

DRAY PRESCOT: 8

**FLIERS OF
ANTARES**

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

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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 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, the Summons of the Scorpion, Prescott is plunged headlong into fresh adventures on Kregen. Outwitting the Manhounds of Antares, he rescues Mog, a high priestess, and defeats the Canops who have invaded her country. Forced to fight in the arena of the Jikhorkdun of Huringa he rises to be a hyr-kaidur and at a climactic moment is rescued with Delia by his comrades in a magnificent airboat. Now they are on their way to Migladrin across the Shrouded Sea . . .

Alan Burt Akers

CHAPTER ONE

I swim in the Shrouded Sea

“By Vox!” yelled Vangar ti Valkanium above the clamor of the gale. “This would be no time for this flier to break down.”

From the forward starboard varter position I clung to a stanchion with my left hand and peered out and down. The sudden onset of the gale had cast a darkness over the bright day, and the twin Suns of Scorpio were dimmed. Through the drenching lash of rain and the erratic lightning-shot darkness I could see the lacerated surface of the Shrouded Sea. The wind slashed off the tops of the running waves, and the white roar below bellowed and flung wind-tossed spume flat and sheeting.

“This voller was built in Hamal, Vangar,” I yelled back at him. He could barely hear me. “She won’t break down like the rubbish they sell us in Vallia.”

We were both drenched with rain. The decks ran with water which spouted out, foaming, through the scuppers. I had full confidence in the flier, for my men

had taken her from a crew of foolish raiders from Hamal, so that they could come to my rescue in the arena of the city of Huringa in Hyrklana; it was now very clear to me that the shipwrights of Hamal applied double standards to their work.

“She flies well, my prince,” shouted Vangar. He felt a particular concern for Delia and me, I well knew, for his appointment as captain of my flier brought him grave responsibilities as well as great joys.

The sea below raged and roared. We were lower than I liked, for we had tried to outrun the gale on our way back to Migladrin to finalize the new arrangements in religious and political matters of that country, and this confounded gale had seized us in its grip as we sped across the Shrouded Sea.

For a moment I lingered. The sea down there aroused strange emotions in me. The Star Lords had prohibited me from shipping in either swifter or swordship; but I admit that, despite the anger of that sea and the fierce and deadly power of wind and water, I stared a little hungrily at the element on which I had lived for so large a part of my life on the planet of my birth, four hundred light-years away.

“Get back to the helm-deldar, Vangar, and lift us. We will have to take our chances with the wind and storm higher up.”

Vangar did not argue but went at once.

To this day I cannot in truth say how it happened. I know the black thought of treachery crossed my mind, for until the conspiracy against the Emperor of Vallia,

who was my father-in-law, had been completely crushed, we walked in perilous paths. And his peril also menaced his daughter, who was my wife, the Princess Majestrix Delia, my Delia of Delphond, of the Blue Mountains.

The most probable explanation is that during that brave rescue of me from the arena when the flier was being shot at from all directions, a chunk of rock thrown by a varter had crunched into the stanchion, weakening it.

Now with my weight and the wind and the violent motions of the flier, the stanchion parted.

Instantly I was tumbled headlong into thin air, spinning head over heels, gasping as the wind and rain struck and sent me plunging into that fearsome sea.

I surfaced and dragged in a huge lungful of air; then the waves smashed me over and down and so I began a protracted period of intense struggle to survive. As you know, I am a strong swimmer, and may dive deeply and long, and believe me when I say I needed every ounce of skill and endurance. The flier vanished, whisked away as a clump of thistledown is brushed by the breeze.

I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, battled for my life with the sea — alone.

There are techniques for keeping afloat and I used all my knowledge to remain near the surface and not allow the vicious violence of the sea to weaken and overwhelm me. That I survived is clear in that I am speaking to you on these tapes; but it was a near thing. When I felt myself at last at the end of my strength and

saw there low against a level break in the clouds the long line of rocks marking a shore, I knew I had to make a supreme effort. I am not a man who will give in easily. I had been learning caution, and tried to contain that intemperate recklessness that had many times brought me kicks and cuffs, and, may Zair forgive me, so many times failed. But against the insensate violence of the sea I would exert everything of me that is me, that makes me Dray Prescott, and no other in two worlds.

Gradually, with immense effort, I maneuvered myself toward the shore. For a moment or two I thought I would be flung end-over-end onto the black rocks that showed through the gouting spray like decayed teeth; but Zair aided me — for the damned Star Lords would not, and neither would the Savanti — and I felt myself picked up and flung between two jagged rocks and so hurled onto a tiered beach of coarse gray sand. I had to summon up all the reserves of strength I had left to prevent myself from just lying there, prey to the waves, and to force myself to crawl on hands and knees up above the high water mark. Then, between two crumbling rocks, I put my head onto that sand and passed out.

The next thing I recall is being turned over gently and feeling soft hands examining my ribs and arms and legs. I lay still.

A girl's voice, light and clear, said: "He has no broken bones, for which he may praise Mother Shoshash of the Seaweed Hair, when he awakes. Father Shoshash the

Stormbrow has not been gentle with him. His ib is knocked fair out of him.”

Another girl’s voice, a little more giggly, answered. “Come away, Paesi. He looks monstrous ugly. And look at his shoulders!”

“Mmm,” said Paesi, in a way I decidedly did not like.

Thinking it expedient to regain consciousness, I let out a few grunts, heaved myself around, and opened my eyes.

Two Lamnias stared down on me. They had run back a few paces, and now stood, poised for instant flight. I have told you that certain races are famed upon Kregen for the beauty of their womenfolk, and the Lamnias, that gentle, shrewd, yellow-furred folk, are blessed with daughters who are as fair in the eyes of other races as any Fristle fifi, or apim girl, or aephar damsel of far Balintol.

The two girls, Paesi and her companion, wore simple short-sleeved white blouses and knee-length skirts of apple-green, and they carried woven wickerwork baskets over their arms. They stood regarding me uncertainly, a monstrous great hairy apim risen from the sea. Shades of Odysseus and Nausicaa! I was as salt grimed and unkempt, clad only in my old scarlet breechclout, as any shipwrecked mariner. But the two Lamnias stood, open-eyed, regarding me, and beneath the white blouses their bosoms rose and fell perhaps a little faster as I slowly stood up, and stretched, and gave thanks to Zair that I still lived.

Lamnia in youth possess that gorgeous laypom-colored dusting of fur upon their bodies that strokes as light as thistledown. Later in life the fur grows thicker and darker but seldom as thick as, for example, the fur of a Fristle. Now the two girls stared at me and the flush of blood beneath the skin showed clearly through that light yellow dusting of fur.

“I mean you no harm,” I said, trying to make my bear-like voice as friendly as possible. But when I spoke they both jumped and took a step back.

After some time I managed to convince them that I was a human being — and by that I mean a human being, as they were; and not merely apim, which they could see — and we set off to walk to their village.

I had no means of knowing where Delia might be now. What I did know, unshakably, was that she would scour the sea until she found me. She knew of my mysterious disappearances, although not the cause of them, and this time the broken stanchion would show all too clearly what had happened. I fancied then, as I went with the two Lamnia girls up past the gorse-like bushes of the shoreline and through broad-leaved sough-wood trees, that very soon the flier would come ghosting in and my friends would yell and bellow for me and a rope ladder would come tumbling down and I would be rescued again.

If I mention, now, that the broken stanchion dumped me headlong into fresh adventures, I must add that the stanchion also contributed much to the destiny of the planet Kregen itself.

The people of the village greeted me kindly. They must have observed the way I was constantly looking up into the sky as Zim and Genodras sailed past scattered clouds, shedding that streaming mingled opaz light, and perhaps they put down those searching looks to guilt against Havil, or to some religious doctrine, or even — and this would be the nature of the Lamnias — to a stiff neck I was trying to ease.

