

DRAY PRESCOT: 14

**KROZAIR
OF KREGEN**

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

KROZAIR OF KREGEN

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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 brown hair, and brown eyes that are level and dominating. His shoulders are immensely wide and he carries himself with 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, the Everoinye, he has been taken to Kregen many times. On that savage and exotic, 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 of the Eye of the World.

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 Mountains.

And Delia claimed him in defiance 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. One of their favorite homes is Esser Rarioch in Valkanium, capital of the island of Valka of which Prescott is Strom.

In the continent of Havilfar, Prescott fought as a hyrkaidur in the arena of the Jikhorkdun in Huringa. He became King of Djanduin, idolized by his ferocious four-armed warrior Djangs. In the Battle of Jholaix the megalomaniacal ambitions of the empress Thyllis of Hamal were thwarted, leading to an uneasy peace between the empires of Hamal and Vallia. Then Prescott was banished by the Star Lords to Earth for twenty-one miserable years. He caught up with his education and learned a great deal during this time.

His joyful return to Kregen was marred by his ejection from the Order of Krozairs of Zy. On Earth he had been unable to answer their Call to Arms, when the fanatics of Green Grodno swept all the Red of Zair before them in irresistible conquest. Determined to forget the Krozairs of the inner sea and return home to Delia and their children, he is told by Zena Iztar, who saves him from being banished back to Earth, that he must again become a Krzy before he can return home to Valka.

The genius king Genod of Magdag, using a new army modeled on one created years ago by Prescott, is sweeping victoriously across the inner sea. Gafard, the king's right-hand man, was — unknown to the king and

to Prescott — married to Prescott's second daughter, Velia. Now, in order to escape on a wounded saddle-bird, King Genod has callously hurled Velia to her death. Prescott, using the name Gadak, is left holding the dead body of his daughter in his arms as the overlords of Magdag ride up to take him.

This is where the last volume, *Renegade of Kregen*, finished. Still known as Gadak the Renegade, Prescott picks up the story as he is dispatched to the horrific fate of an oar-slave in the swiftness of Magdag.

This volume, *Krozair of Kregen*, brings to an end the "Krozair Cycle" and with the next volume, *Savage Scorpio*, Prescott is confronted with a monstrous challenge on the planet of Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio. Because most, but not all, of the action takes place in Vallia, I have called the next cycle of Prescott's headlong adventures on Kregen the "Vallian Cycle."

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter One

The chains of Rukker the Katakai and Fazhan ti Rozilloi

The lash curved high in the air, hard, etched black. I, Gadak the Renegade, grasped the harsh iron chains that bound me so savagely to this coffle of slaves, and which made of us one miserable body. We stumbled down the dusty streets under the lash toward the harbor.

The people of this evil city of Magdag barely noticed us, did not even bother to spit at us or revile us, for we were but one small coffle among many. The iron ring about my neck chafed the skin raw and dribblets of blood ran down onto my chest and back.

“By Zair!” the man on my left, for we were chained two and two, gasped, his face a scarlet mask of effort. “I swear the cramph won’t be happy until he’s had my head off.”

“He will not do that. We are needed to pull at the oars.”

The overseer, careless in his authority, slashed his thonged whip and my companion yelped and stumbled. I let go of my own chain to help him up. The fellow in front, a giant of a man with the black body-bristle of a Brokelsh, surged forward. The length of chain between us straightened and, by Krun, it felt as though my own head were the one being wrenched off.

“Thank you, dom,” the Zairian I had assisted was saying.

Ignoring him, I lurched forward and made a grab at the chain so as to ease the ring about my neck. A voice at my back bellowed in vicious temper.

“Rast! Keep steady, you zigging cramph!”

There was no point in turning about and chastising the fellow. We were all slaves together and I might have yelled as he had done if my own pains had not been caused by myself. The uneven lurching carried back like a wave along the coffle. The air was rent with blasphemies. Listening, I used this occurrence to learn about my fellow slaves, for we had merely been hauled out willy-nilly and chained up together for the walk from the bagnio to the harbor and the galleys.

The stones of Magdag under our feet and rising in wall and terrace and archway all about us held no more pity for our plight than the hearts of the Magdaggians. From the curses and prayers that went up, I knew we were a mixed bunch: Zairian prisoners, Grodnim criminals. And, in truth, I the renegade — who had once been of Zair and who said he was now of Grodno —

hardly knew to which of these gods to cleave for the injuries that had been done me.

We were being whipped down to be taken aboard a galley and there enter upon hell on earth.

I knew.

The glorious mingled suns-light poured down in radiance about us, the streaming mingled lights of Zim and Genodras, the red and green suns of Antares. We stumbled along with our twin shadows mocking us, forever chained to us as we would be chained to our rowing benches.

“If I get my hands on that rast . . .” The Zairian at my left side, with his red face and perfectly bald head, showed a spirit to be expected of a Zairian. I wondered if he would be broken by the torments ahead of him, of all of us. All our heads had been shaved as smooth as loloo’s eggs. We wore the gray slave breechclouts, which would be taken from us once we were shackled to our benches. All this I had endured before. This time, I vowed, I would make a positive effort very early on and escape.

The enormity of the death of my daughter Velia still had a stinging power to wring my heart. I had known she was my daughter for so pitifully short a time. I had known her as my Lady of the Stars for a short space before that, and we had talked. But I had found her and then, it seemed in the same heartbeat, she had been taken from me.

This mad king, this genius, this king Genod, who ruled in vile Magdag, had thrown her from the back of

his fluttrell as the saddle-bird, winged, had fluttered to the ground. Genod had been in fear of his life then, and had thrown a girl for whom he had planned an abduction out to her death. If there was one thing I intended to do upon Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio, forgetting anything else, that thing would be to bring King Genod Gannius to justice.

We passed beneath the high archway leading through the wall of the inner harbor, that harbor called the King's Haven. The cothon, the artificially scooped-out inner harbor, presented a grand and, indeed, in any other city, a noble aspect.

Like all building in Magdag of the Megaliths, the architecture was on the grandest scale. Enormous blocks of stone had been manhandled down to raise these walls and fortifications, to erect the warehouses and ship sheds. Every surface blazed with brilliantly colored ceramics. The tiles depicted stories and legends from the fabled past of Kregen. They exalted the power of Grodno and of Magdag. And, of course, the predominant color was green.

Nowhere was a speck of red visible.

The overseer with the lash bellowed at us, using the hateful word I so detest. "Grak!" he shouted, snapping his whip, laying into the backs of the slaves. "Grak, you Zairian cramphs!"

The lash was of the tailed variety, designed not to injure us but to sting and make us jump. The Kregans have their equivalents of the knout and the sjambok, as I have said, made from chunkrah hide. With these they

can pain, maim, or kill. We dragged along in our chains in the bright light of the twin suns, the smells and the sounds of the harbor in our nostrils and ears, the sight of the galleys motionless by the yellow stone walls. I looked at everything. For I had once been a Krozair, and this place was the arch-enemy of all Krozairs, all the Red Brethren, and knowledge conferred power. Mind you, I might possess a vast amount of knowledge right now; I was still chained up in a coffle of shuffling, whipped slaves.

The particular slave overseer entrusted with the task of bringing us down to the galleys was a Chulik. A Chulik has a yellow skin and a face that, although piglike, is recognizably *Homo sapiens* in general outline, save for the two fierce, upward-thrusting three-inch tusks. A Chulik will normally shave his head and leave a long rearward-descending pigtail, braided with the colors of whomever happens to be hiring his mercenary services at the moment. I will say here, at once, that my comrade Duhrra, an apim like myself, wore his hair shaved and in a short tail at the rear; I had never thought to compare his shaved skull with a Chulik's. A Chulik may possess two arms and legs and look vaguely human; that is all he knows of humanity. I eyed this specimen as he strode past slashing with his whip and I guessed he was taking what he could from the hides of the slaves before he reported back to the bagnio.

"I'd like to—" began the Zairian to my left.

"Shut your mouth, onker!" came that fearsome bellow from my rear. I had not seen who had been chained up

aft of me and I'd been too careful of my neck in that damned ring to care to turn to look.

The Zairian bristled. We passed into the shadow of a warehouse wall, past slaves hauling bundles and bales for the swifters moored alongside the stone wharves. I fancied the swifter for which we made lay past the galley ahead of us. She looked large. If I was shoved down in the lower tier, to slave in almost nighted gloom in that airless confined space, I'd really go berserk. I had been holding myself in admirably, looking for a chance. Not a single chance had been given me. Chuliks and the overlords of Magdag form a formidable combination in manhandling. Like Katakis, who are ferocious slave-masters, they leave no easy chances for escape.

