

DRAY PRESCOT: 5

**PRINCE OF
SCORPIO**

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writing as

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A Mushroom eBook

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Dray Prescott #5

ALAN BURT AKERS

Mushroom eBooks

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CHAPTER ONE

This is the Fair borrows my Savanti sword

I, Dray Prescott, of Earth and of Kregen, once more trod the beautiful and brutal planet of my adoption, and in the engaging way of the Star Lords who had brought me here, was faced instantly with headlong action and deadly danger.

A bulky man in black leathers ran full tilt upon me, seeking to pin me to the ground with his rapier. The slender blade glistened redly in the mingled light from the twin suns of Scorpio. I do not argue when a man tries to kill me.

The guttural shouts and hoarse screams in my ears, the flickering impression of frenzied action all about me, and the black galvanic forms of men contorted in violent conflict running and stabbing and caught up in a confused melee washed around me; but the burly man with the bushy brown moustaches and the eyes of a killer lunged down fiercely upon me.

I rolled.

He cursed and dragged his blade free of the thin earth that dribbled over bare rock, swung himself forward for another essay at mounting me like a butterfly in a glass case.

Nothing else mattered in the world — either this world or the world of Earth distant four hundred light-years — beside that professional killer and his blade.

“You panval cramph!” he said as he advanced, with a little more wariness this time, a trifle of cunning evident in his clear wish to spit me as I rolled.

I shoved up on my hands, getting my feet under me, not rising on hands and knees. I was, as always when I landed on Kregen, stark naked. There were no handy weapons — a sword, a spear, a helmet — just me, Dray Prescott, naked as the day I was born.

A shrieking man ran past, his matted hair streaming, pursued by another of the killers in his black leather uniform. This screaming wretch, too, was naked, and so I reasoned that no one was surprised at my absence of clothes.

“Rast of a panval!” The killer lunged and I sprang, attempting to slip beneath the blade and so grasp him in my arms and break his back.

But he was quick. He eluded me, and a line of bright red wealed up along my thigh.

Now it was my turn to curse.

Normally I never bother to shout and curse when in action; it wastes breath and I do not need my morale boosted in this way.

“By the Black Chunkrah!” I yelled. “I’ll take your Makki-Grodno infested tripes out and wrap them around your diseased neck!”

He was coming in again as I shouted and he looked at my face. He hadn’t bothered to look before; all slaves look alike to their indifferent guards. Now he looked. He checked. He faltered in his attack in so obvious a way that I knew I was wearing that old ugly powerful look, the facial expression men say gives me the look of the devil, and I did not waste my chance.

I fended off with my left hand and sent his rapier skewering empty air skyward. I took his throat in my right hand and squeezed, then I brought my left fist down and around and under and hit him in the belly.

He would have shrieked, but no air could get past my constricting fingers.

He wriggled and flailed and tried to shorten his blade to stab me in the back, but I glared into his eyes with what I know is a wild and maniacal stare habitual to me when someone is trying to kill me, and I choked him and flung him down like a harvested sheaf of grain. I took his rapier. His left-hand dagger swung still at his waist; of what need had he of main-gauche against an unarmed slave?

With the weapons in my fists I sprang up, and at a half-crouch, ready for the next fool to show up, I surveyed the scene.

The bare rocks, with their thin scattering of dirt cover in which straggly beach-grasses and thorn-ivy struggled to grow here and there, led down to a shaly

beach. Scattered along the beach an enormous mass of timbers, bales, bundles, ropes, and spars indicated a shipwreck. At first I thought the naked, screaming running men and women had been oar-slaves, but what was left of the vessel did not match my knowledge either of a swifter of the Eye of the World or a swordship of the Sunset Sea.

A fellow rolling with muscle, vociferous, authoritarian, yelled and waved his rapier. "Round 'em all up, you calsanys! Every last one of the Pandrite-benighted panvals."

Like the other guards he was clad in black leathers, and tall black boots. Like them he wore beneath the leather tunic a garment whose sleeves covered his arms with bands of red and black. He wore a helmet, narrow-brimmed at the sides and curled up at the fore and aft brim, after the fashion of a morion. His face was congested, bloated, full of annoyance that his command had broken down in what to him was clearly a most messy business.

I looked at the sea — to me, then, an unknown sea — and felt the deep longing for the fresh sweep of the breeze and the clean feel of a keel beneath me scudding through the waves. Then I advanced on this man, this leader of men who slaughtered unarmed men and women as they shrieked and begged for mercy.

The jagged boulders beneath my feet felt decidedly uncomfortable after my sojourn on Earth wearing decent shoes, but I have spent most of my life barefoot, and I took little notice. The Star Lords, this time,

evidently had asked a very great deal of me. As always I had been dumped down on Kregen naked and defenseless, and as always a crisis situation was presented to me. This time I had been flung headfirst right slap into the middle of the action.

I jumped down off the rocks onto the beach and for a moment the big ruffian was hidden from me by contorting bodies. A girl screamed right at my feet and I looked down and to my left. She sprawled on the shaly beach, and I saw that the chains between the fetters on her ankles had tripped and brought her down. A black-clad guard was quite callously, quite intentionally, preparing to drive his rapier through her stomach.

I bent and with the main-gauche slewed a scatter of the shale into his face. He cursed and sprang back. He saw me. His main-gauche came out with the practiced ease of the fighting-man, and I knew I would have to take him first.

He tried to circle me. That was a waste of time — of my time, for his was going to finish here and now.

A second guard ran across with a four-foot-long javelin and hurled it at me. I swayed and the missile hissed past. The second drew both his blades. The girl lay, staring up with wide eyes; fear had drugged her emotions, so that she could no longer weep or cry out.

I wanted to get over this fight quickly. There were well over a hundred naked men and women in chains, and something like fifteen or twenty guards methodically butchering them. The two split up, to take me from left and right.

I have fought many times, and no doubt will fight many more times. These two were fair to middling examples of rapier men, which meant that, combined, they added up to a combination that could always take the better single man. I just had to be better than both.

They both succumbed, one after the other, to timed thrusts.

The shipwreck, the black shale beach, the susurrations of that unknown sea, the black rocks, and the evil thorn-ivy bushes coalesced into the backdrop for wild action and devilish murder. I dispatched two more guards. I could hear a roaring and a raging nearer the scattered timbers of the wreck and I ran toward the focus of the sounds, dropping another guard as I ran.

On the beach the big bull-roarer of a guard captain was down. He sat on the black shale looking stupidly at the stump of his left arm. The red and black sleeved arm lay on the ground at his side, still with the hand clutching his dagger.

Three other guards were backtracking rapidly. I looked at the man facing them, and I felt a painful and thrilling thump of blood from my heart tingle all through my body.

Oh, yes, I recognized who that young man must be!

Fair and open of face, with smooth blond hair, and eyes of an icy-blue, he fought with a grace and a delicacy that warmed my heart. Young, strong, confident, bold, he weaved a net of glittering steel before him, and, one, two, three, down went those guards, gouting blood.

He wore soft leathers cincturing his waist and drawn up between his legs, the whole held in position by a wide belt the buckle of which gleamed dully gold. On his left arm he wore a stout leather bracer. He wore soft leather gloves. On his feet he wore leather hunting boots. I had worn that gear once, myself, in the long ago. . .

And his sword. . .

Oh, yes, I felt all the strife and evil of two worlds flowing out and away from me and the beginnings of a new and altogether glorious promise. Here, before me, was my passport to paradise!

“Hai!” shouted this gallant young man, and he charged headlong for a group of guards who withdrew their reeking blades from the corpses of their victims and sprang up to face him.

Before me, half crouched on the beach, a naked man clasped a woman close, the black iron of their chains harsh against their skin. They were middle-aged, with faces lined with care, and yet for all that, the man could look up at the young man with eyes wide with wonder.

“Now in the name of the twins! Where did he come from?”

“Hush, Jeniu, hush!” His wife dragged him down into the black shale, burrowing for shelter.