My previous experiences of Lamnias, notably with Dorval Aymlo, the merchant of Ordsmot, had shown me that they were a gentle people, good merchants, shrewd at bargaining, not warriors. The village had a wooden stockade and was tucked neatly into the crook of a river with a bluff to defend it; but it was a poor place for all that, both in military might and in wealth. It was crowded with people all engaged in running about on tasks of the utmost importance to those performing them but incomprehensible to me at the time. I detected a note of competition in the air, and saw young girls dancing and singing in long lines, and young men running races and hurling blunted wooden javelins, throwing weapons quite unlike the formidable stuxes of Havilfar.

The Lammas seated on wooden stools at the entrance to the largest house, a two-story structure festooned with many varieties of flowers, I assumed to be the village council, and the headman, a shrewd and sad-looking fellow called Rorpal of Podia, greeted me with a punctiliousness I found touching.

“Llahal, stranger who has escaped from the house of Shoshash.”

“Llahal, Rorpall of Podia.”

Podia was the name of the village, and it was situated on one of the innumerable islands of the Shrouded Sea. On the other side of the river a steep, cone-shaped volcano emitted a lazy cloud of smoke. Perhaps the Lamnias thought I kept looking at He of the Yrium, the volcano, in my searching looks at the sky. *Yrium* is a word with profound meanings of force, meaning power, either power conveyed by office, or by strength of character, or given to a person in any way that unmistakably blesses — or curses — him with undisputed dominance over his fellows. To dub a natural phenomenon like a volcano as He of the Yrium was to convey in the most pungent way all the awful ferocity and power these people regarded as residing in the volcano. The Shrouded Sea is plagued with volcanic activity, as well as earth tremors and earthquakes.

“I am Dray Prescott,” I said. Then, I added, “Krozair of Zy,” because at times I am a boaster as well as an intemperate hothead, and I felt secure in the knowledge that they would not understand what I was telling them anyway.

“Llahal, Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy. You are welcome to Podia. Will you tell us your story?”

I did not smile at this, for that would have been impolite; I simply sat on the wooden bench indicated and, with a glass of fruit juice and a plate of palines at my side, I told them a little. I mentioned the Canops,

that fierce, martial race of people who had been driven out of their island home because of its near-destruction by earthquake, and of their settling in Migladrin, but before I had a chance to say that the Miglas, with the help of my friends, had taken back their own country, the Lamnias reacted.

To my surprise they were disappointed that the Canops had left the Shrouded Sea island of Canopdrin.

“They are honest traders,” said Rorpal, rubbing the laypom-colored fur beneath his chin. “Now there is no one to stand against the aragorn of Sorah.”

Well, as you know, I was acquainted with the evil ways of the aragorn. Slave raiders and slave-masters, the aragorn plunder their way to fortune over the agony and the blood of anyone unfortunate enough to be too weak to stand up against them. The valiant people of my island of Valka had driven out the aragorn of Vallia. I was in the midst of a political campaign to drive them out of Vallia altogether. And now, here in the continent of Havilfar, I found aragorn operating in the Shrouded Sea. This was not surprising. Slaves are required. Slaves are always needed. Slave-masters will always find a calling when there are weak people to be enslaved and strong and unscrupulous people to enslave them.

“You fear the aragorn of Sorah?”

“Aye, Horter Prescott. We fear them.”

I sat back and considered. I had chanced here because a weakened stanchion of an airboat had pitched me into the sea. I might have drifted anywhere, or been drowned and forgotten. I had not been sent here by the

Star Lords. No blue radiance had enfolded me, no gigantic representation of a scorpion had borne me away to a desperate mission for the Star Lords. No. No, I had no business here. If I occupied myself in every small corner of Havilfar — let alone Kregen — interfering with the ways of life that had gone on for centuries, there would be no end to it. This business was not my business.

All the same, I felt the thrill of blood through my arteries, and the word *aragorn* — remembering Valka and that great song, “The Fetching of Drak na Valka” — made my hands close as though they held a sword.

I now know I was wrong in shrugging off someone else’s problems. But you must remember that I was young according to Kregen standards, to which I have become adjusted, and I was newly married with baby twins, Drak and Lela. I wanted to go home to Valka and take my Delia in my arms and forget all about Star Lords and slavery and the other pressing problems of Kregen. I was even considering leaving off my search for the Savanti, those mortal but superhuman men of the Swinging City of Aphasöe.

It is not easy for a fighting-man to reconcile himself to the philosophy that teaches we are all responsible for each other, and that one person’s loss is a loss to all.

So I changed the subject and said: “I see you hold a great festival, Horter Rorpal. Your young men and your young girls compete against each other.”

Rorpal’s sad face looked sadder than ever and he leaned forward, about to answer me.

An old Lamnia at his side put a hand on Rorpal's arm. This Lamnia's yellow fur showed silver tips, a clear indication of his great age, for I guessed he must be well past a hundred and seventy-five. He shook his head in warning.

Whatever Rorpal had been about to say, that hand on his arm and that shake of the head changed his mind.

"Yes, Horter Prescott." He took a paline and munched it thoughtfully.

I waited politely; but he said nothing more to enlighten me.

Although I wore my scarlet breechclout, cinctured up with a broad leather belt, and a sailor's knife lay scabbarded back of my right hip, I felt naked. On Kregen, that marvelous world that is so heartbreakingly beautiful and so horrendously cruel, a man must carry a weapon if he wishes to remain free in so very many areas of the globe. The unarmed combat disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy could keep me out of much trouble, but I hanker always for the feel of a sword in my fist.

The activities of the youngsters, which could be viewed with ease from this high verandah outside the headman's house, came to a climax with much shouting and hullabalooing, and at last a group of about fifty youths and maidens, their dusting of yellow fur bright in the declining rays of the twin suns, clustered together, entwined with wreaths of flowers. Something of the sadness of Rorpal of Podia must have affected me,

for these circlets of flowers could scarcely be wreaths. They must be the victors' crowns.

And yet the flowers, so brilliant, so beautiful, were linked together in long chains, so that the fifty were in very truth entwined about, bound, almost.

Masses of people moved away from the open space, laughing among themselves, and yet their laughter struck chill. I glanced at Rorpal.

He stood up. At his side a young man with as aggressive a cast of feature as any Lamnia might aspire to handed the headman his spear of office. Around the spear had been entwined flowers. Rorpal lifted the spear, and the gathering crowds below fell silent and shuffled into place before the verandah and the group of village elders, leaving the fifty bound in their flower chains some way off, isolated.

Rorpal was about to say something that might explain these proceedings. A woman ran urgently up and past the crowd's outskirts, pushed vigorously past the aggressive youth, who made no real attempt to halt her. She stopped in front of Rorpal. She looked agitated and yet determined, and her face, pleasant and mellow in the Lamnia way, set itself in lines of unfamiliar hardness.

"Rorpal! I call on you — Paesi — she it was — and it is decided that Polosi shall go!" She was stammering so much through her assumed hardness that she made no sense. At least, she made no sense to me. But Rorpal of Podia understood what she wanted.

He struck the butt of the spear on the wooden flooring three times. The silence became absolute, except for

the evening breeze in the trees and a few dogs howling from the compound where they had been herded during the ceremonies. I noticed particularly, from my already vast experience, that no babies were crying.

“Very well, Mother Mala. Paesi it was, we all agree to that, it is attested.”

“It is!”

Rorpai gestured in a way that might have embraced this woman, Mother Mala, the crowds, the fifty youths in their flowery chains, the elders on the verandah — or me — and he banged his spear down again, four times. Abruptly everyone burst into shouts and cheering. But, even then, that cheering struck a somber note, there on the dusty compound of the little village of Podia. I noticed that most of the cheering came from the young men and women mixed in the crowds before the verandah. The fifty bound in flowers remained silent, although everyone looked toward the elders on the verandah.

Then — one of those fifty burst into hysterical shouting. A young man broke the flower chain by a single movement of his hands and ran and ran and so was swept up into the arms of Mother Mala. I saw the girl Paesi, who had found me on the shore, also hugging and kissing both the boy and his mother.

Lamias passed among the crowds carrying large gourd-shaped vessels of pottery that are sometimes called amphorae, although they are not strictly of that shape or form, for they have a stoppered spout, and their more proper name is holc. They were mounted on

wicker carrying baskets upon the men's backs and it was remarkable with what nicety and skill the men could tilt the holc and direct a stream of wine into an outstretched cup without so much as spilling a drop. Fresh wine in fresh goblets was produced for the elders upon the verandah, and I took the goblet offered me. Rorpal of Podia banged his spear butt again, twice and a third time, and the silence fell.

