

DRAY PRESCOT: 10

**AVENGER
OF ANTARES**

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

AVENGER OF ANTARES

Dray Prescott #10

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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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. And Delia claimed him in the face of her father the dead 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. One of their favorite homes is in Valkanium, capital city of the island of Valka, of which Prescott is Strom.

Prescot is plunged headlong into fresh adventures on Kregen in the continent of Havilfar. Outwitting the Manhounds of Antares, ghastly parodies of humans used as hunting dogs, and fighting as a hyr-kaidur in the arena of the Jikhorkdun in Huringa in Hyrklana, he becomes King of Djanuin, idolized by his incredibly ferocious four-armed warrior Djangs. But, Hamal, the greatest power in Havilfar, is bent on conquest and Prescott must discover the well-guarded secrets of their airboats. Knowing half the information he is condemned to death by a jealous king. Over the sea he escapes and destroys two huge Hamalian skyships and saves a Vallian galleon. The galleon's crew pluck him from the water and they set sail home for Vallia . . .

Alan Burt Akers

CHAPTER ONE

The leem lovers demand Jikai

“Blow the winds! Roar the gales!” I had shouted, exulting in my newly won freedom. “Bear me on to Valka and my high fortress of Esser Rarioch! Blow, winds, carry me home to my Delia, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia of Delphond!”

The lie to my boastful shouts was given by that ominous scrap of sail, striped black and amber, intermittently lifting over the horizon rim to the eastward. As our galleon bore on northward so that sail dogged us. I fancied I knew what beings manned her, what devils they were, and I went down to the armory and sharpened up a sword and saw most carefully to the harness of armor Captain Lars Ehren had laid out for me.

“By Vox, Prince!” said Captain Lars, his square spade beard thrusting from his blunt chin like the ram of a swifter. “We will send them scurrying back to their filthy dens with their tails between their legs!”

“Aye, Captain Lars.” I looked at him, there in the armory of his galleon *Ovvend Barynth*, the iron harness cold in my hands. “Have you fought the leem lovers before?”

“No, Majister.”

Concerned lest my tone lead him to suspect all the disquiet with which I faced the prospect of an action with these reiving ships from the Southern Ocean, I hastened to add: “I have. We exposed enough of their tripes to find out they are diffs like any other human being.”

He laughed hugely. The galleon surged through the swell, her timbers creaking, the rush of water echoing along her stout lenken sides, the snap of blocks and the rattling of rigging distant but ever-present sounds. It is not easy to disconcert a galleon captain of Vallia, that proud island empire of Kregen.

“I have heard of them, Majister. Can you speak of your fight?”

I thought of Viridia the Render, and of how that pirate lady and I, as a member of her render crew, had fought off one of those reiving ships from the Southern Ocean. Here, south of the equator off the eastern coast of the continent of Havilfar, the sea was known as the Ocean of Clouds. Viridia and her crew had escaped from the leem lovers’ ship only under the cover of a sudden gale. We had got away, but it had been a near thing.

“They fight dirty, Captain. I always look for the good in a man, and tolerate anyone until he proves himself

evil or traitorous; I fancy I would have to look rather too long to find any decent humanity in these leem lovers.”

“I have heard stories, Majister. Unpleasant stories.” Captain Ehren buckled up his armor with the help of young Gil, one of the armorer’s apprentices. He grunted with the effort of drawing in his stomach beneath the cuirass. “These shants carry their aura of evil about with ’em.”

There are many names for these marauding ships and people from around the curve of the world; “shant” was merely one. We stood up, and stretched and wriggled until we were comfortable, then we clambered up the ladders and so came out onto the quarterdeck. The mingled streaming lights of the Suns of Scorpio blazed down, that glorious twinned fusion of opaz radiance, the emerald and the ruby, pouring in molten floods upon the sea and the ship. By Zair! It was good to be alive on such a day! I did not forget that I carried in my head half the secrets of the airboats that were going to prove of such great value to Vallia, my home on Kregen, in the inevitable war with the hostile empire of Hamal. That information must reach Vallia. I drew dark mental pictures of the holocausts of horror that would follow if Hamal attacked Vallia, suddenly, treacherously, fleets of skyships raining from the skies in steel and fire and destruction.

The first lieutenant, a Hikdar, saluted.

“She stays above the horizon longer, sir,” he said to Captain Ehren.

To cheer them, I said: “It is certain she recognizes us as Vallian. That, my friends, gives pause to her cramp of a captain. It makes him think twice, does that, before he attacks a galleon of Vallia!”

There was a little rumbling of oaths from the officers on the quarterdeck, not a few puzzled and half-recriminating glances in my direction. But I had given Captain Ehren strict orders. We were not to put our helm over and go roaring down to tangle with the shant. I had forbidden these proud men of Vallia, seadogs all, to do what they would naturally have done. This, alone, made them uneasy.

There was certain vital information about the fliers I had to take back to Vallia. Yes, I could see that. But, also, I could see that in the next bur or so I would be solely concerned with the immediate situation. Hopeful plans for the future were not going to be of the slightest use when that Opaz-forsaken leem lover at last decided to attack. Everything, then, for us all would be concentrated into the immediate present.

Captain Lars Ehren knew his business. This galleon had been on her way to the island realm of Hyrklana, farther south, to attempt to buy airboats there when the supply had stopped from Hamal. The Hamalians had reacted by sending two of their tremendous skyships to sink the two Vallian galleons. They had sunk one: *Nikvove of Evir* had burned. Though I’d been treacherously drugged and hauled aboard to be flung down as a flaming human torch upon the Vallians, I had managed to gain control of one of the skyships, *Hirrume Warrior*.

By using *Hirrume Warrior* I had contrived to ram the other Hamalese skyship, *Pride of Hanitcha* and wreck and sink them both.

When *Ovvend Barynth*, commanded by Lars Ehren, had picked me out of the sea I had managed to convince his passengers, the deputation to Hyrklana, that our true salvation lay back home in Vallia, where with the information I had we could ourselves manufacture the airboats.

Recalling that fight in the Hamalese skyship I supposed it to be just another battle through which I had gone, willy-nilly. I had fought hard, yes, like a battle-crazed maniac, you might think; but the reasons for my conduct were clear and self-evident. Now, again, I faced a challenge. I bear no man, be he apim like myself or diff like so many others on Kregen, any grudges. Alone, I reserve the right to defend myself and my loved ones, and if this makes me a sinner — as, indeed, it does, it does — then I remain condemned never to roam the Plains of Mist with my clansmen when the last days come.

“She’s hoisting more canvas!” yelled the lookout.

I shaded my eyes and stared across the tumbled blue water, glittering in the glorious light from the Suns of Scorpio.

That ominous sail had increased in size, grown taller, doubled into two, and now showed with perfect clarity the horizontal bands of black and amber. Each panel could be folded down or up, like a concertina, to make or hand sail.

The tall, finlike twin sails foreshortened, drew into one. I frowned. The shant was now heading directly at us, which meant that with our own onward progress it would cut our wake a good few cables' lengths aft. It was up to something, that was clear.

Captain Ehren couldn't understand why his galleon couldn't outrun the shant. He scratched his massive beard, cursing.

"The old *Ovynth*," he said, giving his command her nickname, "is the fastest craft out of Ovvend. Aye," he added with a flash of pride, "and there are mighty fewer faster galleons out of Vondium itself! That's why I was chosen for this journey, to bypass the black devils of Hamal. And this rast of a leem lover overhauls me as a sixteen-oar overhauls a six-oar!"

"Look at his canvas, Lars," I said, pointing. "Just a single tall sail, all in one piece, like the wing of a seed pod from a herm tree, or a fish's fin, or a bird's wing."

"Aye, I see. Heathen ways!"

Vallian galleons are rigged much as an Earthly galleon of the Elizabethan Age would have been rigged, with course and topsail on the foremast, course and topsail on the main, but, instead of lateens on the mizzen and bonaventura mizzen, the Vallians set a square course on their crossjack. To men used to this system, the idea of a tall, narrow battened lugsail would come as strange. But I knew of the powerful sailing qualities of this rig. When the shant came hull up, and I could take a closer look, I felt even more concern over the coming conflict.

“May he rot forever in the Ice Floes of Sicce!” raged Nalgre Sultant, Vad of Kavinstok. He was a hard-faced man, with those thin lips and arrogant eyes of your true noble, for a Vad is a high rank, and his rich clothing proclaimed a man who owned more than a sufficiency of this world’s wealth. He was the leader of the Vallian deputation to Hyrklana. Now he favored me with a haughty and hostile look. “Had we not turned back but continued on to Hyrklana, we would not be in this humiliating position, Prince.”

I did not bother to answer him. I had not failed to notice the small black and white favor pinned by an ornate gold and opaz brooch to his shoulder cloak. This man, this powerful Vad, was an avowed member of the Racter party, and it was the most powerful political party in Vallia. The racters, as I well knew, had no great love for the emperor, my father-in-law. I’d had my differences with the old devil in the past, too, and I would not lightly forget his intemperate bellow to his guards to “Take off his head, now!” But he’d changed and mellowed since then, and I would prefer him to the racters.

