The Release of the Black Wolf

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Chapter One - The Release

The prisoner lay on the floor of his cell, rolled in his threadbare robe. The single window, high above the floor, let in a stream of moonlight that shone directly on his white head, making it seem to glow. His breathing was quiet, even, like that of a sleeping child. But Kan-Arrog was many years removed from childhood, and from his boyhood home, the green glades of the Mek Mountains. He was a very old man, old even before his imprisonment, and grown ancient during it.

As he slept, he dreamed of his youth, of running barefoot alongside clear streams, playing games under shade trees. It was good to be young and free, if only in a dream, hearing the other children calling to him...

"Black Wolf! Black Wolf! Black--"

"Kan-Arrog, you must wake up. There are guards here."

The old prisoner opened his eyes to see Scorpion, his partner in captivity for the past twenty years, leaning over him, his slanted eyes reflecting the moonlight. Behind Scorpion, Kan-Arrog could see that the heavy iron door was standing open, and two men bearing torches were just inside the cell.
"What is this, Scorpion?" he asked, in thickly accented J'agese. Already, he began to prepare his body for torture. It had been several years since the last session, but memories of horror and pain are long in dying.

"They have not yet said, Master."

Kan-Arrog smiled, patting Scorpion's bony shoulder. He could sense the younger man's unease, but knew that Scorpion's courage would not fail. It never had, not during all the years of running, the brutal warfare, the capture, beatings, starvation, and the subsequent, long confinement.

"Help me up, Friend," said Kan-Arrog.

Scorpion placed a steady hand under the old man's elbow and gently helped him to his feet. With one guard ahead and one behind, Kan-Arrog and Scorpion left their cell for the first time in nine years.

"I was dreaming," said the old man softly, in J'agese, "about the mountains. We were playing 'Stalking Cat'."

One of the guards looked hard at Kan-Arrog, so the old man stopped talking. The human's face was pale and bearded, his eyes round and dull. Down the long, dark corridor, he led them in silence, past locked doors behind which scores of unknown prisoners languished in hopelessness.

I am getting too old for torture, thought Kan-Arrog. It will likely kill me, and poor, brave Scorpion will be left alone.

He glanced at his friend, who still held his arm, more for comfort than true assistance. Scorpion gazed fearlessly ahead, his handsome J'agese face composed. Kan-Arrog knew
that, like himself, Scorpion was beginning the Hux-dilyl--

the hypnotic separation of mind from body--in preparation

for whatever torment lay ahead.

The guards ushered them up a flight of stairs, and

through a new steel door, and Kan-Arrog and Scorpion found

themselves away, saluting the approaching man--a large,

imperious human some forty years of age, trailed by several

other humans.

"Master Kan-Arrog!" said this silk-clad gentleman.

"How perfectly wonderful to see you looking so well. And

this must be Golan. It means 'Scorpion' in J'agese, does it

not?"

Scorpion nodded politely, but continued to stare

suspiciously at the human.

"By now, you are probably wondering exactly what is

going on. Of course, everything will be explained to you in

good time. Right now, I will tell you this. My name is

Rufus Gaines, and I am the new warden of the prison." His

face was flushed with excitement. He flashed white, well-
cared-for teeth in a nervous smile. "Master Kan-Arrog, I am

pleased to tell you--Sir, there has been a change in our

government, and you are to be released, you and Mr. Golan."

The two prisoners' eyes widened. Scorpion stiffened,

holding his breath. Kan-Arrog felt a giddy rush of joy.

The warden stuttered, "You may leave now, if you wish,

but I hope you will let me see you well taken care of

first. I mean, bathed, and fed, and given good beds to

sleep in, before you decide where you will go."
Scorpion's jaw rose indignantly at the mention of beds, while Kan-Arrog's eyebrows lifted in skeptical amusement. The old man placed a bony, clawed hand on the human's forearm.

"My son," he said, in the new, human-Dismarian language, "thank you for this wonderful news, and bless you for your kind offers. We will gladly receive whatever you give to us. But I regret that I have nothing to give in return, except questions. Many questions."

The human smiled rather mistily at the old man. "Sir, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to answer any question you might ask me."

Kan-Arrog patted his arm, "I suppose it can wait until we are washed and decently clothed. Rufus Gaines."

The warden beamed. He bowed shallowly. Then he said, "Sir, if you will permit me, I will show you and Mr. Golan to my apartments."

So, after twenty years of captivity, Kan-Arrog, the Black Wolf, and Golan, the Scorpion, found themselves suddenly free. They were treated like royalty by the warden's household servants, given tubs of hot water to bathe in, with strong, but sweet-smelling soap. Once clean, they were given fresh new clothes of cool, white silk. Rufus Gaines' servants filed their claws and bound their legs and feet in perfumed cotton cloth, after the J'agese tradition. Some combed oil into Scorpion's long, black hair, and applied kohl to his dramatically slanted, golden eyes, while others combed and braided Kan-Arrog's long,
horse-like tail, coiling it into a tight knot at the base of his spine. They brushed the short white fur that covered his scalp and back, until it shone.

"It is vain of me, Scorpion," the old man, in his comfortable room, later said, "but I want to look in the mirror."

"So look in the mirror," said Scorpion, laughing. "Master, we are free! There has been a revolution, and, at last, the new Dismarians recognize that we are worthy people--equals!"

"Hmmph. I am not convinced about all that, but I will talk about it tomorrow, with Gaines. Right now, I wish to be vain, and spoiled and concentrate solely upon this luxurious room, and this huge tray of food, and this bottle of sweet, sweet wine."

"Be patient with me, Friend," he said. "I am an old man, and I am very weary, very weary. Until a few hours ago, I thought I would die in prison, cold, hungry, wrapped in rags. Now, through some miracle, I am clean, and clothed, and given pure food to eat. Tomorrow, perhaps I will not care for these things, but for now, I will be naughty and enjoy them."

Scorpion smiled at him, nodding. "My Master knows far more than I the ways of God. Anything you do, Kan-Arrog, must necessarily be good."

Kan-Arrog laughed aloud. "If you say so, Scorpion," he said. Then he sat down on the bed and munched on a piece of fruit, while he continued to look at himself in the mirror.
Oh, he was terribly old. His fur, once jet-black, was now as white as snow, and his large, Mekeri eyes, blue, with slit pupils, were hooded, and a bit dim. His thin mustache drooped sadly at the corners of his mouth. He was painfully thin, as was Scorpion; poor Scorpion, who was still devout enough not to sit on the bed. No, he had made himself comfortable on the floor, which was sinful enough with its thick carpet. Scorpion would not drink the wine, but sipped water as he ate his fruit, bread, and cheese.