Rorpal lifted his goblet.

Everyone raised their goblets or cups high into the air.

“Let us drink the parting toast!” called Rorpal. “The toast of da’eslam! The farewell and the greeting! Da’eslam!”

“Da’eslam! Da’eslam!”

We all drank.

Then, as is the way with Lamnias, everything was over and the people shuffled away. I put the goblet down and looked for the fifty — no, the forty-nine — and saw they were gone from their places.

Only the coiled chains of flowers lay there, abandoned, their petals wilting and losing their color.

One function of the meaning of da’eslam, as I knew even then, rather like the vaol-paol, is the end and the beginning, and equally the beginning and the end. But whereas the circle of vaol-paol encompasses all things, da’eslam contains a narrower vision connected almost always with a person's fate and destiny.

The Lamnias had summed me up shrewdly.

In the last of the light streaming and mingling from the emerald orb of Genodras, which is called Havil in Havilfar, and the ruby orb of Zim, which is called Far in Havilfar, I saw a small group of men walk from the stockade past the last of the houses and so come out onto the open space before the verandah and the elders and the headman.

I saw their faces, and instinctively my right hand crossed my waist, groping for the hilt of a sword that was not there.

Yes, the Lamnias understood men, even apims, even apims like myself.

The newcomers stood in the opaz radiance, their shadows long upon the packed dust where the feet of the Lamnias had so lately shuffled. I saw those damned faces. Thick black hair, greased and oiled and curled, hung about their evil faces. These beings were not apim. They were of a race of diffs I had not encountered before, and they were beast-men and men-beasts of so forbidding an aspect I truly thought that a Chulik might think twice before offending one of their number.

Low were their brows, low and wide, above flaring nostrils and gape-jawed mouths in which I saw snaggly teeth bared in grins of anticipation. Their eyes were wide spaced, brilliant, yet narrow and cold. These halflings wore armor, scale armor that was as commonplace as any I had seen. They wore close-fitting helmets which I then thought were brass, and only later discovered to be gold over iron. They carried weapons of the fighting-man of Havilfar — thraxter, stux, shield.

Apart from the impression of evil upon their faces, they would not have occasioned in me any further interest outside my usual fascination with the myriads of types and species upon Kregen, but for their tails. I saw at once that these tails were probably their most formidable armament. Long and whiplike, the tails were carried high and arrogantly, curved over the right shoulder. And every tail ended in a razor-sharp curved blade. The glinting light from the twin suns caught the serrated blades, upflung on the flaunting tails, and glittered like a field of diamonds.

The faces of diffs are passing strange in the eyes of a man from this Earth. Some are beautiful, some are ugly, some misshapen in our estimation, others quite unremarkable. Yet how difficult it is to say with complete surety that a certain expression upon the face of a man who is not apim — is not a member of Homo sapiens — means exactly what you think it means. I took the gloating faces to portray evil at that moment, and although I was proved right — to my cost! — the assumption was made so rapidly, so much from instinct, that immediately I forced myself to relax and to believe that an alien's face cannot show what a man's face of this Earth would show and necessarily mean the same thing.

Below the scaled corselet each man wore a brilliant scarlet kilt. I stared. I suppose that, too, influenced me, like any onker. The diffs wore the old brave scarlet, the color that had in so many ways become associated so closely with me and mine upon Kregen.

They advanced with a steady step and I saw that they kept in step and to a wedgelike formation. The leader, broad and bulky, wore a multitude of feathers and silks, not on his helmet but about his person. He halted below the verandah and looked up. Once more I had to control myself, to make myself relax. Was I not learning the ways of quietness and peace upon Kregen under Antares?

“Is all ready, Rorpal?”

“All is ready, Notor.”

“Then bring them out, you rast, or I’ll sink my stux in your belly.”

I straightened up at these words, for I understood a little of the thinking behind such uncalled-for insult and arrogance. As I straightened, I felt a hazy qualm or dizziness pass, as though my brain had moved within my skull, fractionally later than I had intended.

So then it was that I understood how easily the Lamnias had read me, how shrewdly they had taken stock of me, and what they had done. I understood now what had transpired here. There was no need for Rorpal of Podia to lean regretfully toward me as I stumbled, and clutched at the railing, and so, stupidly, collapsed to the wooden floor, and for him to say: “We express our deep regret, Horter Prescott. But we are driven by devils. We must send fifty of our youths and our maidens, and the aragorn will welcome you exceedingly in place of Polosi, the son of Mala and sister of Paesi, who found you and so had claim upon you.”

Then Rorpal, who had the good of Podia at heart, called to the aragorn leader: "This apim is a great warrior, a Hyr-paktun. In him you will be well pleased."

Then the drug in the wine felled me utterly and Notor Zan engulfed me in blackness.

CHAPTER TWO

Delia begins a story

It seemed to me that Delia was telling young Dray, the Strom of Balkash, a story. The Strom of Balkash was the son of Seg Segutorio, Kov of Falinur, and Thelda, the Kovneva. Delia sat curled up in a heaping pile of cushions whose glowing silks and embroideries could not compare in any way with the glory that was my Delia. The story was well loved in Vallia, and Delia, herself, enjoyed the retelling of it.

“Under a certain moon,” she began, which is a way of saying *Once upon a time*, “a great and cruel Vad ruled a country and all the people groaned and were unhappy. Now it happened that in that country, at a place where a wooden bridge crossed a stream and silver fishes leaped into your hand, lived a poor man who had a beautiful daughter whose name was Ama of the Shining Hair. It chanced that the great and cruel Vad went a-hunting leem, which had been troubling the ponshos of the people in those parts.”

Something tickled me in the ribs and I stirred and moved and then sank back on my cushions to listen to Delia. As for young Dray, who was Seg Segutorio's son, his little face was puckered up in absolute concentration and he was holding all his body tightly with expectation and glee at this marvelous story from this marvelous aunt.

“But one of the ponsho farmers was a young man who could talk to his ponsho-trag and who loved nothing better than to sport all day in the fields with his friend, as you would with your friends. Now this ponsho farmer's name was—”

The nudge in my side was less gentle, far from gentle. It was a positive kick. I rolled over, ready to find out who would thus dare to desecrate the enjoyment of the Prince Majister of Vallia's entranced absorption in a story told by the Princess Majestrix of Vallia, and a thudding kick bounced off my ribs, and a course and unlovely voice roared in my ear.

“Get up, you rast! Yetch! On your feet!”

I opened my eyes.

An aragorn drew his booted foot back ready to drive it into my ribs again. I rolled away, feeling a terrible pain in my gut, and tried to catch that wicked boot. I could not move my hands.

“Nulsh! On your feet!”

The kick landed. I got my feet under me. The pink-lit shadows of the Kregan night lay between the loom of trees, and I heard the susurrations of the night wind. My hands were bound.

“You cramph,” I said. “I wanted to hear that story.”

My voice slurred horribly and I could feel the solid ground going up and down like the deck of a swordship in a gale off the Hoboling islands.

The aragorn brought his whiplike tail around and laid the flat of the curved blade against my head. That thick skull of mine rang as though all the bells in Beng-Kishi sounded off with maniacs at the clapper ropes.

“Get into line or I’ll flay your hide off!”

He was genuinely annoyed. The pink moonlight from She of the Veils flowed over his gold-on-iron helmet, scaled armor, and brave scarlet kilt. I could see the vague shadows of Lamnias all about and I could hear the harsh orders to move, and so I understood that no great time had elapsed since Notor Zan had taken me entire. The aragorn were taking the young Lamnias selected for them, and, shrewd in their way, the Lamnias of Podia had saved one of themselves and thrown me in as a prize specimen of a slave.

Under the conjoined forces of the tail-blow on the head and the surgings of the solid earth beneath my feet and the rumblings of my gut, I staggered half a dozen paces beneath the trees. They had had the forethought to bind my wrists with thongs and had carried me out and dumped me among the forty-nine sacrifices.