The hoarse rumbling voice at my back sounded again.

“Onker! You make it worse by your prattling.”

The Zairian's red face turned even more scarlet, if that were possible. He started to speak, and I said, smoothly and swiftly, “Lean a little this way, dom — quickly!”

He was struck by my tone of voice. He leaned in, bringing the chains with him. We remained in the shadow of the warehouse wall, marching beside the edge of the wharf where the galleys waited. We were almost on the low-slung ram of this swifter, just passing the forward varter platform on her larboard bow. Beyond the ram stretched a space of open water, before the upflung stern of the swifter I fancied we were destined for closed that open space. I stumbled.

The Chulik was there. He had been waiting to get a few good lashings in with his right arm before he signed us over to the oar-master of the swifter.

His arm lifted and as I sagged against the chains the Zairian at my side sucked in his breath. The Chulik lashed. I took the first blow and then the bight of chain looped his ankle. I straightened and heaved, and the cramph sailed up and over, I had hoped he might bash his head against the stones. As I flicked the chains and so released his ankle, he toppled, screeching. The lash sailed up. He went on, staggering backward, his arms windmilling, his legs making stupid little backward steps. He wore mail. He went over the edge of the wharf and the last I saw of the rasts was his flaunting pigtail, streaming up into the air in the wind of his fall, and the damned green ribbons flying.

We all heard the splash.

We had remained absolutely silent.

We all heard the beautiful sound of the splash, and then helter-skelter, willy-nilly, dragged by the frantic ones up front, we were pelting for the far side of the warehouse.

“Haul up!” I bellowed.

“Stop, you rasts!” boomed that vast voice at my back.

“Halt! Halt!” cracked from the Zairian, in a voice of habitual command.

But nothing we could do just yet was going to stop that panic.

The Brokelsh in front of me was screaming and running.

We rounded the corner of the warehouse in full cry, a crazy fugitive mob of men chained together. This was no way to escape. Anyway, the high wall surrounded the dockyard and harbor, enclosing the arsenal and the ship sheds, and there was no way over that, and certainly no way through the guarded gateways. I wondered if the Magdaggians would feather us, for sport, or if their war-machine was so desperate for oar-slaves that we had, grotesquely, become valuable.

The bellowing voice at my rear smashed out again.

“You! Dom! Throw yourself down!”

The Zairian and I immediately dropped down. I held on to the chain in front with both hands. The Brokelsh went on running. The jolt was severe. I felt the chain haul out and I tugged back, the Zairian doing likewise.

Then — I swear all thoughts of my being a slave for that moment were whiffed from my mind and I was once again a fighting-man confronted with a hated enemy — the tip of a long and sinuous tail curled under my arm. The tail looped the chain that was held by my hands, so the three gripping members formed a lock on the metal. I felt at once the physical power in that tail. The strain sensibly slackened. We skidded over the stones in our slave breechclouts, and then more men at the rear must have stumbled over the Katakai at my back, or thrown themselves down, either because they saw the sense of that or because they expected the arrows to come shafting in.

In a tangled, cursing pile we came to a skidding halt.

The guards surrounding us appeared with mechanical swiftness. They were not gentle sorting us out. I did not see the Chulik among them.

In a welter of blows and curses we were thrashed along to the swifter and pitched aboard. I tried to see all there was to see, for, even though I am cynical about power and resigned about knowledge, still, as I have indicated, knowledge is power, even to a chained slave, even in his abject condition. It might not do me much good right now; but, although still in a partial state of shock after the death of my daughter, I held tenaciously to this idea of an early escape. Then knowledge would be vital.

If I do not for the moment mention the swifter it is because her arrangements became important later on. The chains were quickly struck off, to be returned to us in the form of chains binding us to the rowing benches allotted. As we filed from the entranceway forward I counted. We were conducted below, whereat I cursed, for this swifter was three-banked, and I had no desire to heave my guts out among the thalamites.

The thranites already sat at their apportioned places on the upper benches, eight to a bench. We passed below them down narrow ladders where the chains clanged dolorously. This was like descending a massive cleft, the sky-showing slot between the larboard and starboard banks, with the grated deck aloft.

I blinked and peered along the second tier. I cursed this time, cursed aloud and cursed hotly.

“By the stinking infamous intestines of Makki-Grodno! Every zygite is in place.” I shook a fist upward, the chains clashing. “The bottom for us! The bilge-rats! The thalamites!”

The Zairian said, stoutly, “We will survive, dom.”

The Kataki, above him, his tail looped about a stanchion, leaned over. “This is a strange and doomed place — you know, do you, apim, whereof you speak?”

“Aye,” I said, descending into the bottom tier. “Aye, I know.”

I did not wish to address him, and I wouldn’t call him dom, which is a comradely greeting. I did not like Katakis.

The whip-Deldars were there to welcome us.

They cracked their whips and herded us along and I saw one poor devil, a big fellow, tough, a Brokelsh, strike out at them. They surrounded him like vultures. They carried him away. I knew what would happen. Later on he would be used as an example to us all. He was, and I shall not speak of it.

The whip-Deldars were backed by marines with shortswords naked in their fists, their mail dully glimmering in the half-light. We were sorted into fours. The Zairian, the Kataki, and I shuffled up and were clouted into a bench. The fourth who would row on our loom fell half on top of the Zairian. He was a Xaffer, one of that strange and remote race of diffs of whom I have spoken who seem born for slavery. He looked shriveled. As the smallest, he was shoved past us to the outside position. The Zairian sat next. Then came myself — to

my surprise, really — and, outside me, the Katakai. The locks closed with meaty *thwunks*. The chains and links were tested. We were looked at and then, the final indignity, our gray slave breechclouts were whipped off and taken away.

Bald, naked, chained, we sat awaiting the next orders.

For the moment I could think. The oars had not been affixed as yet. That would be the next operation and was being done with us in position so as to show us what was what, how the evolution was carried out. I felt a surprise I should not have felt. Normally, oar-slaves would serve a period of training aboard a dockyard Liburnian with her two shallow banks of oars. Now that the Grodnims of the Green northern shore of the inner sea were carrying forward so victoriously their war against the Zairians of the Red southern shore they needed every craft they could put into commission. There was just no time to go through the protracted period of training when oar-slaves were weeded out. The vicious weeding-out process would take place in this three-banked swifter, and the dead bodies would be flung overboard. Already, after us, the batches of spare slaves were being herded down and stuffed into the holds and crannies where they would wait and suffer until required. This swifter was a good-sized vessel. There were a great number of slaves forced into her, and we were packed tightly.

The chanks, those killer sharks of the inner sea, would feed well in the wake of this swifter, whose name was *Green Magodont*.

The noise from the slaves echoed and rebounded from the wooden hull. For the moment the whip-Deldars were leaving us to our own devices. Once the oars started to come aboard they'd show us the discipline Magdag required of her oar-slaves.

The Zairian said, "My name is Fazhan ti Rozilloi, dom."

I nodded. The *ti* meant he was someone of some importance in Rozilloi. And that city was known to me, although not particularly well. . . I knew Mayfwy of Felteraz must have sad thoughts of me, still, for I had used her ill. Her daughter Fwymay had married Zargana Rozilloi — and the *na* in his name meant he was, if not the most important person of Rozilloi, then damned well high in rank.

"And your name, dom?"

Well, I'd been called Gadak for some time now and had been thinking like Gadak the Renegade. But this Fazhan ti Rozilloi was a crimson-faril, beloved of the Red, and so I deemed it expedient to revert in my allegiance to Zair. Truth to tell, I'd never seriously contemplated abandoning the cause of Zair and the Red; but recent events had been so traumatic — to use a word of later times — that I had been so near to total shock as to be indifferent to anything. Tipping that damned Chulik into the water had been not only a gesture of defiance, it signaled some return of the lump of suffering humanity that was me to the old, tearaway, evil, vicious, and intemperate Dray Prescott I knew myself at heart still to be.

“I am Dak,” I said. I did not embroider. I did not wish to involve myself in dreaming up fresh names, and I had taken the name Dak in honor from a great and loyal fighting-man upon the southern shore. And, too, I was growing sick of names, sick of titles. This is, of course, a stupid frame of mind. Names are vital, names are essential, particularly upon Kregen, where so much is different and yet so much is the same as on this Earth four hundred light-years through interstellar space. . .