“Prince!” called Vad Nalgre. “You do not answer!”

The way I turned around, slowly, was done not to insult him, but so I might compose myself.

“You wear a rapier, Vad Nalgre,” I said in a quiet and gentle voice. “Put your armor on and take up a stouter sword or a boarding spear for the work to come.”

He spluttered. But my meaning was plain. He turned away from me and went below, and I caught the tail end of a comment about a hairy barbarian, a wild clansman, marrying the emperor's daughter and thinking he could lord it over loyal Vallians. Because we faced an action I let the comment pass. Later, as I then thought, I would take the matter up with this Nalgre Sultant, the Vad of Kavinstok.

The only member of the Vallian deputation to Hyrk-lana of whom I had any knowledge came up to me. This was Lorgad Endo, a shrewd merchant like all Lamnias, that race of diffs with pale-tinted fur and expressions of an honesty eternally mixed with surprise at the world. He wore neat Vallian clothes, those buff breeches and jacket over a white shirt, and the typical Vallian hat with the two square slots in the trim over the eyes. But, being a merchant and a Lamnia, he did not wear a jaunty feather in his hat. Neither, I noticed, did he wear a sword, although a short, stout cudgel of balass swung by a golden chain at his waist.

"What, then, Lorgad," I said, feeling suddenly much more cheerful. "Will you fight, then, merchant?"

"Yes, Prince. If I must. It never seems to turn an honest ob's profit for me, all this fighting; but fight I would, rather than a shtarkin should slit my throat"

"Well spoken, Koter Endo," said I, feeling it desirable that a little formality should be allowed here. "Then please go down to the armory and pick a likely weapon or two, and a harness, and right glad we are to have you with us."

He favored me with his shrewd little Lamnia smile, and, his laypom-colored fur aglow in the glory of the suns, he went below.

Captain Ehren had given his orders, and the ship had been cleared for action and the men had beaten to quarters. The varters were fully manned, and the gros-varters, those super-ballistae of peculiarly Vallian manufacture, snouted hungrily over our bulwarks. Parties of hands stood ready to deal with all the complexities of sail-trimming orders that would follow once the maneuvering began. Again I looked at the shant — the Lamnia had called these malignant diffs “shtarkins,” just one more of their multifarious names, for no one knew the name they gave themselves — and again I frowned. The tall, narrow black and amber sails had opened out again, so that the vessel once more paralleled our course, but at a distance much closer than before. We had traveled a good distance to the northward since *Ovvend Barynth* had picked me up, and were approaching the northeastern corner of the continent of Havilfar, where the Risshamal Keys stretch their spiky fingers out to the northeast. One of those fingers of islands and cays and desolate outcrops terminates in the island of Piraju. That made me ponder. The leem lover, it seemed to me, was trying to stay to windward of us and pen us in to leeward of the Keys. We would have to tack soon and make a good offing to escape the deadly reefs as well as the sure observation of our enemies of Hamal. The next time we made a board we would be struggling up to the shant,

and if we did not do so we would go piling up helter-skelter on the rocks.

As the one-time first lieutenant of a seventy-four I did not much care to be to leeward of my opponent, not, that is, until after we had shattered through his line and could rake him as we broke through and then come to leeward of him and so prevent his escape. Well, there were no stately lines of battleships here. There was a swift and deadly ship from those unknown lands around the curve of the world, and there was a not-quite-so-swift Vallian galleon. It would remain to be seen which of the two was the more deadly.

With that in mind I called for ink and paper. A desk of sturm-wood was set up on the wide quarterdeck, for I had no wish to go below at this juncture, and I set about putting down everything I knew concerning the secrets of the fliers, and the constituents and proportions of the minerals that went into the silver boxes called vaol. I looked up at Captain Ehren.

“Captain, tell me. Have you heard of anything called cayferm?”

“Cayferm, Prince?” He considered. Then he shook that heavy head so his plumes rustled. “No, Majister. The word means nothing.”

“To you and to me, by Vox! But not, I trust, to the wise men of Vallia.”

Cayferm was supposed to be a kind of steam, and cayferm was the mysterious thing — air, immaterial substance, gas, odor — that went into the silver boxes called paol. With a pair of silver boxes, the vaol and the

paol, secured in their spherical sliding orbits of wood and bronze, one had complete control over gravity and motion, and could fly an airboat until the chunkrah tired, as my clansmen would say.

Putting all I knew down in cold words brought home to me the sparseness of the hard-won information I had gathered in my days of spying in Ruathytu, capital city of Hamal.

It seemed fitting to me not to use the swift, graceful cursive script of Kregen, and I eschewed the slightly more formal uncial-type lettering. Instead, I wrote in the *hyr* form, that solemn, dignified, utterly beautiful script of Kregen one finds in the old books. There are many kinds of books on Kregen, as on our Earth, but when reading a *lif*, that is, an important book, or a *hyr-lif*, a very important book, one expects and is not disappointed to find that high beauty of lettering.

The paper was carefully placed within a covering of oiled silk and then, sealed by Captain Ehren's seal, into a leather pouch. "If anything happens to me, Captain, that must reach the emperor. It is vital to Vallia."

"As to that, Prince, nothing will happen to you and you will carry this vital pouch to the emperor yourself!"

Well, it sounded fine. I clapped Ehren on the shoulder and went away to stare broodingly upon that cramp of a shant.

The leem lover's vessel cut through the water with little fuss, and I suspected her underwater lines were finer than the somewhat square-cut outlines of her hull and upperworks suggested. The hull had been painted a

deep, rich brown. I could see people moving about its decks, the snouts of varters and catapults, the twinkle and gleam of weapons. Quite content to parallel our course, it hung off there, dogging us. Neither of its battened lugs with their tall and slender outlines had been fully unfolded and hoisted to the trucks of its pole masts.

I rubbed my chin. Well, that sea-leem out there represented the many others of his kind who took an ever-increasing toll of shipping from the sea-lanes of the lands I knew, who descended in red horror upon peaceful fishing villages, and who, one day, must be met and challenged by us all. Still rubbing my chin, I pondered if I had carried caution too far in ordering Ehren to run and not to fight. We were in for a fight, for when we tacked the shant would be down on us without delay. I did not think he would conform to our movements and tack with us. He had his scheme working, and that scheme visualized *Ovvend Barynth* plundered, its people slain, and the ship itself sunk without trace. No, there was only one answer to this chin-rubbing.

“Captain! We will tack now, while we still have sea room. Stand to your arms! We go into the attack! We strike for Vallia, for honor and our lives! Hai Jikai!”

CHAPTER TWO

How Wersting Rogahan split the chunkrah's eye

The rush of bare feet upon the planking, the urgent shouts of the petty officers, the creak and rattle of blocks and the squeal as the braces hauled, the ponderous swinging of the yards and the firm heel of the vessel as she swung and then straightened up on her new course, all these old familiar sights and sounds and sensations brought a powerful pang of memory upon me. I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, had been for many years a salt-water sea officer, sailing down into the smoke and flame of battle. Then I had been a swifter captain upon the inner sea of Turismond, the Eye of the World. And then a render with Viridia up along the Hoboling Islands. Oh, yes, as the saying has it, the sea was in my blood. But the Star Lords, those mysterious beings who had summoned me here to this planet of Kregen in the constellation of the Scorpion four hundred light-years from the world of my birth, had

given me orders, or so it seemed to me, that I must not set foot upon a vessel, must not sail the seas again.

Well, by Vox! Here I was upon a Vallian galleon and that through no design of my own, save at the end when I had smashed the confounded Hamalese skyship down and had to swim to *Ovvend Barynth*.

Maybe the Star Lords had repented a little in their interdiction.

As we heeled to the breeze and, with our proud Vallian flags stiff and our canvas pouting, went hurtling down on the leem lover, I looked up at the sky and around in the empty air.

There was no sign of that gorgeous scarlet and golden hunting bird, messenger and spy for the Star Lords, planing in wide circles up there. Maybe I was more of a free agent now that I had begun to suspect.

“The shant sees us!” bellowed the first lieutenant. He had leaped into the shrouds and was halfway up the ratlines, pointing, his bronzed face rapturous with the impending battle. He was a waso-Hikdar and his name was Insur ti Fotor.^[1] He struck me as a fine officer, one who ran his ship tautly and relieved his captain of mundane concerns, as any good first lieutenant should. One day, Opaz willing, he would command his own vessel. “She’s massing men for’ard!” shouted Insur ti Fotor. “The shant means to make a fight of it!”

“Then let their own pagan gods look out for them,” growled Captain Lars Ehren.

“May Opaz curdle their livers and their lights!” came a yell from the waist. I looked down over the quarter-

deck rail. The men clustered in the protection of the palisades down there, barricades of scantlings and wicker-work. As they glared up I saw the gleam of teeth. These sailors of Vallia are a hardy, independent race of men. Habitually bare-chested, clad only in loose breeches cut to a generous size, and tight leather skullcaps, they carried boarding spears or thick cut-and-thrust blades. My heart warmed to them; they are capital men in a gale or an action. With men like these — and they were almost all apims — I felt my people of Vallia stood a chance against the insane ambitions of Hamal.

