

**DRAY PRESCOT: 7**

**ARENA OF  
ANTARES**

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writing as

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**A Mushroom eBook**



# ARENA OF ANTARES

**Book Seven of the Dray Prescot series**

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**a Mushroom eBooks sample**

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## A Note on Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott is a man above medium height, with straight brown hair and brown eyes that are level and dominating. His shoulders are immensely wide and there is about him an abrasive honesty and a fearless courage. He moves like a great hunting cat, quiet and deadly. Born in 1775 and educated in the inhumanly harsh conditions of the late eighteenth century English navy, he presents a picture of himself that, the more we learn of him, grows no less enigmatic.

Through the machinations of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, mortal but superhuman men dedicated to the aid of humanity, and of the Star Lords, he has been taken to Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio many times. On that savage and beautiful, marvelous and terrible world he rose to become Zorcander of the clansmen of Segesthes, and Lord of Strombor in Zenicce, and a member of the mystic and martial Order of Krozairs of Zy.

Against all odds Prescott won his highest desire and in that immortal battle at The Dragon's Bones claimed his Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Moun-

tains, as his own. And Delia claimed him in the face of her father, the dread Emperor of Vallia. Amid the rolling thunder of the acclamations of “Hai Jikai!” Prescott became Prince Majister of Vallia, and wed his Delia, the Princess Majestrix.

Through the agency of the blue radiance sent by the Star Lords, Prescott is plunged headlong into fresh adventures outwitting the Manhounds of Antares. After rescuing Mog, a high priestess, and Turko the Khamorro, and Saenda and Quaesa, Prescott brings them safely out of danger — when the giant bird of prey of the Star Lords appears once again to him ...

# Chapter One

## The Star Lords command

“What is it the Star Lords command, bird of ill omen?”

“That is better, Dray Prescott! You should know you have not completed your task. Not until the land of Migla is cleansed of the Canops and Migshaanu is returned to her rightful place — for a time only! — will your work be done.”

“I am almost naked, I have no weapons, no money, two girls depend on me, the whole country is up in arms against me. You are hard taskmasters—”

“You have been naked before, Dray Prescott, and weaponless. You will do this thing.”

With a loud and harsh squawk, a cry of triumphant rage, the raptor winged away into the fading suns-glow. Zim and Genodras, which hereabouts I should call with all hatred Far and Havil, sank in a smoldering angry blaze of jade and ruby, dropping down over the horizon. Darkness closed over the land of Migla upon the continent of Havilfar on Kregen.

Stunned at the enormity of the sentence passed upon me I went down to the boat.

In the darkness, before any of the seven moons of Kregen rose, I pushed off and in silence took the looms of the oars into my hands.

What I must do I must do.

Oh, my little Drak, my little Lela!

And my Delia, my Delia of Delphond — when would I see her again and hold her dear form in my arms?

The two girls, Saenda and Quaesa, ceased their silly chattering at sight of my face, and they shivered. Turko looked at me, hesitated, and did not speak, for which I was grateful. Turko had stood upon the bridge there in the great cavern of rushing waters beneath the citadel of Mungul Sidrath and had taken the crossbow bolts on that new shield of his. He was to become a good companion. His superb muscular development and the cunning khamster skills of unarmed combat were to stand me in good stead. But, just then, by remaining silent he did me the best service he could.

His rosy muscles moved with the ease and suppleness that all the bunched and massive bashing power of a warrior's hardened muscles might never match. He understood at once that we were not to escape easily down the River Magan away from this eerie town of Yaman in the land of Migla.

Out across the water, lights moved in the starshot darkness. The armored men of the Canopdrin army continued to search for us. I pulled down gently, letting the ebb take us. Occasionally a hail floated across the

water. The girls shivered in the bottom of the boat. If we were caught their fate would be horrible, worse than it would have been before I rescued them.

They were no longer my concern.

Those aloof beings, the Star Lords, had commanded me to erase the blight of the Canops from this land, and from the very first I had seen the enormous difficulties of that. I had no desire at all to involve myself in fresh fighting and scheming and planning; all I wanted to do was return home to Vallia or Valka, depending on where Delia and the children might be staying, and clasp them in my arms once more.

But if I refused to help the Miglas turn the Canops out, I would be seized up by the ghastly blue lambency of the scorpion-image and hurled back four hundred light-years to the planet of my birth.

That must not be allowed to happen.

Therefore I must begin at once to scheme and plan to aid old Mog the Witch, the old crone who was now the Mighty Mog, to regain her rightful place as high priestess to the all-powerful Migshaanu. Migla was dominated by religion. Mind you, if this Migshaanu was really all-powerful, then she would never have allowed her high priestess to be defamed, her temple razed, and her religion brought into contempt. If Mog or any of her friends and adherents thought of that, I guessed, they pushed the obvious consequences of the thought aside with the kinds of arguments that have sustained proscribed religions through the ages.

Lights glimmered upon the water and the two girls crouched down, frightened and shivering, and Turko looked at me. All about us in the moonless darkness lurked danger. No hand would be raised to save us. Darkness and danger and the creeping sense of impending doom cast a shadow upon the boat, a shadow that had not existed only moments before, when I had gone up to the bank for the last time before pushing off.

Our whole situation had changed.

Now I must go boldly ahead into fresh dangers and new adventures, and never reckon the cost until the bidding of the Star Lords had been done.

All that had passed meant nothing.

This was a new beginning, a fresh assault upon the destiny that had brought me to this fantastic planet of Kregen beneath the Suns of Scorpio.

Lights moved upon the waters.

Our little boat drifted with only a faint gurgle and splash, a shadow among shadows.

“They draw close, Dray,” said Turko, his voice a whisper in the gloom.

“Aye.”

Plans and schemes tumbled through my head like a cloud of those infernal midges of the marshes men call kitches, cursing and swiping, and no plan was a good plan.

One of the three lesser moons of Kregen rose and hurtled low over the horizon.

That speck of light racing between the star clusters served only further to enhance my mood of restlessness,

of unease, of a mindless shifting of forces I could not control or even come to terms with, and so hated and detested. Water splashed nearby and a voice cursed, the deep rolling cadences of a man who swore by Lem, the silver leem.

We peered in that scant and erratic illumination and made out the dark loom of a boat, ghosting along, low in the water. I could feel the hard lenk of the boat's gunwales beneath my hands, and I gripped tightly, feeling the frustration choking me. I have told you many times that on Kregen a man must possess a weapon and be skilled in its use if he wishes to survive, and this is no less true for the marvelous skills of the Khamorros, the khamsters famed for unarmed combat, like Turko. I had not revealed all my mind to Turko on the subject of unarmed combat against edged and pointed weapons, and would not do so unless Zair commanded in a moment of intense danger, and so I fretted that I did not grasp a sword or a spear or a bow as that creeping dark boat ghosted over the water as we drifted down.

Those men over there, those Canops, hard tough fighting-men from the devastated island of Canopdrin in the Shrouded Sea who had invaded Migla and made the land their own and subverted the peoples' allegiances, they would not scruple to kill unarmed men. And I knew they possessed the skill to slay even a great Khamorro like Turko.

Our boat drifted, and I, Dray Prescott, peered over the gunwale at that other craft, and I cursed, and I was very conscious of my shame.

“She of the Veils will be up soon,” said Turko. He spoke low on two counts, as I well knew. One, so that the armed Canops should not hear, and two, so that Saenda and Quaesa should not hear, either, and begin a frightened squeaking.

“There are more of these Opaz-forsaken crampths about than I had bargained for, Turko.”

“They slink like leem.”

“A leem may be slain with a sword.”

“Morro the Muscle faced and breasted and slew a leem, Dray. It is not left for mortal men.”

“Maybe not.”

He cocked an eye at me sharply. Some of his old quizzical appraisal of my prowess showed through. He must clearly have wondered if I spoke thoughtlessly, or boasted emptily, or — but he could not know of the existence of Sanurkazz and the Eye of the World even as he had been unaware of the unarmed combat disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy.[\[1\]](#)

For a space we drifted silently and the Canops’ boat angled away from us, with an occasional faint splash. The torchlights dimmed. This would not do. I was acting as though I intended to take the two girls to safety, either to the land of Cnarveyl to the north or to the land of Tyriadrin to the south. I had to see them safe. That was a task I had laid on myself, for all their bitchiness and squabbling and their lofloo-like hitchings and squirmings. They were just two silly girls, whom I had happened to rescue from slavery and the Manhounds of

Antares, and they could not weigh in the scales against what the Star Lords had commanded me to do.

A faint pinkish wash of light sifted above the eastern horizon, away across the mudflats and rushes fringing the River Magan. The river runs generally in a northeasterly direction into the Shrouded Sea; but in its sluggish windings a reach opened up due east, and She of the Veils rose and cast her streaming pink light full along the length of water.

I was looking up, watching the pinkly glowing orb as it rose, and I saw a black and angular silhouette for a moment flitter before the moon, dark and sharp and ominous, and as suddenly flicker away and vanish.

Turko sucked in his breath.

The two girls had not seen, and so were silent.

‘Tell me, Turko.’

“By Morro the Muscle! A volrok, Dray. A yetch of a volrok.”