This is true of names. As to titles, I had collected a hatful already in my life upon Kregen and was to gather many more, as you shall hear. Of them all I had valued being a Krozair of Zy the most. And the Krozairs of Zy had ejected me, thrown me out, branded me Apushniad. No, I would not tell this Fazhan I had once been Pur Dray, the Lord of Strombor, the most feared Krozair upon the Eye of the World. Anyway, he wouldn't believe me. Since I had taken a dip in the Sacred Pool of Baptism with my Delia I was assured of a thousand years of life and a remarkable ability to recuperate rapidly from wounds. This Fazhan betrayed the usual ageless look of Kregans who have arrived at maturity; he could be anywhere from twenty to a hundred and fifty or so.

“Dak?” He looked at me, and then away. Then, seeing that we were to be oar-comrades, he said, “I salute you, Dak, for dumping that Zair-forsaken Chulik in the water.”

He made no mention of Jikai in the matter, which pleased me. Too many people are too damned quick to

talk of some trifle as a Jikai. A Jikai is a great and resounding feat of arms, or some marvelous deed — the word should not be cheapened.

“And I am Rukker na—” boomed the Kataki, and stopped, and looked at us, with his evil lowering face dark with suppressed passion. “Well, since you are Tailless Dak, I am Rukker.” He lifted one massive hand. “But I shall not like it if you call me Tailless Rukker.”

The recovery had been swift. But he’d said *na*, and then checked. Whatever place he came from, he was its lord.

Carrying on his recovery, the Kataki swung his low-browed, furrowed face toward the Xaffer, looking past Fazhan and me. Katakis usually grease and oil and curl their black hair so that it hangs beside their faces. Their flaring nostrils curl above gape-jawed mouths. Their eyes are wide-spaced and yet narrow, brilliant and cold. They are not apim, like me; they are diffs. Perhaps their greatest physical peculiarity and strength is the tail each one can sinuously twirl into vicious speedy action, and with a curved razor-sharp blade strapped to its tip bring slicing and slashing and darting in against his opponent. No, I did not like Katakis, for they were aragorn, slave-managers, slavers, slave-masters.

“Xaffer!” roared this blow-hard Kataki, his dark-browed face fierce. “And what is your accursed name?”

The Xaffer surprised me.

“You are a Kataki,” he said in that whispering, hushed, timid voice of a Xaffer. “Your devil’s race has brought great misery and anguish to my people. I hate

Katakis. My name is Xelnon and I shall not speak to you again.”

The Zairian shifted his eyes from the Xaffer to look at me, shocked. I looked at the Katakis, this ferocious Rukker. The blood pulsed in his face, veins stood out on his low forehead, his eyes looked murderous. “Cramph! Were we not chained you would not speak thus! Mark me well, Xelnon the onker! Your day will come and I shall—”

“What, Rukker,” I said loudly. “You will beat and lash and enslave him, as you are undoubtedly a Katakis and that is what Katakis are so good at doing.”

His shocked gaze shifted to me. We sat next to each other, with the steps of the bench lifting him a little higher than me so as to reach the loom. He glared at me. His chains rattled.

“You — apim—” He swallowed down and his thin lips showed spittle.

“Do not fret, Rukker the Katakis. Your tail is safe from me. If you do not cause me trouble.”

He bellowed then, raving. I kept a sharp eye on him, for I knew a little of chain fighting by slaves, and I had no desire to be strangled or have an eye flicked out. He reached down to grab me with his right hand, for we sat on the larboard side. This confrontation was no sudden thing; it was long overdue. He tried to seize me about the neck, for the iron rings had been removed after our walk here and tame-slaves were going about with pots of salve made into paste to ease us. The blood on my neck and back and chest was congealing. If he did as he

intended he'd not only open up the sore places, he'd squeeze my throat into my neckbones, and if he did not choke me, he'd give me a damned sore throat and head. So I took his right hand with my left. His face convulsed. Struggling silently, for a space we held, he pressing on and I resisting him.

He glared with a mad ferocity upon me. Vicious and feral and violent are Katakis. This one thought to overpower me and subdue me and punish me for my words. Yes, Katakis are all those terrible things. Confident in his power Rukker bore down. It was his misfortune that the man upon whom he happened to choose to release his own frustrations labored under torments he knew nothing of. It was his hard luck, as a vicious, feral, and violent man, to meet a man who was more vicious, more feral, and more violent. I do not say these things in any foolish state of inverse pride. I know my sins. But, here, violence met violence and recoiled.

His eyes widened. I bore back harder, twisted, and so brought my right hand up to block the savage blow of his left. As for his killing tail — I stomped it flat against the planking of the deck, whereat he yelled.

“Desist, Rukker, or I shall break your arm off.”

“You — apim — I'll — I'll—”

“Do not think I would not do it, Rukker. You are a Katakis. Do not forget what that means.”

“I do not forget, you rast—”

I twisted a little more, and as his left fist still looped around at me, I took his wrist in my right hand and jerked most savagely.

He let a gasp of air puff past those thin twisted lips.

“You cramph! You’ll pay—”

A lash struck down across his broad naked back and he snapped upright. A whip-Deldar, sweating in his green, his dark face sullen, lifted for another blow. “What’s this?” he shouted. “I’ll discipline you — you—”

“Whip-Deldar,” I said, speaking quickly and loudly enough to make my words penetrate. “There is no trouble here. We were testing the height and the stretch of the loom.”

The odd thing was that our motions might have been taken for a practice evolution. The whip-Deldar lowered his lash. He looked tired, tired and spiteful.

“You dare talk to me, you rast!”

“Only to save your trouble, whip-Deldar. The oar-master would not welcome damaged oar-slaves now.”

The whip-Deldar glowered, flicking the lash. He might be a poor specimen of humanity anywhere, let alone in evil Magdag, but the sense of what I said penetrated his sluggish brain. He gave me a cut with the lash, stingingly, just to show me who was in charge here, and went off, cursing roundly.

I do not laugh, as you know, nor smile readily. I kept my ugly old face as hard as a bower anchor as Rukker, the Katak, said, “He was flogging me, not you, apim.”

“If you wish him to continue I will call him back for you.”

“By the Triple Tails of Targ the Untouchable! Were you a Katak I would understand!”

Fazhan leaned forward and looked up past me. “But for this apim Dak, you would have been beaten, Rukker.”

“I know it. But it would be best if you did not mention it again.”

“Ah,” said Fazhan ti Rozilloi, “but it is worth the telling, by Zantristar the Merciful!”

The swifter shook and a shudder passed through her fabric. In the next instant, to the accompaniment of distant hailing above decks, we all understood we had pushed off from the wharf. A long, slow gentle rocking made us all aware that we had been cast off into our new life. Until the oars were in, the swifter would possess this gentle rocking motion, for she was of large enough build to remain steady in the water without her wings.

Rukker the Katakai and Fazhan ti Rozilloi glared for a space longer at each other, then I stuck my old carved beak head between them and said, “If we are to pull together it will be easier if we do not try to fight one another all the time.”

Rukker nodded. He was a man accustomed to instant decision.

“You say you understand these infernal things. Tell me.”

“You have never sailed in a swifter?”

“Aye, a few times. But I sat in the captain’s cabin and drank wine and the way of the vessel did not concern me.”

“It concerns you now,” said Fazhan.

“Aye, that is why I would learn of it.”

“All you need to know,” I said, and I spoke heavily, “is that you will pull the oar, and go on pulling the oar, until you are dead. All else will mean nothing.”

“Where are these oars, then?”

“We are being towed out from the cothon through the narrow channel. It is too narrow otherwise. Once in the outer harbor we will receive our oars from the oar-hulk. They will arrive soon enough, bringing misery and torment, and for some, a happy release in death.”

Rukker mused on this. His dark Kataki face scowled.

“You appear to me to be a man, Dak — of sorts. I will allow you to assist me in my escape.”

Fazhan gurgled a little cynical laugh; but it was not a laugh a refined lady would recognize. Oar-slaves do not often have either the opportunity or the reason for laughing.

We bumped and the swifter rocked, and then we bumped again and remained still. We had been moored up to the oar-hulk. Noises began from forward, spurting through the confined space, hollow, echoing. Hangings and scrapings, and at least two shrill yells. It was common for a slave to be crushed or injured when the oars came inboard. We waited for our turn and we did not have long to wait, for we pulled six oars from the bows. A sudden shaft of suns-light speared through the oar port as the sliding cover went back. Sailors busied themselves — hard, adventurous, callous men — hauling the oars in, adjusting the set and balance, cursing the slaves who brought down the round lead counterweights. The oar shoved past Xelnon the Xaffer,

past Fazhan ti Rozilloi, past me, Dak, and so past Rukker the Kataki. The loom end was inserted into the rowing frame, which was hinged up to receive it, and locked, and the counterweight was hung on and locked in its turn. The four of us sat, looking at that immense bar of wood before us. The carpenters followed to affix the manette, which we would grasp, for the loom itself was of too great a girth.