I jumped over them, and because it seemed the right thing to do, as I leaped I shouted down to them.

“Remain quiet and you will be safe.”

“Opaz the all-glorious preserve us!”

So far I had seen no beings other than humans among these guards and the slaves they were butchering

to prevent their escape. There were no representatives of the half-men half-beasts of Kregen, those other races of intelligent beings who share the planet with human men and women.

The young man — I had the fleeting wonder if he might not also come from the planet Earth — had engaged nobly with the guards, and in pressing them back, was displaying fine swordsmanship. As I fought, indeed, as I do almost anything, I kept a weather eye open and alert. If a fighting-man sought to leap on me from the rear he more often than not found me suddenly facing him with a naked brand in my fist.

If you tread dangerous paths that is an essential to staying alive — on Earth as on Kregen.

So it was that I had to stop twice more to deal with inopportuno-pressing men in black leather, with their red and black sleeves, and their morionlike helmets. I observed a naked man, with a shaggy mop of brown hair and brown hair on his body so that he resembled a great brown bear, wrapping his chains about the neck of a guard and apparently on the point of severing head from body. This huge man, as thick in the chest as the barrels in which palines are shipped for sea use, roared his delight. I saw the suns-light glisten and gleam along the hairy muscles of his forearms as he leaned back. He saw me as I stepped outside a guard's lunge, dazzle him with what — I confess — was a flamboyant flourish of my dagger, and bring the rapier in for the terminal thrust; and Brown Bear yelled, hugely delighted. "Hai, Jikai!"

“Hai, Jikai!” I roared back. “We will finish them all very soon — and then I will strike off your irons.”

“Not until I am done with using them. Never, by Vaosh, would I have believed I could love my chains so much! Ha!”

All over the beach and the soil-covered rocks just above, the bodies of slain men and women sprawled. But many more had reached some kind of sanctuary among the rocks, and among the dead lay many more guards than any of the escaping slaves had any right to expect. Brown Bear had accounted for his share, and I, mine — and this glorious youngster to whose aid I now sprang had fought right well and nobly.

Perhaps he was too noble; certainly, for all his skill and training he lacked experience. Twice I had dodged flung javelins. I saw it all. I shouted — uselessly, vainly, stupidly. There was nothing else I could do but shout and hurl my dagger; but long before the dagger found its mark in the javelin-thrower’s throat, the cruel steel head of the flung spear smashed bloodily red out through the chest of the gallant young fighter.

It is not easy for me to speak of that moment. I can clearly remember that sharp steel javelin-head sprouting from the lad’s chest. I can recall with exact clarity the way the twin streaming mingled light of Zim and Genodras cast sharp ugly shadows down over the muscles of his chest and the smooth tanned stomach, before he doubled up and fell sideways, drew his legs in, and began to cough up blood.

After that my next memory is of drawing my rapier from the leather-clad body of a guard, and looking around for more, and finding them all lying dead in the abandoned postures of complete destruction along the beach. Evidently, at the end, they had tried to flee from me.

I looked back up the beach.

A small clump of naked men and women had gathered, and more were creeping out from their hiding places among the rocks and boulders and thorn-ivy bushes.

The huge brown bear of a man stood a little way in front.

All stared at me.

None would approach.

I ignored them.

I went back to the dying youngster.

He lay still on his side, for the javelin prevented him lying in another posture. He was conscious and his eyes followed me as I approached. Those blue eyes were still bright and brilliant, but the face had drained of blood.

“Llahal, Jikai,” he said painfully, dribbling blood. “You fight right merrily.”

I did not reply with the rolling double-L of the non-familiar greeting of “Llahal” of Kregen; instead I said: “Lahal,” which is used only to those one knows.

He looked surprised, but his weakness made him incurious and unable to ponder the matter overlong. I knelt by his side. There was nothing material I could do for him.

I looked at him, and I waited until I felt a light of intelligence in those eyes, struggling up past the engulfing waves of blackness seeking to drag him down forever.

I spoke.

“Happy Swinging,” I said. My voice was not my own; it was hoarse, strange, harsh. “Happy Swinging.”

He looked at me with the same shock his face had shown when the javelin pierced him through.

“Happy Swinging—”

“Tell me, dom. Where lies Aphrasöe, the Swinging City?”

He coughed and blood dribbled from his mouth, for he was almost gone.

“Aphrasöe!” He tried to move and could not. “I was there — there in Aphrasöe — only moments ago. I talked with Maspero and bid him Remberee — and then I was here. And—”

“Maspero is my friend. He was my tutor. Where lies Aphrasöe?”

The cords in his throat moved and shuddered, and I saw he was trying to shake his head. His voice was faint.

“I do not know. The transition was made — cold and darkness — and then — here. . .”

I had to know where Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, was situated on the planet of Kregen. Next to my concern for my Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains, next to my love for her, I must know the whereabouts of Aphrasöe. For Aphrasöe was paradise.

He was trying to speak again.

“Tell Maspero — tell him — Alex Hunter tried — tried—”

“Rest easy, Alex Hunter. You have come a long way from Earth, but now you are with friends.”

He looked up into my ugly face with its gargoyle-look strong upon it, and the bright blueness of his eyes faded and he sighed, very softly. His blood-smearred mouth smiled — he smiled, looking upon me, Dray Prescot — and then he died.

I stood up.

I turned to face the gathered naked people.

“Are any guards left alive?” I called. My voice rose harshly, bitter and cutting.

The big brown bear of a man shouted back. “They are all dead.”

I nodded.

“As well for them they are. By dying they escape my wrath.”

Then I turned and looked out to that unknown sea and I did not weep. For many memories had poured upon me and I could face no one until I had purged myself of weakness.

CHAPTER TWO

Sweet and refreshing is canalwater of Vallia

The released prisoners wanted to build the cooking fires into conflagrations of joy, and I had to explain to them as gently as I could — and, Zair knows, I am a gentle enough man when the occasion calls for it — that as no one of them knew where we were, and I did not, the night would almost certainly contain hostile eyes. We must cook our supper carefully, and post watches, and be ready with the gathered-up weapons to defend our newly-won freedom.

They all seemed to think I had been in the prison ship with them. On her way to the Penal Islands, a gale had driven her off course. No one knew where we were — but they all knew from whence they had come.

Vallia!

I was on an island off the southeast coast of Vallia. Somewhere over that sea lay the island empire ruled by the despotic father of my beloved. Over there lay my

target, Vallia, the island I had vowed to reach and storm, bare-handed if necessary, and claim my Delia before all the world.

Prosaic matters obtruded themselves now, however. The released prisoners were far too weak to march, and we had espied not a sign of life or a habitation of any sort. The prisoners could not march; I could not stay here.

The big brown bear of a man — Borg — said, when I queried him: “Prisoners, dom? Aye, we are prisoners, truly enough. Politicals.”

At a guess, I said, “The Racter party?”

He glowered. “Aye! The racters, may Gurush of the Bottomless Marsh take them all.”

I have spoken of the Racter party, those great lords, landowners, and wealthy tycoons who were bitterly opposed to the wedding between myself and Delia. These people were almost all of the Panval party, a more popular front, although containing many folk, I suspected, who had joined together in mere opposition to the ractors as through any common ideology.

Borg was a canalman. The canals of Vallia are one of the wonders of Kregen, spreading out over the entire island, fed by the awe-inspiring Mountains of the North, which have various names in their various districts. The canalfolk are a people apart and a way of life apart. Borg’s name was Ven Borg nal Ogier. *Ven* is a title applicable only to canalmen, as *Vena* for the canalwomen. Ogier was his canal, the Ogier Cut, from which he took his patronymic. That the canal was upward of

six hundred miles long, with many branches and loops, spreading across many counties of Vallia, meant nothing. Mere land area was of no account to a canal-man; he marked out his lineage in the canal his parents traversed.

“I shall go and find help,” I told Borg. “These people must be cared for.”

He had taken a guard’s leather tunic, but his arms and legs were bare. He carried the rapier and left-handed dagger as though he knew how to use them. He nodded in agreement.

