rasping of a file across the edge of a tin can, faint, yet real enough.

What I intended was that Suresi make a break for it, and that I remain to fight the beast, if such it was.

Suresi smiled, and then shook his head.

I made a meaningful face, trying to assert all the authority I could muster in that one look. However, it was quit plain to me then, that age was not the president here over experience. Suresi knew our exact predicament, at least, I did not.

“Go!” I hissed, again pointing up the hill.

The youth shook his head again.

At this point, a growl came from a point to our rear that can have been no more than twenty feet away. Suresi took my arm, urging me to move. I remained where I was, feet firmly planted on the ground.

The boy began to whisper at me then most urgently. The words meant nothing, his facial expression meant everything: Stay here, and we die.

“Go!” I said, louder than before, and I shoved him away in the direction I presumed safety to lie. Doubtless, though the word meant nothing to him, my facial expression and manner were unmistakable. This was an adult telling a youngster to obey. Reluctantly, the boy moved away, keeping low to the ground and glancing to left and right, but mainly over his shoulder at me. I remained where I was. I then reached up to the branch above my head growing from the bole behind which we had sheltered all this while. I had a plan.

Pulling myself up, I climbed to a height of some fifteen feet above the ground, stealthily, and I was pleased to note, quietly. The boy moved on, and now the darkness hid him from me. He made no sound, and I scarcely dared breath, and all the while the sounds of some creature moving through the undergrowth grew clearer to my ears. Whatever it was back there, it was almost under the very tree in which I waited. I held my spear firmly in two hands, balancing upon a branch barely strong enough to support my weight, while the sounds of moaning and now low growling reached up to me from directly below.

I peered down into the gloom, straining to make out the outline of our tormentor. The darkness was utter. Then it was that the double satellite, the twins, leapt over the horizon into the sky, casting an eerie and sudden glow over the world. Now I could plainly see the hunter below me, and he too, was obviously able to see me, for his bright green eyes peered up menacingly at me while his slavering jowls hungrily dripped and a lolling red forked-tongue hung out dripping saliva.

I looked out onto the clearing of the lower hills, and there I spotted the boy, crouching in the grass, the double satellites illuminating him so that he dare not move lest he be spotted by the awesome beast crouching beneath me.

And, by God, what a beast it was!

CHAPTER SIX

THE SURESI ROMADS

This beast, this Rynth to give it its Lohvian name, this huge carnivorous monstrosity of power, anger, and ferocity that stood there pawing the ground, snarling, and preparing to leap upwards at the puny man-thing that was myself, is almost beyond belief in its description, since, although appearing more like a great cat to me than anything else in my Earthly experience, claws, fangs, mane, and flicking tail, it was most definitely not mammalian, but reptilian. Possessed of a hard, scaly skin, flicking forked tongue, and green, evil eyes at it is, the rynth must surely be descended from the same ancestors as the snakes and lizards, and those mighty twenty foot long reptiles of the jungle I had encountered. However, its build, cat-like as I have already mentioned, lithe, stealthy, cunning in the hunt, not to mention the sharp claws, gave it the seemingly unlikely characteristics of the feline mammal and reptilian predator combined. This particular rynth was somewhere in the region of twelve foot in length, six at the shoulder; a small one by all accounts as I later learned.

Balancing in my precarious position, the beast below ready to lunge upwards using its powerful hind legs, my chances of survival seemed grim. I could have climbed higher, but I did not. I had Suresi's situation to consider, he being little more than a child in reality. After the beast had made its initial lunge, a testing leap I was sure, wary even in such a strong position as all hunters must by definition be, I prodded down with my faithful spear in an attempt to prevent it making the killing jump. This was to no avail, for with one swipe of a powerful clawed paw, the beast ripped the thing right out of my grasp.

A shout came from up the slope. Looking up I saw that the boy was now standing, trying to attract the rynth's attention away from me. His bravery appalled me, I must say, for he then began to jump up and down, waving his hands in the air.

Suddenly, the wild beast lunged off in the direction of Suresi, who, seeing that his ploy had worked, began to run for the nearer of the few trees dotting the hillside. I jumped down from my branch, took up my spear, and followed after the beast.

I could see that the boy was not going to reach the safety of the tree he was aiming for. Even if he got to it first, which I doubted, despite his apparent fleetness, he would never have time to swing up into the lower branches and then to the temporary safety above. Foolishly, I cast my spear, which fell way short of the target it could never have harmed in such a manner. Still running, I took up my weapon again and began yelling at the top of my voice. Confused, inquisitive perhaps, very angry surely, the rynth stopped in its tracks and turned to face me.

Suresi, not realising the beast had stopped in its pursuit, had reached the tree, and was now some way into the shelter of the lower branches. Twenty foot above the ground he must have looked down and wondered at my bravery, or was it foolishness? The latter more than likely!

Deprived somehow of instant success, the rynth must have pondered a while as to why it was not already sinking its teeth into warm man-flesh. I doubted it could be so easily distracted again. It flicked its tail angrily, and then proceeded to move back down the slope in my direction. A hasty glance over my shoulder told me instantly that I would never reach the tree I had vacated a short while earlier. I stood there, awaiting the approach of the thing, that patient, sure approach, that the rynths of Loh are wont to adopt, and famous for it also. Not for nothing are they described as the perfect predator, the most fearsome of all carnivore hunters of the plains, jungles and mountains.

The beast approached. This, I thought, was going to be an end to it all. I took a firm grip of my inadequate weapon, braced my legs, and waited for the mad onslaught of clawed and fanged fury that would surely spell my doom. Closer now came the rynth, not over hasty, but doubtless confidence flowed unchallenged through its simian-like brain. But why did it delay so long over so pitiful an opponent? What is this puny thing that stands waiting to die? it doubtless thought in its own, savage way. Could there have been one spark of inquisitiveness in that wild heart that pondered my foolish defiance? No! The rynth bunched up its rear legs, as do the lions of Earth, took a wary glance beyond me, hesitated for one, long instant, and suddenly leapt.

My feeble spear caught the thing in the face as it leapt, and then beast and world span about me in one crazy instant as I lunged to the side in a desperate attempt to delay death by the mere impalpable moments that any living thing would attempt to prolong its doomed life. I felt no pain as the thing clawed at me, just that irresistible thrill that I yet lived a while longer, the panic of sure death, my arms pressed across my face, my body assuming the shape a hedgehog must adopt surely to survive. I wondered then, why it was that my death had not yet occurred. Why no pain? Why no agonising ripping of flesh and sinew?

Motionless, the rynth lay across my battered body, for there, as it had died in its last leap, the carcass had knocked the wind from me, broken ribs, bruised already tired limbs. Many hands were needed to pull the thing from on top of me. Many hands?

I looked up. About me, stood several men, dressed as was Suresi, dragging the beast to one side. The rynth's body was a veritable pin cushion for the many shafts protruding from it. One of those spears, those well-balanced, deadly accurate javelins of the Suresi Romads of Loh. must surely have found the beast's spinal cord, for death comes slowly to one of his kind, even in mortal injury. To kill one such beast outright, had either been the best timed luck, or the best cast javelin of all time, for to kill a rynth instantly, the point must pierce the main nerve of the spine.

What Suresi's tribe did with the dead beast, or me for that matter, I was not aware of for some time, for I passed out. Later, Suresi, who's name was not really Suresi, as you shall hear, told me that a hunting party of his own clan had emerged from the bushes at the bottom of the slope as the beast had crept upon me. I had not seen them, of course, as they advanced behind me. That in itself, had been the reason the rynth had delayed its final charge. Its hesitation had been due to the calculation it doubtless considered as to

whether it could kill me and drag me off before the hunting group reached it. Its dull brain had not considered the cast javelin that had shortened the distance, and therefore tarnished its calculation. Nature did not give the rynth that ability. It had died. I had lived. It was as simple as that. The hunting party, ten strong in number, had cast ten javelins. All had pierced the hard, scaly skin of the beast.

The young lad in the tree had climbed down as the beast advanced upon me. His own people had seen him. They had wondered, my young friend told me later, at the bravery of a man who faced a rynth, *unarmed* as he, I was. That then was how I came into contact with the tribe of Suresi, one of the numerous tribes of nomadic warriors who have wandered the plains of the vast continent of Loh for aeons past and perhaps an eternity to come.

Because I had aided their young acolyte, the hunting party of the clan of Suresi had aided me. That, along with many another simple yet noble philosophy, was what made the Suresi Romads what they were, as you shall learn in due course.

Carried between two of these warriors, returning to consciousness as we topped the mountains and descended into the valley beyond, I came into the next phase of my life on this weird, yet wonderful world of Kregen.

It is impossible for me to give you an estimation of the amount of time that passed while I was with those nomads of the central plains of Loh, I simply had no way of measuring the length of the days or the seasons in comparison with those of Earth. A fair estimate of the length of a day as far as I can guess on this world of Kregen, would be somewhere in the region of twenty six to twenty eight of your Earthly hours. As to seasons, well, the variations that developed seemed mighty less obvious than those of the world of my birth. I counted the days I spent and travelled with the nomads, stopping at a point somewhere past one hundred and ten.

The weather was always warm, with occasional rain, and the even more occasional storm. Always the huge red sun, Luz, and the smaller green one, Walig, filled the world with warmth, as crimson and emerald tinges painted the sunsets and dawns. The seven moons, The Maiden of the Many Smiles, The Twins, Holi and Hola, carrying on their sky-dance of romance, forever circling each other in their own way, She of the Blushes, and the three lesser ones, their colours faint during the day, radiant at night, looked down at night.

I had aided young Eefedd, for that was the youth's name in truth, and as just reward, I was given something of the status of helper amongst the lower orders of the nomads. Of interest here, I shall add, is that the name Eefedd, ending in a double 'd' as it does, is pronounced Eefeth, with a sharp 'th' after the manner of the Welsh double 'd' sound 'th'. I was not a slave, neither a servant, yet, my menial labouring work bespoke of the fact that where I to live and eat amongst these people, then I would work for it with the very skin of my hands and the brawn of my shoulders. I was free to leave, any time I wished, I knew that, yet, something of sympathy, something of gratitude perhaps, lent these just folk the attitude that I could stay on amongst them. The obvious barrier of course, *at first*, was the fact that I could not speak a single word of their language.

While I aided the women in their cooking and fire-building, and the skinning of beasts caught in the hunt, and occasionally the men with the repair of this or that artefact, I

slowly began to learn their tongue. With hindsight, I can tell you who read this that the nomads of the central Lohvian plains speak a tongue called Romadic, which, allowing for regional variation and colloquial difference, is claimed to be universal amongst their many tribes, but being a race that spreads across a vast open area, there are obviously as many variations and unique tongue differences to this rule as there are different land-bound Romad nations. The Suresi romadic version of the language would therefore be but one version of a language that covered a vast area and incorporated a vast number of tribes.

While I learned to speak the romadic of the tribe of Suresi, I learned more and more of the world I had rudely been placed upon. Much of what I learned, I shall tell as this story unfolds, relate things as I experienced them, otherwise, this story will become clogged with encyclopaedic clutter. Of course, as in any environment, or lifetime for that matter, one learns as one goes along. In Loh, indeed, across the face of Kregen, I learned many new things every day as the years passed, as you can imagine.

It was at about this time that I began to realise the implications of the helmet-type device that had been put on my head back on Earth, and also the implications of the then mystery that the device would somehow, as I had been coldly informed, in time, answer all my questions. This was not so much an assumption, but a pre-defined fact that I was becoming aware of.

I can only assume, that with the passing of time on Kregen, somehow, and as a direct result of that session with the dark-clad and emotionless men who had rescued/captured me, I was able to learn new things more rapidly. Somehow, it was as if the information was already implanted into my head, only needing to be experienced to be understood.

This applied to many things, none less so than the matter of learning new languages. I picked up the Romadic tongue rapidly and easily, never forgetting a word once it had been told me, and always able to jump ahead and somehow be able to construct rather than struggle. Verbs and nouns clambered around in my head, easily adjusted and converted to useable adverbs and pronouns with little effort or instruction at all.

In little time at all, I not only learned the language of these, my adopted people, but also their history, customs and protocols.

All this, concerning mind devices and mysterious beings, although I have told it here in a simplified way, would all become clearer in time, painfully, and dramatically clearer, as shall be revealed.

Eefedd was the son of Rhanadd, a senior member of the tribe. As such, I was attached mainly to Rhanadd's wagon and his family group. Of wagons and families I shall embroider upon later. Incidentally, Eefedd had indicated to me when I had first met him, or so I believed, that Suresi was his name. In fact, as you now know, Suresi is the name of his race of nomadic wanderers. In turn, he had thought John Blake to be the name of my people, or, where I was from. The significance of this would seem to hold little import at this point of my narrative, however, later on, you will see that, as I learned the Romad tongue, it would prove the key to a far weightier matter.

The Romads of the Lohvian Plains wander their lives away in an endless search for fresh pastures for themselves and their herds of Yag, large shaggy, buffalo-like beasts that not only pull their wagons but also provide milk, meat and hide. The Yag is the very epicentre of nomadic existence and life, and the nomadic tribes invest in them and receive

from them their fortune and their prosperity in the good times, as they do their misfortune and their poverty in the bad. The Yag and the Romads are rather like the Bedouin and the camel, the shepherd and his sheep, the hunter and his dog, the cowhand and his cattle, and the cavalry man and his mount, all rolled into one with much more besides. Nomadic life revolves around the Yag, and the wagons they pull. The Yag is a beast you shall hear much and much about as time passes.

I learned that the nomads of Loh travelled from east to west in the warmer seasons, and then from west to east in the cooler. This was something to do with the growth of grass on the plains, and also the distribution of migratory beasts which the nomads hunted. It was also due to the fact that the tribes, as you shall learn, united in celebration once every Kregish year. Loh is a massive continent. It is bound up in the south by vast deserts, plains, and endless equatorial jungle and forest reaching north as far as the Central Plains that stretching east to west from coast to coast. The plains are broken occasionally by mountain ranges, the like of which I encountered when I first met Eefedd and his tribe. Dividing the continent into two definite eastern and western halves, there is a massive range of mountains called the Gaed Mountains. The nomads of the tribe of Suresi, which in turn is a part of the Romad nation of Gaelwydd, is the Eastern Romadic nation of Loh. There is no communication between east and west as far as the nomadic wanderers are concerned. The Western clans and tribes never cross the Gaed Mountains to the east, and the Eastern clans and tribes never crosses to the west. In fact, communication between the separate tribes of the clans is rare, and is restricted exclusively to certain annual events and ceremonies of which I was not yet aware of.

To the north of the plains, there are wetter agricultural lands and, as I was to eventually discover, other nations, kingdoms, cities and peoples. In the east particularly, I was to discover more civilised lands. For now, however, you shall have to be content with the knowledge that one day I would travel there and move onto the next phase of my account of adventure on Kregen.

We were on the move, east to west as we had been since I had come across and been accepted amongst Eefedd's tribe of nomads. I had risen in position now to being a runner at the side of the wagons, namely, the wagon of Rhanadd. This involved keeping pace with the wagon as it lumbered along at a steady pace, in formation with its fellows. The tribe was of fifteen families, each with a single wagon, except for the chief, or in Romad terms, the Romaddian, who had two. In all then, there were sixteen of these impressive wagons, or Llumbeddialls as they are called by the Romads. The tribe numbered in the region of one hundred and sixty members ranging from the old toothless hag who was the mother of Romaddian, to his third wife's youngest child of a mere twenty five days of age. On becoming chief of the tribe, or of the entire clan, a male Romad would lose his original name and adopt the title as his sole appellation.

I ran, which believe me, over a distance of about twenty miles a day in my rough estimation, was not as easy as it may at first sound, at the side of Rhanadd's wagon. My purpose, along with Eefedd and several other younger men, was to keep the stragglers of the mighty herd of Yags we drove before us from becoming entangled with the wheels of the wagons, or, as sometimes happened, colliding with them and turning them off their path and causing collisions with other wagons. The wagons, which I shall describe in a moment, moved in a narrow 'V' formation, the chief's main Llumbeddiall at the apex.

My mastery of the language of the nomads had taken root by this time, and was verging upon the point of flowering into colloquial proficiency. I was in no way fluent, but I could make simple conversation, and also understand the general day-to-day talk around me.

“Jan Blak! To side,” Eefedd might call, urgently.

I would react to these warnings, which were frequent while the tribe were on the move and I was running alongside, by pointing my rude spear, yes I still had it, and urging the encroaching Yag Eefedd warned me of to move away from the wagon’s side. It was a risky business, taking that precarious position on foot between a hurtling wagon and close on one thousand pounds of shaggy, muscled bull Yag.

I was known as Jan Blak by then, which was pronounced by these people more as *Jin Blik*. John and Blake, were definitely words they had trouble getting their tongues around. It became shortened to *Janblak* for a space, and was eventually dropped by them in favour of Yablak Sananda, which meant: Yablak, The Man From Nowhere. Such is life, I guess.

“Behind!” would yell Eefedd sometimes.

“To side!”

“Out front!”

‘Out front’ was the riskiest position to deal with, for it involved avoiding the charging, hauling Yags that pulled the wagon itself and the hooves of those that were in danger of fouling their progress. Out front was somewhere I had only been allowed or trusted to venture a couple of times, and that of late.

I was learning all the time.

The wagons of the Romads, these Llumbeddialls, are a wonderful affair. They are basically built upon a large rectangular timber base about twenty foot long and ten or twelve feet wide. This base is supported on four axles terminating in large wooden wheels. The front two axles are supported on a bogie-type arrangement above which the driver, the head of the family in most cases, sits. The rear two axles are fixed, and steering or turning the wagon while it is pulled along is a most skilful operation. On the open plains though, turning circles are not of high consideration as you may have already guessed. The sides of the wagons are constructed of timber also for half of their height, which in total is about ten foot, and the top half and the roof is made of Yag-hide. Each wagon is hauled by a team of perhaps eight or six beasts.

Each family lives in their respective wagon. However, wagons are used only for travel and sleep. Cooking, and all other activities are carried out in the open, and when the nomads settle in one place for more than the odd day or so, they erect Yag-skin tents, rather like tepees.

Day succeeded day, march succeeded march, and I became almost as one of those people with whom I travelled the Central plains of Loh. My fluency of the language increased, as did my skills, not only in menial tasks, but now with hunting and tracking game, for many times I had been a part of a party out tracking wild Yag, or fentrix, a small deer-like beast, and other times merely collecting fruit from some grove of trees we encountered along the way, many of which dotted the plains here and there, usually accompanied by a pool, or sometimes, in the low mountains, bodies of water large enough to be called lakes.

My life flowed on. Long since had I made for myself clothing more in keeping with my adopted people, for the womenfolk of the nomads are adept at the weaving, spinning, and dying of yarn and textiles, the materials of which are to be found and harvested from a wild cotton-like plant and from the stems of grasses and plants both coarse and fine, and the customary light blue tunic now adorned my body, as well as a breechclout of finely woven cloth. I possessed a fine Yag-hide belt and harness I had fashioned, and a pair of the finest fentrix-hide boots. About my head and my now flowing locks, the colour of which provided a stark contrast with those of my fellows, for I have in truth blond hair while the nomads are dark-haired, and tan-skinned for that matter, was tied a band of woven fabric of many colours. For weapons, the use and manufacture of which I shall go into at a later time, I now carried a nomad javelin of finest, straightest, springiest, and hardest zyn, a hardwood that grows in amongst the thorn bushes of the mountain copses in the form of reed-like stems. This javelin, or crox as it is called, has a blade at its tip of shiny, steel-like metal. I also had a bone-handled knife and fancy woven sheath given me by Eefedd, rather like the one which he had used to bring down the beash from the tree so long before. My old spear and stone knife I had long since discarded.

The Romadic peoples of the Central Plains of Loh are, as I have indicated, a people who possess physical attributes different to those of the humans of my experience. They have small solitary spiral horns just above the forehead, pointy ears, and heavily nailed hands and feet. They possess a coarse body hair which is in no way a coat, but dense nonetheless; the males being hairier than the females.

Countless times I was referred to as being *apim*, by them, a term I had no way of understanding at the time. Apart from that, my differences they accepted as easily as I did theirs. Eventually, as I became one of them, these differences failed even to attract the occasional comment.

Time passed and passed again, and I became adept at the riding of the Yag in the hunt. My skills as a horseman back on Earth could have led to no other course of events, I believe. I travelled the plains of Loh with my nomads, very much one of them, very much resigned to the fact that I would, or so I believed then, never return to the world of my birth.

Earth! Home! Well, at that time, I must say that I regarded wherever the nomads roamed as home. Earth. Well, that had been a world upon which I had once lived. It is strange to look back now and remember how well I had adjusted to my new environment. Of my old life, on the world of my birth, I scarcely gave a thought any more. Now, I put that down to the fact that the shock of my *Transit to Kregen*, had a longer lasting effect than I had known at the time. My mind, had somehow filtered out the pain and the longing to return to where I belonged. Cases of this form of self-defence the mind adopts to protect an individual are not rare. Consider the man who is to hang at the gallows, writing his memoirs, coolly, collectively, despite the fact that he is to die a most horrible death, and that my aid your understanding of the state of mind I had in those early days.