The thongs were not lesten hide.

I broke them with a single savage surge, twisted, got the aragorn around the throat, and, ducking my head beneath his instinctive slash of the tail-blade, started to choke a little respect into him.

I had no desire to kill him. I was still ensnared in the repression of my savage and intemperate nature; but enough was enough. He garbled and choked trying to yell. Others of the slave-masters came running, and so I threw this specimen at them and turned to dash into the moon-shadowed trees. Oh, yes, I was perfectly resigned to leave them unharmed and to run away. I had some of the most important aspects of my life worked out now; as you would say today, I had my priorities almost right.

Delia would not welcome a dead husband lying rotting beneath the mud of some putrid island of the Shrouded Sea.

But these aragorn were cunning in the ways of man-management. Twining iron links whirred through the air and snagged my arms and legs, brought me down with a crash. Once the thongs had proved useless to hold me, they merely clamped chains upon me. I tested the iron. It would take long and long — if ever — for me to break the weakest link.

After that it was a question of being prodded along the track between the trees. The aragorn I had maltreated took some delight in prodding me with his stux. I clashed my chains at him, but he laughed evilly and avoided the swinging bight and struck me again.

“Leave off, you onker, Reterhan!” The leader strode up, and his anger made of his ugly face a devil’s mask very like the face of the Devil of the Ice-Wind who guards the north shore of Gundarlo.

“He attacked me, Notor!”

“When he is sold — when we have golden deldys for him — you may take your own payment, then, Reterhan. Until then, by the Triple Tails of Targ the Untouchable, you will care for the merchandise as you care for your tail!”

“I obey, Notor.” Reterhan shrank back from his lord’s anger.

We marched again through the forest, and I guessed we went to another village of the island where more people would be rounded up. I trudged on under the weight of the iron chains until gradually my senses returned and my gut stopped rumbling. I was now ready to pull a few tails.

“That was nobly done, Horter Prescott.”

The young Lamnia looked like them all, yellow furred, meek in appearance, slightly built. I could barely envisage him hurling javelins so well as to out-throw some of the other Lamnia youths of Podia.

“These aragorn,” I said. “They need to be cleansed.”

“Aye, Horter Prescott. But we of Podia are not destined for that great work. We are too few and too weak.”

The youngster said his name was Fanal and as we walked along he spoke to me softly, and I answered with a guiding grunt or question. I learned more, then, of the tangled politics of the Shrouded Sea, and of how these aragorn of Sorah wreaked their horrors upon the islands. They were of the race of diffs called Katakai, and they held their tails in especial esteem. I was not surprised at that. I saw the fashion of helmet they wore, close-fitting and smooth, without embellishment or

ornament. They could whip their tails about over their shoulders and around their heads, lashing forward in lethal sweeps. They would make interesting antagonists. I wondered why I had not encountered any in the Jikhorkdun, the arena, of Huringa; but Fanal explained that the aragorn took good care that they themselves were not sold into slavery and thus avoided the fate of fighting in the arenas of Hyrklana or Hamal.

The Katakis gave most of the islands a bad time. The Canops, of whom I have told you, had forged themselves into a fighting nation of soldiers to resist them. My estimation of the Canops changed once more. And now I understand a little more of the fear-filled lifestyle of the Lamnias of Podia.

Forced to live as slave-fodder, they had worked out a *modus vivendi* with the Katakis of Sorah, and with their accustomed Lamnia shrewdness had agreed period by period to supply a stipulated number of slaves, both youths and maidens.

The games I had witnessed sorted out the strongest and fittest young men, and the most beautiful and graceful of the young maidens. But then — and I admit I ricked my lips up in what might have passed as the semblance of a grin — the Lamnias sent as slaves to the aragorn their failures, the least agile young men, the least graceful young women. All the winners, the best athletes, the most beautiful girls, were hidden away out of sight. This made so much sense that I marveled it had not occurred with more frequency, given that those

willing to take the risks of fooling aragorn must be shrewd and smart and cunning bargainers.

“And what is to become of you, Fanal, once you are a slave?”

“I do not know.” He looked apprehensive, as well he might. “I pray the eye of Lomno-Niarthon may never close over me, so that I am spared the Jikhorkdun or the Heavenly Mines.”

This Fanal had been a loser, one who had not been able to keep up with his fellows in the races, who had not hurled his javelin as far, had not jumped as agilely, with the consequence unfortunate for him that he had been packed off as slave. I did not envision him coming out well from his experiences as a coy in the arena; as an apprentice he would not, I judged, last long. His reference to the Heavenly Mines I then took to be an oblique way of talking about death. I was wrong in that, as you shall hear, dreadfully wrong, and the word *heavenly* embodied a great deal of that typical Kregan aptitude for mockery and deadly sarcasm.

The gale that had wrought my original destruction had blown itself out and She of the Veils rode free of cloud wrack. The trees swayed gently and the night breeze blew cool. Very soon we were ordered to halt and to wait while the Katakis aragorn went about their business.

“The village of Shinnar,” Fanal told me bitterly. “Ochs live there, gentle enough and not overly bright in matters of trade. They supply fifty young people, as do we, every period.”

Shortly thereafter we marched on, and the slaves were now a hundred in number. The next village yielded up twenty strong Rapas. I felt a mild surprise, for the Rapas are renowned for — apart from their smell, to which I was by now becoming accustomed — their ferocity and viciousness. But the Katakis argued no nonsense. I sensed that these Rapas did not come with quite the same willingness as the Lamnias and the Ochs. Maybe there was capital to be gained there . . .

One of Kregen's lesser moons swung low over the trees as we came out onto the shore where the waves glimmered pink in long, surging lines of foam and the wind blew free.

Again I stared with hungry longing upon the waters, for with a vessel under me and goodly spread of canvas I would be as free as the breeze. But now, quite apart from the Star Lords and the Savanti, the Katakis prevented me from taking ship and departing this sorry little island. Its name was Shanpo, and it was one of a multitude of islands in the Lesser Sharangil Archipelago. It seemed to be more obvious now why the Canops had not settled themselves on some other island grouping when their own land of Canopdrin had been so disastrously destroyed. The Katakis were a people either to avoid or to destroy.

“What happens now, Fanal?”

“We will be taken to Sorah — an evil place!” And he shivered — for the night breeze blew a trifle chill, I admit. “From there we will be sold to whoever will pay the Katakis' price.”

There was the thwarted businessman's acumen in that.

The stars now showed through the tattered cloud wrack, brilliant constellations that had become familiar to me over the seasons of my life on Kregen. The Zhantil and Sword; the Leem and Shishi; Onglolo; the Headless Risslaca; many more, twinkling away up there with a fine disregard of me and my problems. Of them all, the Zhantil and Sword meant the most, for I was as sure as I could be — and still I am quite certain — that in this fabulous constellation glittered the star that is the sun of my planet of birth, our old Earth.

Perhaps old Sol is not visible at all from Kregen. But I prefer to believe it is, and that it twinkles there at the tip of the sword in the claws of the Zhantil's right paw.

The Shrouded Sea is named not out of mere fancy, and the horizon mist was enough to blot out a great part of the constellation of the Zhantil and Sword, for it is visible north and south, according to season. And so, looking up, I glimpsed the bulk of an airboat drifting among the stars, a tiny mobile constellation of its own.

Instantly every nerve in my body told me that aloft there, in that voller, flew Delia and my friends. They had to be there! I gazed up and the little grouping of lights swung lower. Others had seen the flier, and with harsh orders the Katakis beat us back to the treeline. I mused on this even as I ran in my chains. So the Katakis were wary enough of fliers to take these precautions!

My immediate reaction of resistance was speedily overcome as the chains were hauled up, I tripped and,

helpless, fell off balance, to be dragged through the sand and shells and scrub and gorse into the trees.

With a curse I clawed my way up and stared into the sky.

The flier dropped lower, swinging toward us, so that the lines of her illuminated ports disappeared and only the fore lights showed. She dipped. The breeze had now sunk to a mere whisper in the leaves. I could hear the hoarse breathing of men and women all about me — men and women! — even if I was the only apim there.