Kan-Arrog sighed as he considered his friend, who, like himself, was a member of a race which was native to this world, albeit different from Kan-Arrog's own race. Scorpion was pure J'agese, tall, long-limbed, and hairless, except for his eyebrows and eyelashes, and the glossy black hair that grew on his scalp. His eyes were slanted, cat-like, and honey-yellow, and his teeth were sharp, for eating meat, his claws long and pointed, for tearing it. But Scorpion had not tasted meat since boyhood. Under the religion he had chosen--Kan-Arrog's religion, the way of Sands--it was a grievous sin to eat meat.

Kan-Arrog swallowed hard, and looking down at his own hands, which also boasted hooked, sharp claws, allowed a tiny thought to creep into his head. For a moment, he let himself remember the last venison steak he had eaten, some thirty-five of forty years before. He could even remember the way the red juice swam on his plate. He had soaked it up with bread, this juice, and had eaten it.

"Oh, my," he said, running his hand over the soft fur
on his head. "I think I had better go to sleep. It will be daylight soon, and I want to ask questions on the morrow. I want to find out all I can about this seeming revolution."

"Shall I stay here, Master, or do you want me to go to the other room?"

"Good lord, Scorpion, stay in here! I probably could not sleep if you were not nearby."

The younger man smiled. "As you wish."

Kan-Arrog removed the satiny comforter from the bed and blew out all the candles before lying down a few feet from Scorpion. He curled up in the comforter, sighing very deeply. He thought about his friend, and his J'agese features.

"Do you know, Scorpion," he said, "a hundred years ago, your kind and mine were bitter enemies, and you and I would probably never have met, except, perhaps, in combat."

"This is true, Kan-Arrog," answered Scorpion, his voice heavy with sleep. "It took the holy word of Rolshad that brought Mek and J'aga together under common rule. Just before he fell asleep, he prayed to God to forgive him his blasphemous thoughts—just as he had done many a night during the last twenty years.

Scorpion awoke to the heat of late morning. He blinked, looking around him at the luxurious room, unsure of where he was. For a moment, he thought it was a dream. Then he remembered the events of the night before, and he leapt to his feet, stepped over Kan-Arrog's sleeping form, and went to the window, jerking aside the heavy black curtains.
The glare of light stabbed at his eyes, causing him to shrink back, throwing a protective arm across his face. By and by, he was able to look out--for the first time in he knew not how many years.

From the window, he could look down on the roof of the penitentiary. Guards patrolled walks along its perimeter, their soft human bodies hidden inside grey, black-trimmed uniforms. They wore heavy, black boots, so highly polished that they reflected the bright sun like mirrors. Instead of the native sandcloth, the guards shielded their heads and faces with wide-brimmed grey hats.

Scorpion snorted contemptuously at the stiff-backed men, then looked beyond them, beyond the prison and the surrounding mud-brick buildings, to the open desert, with its rolling dunes, stretching forever until it met the cloudless, deep-blue sky. He pressed his palms to the warm glass. The heat seemed to course through his body, exciting him. His heart pounded; his breath quickened.

He was free. After so many years, he was finally free. It was almost too much for his brain to absorb.

He whirled away from the window, taking in the richly furnished room. The walls were hung with paintings and tapestries, the furniture, made of precious, genuine wood, was polished to slick perfection. Solid silver candlesticks, with tall, cream-colored tapers, had been placed conveniently around the room. And a plain but very expensive wooden door led into a modern water closet. There was no end to the luxury, it seemed to Scorpion.
"Typical of them," he said aloud. Humans were weak, soft creatures, spoiled by millenia of easy living. They needed soft beds, plush carpets, pleasant decorations. Without such things, they could not survive. They had ruined themselves, and it was disgusting to Scorpion, who believed, as did all Rolshadists, that creatures who changed themselves into something which God had not intended them to be were eternally and irrevocably lost. Only God should live as a god.

He found himself standing over Kan-Arrog, staring down at him. The old man had kicked off the fat comforter and lay sprawled on the rug, arms outstretched, head back, mouth open. He did not snore, but his breathing was deep and loud. A few dewy drops of sweat beaded his white brow.

Scorpion was troubled by Kan-Arrog's behavior the night before--especially by the old man's sitting on the bed--but had been careful not to show it. Kan-Arrog had ridden with Rolshad and had heard first-hand the wisdom of that great leader. Why, Scorpion himself had seen old Black Wolf spin the sands, until they spoke to him.

Compassion filled the J'agese. His lip curled in a sharp-toothed smile as he leaned down toward Kan-Arrog. Black Wolf was so old, it was becoming difficult for him to always sit on the floor. Surely God would forgive and old man's taking comfort where offered.

Scorpion's shadow fell across the sleeping man's face, and Kan-Arrog's azure eyes flickered open, the pupils widening, then narrowing quickly, as if he felt threatened.
Scorpion moved back.

"Master, it is nearing midday."

Kan-A’rog said nothing. He glanced about at the room, stretching. Then he started to get up. Scorpion assisted him.

"Master, shall I call the servants?"

"No, No, my friend. Let us do without them."

Scorpion smiled. "Yes, let’s do."

They took a few minutes to freshen up, then ventured out into the corridor. They had hardly taken a step when a human man approached them.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said, grinning toothily. "I was just on my way to get you. Mr. Gaines awaits you downstairs, in the dining room."

"Good. Take us to him," said Kan-A’rog.

Scorpion leaned toward the old man and said, in poor Mek, "I do not trust him."

"You are too suspicious, Scorpion," said Black Wolf, in the same tongue.

The human led them to the cool, shadowy dining room, where Rufus Gaines had prepared a luncheon for them. The table had been lowered considerably and the warden, along with several guests—uniformed men, men in civilian suits, ladies in gauzy, pastel gowns—were seated on piles of cushions. Kan-A’rog seemed to appreciate the gesture, smiling warmly at Rufus Gaines. Scorpion, however, was not impressed.

"Master," he said, again speaking Mek so that the
humans would not understand, "this is an insult. They make a sport of our beliefs."

"Be patient with them, my Friend. They mean only good will."

Scorpion clamped his jaw shut. Throughout the remainder of the meal, he decided, he would not speak again. Let Kan-Arrog deal with the humans however he wished to do it. After all, Balck Wolf was now the leader of the Rolshadist movement. The two were seated near Gaines.

Also seated near the warden was a particularly straight-backed human with a closely-trimmed black mustache and cropped hair. He was dressed in the smart black uniform of the elite Guardians. His black eyes were shallow, reflecting only pinpoints of light. He seemed to have no soul.

"Mr. Kan-Arrog, my name is Brant, Major Brant, actually. Of course, we’re all pleased to have you free again. It is the goal of our new Head Councilman to be closer to our fellow Dismarians, and he feels that there is nothing to be gained by keeping you from your friends and family. However, you must realize that you are being released on the understanding that you will return our act of friendship and refrain from any sort of disruptive behavior."