Many and various are the beast-men and men-beasts of Kregen. Away in The Stratemsk and the Hostile Territories I had encountered monstrous flying animals and reptiles, and here in Havilfar there were many beasts of the air. I kept a wary eye open aloft, and took up into my hands the boat hook. It was a poor thing, with a clumsy bronze point and hook; but it was all we had.

The thing had seen us, that was sure, and it must have correctly surmised we were a small party. In a rush of wings and a harsh clacking cry, it was upon us.

Now Turko had called the volrok a yetch, which is a Havilfarese term of abuse generally used for a human being, and this should have warned me. I was not facing a flying beast.

I faced a flying man.

The volrok had intelligence, and quick wits, and a supple sinewy strength for all that he was lightly built. He was no impiter, no corth, no fluttrell; he was a man, a halfling. His wings beat against the starlight and I caught the gleam of a weapon. She of the Veils threw down a fuzzy pinkish radiance, and in that glow I saw his eyes, glaring at me, as he circled and dived.

“Watch his feet, Dray!”

I grunted and leaned away from that first vicious onslaught. Wings buffeted air and I smashed the boat hook up and caught the descending blow of a long spearlike weapon, something after the fashion of the Ullars’ toonon, and so deflected the blow. The encounter had given me a closer look at the volrok.

He circled, screeching, and his wings folded, and he dived again. He had evolved from an eight-limbed stock, for his back bore real wings, wide and narrow, sharply angled, wings that enabled him really to fly. His arms held the toonon. His third pair of limbs consisted of legs — real honest-to-goodness legs — with attachments that made of them ghastly weapons of destruction and not honest or good at all. His remaining pair of limbs had fused in a fan to form a tail.

Turko brandished an oar above his head.

The volrok dived, and swerved, and the bronze head of the boat hook clashed against the toonon and then I saw the truth of those legs. On each heel had been bound a long and wickedly curved blade, like twin scimitars, and as the volrok screeched and rose so the blades whickered down toward my head. I ducked. I felt a grazing blow across my scalp.

Turko prodded with his oar.

Saenda and Quaesa were screaming. There was no time to do anything about them.

The volrok swerved there in the level air, turned, and I saw his narrow head peering down to regard us more closely. He wore a tight leather tunic, much decorated with feathers, and a belt from which hung a sword in a scabbard whose lockets held it so that it kept out of his way when flying. His legs scissored and the deadly wink of those scimitar blades made me dash the blood from my eyes and take a fresh grip on the boat hook.

The cut I had sustained in Mungul Sidrath had opened again and the bandage could no longer hold back the blood.

Turko was swearing on about the Muscle and swords and spears and devilish flying man-monsters.

The volrok folded his wings and plummeted.

This time I had to ignore his toonon. The spear had to be slipped, as Turko and I knew how, and I had to get those scimitar blades of his in good sight in that treacherous illumination.

I switched grips on the boat hook.

Instead of holding the sturm-wood shaft with my left hand forward, like a spearman, I held it right hand forward, like a swordsman.

A wooden longsword had been used before. This time it was of unhandy length, of ridiculous length; but it had a bronze point and a bronze hook. The volrok dropped down and I had time to realize the scimitar blades had been strapped to his heels to give a straight-line strength and control from his legs; had they been strapped to his feet or toes he would not have been able to deliver the same power. He would not have been able so easily to drag the blades free and lift off after a strike, either. As it was, he couldn't stand up easily for the blades curved to form a continuation of his legs.

The dark form swept in toward us. The glitter of the spear meant nothing. He would jerk his legs forward in the last moment of his dive, impaling me, or slicing my head open, and then fly on, trailing his legs, and so wrench the scimitars free.

With a yell to Turko, "Get down, Turko!" I ducked and let the toonon go past. It cracked the lenk gunwale of the boat and skidded on. Then I swung. The boat hook circled and smashed with awful force against the volrok's thighs. Both his legs broke. The blades abruptly dangled.

He shrieked.

In that tiny moment I was able to drive on and up, hard, and the bronze point tore up into his body.

Turko's oar battered his wings.

The volrok screamed. His wings churned the air as he sought to drag himself away. The boat hook had caught him. I leaned back, savagely dragging him down. The oar smashed down now on his head. With a convulsive effort, which tore his insides in a shower of blood, the volrok broke free from the bronze hook. He rose unsteadily, shrieking, and his wings beat feebly, and wavering and lurching, he flew away in the moonlit shadows. I was not content to let him go, and cursed.

“We could have used his toonon, and those vicious blades.”

“He was a fighter—”

“Oh, aye, he was a fighter.”

“Vicious, the volroks.” Turko turned back and looked down into the boat. “Stop yelling! He’s gone.”

The girls yelped into snuffled wailings.

“Do they hunt in pairs, Turko, or singly?” I ignored Saenda and Quaesa. This was something a fighting-man had to know. “Or — in packs?”

“It depends entirely on which town or province they come from. I do not claim to recognize all their markings. But, they are men, they have intelligence—”

“I see.”

I scanned the night sky with the warming glow of She of the Veils spreading out upon the dark waters. Our noise had attracted attention. Lights moved across the water, waving, clotting into a bunch, growing in size, nearing.

“They’ve spotted us, by the Muscle!”

“Aye!”

I dropped onto the thwart, chucked the boat hook along the bottom boards and was rewarded by a shriek from one of the girls, and unshipped the oars. Now my training as an oar-slave aboard the swifterns of the inner sea and the swordships prowling up along the Hoboling Islands would come into full use — not to mention my early years as a seaman of Earth's late eighteenth century wooden navy.

The blades bit deeply. Water surged. I put my back into it, uncaring of the blood that clotted on my forehead and stung coldly in the night breeze. I pulled for the north bank. It was the nearer of the two. Coming up fast from astern the long low shape of a galley, a liburna, hauled into just a prow upflung against the stars and what appeared a single oar, rising and falling, each side, starboard and larboard.

I pulled.

But those whipped Miglas slaving aboard the liburna pulled too, and the galley foamed along in our wake, closing.

“Where away ahead, Turko?”

He jumped for the bows, past my back. In a moment he called: “To the left — that is your right, Dray—”

“Aye.”

The little fishing boat, a mere dinghy in reality, surged ahead. If any more volroks attacked now we were done for. We would be done for, too, if I did not reach the shore with time for us to leap out and escape into those alleys of darkness between the mudbanks and the mudflats. I pulled. We had passed a quiet day, and rested,

and my strength was restored. I would not tire yet; but there was little chance of a single man in a clumsy boat like this outrunning a galley crewed by oarsmen at forty oars, at the least.

“By the Muscle! Volroks! Scores of the yetches!”

I did not waste effort looking up. I pulled. The water splashed and hissed and at each stroke the boat leaped. The liburna following cleft the water with a fine pink-tinged white comb in her teeth. She gained. I pulled. The boat leaped as Turko, waving his oar, for there were two pairs aboard, leaped and slashed wildly above his head.

A wing buffeted me, over the head and for a moment a dark haze dropped over my eyes; but I fought it. I had to. This was no way for Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy, Lord of Strombor — and much else besides — to die.

The girls were simply huddled together and screaming in mindless fear. The galley smashed her way after us. And the volroks descended in clouds from the pink-tinged darkness about us.

“This is the end!” shouted Turko, bashing with his oar. “We’re done for!”

## Chapter Two

### Obquam of Tajkent keeps order

Neither the Star Lords nor the Savanti had made any attempts to save me when I stood in mortal peril of my life in obeying their aloof commands. I could look for no help from them.

There seemed no hope.

If the Star Lords moved the volroks, I did not know then and I do not know now.

But the cloud of winged men swirled up, their wings an evil rustle in the darkness, the pink sheen from their weapons rising and swinging, their eyes glittering, and then, in a single close-bunched mass, they swooped upon the galley pursuing us.

In an instant all was commotion and pandemonium aboard.

I did not cease from pulling.

“By the Muscle . . .” breathed Turko, in awe.

Any ideas I might have entertained of remaining in the boat and of slipping past along the river were banished as more galleys appeared, pulling up with the

kind of individual precision obtained by a smart whip-deldar and drum-deldar, and a skipper who knew his business. A brisk little action was being fought back there. The volroks, of whom I was to learn a great deal later on in Havilfar, had flown in from their aerie towns far to the north and west. They had a plan. Although I could only guess what their schemes might be, I did know they would aid me in my own.

The conceit appealed to me.

One of the galleys had hauled around the main area of conflict. I knew they could still see us, as we could see them, a dark blob against the pink sheen along the water. The galley ignored the fight off to her side and settled down to a strong steady pull. We would reach the bank first, I judged; but it would be a touch-and-go affair.

Now it was just a question of a long strong pull across the ebb toward the bank. Rushes and reeds grew there tall enough to shield us for a space, enough to give us time to cross the mudflats and so escape into the shadows. Behind us, and full in my view, the clustered galleys were putting up a doughty fight against the swarming clouds of volroks.

Arrows skimmed upward, their tips chips of glittering light in the pink glow; crossbow bolts also, I guessed, would be loosed among the flying men. Many I saw fall. One of the galleys swayed drunkenly out of line, her oars all at sixes and sevens, and reeled into a second. Her upperworks, which were, in truth, low enough to the

water, were dark with the frantic agitated forms of volroks, like flies upon jam.