I had noticed immediately on boarding the swifter that she smelled clean. She smelled of vinegar and pungent ibroi and soap.

She was not a new vessel, this *Green Magodont*; but she had been in for a refit and was now as sweetly clean as she would ever be. All that was about to change.

Amid the usual barrage of curses and yells, slaves came running along the grated decks and hurled sacks of straw and ponsho fleeces at us. Men scrabbled for well-filled sacks, for fleeces that did not appear too mangy. Rukker hauled in half a dozen and the slave yelped; Rukker knocked him back and examined sack after sack. He took a fine-filled one and as he discarded the others, I snatched up the best and threw them along to Xelnon and Fazhan. The fleeces were likewise gone through, and the slave, jittering with fear, reviled by the other oar-slaves opposite us, squealed at Rukker to let him have back those he did not want.

“Quiet, kleesh,” said Rukker, and the slave shook.

A marine, his shortsword out, walked up along the grated deck and I looked forward, not without interest, to a little action; but Rukker hurled the last sack back

and cursed. The marine chivied the slave along and he went off to throw the fleeces down to the next set of oar-slaves. We were all busy spreading the fleeces over the sacks, arranging them. Already I had nipped three nits under my thumbnail. *Green Magodont* was no longer a clean swifter. I glanced up at Rukker.

“You were allowed the pick of the sacks, Rukker, because you have a tail. I understand that. But do not think to take the best of everything the four of us are issued with.”

He might have bellowed his head off then; but a whip-Deldar ran along, not hitting us but cracking his lash in the air with a sound most doleful and menacing, violent and frightening. He impressed us poor naked slaves, he impressed us mightily.

“Silence!” shouted the whip-Deldar. “The first man to speak will get ol’ snake — I promise you.”

I did not speak.

No one else spoke.

We had learned one elementary lesson we would not forget.

A deal of confused shouting bellowed down from aloft. I, who had been a swifter captain of the inner sea, could understand what was going on — but only to some extent. I knew these oar-slaves with me on the lowest tier, the thalamite bank, were raw, untrained, useless. I could not understand why the oar-master had ordered our oars fixed and threaded — that is, placed in the rowing frames. Presently, amid a deal of noise and confusion, fresh sailors and slaves poured below and

took the oars from the rowing frames, slid the oar-port covers back, and we all had our first lesson in pushing the oar looms forward so that the looms lay as close to the hull as they would go, which brought the outer portions and the blades close to the outside hull. The thalamites were not trusted to pull yet, and *Green Magodont* would begin her journey with only the two upper banks pulling.

We heard the orders, the whistles, the sudden deathly silence in the ship. Then the preparatory whistle, and then the twin beat from the drum-Deldar, the bass, and tenor, thumping out. We heard the creak of the upper oars, the splash of water as they dug in. We all felt the swifter surge forward, slowly at first, but gathering momentum. All rocking ceased and the swifter struck a straight, sure path out through the harbor, out past the Pharos, out from vile Magdag into the Eye of the World. Wherever we were going, we were on our way.

Chapter Two

Oar-slaves in the swifterns of Magdag

We rowed.

We oar-slaves pulled at the massively heavy looms of the oars, up and back and down and forward and up and back and down and. . .

A week. Give a galley slave a week, more or less, and he will be either dead or toughened enough to last another week, and then another, and then perhaps, if his stamina lasts, to live. If the existence of a galley slave can be called living.

The Xaffer, Xelnon, lasted five days.

He would have died sooner, but *Green Magodont* caught a wind swinging out of Magdag and so we slaves were spared much of the continuous hauling that is the killer. But he died.

He did not tell us what he had done to be condemned to the galleys. Usually Xaffers are given the lighter tasks of slaves, household chores, secretarial work, record-

keeping. Most often they, along with Relts, are employed as stylors. But he was here, with us, slaving, and then he was a mere cold corpse, blood-marked by the lash, a bundle to be thrown overboard to the chanks.

A Rapa took his place, brought up from the slavehold. His gray vulturine face with that brooding, aggressive hooked beak and the bright feathers rising around his crest fitted in with the stark horror of our situation.

We spoke rarely. We learned the Rapa's name was Lorgad, that he had got himself stinking drunk on dopa and had run amok in the mercenaries' billets. Exactly what he had then done he did not say, presumably because he could no longer remember. He pulled on the loom with us and we labored and sweated in the stink and dank darkness of our floating prison.

On the day after Xelnon died we beached up on a small island, one of the many small islands that smother the larger maps of the Eye of the World with measlespots. The swifter was hauled up stern first onto a beach of silver sand. I have said that the old devil the teredo worm is nowhere as fierce on Kregen as upon Earth and often the swifters are not sheathed in copper or lead. Often, especially in the cases of the larger types, they are. *Green Magodont* was not sheathed, and so despite her size her captain had her hauled up out of the water as often as he could. The task was formidable; but we slaves, still chained, were flogged up and over the side and so set to work hauling the drag ropes.

The island glimmered under the distant golden fire of two of the moons of Kregen; the Twins, eternally revolving one about the other, smiled down upon our agony.

We were herded back into the swifter and chained up, for in the ship lay the best prison for us.

In the normal course of events the gangs on a loom remained together in duties of this kind; but the captain of *Green Magodont*, although undeniably a cruel and vicious overlord of Magdag, was of the school that liked to rotate his oar-slaves between tiers. Once the agonies of learning how to pull correctly to the rhythm of the whistles and drums and to conduct the necessary evolutions smartly and promptly had been hammered into our skulls and muscles, we thalamites of the lower tier were rotated to the center tier, where the zygités pulled.

Green Magodont carried on the short-keel system eight men to her upper bank, six to her middle, and four to her lower. We did not aspire to the center tier until some time; but, at last, we were deemed sufficiently proficient to be rotated.

We had left that island where we had gone ashore to work, and since then, although the swifter had touched land each night, we had not gone ashore again. As to our journey and its direction, apart from my guess that we were headed southwest, I knew nothing. Oar-slaves are not consulted on the conning of the ship.

“Will they really let us onto the middle deck, Dak?”

“Once we can be trusted to pull correctly, Fazhan. Aye.”

Rukker the Katakai grunted and turned to find a more comfortable position, his tail curled up and looped over his shoulder. We rested this night, as we rested any time, chained to our bench. “Do we ever get up onto the upper deck?”

“Only when we are considered fully proficient.” I did not want to talk. More and more I had been thinking about my daughter Velia, of the tragically short time I had known her and known she was my daughter, of the manner of her death. “I can tell you that if I captained this damned swifter this loom would remain in the thalamites forever.”

“You!” scoffed Rukker. “Captain a swifter!”

“I said *if*.”

“And yet you know about Magdaggian swifthers, Dak.” Fazhan had lost much of the scarlet in his face; he had thinned and fined down on the food we ate, on the daily exercise. “I was a swifter ship-Hikdar before we were taken. But I know little about Grodnim swifthers.”

“I have been oar-slave before,” I said, and left it at that.

Fazhan grunted and turned his head on his arms, spread on the loom. But Rukker showed instant interest. “So you escaped?”

“Aye.”

“Then you will certainly assist me when we escape.”

“I escaped,” I said, “when we were taken by a swifter from Sanurkazz. A swifter captained by a Krozair of Zy.”

I said this deliberately. I wanted to probe Fazhan — and Rukker, too. For the martial and mystic Order of Krozairs of Zy is remote from ordinary men on the Eye of the World, strange, and dedicated to Disciplines almost too demanding for frail human flesh.

Fazhan turned his head back quickly.

“The Krozairs!” he said. He breathed the word as a man might in talking about demigods.

The Rapa, Lorgad, snuffled and hissed. “Krozairs! We fought them — aye, and we thrashed them.”

“Thrashed?” I said.

The Rapa passed a hand over his feathers, smoothing them. “Well — it was a hard fight. But King Genod’s new army won — as it always wins.”

“But one day it will be smashed utterly!” said Fazhan. His voice blazed in the night, and surly voices answered from the other rowing benches in the gloom, bidding the onker be quiet so tired men might sleep.