Scorpion’s head was high as he peered down his nose at the major. Brant’s eyes shifted to meet his own, and again, Scorpion had the impression of flatness. The major’s brow was deeply lined, as if he had known much pain and worry, but if he had, it had not softened him. Scorpion recognized
a powerful, steel-like adversary.

"Major Brant, I am old. I am no more danger to you free than in prison. What could I do?"

Major Brant's attention left Scorpion and centered again on Kan-Arrog. "I hope you will do nothing. The consequences of any subversive activities now would not be beneficial to your people. You know as well as I the suffering that war can cause. Do nothing to bring us into conflict again. You and your people have far more to lose than we do."

Kan-Arrog bestowed his gentle smile upon Major Brant. "Sir, believe me, I have no intention of stirring up another war. I am old, and very tired, and very grateful that I am being allowed to go home."

Brant nodded, but his expression did not change.

Rufus Gaines seemed discomfited by Brant's directness. He leaned toward Kan-Arrog. "Sir, our new Leader sincerely hopes that we can all live together peacefully. We want to have a more brotherly relationship with you our native friends."

Scorpion had to chew his lip to keep from expressing his disdain for Gaines' "brotherly love." He nearly exploded when Kan-Arrog smiled and nodded at the warden.

"An admirable sentiment," said the old man.

Throughout the remainder of the meal, Kan-Arrog and Gaines discussed how the old man and Scorpion would journey back to Tring, the city in Mek where Kan-Arrog's sister and her children must still be living. Scorpion stared into his
plate of food, not eating, while Gaines promised them passage by tran and enough money to eat well on the way.

"I would like to add," said Major Brant, "that Head Councilman Haus has enacted new laws to protect our fellow Dismarians from unwarranted attacks. And the Guardians or the law are sworn to enforce them. I will assign two of my men to escort you home."

Scorpion looked up to see that Brant was gazing at him with those soulless, black eyes. He opened his mouth to question him as to whether the escort was to protect him and his Master, or to prolong their incarceration, but he felt the gentle pressure of Kan-Arrog's hand on his leg.

"My friend and I appreciate your protection."

Major Brant's flat eyes never left Scorpion's, until Rufus Gaines spoke again, changing the subject.
Chapter Two - The Word

Under Kan-Arrog's watchful gaze, Rolshad opened his eyes to the pale light of morning. Outside the tent, the birds were singing sweetly, and a light rain was falling. The great spiritual leader sat up on his sleeping mat.

"Black Wolf, did I not tell you to wake me at midnight? And here it is after daybreak!"

"I thought you needed your sleep, Master."

"Dear boy, when I give you orders, it is not your duty to think, but to obey. Much time has been wasted due to your disobedience. Now we will be late."

Kan-Arrog looked down at his hands. "I am sorry."

Rolshad rose to his feet. He was a J'agese man, hairless except for the waist-length black hair that grew on his scalp. His body was wrapped in strips of cloth, after the tradition of his people. Over this basic dressing, he put on a pair of knee-length breeches, and a loose, thin shirt. He draped an embroidered sandcloth over his head, carefully covering his face below the eyes with one end.

"Get up, lad. We have to take the tent down."

The two hurriedly rolled up their sleeping mats, packed their few belongings into sacks, and dismantled the tent. Before long, they had everything strapped to their backs and were walking southward. Because Kan-Arrog had caused so
much time to be wasted, they did not eat breakfast, nor wait
to see if the rain would stop.

"We've a long walk ahead of us, Black Wolf. We were
supposed to be in Tring by noon. Now we will be lucky to
make it by evening. I suppose I should not have lain down,
even for a moment. We should have continued walking through
the night."

"Master, there are wolves in these forests. I know
because I was raised near here."

"Wolves? What is there to fear in a wolf? They are
predictable. You always know what a wolf is going to do.
If you want to fear something, fear the human. He is
treachery, unpredictable. He will do exactly what you
think he won't, just to trick you."

Kan-Arrog considered the truth of this statement. In
all his seventeen years, he had never seen a human act with
kindness toward a Meker, or a J'agse. At the age of
twelve, he had been taken from his family to work in the
mines in the scrublands between the hilly forests of Mek and
the northern desert dunes of J'aga. If Rolshad had not
taken him along in his escape, Kan-Arrog would probably
never have left the mines alive.

"When we get to Tring, and I rejoin my friends, you may
either stay with me, or you may try to get back to your
home. Of course, Black Wolf, you must remember to always
obey me, if you decide to stay. There will be much danger
in our future. Instant obedience is imperative. Otherwise,
death awaits."
"I will try, Master. I am sorry I did not wake you at midnight. You were so exhausted, I really thought you should rest."

Rolshad smiled at him. "Never mind. I should not have scolded you so severely. I know you had my best interests at heart. But, in truth, Black Wolf, from now on you really must obey my every directive. Do you understand? Lives may be lost if you fail."

"I understand, Rolshad."

The mines had taught young Kan-Arrog to go hungry, and to continue working no matter how little he had rested and no matter how sick or frightened he was. So, in spite of his empty stomach and the fact that he had slept only an hour or two, while he was letting Rolshad get an extra five hours of sleep, and in spite of the steady, misty rain, he was able to walk with fifty pounds of tent, food, water, and stolen gems on his back. He was still dressed in light J'agese garb, without shoes or boots over the strips of cloth that bound his feet. While this was adequate attire as far south as the scrublands, it was neither warm enough nor sturdy enough to protect their bodies in the Mek forests. The pines grew densely, slapping at the travelers with their needle-bearing branches. The ground was muddy, littered with pine needles, twigs, rotten limbs, big, gnarled roots. It was often difficult to walk without tripping, or stubbing their ill-protected toes. And there was always the danger of stepping on a snake. Kan-Arrog remembered from his Mekeri childhood that the woods were
teeming with many species of serpents with bites poisonous enough to kill a large man in minutes.

For the most part, they walked without talking. They had to constantly watch their step, and the steady rain kept their spirits low. Kan-Arrog was curious as to what he would find in Tring. Rolshad had told him a little about his friends, but not enough to endanger them, in case Rolshad and the boy were taken alive and interrogated. Rolshad had mastered the Hux-dilyl and was not able susceptible to torture. Kan-Arrog, however, while capable of withstanding much discomfort, probably could not keep his silence under extreme torment. Rolshad had promised to teach him the Hux-dilyl, but as yet, there had not been enough time.

The youth studied the older man's back. Rolshad was nearing forty years of age. He had spent the past three years in the ruby mines, but before that, Kan-Arrog knew that he had been deeply involved in an ancient J'agese religion and had developed a rather following. It was his anti-human teachings that had landed him in the mines for life. Rolshan, however, was not the kind of man to be kept in chains. He was cunning and brave. He was, as his name described him, the Dagger.