Now the Twins edged into the sky, and the two second moons of Kregen, continually orbiting each other, shed sufficient light in their nearly full phase to pick out details with that pink and typically Kregen semblance of fuzzy ruby clarity. Neither the galleys nor the volroks were winning, I judged. The galley pursuing us must be constrained under the most severe orders to recapture us to leave the fight. I pulled and went on pulling as I watched that furiously waged fight, clamoring and shrieking into the night. We had traveled in our flier from the west coast of Havilfar clear across the narrow waist to the northwestern tip of the Shrouded Sea. We had soared over a mountain range. In those peaked valleys, I guessed, lay the towns and aeries of these volroks, these flying men of Havilfar.

The boat's keel felt the first kiss of mud. The boat shuddered; but with a few long, powerful strokes I forced her on until the keel grated unpleasantly on gravel and coarse mud.

I grabbed Saenda. Turko grabbed Quaesa. Also, with a semblance of a grimace that might be called a smile, I seized the boat hook. It was our only weapon.

Over the side we plunged, thigh-deep, and at once the water roiled and clouded with disturbed mud. We staggered on.

Wasting breath, but considering the waste justified to cheer my comrades, I said: "This shallowness of the

bank side will hold the galley farther out. We have a better chance.”

Saenda, her fair hair streaming over my shoulder, her arms and legs wrapped about me in a clinging grip, shouted: “You’ll be sorry for all this, Dray Prescott! By the Lady Emli of Ras! What you’ve done to me since we—”

I chose at that moment to stumble over an old tree stump half buried in mud and water, and recovered reasonably quickly; but Saenda went under and took a mouthful of that mud and water, and her sharp complaints changed to a choking gargling, in which I caught her attempts at further swearing and promises of the dire things that would happen to me when I took her home to Dap-Tentyrasmot. If ever there was a time for chuckling this night, I suppose that was the time; but I did not chuckle. I simply blundered on up the bank, slipping and sliding in mud, hearing the mud slop and suck at my legs, hoping that I would not fall into a patch of quicksand or that the mud leeches would not get a good grip on my naked legs. For I wore only that old scarlet breechclout. Saenda, for her part, wore a dead Canop guard’s breechclout and a piece of cloth hung around her shoulders, and the leeches would relish the fine blood they would discover beneath that fair skin.

Quaesha, with her darker skin and jet hair, would also provide luscious blood-sucking territory. So it was that I was most thankful to blunder out on top of the bank and slip and slide down the other side where the rushes grew wild and in great profusion and leave the sluggish and highly unpleasant River Magan behind.

“They stuck, Dray, just as you said,” said Turko as he followed on. His breath came as evenly and his chest moved as smoothly as though he had not plunged into muddy water and carried a girl up a slippery bank at top speed.

“But they’ll wade ashore, as we did. Let us *move!*”

That old devilish crack whiplashed in my voice, and the girls jumped, and Turko chuckled, and so we put the girls down and we ran as best we could through the reed beds.

The harsh and mystical training through which I had gone with the Krozairs of Zy — a period that would never really end, for the Krozair usually makes time to return and refresh not so much his physique but his mental attitudes to life and the secret disciplines — enabled me to push on quickly enough and to assist Saenda. The Khamorros, too, taught physical and mental disciplines that enabled Turko to forge on with Quaesa. This was lung-bursting, thew-tearing, heart-hammering effort. Some people when referring to what I have called unarmed combat talk about bloodless combat. There is such a thing, of course, and it is what, really, the Khamorros do in practice — most of the time. But the unarmed combat man is seeking to down his man, and blood will flow then just as though he had sliced him with a sword as hand-chopped his ear so the blood gushes from his nostrils and mouth. There is nothing bloodless about the kind of unarmed combat Turko the Khamorro and I, Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy, shared.

So we were able to outdistance the pursuit. Soon we ran across a road, muddy and full of potholes, but, nonetheless, a road, and here we saw the beings waiting for us to emerge from the reed beds.

Turko stopped with a low hiss of indrawn breath.

The two girls began to squeal — and two hard and horny hands clamped across their soft mouths. Turko knew as well as I the importance of first-footing with strangers, especially strangers encountered on a lonely road at night with the pinkly golden light of Kregen's moons glinting back from the muddy ruts and potholes and throwing details into a hazy blur.

Often and often has the understanding been brought home to me that this kind of situation is what life on Kregen is all about: This continual headlong advance into danger; this confrontation with the unknown. These beings might turn out to be friends, attracted by the commotion on the river and waiting to see what manner of men or beasts emerged from the reed beds. They might choose to be hostile, and so demand all Turko's skills and a measure of hefty thwacks from my boat hook. They would act according to their natures, and, of a surety, Turko and I would act according to ours.

"Llahal!" I called, using the nonfamiliar form of the universal Kregish greeting.

"Llahal," responded the leader, a being who stepped a little in advance of the others.

There were ten of them, and I saw the gleam of weapons; but I fancied that if Turko and I were quick we might see them off. Certainly I would not tamely submit.

I had been trying, as you can bear witness, to quell that hasty and violent streak of mine that will not tolerate oppression in any form. I had been trying, you might say, to talk first and then strike, rather than the vice versa method to which I had been accustomed.

“We come in peace,” I said.

I know this does not sound like the Dray Prescott you may think you have understood, listening to these tapes spinning through the recorder; and I know I told a blatant lie if we were not received in peace; but I meant it. I had more important concerns than a brawl on a muddy path in the light of the moons. The being advanced cautiously. He looked not unlike a volrok, having long narrow wings, neatly folded, but there was about him a difference that marked him out. Those differences could best be described, perhaps, by saying that if a volrok was equated with a Latin of our Earth, this being would be equated with a man of Nordic stock. But the same eight-limbed original body-form was there, with the upper limbs extended into wide narrow wings, the two arms forward — and holding weapons! — the two legs and feet on which there were no scimitar blades, and the rear pair of limbs fused into a tail fan.

“We, too, seek peace. You have been fighting the volroks?”

Turko laughed and started to say “By the Muscle! We’ve fought the—” when I kicked him in the shins. He said, instead, “—The whole wide world in our time. Do you, then, fight the volroks?”

Another flying man pushed up from the pack. In that light it was difficult to tell them apart. But there is one curious fact that I own to with a certain silly pride, and that is with every successive season I spent on Kregen I was able to pick out more clearly and with greater certainty one halfling from another. Men of one race on Earth will say that all men of another race look alike to them; this is natural if regrettable. Rapechak, for instance, the Rapa mercenary with whom we had fought in Mungul Sidrath and whom we had lost when we escaped into the River Magan, had looked like Rapechak to me, and not like any other Rapa.

This second flying man said: "They are apim. I say we do not trust them."

"And I say," said the leader, in a fashion I admired, "that I will stick you if you do not keep quiet, Quarda."

"We are apim," I said. "But we are not Canops."

The leader laughed. It was a good belly-laugh, rich and round and boiling up from a well-filled stomach.

"We know that, dom. Had you been Canops you would have stepped upon the road as dead men."

"That's comforting to know."

He thought I meant it was comforting to know we had not been killed. What he did not know was that I scented allies here in the straggle to come against the iron men from Canopdrin.

One of the other flying men in the pack shouted: "The Miglas will be here soon. There was enough noise and torches on the river — let us kill them and be gone."

The leader did not turn.

He said, "Quincher — hit that onker Quilly for me."

There came the sound of a blow and a yelp from the dark mass of flying men. The leader nodded, as though satisfied. I rather liked his style.

"You tell me who you are, dom," he said. "And then we will decide to kill you — or not."

I am not given to idle boasts. "Tell me who you are."

He spoke in a very reasonable tone. "You are unarmed. We have weapons, of bronze and of steel. Surely, you must see it is in your own interests to tell us first. After, I will be happy to tell you, and, by the Golden Feathers of Father Qua, it would sadden me to slay a man without weapons in his hands."

I glanced at Turko. He did not betray his thoughts, but they were clear enough.

"What you say is indeed reasonable, dom. This is Turko, a Great Kham, and these are two foolish girls, Saenda and Quaesa, who live on the opposite shore of the Shrouded Sea."

"And you?"

The dark eyes regarded me with a closer intent.

"My name is Dray Prescott."

A buzz of conversation from the flying men, which told me they had not heard of me or of Turko, was followed by the leader bellowing for order. He took a few steps forward, his tail high and arrogant in that pink moonlight.

"I am Obquam of Tajkent. I seek for a certain cramp of a volrok called Rakker — Largan Rakker of the Triple

Peaks. Know you of this vile reaver and his whereabouts?”

“No, Horter Obquam,” I said at once. There was no sense in beating about the bush here. “We were attacked by the whole pack of volroks and escaped only because they attacked the Canops in the galleys. This Rakker — he has done you an injury?”

“Aye! And more, may the black talons of Deevi Quruk rip out his entrails and strip his wings so that he falls into the Ice Floes of Sicce!”

For the moment I had learned all I needed to know. Local detail could be filled in later. At any moment the commotion which had attracted so much unwelcome attention would bring a patrol of Canops to the scene. There was light enough still to see the wheeling flock of volroks above the galleys, although they were hidden from direct view. I fancied there were fewer flying men over there. I put it to this Obquam of Tajkent.