“Absolute quiet!” The voice of the Notor cut into the silence, like a rislaca hiss.

At my side I felt Fanal go rigid with fear of the lash.

The flier swung down. I stood up. I shouted.

“Delia! Seg! Inch! Down here! There are foemen—”

That nurdling cramp Reterhan hit me then. He laid the flat of his tail-blade against my head and, although I broke most of its force with my arm, the thing smashed into my temple with force enough to admit the near presence of the Notor Zan and his blackness. I had been so intent on putting a quarterdeck bellow into my voice, as I would hail the fore-top of a squally night, that I had broken one of my own cardinal rules. It nearly broke my arm, too. I went over sideways and lay for a moment on the sandy grass, cursing my own folly.

By the time they dragged me to my feet and the procession of slaves started up again, the flier had gone.

Either she had not been the flier with Delia aboard, or my people had not heard me.

I was as sure as I could be about anything that had she been our flier, my people could not have heard me, for if they had they would have been here by now, with longbows flashing and swords chunking.

For the rest of that miserable night we lay confined in the next fishing village. Its inhabitants had been turned out for us. They were apim, but small and meek; their fishing boats were simple open affairs, the fishing grounds no more than a league offshore, and I felt — with no emotions I could feel ashamed of — that they would have difficulty in actually killing their catch. The Katakis took a few slaves from here, a few of the young girls; the rest were sent to spend the night as best they might on the beach. This, to me, exemplified the aragorn's contempt for them.

The crockery of the villagers was pressed into use and we were fed a thin fish gruel. As you know, I am not enamored of fish, but I forced myself to eat the revolting stuff, for like any sensible fighting-man I eat when I can against the certain privations in store in the future. There were no palines, which was an affront, but we got the word that there might be squishes in the morning — if we behaved ourselves.

The morning came with the twin Suns of Scorpio rising out of the Shrouded Sea wreathed in a flamboyant mantle of green, gold, and orange. We sat upon the packed dirt of the village square, yawning and knuckling our eyes. Everyone was thonged up, one to another; I wore the iron chains. More fish gruel was followed by a muttering clamor among the slaves.

“Where are the squishes? Where is some bread?” The new slaves were distinctly upset and, this early in their slave careers, annoyed. “We cannot live on this fish—”

The Katakis went about with their whips, right merrily, and soon no one was asking where the promised squishes were.

I confess I looked on my fellow prisoners with not a little superiority — foolish, I know, but understandable. They were just beginning the life of slaves. I had been a slave many and many a time, high and low, pampered and flogged, as staylor and as miner. They would find out. Slavery is an evil, and I grew every season more and more sure that the reason I had been brought to Kregen was to stamp out that evil. I was only partly right in that, as you shall hear if these tapes last out . . .

An aragorn ran into the square yelling and waving his arms. Instantly the square was filled with the sounds of blows and yells as the Katakis whipped and bludgeoned the slaves out of sight. A string of calsanys was prodded beneath the long verandah of the headman’s house, and, being calsanys, they did what calsanys always do when upset.

It was now clear with the daylight that there were more Katakis than those who had brought us in, and there were more slaves. This miserable village had been taken over and was being used as an entrepôt for slaves, a barracoon on a grand scale. Katakis armed with crossbows ran across the square. Reterhan came rushing

toward us, his tail high, its curved blade glinting in the suns. He carried a long strip of cloth.

In all the hustle and bustle I saw what was being done.

The village was being returned to its original innocent state. Not a Katakai in sight. Not a calsany that would look out of place. Not a weapon. All the fish-gruel bowls were collected and dumped into the nearest hut. Soon — in mere murs only — the village lay under the rising suns looking like just another poverty-stricken fishing village.

I looked up.

A flier cruised into sight.

I recognized her. I had seen her first in the arena of the Jikhorkdun in Huringa, when I had fought the boloth. Her decks were crowded with people. I would have known who those people were anywhere. And I would have known the flags that fluttered from her masts — every flag the scarlet field with the yellow cross. Old Superb! My flag! Oh, yes, my heart leaped when I saw that voller come flying so serenely over the fishing village.

Then Reterhan and a comrade wrapped the length of cloth about my mouth, ramming a chunk of wood between my lips so that my teeth grated, and knotted it tightly behind my head.

They did not wish to knock me out, for we would be marching soon. I thought that — fool that I was!

“Silence!” The Katakai Notor waved his tail-blade to impress on us the seriousness of the moment. “Absolute

silence, all you rasts! I'll hang and jerk the first of you who cries out!"

I wondered if he would do that, for a slave with crippled arms is scarcely a salable commodity. But it impressed the cowed Lamnias, and Ochs, and Rapas.

Reterhan leered at me, his face filled with an evil I now recognized as being a true reflection of his evil mind.

"Lem rot you, apim! You may watch and suffer, but you cannot cry out!"

Now I understood exactly what ghastly scene was to be enacted here. Lines of Katakai crossbowmen leveled their weapons. They knelt under the cover of houses, in fishing-net sheds, behind walls. They would be invisible from the air. The voller ghosted down, her flags brilliant in the morning suns-glow, and descended to a landing in the village where the hard-packed dust made a descent inviting. Delia, Inch, Seg, and the others were looking for me, and they were searching here.

But when they touched down they would be deluged with a sudden, treacherous sleeting of crossbow bolts. Those who survived would be swept up as slaves. All my friends — so soon to be murdered or enslaved!

And I was bound and helpless in iron chains, gagged so that I could not cry out a warning!

CHAPTER THREE

Of the pulling of a Katakai tail

The flier was in truth a magnificent vessel. She moved with a sure steady grace over the village huts, and her people were hanging overside and staring down, and some of them waving . . .

The iron chains about me bit into my flesh as my muscles bulged. Futile! I tried to gnaw through the wooden chunk in my mouth; but the wood was balass and I merely bit down with teeth-crunching agony. I writhed about in the violence of my movements and the iron chains clanked.

Reterhan looked most evilly upon me, and placed his foot on my neck, and pressed. Sparks darted and flashed before my eyes; but they were clear enough to see the flier turning, the scarlet and yellow flags dropping to their flagstuffs now as way came off. I stared. Then I dragged my gaze away.

The flier had to be warned.

Vangar ti Valkanium, as the flier Hikdar, was bringing her in smoothly and gently, a perfect landing

approach. Those people up there would see below them merely a sleepy, poor and innocent fishing village, with precious few people about at this time of morning.

They would not expect serried lines of crossbowmen.

Here in the continent of Havilfar, south of the equator, we were far from our homes in Vallia and Valka. But Havilfar was accounted the most progressive, the most modern, of the four continents that made up this grouping upon the face of the planet. Around the shores of the Shrouded Sea men had settled here first, long ago, and in the tumbled ruins of long-forgotten empires, in the artificial features of the landscape, in the admixtures of blood within the different species and races, were to be seen clear evidence of that long history of civilization here.

Seg, that wild and reckless Bowman of Erthydrin, was up there in the flier. He and I had fought our way through the Hostile Territories. He would never in ordinary circumstances be taken unawares in ambush. Likewise Inch, that seven-foot-tall ax-man from Ng'grogga so obsessed with his taboos, and I had battled through adventures. He, too, was a seasoned campaigner.

And — and up there on the high quarterdeck stood Delia, my Delia of Delphond!

At any moment now the valler would touch down. And then the cruel steel-tipped bolts would flash in a raining cloud of destruction.

Reterhan's foot pressed with jovial power upon my neck.

Up in the flier was Korf Aighos, the leader of the rascally but loyal Blue Mountain Boys. Up there was Turko the Shield, that superbly muscled Khamorro of the magical murdering hands; but I felt his great shield would offer some protection, and I prayed Zair he would slap it across before Delia when the bolts whickered in. Tom ti Vulheim and his Valkan Archers were there, ready to be cut down before they could draw bow. Obquam of Tajkent, the flying Strom, would be there, and I longed for his slender powerful form to flash out on his narrow wings to scout this innocent-seeming deathtrap.