They stopped once, when the sun was high, to eat a bit of bread and to rest, then they continued. The rain had stopped around mid-morning, leaving the trail a muddy mess, which impeded their travel. As Rolshad had predicted, they did not reach Tring until the sun had nearly set.
Kan-Arrog had visited Tring once before, as a small boy. His father was a carpenter in a farming village some three hours away by horse. In this village, wood was plentiful, but such things as nails and metal woodworking tools were in short supply. For this reason, Kan-Arrog's father made occasional trips to Tring. It was a rather large town for Mekeri standards, largely inhabited by humans--traders, skilled craftsmen, and the like. Wealthy land owners in the area often kept houses in town as well as the sprawling manor houses they had built on their estates in the outlying farmland. Also, Tring was a stopping point between the two major Mekeri cities--Hanall, the capitol set up by the humans, and Dolji, the more southerly, ancient metropolis on the Jing-lian sea. Human soldiers abounded in Tring; the town's many inns were always full.

It was to one of these inns that Rolshad took young Black Wolf, a rather small inn, in the crumbling native quarter of the town. Because of its location, humans hardly ever went there, except to start trouble. Kan-Arrog caused a bit of a murmur as he followed Rolshad inside. It was unusual to see a Mekeri in J'agese garb. It was strange enough to see a J'agese and a Mekeri travelling together.

Rolshad told the proprietor, in flawless Mekeri, "I would like a sleeping room, and a good, hot meal for my friend and me. No meat."

"Very well," said the innkeeper. "And how will you pay?"
"Would a small ruby suffice?"

The proprietor smiled, his blue, cat-like eyes narrowing. "If it's real."

"Oh, it is real enough, I promise you that."

The innkeeper showed them to a small room upstairs, where they were afforded a straw bed and clean bathing water.

"Here, how many nights' stay will this buy us?" asked Rolshad, handing a small uncut ruby to the innkeeper.

"Many, I can tell you that. Perhaps a month's worth. And food as well. Come down when you are ready. We'll have bread, cheese, and bean soup for you. And plenty of ale."

"No," said Rolshad. "Only water to drink."

The innkeeper eyed him curiously. "As you wish." He left them.

Kan-Arrog and Rolshad took a few minutes to wash, then went downstairs. The J'agese carefully looked at the other guests--mostly Mekeri men in homespun tunics and breeches, with high, rawhide boots. They were shorter and more heavily-built for the most part than the average J'agese, and rather furry. Unlike a J'agese, their hair grew only to a couple of finger-widths in length, except, Rolshad knew, for the long, horse-like tail which grew at the base of a man's spine. The few women present were also squat in shape, but less hairy than the men. Instead of fur on the scalp, back of the neck, shoulders, and chest, their hair grew like a mane on their heads and down the backs of their necks. They, too, wore tunics and breeches, and tall boots.
"'Tis easy to be celibate in Mek, Black Wolf," said the Dagger, with a grin. "'Tis much more difficult when faced with a willowy J'agese maiden, with oiled black plaits and golden eyes, rimmed with green paint."

Kan-Arrog shrugged. He had been a mere lad when taken to the mines, and in the mines, men and women were kept separated. He had never known a maiden—had never even spoken to one in the past five years. He knew, however, that if he had not enjoyed Rolshad's protection, he would have been made a woman himself.

They had scarce begun to eat when a Mekeri approached the spot they had taken on the floor.

"Good evening, Sir," he said in J'agese. "We were very worried about you when noon came and you were not with it."

"Ah, Coldan," said the Dagger, leaning back against the wall. "My friend. How are you?"

"Very well." The man named Coldan sat down near Rolshad. He looked hard at Kan-Arrog, then back at the J'agese.

"Only four of us are in Tring. The others are out recruiting. We have not been idle, Master."

Rolshad nodded. "Our clothes are filthy, Coldan. Can you get us new ones? Preferably like yours."

"Of course."

"Oh, by the way, this is my young comrade, Kan-Arrog. He is very bright, and he is no friend to the humans, I can tell you that. He can be trusted."

"He knows the Hux-dilyl?"
"Not yet. But he will, before I leave Tring."
Coldan said, in Mekeri, "Hello, son. Where are you from?"
Kan-Arrog answered, in perfect J'agese, "I am from a tiny village, to the east."
Coldan nodded. "I will go now, Master, and spread the word that you have come. And I will get your new clothes."
"Tell the others I will see them one at a time. Go now; be quick."
Coldan left them.
"He did not trust me, Master," said Kan-Arrog.
"You are observant. But that is Coldan's way. He trusts no one. That is why he is still alive and free."
Rolshad gave Kan-Arrog a long, penetrating stare. "You must decide whether you will stay or go."
"If I go home, will they come for me?"
Rolshad shook his head. "Maybe, but I doubt it. The humans keep few records on their mine slaves. They know exactly who I am, but to them, you are only a nameless Mekeri boy, taken in a roundup."
Kan-Arrog thought for awhile, as he ate his supper. Rolshad was a great, wise man—a leader of the people. If the humans had only known just how influential he was, they would have put him to death instead of sentencing him to the mines. Under his leadership, the J'agese and the Mekeri were becoming more friendly toward each other, realizing that in spite of their differences, they were still more alike than they were like the humans.
"They have better weapons," Rolshad had told him.
"That is why they are so powerful now. But there are so many of us, and over the years, we have pilfered their weapons, and have copied them. We are strong, very strong. And I know how to become even stronger."

"How do you know, Rolshad?" Kan-Arrog had asked.

Rolshad had leaned down to his ear. "The sand told me. It sings to me at night. It is the voice of God. It tells me that the humans are demons, not of this world. They are a blight upon Dismaria. Their ways are a poison to us and to the other things on our world. We are not to trust them, ever. Nor are we to succumb to their weak, pampered ways. 'Be as a creature of the desert,' the sand sings to me. 'Be hard, like the stone. Be able to survive, no matter the hardship. Be stone'."

Kan-Arrog had not really understood, but he was fascinated. Now he gazed into the J'agese man's slanted, greenish-yellow eyes, a bit reddened from lack of sleep, brimming with kindness, wisdom, and steel-like strength. To the youth, they were the eyes of the desert he had never seen. Behind them lay shifting dunes, small oases supporting little villages—proud, tall people, a race as old as the world itself. Kan-Arrog saw Rolshad's recognition of his decision, and immediately afterward, the warm assurance that his decision was the right one. Rolshad lay a slender, clawed hand on his shoulder.

"Black Wolf, I welcome you to the ranks of the army that will destroy the human-demons. You will stay with me
until you have learned all that I can teach you."

"Master, I cannot imagine living any other way than at your side."