We were travelling to a place, a high mountain pass north and west, where the many tribes were to meet in their annual clan gathering. What this would involve, I was none too sure at the time, however, it was, for me, to change things dramatically. There was one other event that would change my attitude to life also, and remind me of who I was and where from I came, and it was in the form of a conversation with two of the older

men of the tribe of Suresi about the fire one evening after the setting of the suns and beneath the racing splendour of the seven moons.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PRESCOT; DRAY PRESCOT

It came to me in a dream, I believe. Or, to be more precise, several dreams. The white-shrouded figure of an old man, claiming: "Ah, John Blake, we meet again!" in a drab, monosyllabic tone of voice.

"We do?" I might have mumbled. "I do not think so!"

"Oh, but we *have* met before," he would stress. "Many times."

I recalled the words of the man on the other side of the desk, hiding his features behind the table lamp. He had claimed the very same thing.

"Where?"

"Many places," he would answer. "Many places. Many times."

"Who are you?" I had asked.

"I am Yahweh. Yahweh of the Elohim."

"The Elohim?"

"We are those who brought you here to Kregen to do our bidding against the will of the Star Lords and their agent, Dray Prescott."

"I know of no such things," I would answer.

He would pause, and then, every time I experienced that weird dream, he would recite the very same long-winded explanation that only served to confuse me further. I can recall the words perhaps almost exactly now, but their meaning, and what they had to do with me, that is another matter altogether. It meant nothing to me.

"Men such as you strode the decks of Lord Nelson's warships, hauling at the hemp lines, amongst the blood and the toil, the explosions and the bloodshed, and the death. Such as you followed Eric the Red, sharing the wonder of discovery of new lands, the grief of conquest. Men like yourself attended Queen Elizabeth's court, Henry's many wives and Caesar's top Generals. Men such as you stood cheering at the quay as Columbus sailed away, and stood waving from the rigging on his return. Men such as you looked on as the arrow was taken from Harold's eye, as the sword was pulled from the stone, when London burned. Such as you lived and fought in the trenches of the Great War, such fought in the Battle of Britain and the Battle of Berlin.

"Men such as you have no memories of childhood, none of family, or of love. Such have fathered sons who reach maturity, the greyness of old age, and then finally, death. Men such as yourself have stood at the gravesides, yet are no older than on the day of the child's birth. Men such as you have had wives and daughters in ages past. Those sons, wives and daughters have long since passed and are all gone, yet, such as you remain, unchanged, in the prime of existence. You recall no mother or father, no brothers or

sisters. It has always been so, and you have existed, it would seem, always. Endless lives, eternal memories, fading to distortion, confusion, and then nothing.

"You have been taken from the place of your existence countless times, deposited elsewhere, to start afresh, anew, naked as on the day of birth, if indeed there be such a day. Heralded by the golden lights, you are taken up and carried to new places, new lives, new existence. There have been so many, they are mostly lost in the mists of time and, whatever else forms our universe. Attempt recollection, for you shall fail.

"And then there are the Elohim, remaining unchanged through the years, the centuries, the lifetimes. We hail from the stars perhaps, the servants of some master plan, or the agents of some cunning game amongst gods. It is not for you to know this, John Blake.

"There has never been explanation or reason given you. Men such as you never ask for such. Each time you are re-born into some new time-frame, some new dimension, some new life, your previous memories fade almost to nothing, as do those preceding, and those to follow, no doubt. Of times past, you feel only oblivion at the edges of consciousness, flowing and merging with the past. Of the future, you know only that you must carry out the instructions or fate ordained.

"Men such as yourself are Eternal Warriors. Of such there are but few. But they are, and they are forever. You are!

"Acceptance is no mere choice, but a rule by which you survive. For you there can still be death, and it could arrive at any moment or time, for you are as mortal as the next man. You could die by the blade, or from flame or drowning. You cling to life and choose not to; like any living thing, you choose survival.

"You are chosen amongst men. Why, you shall never really know. For each time you are cast afresh into the endless void of life, the memories of *why* and *how* fade as rapidly as the new experiences unfold.

"All this you yourself could not tell me, for you possess no such memory, no such belief; Yet I could build up for you a picture of your many existences, your many lives, a canvas washed clean with each new life, and painted afresh each time.

"I could. Yet, I shall refrain once again.

"You are John Blake. It is not a name you have possessed always, but an appellation simply given; though the memory of this meeting shall rapidly fade on your awakening. You are but a pawn in some game of the gods, a piece to be played at the whim of those gods, as they battle amongst themselves for control or for domination of the many domains. You know little more than this, except that you are a man blessed, or cursed, with a life or lives we ultimately control. For you are in truth, an Eternal Warrior."

At the end of each recital I would say: "But I do not understand."

"You will..... You will.....You will....." His reply would echo, and I would wake up, sitting up straight in my sleeping furs, those weird words reverberating around inside my head: "You will.....you will.....you will....."

Each time the dream came to me, the details of the words Yahweh spoke seemed so real, and seemed to mean so much, yet that reality and meaning would gradually fade with the coming of consciousness until they were again but a blur on the edge of my memories.

It was an experience that caught my imagination yet, disturbed me more each time the dream recurred. It all had a certain ring of truth to it, a painful ring of truth, for was I not upon another world, a world named Kregen, and had I not been transported through space, and perhaps time also in the doing of it? Why then could the dream not hold some element of reality to it also?

Yahweh, this agent of the gods collectively named the Elohim was communicating with me through my dreams.

He told me of a man named Prescott, Dray Prescott, and of his masters, the Star Lords.

Each time the dream came and went, that one message would be reiterated and made more plain above the confusion and the misty, to me, meaningless background details of the rest of the dream.

I was John Blake, I knew that already.
There was Yahweh of the Elohim in the dream.
There were the Star Lords.
And there was Prescott; Dray Prescott.
And each time the dream came to me, the name Dray Prescott would be emphasised more each time until, the thing became clear to me, and the reason for my having been taken to Kregen in the first place became clear.
Dray Prescott!
I was to hunt down this man named Prescott.
I was to hunt him down and.....
Yes, that was it!
The dreams ceased for a while after that day I finally realised on awakening the purpose for it all. From somewhere, the message had got through. But, as for the rest of it, I felt only confusion.
Perhaps in carrying out this mission for Yahweh and the Elohim I would be returned to Earth once more, a free man, to live my life as I chose to live it.
Perhaps?
Well, there was only one way to find out. I would find this Prescott fellow, and carry out the directions. And then I would see what would happen.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WARRIORS OF THE SURESI ROMADS

Yablak Sananda, as I have said before, had become my name there amongst the nomads. This suited me. I was Yablak, the nomad, nothing less, nothing more. I accepted it; as did they.

However, as I sat at a warm camp fire one night with two of the older members of the tribe, now fluent enough in their tongue to converse naturally as well as meaningfully, I was posed an awkward question.

One asked: “Yab. You have been with us now for two seasons, the rainy and the dry. From whence came you to our tribe?”

The other elder nodded his agreement at this inquiry.

As I have stated earlier, I had no idea really of the duration of passing time relative to that of my own Earth. It had been 1946 when I had walked through that mysterious portal. I had no idea how much time had elapsed. It could have been a year, or perhaps three. I simply did not know.

The two seasons of the central belt plains of Loh, wet and dry, make up what would be a Kregish year. The Romads exist north of the equatorial jungles of Central Loh. Further north, as I later learned, the two seasons were more distinct, forming summer and winter, with autumn and spring dividing them. I had been with the nomads for two of their seasons. Kregish days are perhaps twenty six to twenty eight Earthly hours in duration. These figures had come to me first because I had noticed that I slept on an irregular basis, not able to remain awake through an entire day, a habit I have since, thankfully, grown out of as my body clock has adjusted. The daylight hours had just seemed to last for too long; by about two to four hours by my reckoning.

The elder coughed as I thought on an answer.

“I come from a land far away,” I said, unconvincingly, and a trifle tritely by my own reckoning.

He was not satisfied with that answer. The two men glanced at each other.

The second elder asked: “What is the name of your land? Who are your people?”

This was embarrassing. “I cannot return to my own people,” I answered, truthfully. “They are so far away I have no way of reaching them. I have no idea where my homeland lies.”

“You crossed the sea?”

“I did,” I replied, for my own people lived in a land called Great Britain, and I had indeed crossed the sea that is the Universe.

This seemed to satisfy them.

“Why did you cross the sea?” asked one.

“I was looking for a friend.”

“One of your own tribe?”

“Yes.”

“What was his name?”

“Prescot.” I said, finally.

After a pause during which both of the men occasionally glanced up at each other, the first speaker said: “My son’s woman is of the tribe of Cael. She once told us of a man who came amongst them. He was dressed in rags. He too was a stranger from a far land across the sea.”

I nodded. It meant nothing.

“It was many seasons past, when she was a younger woman.. This man rose rapidly amongst the men of Cael to become a great hunter and warrior. He was chosen to become a Warrior of the Suresi by Huddog himself at *The Gathering*, shortly afterwards.”

“The gathering?” I asked, casually.

“The Gathering is where we are bound now,” said the second man. “It is there that you will be tested with the other young warriors, for you are a good rider and hunter yourself.”

Tested! I didn’t like the sound of that. “And?” I asked.

“It is at the gathering where Huddog will choose those who will be added to the ranks of the Romad Warriors. Romaddian, our chief, is to put your name forward amongst the circle.”

This was all very new to me, and meant nothing.

“The circle?” I asked.

“You will learn soon enough,” replied the second man.

“This friend of yours,” said the first speaker, “you said his name was Prescot?”

“Yes. But he is not my friend.”

The two exchanged glances again.

“How many seasons ago did your son’s woman first hear of this man?” I asked presently. To these older men of the tribe of Suresi, I was searching for a man of my own tribe, not a man of another world. This stranger they mentioned could be anyone. I knew nothing of Dray Prescot as it was.

“He came amongst the Cael perhaps two seasons ago,” answered the man.

“Your son took his woman and built his own Llumbeddiall, *four* seasons ago,” corrected the second elder.

“Yes,” mused the first. “Then, he came among the people of Cael more than four seasons past.”

“Four seasons,” I mumbled. “And you said he was chosen to become . . .?”

“A Romad Warrior,” said the first man. “He was little more than a youth. But he was strong, brave, sometimes fierce.”

“And where is he now?” I asked them.

“He rode from the plains to other lands. He was a great warrior. His name grew in fame amongst us, for the Romad Warriors, as you shall learn, are noble men indeed. Amongst *their* ranks even, he became a great man.”

“These other lands,” I asked. “In what direction do they lie?”

Both of the elder men of the tribe pointed Northeast.

“He rode to the land where it is said men live in great tents of stone. He was not present at the last gathering!”

Now this last bit of information rocked me back on my heels, metaphorically speaking of course.

Great tents of stone. This could mean but one thing. A city!

We spoke of other things then, and finally, I retired to my tent, my small, solitudinal tepee, and tried to sleep. My mind, a jumbled mass of questions and confusion, I tossed and turned as I tortured myself with this latest mystery.

In this strange, wild, and savage world, there were tents made of stone!

Later on, I decided there and then, I would travel myself to the lands north and east of the plains, and these tents of stone, these cities, kingdoms, empires even, I would learn of.

At that time, while I was still with the nomads of the plains, I knew little. However, hearing reference made to what could only have been a city, was to alter my plans, and my life. I could no longer simply wander with these plains people, whiling away my life in the search for fresh pastures. It was their sole way of life. It wasn't mine!

My mind was full of doubts, fears, uncertainties, and, also, the thrill of my existence on Kregen. I had been sent here for the specific reason of finding Dray Prescott. It most certainly was possible that this man who had come amongst the tribe of Cael, was he.

After all, he had come amongst them as a stranger dressed in rags, this man who had risen to become a great warrior. It reminded me of my own arrival. Could it be that I shared the same departure point as this stranger in rags, namely a portal of stone on a far away planet called Earth?

Could this stranger be Dray Prescott?

I knew so little of Dray Prescott back then.

I would learn more, of that I had little doubt.

I rode, out of respect for the people of the plains, to their clan gathering, for they held it in higher respect than anything else in their lives, apart from their herds of Yag perhaps. I would not sully my acceptance amongst them with a premature and rude departure. After the events that were to befall me at the gathering, I would leave them with respect and ride north. But first, there is more to tell of the nomads of the plains of Central Loh, and of the Warriors of Suresi.

Amongst the high valley meadows in a place where two mountain ranges meet and cross, the tribal march finally reached its destination. This was the meeting place of the tribes, a sacred spot, and I was, as an outsider in truth, privileged to be invited at all. It was the nobility of the spirit of the nomad that bade me be there at all, and not rushing off forthwith to the north astride my Yag, in search of this Dray Prescott character. Out of respect for this trust of a former stranger, and not one of their own, I delayed my passing from the tribe of Suresi.

It was well for me that I did so.

The many herds of the tribes congregated on the pastures of the high valleys where the ranges met. The countless wagons assembled in tribal circles, the endless camp fires burned, the seemingly infinite tents and cooking pots, children, warriors, men, women, young and old, were there for the gathering of the tribes of the Clan of Gaelwydd. And there too, was I, formerly John Blake, an officer of the British Army, now Sananda Yablak the Romadic traveller.

Over the days that followed, a seemingly endless array of wagons and people entered the valleys. All the many tribes of the clan of Gaelwydd were coming, thousands of plains nomads congregating for the gathering. *The Gathering*.

And of this gathering, I was to learn much.

The leaders of the many tribes joined together in celebration of the nomadic cause. This celebration, which took place over a period of many nights and which involved the consumption of much cwru, the wine of the nomads, an alcoholic beverage brewed from the varying and many seeds of the grasses of the plains, was conducted away from the other members of the many tribes. In truth, each circle of Llumbeddialls, the collective wagons of each tribe, held similar celebrations of their own. I, being of the tribe of Suresi, drank much cwru also. The headache I carried with me through those vague times removed a great deal of the growing frustration within me. I wanted to be gone. Yet, I must remain until the gathering had ended, out of respect. Therefore, I drank with much of a mind to pass the time as pleasantly as possible.

By the third day of this mass celebration, I had just about had my fill of cwru, and so took myself and my aching head off on my Yag to explore the locality of the mountains. I was gone for two days and a night, and when I returned, the scene had changed somewhat. The party was over, and now a more solemn atmosphere hung over the congregation.

At the Llumbeddiall circle of my own tribe, I was told that the Romad warriors had arrived, and that Huddog himself had ridden in with them. "The trials," as young Eefedd chirped, enthusiastically, "are to begin."

A circle, *the circle* the elders had told me of, was set up in the centre of the mass camp. It consisted of an area some fifty feet in diameter, circular of course, the borders of which were marked out by many tribal javelins arranged side by side. Not one person, Llumbeddiall or Yag occupied the ground within. In fact, all the Yags were grazing out on the plains, a vast mass of animal power that stretched, if one cared to look, almost to the distant horizon. The javelin barrier, nomad spears stuck in the ground at roughly one yard intervals, consisted of a javelin of each of the tribes of Gaelwydd. The chiefs' javelins. There were so many javelins forming this circle, each one belonging to a chief of a tribe, that I was suddenly made aware of the vast number and variety of tribes there must have been. Judging by the vast area of plain we had crossed as a tribe since my arrival amongst the Suresi, and that without encountering another tribe along the way, I was struck then, that Loh must be a massive place, a huge continent. The nomadic plains of the east, in fact, take up only a small percentage of the land mass of Loh.

Members of the tribes, predominantly male, were gathering around the periphery of this circle. Eefedd did not need to persuade me to go along with him and several others of the tribe to gather with them. My curiosity by this time was aroused fully.

So there I stood, amongst perhaps twenty men garbed in blue tunics, our leather belt and harness supporting our weapons, our javelins in our hands. There were many other tribes as I have said already. Members of these other tribes all wore similar costumes and weaponry to ourselves, varying in colour from black to white and incorporating all shades and colours in-between. All the tribal warriors carried javelins.

Luz and Walig looked down upon us, the heat of their rays intense in this Lohvian noon.

Standing next to each javelin, their arms folded across their chests, their backs straight, their heads held high, stood warriors of a different stature than ourselves. Eefedd nudged my arm. "Romad Warriors," he said, excitedly.

Each of these nomads was a Romad Warrior. A man chosen from his tribe for his superior skill with his weapons and his woodcraft, and his hunting ability. These were the cream of the warriors of the nomad tribes.

Each was dressed in a breechcloth of dark red. Their upper torsos supported a harness of black leather crossing the shoulders rather like a baldric. These harness supported an array of scabbarded knives and pouches. Each warrior carried a javelin. Upon their feet they wore finest fentrix-skinned sandals, strapped up as far as the knee. Each warrior's hair, the nomads usually wear theirs long over the shoulders and tied back with a head band, was braided and tied in a small bob at the nape of the neck. About their heads they wore woven bands of black leather, each sporting a pair of feathers, one white, one black.

So far in Loh, I had seen no evidence of the bow, or of the sword. However, each of these Romad Warriors carried at his left hip a long bladed knife that would have served as a short sword, although I was unsure as to their use at that time, and across the left shoulder a bow, unstrung, light and smallish, which I later learned was of compound construction. Across their backs were supported quivers of perhaps a dozen or so arrows. These compound bows, small as they were, were doubtless used for short range work in forest areas, probably for hunting. The arrows, definitely not the long clothyard shaft of the more powerful longbow, common in the old armies of England as you will know, ranged in length from about eighteen inches to two feet. The heads, although I could not see them at that time, varied in design from the simple sharp narrow wedge to the wide multi-barbed head.

Each of these warriors would be a master of the bow, I knew. As he would be a master with the blade, long and short, and the javelin. Doubtless, each could ride his Yag in his sleep, and most skilfully at that. Skilful riders they would have to be to be counted amongst the numbers of the nomad elite, for all nomads I had seen up until then were excellent riders. They posed a most awesome sight, both individually, and lined up there, as they were, around the periphery of the circle of javelins. Such as these had become I.

I myself am descended of cavalry stock, and I pride myself in my own ability to ride. Eefedd had applied to me once the most pleasing of nomad complements when he had termed me as: *One who had been born in the saddle*. The Yag saddle is of simple design, made of leather and soft hide, and is accompanied sometimes, but not always, by a simple bridle amounting to nothing more than a reign and a mouthpiece. In fact, the mouthpiece does not, as in the Earthly way, enter the mouth of the mount at all. The beast is steered by the reign, which is attached to a band that encircles his snout. The saddle possesses a hitch-band, but there are no stirrups at all, and the balance of the rider is achieved much

in the way that was accomplished by the natives of North America, by skill alone. The nomad rider knows and understands his mount to a far greater degree than does a horseman of Earth of any variety know his steed. Also, the communication between the two, nomad and Yag, is sometimes, I have to say, almost bordering on the uncanny. It is as if rider and mount become as one, almost of common thought and design, so well does the nomad comprehend his Yag and vice-versa.

It was testimony to my own riding skills, not having this ability of seeming extra sensory communication possessed by nomad and Yag alike, that I could ride the beasts at all. I can ride, always have done, always will. It is as simple as that. And well, too! I am not one to boast. However, to a man descended from a long line of men of His Majesty the King's Mounted Brigades, riding is not so much a skill, but a common, everyday ability, as you must realise. To me, riding a horse is like walking along the pavement would be for you. It was an almost everyday occurrence throughout my childhood and youth.

Now, I stood next to Eefedd and his kin, peering over the heads and shoulders before us at the circle of warriors and javelins, there in the high valley of the plains of Loh. In the centre of the circle there stood a man.

Such a man, once I had a clearer sight of him, stood out from the assembled warriors, both tribal and Romad. He had that demeanour about him, that air, that certain manner, that lent to him a most powerful presence. That he was none other than Huddog, chief of the entire Clan of Gaelwydd, and of the Romad Warriors was plain to see. He stood some inches over six foot, and even from where I stood, I could tell that he would prove to be a most formidable opponent in any arena of battle or, indeed, life in general. To him had been handed the responsibility of leadership of an entire nation, in truth. On Earth, he would have been a president, or a king, or even an emperor, so vast was his domain, so wide and varying his powers.

He was garbed as were the other Romads, excepting that over his massive shoulders there hung draped a rich cloak of maroon coloured fur, and upon his head he wore a head-dress of many feathers of many colours. This head-dress was not, as you might be thinking, in the manner of the Red Indians of North America. The feathers hung down, creating the illusion and appearance that his hair was of feathers.

He raised a hand, did this great man. He said not a word to the assembled masses.

Now, several warriors of the tribes, the chiefs, in fact, made their way to the periphery of the circle. In one place they gathered, a great assemblage in their own right. One by one, each threw a javelin into the area of the circle. They landed, those deadly shafts, scarce feet from where the warlord of the nomads stood.

He did not flinch.

I stood, entranced and amazed by this.

A warrior came to me through the throng, and so enchanted was I by the proceedings now taking place, I scarce noticed that Eefedd took my javelin from my hand and passed it to this warrior. He took two others from others of my tribe, and then passed into the crowd.

When the casting of the javelins had ceased, some fifty stood in a circle about Huddog. The chiefs then withdrew from the circle's edge, and the Romads again closed ranks to seal the arena.

It might intrigue you at this point that I should use the word arena, however, I do so with hindsight, and as you will see, it is a very apt choice of word.

Names were then called out, names of nomads of the tribes, all, by the look of them, superb examples of this superb race of men. One by one, these men who's names had been called, stepped forward and entered the circle. Each made his way to a javelin standing within the circle. It came as a rude awakening to me as Eefedd tugged at my arm and pushed me forward. He pointed, saying: "Yab, your javelin. Go stand by it."