Shants, the first lieutenant had called these leem lovers. Well, I often called them “shanks,” out of a memory of the sharks of the inner sea, called chanks. The sharks of the outer oceans of Kregen bear a different name.

I looked over the bulwarks again and across the shining sea. It was true: the shank was forging ahead to meet us.

Captain Ehren boomed his gusty laugh. “By Vox! He may have the heels of us. But if I can’t run rings around him, I don’t deserve my certificate from the Todal-pHEME!”

There was no drum-deldar, there was no whip-deldar aboard a galleon out of Vallia. These race-built ships relied upon the free winds of heaven for propulsion. With my old sailorman’s instincts I had sniffed the wind and studied the horizon and, to my disappointment, could sense precious little sign of an impending

gale. I had great confidence in these sailors of Vallia. But they had not fought against the shanks from around the world; I had.

The shank foamed along in fine style, leaning over. He was within an ulm of us — an ulm, as you know, being something like five sixths of a Terrestrial mile — and Captain Ehren must give his orders soon. I knew what those orders should be, and Captain Ehren had confirmed them. The moment of decision was the crucial factor: too soon and we'd skim past out of range; too late and we could easily smash in board and board, and that was something I had absolutely no desire at all to happen.

The atmosphere of tension on *Ovvend Barynth* was held in check by the seamanlike qualities of the Vallian sailors. Most galleons carried parties of soldiers, and these, in the usual way of Kregen as well as of Vallia, were composed mostly of mercenaries. If I refer to the fighting-men in these ships as marines, you must forgive an old sailor accustomed to the scarlet coats and the boots and the bayonets of the marines, clumping about a seventy-four and always providing their loyal and invaluable services. The bulk, then, of the marines in *Ovvend Barynth* was made up of Chuliks.

Chuliks are expensive mercenaries, commanding much higher rates of pay than most other diffs. With their smooth yellow faces, shaved heads with the dangling pigtailed, fierce upthrusting tusks, black soulless eyes, they looked a formidable bunch. I was most happy to welcome this body of Chuliks to fight

alongside me. Chuliks, as you know, have often figured in more unpleasant roles in my life upon Kregen.

Insur ti Fotor, the first lieutenant, had quitted the shrouds and now stood ready at the quarterdeck rail to bawl his orders the instant Captain Ehren passed the word.

The feel of a ship under me, the breeze on my cheek, the onward swelling surge of the canvas, all uplifted me. Much as I detest war and fighting, I can understand the men who talk of a red curtain dropping before their eyes in the midst of combat. My rapier lay snug in its scabbard, the left-hand dagger at my right side. In my fist I gripped a sword taken from the selfsame rack as the swords held by those about me, the wolfish sailors of Vallia. This sword, straight, heavy, single-edged, was a cheaply produced weapon with a simple iron cross-guard and wooden hilt. The metal of the blade could not compare with the superb steel of the high-quality rapiers; but it was a serviceable weapon, not unlike an Earthly cutlass. The Vallians called it a clanxer — somewhat disparagingly, I thought.

There could be only a few murs left before Ehren gave his order. He stared through his telescope at the onrushing shank vessel.

“What do you make of them, Captain?”

He lowered the glass and turned to me. His face had set into harsh lines. I knew he had seen those evil forms upon the deck of that hostile ship.

“Devils!” he said. His voice boomed and cracked with the violence of his emotions. “Devils, Majister!

Spawned from the deepest crevices of Cottmer's Caverns. They fill me with a revulsion, by Vox, that makes my flesh crawl and leaves me unclean!"

"You are not alone in that feeling, Captain Lars."

Now the moment had arrived and despite the itchy, crawly sensation I knew he was experiencing all over his skin, bringing out the gooseflesh, Captain Ehren gave his order in a harsh, ringing tone. Instantly the first lieutenant bellowed it out, the hands tailed onto the braces, the timoneer thrust the helm over, and *Ovvend Barynth* heeled and thrust at the sea. It spun as the evolution was carried out with faultless precision, went through the eye of the wind like clockwork, and passed at a comfortable distance along the shank's starboard side.

We were still to leeward, but going away from the shank, and in that precise moment of time we had our opportunity.

"Loose!" bellowed Captain Ehren.

Every varter, every gros-varter, every catapult, every bowman loosed. A veritable cloud of arrows and darts and rocks flew up into the air, curving in their flight, descending onto the leem lover.

"Reload! reload!" the Deldars were bellowing, raging among their crews. Sinewy backs and muscled arms hauled the windlasses to draw back the catapult arms, to bend the varter bows. Already the archers had let fly with their second volley. It would be nice to think that every missile we dispatched found a target, but some of the rocks and darts plunged into the sea in a ring of

foam. I stared narrowly at that squat brown-painted ship with its ungainly above-water lines, the railings along its side, the stepped castles at bow and stern, and those two tall black-and-amber-striped sails raking above.

We were hitting her! I saw a whole lower panel of amber rip away from her foremast. Chips flew from her bulwarks where a catapult-flung rock bounced, and rebounded on to smash bloodily onto the deck. The men set up a cheer.

Then the answering broadside came in. Noise clamored about our ears. A man at the nearest varter spun back, streaming blood from a shattered jaw, stumbling to pitch over. Halyards parted and the ship-deldar — that is, the bos'n — roared his crew into knotting, for there was no time now for splicing.

With that and a thunking great hole through the waist palisades, where a rock bounced and miraculously touched no one, we escaped further damage from that broadside.

We were past.

We took the breeze and we went foaming into the northeast with the wind over our starboard beam. If everything held we were on a board that would take us well clear of the Risshamal Keys before we needed to go about again and so run into the northwest for the passage past the island of Astar and so on toward Vallia. The passage would be a long one.

Someone yelled then and I looked back, and there was that Opaz-forsaken cramp of a shank speeding after us.

“He does not mean to let us get away so lightly,” observed Captain Ehren.

“Lightly?” said the Lamnian merchant, Lorgad Endo, staring with a sickly cast to his face at the screaming sailor on the deck below. The man’s comrades were tending to him, and one wrapped a kerchief about his shattered jaw, so that his awful shrieks were muffled. “Lightly?”

“What the captain means, Endo,” said the Vad of Kavinstok in his cutting way, “would be outside the understanding of a merchant.”

This was blatant rudeness. The Vad had deliberately omitted the courtesy title of Koter, and as a Koter is a gentleman, and Lorgad Endo was a gentleman, for all he was a merchant and a Lamnia, then he should be addressed as Koter Endo. The others of the deputation to Hyrklana had gathered, all armored, all with weapons, and no doubt they looked a fine warlike party. I had no faith in them to stand to it when the tinker-hammering began.

The Lamnia merely turned away, and crossing the quarterdeck he engaged in conversation with Hikdar Insur.

One of the deputation, an apim, Strom Diluvon, broke into an animated running commentary on the damage sustained by the enemy vessel, and the others

paid him rapt attention, so the awkward moment passed.

“He’ll be up with us again, and soon, Prince,” said Captain Ehren. He thumped the telescope into the palm of his left hand.

“You have a good man on the poop varters?”

“Aye. A rascal called Rogahan. The men call him Wersting Rogahan. But he’s so good a shot I had to make him up to dwa-Deldar, and overlook his rank indiscipline.”

“Aye, Captain. So many good men have this streak of resentment of authority.”

And then I, Dray Prescott, realized what I had said.

By Zim-Zair! Had I become so stuffy and orthodox in my old age? Had all these ranks and titles, these princes and Kovs and Stroms that loaded me down, had they corrupted me, made of me a mere establishment figure of clay, turned me from the man who kicked instantly against all authority?

Captain Ehren looked at me oddly, and away, and so I knew my ugly old figurehead of a face must have been glaring with all the malice that, to my sorrow, I know it is capable of.

I took myself off up the ladder and onto the poop.

Right aft where the taffrail had been extended out with platforms into two wings, one over each quarter, were sited the varters. A little forward of them and on the centerline, well abaft the mizzen, stood the aft catapult.

The men clustered around the machines stiffened when I appeared. Well, Zair knew, I was used to that. Wherever I went, it seemed I found myself either at the bottom of the stack — slave, prisoner, condemned — or at the top — Lord of Strombor, Strom of Valka, King of Djanduin, Prince Majister of Vallia, Zorcander of my clansmen of the Great Plains. During that recent period of my espionage in Hamal I had been a nonentity, someone more in the middle of society, as Hamun ham Farthytu, Amak of Paline Valley. But to these men I was Prince Majister of Vallia. I could order them flogged jikaidar, put in irons, deprived of rations; I could make life miserable for them at the slightest pretext.

Captain Lars Ehren, I had made it my business to find out, ranked as a good and concerned captain. I would do nothing to undermine his authority, or to tread upon his firm foundations and weaken them.

One of the men with the rank marks of a dwa-Deldar looked up from where he was greasing the varter chute. He had a thin, exceedingly black streak of chin beard running under his jaws. In his close-fitting leather cap a bright red feather sported. His lean body was bare, and his buff-colored breeches had been cut off above the knees. He was barefoot. I looked at his face, at the lean jaw, the broken nose, the bright and knowing brown eyes. I saw that if I treated him with scrupulous fairness, this was a man with whom I could do business.