“Good. Then, Koter Drak, I will come with you.”

Koter is pure Vallian, equivalent to our Earthly “mister.”

“No, Ven Borg. If you will, you would do best to look after these people. And without disrespect to you, I can travel faster alone.”

He glowered at me, and fingered the plain steel hilt of the rapier, but he saw my face, and agreed.

“By Vaosh the all-glorious! You are a hard man.”

“Sometimes I have need to be.”

My feelings after Alex Hunter had died revealed another facet, but I would not discuss that. The thought occurred to me to wonder if the Star Lords had brought me here because they knew Alex Hunter would fail? But that would indicate a prophecy, a power to foretell what would happen. I put nothing past the Star Lords in those days, but the idea made me prickle a little up the backbone. Then the further thought came to me that the Savanti had sent Alex Hunter on a mission similar to

those I would have been sent on had I passed all the stringent tests of Aphrasöe, instead of having the Savanti boot me out of paradise. I still bore them no ill will for that. They had their nature as I had mine. Whatever the truth of the business, I was here on Kregen and — given I could avoid too obvious a collision with either the Savanti or the Star Lords — here I intended to stay and reach Vallia and claim Delia as my bride.

And such was my mood, I was beginning to feel to hell with her father.

So far, the thought that I must in some measure demean him in her eyes had halted me, had checked my footsteps, had held me back from the headlong rush to Vallia and the arrogant barging into Vondium I knew I would have, one day, to make.

I gently unwrapped and unstrapped Alex Hunter's Savanti hunting leathers from him, before I buried him with solemnity and two prayers. Then I washed the leathers in a stream of clear water — how marvelously supple is the hunting leather of the city of Aphrasöe! — and donned them, pulling the end up through my legs and buckling up the wide belt. I hesitated before pulling on the boots, but I might need them if the going became rough. After my march across the Owlrah Waste and through the Klackadrin I felt my foot soles could march across hell without flinching.

And the sword.

The Savanti sword!

It was a beautiful specimen, with that subtle straight blade that in some alchemical way combines all the best features of a rapier's flexibility with a shortsword's harsh thrusting action, together with the slashing capabilities of a broadsword. I felt, then, handling that superlative weapon with its basket hilt, that even a Krozair longsword could not compare with the Savanti sword. I suppose, in mundane weapons, it most resembled an English basket-hilted sword of about 1610 with that cunning Savanti curve to the hilt to enable rapier work to be put in. The blade retained a brilliant sharpness of edge without continuous honing. I had no conception of how it could be done, then, and even today I am sure that no metallurgists of Earth could reproduce that exact mix of metals, that fantastic alloy. But then, as I knew to my cost, the Savanti, although mere mortal men, were capable of superhuman powers.

"Well, Koter Drak," said Borg, proffering a rapier and left-handed dagger. "You had best go prepared."

I slung the baldric of the Savanti scabbard over my right shoulder and let the sword dangle at my left hip. "I will take this sword, Ven Borg."

"It is a strange blade, and yet a useful one, as I judge."

I took the baldric off. I had grown accustomed to having my sword scabbards attached to my belt in such a way that all my upper body was free from strappery. I fabricated a sling, and the lockets would serve. Borg watched me, critically.

“On the canals we use the rapier and the dagger, the Jiktar and the Hikdar, but rarely, they being weapons not easily come by.”

“You have used them before, Ven Borg.”

He chuckled. The camp fire threw his mass of brown hair into deep tangled shadows across his face. He bit hugely into the thigh of a bosk — a rather less stupid and smaller relative of the vosk — from the provisions we had taken from the wreck. “Aye. I was accounted a fair swordsman, along the Ogier Cut, Koter Drak.”

I was not absolutely sure how these people had my name as Drak. Drak is the name of a legendary figure, part-human, part-god, who figures largely in the three-thousand-year-old myth-cycle the *Canticles of the Rose City*. Culture is widespread on Kregen, and the old legends and stories travel the world, and are repeated over and over again. Also, Drak had been the name of the Emperor’s father when he ascended the throne. I had a dim memory of saying, in response to a query, “I am Dra—” and then of a shout or a scream interrupting me. I believe it was the women called the Theladours; they had found a guard half alive, and had finished him off with their hands. Anyway, the beginning of *Dray* and the instant associations with *Drak* had named me. I did not care, then, what they called me, for I intended to leave them in the morning when the twin suns rose, and after finding help for them, see about taking myself across the stretch of sea to Vallia to the west.

Also, I did not fail to realize that the continent of Segesthes, and the enclave city of Zenicce, lay across the

Sunset Sea to the east. In Zenicce stood my own proud enclave of Strombor. I was the Lord of Strombor. But Strombor and all my friends there would have to wait — as they had waited for years — until I had won my Delia finally.

From the shattered remnants of the wrecked prison ship we took what we could of food and wine and I saw that the survivors, about a hundred and twenty or so of them, men and women, would not suffer from starvation before help could reach them. For what Borg said, I judged that he would be very careful how they accepted help; for as political prisoners their fate would depend much on the tendencies of their rescuers.

The political situation in Vallia was complex and finely balanced, the racters and the panvals in their eternal struggling for power, the Emperor now strong, now weak, eternally seeking help from one side, now the other, always asserting his own power and demanding absolute obedience from the citizenry. To hell with all that! Vallia, Vondium, and Delia!

Much banging and ringing of iron finally fell quiet and the last of the fetters had been cut off. I found a snug hole down between two boulders, and with a scrap of cloth from the ship to serve as padding and cover, went to sleep. On the morrow, after a great dish of fried bosk rashers and a jar of some sweet rose wine — a vintage of western Vallia, so Jeniu told me — I was ready to leave.

They waved to me as I set off. They were a starveling crew, eating properly for the first time in many a day,

their nakedness covered as best they could manage. I waved back, and I confess, to my shame, that I scarcely thought more of them except as people to whom I owed the duty of what help I could give. Beyond that — Delia!

“Remberee, Koter Drak!”

“Remberee,” I shouted back, striding on. “Remberee!”

Many times I have marched through country completely new to me, alone or with companions. Memories ghosted up — but I would not think of them now. I studied the land critically. It looked bleak, bare, somehow tired and dispirited. Clumps of thorn-ivy grew along the way and, a dismal prospect on Kregen, no palines. No palines! Not a country for me, I decided, and thereby, as you will hear, made a stultifying mistake.

The Suns of Scorpio cast down their opaz beams and the weather, although warm, was in no wise stifling. If what the prisoners had told me was true — and their ideas of where we might be were almost as chancy as mine — we must be on a latitude sixty or seventy dwaburs north of the southern coast of Vallia. That, as far as I could judge, would be on a latitude about the same distance south of Zenicce.

I marched on and soon I walked through the remains of a village. The houses had been constructed of wood, and they had burned. There were bones among the ashes. The sad relics of an abandoned living-site passed to either side as I walked through what had once been a bustling main street. No birds waited to scav-

enge. This had happened some time ago, for the dusty vegetation was creeping back.

The prospect opened up beyond this dismal scene and hills closed in on my left, so that I walked for a space beside a stream. Here vegetation had taken a hold and I saw many varieties of the myriad growths that flourish so freely on Kregen. Here, too, I came across paline bushes and so could pick a handful and munch them as I traveled.

Far away on my right and ahead, obscured occasionally by cloud and by intervening rises, the tall blue outlines of mountains jagged against the sky. Snow glistened on their peaks, so they were of a size. The forests thickened, and I saw lenk and sturm, an occasional sporfert, and many trees of secondary growths that are common both to Earth and Kregen. Grass grew more lushly — and then I walked out upon a great clearing where the neat rows of samphron bushes lay all untended, where the crops had ripened and seeded and rotted, and where I saw a small village laid waste, burned, destroyed, abandoned.

I began to wonder if I would ever find succor for the prisoner survivors here in this desolate land.