I shrugged, still not comprehending.

"Vrush," he said, impatiently under his breath, while smiling to me. Vrush is an affectionate Lohvian way of calling a slow-whited friend, stupid, or daft.

"Me?" I said, stupidly.

"Yes." Eefedd pushed me towards the circle of javelins.

As each man made his way to stand next to his own spear within the circle, men who's names had been put forward by their respective chiefs, a great cheer came from his own assembled tribe members. Three men had been *chosen* from our tribe of Suresi, the loudest cheers were for myself. I was shocked by this honour.

I walked over, not glancing at the great man himself, to stand next to my own javelin. A man of my own tribe directed me to it.

I understood then. I had been chosen to be entered from my tribe into the contests that would decide whether or not I would be of suitable material to join the elite Romad Warriors.

I, John Blake, was of the chosen!

I shall not dwell over long on the events of the following days, save to say that I was indeed put to the test, along with the other fifty of the chosen warriors of the many tribes. Warriors took part in the tourney-like events, as did I, with open minds and open hearts. This was no competition, simply a testing of the skills of warriors who's names had been put forward by their chiefs. The main reason my name had been sponsored in this way was because of my skills in the saddle.

The first event took place that very moment soon after we had all entered the circle. The chief of the Romad Warriors took up a place at one side of the circle, amongst the many chiefs of the many tribes.

Knife throwing has never been my forte. I have tried it, on occasion, yet, never can I say that I have ever attained that level of excellence so well exhibited that time by young Eefedd as he shot down the beash from the tree. However, my throwing did not come under too much scrutiny, as I had been chosen for my riding skills, yet, on the day, I did reasonably well.

The use of the bow has been a skill that I have also tried, in the past, to master. With the crossbow, with fellow officers, I had excelled. I am a good shot with both pistol and rifle, and that form of marksmanship had aided the trueness of the bolts I had fired many times back on Earth for sport. The compound nomad bow was a weapon I did reasonably well with, as with the knife, and I went practically unnoticed amongst the fifty along the range that had been set up for the tournament.

It came as a surprise to me that the other two men of my tribe were good shots since, I had never seen bows in evidence. As Eefedd told me later, archery was regarded with

respect, and few men took it up seriously. On the numerous hunts I had joined since my coming amongst the nomads, the bow had not been used since, the hunting had not taken place in any environment where it would have been of any use. The men had simply left bow and arrows at home in their wagons. Practice, amongst the few who used the bow, had evidently been carried out in private. As I have said, the use of the bow is regarded with some respect. Perhaps, it is because of the fame of the marksmanship of the Romad Warriors with the compound bow, that any practice amongst the tribe members had been carried out with as low a profile as possible. They simply had not wanted to brag of their skills openly.

This typically respectful attitude of the plains nomad in general had not been applied to the practice of knife throwing. They are all good at it, men, women and even children. I suspect sometimes that most of them could hit a small target in complete darkness, if they so desired. As with riding the Yag, the nomads skills seem to me sometimes to verge on the borders of the uncanny.

The javelin. Now, there I had better success. In fact, of the fifty, with their own favourite weapon, I was numbered amongst the best ten throwers on the javelin range. From the saddle of a Yag, I was numbered in the top five.

As for riding. Well, I excelled myself, gaining the attention of Huddog himself I was later told, from that day's exploits in the saddle. I shall say no more concerning this for, as I have said, I dislike to crow over my own personal triumphs.

Five long days later, twenty one of the fifty who had been put forward, had attracted the attention of Huddog with their skills. And I, John Blake of Earth, was one of them! And that, as they say, is that. Of those sacred trials in the mountains, I shall say no more.

Before the tribes were to split up and go their separate ways, the twenty one chosen would decide whether to remain with the Romad Warriors of Huddog, or to go back to their tribe. These men would then each have private audience with the Clan chief, and the entire assemblage would disperse again until another year had passed, and another gathering began.

My own audience with Huddog was brief. He asked me a few simple questions, which I answered to the best of my abilities. I told him of my search for Dray Prescott, but Huddog himself had not heard of him. I also asked about the stranger who had come amongst the tribe of Cael. The mentioning of that caused the great chief to raise an eyebrow, but no more. He, like his fellow nomads, told me that *the stranger* had left, heading for the north. I was told by a Romad Warrior later, during the ceremony of initiation, which involved simply the handing out of weapons and clothing, that Huddog had held the man in very high regard. He had been simply the most skilled with javelin, bow, knife and Yag that any man had ever known or heard of. He had ridden off, *galw*.

For you, who would desire to know of such things, *galw* is a word applied to a man who has qualified as a Romad Warrior, and yet wished to become a loner, or a man free of tribal responsibility; neither a Romad Warrior by practice, or a tribesman of the clan. This state is rare, yet, it is regarded as no less honourable than taking the vows of membership of the elite brotherhood. Few become *galw*, none have ever returned.

The Romad Warriors in truth, are a band of elite warriors of the many tribes, joined in a common desire to defend the lands of the nomads. In other words, they guard the northern extremities of the plains. Why this is so, I shall explain in length at a later time.

They no longer partake of the normal tribal functions, instead, they ride the plains, elite, apart, a company of the pure warrior class. They number in the region of several thousand by all my rough reckoning of what I had been told those two seasons I had been a nomad of the central plains.

I bid farewell then to Efedd, Rhanadd, his father, Romaddian, the chief of the tribe, and to the many other friends I had made. I donned my red breechcloth, my Romad harness, baldric-like, complete with the full set of Romad weapons, the sandals, and the head dress complete with one black and one white feather. Over this I wore my tunic, the blue tunic of the Suresi, tied around my waist with my leather belt. Tied to the saddle of my Yag, I carried the old blue tribal band I had worn since my arrival with pride, my fentrix-hide boots, and an assortment of other items including food. Over the beast's rump hung a skin bag of water and another of cwru.

Turning my back on the Plains Nomads then, both tribal and Romad, I, John Blake, Yablak Sananda, a proven Romadic Warrior of the Circle, rode north, galw.

CHAPTER NINE

NORTH RODE I TO ZARGOL

I had turned my back on the only friends I possessed on that strange and barbaric world known to me then as Loh, later as Kregen, and still later, in other lands by yet other names. I rode in search of one, Dray Prescott.

And what of the enigma that was Prescott? As I have said earlier in this account, I first heard of him in dream. And he was here, another Earthman! Stranger things have happened. Was I not on another world myself? A world called Kregen. And had I not passed through a portal that had somehow brought me here? So now, or then rather, as I rode north across the central belt plains of Loh, I believed fully that I was on the trail of a man I had never met. A man I had been sent here quite deliberately to find. But why? All I knew then was that he was here, on Kregen, and I was searching for him.

And.....

Perhaps this Prescott fellow would know how to get back to Earth. If I could but find him, then I too might gain transit back to the world of my birth. I had to try. There was no other way.

I rode on, bound for the unknown Northeast.

My way took me across the plains grasses, through low lines of hills, across a vast range of mountains marching east to west, through a dense and formidable forest, and then into a vastly different type of country altogether.

The trees of that great forest had opened up onto a rolling land of hills and trees and vales and valleys. The climate was noticeably cooler, yet still, warm and pleasant. I had long since exhausted the food supply given me by young Eefedd of the nomads, and had lived off the land as he, and his kin, had taught me to do. Through that vast stretch of wilderness I had come then, unscathed.

My Yag had adapted well to this, to him, strange journey. Yet, I felt that he, as a creature of the plains, was unsuited to this new countryside. He was a beast of the open savannah, the wide, unbroken spaces of the plains. He began to pine, I was sure, for I knew him well by then.

One morning, I awoke beneath the bush under which I slept, next to a babbling brook winding through a small copse of trees. My saddle lay next to me, my weapons, my harness, my water bag. The Yag was gone. I never saw him again. Not cursing his wild, yet in some ways gentle nature, his desire to return to the wide open country of the plains, I ate my breakfast, washed in the stream, and carried on afoot.

No doubt my feelings for the Yag's poor adaptation to these, for us both, new lands, had been well founded. He did not belong there. It was as simple as that. I wished him well in his long journey back south, for I had no doubt that he would attempt, and most likely succeed, in returning there. Poor beast. He had feelings, like all living creatures, and he was basically a herd animal. He longed for his own kind. No, I did not curse his passing from my life.

I walked on into lands I had no knowledge of then, in those far gone days. I walked on, into the land of Zargol on the eastern coast of Loh, and just south of the old empire of Walfarg.

Zargol is a large kingdom bordering the forest north of the central plain belt and extending east as far as the coast where lies the capital city of Zar itself, and north for many a league. Of course, that first time I travelled north through Loh, I knew nothing of all this.

I came to fertile, farmed land, laid out in patches, small cottages and barns dotting the landscape. I avoided all of these. A small village here and there also broke up the landscape. I saw people, working the fields, tending to animals, small flocks of grazing beasts, rather like a woolly deer, I later learned were called floctrix, the Kregish equivalent of our Earthly sheep.

I saw no roads.

The occasional small, open wagon could be seen, pulled by a beast I will tell you of at a later time, crossing fields and meadows, led by short, stocky people who appeared peasant-like from a distance. Herds of animals, rather like the Yag of the southern plains, but smaller and short-haired, also grazed the land. Grain crops grew in cultivated patches little above two or three acres in size. Few fences and hedges could I see, although the occasional line of trees broke up the rolling acres, and groves also, of beash and other fruits.

This was an agricultural land the like of which I had not even dreamed existed on Kregen. I thought of the *stone tents* the nomads had told me about, and I carried on, hopeful that I would eventually come to a town or even a small city. I thought of the iron-tipped weapons of the nomads, and I realised that the source of that mined and smelted metal lay somewhere before me.

What wonders lay ahead of me? What hazards? What dangers? What terrors? I had no way of knowing then. Ah, how I lament that long gone day I came into the land of Zargol.

For days I travelled north, keeping out of sight of local farmers and farm-hands as best I could, avoiding the villages and settlements I came across along the way. This became more and more difficult the farther north and east I went, for, the land changed in complexion as I went, and the villages became bigger, and these small town-sized locations grew bigger.

I encountered roads now. Rough dirt tracks cut between cultivated fields and the occasional wooded area. I travelled more and more at night, the moons my constant companions. The season was changing. Far to the south, the nomads would be travelling once again from west to east, and the rains would be falling. Here, further north, the climate had a most Autumnal feel to it. The nights grew chill and damp. I slept uncomfortably, cold, wet, miserable.

One early morning, as Luz peeped above the horizon and the sky turned a wonderful golden pink, I dared to sneak into a small farmyard and pilfer a long, brown cloak that hung from a washing line. On the ground beneath where other clothes hung, I left a large goffalox I had brought down with a lucky arrow the evening before. I am no thief, and doubtless the owner of the cloak would not be pleased, but at least my conscience was clear. How naive that virtuous act seems to me now in hindsight. A goffalox, as no doubt you are wondering, is a birdfowl, rather after the fashion of a chicken, except that it possesses a rather more vicious temperament in its wild state, and is about twice the size of the average farmyard hen you and I will have seen on Earth.

The cloak was of woven wool with a cloth lining of a material rather like cotton, except more coarse in texture and manufacture. A large hood complemented the item, as well as a pocket either side into which I could plunge my cold hands on dark, wet nights. The acquisition of this garment would also serve to conceal my nomadic warrior garb from any chance encounters with locals, which seemed more and more likely the farther north I progressed.

As for those locals, the peasants wore a one-piece, smock-like garment and went bare-footed from what I had seen at a distance. Occasional sightings of people wearing tunics and boots, and the rare pair of pantaloons-type garment, completed the picture of the *fashion scene* for the peasant and the town folk in southern Zargol. The Zargolian or Zargolese peasant's lot is indeed a poor one, as I later learned. In the south of the kingdom, the poorer south by far, the people are referred to as Zargolese. In the north, in the prosperous areas near the eastern coast of Loh, they define themselves as Zargolian. The difference is purely a class distinction between rich and poor.

On I went, encountering now the occasional unavoidable passing of locals in both the countryside and along the muddy streets and lanes of town and village through which I passed. Now the Winter rains were beginning to fall this far north, cold rain assisted by bitterly chill winds at night were turning the surrounding countryside into muddy quagmires in places. The harvests had been reaped by now, and the open fields were becoming a hazardous place to pass in the darkness of night. Therefore, the open dirt tracks, reinforced by constant traffic of both wheel and foot to harden them and make them less susceptible to the weather, were the best way to travel without getting soaked through or caked with mud.

Likewise, the woods and open spaces of the countryside no longer provided good places to spend the night. The trees had mostly lost their leaves by then, and also their ability to shield one from the cold winds. I was forced more and more to seek the shelter of the civilisation into which I was becoming more entwined the farther north I went. The numerous barns, with their warm stacks of hay, were now my chief bedchambers.

I was courting the land of Zargol as a recluse, but I knew I would not be able to succeed for much longer. Already I could smell the salt of the sea to the north, and also suspected that the stone-flagged roads I now travelled, could only lead to one kind of place: a city. Sooner or later, I was going to be noticed as an outsider, as a stranger. What that would encompass, I did not, at that time, know. I would have to either turn back, or learn more of the ways of Zargol.

It was on one dismal and dreary morning, as I awoke and peered from the lofty hayloft in which I had spent a cold and miserable night, as the rain teemed down onto the grey world, that I had my first glimpse of the soldiery of Zargol.

The clattering of hooves had awoken me. Gingerly, I peeped over the edge of the pile of bales. Into the farmyard came a troop of warriors mounted on those beasts I have already hinted at but not yet explained. There were six of them, five ordinary troopers, clad in mail, tight-fitting helms and yellow cloaks, their weapons and iron tackle clattering. At their head, rode a man with the immediate and obvious bearing of an officer. He wore no mail, no armour, and his steed was as white as pure driven snow. The other five mounts were a drab brown in colour.

This officer, dressed in a gaudy long coat of pale blue, bordered with gold gilding, a trim pair of cream trousers, complete with pale blue cavalry stripes, knee-length black leather riding boots, a wide-brimmed hat cocked arrogantly to one side, complete with a panoply of blue and white feathers, and a flowing cloak of royal blue, raised a sabre above his head and called a halt to the invasion of the dingy yard and, I might add, my fitful slumber.

The officer commanded two of his men to dismount, and in a language I could not understand, snapped orders to them. The two troopers of Zargol proceeded to the door of the small cottage opposite the rough timber barn in which I hid. They banged on this door, and after a pause of mere moments, kicked it in most savagely. They disappeared inside. Meanwhile, the officer had walked his *stali*ax over to the entrance, dismounted, and followed his men inside. The remaining three troopers had drawn their swords, and waited.

A *stali*ax, the common mount of many developed kingdoms of North-eastern Loh as I was to discover in my travels, is a fine beast indeed. In size they are similar to the horse of my own earthly experience. However, apart from a rough similarity in overall outline, there the similarity ends. They possess a fine, sleek body, almost feline in nature, yet not low to the ground; four powerful legs, suggesting speed and endurance; a spade-shaped head tapering to a snout rather like that of a dog; a stubby, flat tail; and a coat of fine, close-cropped hair.

I have mentioned that I saw beasts pulling wagons in Southern Zargol. These too were *stali*axes, yet of the bulkier, stockier and altogether larger variety used for haulage and burden carrying. They are mostly always dark brown, these larger beasts. The saddle variety varies in colour from white, as I had already seen, right through grey, chestnut, mahogany, and black.

After about two minutes at most, the two troopers emerged from the dwelling dragging a man between them. The officer followed. The man, who appeared to be of peasant stock, was thrown bodily over one of the trooper's *stali*axes behind the rider, and tied down. The officer and his men then re-mounted, and in a flurry of powerful legs, the *stali*axes carried the officer, his five men, and the prisoner from the farmyard.

From the cottage ran a barefoot woman wearing a brown dress all torn and ragged. Her hair was dishevelled and drab, and she screamed as she ran. I could plainly see a trickle of blood running from the corner of her mouth. In her wake came three urchins of various ages attired in rags. The woman came to a halt at the entrance to the poor farmyard, a rough gate of timbers, standing in a puddle of water. To her knees she sank, sobbing and

tearing at her hair. About her, crying and pulling at her, crowded her three children. It was a sight most tragic, I hardly need add.

I came down from the hay loft, wary that the soldiers might return, yet, as a most times sympathetic man, concerned for this humble woman and her scruffy brood. Why had this poor farmer been taken away? What was it he had done that merited such rough treatment? I knew it was none of my business, and common sense told me that I should not get involved with anything that might equate to me risking trouble with those apparently merciless troopers and their callous officer, yet, as I have said, I am mostly of a sympathetic nature.

An hour or so later, I sat at a rough table sipping strong brown tchai. Opposite, her face still streaked with tears, sat the woman, occasionally weeping, but now somewhat calmer. In a tongue I could not understand, she poured out her woes, as about her, hung her three children in their tattered rags, their faces as dirty and tear-stained as their tragic mother's.

CHAPTER TEN

ZAR

Tchai, the universal drink of the people of Zargol, if I have not already explained, is rather like tea, yet stronger, and tangier. It is made of the tchai bush leaf, and, overall, is a drink of many and varying qualities. It is brewed like tea, using boiling water, with a little sugar added, but never milk. This tchai I drank in the cottage of Lemka, wife of her arrested/abducted husband, Mear, was of the poorer quality. She had no sugar, for Mear, like all his kind, was poor.

Lemka sobbed, her shoulders shaking spasmodically, her eyes shinning wet in her grief. The words of her tongue were totally unknown to me. In this, I mean that she spoke a language different to that of the plains nomads. However, that the two languages shared the same common origin was possible. The vowels and consonants were obviously of the same alphabet, although Lemka did not apply any of the throaty sounds employed by the Romadic wanderers. Rather, her language was slightly more refined, and perhaps more developed. I recognised syllables here and there, that was all.

I spoke to her in my own adopted nomadic tongue, but apart from a look of slight surprise, she shook her head. I even tried English, a little French too, and the smattering of German I knew, but the results, of course, were the same. She could not understand me any more than I could understand her.

The language Lemka spoke was Zargolese, the language of the people of the south of her country, and, also of the poor of Zargol as a whole. Zargolian, spoken by the rich city-dwellers, and the wealthy land owners, and also by the military and the merchant class, was not, I learned, so much different, rather, more refined and advanced.

I spent a dwazan-night at the farm of Lemka, and in that time, I learnt enough of her language to learn what it had been that Mear had done to merit his arrest. A zan-night is ten nights. Dwa means two. A dwazan-night means twenty nights. A dwab-night means twelve nights. These expressions are in the nature of our own fortnights, but are more frequently used, since no equivalent of the Earthly month has been adopted. Little wonder really, since the orbits of the moons of Kregen are complex and esoteric, and also not conducive in the measure of time. This rule, I learned a lot later on, is not universal to Kregen entirely, which will be explained more fully with the passing of time.

I mention the language of Zargol being a more sophisticated version of the Romadic used by my nomadic friends of the plains. This is not strictly true, however, it will suffice in way of explanation to you to imply that I learned more easily due to a simple fact I

mentioned previously, and which I take for granted myself in these latter days as I write this: my mind had been tampered with for the explicit purpose of aiding me in such matters. I speak of course of that meeting on the banks of the Thames and of the device used to implant information into my subconscious mind: the helmet device. This device had not only implanted information pertaining to language, it had also, to a certain extent, implanted information regarding custom, history, society, geography, and knowledge of a certain man named Dray Prescott. Of course, the information only became available to me as I needed it, and was likely triggered by first-hand experience of the matter in question, but, nonetheless, it was all stored somewhere in my head like a dictionary of Kregish data ready for use.

There were also the dreams, in which I met the white-robed Yahweh of the Elohim, but these devices, at that time, I also attributed to being somehow conjured up by the artificial augmentation of my mind's stored information. It was not until much later on that I learned the significance of those dreams, and, more to the point, Yahweh and the Elohim.

I spent twenty days then helping Lemka to run her farm. It was all I could do really, and was not simply an act of mercy. I had realised by then that I was not going to get anywhere walking around Zargol, dressed in my strange garb, hiding in barns at night. I knew that I was going to have to learn of the country to pass convincingly through it. To achieve my objective there, to find out about Dray Prescott, and where he was, I was not going to be able to do so as a complete stranger and foreigner. I had to learn the language of the country. Therefore, as I aided Lemka in the milking of the Yags, and the making of cheese with that milk, the farm's only source of income in the cold, rainy season, I did so with a view to bettering my chances of survival. After all, having seen the fate of Mear, a native of Zargol, I could only but wonder at how such troupers that had carried him off would treat me, a foreigner, possibly in their eyes, an interloper, or even an invader.

It was well that I had taken that view, for, Zargol would prove to be a most dangerous country for a stranger to pass through, suspicious as the ruling regime was. I would doubtless have been assumed a spy, and not being able to speak their tongue at all, probably hanged in innocence of the crime they accused me of. Zargol was at war with a neighbouring kingdom. Times were dangerous enough, even for the natives.

Mear had been accused of not paying his taxes. In the case of a farmer, taxes took the form of produce, which, in those times, were so badly needed to feed the army. War had resulted in a raising of taxes. Crops had not been good that past season. The harvest had been poor, Mear had not been able to pay his taxes, for he had not the produce to do so. Lemka told me that to ensure his release from almost certain slavery in the capital city, Zar, she would have to work her guts out to produce a goodly supply of cheese to make amends for those unpaid taxes. With my help, her farm had produced enough cheese by then for that purpose.