“If the one you seek flies with that pack there, why do you not wing over and discover the truth for yourself?”

He drew himself up, not so much with hauteur as with offended pride. I had suggested blatantly enough that Turko shook his hands and arms, loosening up, readying for the fight he thought must be imminent.

“Look there, apim!” Obquam pointed.

Out over the river the volroks were in turmoil. Their thin screeching reached us blown on the wind. Now among them appeared the larger and bulkier shapes of men astride flying beasts and birds, flutsmen astride fluttrells, as I thought then. The gleam of weapons

turned to a bright glittering. I saw volroks falling, and fluttrells, too, with their riders pitching off to dangle by their clerketers all the way into the water.

The aerial battle raged and drifted away from us.

“The Canops from the galleys will be ashore now,” I said. “If you seek this Rakker you had best follow, Horter Obquam.”

He gestured. “I am a Strom, Horter Prescott. You really should address me as Strom of Tajkent.”

“If it pleases you. But as for me and my friends, we are for Yaman, and the streets will not be friendly at this time of night, so we will take our leave now.”

I could feel Turko’s brisk brightening at my words.

The girls, whose mouths were now free of our hands, let out gasps of surprise and annoyance and, as was inevitable, fear.

“I am not going back there, Dray Prescott!” yelled Saenda.

“Not for all the ivory in Chem!” snapped Quaesa.

“Then you are perfectly willing to stay with this Strom and his flying men?”

Their outrage was both pitiful and painful. If this Strom Obquam of Tajkent tried to stop me I was fully prepared to deal with him and his flying band. As for the girls, I knew I would have to devise a scheme to get them back to their homes on the other side of the Shrouded Sea, and a good scheme at that. But Turko surprised me. I did not then understand why he wanted to go back to Yaman, the city of eerie buildings where Migshaanu had been contemptuously ousted as the

Great Goddess by the Canops. He had no particular love for Mog, the old witch who had so surprisingly become Mog the Mighty, the high priestess, for all that she had doctored him and healed him of his hurts back there in the jungles of Faol.

So it was that I turned to walk off, and said rather sharply: “You understand what it is we are about, Turko? We are making a fresh beginning. We are going to Yaman in the full knowledge that we might never leave, that we might hang by our heels from the ramparts of Mungul Sidrath?”

“I know. I doubt it will happen, Dray.”

I grunted, for I could find no words to express what I felt just then.

The flying man — I suspected these were people who would not welcome being called volroks — called Quarda, who had already spoken out of turn, stepped before me. He held a weapon very like a toonon. The short and broad-bladed sword had been mounted on a shaft of a bamboo-like wood, with cross quillons also daggered. He held it as a man who knew his business.

“You do not walk away so lightly, apim Prescott.”

I did not reply. I looked with a hard stare at the Strom.

He spread his hands, a gesture of resignation. “In this, Horter Prescott, a matter of honor, I may not intervene. It is between you and Horter Quarda, now.”

The distance from my left kneecap to Quarda’s groin was almost exactly what one might have wished in the exercise yard. My knee smacked it with a crunchy *whop!*

and Quarda stood for a moment, absolutely still, his mouth open. Then he dropped the toonon. His eyes began to bulge. They bulged quite slowly, and shone, a most curious sight. Slowly, he began to fold in the middle. I stood watching him, quite still, not speaking. Quarda put his hands to his middle, moving with a slow underwater finning movement, and bending forward and over, more and more, and his eyes bulged and bulged, and the cords in his neck stood out like a frigate's sheets in a gale.

He rolled right over into a ball, and fell on his side, and his legs kicked for a moment. He had not vomited yet, and that showed he must have been in good control. But he could not yell, and what with the yell inside him that couldn't get out, and the stream that wanted to spurt out as well, he lay in a coil and twitched.

I turned to the Strom of Tajkent.

"Remberree, Strom," I said, quite cheerfully. "Maybe we will have the pleasure of meeting another day."

His eyes on me remained unfathomable.

"Remberree, Dray Prescot."

Taking Saenda firmly by the upper arm, as Turko took Quaesa, I marched off.

Marched off along that dismal road toward the city of Yaman where waited horrors and battles and stratagems, were the other three, and I could not find it in my heart to pity them. As, of course, I could never find pity for myself.

## Chapter Three

### A wall beneath Mungul Sidrath comes to life

“Mag,” said Mog, the high priestess. “Nothing can be done until Mag is found. The religion cannot be truly useful to us — to my shame — until Mag is freed.”

“Unless,” said Planath the Wine, “he be dead.”

Old Mog surged up at this in her stiff and gorgeous robes, all crimson and smothered with gold lace and embroidery, the massive golden crown with its rubies toppling dangerously. She banged the great gold-plated staff upon the floor. She looked impressive and dominating and yet, remembering her as the mewling slave I had seen in the jungles of Faol, I felt the irony and pathos here. Her old face with the witch’s beak of a nose and the boot-cap chin scowled most ferociously, and her agate eyes gleamed most furiously upon us in the back room of *The Loyal Canoptic*.

She might be an old halfling woman who had been defamed by the invading and conquering Canops, her

temple razed and in ruins, her king and queen slain, this important Mag a prisoner or dead — but she cowed the assembled Miglas here. The tavern had seen many of these secret gatherings, but on this night the back room bulged with Miglas, more than ever before, collected together from all over the city of Yaman.

And yet they were a pitifully small number to pit against the might of the iron men from Canopdrin with their superlative drill and discipline, their bows and swords, their armored cavalry of the air. But I had had the task of creating a revolution thrust upon me by the Star Lords, so, therefore, a revolution there was going to be, by Zair!

“So we rescue Mag,” I said, over the hubbub.

There was a great shaking of Migla heads, those ludicrous rubbery, flap-eared, pop-eyed faces like children’s playthings all swaying in unison. Everyone wore a crimson robe; the men held their stuxes, the throwing spears of Havilfar. But, as I well knew, the brave crimson robes and the deadly accurate stuxes would all be safely hidden away before these Miglas would dare creep out under the radiance of the moons to slink home by back alleys and slippery stairs.

Turko sat back, his bright eyes on me, and, as always, I felt his quizzical glance and knew he weighed me up. A great Khamorro, Turko, a master of his syple, cunning in unarmed combat. He would follow me, for he had said so. But into what harebrained adventures was I proposing to lead him now?

The general consensus was that Mag must be rescued before any move against the Canops could be made. Even then, I wearily suspected, these Miglas were not the stuff from which could be forged a fighting force fit to stand against the disciplined ranks of the men from Canopdrin. I had seen a little of this occupying army, and I recognized their expertise.

But, first things first.

After we had rescued Mag, we could then weigh the situation afresh.

“He is of a surety imprisoned in Mungul Sidrath,” said Planath the Wine. He looked troubled.

None of them had appeared surprised that I had returned with Turko, Saenda, and Quaesa. They knew I had rescued them from the citadel of Mungul Sidrath. They did not even show surprise at my announcement that I would help them in their fight against the Canops. Either they were too far gone in apathy, or they did not really believe, or they regarded this as merely a further happy result of the return of Mog the Mighty, their high priestess.

“Then it is to Mungul Sidrath I must go.”

Turko lifted his head. But he did not speak.

I said: “How am I to recognize Mag?”

At this old Mog the Witch cackled. She bent her forefinger and pointed it at her nutcracker face.

“You have seen me, Dray Prescott. Therefore you have seen a likeness of my brother.”

We were drinking beer, a thin and rather bitter stuff I did not much care for, although the Miglas lapped it up

smartly enough. Now a man stood up, splayed on broad feet, his ears flapping, beaming the idiotic Miglish smile. He lifted his blackjack, beer slopping down the dark cracked leather.

“A toast! A toast to Dray Prescott who will go in the safekeeping of Migshenda of the Stux.”

“Aye,” rumbled from the assembled Miglas, and they stood and lifted their goblets and glasses and blackjacks, and drank.

It was a pretty gesture. But that was all it was, a gesture.

As the Miglas resumed their seats one man remained standing. He lifted his pewter mug to me.

“I will go with you, Dray Prescott.”

I looked at him.

Apart from the facts that he was a young man, that he looked fit and healthy, that he held his chin high, there was nothing to distinguish him from all the others.

“You will be killed for sure, Med Neemusbane!”

“Oh, no, Med!” A girl leaped to him, clasped her arms about him. He stood there, and for all the ridiculous appearance of the typical Migla morphology, an aura of dignity and determination made him not ridiculous at all.

Planath the Wine said, again, “You will be killed for sure, Med Neemusbane. But if you must go, we will pray for you.”

“Aye,” said the others. “At the temple, among the ruins, we will pray for you.”

“Oh, Med!” moaned the girl, clasping him.

I had no desire to push this youngster into a danger he probably did not understand. I knew from his name that he had already won fame. A large proportion of the economy of Migla revolved around wild-vosk hunting in the back hills. From the vosk came rich and succulent joints, and supple voskskin, and this Med Neemusbane must be a hunter of great repute.

He said, "I shall go."