The way I followed had seemed to me to mark itself out by its contours as a track and when this wended into a valley and ran side by side with a sheet of water, I felt certain I trod a dirt-packed way that once had been a highroad. Now grass and weeds thrust through, worts, ragbladders, creeping vines, and here and there the banks had slipped into the water. At the far end of the

lake I came across a lock. Its wooden gates were closed, and I was downstream. It was such a lock as I was perfectly accustomed to back home on Earth. The navigators had made of the country a different place, and the genius that had put the lock to work, so that narrow boats and barges might rise and fall through mountains, had laid the foundations for the Industrial Revolution.

Dangling over the lock gates a yellowing skeleton brought me sharply back to Kregen.

Wedged in the skeleton's backbone was an arrow.

I studied it. Knowledge of one's opponent's weapons is a psychological knowledge of him, as I have said before.

This arrow had not been loosed from a Lohvian longbow. It was shorter; the point was, although of steel, merely an arrow-shaped barbed wedge. The feathers, bedraggled, were not, to my mind, set by a master-fletcher. They were red and black.

Red and black had been the colors of the prison guards' sleeves.

I left the arrow where it was, and saluting the skeleton's departed spirit — what some Kregans call the *ib* — I passed on.

That night I had to face a decision. I could not cross the stretch of water and reach Vallia to the west without a boat, and to find a boat I needed help. But I had also my duty to the prisoners, prisoners no more, although for how long they would retain their freedom I did not care to speculate. If I circled — then I faced facts. This

land had been raided dry. Slavers had done this. Their handiwork is all too plain. I must press on, look for the lay of the land where it was likely to find habitation, and then see about a boat.

The next day I swung a little more to the west, leaving the canal. I found only scorched earth and moldering skeletons. I wended back to the east, crossed the canal, and pressed on through woodlands and open spaces where great fires had raged and the growth was only just beginning to sprout through. This was hard going.

On the third day I came across a fine metal road. Oh, it was no road of Imperial Loh of ancient times, but it was easy to walk on. I felt absolute certainty that there was no other person near me; long before I suspected I was approaching humanity I would be off the road and into the trees.

The road struck off due east.

This was taking me away from the coast, and I must perforce accept that annoyance, for I now saw that this land had been struck by raiders from the sea who had ravaged the coastal belt clean. I suspected these signs of destruction were more than two seasons old, and the still-dangling skeleton seemed to confirm that the inhabitants had not dared return. I was on an island, therefore I might find someone on the eastern coast or in the inland massif.

Drink was no problem, for the canalwater was surprisingly sweet. On reflection I assumed this to be the result of the absence of traffic. I saw a string of sunken

narrow boats. Food was relatively easy to come by, a few carefully laid traps of plaited reed, a spirited rush, and a stupid bosk wriggled in the trap. Also, there were palines.

The impression I gained was that this had been a prosperous farming community of interconnected villages and towns, and the wild animals I might have expected — leems, graint, zhantils, and the like — had been banished long ago and had not found their way back. These bosk, now, must be the descendants of domesticated herds. Then, as though to prove me right, I came walking down into a valley where crops grew in neat rows, tended crops, with the sign of mankind strong and orderly upon them. There were, however, indications that the harvest was poor, and here and there the ground showed dry and dusty. Indeed, it had not rained since I had landed here.

The canal I had been following had curved away the previous day, but the road which had tracked the canal had seemed the more likely prospect. Feeling I had been proved right I trod on — warily! — and was most surprised to discover the road, wending with the course of the valley, swing away from that glimpse I had had of crops. I walked on for a bur or so, pondering, and then the explanation occurred to me. The road did indeed follow the natural line; those crops I had seen and the village they suggested must lie adjacent to them, had been sited away from the road, off the beaten track, hidden. They had been revealed by some local flaw in the tree cover.

At once I turned off the road and headed straight down into the valley bottom.

In the event, my clever supposition, although right, was rendered totally unnecessary. As I slithered and scraped through the trees down the slope I saw below me the same confounded thorn-ivy hedge that surrounds any boundary of cultivated land against the wild. The thorn-ivy was not of recent growth, for what was wild had once been tamed, but it gave me a few nasty jabs and stabs and scratches before I went through.

Cursing, I stood up, and there, coming down smoothly and decently from the road above, was a side road, all neat and clean and easy. And I'd gone headfirst through a thorn-ivy boma!

So much for my cleverness.

"Sink me!" I started off to let rip a whole string of the curses of two worlds and several colorful cultures — and then I stopped. I didn't laugh, for as you know I laugh seldom and then in situations that seem not to call for laughter as the correct critical response; but I could see the humorous side of that slide down the valley side and the crash through the boma. I was still picking thorns out of my shoulders when I walked into the single main street of the village.

The houses were more like huts: bark-logged walls, large leaves of the papishin trailed over a ridge-pole for roofs, mere holes for doors, and of windows not a sign. A pen contained a dozen or so bosks, squealing and grunting. A few ponshos, languid in the warmth, their fleeces, although heavy in poor condition, were actually

nibbling the grass growing up between the logs of the huts. There was a well. I walked straight to it. It had adobe walls and a fractured cover, but there was a rope and a bucket. I threw the bucket down, hauled it up, and drank deeply, then plunged my head in the icy water.

When I lifted my head and shook it like a ponshtar a quavering voice said: "Llahal, dom."

I turned slowly. I turned carefully. I still held the well bucket in both hands and I could hurl that and draw my sword with blinding speed, if I had to.

The old man confronting me did not look any kind of threat.

He was old, for his hair was white and his thin beard draggled whitely across his shrunken chest. He must be at least two hundred years old, I judged. He wore a simple garment of orange cloth around his middle, hanging to his knees, with a broad fold thrown up and over his left shoulder. For only a single instant could the foolish fancy that he was a TodalpHEME attract me; but I knew he was not, for around his waist he did not have a colored tasseled rope; the robe fell loosely.

"Llahal, dom," I replied.

His weak eyes regarded me. "You are welcome to our poor village. We have little, but what we have is yours."

The words might have been rote — as I wondered then, they might be a trap — but I sensed in this man that what he said was true; he and his people were friendly to me. I saw a number of other people gathering and saw instantly that they were all old or babes-in-

arms, held by their great-grandmothers. I knew these signs of old.

They were desperately poor. The strong young men and the beautiful young girls had either been taken up as slaves or had run off into the central massif. These people were abject. They had been shattered by a continuous succession of slave raids, and they had no fight left. They accepted their fate with a fatalism that, while I could not share its abnegations, I could understand.

The old man, Theirson, led me to his hut and I sat on the packed dirt floor, and they gave me a bowl of fruit, gleaming rounds of the fabulous fruit of Kregen. I picked up a squish. I thought of Inch and his taboos, and then I did not think over those memories again. I munched a mouthful of squishes as old Theirson talked.

“You had best not linger here, Koter Drak. You are most welcome and we would love your help in the fields, for the work is hard and we are old. But no young man is safe. The aragorn, for whom the Ice Floes of Sicce most certainly wait, ride through and take what they will and no man dare say them nay.”

His wife, Thisi the Fair — she was old and stringy and her hair as white as his own — shivered. “Do not speak of the aragorn, Theirson, I beg you. If only the old days were here!”

I felt a peculiar sensation in my stomach, and I rubbed it. I felt hot and yet I felt cold. I drank a cup of water. I wanted all the information I could get; yet the hut walls were receding and closing, swaying, rippling

like the bed of a mountain stream. My tongue seemed as thick as a chunkrah's tongue.

Theirson, Thisi the Fair, and others were looking at me with kind expressions, and talking, but their words boomed and echoed and hurt my ears. I fell full length, and lay there, unable to move. They were all looking down on me with worried, concerned expressions, and Thisi felt my forehead.

"It is the sickness," she whispered. "Koter Drak — you must fight for your life!"

And then I swung away like a surfer on the bottom of a board with only the deep black-green of nothingness beneath me.