“Deldar Rogahan!”

“Aye, Majister.”

“I hear you can split the chunkrah’s eye at a distance where most men can see only their rumps.”

There rose a little titter from the varter crews at this, and I felt encouraged.

“That rast following us there—” I pointed over the stern. The shank foamed along, catching us up, his canvas hoisted fully and, already, the panel we had knocked out replaced. “That cramph of cramphs needs something of your skill, Wersting Rogahan.”

At this his mates chortled out loud. In their experience, officers of the quarterdeck seldom bothered to use the men’s own nicknames. And a wersting, as you and I both know, is a most ferocious black-and-white-striped hunting dog. They were a free and easy bunch, these galleon sailors of Vallia, men I would be proud to number in a crew of my own and to name as friends.

“The moment he comes within range of Vela, here, Majister,” said Rogahan, “I shall spit him.”

By this I knew that the varter nicknamed Vela had a better throw than the other. Men always give pet names to their weapons, as well on this Earth as on Kregen.

“If you loose with Vela,” I said, and I looked across at the other varter, that on the starboard side, “then I shall loose with Sosie here and try to match you shot for shot.”

He laughed, for discipline relaxes on occasions such as these. “By Corg, Majister! You may try. But Sosie has a stretched cord and throws poorly these days.”

I frowned. “I do not care to sail in a ship with varter with stretched cords.”

“No more do I, Majister! As Corg is my witness, the stretching happened when we exercised on the way south, just to the leeward of Astar.”

“Nevertheless, Wersting Rogahan, I shall try!”

“May Opaz guide your shot, Prince.”

He couldn’t say fairer than that.

I eyed him.

“I do not think you have the need of Opaz’s guidance, Rogahan. But for Opaz’s wisdom, perhaps. Shoot straight, for the glory of Vallia!”

If this was fustian stuff, I plead guilty; but then, I have used the rhetorical fustian to good purpose before in my life, and no doubt, Zair willing, will do so again.

As you who have listened to these adventures will know by now, I always feel very much at home with these rough men of the sea, hard-cases, shell-backs, and share much of that feeling of comradeship with their brothers of the land and air services. As for that chattering congregation of faerlings down on the quarterdeck, that deputation for Hyrklana, they were a drag and a bore by comparison with these fighting-men of the galleons.

One of the seamen with a red and blue tattoo of startling indecency across his chest squinted aft and turned to Deldar Rogahan.

“He’s here, Rog. What are you waiting for?”

“I’m the captain of the poop varters, Nath, you great onker! I’ll say when, do you hear?”

“Aye, Rog, I hear. But, by Corg, you’re leaving it powerful late!”

Rogahan glanced at me. I kept my face immobile. Truth to tell, it had come as a great relief to allow all my own natural facial expressions free rein once more. If they are evil and arrogant and overweening, then I blame no one but myself; certainly they came more sweetly to me than that blank look of idiocy I assumed in Hamal.

Rogahan peered aft along his chute. The Vallians have developed a serviceable sight for their gros-varterers; Rogahan, I judged, would shoot by eye and experience and feel alone, as would I.

He put his hand on the release lever, a mammoth lenken trigger. I watched him. From what he said, my Sosie would under-range his Vela. He loosed. We all watched the rock, for the gros-varter looses either rocks or darts depending on the exigencies of the occasion.

Then everyone let out a howl of glee.

The rock had struck fair into the forepart of the pursuing ship. For the moment we could only observe it had struck, we could not see what damage had been caused. The crew were hard at the windlass rebending the varter. I cocked an eye at Deldar Rogahan. He read my unspoken question instantly.

“Aye, Majister. Just.”

I felt the rising and dipping of the stern, judging the moment to loose, traversing the varter a fraction to bring it dead on line. Then I touched the trigger and the bow clanged and the rock flew. Well, maybe I was lucky. I do not know. In any event my rock flew true. It would hit the shank, I knew that surely enough, for I possess

this knack of hitting what I shoot at. But in its manner of striking lay the luck. The rock flew higher than Rogahan's and for a split instant I thought I had missed. Then the rock struck full against the shank's foremast, a quarter of the way down, struck and smashed a splintering of brown chips away, perfectly visible.

The men let out another cheer.

"A fine shot, Prince!" yelled Rogahan.

We all watched in great expectancy as the crews went at winding the vartars. The foremast of the shank was in trouble; two of the panels, one black and the other amber, began to shred away. I saw the top section of the pole mast trembling. If that mast had been made in the usual way, out of foremast, foretop mast, and foretopgallant mast, the thing would have been down already.

In the instant the leem lovers began to fold up their sail from the top to ease the strain, the yell arose on our deck.

"Incoming!"

We could all see the three rocks soaring up, black against the sunlight, tumbling over and over in their trajectories and, in that same instant, I saw they would strike without doubt.

Wersting Rogahan saw that, too. He was a fine varterist.

"By Vox!" he yelled. Then, enraged, "Wind, you onkers! Wind!"

The crew finished winding and we all bent to the task of loading the next rock. With a roar and a smash

and a heave the deck shook beneath us and the air was filled with the whirring splinters of ripping death. Two men went down, screaming, six-foot-long splinters impaling them. Other men slipped on the spilled blood. I saw a sailor looking stupidly at his wrist. Where his hand was no one would ever know. In the midst of this the catapult forward of us let fly with an almighty clang. There might not be the choking smoke or the smashing concussions of the iron guns, but in other respects this was very much like the fighting I had endured as a young man in the sea actions of my own world.

Three more times Rogahan and I let fly. We thought we hit five times out of the six shots, and neither would give the other the credit for the odd one.

Again *Ovvend Barynth* was hit.

And, through it all, despite the loss of pressure from the reduced sail area on its foremast, the shank crept closer.

Captain Ehren stormed onto the poop, rapier in hand.

“Prince!” he cried. “We must turn and rend him! Give us the order, I pray you! Majister! We must board!”

If that happened I, for one, would not like to bet on the outcome. I hold in great esteem the fighting sailors of Vallia. They roam the seas in confidence born of achievement. But I knew of the ghastly savagery, the barbarous power, of these leem lovers from the southern oceans of mystery.

“Prince Dray!” bellowed Ehren.

Everyone clustered there was looking at me. I saw their eyes, the stubble on their cheeks, the sweat drops caught there. I nodded. I could not speak.

“Hai Jikai!” shouted Captain Lars Ehren. He went roaring back to his quarterdeck and I said to Deldar Rogahan: “My duty lies on the quarterdeck, too, Wersting. Fight well. If we both live, I shall seek you out.”

He picked up his leather jack and took his clanxer from that Nath whom he had dubbed an onker.

“Corg has me in his keeping, Prince,” he said. He spoke dourly, shrugging the jack tight and lacing the thongs, the sword thrust down his belt. “I shall live. I pray Opaz has you in his keeping.”

I nodded, satisfied, and clattered down the ladder to the quarterdeck. Everyone stood their posts with strict attention to discipline. Swords glimmered in the light of the suns. Men breathed with their mouths wide open. The Chuliks stood in their ranks, immobile, impassive, imponderable to an apim mind.

Onward we rushed. The sea broke away from our bows, and spume flew outward. Our banners spread above us, the brave scarlet flag with the saltire of yellow, the colors of Vallia, and the crimson and pale blue of Ovvend. My own flag, Old Superb, was not flying there. The galleon did not carry my flag in her lockers, and I most certainly did not have one about my person. I was wearing my old scarlet breechclout, under the armor . . .

Closer and closer we rushed. Now the varters were clanging at point-blank range and the arrows were

crisscrossing the narrowing space of water between us. It had to be done in a swift clean rush. I disregarded the sleeting storm of arrows, climbed up a few of the ratlines of the fore shrouds. Now the deck of the shank lay exposed to my view, and I saw the milling numbers of men there — men! Half-men, beast-men, for now I saw them clear!

The ships touched, the tumble-home of our galleon making it essential for Ehren to bring his vessel in on bow or quarter. We had maneuvered well, and I was looking down on the massive aftercastle of the shank.

A rock hissed past me and severed two of the shrouds.

Arrows splattered past.

This was a situation where a shield would be of priceless use, but the men of Vallia, as the warriors of Segesthes and Turismond, do not habitually use the shield. That I was the first to leap onto the deck of the enemy, then, must be put down to the simple fact that, having no shield and making a cock-shy in the shrouds, I was anxious to get down and out of the staked position in the chunkrah's eye.

Instantly, we were leaping aboard. The shanks, surprised, met us with a wall of steel.

In only a few murs they had rallied, and with wild and screeching shouts that chilled our men's blood, they were raging against us, hurling us back over our own bulwarks, tumbling us back onto our own decks, and then they were pouring over after us in a screeching tide of hell-spawned destruction!

CHAPTER THREE

Concerning fish heads

There are some experiences in one's life one may look back on with some reasonably successful attempts at equanimity. All the times you acted like a fool. The times you did things which afterward you wished you had not done, or had done differently.