Turko said, "A neemu is a most vicious and beautiful beast, a machine of destruction. Even a leem will not willingly encounter two full-grown neemus."

"So be it," I said. I had a plan for this headstrong youngster. "And the thanks of us all, Med Neemusbane."

Although as you know I had figured in a rebellion before, when I had led my old vosk-skulls against the overlords of Magdag, I had been cruelly wrenched away from that final victorious battle by the Star Lords. The rebellion had had no time to flower into a revolution. The time when, as the great song, *The Fetching of Drak na Valka*, says, I had cleansed my island of Valka of the slave-masters and the aragorn did not really count as an organized rebellion. That had been a people aroused in a just anger against rapacious oppressors who raided and reaved. Here, in Migla, the Canops had taken over every aspect of the country and had settled in as the masters. I had no real experience of revolution as I knew it must be handled here. But, as in my avowed way, I would learn.

The problem of returning Saenda and Quaesa worried me; but Planath the Wine assured me he could

arrange travel for the two female apims, one to Dap-Tentyrasmot, the other to Methydria, without too much trouble, provided they did as they were told. They had become accustomed to doing as they were told during their period as slaves, when they were being readied to run as quarry for the Manhunters of Faol. Just lately, after our escape, they had tended to revert to their usual hectoring and faultfinding ways. I spoke to them and I deliberately put that old vicious cutting rasp into my voice.

They quailed as I spoke.

“You both claim to be high-born ladies. You have prated on about the kools of rich grazing land and all the merchant agencies your fathers own. This may be so. But if you wish to cross the Shrouded Sea and return to your homes, you will do exactly as Planath the Wine tells you. He is a man to be trusted. If you give any trouble at all, I’ll clip your ears, by Vox, and send you back for sport in the fangs of the Manhounds of Faol!”

“Oh, Dray!” wailed Saenda.

And, “Oh, Dray!” wailed Quaesa.

A vivid image flashed into my mind.

I saw myself in a muldavy with her dipping lug of the Eye of the World, and I heard myself cutting the Lady Pulvia na Upalion down to size. I hate and detest berating women. It is a cowardly pastime. But, here, these two silly gigglers demanded no less than a real honest-to-Zair tongue-lashing. I spared them. I recognized my softness and weakness; but they had suffered, by Zair, and I thought they would understand and

respect the risks Planath and the Miglas were taking for them.

“You will need many golden deldys, Planath. These I will secure tomorrow.”

“Hush, Dray Prescott! We will be happy to furnish all the lady apims may require. Also—” Here Planath the Wine rubbed his chin and squinted up at me. “Also, if you knock any more Canop guardsmen on the head and steal their money the whole city of Yaman will suffer.”

“Sink me!” I burst out. “I wouldn’t want that — but, equally, I would not wish to sponge on your charity.”

After a long and pleasant wrangle, during which a great deal more of the beer was drunk, we agreed that Planath and his friends should outfit the girls and buy them passages aboard the most convenient ship or voller traveling to the eastern shore of the Shrouded Sea. There would have to be matters of disguise, and secrecy; all that I left to the Miglas. It was no part of the plans of the Star Lords, I thought, to become embroiled with these two silly gigglers.

The frowning pile of Mungul Sidrath waited.

In order to rescue Turko and Saenda and Quaesa I had dressed myself up as a Canoptic soldier and marched in boldly. The commandant had been slain; I guessed the new commandant would have tightened up security so that it would be fatuous to suppose we could break in that way again, and, of course, Med could never disguise himself as a Canop, I thought. During the rest of the meeting there was talk of ways and means. I suppose because he looked more and more agitated as

the night wore on I took stock of an ugly old Migla called Malkar, who kept rubbing a bald spot on his head, and pulling his flap-ears, and burying his hooked nose in his blackjack, and coming up spluttering to wipe the thin froth away. He had been the old boy charged with the duty of cleaning the drains in the temple. Now the temple of Migshaanu lay in tumbled ruins.

At last Malkar got his courage up, as I thought, although in that I did him an injustice. He took a huge draft of beer, spluttered, choked, and then bellowed so abruptly that everyone fell silent.

“May the divine Migshaanu forgive me, for she will understand why I speak! I know the drains and the sewers, for that is my work, and I joy in serving Migshaanu the thrice-bathed. But — I know more! There is a—” He paused here, screwing himself up to the point. He was, in his eyes, betraying a secret which he should never have known. “I know! Often and often have I seen the king and queen, may Migshaanu enfold her golden wings about them, come to the temple from their palace by the secret way—”

“Ah!” said Turko, leaning forward.

“Yes! There is a way, a tunnel, dark and dangerous, and guarded in a most horrible way I do not know. The king and the queen knew. But they are dead, slain by the Canops, by the foul and rast-loving King Capnon whom the yetches call King Capnon the Great.”

“Show us the entrance, good Malkar!” said Med Neemusbane. He spoke with a quick eagerness that warmed me. If there were other brave young men like

him among the Migladorn, the chances of a successful revolution were greater than I had surmised.

So it was arranged. Turko and I said Remberee to the two girls, Saenda and Quaesa, and they were suitably tearful at parting. They were not the shishis they had been called. They were simply two young girls who had fallen on evil times and had tried to retain their sanity by clinging to their own old ways. I was in no real position to pass judgment on those ways, for all that I knew they involved slave management, and, as is notorious, women are infinitely more cruel to slaves than are men.

We slunk through the night streets of Yaman, with the eerie old houses, tall and narrow, crooked against the stars, hemming us in. The ruins of the temple glimmered in the hazy pink light of She of the Veils. The Canops had thrown down the columns and the walls and the roof had fallen. Malkar led us past a black hole that stank of sewage. We penetrated down past stone blocks with weird hieroglyphs incised on their hewn surfaces; but we had not lit our torches and so the secret and magical inscriptions were only fitfully revealed in the pink moonlight. When a stone overhang brought us into deep shadow, Malkar whispered and his voice rustled and echoed among the tumbled stones.

“You may light the torches now, Horter Prescott.”

Flint and steel clicked and scraped, the tinder caught, and a torch flared. I held it aloft. Before us lay a narrow flight of stairs, hewn from the rock, leading down into inky darkness. Weird and ungainly forms of animals and

birds crawled in the light across the walls. The atmosphere of decay and of doom hung about this shattered temple, dedicated to gods of a halfling race.

With a screech and a great rustle of membranous wings a Kregan bat fluttered madly in the light. The woflovol chittered and flew in crazy zigzaggings, seeking the darkness. I put my foot on the first step. Turko closed up. Med, also, began the descent.

Malkar hung back.

“It is down there, Horter Prescott. A great bronze-bolted door. And, after that, Migshaanu the All-Glorious alone knows!”

“I thank you, Horter Malkar. Now get you gone in safety.”

“Remberree,” he called; but his voice dwindled and faded, for he was already scuttling back and away from this place where, if I allowed myself the fancy, eldritch horrors awaited us.

We three pressed on, descending that narrow stair in the flare of our torches.

I wore my old scarlet breechclout, for the weather was mild. I carried the thraxter and the crossbow and a quiver of bolts we had earlier relieved of those who had no title in the higher warrior-justice to them. If this sounds a high-handed judgment I stand condemned. I knew what I knew of overfed, pampered, and decadent people who hunted other people with crossbow and spear.

This land of Migla stood on approximately the same parallel south as the parallel north running through the

Black Mountains of Vallia. I wondered how Inch was faring. But the dark hole yawned beneath my feet and the steps, greasy and treacherous, trended downward inexorably to that massive bronze-bolted lenken door. I suppressed the instinct to hammer on that portal of ill-omen with the thraxter and I kept the sword in its sheath.

Turko, as was his custom, was unarmed. That is to say, he did not carry weapons of steel, edged and pointed. While he had his hands and his feet and his head, he remained a most formidable fighter, a Khamorro and therefore a man to be feared. Med carried eight stuxes in an interesting gadget. From a flat disc of wood eight near-circular notches had been cut around the edge. Each notch had a small spring of carved horn which, when a stux shaft was pressed into the notch, held the stux in place. A simple jerk would flex the spring and release the weapon. There were two discs, and the heads of the spears were so arranged that they staggered downward to give clearance to each fat wedge-shaped blade. A carrying strap could be attached to this stuxcal, when necessary, so that it might be slung over the shoulder and be ready for instant use. Also, Med carried a large hunting knife similar to a scramasax.

The shadows clustered thickly and fled reluctantly before the flare of our torches.

Each individual bronze bolt head of the lenken door gleamed at us like a single malicious eye.

“There,” said Turko, and, stepping forward, seized the sliding bolt. I saw the way his muscles slid and bunched,

roping like great cables as he drew back the bolt. It had not been used for some time, and verdigris made that drawing difficult. A stale and musty odor puffed out, fetid with unnameable miasmas. Med coughed. Turko grunted. I stepped in, holding my torch high.

“Malkar prated of a great and horrible danger, Dray. Best tread warily.”

And, as he spoke, Turko moved up and attempted to take the lead.