I had learned what little Rukker would tell me of his story, and I knew Fazhan’s, that he had been a ship-Hikdar in a swifter from Zamu. Yet he was not a Krozair Brother, not even of the Krozairs of Zamu. As for Rukker, as he said himself, he was essentially a land soldier, and knew nothing of ships and the sea. As a mercenary he had hired out his — And then he had paused, and corrected himself, and said he had been hired out as a paktun to Magdag. I knew, if I was right and he was a gernu, a noble, that he had taken a force of his own country to fight for Magdag for pay. Now this was, to me, passing strange, for my previous experience

with Katakis had been of them as slave-masters, slavers who bartered human flesh. There were a number of races of diffs living up in the northeastern seaboard of the Eye of the World, notably around the Sea of Onyx. Rukker had said he came from an inland country there, a place he had once referred to as Urntakkar, that is, North Takkar. He did not refer to it again.

I said, "Have you heard of Morcra?"

"No."

So I let that lie, also.

But if the Katakis were moving out from their traditional business and becoming mercenaries, then the future looked either darker and more horrible, or scarlet and more interesting, depending on the hardness of your muscles and the keenness of your sword.

We sailed in company with other swifters; just how many we thalamites in our stinks and gloom could not know. We anchored for the night and then took a wind and so rested the next day, and on the following day, the wind fell and we pulled. That was a hard day. Another ten slaves were hurled overboard, either dead or flogged near to death. Those who remained hardened, and the replacements from the slave-hold were those who failed.

That night we once again hauled *Green Magodont* out of the water. I saw six other swifters being hauled up, and also there were signs of a wooden stockade being constructed on the shore into which the slaves might be herded. I knew that Magdag, no less than every other Green city of the northern shore, was utilizing every possible sinew of war. Slaves were now becoming

valuable, even though many a poor devil had been captured by the new army of King Genod, the genius at war.

In the stockade only a few fights broke out. Most of us wanted to stretch out — and what a luxury that was! — and sleep. I did not stay awake long. The four of us — for the Rapa, Lorgad, was accepted by us as an oarcomrade — slept together. The morning came all too soon, and with many groans and stretching of stiff joints, we rose and were doused down with a vile concoction of seawater and pungent ibroi, and then we gobbled the food thrown to us. This was a mash of cereal, a torn hunk of stale bread, and a handful of palines. For the palines everyone gave thanks to whatever gods they revered.

The whip-Deldars stalked among us, the lashes licking hungrily, sorting us out amid a great clanking of chains.

“I believe,” said Fazhan, staring about, “that we are to go up to be zygites this day.”

It certainly looked like it. The dust from the stockade compound rose thickly as hundreds of pairs of naked feet stamped. The blue of mountains rose inland, and the sky showed that hint of fair weather that heartens the hard-bitten soul of a sailorman. I wanted no trouble. We had been working on our chains. I had experience to go on. The Kataki had the experience of the master slaver, the man to whom the guiles of slaves seeking escape were known as a part of his business. And Fazhan and Lorgad worked at our directions. So I wanted us to stay together, and not to create problems.

We waited in long rows, our chains clanking as men shifted position. The Suns of Scorpio rose over the hills and flooded down their mingled streaming light. I stretched and felt my muscles pull. I was in superb physical shape; but I could have done with more food, as could all of us. A commotion broke out among the slaves to our right.

I heard a bull voice bellowing, and abruptly a whip-Deldar catapulted into the air, turning over and over, his whip thonged to his wrist whirling. He landed flat on his back amid a splash of dust. The slaves cheered. The smashing voice shouted:

“By Zogo the Hyrwhip! You zigging cramph! I’ll break your back! Duh, I’ll rip your guts out and—”

Dragging the other three, I was running.

The bellow smashed out again, louder, roaring with fury.

“Duh — by Zair! You’ll not walk again, rast!”

“Hold, Dak — what is it?” And, “You rast, haul back!” And, “By Rhapaporgolam the Reaver of Souls, you are mad!”

The three of them, I hauled along. The dust, the yells, the confusion, the stink . . . I bundled headlong into the thick of the confusion.

A second whip-Deldar screamed with gap-toothed mouth, glaring unbelievably at his left arm, which dangled with broken bones protruding pinkish white. Slaves stumbled out of my way. I bashed on to the center and there — standing like a mountain, like a

mammoth beset by wolves, a boloth beset by werstings — stood Duhrra.

His bald head already grew a bristly fuzz like all of us. His dangling scalplock had gone. His naked body showed all the splendid musculature of the wrestler. His idiot-seeming face was contorted into a hideous scowl, and I sighed, for Duhrra was normally the most peaceable of men unless someone upset him. Once riled he was like to tear your head off. On the ground at his feet and chained to him lay a young man. A youth; barely come to his full growth, his body showed the promise of a superb physique. He was not unconscious, but a thread of blood ran from one nostril.

I threw a Rapa away, chopped a couple of apims, kicked a Brokelsh, and so grabbed Duhrra by the arm. He whirled, ready to smash my face in, and I said, low and hard, “Duhrra! Calm down, bring the boy, come with me. *Jump!*”

He picked up the boy in a single fluid motion of that massive body, and we turned and plunged back into the throng of shouting, excited, dust-stirring slaves. I had to break the neck of the whip-Deldar who reared up, flailing his whip with his right hand, his broken left arm dangling. He had seen us. I knew what would happen if we were detected. As for the other whip-Deldar — I saw a Brokelsh jump full on him and guessed his backbone would not stand the strain.

With Rukker, Fazhan, and Lorgad trailing on the chain, with Duhrra carrying the youth at my side, we bashed our way through the mob until we reached the

line as yet undisturbed. I watched for guards, whip-Deldars, and anyone who showed too much interest.

“Put the boy down, Duhrra.”

I bent and scooped up dust, spit on it, wadded it.

“Stand up, lad! Hold yourself straight!”

I shoved the chunk of spittle-wadded dust up his bleeding nostril and then wiped away the blood, licking my fingers. When he looked presentable, and we had knocked the dust from one another — all of us — I said to them all: “Stand and look stupid. By Zair! That should not be difficult! We know nothing of the disturbance.”

“Duh — Dak—” said Duhrra.

“Quiet, you fambly. Tell me later.”

Rukker, the Kataki, said, “You think fast, Dak, for an apim.”

“Shut your black-fanged wine-spout, Rukker. Here come the guards.”

We all stood there, in our chains, and looked suitably stupid. There was a considerable quantity of confusion lower down, and shouting, and the sound of the whips lashing. Some of the slaves were too stupid in all reality to run off. When order was restored and we were sorted out, the six of us were herded back into *Green Magodont* and chained down in the middle tier. We were to be zygites, six to a loom, and if the oar-master of the swifter discovered he had two slaves too many, he would give thanks to Green Grodno and smile. As for the swifter from which Duhrra and the lad had come, her oar-master would curse and rave — and I felt damned sure that the oar-master of *Green Magodont* would

continue to say nothing and smile even more broadly. As the quondam first lieutenant of a seventy-four I knew only too well the avariciousness of shellbacked sailormen in the matter of ship supplies — and in the Eye of the World of Kregen, ship supplies included slaves.

Green Magodont, as I had previously observed, was broad enough to accept six oarsmen abreast on a loom. Above our heads on the thranites bank the men were arranged to push and pull, the eight men forming a convenient pattern. This tended to cramp them a little more than us lower tiersmen; but the shipwrights of Magdag had done their sums well so that the leverage and power required on the differently sized oars evened out. So we sat at the loom of the zygite oar. The six of us, from the apostis seat, the outer seat, were: Lorgad the Rapa, Fazhan ti Rozilloi, Vax, Dak, Duhrra of the Days, and Rukker the Kataki.

“Duh — master,” Duhrra had said to me as we sorted ourselves out, “I should take the rowing frame.”

He was fractionally bigger than Rukker.

I said, “Fambly! With that newfangled claw of yours! Next to the gangway! Where you will get lashed more easily!”

“Yes, master.”

“And, for the sweet sake of Mother Zinzu the Blessed! I am not your master!”

“No, master.”

As always when arguing with Duhrra on this point — for he had attached himself to me on the southern

shore, when he had lost his right hand, and since then we had had a few skirmishes together and were good comrades — I gave up the argument in a kind of helpless mirth. Even an oar-slave may feel that at times, in the ludicrousness of his position; for, to all the names of the gods in two worlds, it is not a position a sane man can regard without recourse to the black humor of absurdity.

Some bustle attended our departure, and we were forced to throw our backs into the work. The captain was evidently in the devil of a hurry. The stockades and the cooking fires were left on the shore so we guessed we'd be back tonight. We pulled. We heaved up on the oar, those on the gangway sides of the long rows of men shoving up, standing up, and then with all the weight of the body and bunched muscles, hurling themselves frenziedly backward onto the bench. The hard wood had to be covered by the straw-stuffed sacks and the ponsho fleeces. Had they not been we would have been red raw in no time, and unfit for rowing. This is not a luxury the overlords of Magdag extend to their oar-slaves, in the matter of ponsho fleeces and sacks; it is a matter of economics and slave-management.