And there are some occasions you do not wish to recall at all.

Deliberately, I have left out many and many a fight I went through on Kregen, in these accounts, for Kregen is not a world like this Earth. It is hard and cruel, as well as brilliant and beautiful. There men are more often less tolerant of weakness. Some fights I shall never record.

Of that fight in *Ovvend Barynth* as we struggled against these monstrous leem lovers from around the curve of the world I will say but little. Oh, it is not because I lose a fight that I do not relish the telling of it. We lost that first fight between the Miglas and the Canops, there on the field of Mackee. But I have spoken of it. And I have not spoken of battles in which I was

victorious: battles of my wonderful clansmen of Felschraung, battles of my marvelous people of Valka, even battles on the Eye of the World, where our red forces were pitted against the green, where Zairians fought Grodnims. But we did not lose that fight against the shanks.

The struggle was long and fierce and most severe.

Bodies struggled and writhed across the decks. Arrows flew. Swords lifted and fell and the blood splattered friend and foe alike. We clumped together and charged, and forced them back, and they reformed and returned. Our Chuliks fought like demons.

The shanks fought like demons, also.

This particular race of diffs from the lands around the curve of the world were shanks, and not, in the event, the shtarkins that the Lamnia, Lorgad Endo, had feared. The main difference between them is one of physiognomy.

You have heard already of the Rapas, those vulture-headed people, and the Fristles, the cat-headed people, and many and many more of the marvelous diffs who inhabit Kregen.

These shanks possessed lithe and muscular bodies fashioned very much after the way an apim's body is shaped, an apim, like you or me. But instead of skins they possessed scales. They grew a short, gristly fishlike tail. From their shoulders and hung on shoulder blades of a somewhat similar configuration to the sliding concentric shoulder blades of my own famous Djangs, each shank has four arms. Unlike the Djangs, the

shanks' arms are not homogenous. The upper pair are weaker than the lower pair.

And, as one would expect, crowning each fishy body of the shanks grows a fish head.

The effect of these serried rows of fish heads, all with staring round eyes, scaly mouths, tendrils, and slits for nostrils, came at one with a gruesome and grotesque force.

I do not like fish.

If it is essential, then I will eat fish; but I do not pretend to enjoy a mouthful.

The sight of these fishy excrescences, screeching and hissing, charging on with their weapons lifted, with their steel and bronze glittering, infuriated me. The sprouting green corals in their helmets, the jewels fashioned into the likeness of seaweed and swathed in decoration about them, all this piscine splendor and arrogance, this grotesque transference of the things of one realm to another, repelled me. Yet these shanks were acting only according to their own lights, their own way. They did what nature impelled them to do, as did I. (Although, since my arrival on Kregen and up to this point in my story, I had made valiant attempts to curb my nature, to see things in other ways and with other peoples' eyes. I had had some success, as you know, and some failures.)

As the shanks violently rushed upon us, seeking to slay us and take our possessions for themselves, I had no right to any other course of action save that of opposing them.

The blades clashed and rang. Arrows hissed spitefully. The shanks used short, heavily curved compound bows, and they drove barbed arrows in with fiendish cruelty. The Vallians were using bows very similar to the Valkan bows, for that style had proved itself in the eyes of the Vallians who could not pull a longbow and so they had adopted it. As the shafts flew I found myself cursing and raging that there was no contingent of bowmen from Loh with me, and to lead them no one else but Seg Segutorio. And, too, if Inch had been there with his monstrous ax. And Turko, also, with a massive shield to lift up at my back. But they were far away, and I was here, caught up in a scene of carnage and savagery.

Our red blood ran to mingle with the greenish blood of the shanks.

They wore armor, of course, and it was fashioned from bronze scales, as would seem inevitable, given their fishy origins. We fought across the decks of the galleon in the heaving sea and gradually the twin suns of Kregen, Zim and Genodras, the red and the green, sank to the horizon.

You may feel I have overemphasized the repulsiveness of these shanks. This could be so. But from them rose a foul aroma, the decaying stench of rotten fish. We gagged as we fought. But, then, I suppose it would be true to guess we stank in their slit nostrils.

We fought. The suns declined. Backward and forward swayed the fight, first upon our deck, then upon

theirs, and then back again as men shrieked and died and others ran to take their places.

“Vallia! Vallia!” shouted our men.

“Ishtish! Ishtish!” screeched the shanks.

I must now relate what was to me a strange phenomenon. In the lands of Kregen whereon I had wandered this far in my life, the grouping of continents and islands so familiar to me, a grouping that in after years came to be called Paz, I had always found that among all the myriads of local dialects there ran the strong sure thread of the Kregish language. That tongue had seemed universal. But now, to my astonishment, I discovered that my people of Vallia could not understand the language of the shanks.

A few moments' reflection convinced me that this was a more natural state of affairs than that around the curve of the world, on that other grouping of islands and continents, they should speak the tongue we called Kregish. This reflection was accompanied by much physical exercise in slitting throats, and gouging fishy eyeballs, and inspecting what fishy tripes might be like.

During this stage of the combat I began to have hopes that we would win.

The coded genetic language pill given to me by Maspero so long ago in Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, ensured that with a little application I could perfectly understand the language of these fishy people. In the heat of conflict I discarded that information and bashed on.

“Vallia! Vallia! Opaz is with us!” The shouts grew triumphant now as we smashed the shanks back, over their own brown-painted bulwarks, down onto their decks. Bodies lay everywhere, and there was no time to feel pity at the redness of the blood mixed with the green. Time only for a fleeting and wry acknowledgment of the antipathetic colors, the red and the green, forever locked in mortal combat in the sky, and now once again matched in the very blood of mortal foes!

Many a good man was down.

Hikdar Insur came cleaving his way through a crowd of shanks, and as his brand scorched and flayed them I noticed their resistance faltering. We were beating them!

“The Risshamal Keys close to larboard, Prince!” panted out Insur.

That was grim news. The breeze would push both our craft, entangled as they were, down on those reefs and rocks. If we were lucky we might strike a long sandy beach, a low-lying cay. Either way, with night coming on and the breeze at last freshening, we’d be shivered to pieces.

I saw Captain Ehren busily engaged. The Chuliks fought still with their ferocious disciplined violence. We were gradually overcoming the fish-men, but the task was nowhere near completed, and would grow sterner as we grew tired. I leaped for the shank’s quarterdeck followed by a ragged scrum of sailors. We used our clankers and our spears, clearing away the massed tridents opposing us. We forced our way up onto the

quarterdeck. The aftercastle, beyond, towered above us, and fish-men were shooting from it.

Our bowmen replied. *We should have shields*, I thought uselessly, and forged on. The command center of the vessel would be positioned here, and here was where the shank captain would be found.

He stood there, phalanxed by a bodyguard, resplendent in golden-scaled armor, a trident in his hand. His fishy face meant nothing to me. I could see differences in the faces of the shanks, the difference between a trout and a pike, say. To the shanks, I guessed, these were differences of great importance, nation by nation. This captain had the face of a barracuda.

He waved his trident with great authority. These fish-men were of a stature to compare with a normalized human being. They danced and wriggled and fought as I cleaved my way through them. The captain yelled his orders in a high hissing voice, and I understood them.

“Sinotas! Defend the stairway!” There followed a curse that meant nothing to me. “The hairy filth press close!”

Aye! I said to myself, slicing my clanxer neatly across a thrusting mackerel snout. *Aye, we hairy ones press you damned close, you stinking fishy cramph!*

So we pressed on, and for all the viciousness of their fighting, the shanks fell back, and faltered. If one may ever take a pride in fighting and war and battle, and that is a debatable question, I think the men of Vallia might take pride from that fight they put up from *Ovvend*

Barynth against the leem lovers' ship that I learned was called *Maskinonge*.

We might yet have won.

We might yet have done something that had never been done before, to my knowledge.

We might have taken the ship and carried her triumphantly as a prize of war into the great harbor of Vondium.

As was proper I had taken no part in the management of the galleon. The captain was the master of his vessel, and would command her. My part, as Prince Majister of Vallia, had been to take overall command. Now that I could sense victory within our grasp I began to think that I had not bungled the task. Regretting all the good men dead would not bring them back to life, and there had been no mortal way of escaping a fight with *Maskinonge*, for her superior sailing qualities had given her the dictation in maneuver.

I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye of Captain Ehren and Insur ti Fotor with a small group of hands they had collected making frantic attempts to free us from the entanglement of the shank. My part had led me to an attack upon the fish-men's ship, and now I stood upon her quarterdeck past the barricades, traps, and hooks, face to face with her barracuda-like captain. I would take this ship and then, freed from *Ovvend Barynth*, claw her off the shoals.

For, louder now over the clash of the melee, I could hear the sullen rumble of surf.

We were perilously close to the shore.

The vessels lurched beneath our feet as the currents took them. We fought on, steel against steel, hairy ones against scaly ones. At last I was within sword length of the fish captain, slashing at his bodyguard, feeling my men with me as we made the final charge.

Then my clanxer snapped clean across.

