

DRAY PRESCOT: 13

**RENEGADE
OF KREGEN**

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writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

RENEGADE 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 world he rose to become Zorcander of the Clansmen of Segesthes, and Lord of Strombor in Zenicce, and a member of the mystic and martial Order of Krozairs of Zy.

Against all odds Prescott won his highest desire and in that immortal battle at The Dragon's Bones claimed his Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains. And Delia claimed him in the face of her father the dread emperor of Vallia. Amid the rolling thunder of the acclamations of Hai Jikai! Prescott became Prince Majister of Vallia and wed his Delia, the Princess Majestrix. They are blessed with two pairs of twins, Drak and Lela, and Segnik and Velia. One of their favourite homes is Esser

Rarioch in Valkanium, capital of the island of Valka, a part of Vallia, an island of which Prescott is Strom.

In the continent of Havilfar Prescott fought as a hyr-kaidur in the arena of the Jikhorkdun of Huringa. He became king of Djanduin idolised by his ferocious four-armed warrior Djangs. In the Battle of Jholaix the 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 to Earth for twenty one miserable years. His joyful return to Kregen was marred by his ejection from the Order of Krozairs of Zy. Now he is determined to forget the Krozairs of the inner sea and return home to Valka and Delia and the children . . .

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter One

We ride into Magdag

We rode, Duhrra of the Days and I, into Magdag. Magdag, the city of the megaliths, the chief city of the Grodnims, those devoted followers of Grodno the Green, stank in our nostrils, us followers of the true path of Zair.

"This place is a cesspit of vileness." Duhrra spat, juicily, into the dust of-the roadway. "It should be smashed like my hand and cauterized like my stump."

"Amen to that, Duhrra. You know I am taking ship here for Vallia. You are gladly welcome to join me. If you wish to smash and cauterize Magdag, kindly give me time to go aboard and weigh."

He gazed at me, his big moonface sweating, his foolish-seeming mouth gaping.

"Duh — you're a hard man, Dak."

"Aye — and I should be harder. Now shut your black-fanged wine-spout. Here is a pack of Magdag devils in person."

We slumped in our saddles and half closed our eyes and let our heads droop on our breasts as we rode past a body of Magdag-gian sectrixmen riding toward the west. I did not even bother to flier them a searching glance as we lumbered by. Ahead lay the fortress city of Magdag, a place of great power and great evil, and

I wished only to take myself as speedily as possible aboard a galleon from Vallia and tell her captain to sail me home as fast as his vessel could sail, home to Vallia and Valka.

Home — back to Esser Rarioch, my high fortress overlooking the bay and Valkanium, home to Delia and the twins!

The dusty road led straight to the western gate, an imposing structure of many levels, battlemented, loopholed, a tough nut to crack in any siege. The road itself thronged with people coming and going, for as a large and prosperous city Magdag demanded the unremitting toil of many hands to keep its belly fed. Here, on the green northern shore of the inner sea, those working hands would be slave.

Shadows of the gate dropped about us. The smells began in earnest. I intended to talk to no one. Straight to the harbor — the nearest of the numerous harbors of Magdag — and there seek information on the first ship of Vallia; yes, that was the plan. If I had to wait a sennight or so I felt I could just support the extra torment, for I had suffered much of late. The twin Suns of Scorpio streamed their mingled light upon the walls and battlements of the city, giving the evil place a spurious grandeur and glory. All the light and color of two worlds cannot in the end disguise true evil. So I thought then and, by Zair, so I think now.

The stupid sectrixes with their six legs and their blunt stubborn heads sensed the ending of their day's labors and a comfortable stall and food, and they speeded up their lumbering trot. Maybe they were not so stupid after all. Jogging awkwardly up and down we passed the lofty pointed arch of the gateway beneath the hard, incurious stares of Magdaggian soldiery, hired mercenaries mostly, with a few Homo sapiens among them, and turned sharp right-handed for the harbor area.

The eternal sounds of a great city rose about us, mingling with the stinks. The shadows clustered.

"And remember, Duhrra. You wear the green. Think like a Grodnim. Look like a Grodnim. Act like a Grodnim."

"Aye, Dak my master. Uh — Think, look, and act like a devil."

"Aye."

He shifted the stump of his right arm, severed at the wrist, and folded swathing rags more securely to conceal his hook.

"I do not forget I wear the red beneath all this green."

"That is well. Do not forget and strip off and reveal all to everyone. In all else — forget."

He caught the tone of my voice and hawked and spat again and we cantered through the deepening twilight toward a certain sailors' tavern where news was to be had. The shadows lengthened.

A line of beggars along the decaying inner wall cried out and held up pitiful mutilations, rattling their wooden begging bowls. These were men who had been used by the overlords of Magdag in war, and being wounded or rendered unfit for further duty, had been cast off. They were not even of use as slaves.