The swifter squadron pulled about, it seemed to me, quartering in different directions. I guessed the courses were not set at random. We either searched for another ship, or we wasted a deal of energy. Nothing — apart from the eternal damned pulling — occurred, and we eventually and to our surprise heard the terminal whistles and the final double drumbeat. The oars lifted

and were looped and held, locked in the rowing frames, and we slaves slumped, exhausted.

Before lethargy could drug us into stupefaction, we were flogged out and herded up into the job of hauling the swifterns out of the water. The wood from which swifterns are built must have been placed on Kregen either by a god or a devil. This fibre, as I have said, possesses remarkable strength for a remarkable lightness. We would scarcely have shifted the ships had they been built of lenk. But fibre gives a large vessel the shrewd feather-lightness of a much flimsier vessel. As I say, fibre was put on Kregen either by a god or a devil — a god, in order to lighten the drudgery of slaves, or a devil so that the damned ships could be manhandled out of the water at all.

At last, fed, exhausted, we flopped down on the hard ground of the stockade and slept.

If anyone had wished to tell the story of his life to me at that time, and paid me handsomely to listen, I'd have consigned him to the Ice Floes of Sicce, and turned over and slept.

The next day the swifterns remained high on the beach and we oar-slaves sprawled in the stockade, still chained, but able to stretch out and rest our abused bodies.

Parties of hunters went inland toward the mountains and later as the suns began their curve toward the horizon we slaves were issued with steaming chunks of vosk. How we grabbed and stuffed and ate! Provisioning swifterns is invariably a complicated process, and the

large numbers of men involved demand ready access to vast quantities of food. Usually we subsisted on the mash — there are several varieties — the base of which consists of mergem, that rich plant stuffed with protein and vitamins and iron that has the blessed quality of fortifying a man against his daily toil. But for mergem, which provides so much nourishment in so small a bulk, we would have been a gaunt and hungry crew and quite unfitted to haul on our looms. Onions were provided — how Zorg and I had debated the dissection of a pair of onions! — and some cheese and crusts and palines.[\[1\]](#) The palines helped keep the insanity levels within toleration.

We devoured the boiled vosk with the voraciousness of leems. Then we lay back with bloated bellies, burping contentedly, to sleep the night away.

Duhrra at last found time to tell me what had happened since we had stirred up the camp of King Genod's army and stolen his airboat. He had had to be overpowered by the Zairians from Zandikar when I did not return in time, for he would have gone to find me. He spoke of this with some spirit of contempt for himself that he had been thwunked on the back of the head when he should have been alert not only against the cramphs of Green Grodnims but also, apparently, against the Red Zandikarese.

“When I woke up, Dak — duh! We were flying in the air!”

“You cannot blame the Hikdar — Ormol ti Zab, I believe his name was — he had a duty very plain to him.”

“Maybe so. But we flew away and left you.”

He and the lad Vax had shipped back from Zandikar and their vessel had been taken. It was becoming more and more dangerous for any vessel of the Red to venture into the western parts of the inner sea these days. The Grodnims had placed swifter squadrons at sea, which carried all before them. Only a very slim coincidence had brought us together again, and to Duhrra it was absolutely inevitable that we should meet up once more. As for Vax, he told me the youth was a fine lad, and potentially a good companion; although he would swear so dreadfully about his father, and Duhrra was strongly of the opinion that if Vax hadn't run away from home to escape the continual beatings, he'd have killed the old devil. Or, so Duhrra believed.

I gave him a brief — a very brief — résumé of what had happened to me after we'd parted. He expressed a desire to twist Gafard's neck a little. We had both been employed by Gafard, the King's Striker, the Sea Zhantil, who was the hateful King Genod's right-hand man, when we'd been renegades, as Gafard himself was a renegade. When I told Duhrra that the Lady of the Stars had, at last, been kidnapped by King Genod's men, he thumped his left fist against the dirt and swore. When I told him that the Lady of the Stars was dead, callously hurled from the back of a fluttrell by the king when the saddle-bird had been injured, and Genod thought

himself about to die, Duhrra simply sat on the ground. He ran a little dust through his fingers onto the dust of the ground. His head was bowed.

At last, he said, "I shall not forget."

I did not tell Duhrra of the Days that this great and wonderful lady, who had been called his Heart, his Pearl, by Gafard, and who had loved him in return, was my own daughter Velia, princess of Vallia.

My Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, waited for me in my island Stromnate of Valka, that beautiful island off the main island of Vallia. I yearned to return to her. Yet I was under an interdiction. Until I had once more made myself a member of the Order of Krozairs of Zy I would not be allowed to leave the Eye of the World. Whether or not it was the Star Lords or the Savanti who chained me here, I did not know, although Zena Iztar had indicated it was not the work of the Star Lords. Well, I would become a Krozair of Zy once more and escape from the inner sea and return to Valka. Before I did that I fancied I would bring this evil king Genod to justice. So, having done all these marvelous and wonderful feats and proved just how great a man I was, I would go home. I would go home and race up the long flight of stairs in the rock from the Kyro of the Tridents, leap triumphantly onto the high terrace of my palace of Esser Rarioch overlooking the bay and Valkanium and I would clasp my Delia in my arms again. Oh, yes. I would do all this. And then — and then I would have to tell her that her daughter Velia was dead.

It is no wonder that on this dreadful occasion I found less thrusting desire to go back to Valka and Delia than I'd ever experienced before. I must return. I must tell my Delia and then comfort her as she would comfort me. It was not just a duty, it was what love prompted. But it was hard, abominably hard.

Duhrra was telling me about his new hand and I roused myself. I had to plan and think. My thoughts had run ahead. Here we were, still chained oar-slaves in a swifter of Magdag.

“. . . locks with a twist so cunning you'd never know. Look.”

I looked. Duhrra's right stump had been covered with a flesh-colored extension that looked just like a wrist and the hard mechanical hand looked not unlike a real hand. He could press the fingers into different positions with his left hand. He kept it hooked so that he could haul on the manette of the oar loom. I felt it and the hardness was unmistakable.

“That's a steel hand, Duhrra — or iron.”

The doctors of the inner sea are not, in general, quite as skilled as those of the lands of the Outer Oceans. They are good at relieving pain and can amputate with dexterity. But I did not think they were capable of producing prosthetics of this quality. Duhrra had seen Molyz the Hook Maker and this kind of work would have been quite beyond him. Duhrra had been attended to by the doctors attached to the Todalpheme of the Akhram, the mathematical astronomers who predicted the tides of Kregen, and they had fitted his stump with a

socket and an assortment of hooks and blades to be slotted in. But this work here was beyond them, also. Duhrra waxed eloquent for him.

“In Zandikar, it was, Dak. Right out of the blue. This lady says she can fix me up properly. Wonderful woman — wonderful. Gentle and charming and — well, you can see what she did.”

“You saw her do it?”

“No. Somehow — duh, master — I do not know! She looked into my eyes and then she laughed and told me I might leave and I looked down — and it was all done.”

“And her name, this wonderful woman?”

“She said she was the lady Izta.”

I did not answer. What was Zena Izta — whose role so far had been enigmatic in my life although I felt I owed her a very great deal — doing in thus helping Duhrra? Her machinations, I suspected, might not jibe with those of the Star Lords or those of the Savanti. She it was who had told me I might never leave the Eye of the World until I was once more a Krzy. I believed her implicitly, had not thought to question her. She, I felt, I hoped, wished me well. That would make a remarkable change here on Kregen, where I had been knocked about cruelly by Savanti and Star Lords moving behind the scenes and exerting superhuman forces. So I admired Duhrra’s new hand and thought on.

Then the selfishness of my thoughts mocked me. It was all “I” — Zena Izta could have helped Duhrra because he was Duhrra.

Tame-slaves threw in malsidges and we ate them, for they are a quality anti-scorbutic. We settled down to sleep and I had a deal to think about; but, all the same, I slept.

Sleep became a rare and precious commodity during the next couple of sennights, for we were employed pulling at night as well as day. The swifterns called at islands for short periods and then weighed again, and once again we threw our tortured bodies against the looms of the oars. Food was short and we hungered. Men began to die. I fancied Duhrra would last this kind of punishment well, and the Kataki had reserves of strength on which to call. For Fazhan ti Rozilloi the work became harder and harder; but with all the gallantry of a true crimson-faril he struggled on, refusing to be beaten. The young man Vax stuck to his work with stoical fury, sullen, with a smoldering anger in him hurtful to me. We were not flogged more than any other set on any other loom. But we lost Lorgad the Rapa. One day he could not pull any more, and the flogging lash merely made his dead body jump. He was unchained and heaved overboard, and a fresh man took his place.