I hurled the hilt into the face of a yelling shank and saw him go down. I ripped out my rapier. This was not the most handy of weapons for this scramble of a fight, this close-quarters melee; but I was adept enough in the use of any weapon to make the most of it.

The trident hissed toward me and I parried it away with the forte of the rapier, much as one would use a small sword; then the slender blade, gleaming clean silver in the declining rays of the suns, skewered forward, neatly, precisely, punching past the rim of the golden-scaled corselet and transfixing that scaly shank neck.

Green ichor spouted as I withdrew, and the captain fell.

The shanks were now in complete rout.

“Vallia! Vallia!” my men were shouting. But only when they began another shout did I realize they were not my men. For they began the old cry: “Hai Jikai! Jikai! Prince Dray! Hai Jikai!”

A dark shadow fled across the deck.

The shadow was hard and black and sharp of edge. It was no cloud.

Well, we had been fighting our own fight and we had been drifting nearer and nearer the coast of Hamal. There were other people involved in this fight now.

The Hamalese flier turned, coming up against the wind after its first inspecting pass. I knew what it would do. The shank vessel was a shambles. The galleon was in little better case. The Vallians' attempts to free the wreckage had so far been fruitless and, locked together, the two vessels drifted down upon the low-lying land. The suns were nearly gone; floods of orange and crimson and emerald stained the water to the westward, and against that flood of radiance the stark black outlines of the land showed as jagged hungry teeth.

Somehow I found Deldar Rogahan in the confusion.

I gripped his arm. He was spattered with blood, a shining green figure in the darkling light.

"Put a varter shot into 'em, Rogahan!"

He was gone on the instant. A few shanks still wished to dispute the loss of their vessel, and with a handful of Chuliks and sailors I drove forward to finish the thing.

I heard a varter clang. I knew Rogahan loosed.

And then the cry we all dreaded burst up.

"Fire! Fire!"

That Opaz-forsaken yetch of a Hamalese airboat had flung down upon us an iron pot filled with blazing combustibles.

With fearful speed the flames roared upon the ships.

Smoke and flame rose into the dying light. The flames twined and lifted, roaring, gigantic tongues of

fire shooting into the sky. The airboat turned, insolently it seemed, and I saw its Hamalese colors flying; then it showed us its stern and flew away.

Helpless, on fire, we drifted down onto that bleak and barren shore.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shipwrecked

Darkness lay over land and sea.

The breakers roared and leaped. The entangled ships rode down, wrapped in flames, sheets of fire spreading upon the tumultuous surface of the waters. The waves rolled in to break in crimson bands of flame upon the rocks. Gradually She of the Veils rose into the star-speckled sky to cast down her golden-pinkish light. Everyone left alive clustered to windward of the flames. The flames blew and gyrated in ghastly streamers and fingers of fire down toward the breakers.

The wind would soon pile us up, if the flames did not eat their way back to our precarious perches along the taffrail and the poop varter platforms. I did not think any shanks had survived. Certainly we saw none. But the thought occurred to me that, being descended directly from fish, they might well be singularly at home in the sea. Even so, had any jumped overboard, they were a very long way from home. You may judge of my frame of mind if I say that I did not then give a great

deal of praise to these fish-men's courage in thus venturing so far across the seas; I was concerned only with the foul results of their voyages.

The wild holocaust of breaking waves and iron-fanged rocks lay waiting for us.

"Not long now!" bellowed Captain Ehren above the wind. We had all stripped off our armor. But we still carried our weapons. I was glad to see the Lamnian merchant had survived. The Vad of Kavinstok was also there, drenched with spray, a slash across one cheek; his eyes, bright with bitter anger, rested on me accusingly. I ignored him. Wersting Rogahan clung to his varter platform near me. Wind lashed the spray cut from the waves across us. Before our eyes the flames roared and crackled, and the mizzen suddenly exploded into a pillar of fire.

The conflagration was now so intense that a number of men slipped into the sea, to take their chances against the breakers. Few were seen again. The heat beat against our bodies. The spray steamed as it splattered the decks where the pitch ran like mercury.

"When we hit, we will slue!" bellowed Ehren. "Then will be the time to jump — when the stern is near the shore."

He was right, but it was small comfort.

The scene presented a mad, confused nightmare: the black rocks, the spouting waves glinting a fierce orange and ruby in the awful conflagration as the ships burned, the driving wind and stinging sheets of spray, the continuous wild screeching that penetrated our

eardrums and battered our bodies. The ships struck. Before they could swing, the waves pounded them and instantly they shivered to kindling. In a tumultuous torrent of helpless humanity we were swept from our perches. Smashed at by timbers and spars, by barrels and wreckage of all description, we went splashing headlong into the sea. The waves tumbled us head over heels. Many a man was struck and knocked unconscious and slipped beneath the contused surface of the sea. But some of us struck out boldly, struggling and fighting to stagger at last up onto a long shelving beach between rocks. The waters dragged at our shoulders, our waists, our legs, until we finally staggered free and collapsed, like drunken men, breathing in loud, harsh gasps, sprawled on the silver sand — but safe!

That night passed miserably as we huddled up the beach, exhausted, trying to sleep and regain our strength. Along toward midnight enough wood had been gathered and stripped to expose the dry layers within, and a fire was started. The men of Kregen do not need an electronic or gas-fueled lighter in order to make flame; if a bow and drill do not suffice, a compression tube will do the trick. We gathered about the fire, warming ourselves and drying our clothes, and I could not fail to remark upon the tameness of this fire compared with the one that had destroyed us. Man is adept at using forces so powerful he barely understands them.

With the first glow in the sky heralding the coming of the suns we stretched and yawned. Awake now, we stood up, ready to take stock of our situation.

The Risshamal Keys consist of a number of finger-like extensions of islands, cays, mere rocks, shoals, and reefs, all running out in a generally northeastward direction from the northeastern corner of the continent of Havilfar, which is also, of course, the northeastern corner of the empire of Hamal. At the farthest extent of one long island chain rises the island of Piraju. In all, we might have come to grief in worse spots. The length of the longest chain is something of the order of a hundred and seventy dwaburs.^[2] Many of the islands are quite deserted, others support a small fishing population. Hamal's laws extended to this remote spot, and I knew there would be garrisons scattered throughout the Keys, evidence of which we had received in so unwelcome a fashion when the airboat attacked us.

"We will have to find a fishing village," said Captain Ehren. "And barter, buy, or steal a boat."

The Vad of Kavinstok made a disgusted sound.

"We can barter our ibs, we have nothing with which to buy. You will have to steal a boat, Captain."

"Whatever method," said Lars Ehren, frigidly polite. "We will secure a vessel in which to sail for Vallia."

Wersting Rogahan was coming up the beach swinging a line on which dangled a number of fine fish. I made a face.

I said: "It is practically certain there will be war between Hamal and Vallia. The Hamalians are insane

with imperial ambition. Therefore we can claim privilege if we take a boat. The laws of Hamal are precise on the subject.”

The Vallians were thoroughly sick of the subject of Hamalese laws. Everything in Hamal is ordered, numbered, ticketed. At this time in their development as an empire the Hamalians still held to many of the old, rigid laws that had given them strength in the past. The signs of a new age were everywhere apparent, not least in the coming to power of Queen Thyllis, who merely awaited the favorable opportunity of a great victory against Hamal’s foes to prove in her coronation as empress her divine right to rule. I was sure she would cut through the strict law-structure of Hamal to further her own ends and in the process fatally weaken her nation. Mind you, I welcomed that day. Indeed I did.

A most unpleasant odor curled into my nostrils and, wrinkling up my nose, I turned to where the seamen were busy with their fish and their fire.

The smell did not come from the fish. It is not true, I suppose, to say I dislike all fish. Sardines in olive oil are fine, though not in tomato sauce, and kippers are also very fine. In later years I have taken to tinned salmon where the fresh fish leaves a mere rubbery taste in the mouth. But the smell that was now offending everyone on the beach came from the fire itself.

“By Vox, Wersting! What vile muck are you burning there?”

I might have guessed.

“We found timbers from that Corg-blasted shank, Prince. It is those timbers that stink.”

“Impregnated with the damned fish stink,” said Captain Ehren.

I inspected some of the wood the hands had gathered. Of a heavy and close-grained appearance, it bore a greasy greenish texture, somewhat spongy to the feel and, surprisingly, not particularly heavy at all. No one recognized the wood.

“The wood stinks of itself,” I said. “And I guess it is a capital timber for ship construction.”

“Aye,” said Lars Ehren. “Capital for fish-men! But I’ll allow their stinking craft outsailed our old *Ovynth*, Opaz rot ’em!”

I said briskly, “This stink blowing downwind will bring out the locals if I’m not mistaken.”

How instructive it was to see who made an instinctive check of their weapons, feeling the sword snugged neatly to waist, the spar to hand, the knife at belt!

We ate the fish, and poor fare it was, too. Then we set about marching from the beach southerly, looking for water.

The burning stink from our fire wafted with us for a good long way.

The shank ship, burning, would have alerted the people along this coast, both by fire and smell. We marched, ready for what might befall us.