I left Lemka's farm then in the driving seat of Mear's wagon, aboard, a goodly supply of cheese in payment of unpaid taxes; pulling that wagon, one of the short-haired variety of Yag. I was bound for Zar. I was to locate Mear, hand over the cheese, and so release him from his sentence of slavery. In those times of war in Zargol, with so many of the young men abroad, there was much work to be done in the capital city.

Zargol was a slaver nation, and therefore, needed only a slight excuse to carry people off into slavery. However, there were also laws, and slaves such as Mear, a Zargolese native, sentenced to slavery for non-payment of taxes, would one day be released when that sentence had been served. As for slaves from other kingdoms, such would not apply. They would die in slavery, if not of their harsh labours, then of old age. I can tell you I was more than a little worried as I rode slowly towards the capital. Lemka had guessed, as she had not been told, that her husband would have been put into slavery for two seasons at least. In that time, the farm would collapse altogether, and he, and she, even their children, would likely become slaves forever. I was therefore paying well for my keep over that last twenty days and nights on the farm, and for my hasty and very rough education in the Zargolese language and ways.

Three days later, the hazy outline of the capital city of Zar came into view. The sea, shining pure blue in the background, pushed cold winds over the land. At this latitude, far to the north of the equator, the climate was considerably colder in this rainy season, than it was on the central plains, colder by far even, than the southern reaches of Zargol.

A huge bay extends inwards along the Eastern seaboard of Loh north of the central plain and south of Walfarg, and it is here that the capital city of Zargol, the sprawling seaport of Zar, lies. The climate of Kregen is generally hotter than that of Earth. Where Loh lies on the equator, and the vast jungles of Chem roam free and wild, it is unfit for human habitation, and people simply do not live there at all; they cannot, or so I have since been informed. Only in the cooler, rainy season, can men investigate or cross that vast and harsh region of the globe. Roughly speaking then, the climate was rather similar to what one would expect to find in Southern England in mid Autumn.

I sat my seat as the Yag pulled the wagon down that stone-flagged road to the walls of Zar, my nerves on edge. There I was, a man of Earth, on some strange and hostile other-world, riding up to the gates of a city reputed to house the cruellest ruling men of Loh, with nothing more than a cart-load of cheese to pay my way.

My objective, my search for Dray Prescott, seemed no nearer a conclusion than it had since my first day on Kregen. I had stepped out of some stone portal that had transported me across a vast gulf of space, and I had opened my eyes on another world. All I had to go on was that he inhabited that same world. I assumed of course, that I had been placed in a region of the world of Kregen where Prescott could be found. Naturally, if I had been sent there by supermen or by the gods, then those entities, surely, would not have been foolish enough to have put me down on the opposite side of the globe. Loh itself, just one continent of Kregen, is a big place. If he was in Loh, that was, if he had ever been there at all, he could have been several hundred, even thousand miles away to the north, south, east or west. Lemka had known a little of the geography of her world. She had described the vast extent of Zargol to me, yet, I knew that kingdom to be vastly smaller than the Central Plains, and I had seen only a mere fraction of that seemingly eternal area. How could I ever expect to find this Dray Prescott character without more concise directions as to his location? But then, I have not revealed everything to you, the reader of this chronicle, at this time, else a story of it could not reasonably be made. There are certain details I have so far withheld, but only pertaining to what I was to do when I eventually found him. But, in God's truth, you now know as much as I did then as to the whereabouts of Dray Prescott.

Also, there was the obscure plan, somewhere in the back of my mind, that he, Mr.Prescot, would know how to get back to Earth. If that was so, then perhaps he had already done so. Perhaps I was to be stranded on Kregen for the rest of my life.

Perhaps?

It must have been a surety, a fact.

The way I felt in those days, I would doubtless never see the world of my birth again.

I shook my head as I pulled on the reigns and the wagon creaked to a halt beneath the towering gatehouse. Such great plans! I was here to find a farmer, to release him from slavery. If I could not achieve even that, with the payment stacked on the wagon upon which I sat, then what could I hope to achieve of my far more loftier goals?

“State your business at the gates of Zar. Gretch!” The voice demanded from above. “Speak, or I will spit you were you sit, on your miserable peasant wagon!”

My acquaintance with the ways of Zar, capital of the kingdom of Zargol, had begun.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SOME CHEESE FOR THE COMMANDANT

To call someone a gretch, is to liken them to a dung-beetle. For that is the name applied to such a creature on Kregen. But, to forcibly remove one such from the seat of his wagon and fling him to the hard ground, well, that is to treat him as dung itself.

They had emerged from the postern gate, its creaking hinges giving evidence that this smaller valve set in the main gate was rarely used. There had been four of them, warriors dressed in leather harness. They had spoken the native Zargolian, as opposed to the rural Zargolese I protested my innocence in.

That, in its own simple way, was the reason they treated me such. To them, I was a farmer, or peasant. It was the way I wanted them to take me. Rising from the ground, I heard the harsh, grating command of the gate commander just as one of his men attempted to put me back down again.

The three gate guards stepped back.

I dusted myself off.

“Who are you and what do you want?” snapped the officer, as he approached me.

“I have brought payment for a slave’s release,” I said, honestly.

The officer stopped short two paces from me. His breath stank of spice, and his neatly trimmed beard also bore evidence supporting that he had not long eaten, for it was stained with food. “Payment? Slave?” he bellowed. “We do not release slaves here in Zar, gret.”

Gret is a slightly milder form of verbal abuse than is the obnoxious gretch.

I pulled back a little from his offensive face.

“Pull off the covers!” he commanded his men. They stepped forward, removing the wagon’s covering of sacking.

“Cheese,” said one of the men.

The officer eyed me meaningfully and then walked over to see for himself. I heard the sound he made as he licked his lips. He lifted out a round of cloth-covered cheese and brought it over to me. Opening the wrapping he broke a piece off and stuffed it into his mouth. “Good stuff,” he said, crumbs flying in all directions.

I felt distinctly sick.

“Who’s this slave, then?”

“A man named Mear,” I replied.

The officer sucked in a breath as he waved to one of his men to unload more of the cheese and carry it through the gate. "Put a good tenth of it in the gate tower lock-up," he said. "And, for Lurg's sake, open the gates!"

One of his men drew a short sword which he held at my back. The other two carried on unloading cheese. The gates opened.

More soldiers could now be seen loitering inside the gate tower opening. The officer pointed at one. "Move this gretch forsaken, wagon." He shouted. Taking another mouthful of cheese he indicated I enter the city, and wagon, Yag, peasant and soldiers alike went inside.

The massive bronze-banded timber gates shut with a clanging of iron hinges and timber bolts. A huge beam of timber was lifted back into place by ropes attached above the gates and hauled by two Yags at either side.

The officer belched his contentment of the cheese. "Good stuff," he said for the second time, licking his lips. "Now, get back up in your seat and one of my men will take you to the slave compounds."

I was not checked for weapons, neither was I questioned further at the gates. The incompetence brought a slight smile to my face as I rode along through the narrow streets of Zar, a gate guard standing amongst the cheeses, or what was left of them.

The city of Zar is at best described as a dingy collection of grey buildings fronting narrow, badly maintained, cobbled streets, none of which, apart from the few dull plazas, are wide enough to take more than two decent wagons abreast. The city oozes antiquity of the worst kind. Decaying old monolith piles of grey and black stone confronted me everywhere. From the very streets themselves pervaded a stench that spoke of dirt and disease, lack of sanitation or sewer.

Not one street I saw ran straight or even. Buildings large and small cluttered about each other as if propping each other up. There were no flowers, the populace dressed as grey as their monuments, and all surrounded by an oppressive wall that rose higher than any building in the entire city, except, I was told later, the imperial palace where sat the ruling man of Zargol himself, Ransith Lurg, Oh Great Wise One, or Oh Great Obese One, as he was affectionately dubbed amongst the slaves and the poorer classes. Oh they mocked him, all right, yet, over them all, both rich and poor, both military, savant and merchant, he held the terrible power of the supreme state autocrat. His power was limitless and almighty in the city of Zar, and he held sway over them all with the merciless, iron hand that was his massive, well looked after, pampered, and over fed army. Those that laughed did so behind their hands, or in the shadows, or in strictest confidence, for there was no power greater than that of Ransith Lurg in all of Zargol and its many conquered territories.

We arrived duly at the compound of the slavers, a massive pile of dingy, brown masonry behind which sprawled a most unseemly vista of cages and penned in areas. Around all stretched a fence of iron and timber, and at strategic points, guard towers rose over all to look down on the squalor and the misery. I pulled the wagon up outside the main entrance and was directed by a guard to move it to a side entrance.

My escort/guard threw a couple of cheeses to the guards as we approached the entrance on foot. "Here," he snapped, "go to that guard there and tell him your business."

I did so, noticing that the soldier who had accompanied me lay down in the back of my wagon and closed his eyes. Ah, the army life of Zar! So regimental, so proud.

I might well mock, having been an officer in the greatest army a world could produce, yet, the vast army of Zargol was all-powerful as to sheer numbers if not a great purveyor of discipline. They held the city and the kingdom in sway for the Great Obese One.

I was escorted inside the slaver compound by a guard from the main entrance. He bade me wait in an ante-room with several other desperate looking men and women, doubtless people who brought similar cases to my own to be heard. There were no chairs, and most people sat back down on the floor once the soldier had left. It was sorrowful sight. Cowed humanity. And these poor souls weren't even slaves!

About ten minutes later the guard returned. "Wait here," he snapped at me and wandered off. I wondered if there were any soldiers in Zar who did not snap each sentence out, and then I thought of the city gate officer who was rather partial to cheese. My cheese! I wondered how much would be left once I got out of that terribly depressing place called the Slave Compound of Zar.

It must have been two hours and no less later when I was eventually called forward. There was no record kept of names, and no apparent queuing order at all. People were seen at random, regardless of how long they had waited. I tended to think it might have had something to do with the size and speciality of the bribes they had paid to enter in the first place. I noticed that women seemed to have a generally shorter wait. The whole place turned my stomach, I can tell you.

I was taken to a small, untidy and dirty office, behind the rickety table of which sat a most pompous looking individual who ignored my presence for a full five minutes before looking up. He attended to paperwork, idly. His kind infest authoritative positions two worlds over, and more besides in all likelihood. They always had; they always would.

It is an irony indeed, that the smallest of minds oftentimes succeed to positions of rank which involve power over helpless people. I could just imagine the attitude that this filthy specimen who sat before me had to his men, and especially to those who were unfortunate enough to be counted amongst the many slaves of that grim city.

At last, the dough-bag looked up.

The guard, who had stood with me in the office, coughed.

Dough-bag behind the desk waved him away with his hand.

The guard left, closing the door behind him.

In a very well practised pomposity, he said in strictest Zargolian, with an arrogance born from habit: "Well?" He then looked down again at his papers.

"I stated my case simply, in as few words as I could. For, although there are many similarities between Zargolese and Zargolian, the difference mainly being ones of accent and extent of vocabulary, I did not want to let this pretentious blob get the better of my new-found and obviously limited use of his language.

He looked up again when I had finished, and pretending not to have heard, asking: "What did you say?"

I spoke again, explaining about Mear and that I had brought payment for his release. I remained patient.

"Hmm. What kind of cheese is it. How much have you?"

I got the distinct impression he, too, liked cheese.

“Just cheese,” I said. “A wagon full the last time I saw it.”

“Is it good?” he asked, at last able to look me in the eyes for more than a passing moment. I could see his temper would be a short one. And nasty.

“Good enough,” I said, calmly, refusing to bend to this man’s petty authority. I have never been a lover of authority, except of course, where it is well deserved and honourable. I would have dearly loved to say: “More than good enough for the likes of you!” The produce of Lemka’s farm was vastly superior to this *gretch’s* requirements, in my opinion.

He tried to out-stare me then, failing at last as he looked purposefully down at his papers. The look in his eyes, that nasty, pig-eyed expression that tells of this kind of man’s weaknesses, his perverted reasons for seeking power over others in the first place, boiled with contempt for me. He looked up again.

“Farmer are you?”

“The cheese is outside,” I said, evenly, ignoring his question.

“And you are inside!” he snapped, again trying to out-stare me and failing. “Watch that you don’t remain so.”

This was a direct threat. A Threat to my freedom.

“Shall I bring the cheese in while Mear is brought?” I asked. I was pushing my luck, I knew, but I felt a bluff would work with this weak man who hid behind his desk.

“No!” snapped the commandant, for such I guessed him to be. No one had said as much, there was no sign of rank on his desk or uniform. Like I said, inefficient lot, the *good ol’* Zargolian army.

I stood waiting. Still patient.

“I will have my men bring in the produce,” said the officer presently. “You may return tomorrow to hear *my* decision.”

This was daylight robbery. “I shall bring the cheese back tomorrow,” I said. “Perhaps,” and I smiled, although it was a strain to rick my lips back, “you could have Mear ready for me to collect.”

He didn’t like that.

“The wagon has already been brought inside the compounds,” he said. “Come back tomorrow. Unless,” he added, cunningly, “you would like to remain here in the meantime. Leave now!”

He turned his attention back to his silly paperwork.

I don’t know quite why I did what I did next. I just did. Perhaps it was because I detested his type so much, the injustice, the insult to common decency. I reached over the desk and took him by the scruff of the neck.

“You will bring Mear out, now!” I said, my voice low, “or I will break your damned silly neck.” I squeezed harder.

His eyes popping, the officer tried to stand.

He failed.

He nodded as best he could.

“Any trickery,” I said, “and. . .” I made a noise with my mouth and drew a throwing knife from within my cloak. “Understand?”

His face, now a sickly hue of purple, and I swear, more than a little bit green also, looked fit to burst. He nodded again and hissed between clenched teeth: "I . . can't . . breath. . ."

I relaxed the pressure.

"I will let go in a moment. You," and I stared hard into his ugly, puffed-up eyes, "you will collect yourself together and call one of your men. You will act as if nothing is out of place. You will tell your man to get Mear. Understand?"

He nodded, pathetically.

I let go.

Immediately his puffy hands reached up to his puffy, red neck.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Yes," he confirmed, avoiding my eyes altogether.

I had surprised myself in my proficiency with the language of Zargol, although, I did use the odd Romadic word here and there. I am sure he understood me though, simply from my actions. I stuffed the small blade into my sleeve, making sure he saw me do it.

"It would take but one instant to kill you," I said, menacingly. "Now, call the guard."

He did so, a small bell on his desk serving the purpose.

Despite my determination to fight all in Zar in one go if I had to, for I was in a foul mood in truth, my heart missed a beat as the guard knocked and entered.

"Bring me a slave by the name of Mear," snapped the officer.

"Who, sir?" asked the guard.

"A slave called Mear. A farmer. Get him. Now!"

"But, sir. There must be several slaves by the name of Mear here in the compound."

"Then bring them all, man. Now go!"

The guard left hurriedly, and doubtless, a little confused.

"How do you know he's here?" I queried the officer.

"I don't. But you seem to think he is!"

I shook my head, and waited for the guard to return with as many men called Mear as he felt wise to do.

Uncertainty began to creep through my mind.

CHAPTER TWELVE

REVENGE OF THE GRIM CITY

There were no slaves by the name of Mear brought to the commandant's office. Also, there must have been fools other than myself who had tried the odd trick or so like mine in the past. A long while after the guard had left, he returned. He knocked the door, entered quickly, and shut it behind him. He looked to his commandant, ignoring me completely.

"I have found no slave by that name, sir. There was one such, but he was shipped out to the mine, just this morning."

The commandant inhaled a deep breath through his nostrils. He then looked up at me, standing there, beginning to feel like a fool. "There you have it, farmer," he said. "You may take your blessed cheese, and leave."

"Where is this mine?" I asked, trying to sound a little meek in front of the guard.

"North, along the coast, it is well known. You should not have too much trouble finding it. Now, I am a busy man. I have work to do."

I nodded, taken in by his ruse entirely.

The guard said, "Come," and I followed him out of the room, completely convinced by his and the commandant's attitude. Once outside the door, the guard slammed it shut fast. He escorted me to an exit at the side of the building. "Your wagon, we have moved it out of the way. Out there." He pointed.

I said nothing and passed out of the exit, the two guards either side unmoving. There stood the wagon. The Yag was gone. I walked over, beginning to sense deception. I looked over the side. Empty!

I turned, and strangely, I was not surprised to see that several men now stood, their short swords drawn, facing me across the yard at the side of the compound building.

A laugh came from above them. A nasty laugh. I looked up. The commandant stood upon a balcony, leaning upon the rail, a look of gloating triumph written across his contemptuous features.

There were six warriors, typical Zargolian troopers like the ones I had seen at the farm. Like the ones who made up the guard at the gate and here, at the slaver compounds.

I had little doubt that they intended killing me outright. I threw off the cloak Lemka had given me, revealing the blue Romad tunic and red breechcloth beneath. I rapidly loosed the three remaining throwing knives in my baldric sheaths and pulled the fourth from my sleeve where it still fitted snugly.

I stepped back, and a reach underneath the wagon rewarded my hand with the comforting feel of my bow and my throwing javelin, my crox. I pulled them out from where they had been strapped, along with my quiver, in which, seven arrows remained. I passed the quiver over my shoulder and strung the bow. The crox I leaned on the wagon behind me.

The six advanced, warily. At their backs now, several more crowded through the exit. I nocked an arrow, raised the bow, and aimed. Galw was I, a Romad Warrior, galw yes, but still a Romad warrior of the tribe of Suresi and the clans of the central plains.

“I wish to go in peace,” I shouted, my Zargolian rough at best.

The odd snicker and smirk came from behind the six who advanced, although I noticed that none of them showed any signs that they thought this situation humorous. They could see the bow in my hands, the arrow nocked.

“Let me pass, and I will be spared killing any of you.”

At this, the commandant roared a command from his *safe* position: “Kill the Gretch!”

I raised my bow and the commandant reeled back, an arrow protruding from his vile body. I hoped I had killed him.

Still the six advanced, their grim faces now only too clear to me. I loaded again, and fired without hesitation. One of them fell, a shaft protruding from his left leg above the knee. Still they came on. I loaded again. Another fell, this time with a shaft through the right eye. The first shot I had intentionally intended to injure only. The second had hit its intended target also, they showed no sign of backing off.

I was then aware that each carried a shield, a small, round buckler-type effort, made of wood as far as I could fathom, and banded with bronze or iron. Each held his close to his chest or out before him. I could fight men like these all day, but I only had four arrows left and more men were now advancing, angrily now. They all spread out, reducing, or so they thought, their chances of getting hit by my shots.

Another fell, a shaft through his guts just below the shield. A charge, I knew, would end this suddenly. I looked to left and right, more men had emerged from the building, they were spreading out, surrounding me.

Rapidly, I shot my last three arrows in quick succession. Three men fell. Two doubtless dead, another squirming on the ground, screeching and claspng his neck.

Still they came on.

I took my bow and passed it over my shoulder.

In my right hand I held the throwing knife.

With my left I loosened that long nomad knife in its scabbard. I wondered if it would serve as a short sword against the much heavier blade the guards hefted, or whether it might snap with the first clash of steel.

Looking up at the building, I wondered why these men did not use bows themselves. Perhaps they possessed none? It was just possible. I scanned my immediate surroundings, rapidly, turning about in a complete circle. As yet, not one of the guards stood to my rear. At that point, I began to seriously doubt these men as warriors at all.

One particularly large individual, across his face a nasty red scar from some past encounter, advanced closer then, hefting his sword. I raised the small throwing knife, took aim and threw in one smooth motion, and he fell silently to the ground. A look up indicated that some of the guards now hesitated. Some held back.

However, even if they were possessed of simple minds, they must surely realise that I was running out of ammunition. I drew another throwing knife in my right hand, then another in my left. It could not go on like that forever, sooner or later, they would close and I would fall beneath their many blades. Their problem, however, was that each of them was reluctant, understandably so, of course, to be amongst those to die before that happened.

Another knife flashed, and then I transferred the left-hand knife to my right and threw again. I am not a Romad Warrior for nothing. Two more died there in the muddy courtyard.

“This is a high price to pay for a bit of old cheese,” I shouted at them. They did not laugh. I threw my last knife, took up my crox in my left hand, and drew my long knife with my right. This would be interesting.

At this point, seeing that I was out of projectiles, except for the javelin of course, they began to advance more bravely. I could now count their number accurately. There were twelve of them left in the yard, not that that did me much good, there were doubtless more inside. I could not kill them all.

I stood there waiting, wishing I sat a good ol’ nag from back at the stables, a sabre in my grasp, and about fifty of my lads at my back. The mounted brigades of my ancestors’ old regiment would have sorted all the Zargolian troopers in Zar and beyond in less than an hour. I was sure of that. If only Barney, Smithy, or good ol’ Blakey were here now, I thought. Barney would have sorted this rabble with his pet rapier and main gauche.

But I was alone. There were no old comrades at my side, eager to join the press of sweating agony that is every battle for the men who both live and die through them.

I was alone!

As they began to advance again, I looked about, trying not to appear too desperate. Fear in the eyes is a sure invitation for a foeman to make the killing charge and strike.

It was then I spotted the small group of staliaxes being led across the far side of the yard by two or three hands, and only lads at that.

It was time to take a risk!