CHAPTER THREE

Thisi the Fair borrows my Savanti sword

Many visions passed before my inward eye as I lay stricken by the hallucination-fever of the sickness. I saw the smoke and heard the monstrous concussions of the broadsides as I sailed so slowly down on the Franco-Spanish line off Cape Trafalgar; I saw the swirling charge of the cavalry as we held the ridge of Mont Saint Jean; I fought with my clansmen, and swaggered as a bravo-fighter in Zenicce; I battled swifterns of Magdag, and swordships with Viridia the Render laughing; I saw many things and I felt many things.

Through it all I, Dray Prescot, Pur Dray, Krozair of Zy, the Lord of Strombor, sunk so low and helpless, did not for one moment imagine that these old folk had poisoned me. In a way that only hindsight can justify I knew I could trust them.

For three days I lay there caught in that damned soup of fevered visions and for all that time they stayed

by me and cared for me. On the morning of the fourth day I opened my eyes and looked through the open door and saw the jade and orange light of the twin suns falling in mingled radiance across the street, and knew I was once more myself, once more in control, once more a man. But I was as weak as an infant.

They were surprised.

“The sickness takes a man or a woman and holds them fast bound for a whole sennight.”

I did not tell them that I had bathed in the sacred pool of the River Zelfh, in unknown Aphrasöe, and was thus assured of a thousand years of life and a natural constitution to throw off wounds and diseases rapidly. I thanked them. I had been a burden to them. I was still very weak, weaker by far than I had been after those horrific experiences crossing the Klackadrin, and for a space all I could do was sit in the suns-shine at the mouth of the hut and rest and recuperate.

I know, now, that my sickness was the result of drinking the canalwater.

Sweet, it was, to be sure, and ever after was to prove so. But, to a man or woman not of the canals, to anyone not of the canalfolk, it was deadly. After the week's fever-dreams, the victim very often died. That I had not was a tribute to the pool of baptism of the Savanti in Aphrasöe. Three days — half the six that usually constitute a Kregan week, for all that I render it into English as a sennight — was astonishing to them. I just sat in the sun and watched the dust devils on the street and struggled to grow strong.

They had taken my Savanti hunting leathers to have them cleaned and I wore a simple breechclout of the orange cloth. The color came from squeezed berries abounding in the forests. I looked up as Theirson came from the hut with a bowl of bosk and taylyne soup. Just as Tilda the Beautiful had said, here in Vallia they did drink their soup hot. I sipped it gently, grateful for the soothing sensations in my abused guts.

“My sword?”

“It is safely hidden. Should the aragorn ride in and find a weapon—” Theirson’s wrinkled mouth pursed dolefully. “Rest and get well, Drak. Then you may take up the sword again.”

This did not seem good advice to me. About to argue with the old man and if necessary become objectionable until they brought out my sword, I became aware of a hush fallen over the village. Down the street and riding toward me through the streaming jade and crimson light advanced the aragorn.

Theirson let a low moan escape his lips, then his face took on the look of one of those alabaster statues from Tomboram. Still holding the soup bowl he stood, bent over a little, in the doorway of his hut. I continued to sit.

This was close to eventide now, when the people trudged back from the fields after a full day’s work. I had seen them go out and I had seen them return. They were forced to work hard and relentlessly, persevering with the monotonous labors as the twin suns poured down their beams on the backs of their necks and their

heads, until the old folk could barely stand to walk back in the evening.

The results of their labors were stacked in the low barns at the end of the village, for harvests here, as is common in much of Kregen, occur when the fruits and the corns and the vegetables are ripe and not as a result of some unvarying round of seasons.

The great thanksgiving time of harvest is understood, however, on Kregen, and these old folk put by to that end. The aragorn rode in. I just sat there, stupefied, weak, watching them as they made their grand gestures, gave their orders, as the produce was brought forth and loaded on the backs of calsanys. I, Dray Prescott, Krozair of Zy, just sat.

Whatever of harvest thanksgiving lay in the hearts and minds of these men, it did not touch the people of the village.

I looked at these aragorn.

They rode zorcas. Well they would, being proud and mailed men in their might. These zorcas were fine beasts, with the tall and spindly legs and the single twisted horn that brought back the memories of riding with the wind across the Great Plains of Segesthes. The aragorn had the habit of using the tight rein, so that the twisted horns upreared in a way at once proud and flaunting to observe, and damned uncomfortable for the poor zorcas.

They were men. On Kregen, of course, one habitually identifies species as well as race. Their armor shone resplendently: plate on back and breast and thigh, with

thick purple-dyed leather for arm and leg. They wore the typical Vallian hat, with its low crown and wide brim with the dashing upcurled feather, and with those two slots cut in the brim over the forehead. At their saddle bows swung morions. They did not carry lances, and their weapons were rapier and main-gauche, and a sheaf of javelins.

I wanted to get up and challenge them, but lethargy like a spider's web adhering to my arms and legs drew me down.

The aragorn took the produce, hit a couple of old men over the head with their riding crops, stared around arrogantly, and announced they were staying overnight. From their small string of calsanys they produced food and wine of kinds that the villagers had not seen since this blight had been laid on the land. They turfed Theirson and Thisi out of their hut and Vulima and Totor out of theirs, commandeering them. There were six aragorn, with six slaves for servants, and three dancing girls, with golden chains through their nostrils and exotic transparent pantaloons and silver-mesh mantles. There was about these aragorn the simple belief that they were the masters, that what they said was law and must be instantly obeyed. No idea of opposition occurred to them.

I realize I have not given you any description of their faces. I find I approach this with diffidence. Even then, as I sat in the dust, I could see in their faces what so many people have seen in mine. There was the same harsh intolerance, the same fierce and predatory

demands of instant obedience, the same intemperate damn-you-to-hell arrogance, that old devil's look I know I assume. And yet I know many women have looked on me with a kindly eye, and I get along with children famously, and I venture to think that if any traces of that show in my face they were absent from the countenances of the aragorn.

"Get this dolt out of the way," said one, as he swung down from his zorca.

"He is sick, master, badly sick."

"Then I'll drive out his disease!" and with that the aragorn put his boot up. He intended to kick me in the face. I moved my head sideways, yet I felt that treacherous lassitude upon me and I was slow. The aragorn's boot took me in the shoulder and I toppled backward into the dust.

They laughed.

A couple of the villagers scuttled across to help me up and away. I say scuttled advisedly. The villagers bowed, and remained bowed, in the presence of the aragorn.

The absolute terror these men spread about them could be seen in little things. In the way people ran to hold their zorcas' heads, for instance. The constant trembling in their bodies, their hands shaking, their words disconnected. In the sudden rigidity with which they reacted to the words of the aragorn, so it seemed as though mere words could strike them to stone. The aragorn took whatever they wanted, and destroyed

casually and without thinking in their search for hidden food. All valuables had long since vanished.

I thought of my sword, hidden I knew not where, and sweated it out.

That night I heard the shrill laughter, and the clashing of ankle-bells — I have never made up my mind if ankle-bells are the height of refined sexuality or the depths of depravity, or if they merely denote shocking bad taste — and although I could not see these men I could guess the games they were up to, the wine they were drinking, the food they were guzzling.

I still felt weak in the morning.

“Where is my sword, Theirson?”

“No, Drak. No!”

Thisi the Fair moaned. “You will surely be killed.”

“My sword!”

But these old folk possessed courage and tenacity where their friends were concerned. They could do nothing about the aragorn, and so were beaten. But for me, they could save my life. Who am I to say they did not? I was aware then, and subsequently have been more than grateful, that I was privileged to be called their friend.

So I, Dray Prescot, had to watch with bowed head and a face over which I had drawn a corner of an orange cloth as the aragorn, leisurely, insolently, prepared for departure and then rode out. They rode their zorcas well. Easily and lithely in the saddle; tall, bold, strong men, absolute masters, absolutely in command; oh, yes, they bore the outward semblance of warriors. But I

knew that the ordinary fighting-men of Kregen among whose number I had been proud to include myself, were as different from these men, these aragorn, as are the zhandils from the leems.

When they had gone I said to Theirson: "Do they often ride in and take everything you have?"