Rolshad smiled at him, with all the warmth and radiance of the J'agese sun.
Kan-Arrog's mind was full of memories as he and Scorpion, along with two Guardians, entered the city of Tring. It had changed during their captivity, had grown larger and seemed to have become more native. Its center, where the train station was located, had been refurbished. Large, luxurious hotels and restaurants were everywhere.

"Do you want to eat here, Master?" asked Scorpion. "We have more than enough money."

"No, my friend. There used to be a small inn in the old quarter. I stayed there many, many years ago. Let us go there."

The Guardians stayed with them. When Kan-Arrog made no move to stop them, Scorpion said, curtly, "We will not be needing your 'protection' any more. Good-bye." And he climbed into the carriage and slammed the door in their faces.

Kan-Arrog laughed. "Good riddance to bad rubbish," he said.

"Would that I could have done that long ago. But believe me, Kan-Arrog, there will be many more spies, probably not as obvious as those two. We will be watched our whole lives. We will never be truly free."

"No one ever is, Scorpion."

The carriage took them to the Inn, which was as shabby as ever. Scorpion arranged for them to have a sleeping
room, and to have their supper brought to them there. He paid with their government money.

"We can start looking for Renna tomorrow. I hope she is still alive."

Scorpion looked up at him. "How old would she be now?"

"Fifty-five. Not very old. But who knows what might have happened?"

Scorpion grew silent and thoughtful. The pucker in his brow was not lost on Kan-Arrog. The old man turned to the window, to let his friend have his privacy. The two knew everything about each other, but some things had never been said aloud. Certainly nothing had ever been said about Scorpion's affection for Renna. Rolshad had taught that sexuality was distraction. It made one vulnerable, and should simply not be acknowledged. The most devout followers were celibate, as Rolshad himself had been. This did not mean that they did not slip occasionally. Even Kan-Arrog had given in from time to time.

They ate their supper, changed clothes, and went out for a walk, to see exactly how much Tring had changed. No one paid much attention to them—or it seemed. The people in the streets, mostly native Mekeri, Scarcely looked at them. Some noticed Scorpion, simply because he could not hide his J'agese features, but they did not speak.

After about an hour, Scorpion said, "Master, we are being followed."

"Are you certain? I thought so as well, but I said
nothing, because I was not sure."

"Oh, I am sure. He is Mekeri, about my age."

"Let us return to the inn, then."

They were followed all the way back to the inn, but the
tail did not come inside. Relieved, Scorpion and Kan-Arrog
got up to their room.

"We have this to look forward to until we die," said
Scorpion, bitterly.

Early the next day, they set out to look for Kan-
Arrog’s sister, Renna, beginning with the house she had
lived in twenty years before. It was a half-hour walk from
the inn, in a relatively prosperous neighborhood. The
sidewalks were well swept, the buildings white-washed, the
residents well-dressed. Tidy little shops abounded, their
proprietors leaning in the doorways, watching the people go
by. More than one merchant, noting Scorpion and Kan-Arrog’s
expensive, J’agese dress, smiled and spoke to them, as if
they smelled money.

Renna’s husband had earned a good living as a tailor.
When he was murdered by human hoodlums, for the small
amount of copper coins in his pocket, he had left a fair-
sized estate, including the house where his business, as
well as his family dwelling, was located. Renna, then
thirty years old and the mother of two small children, had
continued to live in the house, leasing the shop downstairs
to another tailor. It was to this house that Scorpion,
whose tight-lipped expression had intensified.

"Master, if she is not there, where will we look next?"
The old man shrugged. "I don’t know, my friend. We will worry about that only when we find that she is not there."

They took a step toward the house, only to be stopped by a Mekeri man, of approximately fifty years of age, dressed in clean cotton.

"Excuse me, Sirs," said this fellow. "Are you not Master Kan-Arrog? And you, Golan, the Scorpion?"

Scorpion's eyes narrowed to gleaming, golden slits as he scrutinized the man.

"We are," said Kan-Arrog, pleasantly. "Who are you?"

Scorpion's clawed hand suddenly gripped the old man's forearm.

"Master!" he cried. "Is it not Had-Ethran?"

The old man's face took on a puzzled expression, while the other man grinned broadly.

"Yes, Scorpion, it is I! I am Had-Ethran!"

Kan-Arrog nodded. "Yes, it is you, after all. How are you, my son?"

"Oh, well! So well, now that I see you again, my Master." His eyes filled with tears. He knelt before Kan-Arrog, pressing the old man's gnarled hand to his lips. "I thought I would never see you again in this lifetime."

"Come now, Had-Ethran. Get up, now. That's my good lad."

Had-Ethran swallowed his tears, seeing that Scorpion was giving him a disapproving look.

"Master," he said, "if you are looking for your sister--
and I think you must be--she is no longer in Tring."

"Where has she gone?"

Had-Ethran shook his head. "I do not know that, Master. You see, I met old Caneth in a tavern one night, and he told me that she was gone."

Scorpion turned his back to them.

"Well," said Kan-Arrog after a few moments. "I suppose I will find her eventually."

"Master," said Had-Ethran, "would you like to come back to my house and talk? I live only a few streets over. My wife could make us some dinner and--"

"Your wife?"

Had-Ethran looked down at his boot ed feet, his cheeks reddening. He cleared his throat. "After you both were taken, the rest of us split up, you see. We went our separate ways. My way included marriage." He peered hard into Kan-Arrog's eyes. "Master, there was no hope with you gone. We had no one to lead us. We were utterly defeated. I was alone."

Kan-Arrog nodded, laying his gently hand upon his shoulder. "Be comforted, Had-Ethran. Take us to meet your wife."

Had-Ethran smiled with gratitude. "As you wish, Master."

He led them into a less affluent neighborhood, where naked native children played in the streets and stout Mekeri women sat on steps, gossiping and laughing. They went inside a tall house, up a flight of stairs, into a one room
apartment where a middle-aged woman sat by a window, sewing. The room was furnished like a human dwelling, with a bed, a table with a set of two chairs, and two rocking chairs.

"Ah, Had-Ethran," said Kan-Arrog, "you have wandered far, haven’t you?"

Had-Ethran did not hear him. He had gone to his wife, telling her who their two guests were, instructing her to cook a bite of dinner. She exclaimed her excitement at having the great teacher, Black Wolf, in her home, and she tossed her sewing aside, hurrying to the cupboard.

"Please, Master, sit down," said Had-Ethran, laying straw mats on the floor.

Scorpion helped Kan-Arrog to sit. While Had-Ethran’s wife went about getting dinner together, the three men sat on their mats on the floor, talking about what had happened to the Rolshadists after Scorpion and Kan-Arrog’s arrest—the long periods of hiding; the suicide of Verlad, a brilliant strategist who had ridden with Rolshad during the great teacher’s last days; the brief imprisonment of some of the other leaders. Kan-Arrog and Scorpion told of how they were subjected to torture and starvation, and were kept locked in a tiny cell for nine years, unable to even see out because the window was too high.