There were three men between me and open ground in the direction of the staliaxes. Suddenly, I turned to face them. It was my turn to advance upon them now. The first felt the cold metal shaft of the thrust crox through his ribs before he had realised what ailed him, the second fell to the thrown long knife. I rushed on, casting the javelin at the third of these human barriers. Running, I reached down and grasped the short sword of he who had taken the long knife in the throat. Passing the dying man who clutched in vain the long, slim shaft that protruded from his belly, his life’s blood pouring over his desperate hands, I grasped a second short sword. Before the others had realised what I was about, I was legging it in haste for the nearest of the staliaxes.

A crowd of yelling men hard on my heels, I eventually reached the beasts. The lads ran off, my war-cries stirring their blood. I grasped a staliax by his neck and leapt to its back. His head turned, teeth snapped, and I rapped the beast across the nose with the flat of a sword.

Realising that I was the master, sure handed as I am with riding beasts, the staliax consented to this intrusion of his afternoon exercise. The beast wore no saddle, there was

only a light reign for leading, yet I spurred it in the flanks with my fentrix-hide boots, and he tore off across the yard at speed.

It took all of but a moment to realise what a fabulous creature these staliaxes are as riding animals. I took the reign more firmly, yet not too roughly, and goaded my new mount in a direction opposite to that of the fast approaching warriors. I dug my heels in, and the beast exploded in a burst of incredible speed.

There was I, John Blake, descendant of the stuff of His Majesties Light Brigade, Yablak Sananda, Romad Warrior of the Central plains, taking full advantage of the staliax's fine, sleek body, almost feline in nature, yet not too low to the ground, racing across the dirt floor of the yard; four powerful legs, pumping speed and promising endurance; the spade-shaped head tapering to a dog-like snout gulping huge draughts of air, steadily, easily; the stubby, flat tail, held out straight behind; the fine, close-cropped hair of its hide, grasped between my legs. The mahogany beauty raced on, while I rode bareback, swinging the Zargolian short swords about in the air, one in each hand.

The only problem then, a way out of the enclosure, and I did not doubt at that moment the beast would carry me onwards forever, so superb a creature was it. I could have ridden all the way back to the plains without stopping or even slowing, and I almost believed the staliax would have accomplished it too. However, that little jaunt across the yard of the slaver compound was to be of far shorter duration than even I could have dared dread.

A warrior leapt out from somewhere to block my path, I pulled hard on the reign to change direction, and the beast turned an ankle, and I was off, sprawling on the hard packed dirt floor.

Before I could rise, stunned as I was, several hands were laid on me, my swords were pulled from my grasp, and I was knocked almost into unconsciousness, so severe was that beating, and so many blows did I endure.

They had me, the hateful gretches, and it would be death for me.

Or would it be worse than that?

They would not allow me to escape revenge that easily, surely not.

Torture!

Slavery!

Slavery of the worst kind would be my lot.

I was doomed.

One last vicious blow, my head swam momentarily, and then the blackness of Notor Zan himself engulfed me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A SLAVE IN THE MINES WAS I

My head hurt with the very redness of Luz himself seemingly roaring about in my skull. And was that She of the Blushes, casting blue and pink lights, like stars, searing into my consciousness, across my vision? Better by far the stygian gloom of Notor Zan, and the ignorance of slumber.

Better by far.

I tried to open my eyes. Gods, it hurt!

I began to sense a movement, as if my body, lay flat as it was, was being dragged over bumpy ground. Again I attempted to open my eyes. The redness of the sky hung above me like a sheet of colour, vibrant, alive, painful.

I tried to sit up.

Not advisable.

I became aware of various aches and pains about my person.

My back ached with a vengeance. I lifted a hand to my face, it felt numb, swollen. I managed to raise my head. About me, the wooden sides of a cart, or wagon stood out bleak, cold, harsh.

I realised then that I was being taken somewhere. The sounds of a plodding Yag's hooves came to my ears. Pain seared suddenly through my limbs, pulsing, agonising. I raised my head. I looked down at my body. I was in a bad way. I don't think there can have been one part of me that was not injured.

I tried to sit up again.

I couldn't.

I was tied down!

The pains in my legs, arms, back and head shifted about in waves.

I vomited.

Reaching up again, for my arms were fastened at the shoulders, I felt the dried blood clogging my hair. I became aware of the fact that I was lying awkwardly, and something painful was sticking into my back.

Adjusting my position, I was able to move myself sideways and off the thing I lay upon. My various pains throbbed, and then receded. I was not tied too securely. Perhaps there was little need. Perhaps my body was broken and smashed.

“Lie still, you gretching filth!” came a harsh voice to my ears.

I strained my neck, and managed to bring into the range of my vision the bearded face of a man who sat up on the driver's seat.

"If you don't cease that struggling," he shouted above the sounds of the Yag's hooves and the cart's wheels on the rough road, "I shall come back there and kick you back into oblivion."

I took my eyes from his face, and rested my head back on the hard boards of the cart. I was lying half on and half off a raised plank in the floor. That it had been pressing against my back and my legs. I moved one leg and one arm to clear myself of it altogether.

Most of that forlorn journey I spent in and out of consciousness. Most of the following three days I spent recovering from my wounds, which, had not been as bad as I had first thought. Those three days, a blur mostly now, I was placed in an enclosure at journey's end, along with some fifty or so other poor brutes.

I knew what had become of me, of course.

I was a slave now.

These were the mines.

A slave of the mines was I.

I could smell the sea-salt clearly.

I knew little of what would become of me, but, after three days I was herded with the rest of those unfortunate creatures, and we were put to work in the mines hauling stone across a viciously cutting rock landscape in bare feet.

The mines were more of a quarry really, an open mine, digging out rock very much like sandstone, brownish red in colour. I remembered the buildings in Zar, and I knew why we laboured to our deaths amongst the choking dust and the acrid dryness of the air. This stone, these large chunks of rock, they were intended for Zar for building work.

Each night we were herded back to our enclosures. Exhausted, dropping from sheer fatigue. That first zan-night was the worst for me. After that, my wounds and bruises had recovered completely, and also, I ceased my pathetic counting. There was no way of escaping the mine district, so the other slaves said. I believed them; at first.

We ate of a poor gruel, and for the lucky ones, or the strongest, or whoever could grab onto them and hold them from those without, a few vegetables. We were given water four times a day: once at sunrise when our labours began, once at sunset when they ended for the day, and twice during the intervening long shift. The air was dry, as I have said, polluted with sandstone dust from the constant work of the men with pickaxes and huge hammers who dug it out. We sweated during the day, and at night, shivered, for the coldness of the season had reached its extreme now.

I made a point, that if I was ever trusted with a hammer or a pick, I would put it to the best use I could find for them, if I got the chance that was. Our guards were a cruel lot. They showed no mercy whatsoever, and the lash was the only way they communicated with us, apart from savage or nasty commands. I knew more than a few of these by sight now, well enough to want to bash a few skulls before they cornered me and cut me down with the wicked, curving swords they carried at all times at their sides. I knew they would use them if they had to. I knew they would enjoy it. The merest excuse for these cruel, cowardly types who formed the guard of the sandstone mines of Zar.

I had been told since, although not seen the evidence with my own eyes of course, that the pompous officer who had stood upon the balcony, the fool I had shot down with a

well aimed shaft, had survived. It had been he in fact who had prevented my death in the yard. It had been he who had intervened and declared that I should be sent to the mines for life. That life would not be expected to span so many seasons. Two or three if I was lucky according to one of my fellow slaves who was somewhat less reticent than our fellows.

I did not care whether the pompous old fool had survived or not. He had sentenced me to a fate worse than outright death. I had been unconscious when they had taken me from the slavers compound. Of course, the prolonged agony and slow death from damage to the lungs, too little food, and too much work, would be a far better revenge for the fellows of those guards I had killed back in Zar. Damn them all, that was my true sentiment, and doubtless, always would. Not one of them deserved the label soldier. A right shower! As they say.

Occasionally, I was able to obtain one, two, or even three of the vegetables thrown at us during feeding time, onions mostly, soft and smelling of rot. We ate twice a day. Once in the morning, once at night, and I was the only man there from what I could see, who was willing to share his food with those less fortunate. Several were the skinny wretches I passed the odd carrot or potato to, prolonging, I suppose, their imminent deaths. Who can say?

Days passed. Dwazan-nights. I survived. A dwab-night is twelve nights, a zan-night, ten. Dwa is two. A dwazan-night means twenty days and nights. I lost count, as I have said. Eventually, thriving, my body adapting to the constant strain of seemingly endless work, my mind virtually a blank by now, I carried on. The season changed, the heat increased, and life became more unbearable still.

It was about this time that I was handed a large hammer and sent down with the men who cut the rock from the pit that had once been a mountain. The thing felt good in my hands, and after the blisters had subsided, I worked with a vengeance. My strength increased. I began to realise that the only real thing I had to hold on to was the forlorn hope that one day I might escape.

And then I met a man I knew, or rather, knew of. The burly man who had once been a farmer, a man now a slave and fellow basher of rock.

Mear.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A STOLEN PICK BLADE

Mear swung his hammer with all the venom and aggression of a man who held on to his identity and sanity and dreamed of escape. I could identify such men, men such as myself.

There were few.

We were few.

We worked in the somewhat shaded environment where the direct light of the suns failed to reach. For this I was thankful. For the increased density of dust in the air, I was not.

It took several days for me to get to a place where I could work next to the large Zargolese farmer. There was a pecking order of sorts amongst the slaves, especially those who wielded the picks and the hammers. To work farthest away from the direct heat of the suns, was achieved by working harder. The harder one worked, the less he was whipped. To avoid being whipped then, could only be achieved by those in the shade, and Mear was one of them. It was a mean, tight-lipped crew who worked the hardest, who meant to survive.

The guards would whip an ineffective labourer. This would result in his position in the shade being taken, sometimes aggressively, by a stronger man. The guards liked the shade too, but they also seemed to enjoy whipping. Therefore, they slacked in the shade, and earned their keep in the heat. They too had a pecking order.

I slugged and bashed and avoided the whip. Each time a man next to me stopped to rest, the lash cut across his back. I would then step into his place. Each morning, only the strongest re-took their shaded positions. I was one of these, ashamedly. However, I had to reach Mear's side, for we slept in different enclosures. I wished to speak with him.

Of course, with the revolution of the suns across the sky, the position of shade changed throughout the day. Therefore, one had to work always with the side-step in mind. This suited the quarrying of rock by so primitive a means as the hammer and the pick, for the rock had to be taken layer by layer to avoid digging into a dead end. The picks dislodged huge chunks, and the hammers smashed them up.

Men who dragged or rolled rock out of the quarry, came and went, as I had done before I had been handed my hammer; speaking of which, I was given the tool each morning and had to hand it in each night. It was a long wooden-handled thing, with a head made of solid iron. It weighed more than many of the weaker slaves could have lifted, let alone swing.

As I swung, I grew stronger. As I grew in strength, my resolve to escape increased. I had passed the point of wishing to bash a few guards' heads in now. That would be too crude, and would result in my being beaten again, likely killed; I desired freedom more than revenge. In fact, revenge was no longer a part of it. I just wanted to be out of this wicked kingdom of Zargol as soon as possible.

Mear was the best man there with the hammer. I worked next to him each day, through the heat, through the dust. I tried to match him blow for blow, effort for effort, mighty swing for mighty swing. After having worked beside him for several days, I almost achieved it. He never stopped to rest, never took a breather, he just went on smashing rocks, from morning until night, except, when water was handed out by the guards.

This, of all the things done at the mines, was the only procedure I witnessed that was done fairly. Without water, men would have dropped like flies in the heat of a sweltering Summer day back on Earth. The more men that died, the less rock would be quarried. That was the logic behind the regular, although insufficient water ration for each man. Guards brought a tin cup full of the precious stuff to each of us, we drank, and then resumed work. However, as I have indicated already, I saw many men die of exhaustion.

Mear was a stolid sort. He bashed rock and little else. I saw him speak to no one. It was with some surprise then, that as we drank our water one day, he looked up at me and, I could say smiled, but rather I will say his face assumed a momentary wry grin. I took another sip of water, for neither Mear nor I gulped our water in one go, as is judicious in such circumstances, and grinned back.

We did not exchange words, there was little need. It was a sign that there was some form of understanding between us, a certain camaraderie. I feel that he acknowledged my efforts with the hammer. I am no brag, as I hope you have realised by now, but I must say here that I am a large man about the shoulders and chest, and I am tall, a couple of inches over six foot. The survival of slave-labour in the quarry had toned up my body nicely, my back made stronger than it had ever been, my biceps noticeable larger, more powerful. The endless hard labour had developed my physique. But Mear, this solid Zargolese farmer, he was truly huge. I wondered then at how he had been taken so easily from his farm. But then again, the fear of the overlords was ingrained in the simple farming stock of Zargol, the veneration and dread of the hated establishment was built in. It was his mind they had defeated, not his brawny Yag-hide body.

He stood some inches taller than myself. His shoulders were huge, his chest massive. His legs, for we were all practically naked except for simple loincloths, were like two tree trunks, his arms as wide as my thighs.

I poured the rest of my water over my head, as did he, and blow for blow we smashed vengeance against Zar out of the rock of the quarry for the rest of the day. Both of us, he farmer of Zargolese stock, and I, well, apply which appellation who wish at this point, British officer, Romad Warrior galw, slave-labourer, it is up to you.

Both of us knew, without words spoken, that the other thought endlessly of escape. It is a sort of esoteric, enigmatic understanding that cannot be described in any logical or meaningful manner that we slaves of unbroken will shared. We were slaves. We did not wish to be. We both knew it. We would talk of escape at a later time, when it was safe to do so.

There was another who worked well into the shade who had caught my eye. This man, of medium height, bearded and shaggy of hair like the rest of us, a lean whipcord of a man, perhaps just out of youth, slugged away at the sandstone face with a pick as if each swing was a blow of revenge against Zargol. I marked this man well. Like the others of us who had secured our shadow positions along the face, he was gifted, or cursed, think of it as you will, with extreme reticence.

The long, hot, almost unendurable days passed. Men died. More replaced them. There seemed an endless supply of poor souls to dig out the sandy rock of the quarry. I had lost count of the days of my enforced slavery. By then, we three, Mear, the wiry youngster, and myself, were all who remained of the original crew. Also, by then, I had been moved into their enclosure at night. It seemed that the strongest, most able men were all put together in the one enclosure. These were the grafters, the survivors, and we were seldom wiped, if at all. We simply laboured away to the satisfaction of even these, hard, almost merciless Zargolian guards of the quarry.

As yet, I had not spoken a word with either Mear or the younger man. However, we three had exchanged glances, and that was enough. All three knew, escape was uppermost in our thoughts.

One night, just before the end of a long day's graft, the very chance we had been waiting for presented itself. The usually ultra-security conscious guards slipped up. The wiry individual I have mentioned, somehow, had slipped the head from his pick and hidden it in his breechcloth.

We were all escorted back to our night time enclosures, and as all three of us were numbered amongst those who slept in one particular sleeping compound at that time, for this was alternated occasionally, all three of us shared the same thought and knew it was uppermost in each others' minds.

As darkness fell, and as we prepared for sleep, the youth whispered one word to me: "Freedom."

Both Mear and I watched as he carefully buried the implement in the ground and then lay down upon the spot as if to sleep.

There would be no sleep that night!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

OF DRUGGED WINE AND GREAT STRENGTH

Several hours had passed.

I lay watching as Mear and the man with the pickaxe blade dug away at the foundations of one of the wooden posts supporting the timber planks of our compound.

My eyes searched for guards.

My heart was in my mouth.

Taking his turn, Mear pulled out several rocks supporting the post and then took the massive thing in his grasp and lifted with all his might. A space appeared between compound planking and ground.

The wiry man slipped through.

I followed.

Both of us took the weight while Mear squeezed through.

Once outside the compound us three lay panting in the darkness.

As we had all three known it would be, it was a night of Notor Zan.

There was no sign of the guards that had recently passed our enclosure on their rounds. No other guard was in evidence this side of the compound. This was most unusual.

Taking advantage of this slackness by our usually efficient captors, we crawled along to the growths of low bushes bordering the camp. The compounds were all lined up around the periphery of the central area, so this was easier than we had expected.

Normally, the slave compounds were heavily guarded.

We did not ask questions.

Mear led the way, followed by the wiry man, who's name you shall learn shortly. I followed in the rear.

At last we came to the first of the fences.

Looking up, I saw the nearest guard tower unoccupied.

"The wine has taken good effect then," whispered the youngest of us.

Mear glanced at me and we both shrugged.

A gate in the long fence was guarded by three or four warriors. They could plainly be seen, some fifty feet from us, in the light of their oil lamps.

The youth pointed in the other direction.

Slowly, always aware of the great risk we took, for had we been caught it would mean certain death, the three of us made our way farther from the gates. Carefully, we came to a place where darkness shrouded all. Here, the youth took the pick blade and began

working on a post of the fence. This barrier was formed in much the same way as the taller compounds in which we slept, of planking, periodically supported by posts.

An hour or so later, Mear was lifting the first fence and I slipped through. Another two hours or so later, we had slipped beneath the third and final fence, a higher affair of some twenty feet.

Ahead of us lay open ground, lit here and there by oil lamps suspended on posts. It was then that we were apprehended. Three guards strode up out of the shadows.

We were desperate men, unarmed, escaped slaves. These were Zargolians. Hated, despised. Our masters. Our overlords all this time in the quarry. I shall not enter into the details of how those three guards died. It was awful, bloody, merciless. Mear possessed the strength of a maniac.

Before the three guards could react, the youth had taken one by the throat, slipping the thrust short sword, and had dragged him to the ground. Mear leapt at one, and I took the third, who, foolishly, turned his back to aid his fellows. The awful slaughter was over in mere moments.

We none of us said a word, but acted as one instantly. Scarce minutes later, three guards, so recently captive slaves, continued their rounds. The uniforms were not the best of fits, but in the darkness no one would have noticed.

Four more guards Mear killed that night, the youth dispatching another one. I myself, took no more lives, thankfully, but I would have done so if necessary. Our escape was more important to us than taking despised lives. We were obsessed with it, so much so, that mere words were not needed to replace the uncanny extra sensory messages and instincts we used to communicate. As slaves, we had spoken mainly in looks, in glances, in understanding of a common suffering. If one man was whipped, all others enslaved felt the lash on their own flesh. It went beyond mere comprehension and cognition, as I have already said. One must be slave to understand being slave.

From there, we passed two gates rather easily, pretending to be slightly drunk. One false move on the part of the guards, and more dead men would have littered our path out of that awful place.

None other of the slaves had followed us. This fact was true, despite my wonder of it. Mear told me that we three had been the only ones in our compound with will or sanity enough left to want to escape. It had been as simple as that. Tragic, hard to accept, but true nonetheless.

I shook my head and put slavery behind me.

Daybreak found three free men roaming a bleak beach in search of food. Hours later, bellies full of shell fish, we emerged from a wooded area far north of the quarry, and many more north of Zar.

A day later, and the guards uniforms had been dumped in favour of stolen garments from the washing lines of the poor. We stole food from farms, and ate better than we had for longer than any could recall.

Ah, it was good to be free once again.

I told Mear of his farm, his wife, the cheese, and the fact that I had witnessed his arrest. I told him of his wife's plan to pay for his release, and I told him of her hopes that he would return.

He did not thank me in words. How could he have? Having declined his invitation to go with him, he turned about and left us there and then. Mear, as I have said, was a man of few words. His eyes had spoken volumes. The tears, shed without shame, told infinitely more.

Mear would return to his farm, and from there, take his family south to his brother's farm across the border. Zargol, for him, was no longer safe.

I wished him well.

The three of us used the Zargolese language, by the way, which was Mear's native tongue. There was, in the way the youth conversed, more than an indication that he, like myself, was in no way fluent. However, it must be a common thing amongst slaves that they would not naturally share the same language, so this caused no awkwardness at all. It is the nature of the beast that slaves are usually drawn from far and wide, and, therefore, by default, unlikely to share the same common tongue anyway. In any case, Mear was far too polite a man by nature to make comment.

The youth had explained to Mear and I that he had received a message that on the night of our escape, a much needed and eagerly awaited delivery of wine to the quarry guards had been tampered with by certain friends of his. He did not say how the message had been delivered, or who his friends were. We, neither Mear or myself, asked him. The escape had been deeper in plan than I had known, but would not have worked without Mear's strength, or, I suppose, mine also. It definitely would not have worked without the pick axe blade, or the drugged wine.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TOM HORSEPOOL

Now, this young, wiry fellow, without whose ingenuity we three would not have escaped from slavery, proved to hold within his mind a dilemma. He proved more reticent than a free man, than he ever had as a slave in the mines of Zar. Another day's travel up the coast, and his appetite for further travel had dispersed as entirely had his appetite for conversation.

We had spoken little since Mear's departure, and it had become imperative for me to formulate some form of plan, especially with regard to where it was I should go next. It was my task on Kregen to find a certain Dray Prescott. This mission had been ordained, whether I liked it or believed it or otherwise, by The Elohim. It had been they who had put me down on that strange world of Kregen in the first place, and be they gods or not, that was persuasion and example of immense and unexplainable power enough in my view, to take this matter seriously.

The fact was, I was on another world; a very real world. I had no reason to doubt that it was called Kregen, and that Yahweh of the Elohim was very real also.