Also, up there in the volder, were those new friends who had saved me in the arena by their selfless devotion: Naghan the Gnat, armorer superb; Balass the Hawk, who had earned the distinction of becoming a hyr-kaidur, Tilly, my little golden-furred Fristle fifi; and Oby, that young rascal who had aspired to greatness in the arena, but had had his dreams shattered, to be replaced by a vision of a greater future — and who must, I suspected, figure in the shadowy schemes of the Star Lords.

All of them might in the next few murs be lying dead, pierced through and through with arbalest quarrels. Or they might be staggering up to be chained as was I and be carried off into slavery.

Oh, Delia, my Delia!

I rolled my eyes at the Lamnia youth, Fanal. He saw me looking at him. I could not cry out. But he could. He could warn the airboat. Across my face that old evil look of power and arrogance passed, and my eyes glared with a mad berserker brilliance, so that he flinched away. But he turned his head, and would not look at me, and he did not cry out a warning.

No one would shout voluntarily.

So I must do something horrible.

Reterhan's foot slid from my neck as I squirmed. I got my linked chains up and swung the small bight they had allowed me, and so snared that curved blade mounted at the end of his whiplike tail.

Metal splines ran down from the blade to give stiffening and protection to the end two feet of tail.

The chains snagged beneath the blade where it curved from its socket I rolled and lurched and staggered up and I pulled.

I pulled Reterhan's tail.

It was not a gentle pull. It was a savage, barbaric sinew-and-muscle-bursting jerk.

Reterhan yelled.

He could not stop himself.

The Kataki opened his mouth and yelled blue bloody murder.

His shout of agony bellowed across the open space.

I was not content.

Circling, I twisted the tail about me and jerked again with utmost vicious force. The Kataki leaped and toppled toward me, and I truly think had he not done so

I would have wrenched his tail out all bloody by its roots.

His agonized screaming knifed through the air where the mingled streaming light of the Suns of Scorpio threw twin shadows of the flier across the packed dirt.

The chains so cunningly bighted around by ankles and knees would not allow me to walk, let alone run, and that stumbling circle was the only progress I could make. I fell to the dirt and tried to roll myself like a barrel of cheap dopa out into the cleared area. A warning! My brain blazed with the single desire to warn my comrades in the voller.

The rolling did not get me far, but it saved my life, for two crossbow bolts sizzled into the earth, gouging clods, where I had been.

Covered in sweat and caked dirt I dragged in a lungful of breath and glared at Reterhan, who was crouching up, his left hand clamped bone-white across his mouth, his right hand feeling his injured tail. He was in no position to hit me again for some time.

The flier halted its descent. It hovered a dozen feet above the open space.

The rows of heads that had been showing over the bulwarks had all vanished, and I heaved a great gasp of relief. Those men of mine up there were alerted! They would not know what was going on down here, but now they would not come down meekly to be massacred and enslaved.

I had expected a sheeting storm of crossbow bolts to rise toward the flier, and I was confident enough in her armoring to know it would take more than a hand-held arbalest to drive through. A good-sized varter would be needed, and the Katakis, as far as I knew, did not dispose of varters here.

But this Kataki Notor was a cunning lord. He also held his men under a strong controlling rein, for he had not given the order to shoot, and so no one loosed.

No one shot at me, either, so I guessed the Notor had a scheme afoot.

I saw him giving swift orders; then he divested himself of his war-gear. Off came the scaled tunic, the greaves, the close-fitting helmet. His thraxter and stuxes were grasped by an attendant. Two more worked rapidly on his tail and soon they unstrapped that wicked curved blade.

The Notor snatched up a net-needle and its spool of thread from a draping net by a wall. Clad only in his breechclout — that scarlet kilt! — he walked slowly, bent over and shuffling, into the central plaza. He shaded his eyes and looked up.

“You are most welcome, whoever you are!” he called up. “We are but a small village and poor. We have nothing for aragorn to plunder or for slave-masters to covet, for all our strong young men and beautiful girls are gone in the plague.”

Reterhan was still totally absorbed in his concern for his tail, but his comrade stifled a little gust of merriment at his Notor’s words.

I felt the chill of despair.

Vangar ti Valkanium leaned over the quarterdeck rail and bellowed.

“We wish you no harm, old man. The plague, you say?”

“The dropping sickness and the purple buboes. It is a visitation from Chezra-gon-Kranak for our sins, though we know not how we have offended the Great Ones.”

I’ll give this evil Katakai lord his due; he made a convincing liar.

“We will come and assist you, old man,” yelled down Vangar. “We have medicines—”

I was on tenterhooks.

The Notor waved his tail, all innocent and naked as it was.

“I thank you, Notor, but we are few and the sickness passes.”

Some further conception came to me then of the way these Katakai aragorn operated. The Notor could see the crowded decks and the glitter of weapons, he could see the varters ranked along the broadsides, all fully manned. He could not fail to understand that this flier and these men were a most formidable opposition. All surprise had been lost. A shower of crossbow bolts now would do little damage, and then the varters would loose and the return arrows would come in . . .

To give him his due, he preferred to go around terrorizing the villages and taking plunder and slaves without trouble. Much though the Katakis liked a fight,

they would not fight if the odds were against them. There was no profit in tangling with this powerful adversary — or so I read his thoughts.

“You’re sure you do not require assistance?”

That was Seg Segutorio, leaning over the rail, his black hair brilliant in the suns-glow.

“We do not, Notor.”

An incredibly tall figure with waist-length yellow hair stood beside Seg. Inch lifted his battle-ax.

“You have food? Wine? Can we not help you, old man?”

“I thank you, Notor. But we have what little we need.”

And then Delia stood on the quarterdeck. I could stare up and see her, there, above my head, leaning over the rail, radiant, glorious in her beauty, the true princess of an island empire, and yet, as I well knew, so softly firm and tender and filled with love for me and for our twins.

“Have you seen a man washed up from the sea?” She called down. “A man—” She paused then, and whether it was sob or laugh I did not know. “A strange man with brown hair and brown eyes, with shoulders that — with broad shoulders — a man of power, a man with an aura. Have you seen such a man — who would be very violent, I am afraid, if you or anyone tried to maltreat him.”

“Is this man a Hyr-notor, my lady?”

“Oh, yes, and a great villain besides. He is my husband and I search the Shrouded Sea for him—”

“I have seen no man as you describe, my lady.”

I was writhing in my chains and trying to break the iron links, trying to roll out into the open, trying — oh, trying to send my passionate thoughts winging from my mind into the mind of my beloved as she stood above me, looking down, her lovely face troubled and darkly shadowed by her grief — her grief for me!

Reterhan had assured himself his tail was still attached to him. He stood up in the shadow of the huts and the trees, and he strutted toward me, holding his tail in his left hand.

So close! So near at hand were my friends, just a tiny distance away! That just one of them might see me! I rolled and clashed my chains and Reterhan stood over me, his greave-clad legs wide-spread. He took out his thraxter. If I was to die now, then in what a fashion I was to go! This was no way that my Anglo-Saxon forebears would relish as dying well. I rolled onto my back and glared up murderously. The gag stifled me. I saw Reterhan lift the thraxter and I saw his wrist turn so as to bring the flat alongside my head.

The twin suns of Kregen and the seven moons all spurted up and were gobbled down into the blackness of Notor Zan.

The last thing I saw was the glorious and divine face of my Delia as she stared out, so woefully troubled, over the quarterdeck rail.

If I was to go down into the great darkness and find my way to the Ice Floes of Sicce, then I would take with me that last look of longing that contained all of love. So

I fell into the blackness, and the darkness was irradiated for me by Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains.

CHAPTER FOUR

The ways of the aragorn

I, Dray Prescot, Krozair of Zy and Lord of Strombor — and much else besides — came back to consciousness sluggishly packed among my fellow slaves in an open flier. The stink and the groans and the shrieks were all familiar to me, not from this Earth but from Kregen, and I knew I must endure. I was still alive, which surprised me only a little, for slaves equate with money. We were worth many golden deldys and silver sinvers almost anywhere in Havilfar.

A dead Och lay at my side, his four little arms shriveled and wrapped around his wasted body.