I simply increased my stride, plunging headlong into the tunnel beneath the ruins. Sink me! I was still young and foolish enough to think it not pride but a proper sense of martial valor that I should go first. Turko muttered something about a Muscle-bound onker, but he fell in to my rear. Our torches threw ghastly shadows fleeting before us, contorted phantasms from jagged edges of rock. I kept up my brisk advance, for I was not willing for Turko, all unarmed as he was, to take the lead.

We were all breathing lightly, tensed up, cautious, and yet anxious to be through this melancholy tunnel with its aroma of death and decay.

Little echoes from disturbed stones beneath our feet chattered ahead, reverberating tinnily, disquietingly. I stopped.

“Let us move quietly, my friends,” I said. “As though we hunted leem.”

The way grew warmer. The fetid breath on the air near choked us. Presently the sound of rushing water trembled nearer, until we came out to a cavern where

steaming water, boiling and bubbling, spouted from a cleft in the rock and ran, hot and angry, in a channel cut alongside the path. The channel continued into the tunnel, and steam rose about us, slicking upon our skins, so that we gleamed and sweated as though passing through the baths of nine.

Through the steam I tried to espy what lay ahead. I could hear nothing above the boiling rush of waters. Our torches twirled their flaming hair, dampened and fading, so that the shadows closed in. Was that a movement there, up ahead along the tunnel wall? I slowed down and moved forward warily. Yes . . . that *was* a movement. Something waited for us at a bend in the tunnel, something I could not make out, something lethal and horrible and waiting to pull us down.

Now I put each foot down soundlessly. The torchlight wavered along the slimy walls. White-yellow vegetation grew here, and at the very corner of the bend a gap in the rock ceiling revealed a chink, and a thin streamer of pink light falling through. We were near the surface, then. I advanced.

Med's voice, whispering, reached me.

"Dray — there, by the wall! By Migshenda! A syatra!"

The wall writhed. Many thick and fleshy tentacles sprouted from a central trunk, corpse-white, spine-barbed, rippling and writhing and seeking us. I saw the barbed leaves of the trap opening, ready to snap on its victim. Each Venus's-flytrap would gobble a grown man. The steam rose bewilderingly. The tendrils swayed and writhed like beseeching arms, like the serpent-hair of

the Gorgons. But this syatra was no Medusa; rather, it must be one of Medusa's sisters, Eurale or Sthenno. It lashed its tendrils about and its spined trap yawned, barring our way along one side of the tunnel.

I edged forward on the other, the sword in my fist, the crossbow slung over my back.

The tunnel widened a little. The horror opposite lashed its tendrils at me. I ignored them. Until they reached me I would refrain from smiting.

A few bones crunched underfoot.

I pressed on, the steam swirling confusingly in my face, the swishing, thrashing sounds of the blind tendrils seeking those who passed whistling by my ears. Turko closed up. Med followed.

The shadows gyrated madly. Crimson torchlight bounced from the corpse-white trunk and tendrils. The leaves of the trap, like doors hinged flat, quivered. I felt a light sliding glance on my arm and halted instantly.

But — Turko!

The wall at our side had opened. In some way the tunnel was wider still and a second syatra growing from the wall, its roots seeking the hot water, flailed its tendrils above us. We were directly between the two. Their tendrils locked and closed about us. Turko yelled. Two tendrils wrapped around his body were pulling him two different ways, toward the two opposite traps. In scant seconds Turko would be torn in half.

## Chapter Four

### The Miglas demand revolutionary vosk-stuxing

Instinctive reaction lifted my sword arm. I was ready to slash through the tendril nearest to me. Then I, Dray Prescott, paused. Sheer blind bloodthirsty passion had almost condemned my new comrade Turko to death. Instinct to action here was useless. If I slashed through this near tentacle, then the other would have nothing holding it and so could spring back with all its hideous power and snap Turko into the barbed coffin of the trap.

Turko's magnificent body strained. His enormous strength concentrated in resisting the twin pulls. His body was being torn in half, but his training, his discipline, and his muscles fought every inch of the way.

One tendril cut would be followed instantly by the springing of Turko into the trap. The coffin-leaves would close and the spines bite, like a vegetable Iron Maiden, and perhaps a thin trickle of Turko's blood might seep past those clenched vegetable lips.

Instinct had been quelled, and thought had taken over; but to tell you all this has taken ten times longer than the facts of action. In almost the same moment the tendrils lapped Turko and he yelled, I had seized his body in my left arm, throwing the torch to Med and trusting to his quick-wittedness to catch it, had reached across and slashed the tentacle and almost had my feet pulled from under me, so savage and powerful was that force pulling from the opposite syatra. There was time — but only just, only just! — for me to follow that swiping swing with a second and sever the far tendril.

Turko was on his feet in an instant.

“By the Muscle! Burn the monsters!”

He thrust his torch at the nearest syatra and the thing went crazy. Tendrils lashed and writhed, the torch went spinning, to plunge to a fizzing extinction in the boiling water. Med yelled. He was slashing with a stux, not the most handy of weapons for the business, managing for the moment to keep clear of the Gorgon’s hair. My thraxter was circling and hacking and hewing all the time, leaving a growing heap of dismembered tendril tips scattered on the floor about us.

This whole scene was awry. How could the old king and queen of Migla have come walking through here in secret to their devotions in the temple? In the ceiling, erratically lit by the two remaining torches — Med had flung mine back — I could vaguely make out a straight line crack, some six inches or so wide. Now if . . .

I whirled the torch in that crazy steamy atmosphere. The king and queen would have brought samphron-oil

lamps. I saw the long lenken lever protruding from the wall well past the syatras and a look back showed its counterpart. We had missed it in going past, an easily done thing in that treacherous light.

With a wild yell I whirled the torch at the near syatra, slashed more of those tendrils away, hacking and slashing, jumped for the lever. A tendril lapped my thigh as I reached the lenk. I ignored it. I felt the vegetable strength of the thing, horrific, dragging me back. With a single last heave I laid my hand on the lever and dragged it down. It resisted and I used all my strength, and with a clashing of gears and a great groaning, the lever fell.

“Look out, Dray!” Turko yelled savagely.

I whirled.

A single stroke from the thraxter severed the tendril around my thigh; but the stroke was unnecessary. From those two six-inch wide slots in the ceiling, one on each side of the tunnel and parallel to it, vast slabs of slate descended smoothly, their massive weight in some way counterpoised behind the walls. As they slid downward so the tendrils wriggled backward, bunching, coiling, avoiding the descending edge of slate. The last corpse-white wriggling tentacle slipped back beneath the slate and the two edges struck the ground with a hollow and reverberating clank.

The running water which gave sustenance to the syatras also must power the counterweight mechanism.

Turko peered over his shoulder, frowning. He never did like having his body ripped up — well, no one does,

of course. But for a Khamorro the sanctity of his own body is very close to his heart.

“By Migshenda the Stux!” breathed Med. “We were nearly cast adrift on the Ice Floes of Sicce then!”

“Aye,” said Turko. He breathed deeply and flexed his biceps gingerly, testing. Everything seemed to be in order, which put my mind at rest. “By the Muscle! They were strong kobblurs.”

Trust Turko for a comment on the aspect that affected him!

We advanced, relighting the torch after some trouble, and found no less than four more levers and slate barricades which, descending with a rumbling roar, walled off the voracious syatras. Although I had not previously encountered this famous plant of Kregen, I had heard of it. It liked hot damp climates in general, and I understood Chem was choked out with the things. No doubt the builders of the temple and Mungul Sidrath had thought it a capital scheme to employ them when they had a ready supply of hot water. The cracks in the roof were not casual cracks at all but carefully constructed ventilation tubes, and no doubt their upper ends would be concealed in innocent-seeming masonry of an innocent-seeming building.

During the day the twin Suns of Scorpio would shine down here for a space sufficient to sustain the syatras.

We padded on and were thankful to leave that tunnel of dark and dank and danger to our rear. We came up into a shaft around the inside of which a narrow spiral

stair led upward to — to more darkness and danger, for a surety.

We had, of course, no idea where Mag, twin brother of Mog, would be imprisoned. We did not even know if he was still alive.

Many and many a time have I crept into a fortress, a naked brand in my fist, bent on one nefarious scheme or another. This time I was out to rescue an old Migla and take him back so that the religion of which his twin sister was high priestess might regain its former glory and puissance. Then, if we were lucky, we could turn the Canops out of Migla. We padded through the lower levels of Mungul Sidrath and we were not gentle with those whom we met. We did not run across that dolorous cavern of the waterwheels, where slaves heaved and struggled to hoist water up to the high towers, so that the nobles and lords and ladies of the occupying Canoptic army and court might bathe and wash and refresh themselves. I took the time to don a Canoptic soldier's uniform, the white kiltlike lower garment, the greaves, the lorica, the helmet, and I took up his shield. As he had done before, Turko ignored the weapons, but he took up a shield and slid it up his left arm. I remembered what Turko had done with his shield on that fragile bridge above the rushing waters of the cavern, and I own I felt greatly more happy about life with Turko at my back with his shield.

And, of course, as you must guess, Turko soon became called Turko the Shield.

Presently a Jiktar, sweating, frightened clean through, the point of my sword drawing a bead of blood from his throat, was only too happy to tell me what we needed to know. I knocked him senseless, for that was his due, and we prowled on along the dungeon-lined corridor he indicated. Men and women crowded to the bars. Hairy and whiskery faces peered out, arms beseeched us through the iron bars, a wailing chorus of utter despair which senses that utter despair may be ending screamed at us as we passed.