I could not doubt that there was a man called Dray Prescott, and that he, like myself, was an agent of the gods, albeit, of a different persuasion of ambition to the Elohim. The Star Lords, or Everoinye as Yahweh also called them, whoever they may be, employed people, in Prescott's case. A man from Earth, a Kregoinye, as agents to do their bidding on Kregen and doubtless other worlds besides.

The Elohim and the Star Lords were in direct opposition to each other. Why this was, I had no idea, no more so than did I understand who or *what* they were. Prescott was an agent of the Star Lords, who did their work for them on Kregen.

From the store of implanted information in my head, and from the revisiting Yahweh in my occasional dreams, I was learning more and more of this world of Kregen, its peoples, its customs and its pure savagery, not to mention my own role within its complex and oftentimes esoteric fabric.

This was a world of many and varied life forms way beyond that of the simplex comparison of my home world Earth. This was a sheer plethora in comparison. But of these things, and more, I shall speak as opportunity arises along the way to what was becoming abundantly more plain to me with each passing day, that it was my mission to find Dray Prescott. Until I had achieved that, I could never return to Earth.

"So," I said, as we sat amongst a copse of small fruit trees eating our fill, "tell me, what next, do you think?"

"Next?" The youth replied not in the Zargolese tongue, but in the Romadic of the plains nomads.

"Yes. Where to now?" I answered using that same tongue.

We eyed each other momentarily, probably both thinking the same thing: This man is no Romad. To start with, neither of us possessed the head horn, the pointed ears, or the shaggy coat of hair.

The obvious question was not posed by either of us. That question would have been along the lines of: "So, you are from the plains?" Instead, an awkward atmosphere descended upon us then.

"Well," replied my companion, "raising an eyebrow, I cannot answer that question in respect of yourself. As for me, I have a task to my hands that must be carried out."

"A Task?"

"Never mind the details," he replied, snapping at me. "But I can't go any further from Zar for a space until that task has been carried out."

"I see," I said, trying to fathom the mystery that was this young fellow. Strange really, but one can know a man well in slavery, without the need for words. Yet, take that shared hell away, add freedom of speech, and the man becomes a stranger.

It struck me then that I had heard spoken amongst the Romads the story of the stranger. *Could this be the very same man?* All the evidence pointed in that direction. His raising of the eyebrow even, carried more than a reminder of Huddog in it.

"You are galw?" I could not resist the question.

"I am," he replied, and his lips fastened shut in grim determination, indicating quite clearly that he would say no more on that subject.

"Well," I said, changing my manner to that of casual disinterest, "I for one am tired. And, as it is getting dark, I think it a good idea to get some sleep now. In the morning, we can decide what to do next."

He eyed me quite suspiciously, I thought.

Nevertheless, and without another word, he lay down, turned his back on me, and was soon evidently asleep.

I looked up at the heavens, and then closed my eyes.

Seven moons rode the sky that night.

Seven Moons for Kregen.

Beneath the Moons of Kregen, lay I.

I was awoken by the sensation of having something sharp poked into my throat.

I opened my eyes, somewhat urgently, I can assure you.

The youth knelt over me, the pick axe blade in his hand didn't shake one bit.

His eyes were steady.

Suddenly, his youthful looks were overshadowed by those of manhood and worldly experience.

This was no child, I reminded myself. Here was a man who had become a Romadic warrior, galw at that; a man who had survived and escaped slavery.

"What?" I managed to get the word out, despite the fact that the blade cut into the skin at my Adam's Apple as a result.

"Say no more! Do nothing!"

I had been surprised at this young man's use of Romadic the night before. Not half as surprised as I was then though at his use of clear, everyday English.

He spoke in a Northern accent.

"John Blake, I presume," he said, an amused glint in his eye, as he obviously enjoyed the irony.

I could say nothing.

If I had wanted to do anything, I could not have done so. The feel of bonds around my wrists told me this fellow was cunning in the extreme. If I had wanted to rise, I could not have done so, for my hands were tied behind my back.

My life was in his hands.

"You sleep soundly," he said, again exhibiting humorous appreciation of my situation.

"And you," I managed to get out, "are a....."

"A what?" He pulled the blade back a smidgen, allowing me to continue.

"A bloody sneak," I snapped out. And: "What in Hell's blazes are you doing here on Kregen? Who are you?"

He smiled, but doubt crossed his features. "I am Tom Horsepool," he said.

"And what's the meaning of this?"

"You don't understand!" he snapped. "I have to do this."

"Do what? Why?"

"They made me," he stuttered, suddenly a youth again.

"They?"

The damned bonds were tight! How in God's name had he managed to tie me up so tight without waking me?

"The damned Star Lords." He cast anxious looks around with those words, fear written large on his countenance.

"Look," I said, realising he was faltering, "perhaps there's a better way."

"A better way! No!" The blade moved back against the skin of my throat. "If I don't kill you, they won't send me back to Earth."

Here was another Kregoinye of the Star Lords, for sure. This Tom Horsepool, another Earthman, had fooled me. As surely as I was searching for Dray Prescott, this young fellow had been searching for me. And I had failed.

Failed!

Again he cast looks of anxiety around. Something bothered him.

I tried again to loosen the cords around my wrists. One mighty tug, and something gave, a little.

"What is it?" I managed to get out, seeing that he was obviously distracted by something over in the trees or beyond.

"What is it? Nothing." He looked down at me again, as if snapped from the reveries of his past. He looked calmer again. "I was just minding my own business," he said, slowly. "We were bound for the West Indies. The seas had been becalmed for days. The sails hung like parlour curtains. Then the bloody storm swept over us, as if from nowhere. And..."

"And you found yourself here on Kregen," I said, hazarding a guess.

"That's right. Ship, crew, water, all in turmoil around me, and then I was here, on this God Forsaken world. She must have gone down. Sunk!"

"You said sails?"

"Like bloody curtains they were. Limp!" A tear ran down his cheek. "And the screaming! It was awful, dom. And them tied to the decks. They didn't have a chance. All hands lost, except one. Must have been. Everyone! Except me. Me! Why me?"

He was faltering now, emotions running high, scarcely able to hold the pick axe blade to my throat as his hands shook.

I could feel a trickle of blood running down my neck as I yanked once again at the bonds.

"Who was tied to the decks?" I asked, trying to gain time. I knew whatever held my wrists fast would give any moment.

"Decks?" Again Tom Horsepool glanced around amongst the trees. There was something out there, something bothering him. I doubt he even noticed then as I struggled to break free.

I pulled again, hard. One hand nearly slipped free.

"Who was tied to the decks," he mumbled. "The damned cargo, of course. The slaves we was taking to the West Indies."

Sounds came to my ears, faint at first, but rapidly growing in volume.

Voices. Sharp, cutting, demanding. The sounds of bodies pushing through the trees.

The bonds gave, and I reached up and grasped Horsepool's shaking wrists.

Just then, the small clearing filled with a mass of demonic humanity such as my eyes had never before beheld.

Demons they were.

Men with tails!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DEMONS WITH TAILS

I reached my feet just as the kataki slavers poured over us. Katakis are the lowest of the low of the diffs of Kregen, in my opinion anyway; slavers usually, and just plain mean by nature.

Plain mean.

"Run, dom!" came Tom's voice amongst the melee.

"Grak! Grak! Grak!"

The word rang out around my ears as I tumbled to the ground once more, knocked back by the sheer force of numbers.

"Bratch! Move!"

Katakis!

Whip-tails!

There are many and many a variety of humanity on the world of Kregen. To these many species is applied the collective name: diffs.

The species of humanity driving in amongst Tom and I, katakis, with their thick black, oiled, curled hair, flared nostrils, gape-jawed mouths with snaggly teeth, wide-spaced eyes, narrow and cold, I was soon to discover, were master slavers.

They showed little mercy, and it is a wonder Tom and I were able to stand, let alone walk after they had finished with us.

The bonds I had so recently quit, were replaced now by more, and these of metal as opposed to cord.

Face down on the sward, I distinctly heard the click as a cold band of iron was clamped about my left ankle.

They had come amongst us in force, rapidly persuading us both that any further resistance would result in injury or death as a consequence of those wicked, long whip-like tails they trashed skilfully about, each adorned by a steel blade strapped to it.

Slave-masters, seldom found as slave in any part of Kregen, katakis.

Formidable fighting men.

We were led, none too nicely, out into the open where stood some way off a long line of debased humanity, all apims from what I could see, fastened together by chains.

To the end of this long line of despair we were fastened, the chain passed through our ankle-irons, first Tom, and then myself at the end.

Whips cracked, and ponderously, the line began to move off at a pace I knew at once was not to the liking of the katakis for whips cracked again, backs bled the more, and we moved at a more respectable gait.

Apims, for your information, are humans who are not diffs. Normal human beings, of the species Homo Sapiens Sapiens. I was apim, as was Tom.

Kataki whip-tails, as I learned later, have also been dubbed with the common appellation Jibr-Farils, lovers of pain. Loh hid many a mystery as to lovers of pain I was later to learn, and her history was dotted to the point of obliteration with besotted monarchistic queens of the masochistic variety.

Bleeding and defeated, the coffle was driven South, back in the direction of the city of Zar. We came presently to the beach, and along the way I saw remembered places where the exaltation of freedom had been enjoyed.

This almost overwhelmed me.

Almost.

Ahead of me walked Tom Horsepool, another man of Earth, a Kregoinye of the Star Lords, and not one backward glance did he pay me all the way.

That he had been employed by the Star Lords to prevent my carrying out my mission in respect of Dray Prescott, I did not doubt one little bit. What mystified me, was his reference to things very Eighteenth Century, from whence, evidently, he had been plucked to do his masters' bidding.

So, along I trudged, a man of mid-Twentieth Century Earth, preceded by a man out of my world's history, a man who knew nothing of steamships and diesel engines quite obviously. The sails had hung like parlour curtains; those had been his very words.

Ahead of Tom walked Mear, his head hung down on his mighty chest. More than a few wheels of red criss-crossed his broad back. Poor Mear, I had so hoped he would make it South back to his farm, and then leave with dear devoted Lemka and their children for safer lands.

Poor Mear!

Poor humanity!

Ahead of Mear trudged somewhere in the region of another twenty poor souls. Few there were whose heads did not hang, dejected and forlorn.

Of that painful and sad trip I shall say little more than is necessary to relate. I saw men, and women, drop, feel the anger of the whip, and either rise back to their ruined feet, or die in the trying or otherwise. Otherwise being to simply lie down and die under the cruel and tearing lash of the kataki whips. As I have said, katakis are slave masters, and as such on the cruel and harsh world of Kregen, business men. Slaves are a business on Kregen as surely as they were back on Earth in the days when Tom Horsepool sailed the seven seas on a wooden, sail-driven ship.

Those who died along the way represented financial loss for our captors. No remorse was shown, just plain anger at the loss of another asset. The dead were left to rot along the way. I wondered how many had died since this line of sadness had started to march. I counted six in my time at the end of the coffle. From where were these people being taken into slavery? How long had they marched to be finally cheated of the reward of finally being allowed to rest?

It sickened me.

A few places up from Mear, I could plainly see one of two remaining women in the line. She walked with pride in her gait still, and her head, unlike so many others, was held high. Who was this woman who obviously possessed the mighty will and defiance of the so-hard-to-kill rynth in her soul. Was this the pride of a queen, the hauteur of an empress being exhibited? I doubted it, for she was dressed in rags. How long had she been in the line? Not long, I fathomed, for surely so slight a form would have long since succumbed to the whip and the endless miles, or dwaburs as distance is measured on Kregen.

For days we marched.

At night we slept on the cold ground, huddled in our rags, our bellies grumbling from the single poor meal per day we were given for supper. A small bowl of gruel, an onion, a handful of corn or suchlike. Water we were given at regular intervals during a day's march, once at night, and once in the morning before resuming travel.

On the final morning of the march, our order in the line was changed.

The woman I have referred to was placed at the front, and I was placed right behind her. Tom Horsepool was directly behind me, and Mear was some way about half way down the coffle. We were then washed down with buckets of very cold water thrown over us from a nearby stream. I was stripped to the waist, as was Tom, Mear and a few of the other men in better condition, and the women were draped in red shoulder shawls, I supposed, to enhance their looks and cover up the rags.

I suppose they were putting the fittest at the front for the march into the city. A bit like putting your best goods on the shop window, and the ordinary stuff back in the stock room. In this way, the slaves in best condition would be seen first as we passed through the city gates.

I was not in bad shape, as I had only been captured a few days previous. The woman at the front was beautiful despite her rags, and not at all showing signs of fatigue. She was glorious in her defiance, I can tell you, green eyes flashing full of fire and not once would she return my glance. Her dark hair, drying in the breeze, swam about her shoulders. Her head held high, back straight, shoulders proud, she led the coffle.

So, off we went again, a sad reflection of humanity altogether, yet refreshed and eager to complete the journey. Well, I say that for the others really, for that is what I supposed, but as for myself, I dreaded my return to Zar for obvious reasons.

As Zar came into view down the coast, and the land took on a very downbeat atmosphere for me, we were halted. Two bedraggled men, who were by far the in the worst condition of us all, were removed from the coffle and struck down by those tail blades and left to bleed and rot on the ground.

Shocked, I reflected on slavery as a business. What use were these damaged goods to the slave masters on the slave block?

None.

We reached Zar by the hour of mid, which is mid day by Kregish terms.

Entering by a side gate, we were soon embroiled in the dust and crowds of the streets, as a gathering collected to watch our passing.

A torment of mockery and cowardly cruelty escorted us to the slave compound of Zar, as the jaunts and harsh treatment of the crown rubbed salt into already deep psychological wounds.

We were lined up in the courtyard, the very same in which I had fought my running battle with the guards, and readied for inspection by the kataki slave masters.

Keeping my eyes to the ground, and fearful of being recognised, I distinctly heard the tones of a voice I had heard on an occasion once before.

Taking a chance at glancing up, I caught sight of him, sauntering up to the line, his pompous and silly uniform almost as ridiculous and out of place as our own garb, now reduced to rags.

The commandant crossed the yard, heading straight for me, and in his hand resided a nasty-looking switch with which he flicked at the air about him most purposefully.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"TO THE BLOCK WITH YOU!"

The Slave Compounds of Zar are a harsh place indeed. The commandant had marched right up to us and looked us over most carefully. He did not recognise me, that was for sure, otherwise he would have done more than glare at me as he did at us all. I realised that my appearance had changed somewhat since my little escapade with the guards and the staliag.

After inspection, the katakis must have paid a holding fee for our keep at the compound, for we were handed over to the commandant's men and taken to our respective enclosures to await, so it was rumoured amongst some of our number, sale in the slave market.

The women were taken away separately, and I was lucky to be numbered amongst the seven men of the group in which Mear was included. We were placed in an indoor compound, which was little more than a cramped, stinking hovel. Tom Horsepool was taken elsewhere with the others of the men.

"It's the Death Jungles of Sichaz for us, dom," was all I could get out of Mear, and I truly wondered at that moment for the man's sanity. His eyes failed to meet my own gaze. His shoulders were stooped. The man was crestfallen to say the least.

He had been the most devout of the stubborn at the mines, his will unbreakable, yet now, he seemed merely a reflection of that former rock he had been. Gone was the determination, the steely eyes, the confidence in every movement. Sure, he had been reticent when I had first known him, but something of his spirit seemed to have been knocked out of him by then.

Something of his spirit.

All of it, more like!

I watched Mear most carefully that first night in the compound, waiting for just a sign of something more than accepted gloom and doom. None came.

Mear was lost, beaten, and little wonder was it considering the hope and freedom that had once again been taken from his grasp.

Death Jungles of Sichaz!

It boded most ill. Most ill indeed, did that phrase.

We were left in our hovel for three days, and fed on the worst fare I have ever eaten in my life. This period was perhaps my lowest on Kregen up to that point, and it is one I would rather forget, let alone relate here.

Mear continued his downward slide, and the others of us did little better. Plans for escape were not mentioned, and I honestly think, were not even thought about by my companions. Acceptance seems to me to be the first harsh lesson meted out by slavery. As for me, I thought of little else other than escape.

During this period, I was plagued by nightmares, often finding myself awoken in a cold sweat as some phantom or other chased me through the night. Yahweh would enter these dreams on occasion, as would Tom Horsepool, and I wondered just how much of it was of the dream-suggestion type, as of former dreams involving my destiny on Kregen, and how much of it actually originated in my own mind.

A figure much in these dreams was the young woman who had led the slave coffle into Zar. During the daytime misery of my incarceration, I thought of little else. In truth, she had had a profound effect on me. There was something about her I could just not shake from my mind. Her dignity and pride had marked me for life, to say nothing of her great beauty; for she was beautiful beyond any woman I had ever set eyes on before or since in my life.

Who could that woman have been?

Why did I feel so much responsibility towards her?

Another thought that plagued me was the enigma that was Tom Horsepool.

This young man had been rescued from the clutches of a mighty storm and taken to Kregen for the specific purpose, it seemed to me, of stopping me from carrying out my task for the Elohim. Yet, he had been taken from Earth perhaps two hundred years before I had. Now, not only was such a concept hard for me to grasp, it was also ridiculous to my mind. How could the Star Lords have known, two hundred years in advance, that I would be taken to Kregen by the Elohim? And, how would they know that I would exist in the then future at all?

I was becoming embroiled in a plot most mysterious, and also deeper than I had first imagined.

There was Dray Prescott.

There was Tom Horsepool.

And now, well, there was this young woman, who, for some profound reason, I could sense was a part of the whole thing.

That the Star Lords and the Elohim were in contention with each others' ideals and plans on Kregen could not be doubted. I knew where Tom Horsepool stood, and Dray Prescott to a certain extent, but what of her? What of her indeed?

Another fact that had become apparent to me in my time on Kregen, was the existence of a common or to some extent, universal language known as Kregish. I knew little of it at that time, but I did know that it existed. It would be a most useful thing, a universal language that is, to have access to and to be able to converse in. Yet, at that time, I had seen very little evidence concerning it.

All matters considered, those three days passed, as days do, however hard they may be, and I was heartened on that cold morning we were ushered from our cell and paraded once again out on the yard by such simple things as being able to stand erect, to walk again, and to not having the stale, nauseating and disgusting smell of cramped humanity in my nostrils.

This assemblage of slaves I was a part of was a larger gathering than the one I had stood amongst on our arrival. There were more katakis slavers as well, and I realised that this was the sum of slaves from perhaps several outings by the slave masters of Kregen.

There were simply too many to count, and for this I was truly thankful, for once again the commandant was there to look us over.

Hosed down once again, we were marched out of the slave compound of Zar to the sounds of cracking whips and such cracked commands as: "Bratch!" and "Grak!"

We numbered in the region of a couple of hundred, and the variety of humanity there, all apim, was startling. There were all types and sizes, of both men and women.

Tom Horsepool was there, glaring at me when he got the chance. Mear was there too, walking head bowed, his mighty frame somehow shrunk now in his depression. The beautiful and proud woman who had led us into that hateful place did not lead us out. She was nowhere to be seen.

The whip cracked, and I felt the sting of the lash on my bare back.

"To the block with you! All of you," yelled the whip-happy kataki behind me.

I turned to look over my shoulder, stopped dead in my tracks, and spun about.

My blood rose most terrible.

Again the cruel whip cracked, this time striking me across the front of my legs.

"Move, Slave, before I pattern your back jakaida with the song of this sweet lash!"

He swung again, and I caught the damned hated thing in one hand and pulled it from his grasp.

What jakaida meant, I had no idea, but whatever it was, I didn't fancy it at all.

My hand burned with pain.

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Not now, John Blake.

Turning again, I saw Mear standing there, a half-smile of grim determination once again written on his face.

I threw the whip down in the dirt, gave the kataki a long glare and spun about and continued walking.

Truth to tell, had I continued my defiance, I have no doubt that they would have killed me there and then.

The kataki did nothing more to me. I don't know if he picked up his whip, I didn't look. I didn't care.

The incident passed.

"Later," I said to Mear.

He said nothing, just smiled.

For that I was most thankful, most thankful indeed.

We wound our way through the twisted streets of Zar, many and many a slave bound for the Slave Market of Zar. It was rumoured this day, that Ransith Lurg, Oh Great Wise One, Supreme Overlord and Sovereign Ruler of Zargol himself would be attending.

For that, I cared nothing.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

LYNXOR VOLENEUX TI KALTHENBURG

Ransith Lurg, Oh Great Obese One, as we slaves dubbed him, did indeed attend the slave market that day.

We had been placed in a series of cages running around the periphery of a circular central area of the market. I was lucky enough, or unlucky enough, however you may see it, to be in a cage that fronted the main selling blocks. Therefore, quite clearly, I could watch the proceedings of the day as we slaves were sold off to merchants, local households, local works, a passing lord who took a fancy to a particular slave girl, or whoever. It was a most embarrassing process for many, especially the women, as they were gloated on and inspected by prospective customers.

We stood five to a cage, which was cramped to say the least. Mear had been paced in the cage next to mine, Tom Horsepool was nowhere to be seen, but I knew he would be there somewhere. He was slave, as were we all. Humanity on sale!

Katakis stood around in numbers, ever watchful, ever keen to oversee the manhandling of slaves, but not actually involved in the selling itself. This was conducted by a team of dour-looking fellows who knew their trade well enough. I saw several men slaves sold for labour who I could plainly see would not last a few days at anything too heavy. I had learned that much in the mines at least. I also saw and was sickened by the sale of many young women and even children to various depraved- and perverted-looking individuals who's interest in slaves went beyond that of the need of labour or household duties being carried out.