Had-Ethran hung his head, nodding sadly. "Wicked people, to be so cruel to a man as kind and as wise as you, my Master. If only I knew a way, I would repay the humans for this injustice."
Kan-Arrog shook his head. "No, my son. We must be peaceful toward the humans. See how they have let Scorpion and me go free? They are learning, however slowly."

Scorpion said, "But, Kan-Arrog, they are polluting us with their gifts of freedom. Don't you see? By letting our people own property, go to government schools, work for wages instead of so-called food, they are recruiting us into their system. We don't want to be a part of their system. It's poison!"

The old man patted his arm. "We tried once to rid ourselves of them, and we failed. Now we have a new Head Councilman. I think he will allow our people more room to be free. Let us give him a chance. If we try again to free ourselves through force, they will only crush us again, take away what they have already given us, destroy us utterly, so that we will never rise again. We do not want that, Scorpion."

Scorpion said nothing, staring down at his hands. Kan-Arrog saw that his teeth were clenched.

I shall have to have a long talk with him, thought the old man. There was too much anger in the J'agese, too much cold hatred.

Had-Ethran's wife brought a tray decked out with a loaf of dark bread, a dish of butter, a large wedge of cheese, and a bowl of ripe fruit, along with a pitcher of water and three glasses. Then she went back to her sewing, leaving the men to their talk.

After dinner, Scorpion and Kan-Arrog took a carriage
back to the inn. Had-Ethran had dutifully invited them to stay with him, but the old man had declined, saying that he would use the government's money to rent a room rather than put Had-Ethran and his wife to any trouble. So they returned to the old inn, went up to their room, where, to Scorpion's dismay, Kan-Arrog lay down on the bed.

"Master!" said the J'agese, shocked beyond belief. It was one thing for an old man newly released from prison to sit on the edge of a bed and eat his supper. But to so casually fling oneself down on a bed in the middle of the afternoon--no, Scorpion could not accept that kind of behavior from Kan-Arrog.

"Oh, Scorpion, be not so impatient with an old man. I am tired, and the summer is hot."

"And there is no Rolshadist faction any more, is that it?"

Kan-Arrog sat up, giving his younger friend a penetrating stare. "Is there something you want to say to me, Scorpion?"

Scorpion turned away, striding to the window. He said nothing. Kan-Arrog was greatly disturbed.

"My friend," he said, "we are both glad to be free. We are both disappointed that we have not found my sister, and that so devout a brother as Had-Ethran has taken so human-like a path. But we will find Renna, and we cannot choose another man's way for him. And, my dear friend, we simply must face the fact that the movement is dead. Do you believe that they would have released us from prison if they
thought we could find a great Rolshadist faction to lead again? I think I will be doing well to find my sister and to settle down with her to live out the remainder of my old age. I hope you will join me, but just as I cannot choose Had-Ethran's path for him, neither can I choose yours for you. Nor you mine."

Scorpion remained silent, staring out the window at the narrow street. Somewhere, a small child was crying, a dog was barking, a vendor hawked copper kettles.

"As I have said before," said Scorpion finally, in a soft voice, "you know far better than I the ways of God. I think it has been ordained that I stay with you. But I will not sit on the bed. I will sit on the floor, as I have always done. I am only fifty years old— not an old man, and not a young one. What can I do now? As I see it, Kan-Arrog, there is nothing left for me to do but follow you, as I have always done. You decide where that will lead me."

Kan-Arrog said, "Only so long as it suits you, my friend."

Scorpion turned back toward him, smiling. Kan-Arrog saw traces of tears in his eyes—something he had never seen before.

"It will be better, I think," said the J'agese, "when we find Renna."

And then Black Wolf understood the mist of tears; Scorpion was afraid that they would not find Renna, ever.

"Yes, it will not be long. We can go back to my home village, and inquire after her there. Surely some relative
of ours knew where she might be. Or she might be there. Who knows?"

Scorpion looked down at his cloth-bound feet until Kan-Arrog saw his shoulders square, and his back stiffen. Then Scorpion raise his head, and the tiny trace of tears was gone.

They talked for awhile, about Had-Ethran and his wife, about the man who had killed himself after their arrest, and about Rolshad himself. Then Kan-Arrog closed his eyes to take a nap.

He had nearly gone to sleep when Scorpion said, "Master, I do not trust Had-Ethran any more. He is too changed. He has become something other than the Had-Ethran we knew."

Kan-Arrog replied without opening his eyes, "Of course he has, Scorpion. So have I."

"But I truly feel he cannot be trusted."

The old man chuckled quietly. "Friend, what have we to trust him with?" Then he fell asleep.

He was awakened an hour or two later by a loud knocking at the door, and by Scorpion's gruff, "Who is it?"

"Buffum, the innkeeper," was the reply. Scorpion opened the door.

"What do you want?"

"There is a gentleman downstairs, looking for you and the old one. He says his name is Kett. Do you know him?"

Kan-Arrog got up as fast as his eighty-five-year-old
body would allow him.

Scorpion said with elation, "Yes! Send him up! Send him up right away!"

"My nephew!"

Within a minute, they heard Kett’s light footfalls as he ran up the stairs, and then, the young man was in Kan-Arrog’s embrace, crying, "Black Wolf! My uncle!"

"Are you well, my son?"

"Yes. And you, Uncle? How are you after all these years?"

"I am well enough, as is Scorpion." Black Wolf looked into his nephew’s clear, blue, Mekeri eyes. "Now, Kett. Tell me about your mother."

The young man only looked back, without saying a word. And Kan-Arrog knew that she was dead.

"I thought as much," he said. He looked suddenly very old, and very frail. Kett supported him.

Scorpion’s whole body stiffened, but he remained silent, his eyes dry. "How did she die, Kett?" he asked, his voice a low, even murmur.

"Let us sit and talk about it," said Kett. He helped Kan-Arrog to lower himself to one of the mats on the floor, then seated himself on the bare planks by his side. Scorpion remained standing.

Then the young man told the story of how the widow and her two children--Kett, then only ten years old, and Reyla, then seven--had feared for their lives in the face of the rebellion’s crushing demise. She had gone with Kan-Arrog’s
friend, Yerlath, the Hawk, to a former Rolshadist hiding place in the forest near Dolji. For awhile, they had been safe. But one day, Renna had awakened sick, with severe pain in her belly, and Yerlath had put her in the cart and taken her to Dolji, to see a doctor. When they reached the first doctor’s office, they were told to go elsewhere--this doctor was human and did not treat natives. By the time they reached the native quarter of the city, and a native physician, Renna was dead.

"The swine," said Scorpion.