In the event the local inhabitants were far more frightened of us than we had need to be of them. We first saw them popping up over the sand dunes inland,

where scraggly bushes and coarse rank grasses grew, showing scared faces which seemed all eyes and mouths, before they turned tail and ran. They turned tail quite literally, for these were Yuccamots, a sleek otter-like people with long, broad flattened tails. They had progressed as a race from swimming individually to catch the fish on which they lived, to sailing open boats with purse seines (nets which they looped in a great semicircle and dragged ashore), a whole village hauling on the lines. Their fingers are no longer webbed, but their feet still are. To my delight I found the Yuccamots proud of their webbed feet. How different this was from the shame the Undurkers, those supercilious canine folk from the islands south of Persinia, feel for their hind paws!

Well, it takes all kinds to make a world. The Gons, as you know, are ashamed of their white hair and religiously shave off every last lock of white from their scalps.

We made contact with the Yuccamots, and after a time managed to convince them we bore them no ill will. That we might have to steal one of their boats was a question not raised at this time. The boats themselves possessed the tall incurving stem and stern of the type of boat built two thousand years ago in the Mediterranean. They were flat bottomed, broad beamed, and lacked sails. They were propelled by six massive oars, each crewed by at least eight men, often amidships by a dozen, pushing and pulling, after the manner of swordships. These boats, with the bright colors and the

otter-eyes painted in the bows, reminded me most, I suppose, of *xavegas*. The *xavega*, a Portuguese boat used against the Atlantic to catch sardines in exactly the same way as the Yuccamots use their boats to catch their fish, is fast dying out on the Earth. A pity.

The Yuccamots had developed the technique used in *xavegas* of positioning extra men judiciously about the craft and having them haul on lines attached to the looms of the oars. Exactly the same kind of extra manpower on the oars is employed by the captains of the inner sea in their swifterns, and the captains of swordships along the coasts of the outer oceans.

Captain Ehren expressed himself as satisfied with the boats themselves, although wishing for a little more fullness in the bottom lines, or a leeboard, failing a keel. But he was scathing about the absence of masts and sails.

“We can fashion masts, Captain Lars,” I said. “Aye, and sails, also. If it comes to the fluttrell vane, we can do it.”

Captain Ehren favored me with an odd look, and I realized I had unthinkingly used a common Hamalese saying. The fluttrell, that powerful saddle-bird of Havilfar, has that deuced awkward vane at the rear of its head, rather like an ancient Terrestrial pteranodon, and this quite naturally makes riding more than two aback somewhat a matter of ducking down to avoid the massive vane. So “to come to the fluttrell vane” is the cant saying in Hamal for putting up with less than the most desirable.

Once we had convinced the Yuccamots we were merely friendly, shipwrecked mariners, they were ready to aid us. They had noticed our weapons, of course, and so understood we were in good case to defend ourselves against treachery. We were given food to eat — more damned fish — but there were a few gritty loaves and a bowl or two of fruit. The bright yellow berries of the paline were eagerly snatched up, a most sovereign remedy against depression. The paline bush is one of Zair's greatest gifts to Kregen.

Later on that day, while we sat dozing in the blue shadows of the straw and seaweed huts, the dark leaf-shaped shadow of a flier passed across the mud-packed square. Using great caution I looked out and peered up. The voller up there was patrolling; it lazed along, its flags fluttering, keeping a watch on what went on below.

"Fliers from the naval air station," said the Yuccamot headman, old in years yet with a still silky coat and a fat flat tail. His name was Otbrinhan and he wore a white robe much adorned with motifs in green thread of seashells and squids and amazingly finned fish. "They say we must guard against attacks."

He saw my astonishment.

"Aye, Notor. Attacks." He flapped his tail, making a meaty thump against the dried mud. "When I ask who will attack us poor folk, the Hikdar laughs and says we will know when they attack. It is beyond me."

"Where is this air station, Otbrinhan?"

He used his tail to point the way, angled inland and past the crest of a sizable gorse-clad hill that rose a

dwabur off. This island was of a fair size, and being so close to the equator I expected dense jungles. But the salt water ran through the soil far inland and made of it poor-quality stuff. Other islands in the chain were choked with jungles.

“How far?”

I might have guessed that to a seafaring folk, a land distance was difficult to describe. Two days, he told me, but I had to recalculate that to the length of stride of my apims and to knock off at least half a day.

Later I said comfortably to Captain Ehren: “I think we will not need to steal a boat from these folk, Captain Lars.”

“I am heartily glad to hear it. A single boat is an enormous treasure to them.”

“So what if it is?” demanded Kov Nalgre Sultant in his unpleasant hectoring tone. “They are no friends to Vallia.”

“They are friendly enough to us!” began Ehren, hotly.

“Do not seek a quarrel with me, captain!” The Vad of Kavinstok’s color was up, his lips thin and most unpleasantly curled, his jeweled hand pressing down the equally jeweled hilt of his rapier.

If it came to it I would control this insufferable Vad. If the empire ruled over by my Delia’s father was to survive we would need every single one of the good men of Vallia. Between these two, this bluff ship captain and this over-refined and contemptuous Vad, there was in my mind no choice. But, surprisingly, the little Lamnian

merchant stepped forward. He held a leather bag in his hand and as we looked at him, surprised, Lorgad Endo drew the string and upended the bag over his palm and poured out a small stream of silver.

“These are sinvers from Xilicia,” he said. He spoke quite calmly. “I came by them honestly in the way of trade. They seemed to me, when we set out on this journey, to be a useful currency to carry to Havilfar, seeing that Xilicia is one of the ancient kingdoms bordering the Shrouded Sea.”

“True, Koter Endo,” said Strom Diluvon.

“Let us then pay these good Yuccamots for their hospitality. If we all put together what we have, we may yet find we have enough to buy a boat.”

“This I doubt, Koter,” said Captain Ehren. “Faith! All my treasures are gone with the old *Ovynth!*”

“And mine! And mine!” various survivors commented.

I moved forward.

“The offer made by Koter Endo is brave and generous. We will pay these Yuccamots for their food and drink. But we will have no need to steal a boat. We shall take a flier from the Opaz-forsaken crampths of the Hamalian Air Service!”

They gaped at me.

“And how, Prince Majister,” said Vad Nalgre, emphasizing the title and thus further insulting me by his tone, “do you propose to do that?”

But Hikdar Insur ti Fotor had jumped forward, excitedly speaking over the last of the Vad’s words.

“By Vox! It is a good plan, Prince! Let us go forth now and show these Hamalian vosks how true Vallians fight!”

In the hubbub that followed these survivors further divided out. There were those, led by the Vad, who were for stealing a boat. There were those who would strike for the air station and take a flier. I held up my arm.

“Let there be no dissension here. We strike a blow for Vallia if we take a voller. We merely embarrass poor fisher-folk if we steal a boat.” I bent my ugly face toward the Vad. “And in any case, Vad Nalgre, do not think, if we stole a boat, that you would be excused rowing.”

Some in the gathered throng, ruffianly seamen mostly, guffawed lustily at this sally.

The Vad flushed, and yet he was deathly still, icy. His Vallian nobility was outraged by the crude words and ways of a hairy barbarian who had dared to marry the Princess Majestrix of the empire of Vallia.

My old figurehead of a face must have worn that look of the devil, for the Vad of Kavinstok, for all his icy coolness, flinched back. His hand crept up and fingered the black and white favor fastened with the gold and opaz brooch he had made sure not to lose. His anger burned within him, his eyes showed the cost of holding his tongue. But he could not stop himself from saying: “I shall remember, Prince Majestrix! By Lycurs, I shall remember!”

CHAPTER FIVE

“For Vallia and Prince Dray!”

There is little to be said about the affray against the Hamalian Air Service station upon that forlorn little island of the Risshamal Keys. Leaving those of our company who, like Lorgad Endo, were not fighting-men, and leaving, also, the wounded we had carried here on litters improvised from wreckage, the rest of us set off.

We panted along over the coarse sand and the coarse grasses, addressing ourselves to the discomfort of the journey. The weather remained bright and hot, and this close to the equator we were soon sweating and puffing. But I would brook no delay.

The air station turned out to be a mere miserable stockade constructed of coral and rocks, for timbers were hard to come by here. The Hamalese flag floated from a mast. Sentries patrolled, their bronze helmets brazen in the twin suns' glare.

No, there is little needs to be said. We surprised them and fought until we had killed enough to make the rest throw down their arms. We were merciful, although

Wersting Rogahan fingered an evil-looking knife, muttering about slit throats.

There were but two vollers there. One was the little patrol craft we had seen earlier, a three-seater, fast and not particularly comfortable. The other was more substantial, with decking and varter platforms, with two masts from which our first concern was to strip away the Hamalese flags.

We discovered that a third flier, similar to this second one, was away on extended patrol over the islands. That, I reasoned, had been the rast who had thrown down the iron pots of fire upon *Ovvend Barynth* and *Maskinonge*.

The moment this flier returned we could expect pursuit.

Someone had let rip a defiant yell, as we fought, shouting: "Vallia! Vallia!" And someone else, caught up in the excitement, had roared out: "For Vallia and Prince Dray!"

So these cramphs knew who we were.