As I said, I was sickened.

Slavery, I thought, was a thing that needed addressing on Kregen, as it had once been on Earth, and wiping out. Far for me, a slave, to do anything about it, but the experiences and sights I witnessed in the Slave Market of Zar, shaped many a future episode in my life, so deeply did the pathetic proceedings of that day touch me.

There was the occasional passing palanquin, carried by richly-attired slaves; there were extravagantly-dressed groups of lords and ladies, chatting amongst themselves most properly; there were evil- and suspicious-looking characters, who I have mentioned already; young people; old people; and many more. All types came to the market to get themselves a slave, it seemed to me quite the in-thing to do in Zar by the looks of it.

Another came to the market also, and that was Ransith Lurg himself, ruler of Zargolan and her minor conquered territories. One look at him, and it became evidently clear he

thought himself several cuts above the lords and ladies who had preceded him, and doubtless a cut above kings of other nations as well. He had the look of greed and ambition written all over him, like a sickness, an obsession, and that he fancied himself an emperor was plain to see. Evil oozed from him as did the sweat from his pores, as he peered from the open curtain of his palanquin, which was twice the size and twice as pompous as any other I had seen that day, and carried by fully a dozen slaves, all garbed in golden finery, and chained at the waist by golden chains.

All went quiet in expectation on his arrival, as the crowds of onlookers showed their respect with silence. A broad way was opened for the passage of the king, and even the merchandise seemed awed by it all.

Merchandise!

Ransith Lurg's entrance to the market was accorded all the due respect and more of a visiting monarch. Red and golden petals were strewn about the place from baskets carried by young girls bedecked in bells and little else as they ran ahead of the royal palanquin. The lords and ladies and all other prospective buyers stood to one side, anxious it seemed to me to catch their king's eye and hopefully curry favour with him. All proceedings halted in expectation.

He was, as the rumour went, very large, and it could be seen quite plainly, even from my limited vantage point he was excessive and obsessive in everything he did, including, quite obviously, eating. Even there, in the slave market, a handful of young serving girls followed along in the wake of the palanquin carrying golden platters of savouries and sweet-meats, and various other assortments of culinary finery.

I had caught but a glimpse of the man as he had passed, but in that moment I had seen all this, and more. In one hand he held a large roasted leg of poultry, dripping grease, and in the other hand a large silver goblet from which he took a large gulp. A red stain adorned a few of his many chins, as wine ran over his bottom lip and joined the grease in his lap. At his feet squatted a young effeminate-looking man, all dressed in pink and holding a large bright yellow feather in one hand, and a silken handkerchief in the other, presumably scented, with which he occasionally reached up and dabbed at Ransith Lurg's mouth.

The palanquin halted before the main selling platform, and one of the many guards of the escort, perhaps Ransith Lurg's major domo or one of his subordinates, called out: "Prepare the merchandise for Our Lord!"

A thin, weak voice could be heard issuing from within the palanquin also.

Slave handlers rushed about, cage doors could be heard opening hurriedly, and several young male slaves went whipped and yelping to the blocks.

From where I was, I could not see Ransith Lurg's face, but I guessed that this assortment of merchandise failed to please him, for they were returned to their cages and replaced rapidly by an equally whipped and yelping bunch of young females. After these had seemingly failed to please *Our Lord*, a lone woman was led out, accompanied by three strapping male individuals. These were not whipped I noticed, neither did they yelp.

The palanquin visibly rocked slightly, as, obviously, the king leant forward for a closer look.

I say king, at this point with hindsight, for Ransith Lurg was indeed the king of Zargol. However, his proper title was: Oh Great Wise One, Supreme Overlord and Sovereign

Ruler of all Zargol. This might seem a trivia at this point, but it is well worth mentioning that the king of Zargol was seen in a religious as well as a monarchistic role. To his subjects, Ransith Lurg was not only royalty, but also a god, of sorts, and thus treated accordingly. Quit simply put, he was worshipped as a deity.

The three male slaves on the block were indeed splendid specimens. None of them stood less than six feet six inches in height by my reckoning, and all were well muscled and handsome. The woman, ah, now then, I had seen her before.

She stood, chin in the air, eyes flashing and full of fire, as defiant as I had last seen her on the march into Zar and in the slave compound, and maybe more so.

They had obviously gone to great lengths preparing her.

Her dark brown hair, arranged glamorously atop her head had been given the best treatment by the finest coiffeurs, her face and cheeks enhanced with subtle eye-colourings, and her lips painted darkest ruby red. On her feet she wore golden sandals, woven of fine platted thread, and tied in ascending bands to just below the knee. Overall she wore a silken sari-style gown of gold, bedecked with sparkling gems of many sparkling hues and dazzling colours. A rich, burgundy sash, wound about her waist and reaching up over her left shoulder completed the attire, and a tiara consisting of a simple gold band adorned her brow.

She was indeed a sight to behold. However, in my opinion, her beauty needed no enhancement, and she looked no more radiant in all that finery, than she had done half naked and barefoot walking in the coffle.

She was indeed a most startling woman, with her green, almost feline-like eyes burning holes in the conscience of all men who looked upon her. To see her, perhaps, was to become accursed, for this was no ordinary woman, and over all who gazed upon her there that day, I doubt there was even one who was more spellbound than was I.

In short, I simply could not take my eyes from her.

The palanquin fairly rocked back and forth a space as she raised herself to her full height, tilted her chin a few degrees more, and then turned her back on the king altogether.

"Oh Great Wise One, Supreme Overlord and Sovereign Ruler of Zargol. Your Majesty. Your Highness," came the voice of the chief auctioneer of slaves, ringing out above the awed silence, "would you require the use of the whip on this insolent young she-cat?"

A squeak came from the enclosed palanquin.

"His Majesty is displeased. Yet, he would not wish to damage such delectable goods. No, do not use the whip," came the commanding voice of Ransith Lurg's major domo.

"And. Oh Great Wise One, these three fine male slaves?" enquired the auctioneer, bowing low, and using the most polite and obsequious manner he could muster.

"Our Lord requires they be delivered to the palace. But prey, who is this young wench? His Majesty is intrigued to know more," said the major domo.

"Ah, now, if Our Lord did but know the identity of this fine woman," answered the auctioneer, "then he would indeed desire her greatly."

A squeak from within once again.

"Our Lord would desire most urgently to know," auctioneer, "but see that you do not waste His time with trivia and hearsay."

"If His Majesty would permit," said the slightly cowed sales official, "then I shall whisper to your good self, so that you might convey such wonderful tidings to Our Lord in confidence."

The major domo was growing impatient, yet he stepped forward so that the auctioneer of slaves could impart the information to him. He cocked his ear and the whispered words brought first a look of shock to his countenance, followed by a smile that grew broader and broader as he returned to the palanquin and leaned through the open aperture to inform the king.

Silence ruled for fully several heart beats before the palace official spoke again, doubtless echoing the squeaking words of Our Lord, Ransith Lurg: "His majesty has decreed that this woman is, by nature of her identity and therefore by default, the property of The Imperial State, and a prisoner of war. As such, He has advised that she be taken to the palace forthwith and that no fee be exchanged for her. However, His Majesty will pay handsomely for the three male slaves. See to it!"

The auctioneer smiled a most oily smile.

"On the other hand," continued the major domo, "if the woman turns out to be other than who you say she is, then your head will be paraded around the city walls and then put on display on the palace gate for fully one season. Do you understand?" He then tossed the seller of slaves a small bag, doubtless containing coins.

The auctioneer caught the bag, stuffed it into his tunic, and nodded, his complexion becoming paler with each passing moment.

"And now," said the major domo in a voice most grandiose and booming, "Our Lord, Oh Great Wise One, Supreme Overlord and Sovereign Ruler of Zargol, Ransith Lurg, will retire from the proceedings and allow what trade might ensue with his blessings."

The palanquin moved off slowly, and as it passed, each and every personage present doubtless passed a sigh of relief.

As for me, I was most discouraged by what had occurred.

There had been, in the presence of Ransith Lurg, no bidding. Fool he who dared bid in the presence of and in direct opposition to the king, especially if that king be Ransith Lurg himself.

With *Our Lord's* passing, the place became lively again, and the lesser buyers of the day ruffled their feathers and once again resumed their usual level of self-importance.

It was my turn to go up on the block by this time, and along with Mear, Tom Horsepool, and half a dozen other male slaves, I was purchased by a most-hearty looking fellow by the name of Lynxor Voleneux ti Kalthenburg, which meant in Earthly terms, Lord Voleneux of Kalthenburg. Horsepool had been in one of the cages over on the other side of the enclosure, and it had been for this reason I had not been able to see him until then. He looked most downhearted, as did Mear, as indeed was I; for had we not just been sold as goods at a slave market?

Now we were the property of a lord of somewhere outside Zar, it would have been the normal procedure to have been taken down to the docks to be locked away awaiting transportation, or back to the Slave Compound awaiting to embark on a long, and needless to say, painful journey on foot.

Surprisingly, in the case of our new master, this was not so.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A QUEEN OF PAIN

Zargol was a nation at war. As a country, it had been expanding its borders south and west since virtually the beginning of Ransith Lurg's reign a few short years before. Before that, it had been a small city state, with little military power to boast. Its army was now made up from men recruited mainly from the city of Zar itself, and also small towns from the surrounding area. More latterly, an influx of soldiers of fortune, or more plainly put, mercenaries, had been arriving from ports overseas. Lurg had recruited these men to bolster its attack on its neighbours and to add military prestige and presence to Zargol's ever expanding territories. It was said that Zargol's military success was due mainly to the employment of several officers from amongst these mercenaries, and also to the services of a general and his complete staff from Walfarg itself.

Flies gather around rotting meat from afar, so it is said.

Zargol had invaded large tracts of land to the west, and also to the south, which had previously been made up of a patchwork of tiny states, taking in areas of farmland and forest and the populace of those areas as well, annexing various small kingdoms in the process. However, for this relatively insignificant yet expanding empire, there was little else left south or west worth conquering. South of the forest belt was only an empty expanse of savannah. West lay vast mountains and more open grasslands. North was the direction in which to expand, most definitely.

Cymuria, a smaller nation further north and just south of the old border with Walfarg, had put up a stern resistance to this expansion. Kalthenburg, a small grape producing town further up the coast, already conquered by Ransith Lurg's army, yet given a certain amount of free reign due really to its unimportance both militarily and strategically, was sandwiched in-between this dispute.

Lynxor Voleneux ti Kalthenburg, being a landowner and wine producer, was therefore treated with a certain amount of respect in Zar since, Ransith Lurg, as many another monarch and common man surely were, was very fond of good wine.

Kalthenburg, although technically within the boundaries of this new empire, was far too highly valued to overrun with conquering armies and risk ruining its valuable crops and produce, so it tended to be bypassed altogether by Ransith Lurg's divisions.

Cymuria, a nation dominated by its production of corn, fruit and also fish, was a prize *Our Lord* was very keen to possess. However, Cymuria had a well-oiled and finely tuned army, and although smaller in numbers to Zargol's was holding the invasion at bay. Her

rulers had now also started recruiting from the influx of mercenaries to Eastern Loh. The result was a stalemate.

The reason Lynxor Voleneux ti Kalthenburg was in the process of buying slaves at all, was the fact that he wanted to build up a small force himself, a sort of insurance so to speak, against any possible chance of his land being overrun and caught up in any stray battles. He certainly did not purchase slaves for the process of making wine, for such work was done by free men of his estate. There was no guarantee that his lands and those of his fellow nobles would be spared a bloody war of course, for Cymuria had a right to defend herself, and it was not outside the realm of possibility that she might gain the upper hand and push the Zargolians back south across the grape vineyards and destroy years of hard and cherished work.

Several men, including Horsepool, Mear and myself therefore, had been purchased on the merits of our apparent usefulness as potential soldiers, or better put, guards. The Lynxor had been doing this for some while, and on this particular trip to the city, he had recruited a small force of fifty men, of which I was now one. He had not a lot to go on, mainly physical appearance and apparent intelligence, which was something he had to assess for himself. I was informed by a fellow slave purchased in this way that the man was very fair, and that our lives would improve drastically. He told me that we would live the lives of practically free men, as long as we towed the line and learned to become a part of Kalthenburg's freelance defence.

Voleneux was just one of many nobles in Kalthenburg who possessed land which produced wine. His little force would then be just one of many independent little armies. I sensed something deeper in all of this, because after all, Zar was the only available outlet for wine exportation by sea, and should that fail for any reason, wine trade would be badly affected no doubt, and therefore Kalthenburg's landowners would lose money.

I wondered at just what assortment of kingdoms and lands such exports went to. I fancied that my travels would one day take me across the ocean in search of this Dray Prescott fellow, and that ultimately, I would do a fair amount of wandering around this world of Kregen.

Little did I know at that time just how true such idle thoughts would turn out to be.

All of the above and more I learned at the time from a smattering here and a smattering there amongst the chatter of my fellow slaves bound for Kalthenburg. We had been taken down to the docks, and there, watched over by Voleneux's crew, we unloaded a goodly load of wine from his small fleet of sail boats. Kalthenburg did not possess the potential to dock large ships, otherwise she would not have needed Zar's vast facilities for export purposes, her small harbour, mainly used by fishing boats was simply not expansive enough, and the water far too shallow.

Wine was moved to Zar in barrels loaded upon small coastal sail boats, and then transferred to the larger ocean-going vessels of which many were in evidence at the dockside. I gazed upon a multitude of wooden sailing ships, galleons and wide-gerthed merchantmen, lined up in careless rows along the quay sides of Zar's large harbour.

Zar, needless to say, supported a large merchant quarter, and it was to such men as these that the wine was sold in bulk before transportation. The city's markets and souks specialised in a multitude of goods as well as slaves and wine, for Zar was the trading capital of this part of the eastern coast of Loh.

We were to be taken to Kalthenburg aboard the small fleet of coastal sailing boats belonging to Lynxor Voleneux, and I, for one, looked forward to the trip. I had heard nothing but praise for the man, and, to boot, we had been treated well.

Tom Horsepool, a man from the heyday of Earth's sailing ship era, seemed lost in reveries for most of the time, obviously at home walking up and down the planking as we loaded and unloaded barrels and crates. He trod the decks with the ease of a man who knew life at sea just as much as he did life on land. In short, he was in his element. Since his attack on me, we had not spoken, but odd glance was exchanged accompanied by a grimace of malice on his part. I watched him well, for I knew he would surely try to kill me the first chance he got.

Mear, by contrast, was obviously a man way out of his element, and we had not yet even set sail. He was burly and strong enough, of course, for he was a Zargolise farmer, and he had smashed rock in the mines of Zar and survived. Yet, Mear was not the man he had been, and the occasional glance from him, or the odd word here and there, told me that he was fighting a battle within to regain his former confidence and strong will. I hoped he would pull through, for things would get better for him now, and his chances of eventual escape would improve also, as would mine.

Yes, I looked forward to the voyage to Kalthenburg, and to life there on Voleneux's estates. It would be a far better lot for a man than slavery in Zar, that much I knew already. Our bellies were full, and we were not over-worked. I fancied a man could live just as happily a slave in Voleneux's custody as a free man could in many a place I had seen on my travels.

At this time, my mind dwelled endlessly upon the woman I had seen *sold* at the slave market to Ransith Lurg. There was something about her that had filled my mind with ideas both ridiculous and far-fetched concerning her. I dearly wanted to just be able to gaze upon her wonderful face again. I would not go as far as admitting this was an obsession, or that I wanted to possess her, I simply wanted to know who she was, and why she was captive in the first place. I felt an unexplainable and undying affinity to her, and whatever cause she lived for, and I knew not why. It nagged at me. That she lived for a cause, whether noble or not, I did not doubt.

Such thoughts coursed through my mind as we loaded the last barrels of wine into the hold of a broad merchantman. It was just by chance that I was the very person descending the plank to the quay side just as a colourfully-garbed character stepped up and enquired as to the whereabouts of Lynxor Voleneux. Now, the Lynxor I had last seen just moments before, and as I cast my glance about the busy quay, I chanced to spot him standing not far off discussing some matter or other with one of his men.

I pointed in Voleneux's direction, and as I was going that way anyway, I walked along at the enquiring man's side.

It turned out that the chap in the rainbow suit was an orderly from the palace, and that he brought a specific order for six barrels of the finest red wine from Voleneux's estates to be taken to the palace without further delay.

The palace orderly, having explained this to our new master, took me by the arm as if to requisition me for the task.

A quick glance from Voleneux seemed to satisfy him that I was up to the job, and he called over two other men from amongst our number and explained that we should take

the wine by cart up to the palace grounds, where it would be handed over to doubtless nervously awaiting servants.

An escort of six of Ransith Lurg's palace guard stood near by. It all seemed pretty regular procedure to me, and doubtless was, for the reds of Voleneux were a favourite with the king I had heard.

Before I knew what I was about, I was pushing a four-wheeled cart loaded with six barrels of red wine up the winding, cobbled streets of Zar, helped by two of my fellow slaves, both of whom I was unfamiliar with, and escorted by six palace guards. Lynxor Voleneux had also sent along three of his own regular men to ensure our return to the docks. He may have been a kind master, but he certainly was not stupid.

When we eventually arrived at a back entrance to the grounds of the palace, it became evident that there were no waiting servants eager to take the wine up to their Lord.

The guards cursed the stupidity of servants and slaves a while, and then sought permission from the gate captain to let us continue all the way to the kitchens as we were. We did so, and along the way I took in the scenery most casually, just as some sightseer about London for the day would have done.

The palace was an enormous and grandiose affair, but ugly nonetheless. It had obviously been extended somewhat of late, and its overall architecture seemed a mismatch of styles and tastes that I imagined and was quite convinced must have been the product of personal desire on the part of the king. The entire west wing was evidently newly built, and was constructed of stone quite familiar in appearance to me; that of the Stone Mines of Zar.

Along the way we wound through a labyrinth of paths and individual gardens lined and stocked with all manner of flowers, shrubs and trees. It was, in my opinion, a most distasteful and grotesque design.

Right up to the frowning back wall of the palace we went, where, as at the gates, no servants waited.

"Where are these barrels going?" asked one of two guards posted at the outer kitchen entrance.

"Wine for Our Lord's table," confirmed one of the escort.

"Just take it through, dom," said the door guard, most casually, but leave these other fellows here with us until the slaves go back."

By these fellows, he meant Volenuex's own men. By slaves, he meant us three who pushed and pulled the cart.

"Very well," answered the same man of the escort who had spoken up. Then: "Come on you three onkers! Get it inside, sharpish."

And so, as ordered by these men of the king's guard, we three unloaded the barrels between us. It would take two trips to take them inside, as each man could just about manage one barrel apiece upon his shoulder.

I lifted my first barrel up and plonked it on my right shoulder, waiting while the other two, with the assistance of Volenuex's personal soldiers, did likewise. We then followed one of the guards within, accompanied by the vocally forward escort guard, and set about tackling a labyrinth of passageways and corridors just as complex and impractical as the garden pathways had been.

As we carried the wine, the two guards carried on a conversation. I took little notice, but presently my ears pricked up at mention of a certain someone.

"So," said the door guard, after they had discussed everything but their kitchen sinks, "who do you think she is?"

"Beats me, dom," replied the guard of our escort. "But she is one leem of a woman, I can vouch for that."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I saw them trying to get her aboard his yacht."

"She didn't want to go for a sail with Our Lord, eh?"

"Not exactly. She just didn't want help getting aboard. Someone tried to force her up the gangplank faster than she wanted to go, and she tipped three or four of them into the harbour waters. Famblys!"

"What then?"

"She just stalked up the walkway at her own pace, went aboard, evil green eyes flashing, and didn't bother to observe the Fantamyrrh either."

"No!"

At this point, we had deposited the wine in a massive cellar down a flight of cold, stone steps down in the bowels of the palace foundations, which was stacked to the ceiling with barrels and bottles, and returned to the outer door. We took up the remaining three barrels, and carried out the same trip again, excepting, that one barrel was taken from us by a pair of servants at the top of the cellar steps.

"One for upstairs, is it?" asked one of our guards of the servants.

Neither said a word. Neither dared.

"Well, he'll need it to subdue that one!"

The guards carried on chatting as we deposited the last of the wine in the cellar and returned to the outer door, and I carried on my unofficial sightseeing tour of this rather dreary section of Ransith Lurg's palace.

"So," asked the door guard again, "*who do you think she is?*"

"Didn't I say?" said the other guard, looking about carefully before he carried on with this particularly juicy portion of his gossip. "Well, I have heard she is none other than....."

The other guard bent close as the vital words were whispered into his ear. He then whistled between his teeth, adding: "That means this damned war will be done with sooner rather than later, if you ask me. I didn't fancy being sent out to fight those accursed Cymurians. Damned Queen of Pain, that's what she is. It's as plain as those evil eyes in her head. A Queen of Pain."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

THE BOXER ONCE AGAIN

With those words ringing in my ears, we three slaves returned to the docks with our now empty cart and the smaller escort of three of Voleneux's men.

The words: A Queen of Pain, ran around inside my head like a tornado.

Queen of Pain!

I had no doubt whatsoever the guards had referred to none other than the green-eyed beauty Ransith Lurg had *bargained for* so eagerly at the slave market.

At the quay side, all was ready for departure. We simply awaited the tide. Lynxor Voleneux ti Kalthenburg's fleet consisted of ten small, double-decked, twin-masted sailboats. Below decks therefore, in the hold in which the wine had been brought here, would likely be the place we would spend the journey back to Kalthenburg.