He was short, and he took the apostis seat, chunky, and with a black bar look about the eyebrows, and a pug nose that was of the Mountains of Ilkenesk south of the inner sea. Yet he was a Zairian, an apim, and he contrived to give Rukker the Kataki a cunning slash with his chains as the whip-Deldars bundled him across.

Rukker bellowed and shook his chains.

I saw the chain between him and Duhrra pull taut. The chain between Duhrra and me began to pull. The link on which we had been working bent. It began to open. I cursed foully, loudly, unable to get at Rukker past Duhrra.

“Sit back, you stinking Katakaki cramph! You tailed abomination! Sit down or I’ll cave your onkerish head in!”

He swung back to glare with murderous fury at me. The whip-Deldars bashed away at the new man’s chains. Duhrra tried to sit back as well, to release the pressure on the chains. It was a moment when all hell might have broken loose.

One whip-Deldar flicked his lash — almost idly — at me and I endured it. I bellowed again, something about Katakis and rasts and tails, and whispered to Duhrra, “Tell him, Duhrra! Get the gerblish onker to sit down!”

Duhrra leaned across and his rumble would have told the whole bank if I had not started yelling with the pain of the lash. It was not altogether a fake. Vax looked at me in surprise. I yelled some more. And then Duhrra must have got the message across, for Rukker slapped himself back on the bench, whipping his tail up out of the way, and the strain came off the chain.

When the whip-Deldars had gone, he started to rumble at me, “You called me many things, Dak, and I shall not forget them—”

“You would have ruined all, Rukker. You must think and plan if you wish to escape the overlords of Magdag

and their slave-masters. Onker! I did what I did to make you sit down.”

Duhrra said, “Had you ruined our chances, Rukker, I would not have been pleased — duh — I would have been angry.”

Rukker glared at me again. Duhrra lifted the chain between us. Rukker looked.

Duhrra’s metal hand had worked hard and well. The bent link was on the point of parting. Rukker whistled.

“Well, you onker! Now do you see your foolishness?”

He did not like my tone. But he was a Katakai.

Rukker said, “I understand. I will not speak of it again.”

That was Rukker the Katakai. He had this knack of putting his own mistakes and unpleasant experiences into a limbo where he chose not to speak of them. The idea of apology never entered his ferocious Katakai head.

Chapter Three

Of Duhrra's steel hand

“Well, Dak, apim, when is it to be?”

Rukker's words whispered in his growly voice in the darkness. *Green Magodont* lay anchored somewhere or other — we oar-slaves had no idea where we were after all the comings and goings of the past days. We knew only that if we searched for a ship we had not found her.

I said, “There is the question of this Nath the Slinger.”

“I shall break his neck the moment I am free,” said Rukker, in a comfortable way, perfectly confident.

Nath the Slinger turned his pug-nosed face our way, looking up from the apostis seat, and scowled. He looked an independent sort of fellow, who would as soon knock your teeth out as pass the time of day. Rukker had not liked the slash from his chains.

“We can free the link tomorrow. But we shall not let you go, Rukker, if you—”

He bellowed at that, raising a chorus of curses from the oar-slaves about us in the darkness, weary men trying to sleep.

“You are a nurdling onker, Rukker — why not shout out and tell the captain? I am sure he will be happy to know.”

In the starlight and the golden glow of She of the Veils the zygite bank showed enough light for me to catch the look of venomous evil on Rukker’s face. But it was dark and shadowy and I could have been mistaken; I did not think I was.

“I do not wish to discuss that, Dak. If it is tomorrow night, then—”

“We will release you only if you swear to fight with us. Your quarrel with Nath the Slinger must wait.”

“I’ll rip his tail out and choke him with it!” said Nath the Slinger, in his snarly voice.

I sighed.

Anger and enmity — well, they are common enough on Kregen, to be sure. But when they interfere with my own plans I am prepared to be more angry and be a better enemy than most.

“When we have taken the swifter, you two may kill each other,” I said, pretty sharply. “And curse you for a pair of idiots.”

A voice from the bench in front whispered back.

“If you all shout a little louder—”

“We already said that,” said Fazhan nastily.

“Then we will join you. The oar-master has the keys.”

Duhrra rolled his eyes at me.

“They must think we don’t know what we’re about.”

“They are slaves like us. Now the word will be all over the slave benches. If there are white mice among the slaves we may be prevented before we strike.”

“White mice” is an expression from my own eighteenth-century Terrestrial Navy, meaning men among the hands who will inform to the ship’s corporals and the master-at-arms. On Kregen these men are called *maktikos* and may sometimes be discovered among slaves who appear and disappear without apparent reason on a tier of oars, moving from bench to bench. I had wondered if Nath the Slinger might be an informer. There were plans to insure his silence once we had begun the escape. The only way to insure our safety before that was to note if he spoke to the overseers or the whip-Deldars. I fancied an apostis-seat man would experience difficulty in that.

“Why not tonight?” rumbled Rukker. “Now?”

“The link must be further bent.”

“I would snap it with one wrench.”

“You may try — but for the sake of Zair, do it quietly.”

Rukker leaned over Duhrra. He took the chain in his right hand and tail and heaved. The link strained open, as it had when he’d surged up before; it did not break.

The veins stood out on that low forehead, his face grew black, his eyes glaring. He slackened his effort and panted. “Onker, Duhrra! Help me! You too, Dak!”

So we all pulled.

The link would not part.

“Tomorrow,” I said.

Duhrra said, "You were told, Rukker. Now do you believe?"

Rukker said, "I will not speak of that."

I did not laugh. We were going to escape, I was certain; but I could not laugh — not yet. There would be time, later. . .

The next day during those periods in which we were not called on to fling every ounce of weight against the looms, Duhrra used that marvelous hand given to him by Zena Izta. The steel fingers prised against the link like a vise. Even a steel hand that gave the hard pressure necessary would not have accomplished the bending without the superb muscles that Duhrra could bring to the task. I helped as best I could, taking the strain. We had to work surreptitiously. The bent link was camouflaged by a mixture of odoriferous compounds I will not detail and it passed the daily inspection, for a strong pull on it resulted merely in the usual melancholy clang. The whip-Deldars suspected nothing. They were always on the watch, for slavery makes a man either dully stupid or viciously frenzied.

I said to Rukker, "Once we are free, everything must be done at top speed. The slaves will yell and cry out and demand to be freed. You will not be able to silence them. They have no idea at all, in moments like that, beyond the hunger to strike off their chains. So we must be quick."

"I'll silence—"

"You will not. You will take the whip-Deldars. We need weapons. I will see to the oar-master."

“I give the orders, Dak. This is my escape.”

“I don’t give a damn whose escape it is. But if you foul it up I’ll pull your tail off myself.”

I had warned him, earlier, not to be too free with his tail. He could have upended a whip-Deldar easily enough. They did not carry the keys, as the onker of a slave in front of us had said. If a Katakai used his tail too much in a swifter the overlords would simply chop it off. I had told Rukker this. He had heeded my advice.

So we planned out our moves exactly, each man assigned his part. I listened as Nath the Slinger spoke, in short harsh sentences. I came to the conclusion that he was not a maktiko, that he might be trusted.

The day seemed endless. *Green Magodont* pulled frenziedly in one direction for a bur; then we rested on our oars for another. Then we set off at slow cruise in a different direction and suddenly we were called on for every effort, and as suddenly relieved and sent back to slow cruise. I fancied we were dodging about among islands and shooting out past a headland in a surprise attack that resulted always in nothing. If the Grodnims sought a ship, as I suspected, her captain played them well in this game of hide-and-seek. Duhrra told me he had come from the swifter *Vengeance Mortil*, where he and Vax had been the two slaves chained together to push against the loom. I did wonder if Gafard’s *Volgodont’s Fang* led this squadron, for our swifter was not the flagship.

One item I should mention here, for it would affect our manner of escape, showed how either development

was taking place in the swiftness of the inner sea, or the overlords of Magdag were running short of iron; or, very likely, were conscious of the need to lighten their galleys. There was no great chain that connected all the chains of the inboard slaves. We would have to release the locks of each set separately. This would take time. There would be no release of the locks of the great chain thus freeing all the slaves the moment the great chain had been passed through their chains. It was a factor to be figured into my calculations.