"Whenever they wish. We cannot stop them."

I noticed that the villagers seemed to be beyond the point at which mere ordinary curses could do anything for them in their mortal anguish against the aragorn. The aragorn were mercenaries, of course, working with the slave-masters. Now they were living in high fettle in various of the castles and fortresses of the island, going out on their raids, drinking and wenching, quarreling, quite happy to live here on the backs and the sweat of those they had not run off into slavery.

"They make sure we have enough on which to survive. That way we can work for them."

"How long is it to go on for?" said Thisi. Her veined hands trembled. "We must have offended the invisible twins in some way not vouchsafed to us."

"Not so," I said. "These are men, and therefore may be killed. I am a man of peace, but now give me my sword."

They tried to dissuade me. I was arguing with them, most vehemently, when I found myself sitting on the ground. I was weak, still — damned weak! I struggled up, and swayed, and blinked my eyes, and Thisi gave me a cup of water, and I knew I must wait until the

marvelous powers of the waters of baptism cleared the poison from my system altogether.

On the sixth day everyone carried out the simple devotions that marked the religious observances of these people, much after the fashion of those I had witnessed in the argenter *Dram Constant*, where the invisible twins were honored and revered as the mystical twinned godhead of all things.

Then, even though the sixth day might reasonably be called a day of rest, the people trudged off to the fields. The work would never wait. I tried to go with them, and fell down, and had to crawl back alone, for they could not be allowed to waste their effort on me, a stubborn onker, when the fields and the incessant work demanded everything they could give. For strong young lads and girls, the agricultural work would have been easy — as it had been in the good old days.

Four days after that I was strong enough to insist on being given my sword and chopping wood. I noticed how I had to make a conscious physical effort to slash through branches that normally I would have cut through with a supple twist of wrist and forearm. But I persevered. The people had told me that the rescued prisoners on the beach were not likely to be interfered with; all that area had been slaved out and the aragorn or the slave-masters no longer went there.

The island, I learned, was called Valka. Valka had been the name taken by an oar-slave who had been a good companion with me in the swordships. The nearest way of explaining his use of the name — for he came

from the main island of Vallia — is to suggest that a man from California might choose the name of Tex as an alias.

I donned my Savanti hunting leathers.

There seems little point in belaboring my feelings at this time. You will know something of the kind of man I am; inaction in times of peril is anathema to me. I resent an insult, and if a man seeks to kill me I own to the moral weakness, thoroughly reprehensible, of attempting to kill him first.

I chopped a great deal of wood in the next few days, swinging my sword arm, using my left arm, also, working the sinews and muscles, feeling the jolting power of the sword blows. What Maspero, that gentle man who had been my tutor, would say, I did not know. He swung a sword, complaining of his own weakness, also. But the swords the Savanti use in their sport deliver a psychic blow that does not kill, does not even harm. This sword had lost that power, assuming it had ever possessed it, and Alex Hunter had been equipped as an ordinary fighting-man of Kregen — with this single exception of the sword.

On a bright morning when a little pink mist lifted from the treetops and birds sang with what I can only describe as a trilling note I told Theirson I must say Remberee.

“For one thing, good Theirson, I am eating far too much.”

“You are always welcome to share what we have, Drak.”

“And for that I thank you. But I ought to return to the beach and tell the people there what has happened.”

“They would be advised—” And then Theirson paused, and looked helpless. Indeed, what to advise those escaped prisoners?

“I will think of something,” I said.

He sighed. “If only the old Strom were here. He was a man! He ruled Valka with a rod of iron, and with justice and mercy. A girl could walk from one end of the island to the other without fear in those days.”

“Why does the Emperor permit these things?”

His distress was obvious. “We do not know. Perhaps the Emperor does not know what goes on in Valka. We are the most cut off of all the Stromnates.”

I didn’t necessarily believe that, but I knew what he meant.

A Strom is the nearest equivalent to a count, and a Kov to a duke; the Strom of Valka had been early killed in opposing the slave-masters and their mercenaries. After that the island had become a mere slave-droving ground. Although, so Theirson told me, in the central massif were many, many young men and women who had escaped from their villages and towns. The chief city of Valka, Valkanium, lay fast held in the clutches of the slavers and the aragorn, the men of prey who feasted on the carcass of the island.

“They guard themselves well behind their iron gates and their tall black towers,” said old Theirson.

Thisi the Fair came hobbling fast along the main street. She panted. Her white hair had fallen free of the

wooden pins holding it — for all her silver pins from the Street of the Silversmiths in Vandayha had long since been stolen — and the sunshine glistened off the sweat along her forehead.

“You must give me your sword, Drak!”

“Willingly, Thisi,” I answered in as uncharacteristic a speech as ever I could make. “But give me a good reason.”

She halted before me, twisted her head to look up, and tried to push her hair into place. “Why, I would clean the hilt for you, and, too, I would show it to Tlemi, who would recapture his youth.” She cackled, and there was strain in her laugh. “He is too old to work, and he lies on his pallet dreaming of the past.”

“The hilt is clean, Thisi.” I drew the sword and held it out to her, hilt first. “But show it to Tlemi, with my blessing, and tell him once a warrior always a warrior.”

“Aye,” she cackled, grasping the hilt and holding it as awkwardly as one can imagine. “I know about warriors, Drak.”

“I will pause a while before going into the fields, Drak, and drink a cup of water with you.”

“That will give me great pleasure, Theirson.”

So we sat in the early sunshine and drank our water and talked of the lack of rain and the crops and the old days in Valka. Truth to tell, I recall, I wanted to learn as much as I could of this island of Valka. This village had been raided often, and the pitiful attempt to hide it away from the main road and canal had been completely unsuccessful. That the roads here were reasonably good

was a result of the old Strom's grandfather, who liked to race zorca chariots, a sport he could not practice on the canals.

Presently Thisi came back. "Tlemi had tears in his eyes," she said. "The old fool. Over a mere sword!" She looked a great deal calmer.

Thisi leaned over and whispered to her husband.

He started, and looked down the road, and then at me, and back at Thisi. He swallowed. "Here, Drak. Cover yourself with this old cloth—"

But I understood, and I cursed myself for a credulous simpleton.

They cared for me, these old folk, and they did not wish me killed. I had done nothing for them. I had brought merely sickness, and another mouth to feed. More altruistic love for a fellow man is difficult to find.

I stood up.

"I will go to Tlemi's hut and get my sword, now—"

"It is too late, Drak. Look!"

I looked.

Riding in their pride and their power, the aragorn astride their zorcas moved up the street. The old folk stumbled to their knees as the mercenaries passed. Absolute power they held, absolute control, a will never challenged.

And I, Dray Prescot, stood like a loon in the dust before them, empty-handed.

CHAPTER FOUR

A surprise for the aragorn

Theirson's hand gripped my ankle and jerked, and stunned by the folly of my own actions, I lost my balance and tumbled into the dust at his side. He whispered fiercely, in an agony of terror.

“Put your forehead into the dirt, Drak! For the sake of the glorious Opaz himself! Else you are a doomed man — *and we with you.*”

Those last words, alone, could make me bend my stubbornly and stupidly proud neck. I bowed. I cringed. I, Dray Prescott, double-inclined to these crampths of aragorn.

The zorca hooves twinkled past. Following them the calsanys lumbered along, tails flicking. Tethered to the last two calsanys by lengths of rope were two people, a man and a woman. I could see only their naked legs. They stumbled as they were jerked along. The woman fell. Now I could see her. She was young, with long brown hair and a thin but vigorous figure, clad only in a wraparound of the orange Valkan cloth. She was

dragged by her bound wrists. An aragorn reined back and beat her with his crop until she rose up silently, and stumbled on, dragged by the calsanys.

Theirson's hand gripped my arm.

Then the party had passed and the aragorn were yelling for the headman and Theirson was rising and shuffling forward, head bent.

"Bibi!" said Thisi. I looked at her. Tears coursed down her cheeks. "Bibi — my granddaughter."