No, there is not much to say. What I remember with the most vividness is poop varterist Nath, whom Deldar Rogahan had dubbed an onker, flinging himself in front of the body of the first lieutenant, thereby taking the arrow that would have slain Insur ti Fotor.

Later Hikdar Insur shook his head in wonderment, as he stood looking down upon the scrawny, hairy, half-naked body of this Nath. He looked up at me and I saw the pain in his face.

"Why did he do it, Prince?"

“You know the answer to that better than I do, Insur.”

He started at my use of his first name, unadorned. These things are of importance on Kregen.

“This is not the first time, Prince. We fought an argenter of Pandahem and there a lusty rogue just like this, Naghan the Ears, he was called, for his ears were large, I admit, and stuck out at right angles, well, he threw himself into a spear that would have de-gutted me. I slew the man who did it, as I slew this cramp of a Hamalian, here. But I do not understand it.”

It was not for me to tell him that, on occasion, in the heat of battle, ordinary roaring, brawling fighting-men will gladly give their lives for others for whom they cherish an affection. It is not a thing much talked about in the refined drawing rooms of civilization. It is much out of fashion on this Earth, here, explained away by psychological expertise as obsessional madness, fighting idiocy, the seamy underside of truth to the legends of heroes. And, true, there is much to be said for that. But in battle many ordinary things become supernormal, and anything may happen.

I did not think anyone, seaman or soldier or hired mercenary, would throw his own body into a spear aimed at Vad Nalgre Sultant, Vad of Kavinstok.

So, instead, I clapped Insur ti Fotor on the back, and bade him give thanks to Opaz he was alive.

“Do not waste the sacrifice of Nath,” I said.

“I shall not, Prince. I am anxious to return to the village, for I left the leather pouch entrusted to my

keeping by Captain Ehren with the Lamnia, Lorgad Endo. He is a brave fellow, right enough, but he is no fighting-man.”

This was the pouch containing my writings upon the Hamalese secrets of the vollers.

“You and Captain Ehren are charged with delivering that paper safely into the hands of the emperor himself. If you have any difficulty in getting to see him, as you may very well have, then ask for Delia, Princess Majestrix, and say you come from me.”

He laughed. He was back to the affairs of Kregen once more, the reflections prompted by the death of Nath put into their proper perspective. “Aye, my Prince! A messenger from Dray Prescott, Prince Majister of Vallia, has a sure passport to the glorious presence of the Princess Majestrix!”

I knew that, and it worried me at times. If an enemy said he came from me, and so wormed his way close to Delia . . . I had no ring to give as a talisman, for I detest wearing rings upon my fingers, or anywhere else, for that matter, even in my ear as a lusty sailorman should. I could only say to Insur ti Fotor that he should say certain words that would ensure a speedy passage through the fusty formalities and dry protocol of the palace.

Strom Diluvon could fly an airboat and they all piled aboard the larger of the two craft. I piloted the smaller back, keeping a watch. We landed near the village and went the rest of the way on foot.

The first thing Hikdar Insur did was to retrieve the precious pouch from Endo.

Arrangements were quickly made. The Lamnian merchant paid out his Xilician sinvers to the chief man, Otbrinhan, and we took aboard dried fish, jars of water, and a supply of the gritty bread. A trading vessel threaded her way through this section of the islands once a month — that was the month of She of the Veils — coming from a sizable port town farther south. Otbrinhan was delighted.

“Now we can buy real bronze plates for the dome of our temple!” he cried, thumping his tail.

The village must catch enough fish not only to subsist but to sell for other essential supplies. I glanced up at the rock-built temple with its whitewashed walls. The dome, a mud-packed affair over cunning groinings, gleamed whitely in the suns. If this village could cover that dome with bronze that gleamed and sparkled — what a great triumph that would be! What a victory over other less fortunate villages on other islands nearby! What a marvelous tribute to Havil the Green!

I have seen the great temple of Havil the Green in Ruathytu with its three great green domes. I try not to let sentiment overcome sense in my appreciation of the artifacts of those who call themselves my enemies. I had then a great detestation for the Green, as you know. Havil the Green was the great god of the state religion of Hamal. Yes, I knew with joy that the truer and more enlightened religion of Opaz, the glorious twinned spirit, was creeping into Hamal. And, too, I knew the

loathsome cult of Lem the Silver Leem, with its dark ritual and bloodletting and sacrifice and lusting, grew daily stronger there. But, even I, Dray Prescott, who was a Krozair of Zy, must admit that the great temple of Havil the Green in Ruathytu was a most imposing affair.

“I wish you well of it, Otbrinhan.”

“May Havil the Green shine upon you, Notor, all the rest of your days!”

I did not smile, but the grimace would have been perfectly in keeping. This little Yuccamot, Otbrinhan, did not know, could not know, that since my baptism in the Sacred Pool of the River Zelph in far Aphrasöe I was assured of a thousand years of life. I gave him the formal salutation and took myself off. I found the waso-Hikdar, Insur ti Fotor, checking the supplies being loaded into the patrol voller.

“How long, Insur, have you been in the rank of waso-Hikdar?”

“Three seasons, my Prince.”

I pondered. I had no real influence in the navy of Vallia. Oh, I knew old Sonomon Barcash, the Kov of Ava. He was a highly placed admiral, what the Vallians called Jen Admiral.^[3] He was not the Lord High Admiral, what the Vallians dub the Hyr Jen Admiral. But he owed me a favor. And, of a surety, this fine young man, Insur ti Fotor, deserved promotion in his rank.

With a scrap of cloth and cuttlefish ink I wrote a short note, using the uncial style, to Sonomon Barcash, calling his attention to waso-Hikdar Insur, and suggest-

ing he should be promoted at least to shiv- and rightfully to shebov-Hikdar.[\[4\]](#)

I did not tell Insur what I had written. He stowed the cloth away with the leather pouch. To anticipate myself, I learned subsequently that between them, Captain Ehren and Hikdar Insur had made a copy of my writing concerning the secrets of the Hamalese vollers. Each man carried a copy. And, too, I learned that when my Delia discovered all and heard of my wishes concerning Insur, she put herself out, and, lo!, Insur ti Fotor became not a shiv-, not a shebov-, but an ord-Hikdar! Such is the glory and womanly wonder of my Delia, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia of Delphond!

When I told Captain Ehren that it would please me if among two or three others of his men I thought should be rewarded, he would promote Wersting Rogahan to so-Deldar, the good captain made a face.

“Truly, my Prince, that rascal has the luck of five-handed Eos-Bakchi! Very well, I will thus promote him in due deference to your wishes.” Then he boomed his gusty laugh and finished: “Aye, Majister! Rogue he is, but he deserves the rewards of his impertinence!”

Insur carried another scrap of cloth, written in cuttlefish ink, and this called my Delia’s attention to Captain Lars Ehren himself. She knew as well as I the importance of loyal friends in the conflicts that lay ahead within Vallia. Captain Ehren was almost at the highest rank of Hikdar; I told Delia he should be promoted Jiktar, and this matter, being a weighty one, would demand all her skill. In the event, she contrived

it, beautifully. Lars Ehren jumped the first grade within the Jiktar rank, becoming a dwa-Jiktar. This pleased me when it was told me, later . . . much later . . .

Between that happy time and now there lay a great many adventures, and foolish escapades, and much danger, as you shall hear.

Preparations were made, the route planned, the vollers checked. I wished to leave before sunset. This was accomplished. If you do not understand that I fully appreciated how selfish I was being in this distribution of favors, then you have listened with half an ear to these adventures. I drew a great and selfish satisfaction from giving favors and promotions to my friends. I do not make friends lightly, and I value them. Time has little of consequence in this matter. Perhaps this delight in assisting those who assist me is a weakness, a kind of insurance, a fear, deep and inexpressible, that they may turn and rend me. I do not know. But I like to think it pure selfishness on my part, and not dread of the unknowable future.

Captain Ehren expostulated, red in the face, waving his arms.

“But, Prince! Surely you will return to Vallia with us!”

“Not so, Captain Lars. You have what I have already discovered about the vollers, safely stowed away in the pouch. But that is only the half of it. I must discover what this cayferm is. I think, maybe, the wise men of Vallia may not know, either. And it is essential that Vallia build her own vollers. You have seen what these

vast and marvelous skyships of the Hamalians can do. Well! When they attack us in Vallia — and I say *when* and not *if* — *we* must be ready for them. You must fly to Vondium and lay all before the emperor. For me — it is Hamal and a little bladesmanship.”

Puzzled he might be, loyal he most certainly was.

“If this is your command, Prince, then may the Invisible Twins witness it is my duty to obey. I do so.” He took himself aboard the patrol flier. “Remberee, my Prince. Remberee!”

“Remberee!” I called back. “Remberee!”

**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] *Waso*: five.

[2] *Dwabur*: five miles.

[3] *Jen*: Prescott has often used this word and I have changed it to its English equivalent, “Lord.” It compares with the Hamalese “Notor.” “Jen” is pure Vallian, I believe. [A.B.A.]

[4] *Shiv*: six. *Shebov*: seven. *Ord*: eight *So*: three.