Somehow, I was now none too keen to go.

The darkness of night was descending, and the lights from the quays and the buildings close to the water reflected out across the harbour, to mingle with the flickering and eerie illuminations of the oil lanterns aboard the myriad boats and ships docked and anchored about like a patchwork of shadows.

Before long, seven moons rode the night sky.

With first light, we would sail.

First, or so thought I, there would be time to sleep.

Not so.

Lynxor Voleneux was a most orderly and efficient man. He, of course, organised a watch on each of his ten boats. To each watch, he added one man of the five new slaves aboard each boat to begin the process of learning the trade for which he had been virtually rescued from a life of misery as a slave in Zar or elsewhere.

That one man aboard our boat was none other than myself.

I was handed a lantern, and told to sit upon the rail farthest from the quay and keep an eye out for anything suspicious. Crime was rife in Zar, and as criminals are wont to do, they carried on their nefarious trade at a time most suitable to themselves, namely at night.

Further down the harbour wall, in a private birth marked out with a boundary of buoys, anchored just a few feet off shore, floated a most impressive sailing vessel. I had spotted her earlier on, but now, one could not help but notice her due to the fantastic array of lights coming from her decks.

She was a beauty. Long, sleek, multi-masted.

From her large forecabin, a most joyous noise was issuing, as of many people enjoying a celebration. Light music mingled in with the assortment of party sounds, and several guests were spilling out onto the deck to enjoy the cool night air. I could clearly see their fancy costume from where I sat, and ever and again some gem or other in some lady or other's gown would catch the light and send sparkling rays across the water like brilliant shooting stars.

I was reminded then of the guards' conversation earlier on as we had carried wine to the palace, concerning the king's yacht and a certain woman who had been reluctant to be rushed or to show her respect.

A picture of her face and those vivid green eyes came to mind. She seemed so familiar to me then, almost as if I should have known who she was.

"Well, John," came low voice from behind me.

I jumped out of my skin and looked over my shoulder.

There, next to the rail, stood an old man, all dressed in white robes.

"Yahweh!" I exclaimed.

"Not in person, John Blake, but as far as you are concerned, real enough."

Recovering rapidly from the shock, I took a closer look at him. He seemed almost transparent, semi-lucent would be a better way of putting it. Behind and through him I could plainly see the almost still waters of the harbour.

"You are not doing very well," he said, almost mocking me in his tone.

"Well, if you were so damned clever," I ejaculated, and then, lowering my voice to just above a whisper in mind of where I was and the company I kept, "you could have given me some stronger clues as to where I could find this Dray Prescott fellow."

"Anger will get you nowhere, John," admonished Yahweh, although the tone of his voice in no way matched my own anger. In fact, his voice was calm, serene almost, just like the lulled and gentle lapping of the sea against the side of the boats.

"Any clues then?" I asked, showing a marked lack of respect for this man who claimed to be an agent of the gods, if not one of them. He had influenced my life well enough by then to prove kinship amongst the gods, for sure.

He did not answer, but instead pointed out across the calm waters of the harbour at the king's yacht floating serenely in the colour-dashed waters.

I gazed out over the waters for a long moment. "Over there?" I asked, confused.

"What?"

"Do you not recognise her, John?"

"Who?" I asked, forgetting all about the green-eyed Queen of Pain who had dominated my thoughts this past day or so.

"Her!"

It then came to me in a flash of inspiration.

Gods!

At last I who she was.

I turned back to Yahweh.

He was gone!

"Blast!"

"Get some sleep," came another voice, this time from the opposite direction.

I spun about, only to see one of Lynxor Voleneux's men bringing one of my fellow slaves to replace my watch. As they came closer, I recognised Mear's broad countenance. I winked to him, and was heartened to see his response was most positive. A look of pride had replaced the sullen downcast expression he had developed of late. It had been Mear himself who had handed me some very useful advice back at the slave compound as I had been about to lay into the kataki slaver with the over eager whip-hand.

"Not now, John Blake," he had said.

Well, the time had come.

It was now!

Tom Horsepool was aboard one of the other ships.

Best place for the little sneak, I thought. Out of the way.

I thanked them both most heartily, putting a yawn on to further display that I was much in need of sleep, although the gratitude was lost on the Lynxor's guard even if the yawn was not.

"Get below," he said, although in no way angrily, "you are all going to need every bit of sleep you can get."

Mear took my place, and as the guard explained a little to him concerning keeping watch, I went over to the hatch that led below decks.

Taking another glance over to where Mear stood, I saw the guard had his back to me.

This was my chance.

Against every jot of common sense screaming out to me from my mind, I took three rapid strides across the deck to the far rail and gently slipped over the side.

The water was cool.

Without making any noise, I propelled myself away from the boat far enough to swim around and out to sea a space and far enough out of the lights to be seen. Then, using the breast stroke, I carefully and quietly made my way in and out of the numerous hulking shadows of hulls all around the harbour in the general direction of Ransith Lurg's private yacht.

It was by far the fanciest and best-lit vessel out in the harbour, was the royal yacht, tied as it was scarce feet from the quay side, and so was not hard to make out amongst the strange mix of gloom and bright illumination upon the still waters.

I stuck close to the densest shadows I could, whilst all the while the noises of the party grew stronger in my wet ears.

Just what I proposed doing, I had no idea.

Yahweh had pointed.

That had been enough reason to take action.

What else could he have meant?

Perhaps even the scoundrel Dray Prescott was aboard the king's yacht.

If not, there was at least one person there who's identity I knew for sure. Two in fact. One was Ransith Lurg, Supreme Obese One, and Sovereign Fool of Eastern Loh.

And the other?

Well now...

I eventually came to the side of the boat I was aiming for, a small rowboat tethered to the bow of the yacht. From there, and amongst shadows, I could raise myself from the water slightly and take a closer look.

The rail of the yacht was by this time practically crammed to the point of bursting, so many people were there aboard. I began to have serious doubts as to what I was about. I had no plan, and little clue what I would do once aboard. However, I was a man obsessed with the recent discovery my memory had revealed to me with Yahweh's aid.

I just had to see her.

I just had to know for sure.

Slowly, I swam around the base of the hull of the sleek vessel that was the royal yacht, although I feared not by then that I should be discovered from making any noise. It would have been almost impossible to have made noise enough to rise above that being made by the revellers aboard. However, to be seen was a vastly different matter.

I reached the anchor line at the prow and hovered just within its shadows. The harbour wall was clearly visible to me then, and I could see numerous guards patrolling the top of the quay side.

Slowly, I once again made my way around to the back of the hull, so that by then I had completely circumnavigated it in the water.

The line to which the rowboat was fixed was fastened the other end to a capstan on deck for sure. I pulled at the rope. It seemed firm enough to hold my weight, although the small boat pulled in toward the hull.

Taking the rope more firmly, I hauled myself up out of the water and, hand over hand, raised myself up far enough to be able to reach out and grasp the narrow maintenance ledge protruding from just about a man's height below the main deck. I then transferred my entire weight to this ledge, in the process rocking the rowboat. Holding my breath, I awaited the raising of voices, but none came above the din of the party.

Carefully, for it would have been all too easy to slip, I made my way amidships, where, as I had observed earlier, the forward cabin wall reached nearly to the edge of the deck. There would be no one crowding the rail there.

So, taking extreme caution, I pulled myself up to the deck level, and rolled in under the rail and next to the forward cabin wall. I was facing, as planned, the stern of the yacht. I then crawled back in that direction, eventually reaching the extreme end of the cabin where I was able to peep out onto the open deck.

I was rewarded by a forest of legs milling closely together and blocking all further progress, as I had known would be the case.

I crept back a space and hauled myself upright against the cabin wall. Reaching a hand up, I caught ahold of the edge of the deck above the forward cabin, the floor of which, as I had guessed, was recessed into the main deck to allow those inside maximum head room. For that, I cared little, except that it meant I could peep in through the open ports and scan the interior without being at eye level with those within.

A sea of heads met my gaze this time.

At the head of a vast table running down the entire length of the cabin, sat Ransith Lurg. To his right sat she for whom I searched. All the other places down each side of the table were occupied, and a multitude stood around the periphery of the cabin walls sipping from tall glasses and chatting most properly. Many of those about the table looked like they had had too much to drink, as did the king. The green-eyed lady sat stolidly, straight out in front. If one of the many guests had been Dray Prescott, then I

would not have known. I had no clues as to his appearance, any more than I did concerning his whereabouts.

Damned Elohim! I thought. Damn you Yahweh. Why was I not given something more substantial to work with instead of always being left out in the dark to plain guess my way around Kregen. Hell, I was never going to get back home to Earth at this rate.

Never!

I clung on, waiting.

For what it was I waited, at that precise moment, I knew not. But if I could but catch her eye, or if she would but go outside, then I would have a far better chance of being able to work out a plan.

Just then, Ransith Lurg took it into his head to make a speech. Whether this was a planned part of the night's proceedings or not, I did not know, but after he had made that short, egotistical and self-centred outburst of pure hypocrisy in his squeaky, pathetic voice, which I shall not bother to relate to you here, I knew a lot more about what to do next than I had before he had made it.

By that time, I knew, or rather guessed that what it was I was supposed to do was rescue this woman. That she was the Queen of Cymuria, or some such other prominent personage from that country, I then plainly knew, Ransith's speech had told me that much at least. Whether a Queen of Pain or not, whatever that implied, I somewhat doubted, for I fancied I knew this woman very well, very well indeed. She was the captured prize of Zargolan, that was all I needed to know then as I clung to my flimsy hold, and I was none over fond of Zargolan and its pompous king.

If what I was about to do was a stroke in favour of ending slavery in Zar, then so be it. If what I was about to do furthered my quest in searching out Dray Prescott, and, as Yahweh had quite clearly ordered, the killing of him, then so be it. To be honest, I did not at that exact moment care, as I hauled myself up and over the top of the cabin roof, crashing in through the sky light and landing square in the middle of the table as a consequence. Ransith Lurg himself sat scarce ten feet from me as I reached down and took a sword out of the hand of one of the fastest guests to react.

"Give me that!" I yelled, rather foolishly, "you might hurt yourself."

Pandemonium broke out.

Swishing this way and that, I made my way to the head of the table. Surprisingly, under the cramped circumstances, the cabin rapidly emptied of guests who were just as rapidly replaced by guards wielding swords.

I reached the head of the table.

Ransith Lurg was still struggling to gain his feet.

"John! What in God's name are you doing here?"

"Little time to explain now, Maria," I said, almost laughing it out, "spot of bother to deal with first. I could ask you the same thing, though."

Maria Torres!

She snatched the king's decorative ceremonial sword from his side as she spoke, "I am a savapim, if that means anything to you."

"No," I replied, puzzled.

"Later," was all she had time to say as she grasped Lurg by the ceremonial collar and wrenched him face first over the table.

Gods, she shocked me then.

"Anyone move, and this fat stinking rynth gets his throat cut!"

The guards pulled up short.

Maria Torres had changed a tad.

Or had she.

The same vivid green eyes flashed defiance at the world, in the same way they had long ago and on another world as she had fastened the top button on my tunic. It had been a bit tight, after all, that long gone day I had become an officer in an army on another planet.

The guards hesitated.

"Outside!" I ordered, "or he gets it, because believe me, she will do it if she has to."

The cabin slowly emptied.

Once the guards had left, I took the king by the back of the neck and forced him towards the entrance. I had a wild thought then concerning rowboats and a certain small fleet of sailing boats out in the harbour.

The mingled opaline light of day began to creep over the world.

We stepped out of the cabin and I took a glance over to where Lynxor Voleneux's fleet should have been.

It was gone!

I shifted my gaze out to sea, and there they were, abroad on the high tide.

Just then, and to my great surprise, Mear's head popped over the rail. "John, you great fambly," to the rowboat, fast!"

Events were changing and passing faster than my mind could cope with.

Maria dragged the king backwards as we headed for the stern end of the yacht. Sure enough, the small rowboat was still there, fastened to its rope.

"I saw you leaving the boat, John," said Mear, excitedly, "I thought you were escaping without me."

The guards were pressing close now, seeing that our daring ruse was almost on the verge of success.

"Down, into the boat, Maria," I shouted, "and pass that fat thing here."

Ransith Lurg whimpered as the blade of his own sword scratched his neck.

Maria looked at me. "You don't understand, John," she said, her eyes flashing with fires of passion, excitement, and fear, all at once.

I glanced at Mear.

"The Lynxor, John," he whispered in reply to my enquiring gaze, and in such a lowered voice no one but myself could have heard, "you pre-empted his plan."

"You mean you knew all along?" I asked. "You mean Voleneux ti Kalthenburg was here to rescue....."

"To rescue the queen of Cymuria, John, yes. But...."

"Then he better get on with it then, Mear," I retorted, interrupting him, "because these guards are not going to hold off much longer. And this item of scum?" I asked, shaking Lurg and holding my own sword closer still to his jugular. "What about him?"

Mear had pulled Maria down into the boat. Her parting words to me were: "Leave him or bring him, it is up to you, but move, for pity's sake, John. They will be upon you any moment."

I reached over and taking the sword from the king's throat, cut through the rope that held the rowboat fast. I noticed in doing so that Mear held no blade in his own hand.

"Go!" I shouted.

Just then, Ransith Lurg squeezed out of my grasp and lunged forward over the deck.

His men stepped forward immediately, swords raised, at the ready, and I knew I was going to be hard pushed to hold them back even for the few seconds necessary for the rowboat to get underway.

One more look over my shoulder and I could see that Mear had been joined by several swimmers who were even then climbing aboard the rowboat and taking control of the oars. These were Voleneux's men for sure. Another moment and that avenue of escape would be closed to me.

One last look at Maria revealed a haunted expression written plain across her beautiful features.

Our eyes met, perhaps for the last time ever.

One lingering last exchange of emotions.

A million unspoken words in one all too brief look.

Vivid green eyes she had. But somehow now those bright flames had diminished, replaced by sadness and despair perhaps.

Perhaps.

For sure!

I tore my eyes away and turned back to face the men before me. All this had taken but mere heartbeats to pass.

Ransith Lurg was being taken away, and I was now at the mercy of the many swords facing me.

As one, they rushed!

Taking the rail in one hand, I skipped wide of them and drove a path past them with a show of swordplay even I doubted was quite real. Somehow, I reached the cover of the space between the forward cabin and the rail, and from there managed to get to the prow of the boat. It had been hauled into the edge of the quay to allow the screaming guests an easier route from it, and the guards an easier route aboard, and so I was able to dodge several vicious sword blows and run straight out onto the quay side proper.

I then snapped my sword on the blade of a guard, and so had to resort to a barbaric left hook to knock him out of my path. He sank to the floor in just the same manner another man had sunk to the canvas a long time previous, back in London. Likewise, this man also was dead as a result. I knew it. It was just one of those punches.

Somehow, and I don't quite understand to this day how, I managed to elude the many swipes of swords aimed at me by the gathered multitude of guests and guards, and elude them altogether. It was perhaps the shock of what had happened that had slowed down the guards' actions and reactions, but even so, I floored a good half-dozen of them with fairly decent left hooks and straight rights.

Running now along the quay side, I glanced out to sea. The rowboat had long since disappeared from view amongst all the other vessels in the harbour, and ten small sail boats amongst many others, large and small, merged with the light and shadows of the middle distance between myself and the horizon. I could not pick out Voleneux's fleet amongst the myriad sails now abroad on the waters.

My mind boggled at the turn of events.

Maria!

What was she doing on Kregen? And what was a savapim? And how in God's name was she the Queen of Cymuria? A Queen of Pain, whatever that may be.

Mear!

Had he known all along that there had been a plot to rescue Maria? Or, had he done as he had said, and simply followed me in a hasty escape bid?

Lynxor Voleneux ti Kalthenburg!

To this man there was more than met the eye. Surely he risked a serious reprisal from Zargolan should Ransith Lurg learn the truth.

Even Tom Horsepool.

He had surely now succeeded. For had he not prevented me from furthering my search for Dray Prescott in altering the flow of events as he had?

They had all surprised me, greatly it must be said.

The cries of my pursuers followed closely upon my heels, and as the suns rose, so also did a slight mist from the cold ground, to hover eerily about my feet as I ran for my life. But, flight was now useless, for up ahead a group of guards blocked my path.

I was trapped!

To my right the bank rose up at an impossible angle.

To my left, the harbour waters looked cold and uninviting, and upon their surface the mist swirled.

Ahead and behind the mob closed in as I slowed down and stopped to look around me one last time before I died.

The mist rose higher.

Then, and only then did I realise the analogy of this weird state of affairs with an event of long before, for ahead of me, a stone portal stood, its entrance awash with thick, oozing mist.

The truth struck me even more so then.

I had failed in my mission.

I had failed to find Dray Prescott.

Doubtless in following my actions to save Maria, once my wartime sweetheart, now the Queen of Cymuria on Kregen, I had failed my own masters badly. I had misunderstood Yahweh's instructions yet again, for doubtless, *Dray Prescott must have been in the forward cabin*, and I had failed to recognise that fact and carry out my orders.

Doubtless, it was now time to pay the price for inadequacy, defeat, and therefore failure to complete my mission.

I took one last glance at the world of Kregen, wished Maria, Mear and Lynxor Voleneux good fortune, cursed the slyness of Tom Horsepool, and stepped through the entrance.

Notor Zan?

No!

The blackness of Hell itself greeted me and I was but a mere nothing in a vast dark sea of nothing.

My mind went blank.....

END OF VOLUME ONE

EPILOGUE

For John Blake, there had been only failure. His encounter with Kregen had brought him pain and suffering beyond belief, yet he had persevered. The ways of the gods are profound, to say the least, for he had first-hand experience of the their ways, yet he would get no second chance it seemed, for they would not tolerate failure.

There had seemed so much more on the savage and spectacular world of Kregen for such as he. So much he had lived through already that he would doubtless live through again if he could have done so. Kregen possessed so many mysteries to unravel, so many strange lands to travel, strange men and diffs to meet, and even stranger animals and ways to wonder at.

But alas, he had failed.

I can tell you now that I know no more than has been told already. The medium through which this narrative was delivered to me has since brought no more, and I can now only speculate on the fate of John Blake.

And yet, I wonder.

I wonder.....

BACK COVER TEXT

KREGEN REVISITED

John Blake, an officer of the British army at the close of World War Two, snatched from Earth abruptly and set down naked and unarmed on the savage world of Kregen by some unseen force, must fight his way to meet his destiny and an encounter with the man Dray Prescot, or accept failure and the ultimate revenge of the gods.

Ken Bulmer's Kregen is a stark contrast between splendour and tragedy; a beautiful, yet dangerous world. It is a world upon which only the strongest and the bravest survive. Dray Prescot, of course, was one such, a man amongst men, a leader amongst leaders.

Would John Blake possess enough courage and initiative to do likewise? Would he, too, earn the right to live and breathe the clear fresh air on a world in many ways wonderful, and in so many others, forlorn and terrible?

AFTERWORD BY STEPHEN J. SERVELLO

Llahal and lahal to all of you lucky fans of both Ken Bulmer and Dray Prescott. Lucky because you have just finished reading "Beneath the Moons of Kregen," written by my close friend and fellow Prescott enthusiast, Tim Jones.

Tim and I met online through the "Kregen List" on Yahoogroups. This is a group I am fortunate enough to moderate that is dedicated to the works of Ken Bulmer in general and the Dray Prescott Saga in particular. From a humble beginning in 1998 of only a handful of subscribers, we now boast of over eighty members from North America and Europe.

With over 52 books alone in the Prescott Saga and well over a hundred beyond that, Ken has given the group much to review, discuss, theorise on and summarise. His writing history has spanned approximately fifty years and many of those works have appeared under an assortment of pseudonyms. Among them is Alan Burt Akers for chronicling Dray Prescott's adventures on the planet Kregen. But one thing was hugely lacking in all of this. The last fifteen books in the Prescott Saga were only available in German! A long story, perhaps best saved for another time. But there it is.

At about this same time Mike Sutton and his Savanti Press reached an agreement with Ken and this resulted in the next four or five books in the series being released in English, via diskette. Sadly, this arrangement ended when Ken suffered a massive stroke that prevented his continuing his most famous of all series, which he was then solely concentrating on.

It was this stalemate of sorts that propelled Heike Schampera, a Kregen fan from Bavaria, to create the "Prescott List," dedicated to seeing through the completion of the Dray Prescott Saga in English, the re-publication of as much of Ken's other body of works as was feasible and (here is where Tim comes in), the continuation of Dray Prescott's adventures under the mingled streams of the red and green lights of Antares.

You see, when Tim initially joined the Kregen List, he sent me samples of his sword and sorcery plus interplanetary adventure fiction. It was his superb material which prompted me to suggest he be included on the Prescott List where his writing skills would be best utilised. Both Heike and Els Withers (co-moderator) agreed.

The result, you now hold in your hands, having just read "Beneath the Moons of Kregen," written with the blessings of Ken. This will be the first but certainly not the last such novel, chronicling events (not necessarily Prescott's either) on Kregen and nor will Tim be the only author. He is however, the first!

The future of Kregen is wide open and I hope that fans of interplanetary adventure stories will continue to support this effort being put forth by Tim and the other members of the team. I believe even Dray Prescott would consider this a Hai Jikai! I know I do.

Happy Swinging!

Stephen J. Servello