Somewhere a few good days' ride back to the west lay the corpses of half a dozen devils of Magdag. The gold and silver oars that had once jingled in their purses made the same bright sounds in ours. Money has no cares over its owners. I drew out a handful of copper obs, that almost universal single-value copper coin of Kregen, and threw them, one by one, at the beggars as we passed. The act gave me no pleasure.

"Groдно bless you, gernu!" "May the delights of Gyphimedes be yours tonight, gernu!" The babbling cries lifted as we rode past. The gutter ran with slime here. "May you sup with Shagash, gernu!" "The sweet Greenness of Groдно upon you, gernu!"

I kept my ugly old face iron-hard as we passed. There was every chance, had this scene been enacted fifty years ago here, that some of those men might have come by their afflictions at the end of my longsword. Duhrra's sectrix pushed close.

"Waste of obs," he said.

"Aye."

My thoughts pained me. In Holy Sanurkazz, the chief city of the Zairians of the southern shore of the inner sea, sights like this, of maimed and blinded men piteously begging, were almost unknown. The various orders of chivalry of Zair saw to that. That was one of their prime functions besides the greatest function of all, which was their sacred duty, the destruction of everything of the Green and of Grodno upon the Eye of the World. My thoughts should not pain me. Once I had been a Krozair of Zy, a member of the Krozair Order held in highest repute. I had been ejected, ignominiously thrown out, declared Apushniad, my longsword broken. Of all the fancy titles I held on Kregen, only being a Krozair of Zy had meant much to me. Now I must push all thoughts of the Krzy away. I was for home, for Vallia and Valka. And, too, I do my wonderful four-armed warrior Djangs a grave injustice if I say I did not hold being their king as of high importance and meaning in my life.

The names of places that have special significances to me ring and resound in my head. At that time apart from Felschraung and Longuelm, which were not places but the names of my wild Clansmen of Segesthes, a number of names could move me.

Strombor. Valka. Djanduin.

Yes, and Felteraz, too, here in the Eye of the World where I had been cruel to Mayfwy, widow of my oar-comrade Zorg. I can remember my thoughts, triggered by that pitiful line of broken men, mulling and jangling in my skull and giving me not so much a headache as an infernal feeling of wishing to get home to my Delia and finding some sense in this beautiful and horrific world of Kregen. I was just thinking that, too, under my alias of Hamun ham Farthytu, Paline Valley in Hamal had meaning for me, when I caught the suppressed breathing from the shadows of the next archway, the incautious chink of steel.

The reins tautened under my fingers and I slowed the eager sectrix. Duhrra reined in alongside me.

"I came here in order to take a ship and sail away. I did not seek trouble." My right hand crossed my body and fastened on the hilt of the longsword scabbarded at my waist. "But sink me! If any cramp wants to make trouble I will accommodate him!"

Duhrra's long exhalation of breath sounded like a benediction. His big face gleamed in the erratic light of a distant torch bracketed to a slimy wall. "I knew there could only be trouble in vile Magdag. By Zair! Right happy this will make me—"

"You take the left-hand rasts, Duhrra."

"Aye, master."

Duhrra could swing a longsword with his left hand. I knew.

We rode another half a dozen yards and the tall pointed archway rose over our heads carrying either a cross street or a house above the harbor road we followed. The shadows blacked out the forms of the men waiting. I did not think they would be stikitches — professional assassins — but more likely would be desperate men ready to kill for money, and men of that stamp are to be found wherever men congregate together.

Well aware they could see me, I did not draw.

Surprise is a useful weapon. So is a longsword. Even the sword I bore, taken from the body of that Grodnim Jiktar who had attempted to stop me opening the caissons of the gate of the Dam of Days and so destroying a convoy of foemen's ships. I held the hilt that was almost the hilt of a true Krozair longsword. The blade bore the device of a lairgodont, a most ferocious carnivorous risslaca, surmounted by a rayed sun. That device denoted a Green Brotherhood devoted to Grodno. The sword had served me well since we had left the Dam of Days and the Grand Canal at the extreme western end of the inner sea. Now it would serve again.

The lesten-hide grip over wood and iron ridged firmly into my hand. This thing would have to be quick — quick and deadly. I saw the shadows move.

The thieves made the mistake of shouting. No doubt they sought to frighten us. As they leaped so they screeched.

"Gashil! Gashil! To Sicce with you!"

Duhrra bellowed a fruity oath and his sword blurred up and down. My blade leaped for the throat of the first attacker. He staggered back, trying to scream, with the black blood spouting. Twice more I struck as the leems of the sewers leaped. One reeled back, sightless, faceless, dying. The other, a Rapa, skewed his sword across and partially deflected the blow so that the blade sliced through the crest atop his gray vulturine face. He stopped screeching "Gashil," the legendary patron of bandits, and screamed out a string of Rapa oaths. But, for all that, his sword lunged in again. I leaned out and over, looped the weapon in a shadowy blur, lifted it, and so slashed down. The Rapa dropped his sword. He took a step from the shadows into the pink moonlight, his hands to his head. He had been cleft down to the bridge of that big vulturine beak. Only then did he fall. Rapas are fierce opponents and worthy to be called warriors, even if they do stink in the nostrils of apims like me.