"My sister and I then begged Yerlath to teach us everything he could about Rolshad and the way of the Sands. And he did. Now Yerlath is dead. Reyla is in J’aga, studying. And it is I who lead the faithful.

Kan-Arrog’s eyes widened considerably, the pupils contracting to startled slits. "You are, Kett?"

Kett smiled, his long, Mekeri mustache lifting cheerfully. "I am. There are many of us in Tring, and this very night, we will be meeting. Will you come?"

Kan-Arrog pressed his knuckle to his lips, unsure of what he should do. He had had no idea that there were any Rolshadists left in Tring, let alone that his nephew was their leader. He wanted to see for himself just how large the movement was, and how it was being led. But he remembered what the Guardian, Major Brant, had told him, and he was afraid.

"It would be a risk for me to go, for if I am caught, they will take me back to prison."
"You won't be caught, Uncle. We are very careful. If you wish to come, I will take you there."

"Where is the meeting to take place?" asked Scorpion.

"Why, in the underground chamber. Where else?"

Of course, the underground chamber. Kan-Arrog remembered now that there had been a tunnel under the inn at one time, which led to a large cavern. But he also remembered that the Guardians had destroyed the meeting place.

He opened his mouth to question his nephew about it, but Scorpion had beaten him to it.

"That makes it safer, doesn't it?" said Kett. "The Guardians think it is useless to us now, so they never suspect that we meet there. In truth, we re-excavated it."

Kan-Arrog sighed deeply. "Very well, then. I will go. But this does not mean that I will ever go again."

Kett grinned. "I understand, Uncle."

They sat in the room, talking, until supper time rolled around. Then they went downstairs to eat. It was not very unusual to see people eating on the floor—which is what Kan-Arrog, Scorpion, and Kett had to do. They sat on the floor near the hearth, eating potato soup and creamed leeks, talking quietly about how Tring had changed in the past twenty years. No one seemed to notice them, and certainly no one made any attempt to speak to them—that is until Had-Ethran came into the inn, carrying a large basket. Kett was instantly more alert than ever.

"Ah, Had-Ethran!" said Kan-Arrog. "Come join us."
"Master, I brought you some things," said Had-Ethran. "I hope they are worthy of you."

"Of course they are worthy. Thank you." The old man smiled warmly at Had-Ethran, while Scorpion and Kett surreptitiously studied him.

"Let's see what you have brought," said Kan-Arrog, rummaging through the basket. "Soap, a Mekeri suit, boots, a pair of goblets, a brush." His eyes twinkled. "Thank you, Had-Ethran. This is very thoughtful of you."

"Master, I wish to make it up to you--my going astray, I mean. I am sorry I lost faith."

"Think nothing of it. One does what one has to do."

"If only I knew of a way to restore the movement, I would do it."

In spite of Scorpion's desperate stare and Kett's subtle warning gestures, Kan-Arrog said to Had-Ethran, "You do not need to restore it, my son. But you may join it. Come with us tonight."

Kett dropped his fork. "Excuse me," he said, picking it up.

Had-Ethran's smile was radiant with gratitude. He kissed the old man's hand.

"Master," said Scorpion, standing, "let us take these things upstairs and get ready." He extended his clawed hand to Kan-Arrog who took it and let the younger man help him up. Kett said that he would remain downstairs, and Had-Ethran said he would sit with him.

Once they were in their room, Scorpion softly shut the
door, then leaned against it while Black Wolf washed.
Neither of them spoke until Kan-Arrog, putting on the
Mekeri clothes Had-Ethran had given him, broke the silence.

"Come, Scorpion. It is Had-Ethran--the Spotted Hound,
for pity's sake."

"I know who it is. I do not care. I do not trust
him."

"So you have said. But I trust him. He is genuinely
remorseful for having gone astray."

Scorpion's golden stare was unyielding. He folded his
arms on his chest. "You are my master. You are wiser than
I. But with all due respect, Kan-Arrog, I must tell you
this--you have erred gravely. I know this in my heart.
You have erred."

Kan-Arrog buttoned his tunic. He turned to face his
friend. "I do not think that I have erred. I intend to
take him with me to the meeting because I trust my friend,
Had-Ethran, the Spotted Hound. You are too suspicious,
Scorpion."

The J'agese sighed, shaking his head. But in the end,
he smiled, knowing that he could not sway the old Black
Wolf.

"How do I look?" asked Kan-Arrog.

"Like an old Mekeri man," said Scorpion. Laughing,
they went back down to the tavern.

Had-Ethran went with them to the meeting, where nearly
two hundred men and women had gathered to sit on the floor
in the eerie, orange, flickering torchlight and remember the teachings of Rolshad. Scorpion, Kan-Arrog, and Had-Ethran sat in the front row, but were never identified aloud. It was apparent, however, that everyone knew who Black Wolf was. And Kett had told him that he had known days before that his uncle and Scorpion would be arriving in Tring. It seemed the Rolshadist grapevine of information was as strong as ever.

Kett was a powerful speaker. He denounced the weak ways of the humans, and the weakness of the natives who succumbed to their materialism. This part of his speech brought tears to Had-Ethran's eyes. Then he spoke about the brutal war and Kan-Arrog's long imprisonment, and about his own mother's needless death.

"God did not intend for them to inhabit our world," said Kett. "They are wrong. They must be removed."

A tremendous cheer rose up from the crowd. After that, everyone broke up into little groups, to discuss various plans of action. Kan-Arrog and Scorpion, along with Had-Ethran, took their leave, having seen what they wished to see.

Early the next morning, before the sun had cleared the tops of the city buildings, Scorpion was on his way to Had-Ethran's neighborhood, dressed in Kan-Arrog's new Mekeri suit. To spare his master the worry of wondering where he had gone, he had left a note saying, "Gone shopping," knowing full well, of course, that Kan-Arrog would not
believe it, but at least he would know that Scorpion had not been abducted.

All along the way, shops were being opened, cats mewed for their morning milk, and sturdy Mekeri women filled into the bakeries to buy fresh bread for the day. Scorpion was hungry, and he could not withstand the tempting aroma of hot bread, so he, too, stopped in to buy some rolls. Before he got back outside, he saw Had-Ethran through the glass window, striding quickly in the direction of the city's center. Scorpion stuffed his rolls into his mouth as fast as possible. Then he began to follow Had-Ethran.

The Mekeri still had the instincts of a Rolshadist fighting man—he seemed to be being followed. But Scorpion was clever. He never allowed himself to be seen. For more than an hour, he tailed the Spotted Hound through the narrow, muddy streets of Tring, eventually crossing over into the human part of the city. Native people were still to be seen, but they were mostly laborers and servants going about their daily work with little enthusiasm. Only Had-Ethran seemed to have a definite purpose, hurrying along, looking over his shoulder.