“By Zinter the Afflicted!” rasped Nath. “Is the work finished?” We lay on our oars as the gloom deepened about us and *Green Magodont* rocked gently with the evening sounds from an island nearby reaching us mutedly — the cries of birds, mostly, with occasionally the coughing roar of a beast of prey, and then, sometimes, the shrill scream of its quarry, telling us we were anchored well into the island up a river mouth. The chinks of light that streamed their opaz radiance into our prison waned as the suns sank.

“We will escape,” said Vax. He spoke seldom and he was, as we all could see, obsessed by some consuming inner torment.

“Then praise Zair,” said Fazhan. “I do not think I could last another day.” He coughed, too weakly for my liking. “My old father would weep to see me now.”

Vax let rip with a rude sound, and a coarse observation about fathers in general and his devil cramp of a father in particular. The venom in his voice gave me

hope that he would fling some of that diabolic energy into the coming fight.

“I do not care to hear you talk thus of your father—” began Fazhan. It was clear to me that Fazhan had been brought up in the best circles of Rozilloi and was, in the terminology of Earth, a gentleman, although the peoples of the inner sea have a trifle different set of gentlemen from the horters of Havilfar and the koters of Vallia.

“You did not know my rast of a sire,” said Vax, most evilly. “And neither did I, for he died just before I was born.”

This did not accord with what Duhrra believed; but it was of no moment then as the whip-Deldars ran screeching among us, lashing with their whips, and the whistles blew and the drum-Deldar crashed out his double-beat. In the gathering gloom the swifter made a last try to trap the elusive vessel that caused the Grodnims so much trouble and us oar-slaves so much agony.

Green Magodont did not catch the quarry.

“I do not know,” Vax had said as we bent to our loom, “if I wish my foul father was here with me now. I would not know if I should slay him at once and thus purge his evil crimes, or if I should allow him to live so that he might suffer as I suffer.”

“Let the rast suffer, dom,” said Nath the Slinger and then we flung ourselves into the task.

The Suns of Scorpio set in a last blaze that penetrated our prison in a mingled veil of colors and gradually died to an opaline glow. Presently the chinks of light through

the gratings took on a pinkish golden tinge as the Maiden with the Many Smiles lifted above the horizon and shone down upon us.

Duhrra kept up the work on the link. I helped.

At last I said, "You must sleep, Duhrra. We will have much to tire ourselves on the morrow."

"I am sure it will give—"

"Then all the more reason for sleeping."

We composed ourselves. Rukker's hoarse whisper, cruel and sharp in the night, pierced the darkness.

"What are you onkers doing? There is no time for sleep. Keep working, rasts, or I will—"

A whip-Deldar on watch walked along the gangway between the rowing frames and Rukker had the sense to shut up and drop his head on the loom. Although the swifter's slaves were washed out twice daily with seawater, we still stank. Our hair was growing back in bristles, giving us an outlandish appearance. The Deldar passed on, humming to himself — the stupid "Obdwa Song," it was — and Rukker lifted his head. I caught the gleam of his eyes in the slatted chinks of light from the gratings.

"Shut up, Rukker, and get some sleep. I shall see how you fight on the morrow — or before, if I decide."

"You—"

A ship is never silent. There are always the same familiar sounds, at sea or at anchor. Through that quiet threnody of water splash and creak of wood, the murmur of distant voices, I whispered, "You are becoming tiresome, Katak. I know you are a fighting-

man. Just do not keep on trying to prove it all the time. And remember who it is you fight — the overlords, and not the slaves. Dernun?”[\[2\]](#)

A marine bellowed some order or other high on the quarterdeck, and Rukker made a visible effort. His moon-shadowed face scowled with the effort as he controlled himself. “After, Dak the High-Handed,” he said. “After we have the swifter—”

“Yes, yes, go to sleep.”

I heard a low gurgle — hardly a laugh — from Vax, at my right. Duhrra was already fast asleep.

“If my evil rast of a father had been tamed by someone like you, Dak, I might have let him die under my hand, instead of letting him suffer.”

A most vicious and intemperate young man, this Vax.

Toward morning, with the innate sense of rhythm of an old sailorman that even the oddities of Kregen and the stresses of being an oar-slave could not break, I awoke. Soon Duhrra was hard at work on the link. Vax yawned when I nudged him, and bid me clear off. “Schtump!” he said, most malignantly.

“Wake up Fazhan and Nath. Jump!”

He gave me a look, all shadowed and dark, that was unmistakable. But he leaned down and gave Fazhan a crack in the ribs. When Fazhan was awake he woke Nath. We yawned, still tired; but I knew they were keyed up to the work ahead. If I have glossed over this period of my servitude as an oar-slave it is because I do not care to remember in too vivid a detail a time of great agony and fatigue upon Kregen. Suffice it to say I may

appear to be callous about serving as a slave and lax in escaping; the truth was I wanted out of that hellhole as fervently as a man dying of thirst needs water.

Duhrra let a low whispering sigh pass his lips. His powerful body eased back. The snap of metal echoed in the night

We all sat perfectly silent.

Presently, when I was satisfied no other ears had picked up that sharp snip of sound, I eased the chain off. Duhrra clawed himself up and I put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him down.

Without a word, not moving the chain that lay limply on the deck at our feet, I stood up. The gratings above let down a patterned splotching of pink and gold. The long rows of naked feet and legs of the thranites glistened in the light. Here and there the coil of a chain shone dully. A whip-Deldar approached.

Silently — silently — I eased up. The Deldar passed. In one leap, touching Rukker's bench with foot and springing on from there, I reached the central gangway. A hand clapped about the Deldar's mouth. He went limp and I eased him to the gangway.

He had a knife.

This I passed down to Rukker.

I saw the Katakis face.

"No noise, Rukker," I whispered. "Until we are all free." By all I meant the six of us on the oar. "This end is up to you, now. I'm for the oar-master and the keys."

He would have spit some surly remark; but I padded off along the gangway. The slaves slept and I did not

fear discovery from them. Only one more whip-Deldar fell before I had reached the after end of the gangway. I looked up. Up there past the thranites the little tabernacle in which the oar-master sat and blew his whistle and controlled the drum-Deldars and made sure the motive power of the swifter functioned perfectly lay in darkness. I went up like a rock grundal. The oar-master would be asleep in his cabin. The keys were neatly racked on their hooks ready to be issued to the whip-Deldars when the slaves must be taken out of the ship. I scooped them up, reading the labels, made from leather, going back down again to the zygites. From then on the process would be one of progression.

Fazhan met me on the gangway. He shook. He looked elated and yet filled with a dread fury he might not be able to control. There was no sign of Rukker or Duhrra. Vax and Nath took the keys I handed them and began to awaken the slaves.

Fazhan said, "I will go aft, Dak."

I gave him the thalamite keys. I pointed down.

"When you come up again, Fazhan, bring men who will fight with you."

"Aye, Dak."

I shooed him off. Nath was working forward. A noise and a stir began to whisper in the hollow hull of the swifter. In a few short murs all hell would break out. The time for silence was almost gone.

I started off aft again, and Vax threw his keys to a slave three benches forward. He hit the poor devil over the head and awoke him and whispered fiercely in his

ear and then clapped a hand over his mouth. I warmed to the young man. He might be intemperate and malignant in his ways, but he knew what he was doing. He looked at me. I was aware that the light was growing and that I could see him quite well.

“I will come with you, Dak. I need a sword.”

He merely echoed my own thoughts.

Together, we stole silently aft, aiming for the quarter-deck, aiming for swords, aiming to wrench this swifter from the grip of the hated overlords of Magdag.

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

Alan Burt Akers was a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer, who died in December 2005 aged eighty-four.

Bulmer wrote over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction, both under his real name and numerous pseudonyms, including Alan Burt Akers, Frank Brandon, Rupert Clinton, Ernest Corley, Peter Green, Adam Hardy, Philip Kent, Bruno Krauss, Karl Maras, Manning Norvil, Chesman Scot, Nelson Sherwood, Richard Silver, H. Philip Stratford, and Tully Zetford. Kenneth Johns was a collective pseudonym used for a collaboration with author John Newman. Some of Bulmer's works were published along with the works of other authors under "house names" (collective pseudonyms) such as Ken Blake (for a series of tie-ins with the 1970s television programme *The Professionals*), Arthur Frazier, Neil Langholm, Charles R. Pike, and Andrew Quiller.

Bulmer was also active in science fiction fandom, and in the 1970s he edited nine issues of the *New Writings in Science Fiction* anthology series in succession to John Carnell, who originated the series.

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at www.mushroom-ebooks.com, and at wikipedia.org.

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