Many secret societies exist on Kregen, as anywhere else, I suppose. Societies exist devoted to this end and that. On Valka, with the absolute dominance of the slavers and the mercenaries, and the disappearance of so many of the younger people into the central massif, a clandestine organization must grow up to resist. Given the normal strengths and fears of human beings — and of the halflings, too — this is natural and inevitable. Bibi, Thisi's granddaughter, must have come down with a message from the center. They — she and her companion — had been caught. Now the aragorn wanted to find out why she was visiting here.

I stood up warily, and looked up the street.

Theirson was talking to the aragorn. They looked to be the same six, evidently backtracking because of their captives. Other village people crouched abjectly by their huts. The six slaves stood by the calsanys, and the three dancing girls put their heads out of their preysany-palanquin covers and chattered like parakeets. The palanquins were gorgeously decorated with filigree work, and the poles by which they were slung were

lavishly bound with silver wire. The preysanys — a kind of superior calsanys — were likewise highly decorated and feathered.

I stood there and I looked down on Thisi.

My voice carried all that harsh, intolerant authority, and I know my face must have glared with that hateful devil's look.

“Run, Thisi, and bring my sword. Tell Tlemi I have need of it.”

“But, Drak—”

“Run.”

She ran.

In the days immediately after I had been captured and taken as a slave into the marble quarries of Zenicce, coming at a stroke from Zorcander of my clansmen to slave, I fought blindly and obstinately against restraint until beaten into submission. That happened only when I was unconscious. I still react in the same way now, on occasion; but I have tried to school myself. As I stood there looking upon these indifferently cruel and despotic aragorn I kept telling myself to wait. I had to wait for Thisi and my sword. I did stand, and how I did it is a mystery, for I longed above all else to hurl myself forward and fling myself upon these sadistic overlords and tear them from their jeweled saddles.

I was spared the wait.

One aragorn glanced at me. He frowned. He lifted his crop and beckoned.

“Stupid cramph! If you cannot incline before your master I will teach you! You will scream for mercy — but we aragorn no longer know what mercy means.”

At this his companions guffawed.

The orange cloth hurriedly thrown around me still hung from my shoulders, and it was evident that the mercenary had not yet appreciated I was not an oldster like the rest. I shuffled forward. I kept my head lowered.

When I reached the zorca I looked up.

I had put that simpleton’s look on my face. Zair forgive me, but I take a pride in that look, for it makes me look an idiot of idiots, and gives me great and unholy — and very petty, I confess — feelings of gaiety and secret knowledge that I play a prank, that I disguise Dray Prescott.

“You stupid, Doty-rotten cramph! I’ll teach you—”

I looked up at him. His arm was raised to bring the crop down across my face, possibly to blind me, certainly to mark me. His companions laughed.

“Kleesh,” I said.

I prided myself, then, that I spoke so rationally. A kleesh is violently unpleasant, stinking, repulsive; and yet applied to me the name serves only to make me yawn. Applied to most men, I have noticed with sure unconcern, it is a guaranteed explosive firecracker.

His face contorted, he roared and brought the crop down in a violent slashing blow.

I moved in, took his foot from the stirrup, jerked it up, hauled it out — I didn’t care if his leg parted from his hipbone — and tossed him swinging over my

shoulder into the dust. I took a pace toward him and brought my foot down on his face. Then, without thinking about it, I ducked.

The flung javelin scraped over my back. It struck the ground with such force that it snapped. I disregarded it. I leaped sideways, turned, surveyed the five remaining mercenaries. One was already in action, gouging in his spurs cruelly, hurtling down on me, his drawn rapier pointed and low, aiming to spit me. I slid off the orange cloth, whirled it once and enveloped that rapier in the folds, and dived to the side.

The others were reacting now. Bibi and her companion, a personable young fellow with a thin face but merry eyes, huddled together, bound and helpless. I shot a look down the road. No sign of Thisi. The aragorn had seen I was unarmed, and they were taking no chances of my reaching their fellow lying in the road with a red pudding for a face. Mercenaries are ever conscious of the value of seizing a weapon from an adversary. They were roaring and yelling all the time, of course, threats and curses and detailings of what they would do to me and the rest of the village. I needed nothing extra to spur me on; had I done so the threats against my friends here would have been a spur and a brand.

Two came at me, with a third cursing and trying to rein his zorca around with them. I had to dodge and duck and weave. They were even taunting me now, cries such as some warriors use, mercenary tricks that, even if

they did not realize it, meant they had admitted they were not faced by a helpless old man of the village.

The utter surprise they had, the sheer impossibility of an old man suddenly dragging one of their number from the saddle and breaking his neck, had now passed. But that uncanny business of a helpless victim abruptly turning on them, savagely, had for a mur unnerved them. Now they were upon me again, ready to drive and hunt me, to have sport, to flick and lash with their rapiers, not to kill but to torture.

Forced thus to skip this way and that I worked my way to the side. They reined their beasts around, the spindly legs of the zorcas perfect for this kind of wheeling curveting work. They performed caracoles very well, these aragorn. But I wormed free, turned, leaped, and, as I had done on that beach so long ago in Segesthes, I was upon the haunches of the nearest zorca and with an arm around the neck of its rider was dragging him back. I had to be quick. If I knew these people they'd care nothing for their comrade and would hurl a javelin to kill me, risking his life.

I snapped his backbone and then made a grab for his rapier. But he had twisted in his agony and I missed. I had to let myself go and slide off the zorca. The javelin hissed into the dead man's back.

On the ground I danced, as it seemed, between javelins.

Again I risked a glance down the street — and here came Thisi, hurrying and stumbling. She carried my sword.

The calsanys were uneasy and were milling, the two bound prisoners were being dragged across, and I saw they would stagger between me and Thisi. A zorca rider saw Thisi. He shrilled his anger and drew a javelin from the sheath strapped to his saddle. I saw Bibi open her mouth, but her scream was drowned by the roars from the aragorn. Her companion staggered across and fell against the javelin-man's zorca. The javelin missed. The calsanys barged against Bibi's friend and he fell. The zorcaman reined away, raving, drawing his rapier. Bibi pulled her man into the calsanys. I could leave them, but not for long. The stink of blood and dust stung my nostrils, rank and raw, but they have been familiar smells to me all my life.

I ran toward Thisi.

"Here, Drak! May Opaz have you in his keeping."

I forced myself to speak. "Thank you, Thisi."

I took the brand. The hilt had never felt so good in my fist before.

I turned.

There were four of them left, and they were completely incapable for a single moment of understanding defeat. They had cowed these people, enslaved all their young men; their slightest word was law, their littlest whim a command. Here was a man, all but naked, impudently attempting to challenge them. That two of their comrades were dead would mean only an excuse for an orgy of revenge. They had no conception that they would not slay me.

They wore armor and the man on the zorca whose back I had broken had not died of the javelin, for it had failed to penetrate his backplate. I balanced easily, the sword held low, and I laughed at these professional killers.

A shrill screaming that had been fracturing the air all the time gurgled away as I laughed. The three dancing girls, who had so short a time ago been laughing from their preysany-palanquins, had been shrieking and screaming; but when I laughed they stopped, and they remained silent thereafter.

Then, I confess it not without a knowledge of how foolish and inflated it makes me appear, I shook the Savanti sword at them, and I shouted: "Bite on a sword for a change, you cowardly kleeshes who murder old men."

Their rage was a wonderful and edifying sight.

They dug in their spurs and they charged.

I am a clansman, of the Clan of Felschraung, and I have faced the earthshaking charge of a whole hostile clan astride their voves. The zorca is not an animal a clansman uses in the massive barrier-smashing charge.

"Fools!" I said, and set to work.

I here proved, at least to my own satisfaction, that the Savanti sword was, and again, at least in my hand, a better weapon than the rapier. I had no main-gauche. The first man simply tried to spit me through as though I were a target at practice. I flicked his blade aside and as he passed I struck his thigh. The stirrup alone kept his leg from falling off.