By this time, Scorpion was certain that the Spotted Hound was on his way to report to some human all the things he had seen and heard the night before. And Scorpion had no intention of letting the news spread too far. He had far too much to lose. He needed to stop Had-Ethran before he reached his destination, but he was on the streets, in broad
daylight, with an occasional Guardian around. He could do nothing now. He would have to wait, and somehow kill Had-Ethran and whoever it was he reported to, whenever the opportunity presented itself. Scorpion knew that such opportunities usually were forthcoming, if a man were patient.

He watched Had-Ethran enter a hotel. After several minutes, he went inside as well. And there he saw, as plain as day, Had-Ethran at a table with a dapper, young Guardian. Scorpion choked back the bile that crept up in his throat. It was one of the Guardians who had escorted him and Kan-Arrog to Tring.

"The bastard," said Scorpion under his breath. He forced himself to sit down at a table. Within a few moments, a waiter approached him.

"What can I get you?" asked the Mekeri.

"A salad and some water, please."

From the place he had selected, Scorpion could watch his quarry by observing their reflections in a window. But they could not see him clearly enough to tell who he was—or even tell that he was not human. The two talked for a good ten minutes while Scorpion ate his salad. Then his view was suddenly blocked by the figure of a man. It was Kett.

"What--!"

"Shush, Scorpion. I, too thought it prudent to follow our dear friend the Spotted Hound. In the process, however, I also found myself following you."

"Sit down and be quiet," hissed Scorpion.
Kett obliged him. Together, they watched the Guardian and the spy.

"When they leave, I will take the human lad. You can take Had-Ethran," said Kett.

"Agreed."

Shortly, the Spotted Hound rose to his feet and turned to leave. Scorpion prepared to follow him. But just as the J'agese was walking out the door, he bumped into a well-dressed human on his way inside.

"Pardon me," said the human, glancing at Scorpion. In that moment, the J'agese's heart nearly stopped beating, for the shallow soulless black eyes of none other than Major Brant. Scorpion did not wait for the black brows to arch in recognition. He muttered, "No, pardon me!" and pushed past the man, hoping that Brant was not connected to the Guardian inside. But Scorpion knew it was a stupid hope, and he knew that he and his master were in deep trouble.

He could see Had-Ethran hurrying along the sidewalk up ahead of him, so he decided to catch up to him and kill him on the spot, then go back to the hotel and help Kett, if he could. Unfortunately, his increase in speed caused him to be less cautious, and the Spotted Hound caught a glimpse of him. Had-Ethran started to run.

Scorpion swore vehemently in J'agese. He pushed his way through the humans and natives who blocked his path, knocking some of them down. Twenty years in prison, nine of them in a small cell, had done nothing for his endurance. He and Kan-Arrog had exercised daily in order to retain some
strength, but it had not prepared him for this. He would have lost Had-Ethran if he had not spotted a horse tied to a nearby hitching rail, with no one near it. He quickly untied its reins, leaped astride its back, and kicked it into motion. The beast reared, almost throwing him, then took off at a gallop, nearly trampling a number of bystanders. Scorpion soon caught up to Had-Ethran, who was running at full tilt down the street.

Scarcely able to breathe, Scorpion jumped off the horse, tackled Had-Ethran, wrestled him to the ground, and stabbed him with a knife he had stolen from the shabby inn. The Spotted Hound groaned, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. He looked into Scorpion’s eyes, which were cold and cat-like. Then he died.

Scorpion had very little time to make an extremely important decision: he could either take the horse to the old inn, fetch Kan-Arrog, and try to effect an escape from the city, or he could hurry back to the fancy hotel, and help Kett kill the young Guardian and probably Major Brant as well, then get Kan-Arrog and leave the city.

Before he could make up his mind, Kett nearly ran him over.

"Run!" cried Kan-Arrog’s nephew as he raced past. In hot pursuit were Major Brant and the young Guardian. Scorpion ducked into a doorway. He let Brant pass him by, but when the young Guardian came within reach, Scorpion ambushed him and cut his throat before he could cry out.

That left only the major.
Surely Kett can handle him, thought Scorpion. After all, he was young and strong, whereas Scorpion was now quite out of breath and growing purple in the face. But some instinct led the J'agese to mount the stolen horse again and take off after the major.

Everything had happened so quickly and in such a short stretch of street that no one had time to intervene. The citizens of Tring, going about their own business, merely got out of the way without causing any real interference. This was good luck, as far as Scorpion was concerned. He prayed to God that no other Guardians would come along. But what happened next also took place so suddenly that no Guardian could have gotten there in time to stop it.

Scorpion saw Major Brant closing in on Kett, so he rode the horse as close as he could without endangering his master's nephew, then leaped off.

"There's only this one left!" he cried, hurling himself at the human. Brant grabbed his right arm, breaking it at the wrist. The knife clattered on the sidewalk. Scorpion clawed at the major's face with his other hand.

"You'll die for this," Brant growled through his teeth. He twisted Scorpion's broken arm. The pain nearly made the J'agese pass out.

Just then, Kett snatched up the fallen knife and stuck it in the human's back. Brant's flat eyes opened up, revealing, after all, a soul. Then they dimmed forever as he slumped against Scorpion. The J'agese pushed him away.

"Let's go!" said Kett, pulling Scorpion by his good
left arm.

They ran quite a distance, even though Scorpion was near collapse. His black hair was matted to his head and sweat soaked his blue tunic and breeches. Still, he remembered the Hux-dilyl, and while it could not make an athlete of him, it did ease the extreme pain he was feeling. It was not until Kett took him inside a house did he allow himself to sink down to the floor, his chest heaving, his heart ready to explode.

"It's all right, Scorpion," said Kett. "I know these people. They are our kind."

The J'agese was beyond questioning him. He could not even acknowledge what had been said. But he heard Kan-Arrog's nephew tell the well-to-do Mekeri man who lived in the house to go to the shabby inn in the old quarter and collect old Black Wolf.

"Get my uncle out of Tring," said Kett.

"I will do it, be sure of that," said the man. "And then I will come back for you."

"I know you will, my friend," said Kett. "But for now, go and get my uncle to safety."

Scorpion heard the door close as the man left the house. Then he let his consciousness slip. The next thing he knew, he heard his master's nephew, through the gentle drone of the Hux-dilyl's magic, telling him that he was wrapping his broken wrist and that everything had been taken care of. The Rolshadists in Tring would be warned as to what had happened and Kan-Arrog, Scorpion, and himself,
Kett, would be safe elsewhere before the humans could retaliate.

Scorpion raised his left hand, gesturing the young man closer to him.

"Yes?" said Kett. "What is it, Scorpion?"

"You are a great leader," said the J'agese. "Congratulations."

Kett smiled, and he looked very much like Kan-Arrog had fifty years before, though Scorpion did not know it.