“When we return, Med,” I said, hard and unpleasantly.

“As you will it, Horter Prescott.”

I did not blow up at his formality, taking it as a reproof.

“Take your formality to Makki-Grodno, Med! I have been Dray to you — there is no need for ‘Horter.’ We will release them when we return, for otherwise they will raise the citadel about our ears.”

He glanced at me, and away, and gripped his stuxcal. For a Migla he had a spirit I admired. He must have had, for since when did I, Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor, condescend to explain my every order?

These were political prisoners, which in Migla meant religious prisoners.

A Deldar, arrogant in his brilliant uniform, strutted down toward us as we reached the end of the corridor where an iron-barred gate concealed the final cell. Med hurled his stux. The squat wedge-shaped blade smashed into the Deldar’s lorica, punched on to lodge fatally in

his heart. Gouting blood from his mouth — for the wide blade must have severed all his veins and arteries there about his lungs — he toppled without a scream.

“Stupid calsaney,” commented Turko.

The final cell yielded up Mag.

Mog had spoken truthfully. The oldster after the fashion of very old people was hard to differentiate as to sex. He looked just like Mog. The same beaky nose, the same rat-trap jaws, the same toe-cap chin. He blinked as the torches glittered across his eyes.

This was where Med Neemusbane proved the value of his coming with us. He was able with quick words and the right and correct references to the religion of Migshaanu to convince old Mag that we were friends, come to take him to freedom. The Canops no doubt had plans for him, for they could not be absolutely sure they had crushed the religion, and old Mag, with suitable encouragement of a kind I would not seek to dwell on, would have been a pawn to reimpose their will. We helped him back along that dismal corridor of incarceration, and we opened all the barred doors on our way, swearing vilely at the inmates to be silent. Like released slaves from a swifter, they could not contain their joy, and they ran about, some picking up weapons, others kicking prostrate Canops, others falling to their knees in thankful prayers.

“Mag!” I shouted. “Tell this rabble to follow us. And, by the diseased left armpit of Makki-Grodno, if they don’t stop that caterwauling they’ll have the whole Canoptic army at our throats.”

Mag tried to calm them, but I saw he never would, and as my duty was to him I hustled him away. Turko and I hefted him between us, and he whistled through the air, his feet six inches off the ground and flailing.

We had to put him down half a dozen times to deal with isolated parties of Canops come to investigate the uproar. We noticed that none came upon us from the rear, and from this we took heart. The released prisoners were fighting, then.

Some came with us. Men hardy enough to want to get out with Mag and begin the struggle from the outside, when they were prepared, and not to idly throw away their lives in here.

At one point one of the Miglas, who looked just as stupidly flap-eared and rubbery as any of the others, but who had a rolling muscular look about him, hesitated as we were accosted by a detachment of Canop soldiers. A Migla next to this one, whose name was Hamp, screeched as a crossbow bolt thunked into his belly.

Hamp held a stux he had picked up from a dead Canop.

“Imagine they are vosk, Hamp,” I said. I spoke quietly, without drama, reasonably, as though discussing an abstruse point of their own religion with him. “Hurl with Migshenda’s skill.”

The idea struck him as novel. “Vosk!” he shouted. I loosed and hit a Deldar in the mouth. Hamp bunched up, poised, and threw. His stux battered away the shield of a Canop soldier and slashed out the side of the fellow’s face.

“It is done!” Hamp shouted. His curious Migla face looked dazed. “Canops are vosk, to be stuxed!”

Looking back, I saw that was the crux of the problem. The Miglas *had* sought to fight off the Canoptic invasion, but I had put down their complete failure against what were so few men as being due to the superb organization and military discipline of the Canops. But the reasons ran deeper than that.

Here on our own old Earth the East has a tradition that only certain races or tribes are warlike. Others are never reckoned as being of martial spirit, as being of any use as soldiers. Certain developments in the last few years have undermined this belief. In Europe we are a warlike lot, it seems, for the West does not have the same tradition. So the Miglas were a religious nation, and warfare something with which they were unfamiliar. For the Canops, the army represented the ideal. The Canops, with a few regiments and a tiny air arm, had subdued the whole country of the Miglas. Now they sought to maintain their conquest.

With more Miglas like Med Neemusbane and Hamp, I judged, the task I had considered almost insuperable might have a solution that was one I could accept. We reached the open air and climbed back through the tunneled stair and so came out into the ruins. The Maiden with the Many Smiles shone down on us. We made our surreptitious way back to the tavern leaning so crazily on the bank of the River Magan. *The Loyal Canoptic* buzzed with activity that night. I worried over that. The two girls were gone, having been sent on the

first stage of their journey home. *The Loyal Canoptic* was a sarcastic name for Planath the Wine's tavern. Before the time of tragedy it had been called *The Loyal of Sidraarga*. Now I fretted that Canop patrols, or any of the mercenaries they employed, would hear the sounds of merrymaking and investigate.

If they did so, of course, every man of the patrol would be dead. But that would only stir up fresh trouble.

The tangled skein of politics in Havilfar, and the delicate balances of power, I found fascinating. The Canops had been able to carry out their conquest of Migla, their own island of Canopdrin in the Shrouded Sea being made uninhabitable by the volcanic activity there, because no one wished to fight them on this issue. The Canops were no more powerful now than they had been. This was not an empire-building conquest. On the other hand, there were many countries around the Shrouded Sea which would welcome the downfall of the iron men from Canopdrin. Their army discipline and organization, I discovered, was not peculiar to them, or remarkably exceptional. The Canoptic army was a fair representative war machine of most countries of Havilfar.

Against that war machine we must pit only religious-minded halflings with vosk-hunting experience. In the normal course of events we could not hope to win; but I held ever in my mind what had been accomplished with the slaves and workers of the warrens of Magdag, and I did not lose hope. I had no right to lose hope, for that

would have displeased the Star Lords, and my overriding duty was to stay on Kregen — no matter how.

A camp was established in the back hills of Migla and here collected disaffected halflings prepared to fight. They came in, in small numbers; but as the message was spread by word of mouth throughout the land that both Mog and her brother Mag were returned the stream of recruits thickened. The full rites of Migshaanu were celebrated every sixth day, as was proper on Kregen, and due observances were restored every day also.

I was kept very busy.

A small cadre of dedicated Miglas gathered about Turko and me. Hamp, as one of the better potential officers, and Med also, could be trusted to carry out orders faithfully. I spelled out various of the difficulties to them as we watched Miglas straggling to stay in line and advance shoulder to shoulder over the slope of a hill.

“We face a number of problems,” I told them. “One is the absolute absence of hand-to-hand fighting experience here. Not only are you deficient in the art, you do not even have the weapons.”

“I have this,” said Med, ripping out his big knifelike scramasax. “My veknis has slit many a vosk throat — aye! And a neemu’s also, into the bargain.”

They solemnly nodded their heads, these ugly little Miglas.

“Aye, Med Neemusbane, you speak the truth.”

Whereat Med lowered his head, and looked away, ashamed of thus boasting of his prowess and calling

attention to the deed for which he was both famed and named.

“And,” I said cuttingly, “what of your little veknis against a real sword? Answer me that!”

I was harsh about his scramasax, for that Saxon weapon is a knife built like a sword, and is very ugly and deadly, although of beautiful shape. But a thraxter, the cut-and-thrust sword of Havilfar, would deal with the veknis with ease.

They shuffled their feet and the Miglas in the line advancing up the hill weaved about like those tendrils sprouting from that horrific syatra in the tunnels beneath Mungul Sidrath. I looked up. At least, the Suns of Scorpio still shone.

“We need shields, and bows, and we need the skills to use them.”

Here there were no masses of slave workers skilled in all manner of arts and crafts, as there had been in the warrens of Magdag, as ready to produce a bow or a shield as to produce a statue or a decoration for the megaliths of the overlords.

Mog waved her arms. She insisted on attending every planning meeting, and this was her right, I suppose.

“We must collect all the money we can. All the deldys my people will give — aye, and more. Then we can hire mercenaries. I am told Rapas are very good, for I do not think we could afford to hire Chuliks. There is your answer.”

They could do this, of course.

“You can do this,” I said. “But who holds the treasury of Migla now? Who controls the state chest in Mungul Sidrath? Can you outbid the Canops in hiring soldiers? For every Rapa you hired they would hire two Chuliks. And, I tell you, for I know these things, no mercenary likes to be hired to fight for a side so obviously doomed to lose.”

That, I realized at once, had not only been a tactless thing to say, it had been also offensive.

I went on bluntly and offensively: “Until you learn to fight for yourselves, you will not regain your own country.”

“We will fight!” yelled Med Neemusbane. He jumped up, waving his stux. “We will fight!”

“Then learn, you wild neemu! Learn!”

Turko said, in the hush that followed, “If we fight and begin to win, will not the Canops then hire more mercenaries?”

“If they do that, good Turko, they admit defeat. Then, I would be happy to see contingents of Rapas and Brokelsh and Fristles landing in Yaman. For then we would be winning!”