The flier remained firm and solid in the sky with that peculiar way of a certain kind of voller which travels independently of the wind, and there was no pitching and rolling to add to our discomfort. The flier was of that kind I was to come to know well later, but which until then I had not encountered. She was long and wide in the beam, but shallow, being open and without a deck. A tiny cabin had been perched amid-

ships to house the controls and crew. The slaves lay jammed like logs. They call these barge-like vollers *weyvvers* in Havilfar, and sometimes they refer to them as Quoffas of the Sky. They are designed simply to cram as much cargo as possible into a flat space, without niceties of careful loading in tiers. The slaves were mere lumber.

Fanal lay miserably at my other side.

He would not meet my eye when I stirred.

He understood what I had asked of him, back there in the fishing village, and he had failed. I could not blame him. All men are not built in the same way, and Kregen, let alone the Earth of my birth, would be a strange place if all men were alike. And as for all women . . . !

Presently he said in a whisper, "I am glad you are not dead, Horter Prescott."

"What happened to the flier?"

"The Kataki Notor convinced them he was a harmless old fishing man, who needed no assistance with the plague. They flew away."

They flew away.

Well. It was a disappointment, but also it was a relief. I had, in the instant of awakening, been horrified that I would turn and see my people, my Delia, wrapped in chains and thongs and wedged in among the mass of slaves.

"The flier flew well?"

"I have not seen many vollers. She flew low away to the west, as though she were searching for this Hyr-

notor — this man with the yrium — of which the lady apim spoke.”

He looked at me then, a real Lamnia look, shrewd, sizing me up anew.

“You are the man they sought, Horter Prescott?”

“Yes, Horter Fanal. I am the man.”

“I think perhaps if the aragorn realize this they will sell you for ransom.”

“It would be paid,” I said. I did not boast. I knew what I knew. To my shame, I knew that the coffers of Valka and Can-thirda, of Zamra and Delphond and the Blue Mountains, would pour forth gold and jewels and treasures if by those means my Delia could once more clasp me in her arms.

And if they were not enough, then Seg’s Falinur and Inch’s Black Mountains would bring more gold and jewels. And, if necessary, Delia would go to Strombor, my enclave in Zenicce, aye! and to the Clansmen of Felschraung and Longuelm to take of their treasures for my release.

These thoughts brought me no elation. I knew that the treasure of a country is not bought without sweat and blood and the labors of the working people who are the real originators of wealth. The comfort was that I could perhaps give of myself in after days so that my people, and my friends’ people, could quickly recoup their losses and once more live comfortable lives, as I wished.

No mention of ransom was made then or thereafter, and maybe the aragorn of Sorah had no real belief in it,

not recking of lands so far away across the equator as Vallia and Valka, of which they had barely heard.

Sorah itself was a large and prosperous island of the Shrouded Sea. Canopdrin lay not too far to the north. The weyver touched down inside the cleared central area of a vast barracoon, and we were herded out and given more revolting fish gruel. Then after washing in water lightly sprinkled with vinegar, our hair was cropped, and, stark naked, we were prodded into lenk-wood cages.

There was much shouting and cursing and belaboring with balass sticks. The Kataki also used their tails upon us most vilely, but in all this brutality they were careful not to mark or cut too severely the merchandise by which they made their evil living.

Rumors swept the barracoon as was to be expected.

A Rapa said positively that he would slit his throat with a sharpened flint before he would go to the Jikhorkdun of Hamal or Hyrklana. He refused to discuss the possibility of being sold into the Heavenly Mines or the pearl fisheries of Tancrophor.

The women were segregated; they would be sorted out into classes so that they might be sold to the best advantage. The men were also sorted, and here I parted with Fanal of Podia. He kept himself cheered by the thought that he might end up as a stylvor or perhaps a steward upon an important estate.

The art of reading and writing had once before brought me an easier task among slaves;[\[1\]](#) but here in Havilfar the art was much more common. If I was sent

to the Jikhorkdun of Hamal life might be interesting. There are many arenas in the Empire of Hamal, and there is more than one in the realm of Hyrklana. If I was sold as a coy to the Jikhorkdun of Huringa I scarcely relished what Queen Fahia would do. Had I not contemptuously tossed the bloody tail of the silver-collared leem in her face? Had I not shamed her in the arena before all her people, and, at the end, had I not slain the boloth and escaped? Queen Fahia and her neemus would be overjoyed to see me back in the Jikhorkdun.

So it was that as the rumors swept the packed barracoon I determined that I would not be sold back to the amphitheater in Huringa, the capital city of Hyrklana, to be fresh sport for that foolish, fat, and yet nasty little Queen Fahia.

Bunches of slaves were taken out from time to time to be oiled and cleaned up and paraded for prospective buyers.

Sorah is a large island and her slave pens are notorious. The aragorn do a good trade. They charge high prices for their merchandise and traders come from all over Havilfar.

A group of Shaslins was herded out one morning after fish gruel. They were just about the only people there who relished the foul stuff, for the Shaslins are a sea-people; they look not unlike what some wild mating of a human with a seal might produce, with their sleek streamlined heads, their sloping shoulders, and their arms and hands, legs and feet, beautifully adapted for

swimming and diving. Their pelts gleamed in the sunlight, for the food was good for them. But they set up a tremendous racket, screaming and shrieking, and had to be dragged out to the waiting fliers of their buyers.

“They have been sold to Tancrophor and will dive until they die in the pearl fisheries.”

The man who spoke to me, a Brokelsh, looked as annoyed as any slave has a right to be. His dark body bristles stiffened.

“But they are a fishing folk,” I said, somewhat unwisely.

“Aye! The Shaslins can swim well. But the devils of Tancrophor drive them to their limits, and they cough blood and their heads split with the ringing of the bells of Beng-Kishi. I am glad I do not go to the pearl fisheries of Tancrophor.”

This Brokelsh was sold with others to a Notor who owned many kools of land in Methydria. Other slaves were sold, and then it was my turn. I spent less than a day in the Sorah barracoon and I took no pride from the price I brought. I had taken one simple precaution during the ritual questioning of my abilities. I lied. I said I knew nothing of swords and battles and fighting, and whether or not the record-keeping Kataki believed me, I do not know. But he sold me to an agent from Hamal buying workers for the Heavenly Mines.

You have probably heard it said more than once that if you can keep your head when others all around you are losing theirs, then maybe you do not fully understand the situation.

There were two brothers, two apims, fine young men with strong shoulders and sinewy backs. When the understanding hit them that they were sold to the Heavenly Mines, they looked into each other's eyes and, with a previous arrangement clearly agreed between them, placed their hands on each other's throats. The two brothers stood there, facing each other, gazing one at the other in brotherly love, and choked each other to death. Guards bustled through with their balass sticks lashing and dragged the two apart. The finger-marks glared lividly upon their throats. One of the brothers was dead. The other was revived, and when he realized what had happened he sat in a ball, his hands over his head, crooning. He had become insane, and if I thought that would disqualify him from laboring in the mines of Hamal I was mistaken. This young man, Agilis, was taken out with the rest of us to the waiting fliers.

Many of us fought. The guards brought their balass sticks down viciously now, now that we were sold. I kept a wary lookout for Reterhan, but I did not see him — luckily for him.

“Treat them carefully, you onkers!” The agent from Hamal, a Rapa, screeched at the Kataki guards, and he tried to protect his merchandise without letting them beat him over the head. I joined in. After all, I knew the outcome of this; the slaves would be battered into submission and be dragged aboard the fliers. But I admit I wanted to get in a few whacks before that.

A surprised Kataki felt his tail pulled, and as he swung toward me, roaring, I took the balass stick away

and clouted him over the head with it. Then I jumped into the melee.

Well, foolish as I was then, and stark stupid as I am now if I still recall some pleasure in laying about me at those evil Katakis faces, I feel only a little shame in saying that I enjoyed thwacking that long ebony stick down and stretching a few of the aragorn senseless.

We fought in a small enclosure at the side of the main barracoon, with a lenk-wood fence beyond. The gates were closed and the fliers from Hamal waited, hovering, to pick us up. The thought of escape flashed across my mind with considerable shock. At once I began to fight in earnest, bashing now with intent and working my way through to the nearest flier. But, as I have said, the Katakis are good man-managers, like so many of the aragorn and slave-masters I have met on Kregen.