The second man, seeing this, attempted to rear his mount back and slash me down the face. The zorca is a nimble animal — perhaps there is no more nimble animal on all Kregen, certainly there is none on this Earth — but I was quicker and slid the blow, reaching up and forward, and so passed my blade through his guts just beneath the corselet rim. I withdrew and flung myself sideways. The next man's blow would have clanged off my helmet comb had I been wearing one.

Mind you, unless you are a superb horseman or zorca-man it is deucedly difficult to fix a man who insists on dodging all around you and intends to unseat you or smash you or in some other unpleasant way do for you first. The third aragorn came out of his stirrups all flailing with my left hand gripping his left boot. He tried to cut down on me, but my blade deflected his blow, and as he struck the ground I sliced the sword down. The way I was feeling must surely be indicated by the fact that his head jumped clean off his shoulders and rolled under the middle preysany-palanquin, whereat its occupant swooned and fell out, a heap of jumbled silks, gold, and bells in the dust.

The fourth aragorn had no intention of quitting, I'll give him that; he was angry, so enraged that he roared in, screaming abuse, swirling his rapier, madly intent on finishing me off. I didn't want to kill this one. Him, I would like to question; but the fool ran himself onto my blade. It went through his throat. By Zair, but he was a fool!

Mind you, I must take a share of the blame. But, there they were, six dead aragorn littering the dusty street of the village.

Then it began to rain.

If the villagers wanted to take that as an omen, they might. Certainly, the raindrops felt cool and sweet. I walked over to the palanquins. The two petal faces regarded me in horror. They were not particularly pretty girls, but curved and complaisant, as I judged, able to wiggle their hips and rotate their bellies and jangle their bells. I spoke quite pleasantly.

“How do you wish to die? Would you like to be hanged, burned, beheaded? Perhaps you prefer drowning? I am in no hurry. Just make up your minds and then let me know.” They cowered back, shattered, shrunken, unable to implore, seeing in my face only darkness and evil. I swung back. “Oh — there might be a way — but no. I am sure you will wish to die.”

Then I strode off and left them. Bibi and her man were freed. His name was Tom — yes, the same as our Earthly Tom, although not deriving from Thomas — and although thin he was well-muscled and active and a very merry man altogether. He eyed my sword.

“Lahal, Koter Drak,” he said, for Thisi had whispered the name by which they knew me. He shook his head. “I would not have believed it possible had I not seen it with my own eyes.”

“Lahal, Koter Tom of Vulheim,” I said, for that was where he came from, a port town up the coast that was

now a mere pile of rubble and burned beams, razed, destroyed, and abandoned.

He looked about, lifted his arms, and let them drop.

Certainly, the situation called for considerable thought.

The dancing girl woke up from her swoon and when she was given the news by her two companions promptly swooned again. The six slaves stood docilely by the calsanys, soothing them. They would be a problem. There were four men and two women, hardy, short-statured folk with thick oily black hair and flattish noses, bought in a market far from Valka, I judged. That made me realize they were probably in a special relationship with the aragorn; slaves, yes, but privileged slaves, doing domestic work and quite unlike the whipped and beaten slaves for which Valka was scourged.

“We had best tie ’em up, Tom,” I said. We had quickly dropped formalities. But the use of *Koter* is obligatory in Vallia unless you know a man well. We felt, Tom and I that we did know each other tolerably well. Time telescopes when you fight together — and his action in spoiling the aim of the javelin man, when he must have thought he would be instantly cut down, was as brave a stroke as any in any being’s book.

“Will you really kill the girls?” Theirson wrinkled his nose up. He eyed me with a look that struck me as altogether too knowing.

They had heard him, for we were using Kregish.

“Certainly,” I said. “The aragorn are evil, and these perfumed dancing girls are likewise evil.” I heard them

squeak, and snuffle, and realized they were crying now. That was one crisis over. “Of course,” I said loudly, taking Theirson by the arm and walking him away. “If they understand just how evil the aragorn are, and are prepared to mend their ways, then perhaps—”

By that time I had lowered my voice and walked sufficiently far off for them not to overhear us.

“I doubt that I could kill them, Theirson. I am a man of peace. I seldom kill in cold blood.”

“Seldom?”

“For my sins.”

“You are a strange man, Drak. Harsh and hard and merciless. Yet there is mercy in you. I will see what we can do with those girls.”

Tom had joined us. He had possessed himself of the leathers of an aragorn, a rapier, and a main-gauche.

“They’ll have to be watched. But they will give us valuable information.” I told Tom about the released prisoners on the beach.

“Panvals?” he said. “They can be useful to us, too.”

The street was cleared, and the bodies stripped and buried. The slaves were placed in a hut, and an old man with a rapier stood guard over them. The largesse on the calsanys was distributed and the calsanys and preysanys themselves herded in with the village animals. We made the place spick and span again. And then we discussed what best to do.

I made my position clear. I would find a boat and go to Vallia. I saw Tom looking at Theirson. Tom would marry Bibi as soon as that could be contrived, and

between them they could look forward to no life at all. Unless. . .

No one did any work in the fields that day. That night we ate well and drank wine for the first time in many a long day.

Then we commanded the dancing girls, who were half dead with fright and horrendous expectations, to dance for us. The ordinary dancing girl, such as one finds in taverns and *dopa dens* and even in higher establishments of pleasure, never appeals greatly to me, almost certainly on account of my experiences with my clansmen where the girls dance gaily and freely and with a fierce joy that finds its greatest expression of art — and where they'd stick you with a *terchick* if you called them dancing girls. Slavery and dancing are obscene bedfellows.

I had never touched the Triangular Trade, but I knew.

After that I called the three of them over and said: “Have you chosen?”

They fell on their knees, the tears streaming — and, of course, I could not let the cruel farce continue any longer. I told them, simply, that they must henceforth cut themselves off from the *aragorn*, and help the villagers. Later, when things had worked themselves out, they might be dancing girls again. It was not a satisfactory solution, but I was afire to find a boat and sail to *Vallia*.

Tom was doubtful I'd find a single boat along the west coast of *Valka*. When he understood that I had no

objections to stealing a boat from the slavers or the mercenaries, and if necessary, bashing in a few skulls in the process, he said that, yes, there were boats; but the skull bashing would be hectic and heavy.

That suited me only in one way; but Valka, however pleasant an island it really was despite the depredations, could not hold me at all, and if skull bashing was necessary, then skull bash I would. Speed, now I had almost reached my goal, seemed to me the prime requisite. Tom accompanied me back to the beach. The prisoners were astonished to see me. Under the direction of their self-elected leaders, of which Borg was one, they had begun to sketch out a camp for themselves off the beach and on the banks of a little river where we tracked them. They were warned about the water in the canals, whereat Borg laughed hugely, a true canalman.

Tom and I departed, and after some difficulty, discovered a slaver camp where we stole a boat. The skull bashing did not, in the event, prove necessary. Tom waved goodbye. "Remberree, Drak!" and: "Remberree, Tom!"

I hoisted the dipping lug and the little boat curled out across the sea. I felt at last my peculiar destiny was running in ways I could understand when the black clouds gathered and a gale blew with incredible, immediate violence and the waves broke mountainously high; with a sick heart I recognized all the symptoms I had met before. This had happened on the inner sea. The Star Lords were forcing me back. I could not go on. The Star Lords were saying plainly: "You may not go to

Vallia! Return to Valka, Dray Prescot, and perform there the work to your hands.”

Sorry, but that's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it. If you would like to find out what happens next, you can buy the complete Mushroom eBook edition from the usual online bookshops or through www.mushroom-ebooks.com.

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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] Elsewhere Prescott says that *Koter* is usually abbreviated to *Kr*, as is “Mister” on Earth abbreviated to “Mr.” Also, he says that *Krozair* is often abbreviated to *Krz*. The Kregans, like the ancient Romans and modern men, are fond of abbreviations. *A.B.A.*

[2] *Kta.*, *Kotera*, the female equivalent of *Koter*, of *Kr*. *A.B.A.*