One important fact I must make clear at this point is that I felt myself cut off here in halfling Migla. I was a Homo sapiens, as was Turko; apim. We were the only apim among all these halflings, people whom I would have dubbed, when I first moved among the races of Kregen, as beast-men. I knew a little better by this time. But the oppression of being stuck away here in this backwater of Havilfar, when all I really wanted to do lay

across the Southern Ocean, filled me with a haziness as to my proper course for the immediate future. Building up an army seemed to me the only sensible course to follow. The army grew slowly, and shields were produced, and I hammered out a system of tactical combat that I felt would serve its purpose on the day of battle.

We had the advantage of numbers. But, had I been a Canop Chuktar commanding my brigade of regiments, I would have chuckled and in the old uncouth and savage way have said: "All the more targets for my fellows."

As far as the numbers opposed to us were concerned, I was amused to notice how the oddly intricate mensuration of Kregen hampered estimates. Kregen measures in units of six and also in units of ten. In the ancient and misty past we here on this Earth used to measure in units of six; but the decimal system ousted that, and a last rearguard action was fought when shillings vanished and twelve pennies were no longer a unit. There were eighty men in a Canoptic pastang. Six pastangs formed a regiment. With ancillaries like the standard-bearers and the trumpeters and grooms and orderlies and cooks and others of the un-glamorous duty-men necessary in every army, there would be, I judged, something like five hundred and fifty men in a regiment. The commandant in Yaman held no less than twelve regiments, of crossbowmen and of footmen. With extras here, also — say between seven and eight thousand men. He had an air wing also, of which I knew nothing; tough aerial cavalry mounted on mirvols and not on fluttrells as I had previously thought. There was a

ground cavalry force, riding totrixes and zorcas, and I had been told that here in Havilfar the half-vove also was used.

In addition there would be the Canop Air Service, flying vollers, those airboats which were at the time manufactured solely in certain of the countries of Havilfar.

All in all we faced a formidable fighting machine.

They hadn't understood my reference to being glad to see contingents of mercenaries, and I had to explain that I meant that these would be mercenaries we hired, for then they would be happy to come to join the winning side for booty and glory.

I had for the moment discounted various Canoptic regiments stationed outside the capital city, for I meant to make the decisive struggle in and around Yaman itself. By the time those regiments scattered throughout Migla arrived they would march into a debacle and could easily be dispersed and captured.

The air of impatience among the Miglas grew with every new bunch of arrivals. They were excellent spear-throwers. I told them what I wanted, what, indeed, I could see as their only chance.

"Shield-bearers will protect your flanks and your front and the stux-men must hurl as they have never hurled before. By sheer weight of flying stuxes you must beat down the Canop shields and slay their bowmen. Then, once you can charge into close quarters, you must use your veknises to strike savagely upward and in, past the edges of the devils' armor. That is your only chance."

I stared at the group of Miglas I had chosen as officers, not finding it at all strange that they and Mog had allowed me to take overall command. "I shall show you how to create a new kind of stux that will strip a man of his shield. It will be hard and bloody work. But with a continuous supply of stuxes" — and, Zair forgive me, I did not add, 'and a continuous supply of men' — "you should beat down their strength and their will and so slay them as you slay a wounded vosk."

That, too, was not a clever image, for a wounded vosk is atrociously dangerous, the time when vosks lose their usual placid stolidity and become fighting mad. But, then, the image was correct, after all, for the iron men of Canopdrin were far more dangerous than any vosk, wounded and raging.

And as well I must not lose sight of the fact that Med and his fellows hunted wild vosk out here in the back hills. The domesticated vosk is the stupid sluggish animal of story and legend, and I recalled how we had used them and their appetites in the Black Marble Quarries of Zenicce. The wild vosk, as I discovered, was another kettle of fish altogether. They were wild. Their horns would impale a man and his totrix together given half a chance. The Miglas prized them, though their meat was stringier and tougher than that of the domesticated vosk, because their skins were infinitely more supple and strong, and the export of voskskin had been of great economic value to Migla. The Canops were altering that, as I knew; but for us, here and now training up an army in the back hills, the wild vosks had

served to create men — Migla men — with unerring eye and aim, and muscles that could drive a stux with deadly accuracy.

More and more Miglas joined the growing army and shortly a vociferous claque began to demand we march instantly to Yaman and smash the Canops in fair fight.

However much I tried to explain the truth, the hot-heads would not listen. They were the victims of an old illusion. Once a man joins his regiment and puts in a little training his whole life changes, he knows he is fitter and tougher than he has ever been, and possessed of fighting skills he had not dreamed existed. He sees his comrades all in line and charges valiantly with them against straw-filled dummies. He believes he is then a soldier. He imagines he is ready to fight.

They would not listen.

Mog and Mag, ugly old twins, whipped up the passion for immediate action. The crimson of Migshaanu appeared everywhere.

I did what I could to depress this premature enthusiasm; but everyone, including Turko, looked at me askance, and could not wait to march.

As promised the new spears were made under my instructions and issued. All I had done was to tell the smiths to convert a stux into a pilum. This was simply done, and in the crudest of fashions, by inserting a rivet halfway along the shaft which, when the spear bit into a shield, would bend and snap and so allow the pilum to droop. The trailing shaft on the ground would impede the soldier and drag down his shield. He would not be

able to drag it free for the barbs, and he would be unable to cut it away with his thraxter for the metal splines running down the forward portion of the shaft. When the pila flew shields would be cast away — or so I hoped.

The men were divided up into regiments, and shield-men, stux-men and pilum-men formed into units for the tactical plan.

We had a small totrix-mounted cavalry force, mostly of young Miglas who had been shaken from the placid lethargy of their elders by their resentment of the Canoptic invasion. The totrix, a near relative of the sectrix and the nactrix, is a somewhat heavier beast than either of those and will carry an armored man more easily. They had nothing of the fleetness and nimbleness of zorcas, and nothing of the smashing power of voves, but we had ourselves a cavalry screening force.

Of course, it was not easy. I had to be everywhere and superintend everything, and I own I was tired in a way strange to me, enervated and depressed and struggling vainly to whip my enthusiasm up to the giddy heights of all those around me.

We possessed no aerial cavalry whatsoever.

Hamp was a transformed man.

“They are vosks, Dray Prescott! You said so yourself!”

“Yes — but, Hamp, we are not ready—”

“Look!” Hamp waved his hand at the men who now ran forward steadily in long even ranks, hurling their pila, the air filled with the flying shafts. The stux-men

threw, hard and accurately. Then the whole mass drew their veknises and charged, whooping and skirling and roaring. They made a brave sight.

“Not ready,” I repeated. My face was ugly.

“You cannot be afraid, Dray Prescott,” cackled old Mog. “I saw you at work, in the jungles of that Migshaanu-forsaken Faol. You perhaps fear for the lives of my young men?”

“I do.”

“We are happy to give our lives for Migshaanu the All-Glorious!” yelled Med Neemusbane, waving his knife.

“Aye, you are happy. But I am not. Suicide is no way to find Zair and to sit at his right hand in the glory of Zim.”

“Heathen gods, Dray, heathen gods!”

I had to bite down my angry retort. I was, as you would say in this day and age, losing my cool.

Despite what many men — aye, and many women! — have said, I, Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy and Lord of Strombor, am a human being. I am only human. I was tired in a way that irked me. If I let the decision slip away, if I did not fight them more forcefully, I own the fault is mine. Worry and concern pressed in on me, and I gave way. Their enthusiasm and confidence were treacherous pressures. I should not have allowed it. But, to my shame, I did.

“Very well! Give me two more sennights. Just two. Then, by Vox! Then we will march on these men of Canopdrin!”

I was a fool.

The Miglas would not wait twelve more days.

Hamp was the ringleader; chosen by me as a commander, he took full control, actively encouraged by the twins Mog and Mag. Med Neemusbane was his enthusiastic lieutenant. The Migla army, a creation wholly new to them, and a thing not seen in Migla for many and many a season, marched out.

They marched singing.

They carried their shields over their backs. Their stuxcals were filled. Their pila were ready. Their veknises were sharp. They sang as they marched and the long winding columns of crimson, with the great staff of Migshaanu borne at their head, rolled down from the back hills and took the road to Yaman.

Turko and I sat our totrixes on a little eminence and watched them go.

“Fools!” I whispered.

“They are brave, Dray. They will fight well, for you have taught them.”

“I have sent them to their deaths . . .”

“They chose to go.”

“Aye. And I cannot let them go without me.” I shook out the reins.

Turko lifted his great shield, specially built and strengthened, behind my back. The Suns of Scorpio streamed their mingled red and emerald light about us as we trotted down from the hills, our twin shadows moving with us. All this was happening because of the direct orders of the Star Lords. I did not much care for the Everoinye then. We trotted down from the hills and

so rode with the Migla army for the city of Yaman and  
for disaster.

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

Alan Burt Akers is a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer. Bulmer has published over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction.

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## Notes

- [1] This is intriguing. It seems to imply that Prescott did fight a leem barehanded before — or possibly after — he had become a Krozair of Zy on the Eye of the World. If so, it is just one more fascinating story lost to us in those tapes, as recounted in *The Suns of Scorpio. A.B.A.*