At a raucous shout the fliers lifted out of reach, and reinforcements of Katakis pounded into the small enclave. They must have gone through this scene or similar scenes a hundred times. I guessed they did not bother to practice a deception on the slaves and tell them nothing of their destination because they wished to enjoy the sufferings and anticipatory horror of the slaves. I saw at last that any further joyous slashing and bashing would get nowhere and so I tripped a Katakis, kicked him in the belly, hurdled his screeching form, and dived into the safe shadows by the lenk fence.

When it was all over I walked out, unruffled.

I, Dray Prescot, had stood calmly and watched a fight going on and made no further effort to interfere — and that, mark you, a fight between slaves and aragorn! Truly, I was either growing old and stupid or old and wise. It is my experience that being a father is a wonderfully sobering device.

I most certainly did not bother to observe the fantamyrh as I stepped aboard the Hamalian slave flier. I fancied I'd let the rasts take whatever sorrow their pantheon of gods and devils might care to hand out.

The flier was a simple, practical, no-nonsense vessel with ample capacity below decks for slaves and with enough armament above decks to repel any expected normal attack by volroks or laccapins or volleem, or any combination of flying mount and rider. I understood that the free-flying brethren of the air, the flutsmen, might well be operating in the vicinity, for there had been unrest around the Shrouded Sea; the flutsmen, the mercenaries of the skies, had been called in by more than one worried ruler.

The slaves slumped down on the low tween-decks, a thoroughly subdued lot. Their terror remained, for they had heard lurid stories of the Heavenly Mines of Hamal, although when I asked more probing questions it soon turned out all the information anyone had was mere hearsay, mere rumor circulating and magnified. There was one very good reason why information of this monstrous kind should be by hearsay only; and this will become all too apparent as I speak to you. So the slaves lay moaning and groaning and nursing their bruises and

bumped heads as we flew on north-northeast over the Shrouded Sea.

The flier carried a fair-sized crew of slavers, men of a number of different races. We were given water to drink, chunks of bread — which the first mouthful told me had been baked from dilse, that almost useless yet common cereal — and thin, stringy strips of vosk. Again there were no palines, although there was a small supply of overripe malsidges, those melon-sized, somewhat tart fruits that, at the very least, keep the scurvy off a man. We were thrown sections of the malsidges and we scrabbled for them as they flew among us, and I, at least, sank my teeth into the sharp pulpy flesh with its flushed green color, eating right down to the brown and wrinkled skin.

The journey from the island of Sorah to the Heavenly Mines of Hamal is about three hundred and fifty dwaburs. I calculated roughly that the speed of the voller could not be above ten db — that is, ten dwaburs per bur. So we could expect to reach our destination in something like twenty-four or so Terrestrial hours. I settled down to a patient negation of everything outside me, willing to start more trouble when we reached these notorious mines.

The only incident of any interest occurred after we had crossed the coast up toward Methydrria and could see in the far distance on our larboard side the hazy snowglint of a giant range of mountains. Two rofers appeared above us, beating through the air with massive strokes of their enormous wings, their necks out-

stretched. The flying animals, sailing past, looked calm and majestic, and we could see that each carried seating for a family of Fristles, six or so, with the little ones perched high at junction of neck and body craning over to look at us.

Although the root syllable *flut* does not appear in its name, the rofer is a kind of bird. Not so the tyryvols which, with their riders brandishing welcoming tridents, surrounded us as we settled into a gigantic basin in the foothills. These tyryvols are large flying animals, with whip tails, wicked, intelligent eyes, and bodies clad in flexible scales that evolution has not yet changed into feathers; although their wings — given another few million years or so — will sprout true feathers, I shouldn't wonder. They come in different colorations, although the most favored color chosen by the aerial riders of Hamal is a lustrous mottle of black and ocher, with scarlet claws and bands of multicolored scales around their necks. They impressed me, these tyryvols, who had seen impiters and corths of the Hostile Territories, not to mention fluttrells and mirvols of Havilfar.

Their riders were short squat diffs with thin bandy legs. Their faces reminded me of the Ullars of Ullardrin of Northern Turismond, although there was none of that indigo dyed hair. There was, however, the same savagery about the square clamp of their mouths. At this time they habitually wore black and ocher scaled clothing made from the skins of the tyryvols, and they carried those damnably sharp tridents, and the thin flexible

sword of the aerial fighter. These are the Gerawin of Gilarna the Barren in the Empire of Hamal. They proved to be immensely efficient guards and watchdogs over the Heavenly Mines for the Hamalese.

Around us stretched the barrens. The foothills trended up steadily toward the west and northwest. The task of escape from the mines on foot would be a daunting enterprise and one not to be considered without many days' food and water and, inevitably, a weapon of defense against the frightful dangers infesting all such spots.

The Hamalese are an efficient people. The dominant species happens to be apim; but the many species of diffs take a full part in government, industry, commerce, and all the other branches of activity that make up a thriving empire. Hamal was an ambitious and outwardly thrusting empire. They made airboats and sold them to Vallia and Zenicce and other favored customers, although they would not sell to Pandahem or Loh. That efficiency took us in, cleansed and fed us, and let us rest for a space. Then we were issued picks and shovels. An example was made of a Gon who wanted to shave his hair and so made trouble; the cold, calculating discipline administered to him chilled all the slaves' blood, and then that harsh impersonal discipline, that massive adherence to law and order, imposed its full weight on us. We marched down to the mines and went through the artificially illuminated passageways cut in the rock, and so came out to a vast and echoing space in the mountain. Here we set to work to hack the rock

away and fill baskets with the broken stuff. The baskets were drawn on a track by calsanys, to the opening where crushers and refiners went to work, powered by the arms and backs of slaves.

That efficiency saw that every slave worked to the uttermost of his strength. Everything was regulated down to the last drop of water. Rock was cut, drawn out, crushed, refined, and parceled up into fliers to be sent somewhere in Hamal of which we had no knowledge then.

The whole process was inhuman.

The last ounce of effort was taken from every slave.

It was possible to survive, for I saw old men still laboring away, although the turnover was rapid, for the labor simply wore a man down until he saw no good reason to go on living. Absolute inhumanity reigned here. Work — slaving work — filled every day. Rest periods were calculated out with a nicety that allowed a man to recuperate just enough energy to return with his shift to work the next time around.

By comparison, the Black Marble Quarries of Zenicce, in which I'd spent some time, seemed to have been run by amateurs.

Order, law, discipline, rule. The lash, starvation, deprivation of water so that thirst tore a man's spirit and made of him a tool in the hands of the Hamalese, all these things conspired together to make of the Heavenly Mines a place that proved Agilis knew what he was doing when he strangled his brother and would have allowed his brother to strangle him in return . . .

So I entered another period of my varied life on Kregen that, even now, fills me with a most profound horror, a revulsion of spirit that brought me face to face with the man I thought I was, the man Dray Prescott, shorn of all titles and petty ranks and symbols. It was just me, Dray Prescott, pitted against inhuman will and discipline.

I knew only one thing.

I would not give in.

**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] As a stylor in the warrens of Magdag. See *The Suns of Scorpio*. A.B.A.
- [2] Town.
- [3] Flier and flyer. Dray Prescott has made it clear early on by spelling out the two words that by *flier* he means a voller or airboat. By *flyer* he means a man or woman who fly any one of the marvelous winged creatures of Kregen. Also, by *saddle-flyer* he means the bird or animal itself. A.B.A.
- [4] The nit of Earth is the egg of the louse, whereas on Kregen the word *nit is* clearly applied to the louse itself. This is interesting — and the reference to *Nathian* here, clearly, is to Tyr Nath, the Kregen Hercules. A.B.A.
- [5] One of those annoying gaps in the record of the Tapes from Rio de Janeiro occurs immediately after Prescott tells us that he was pitched into the basket

of shonages. We have lost all details of his journey to and arrival in Sumbakir, and of the official attitude to him and Avec and Ilter. As, also, excruciatingly, we have lost what happened immediately after he took his fruit-stained face out of the shonages. *A.B.A.*

[6] This is lost. *A.B.A.*