Duhrra's sectrix backed and collided with mine. I swung a swift glance toward him. The one-handed man's sword skittered up into the air, spinning, catching the slanting rays of pink and golden moonlight. I saw beyond his sectrix the lithe vicious shape of a numim closing in for the kill.

"Look out!" I yelled, trying to kick my beast into action and so close. I would be too late.

The numim, his golden lion-face a single blaze of ferocious pleasure in the moonlight, which slanted narrowly above the eastern roofs, leaped for Duhrra, a longsword upraised. I felt that

my comrade was doomed. I reversed the sword ready to throw, and—

A bar of steel twinkled cleanly in the moonlight. It thrust straight at the numim. The lion-man's leap ended in a shriek and a gurgle. He slumped to the ground. He tried to rise and run, and collapsed, and lay, groaning and cursing.

Duhrra turned his big face toward me. He looked more like an idiot than ever.

"The rasts," he said. He lifted his right arm.

Where he usually wore his hook, fitted for him by the doctors attached to the Akhram by the Grand Canal, now a brand of steel flamed black and gold in the moonlight. I knew why he had carried what I supposed was his hook concealed in rags, for we had wished to prevent news of a one-handed man being bandied about. Now I realized he had concealed more than a mere hook.

He waved the blade at me, socketed into leather and wood over his stump, and his great idiot face showed pleasurable delight in a new toy.

"They did not expect this, Dak. They didn't like it."

He slid a leg over his saddle and jumped to the ground. I was very conscious of the shadows about us, the darkness of the pointed archway in which the ambush had taken place, the comparative brilliance beyond as She of the Veils rose higher and cast down her light. Eyes could be watching us; but that was a thing I could do nothing about.

The wounded numim lay gasping on the ground. He had rolled over and so lay on his back, gasping and cursing, and glaring up at us. Blood stained his golden mane. I had known a numim who had been a great man and a good friend, even if he had been a citizen of hostile Hamal. I stopped as Duhrra bent.

"You, rast," said Duhrra of the Days, "may receive a boon at my hands. You may go to roister with Gashil, to sit on the right hand

of Grodno in the radiance of Genodras. You are equally doomed, cramp. For Grodno is the true devil."

And Duhrra sliced the cripple-blade across the numim's throat and so slew him.

He stood back and turned to me.

"He had seen my hook — or, rather, the blade. He would have talked. I do not think you would care for that, Dak, my master."

All I could say was, "No."

Methodically, Duhrra cleaned the cripple-blade and its tang which fixed into the socket of the stump, turning with a cunning twist to lock. He unlocked it and cleaned the tang and the socket as we rode on, for we did not wish to tarry with the street cumbered with dead bodies. Magdag has a force of hired mercenaries to fight with her own people, and she had the night watch, who delight in catching thieves and ne'er-do-wells, for each one gains them a bounty when sent to slave at the oar benches of the galleys.

Presently Duhrra, his stump once more concealed, said, "You seem to know this devil's nest passing well, master."

"Aye. I once lived here for a space — in good times and evil. And must I keep on telling you I am not your master?"

"No, master."

"What does that mean?"

A hurrying group from an alehouse passed, men and women of a number of different racial stocks, all swathed in dirty green garments, with link-slaves to light their way. They passed the sectrixes like a flood, opening out before and closing aft. I twisted in the awkward wooden saddle to stare after them. The torch-lights scattered red and orange reflections. The shadows grew darker and swooped down, writhing. Silently, with only a rush of sandaled feet, those people passed us.

"Are they phantoms?" Duhrra's face showed no shock, but I saw the coverings over his stump moving.

"No, you great fambly! They are workpeople going to their hovels after drinking as the suns set. They go in a group with torches because—"

"Yes. Well, there is one little lot who will not disturb them this night, by Za—"

"Onker!" I bellowed.

I had no need to say more. But Duhrra, who looked like a great muscle-bound idiot, could play games, also.

"By Grodno the Green!" he said loudly. "You call me onker, master!"

I glared at him. Neither of us would smile. The moment was amusing. I shook the reins and we cantered past the alehouse with its sign of a broken pot — broken by skylarking children, I shouldn't wonder — and so turned into the Alley of Weights which would take us to the main waterfront of Foreigners' Pool. The alley lay in darkness, but from the waterfront the sounds of rollicking and roistering lured us on. I had no real fear of another attempt on us so close to the clustered taverns of the waterfront, but we rode with swords in our hands, just in case. As to the carousing — the sounds rose thin and few. I had fancied the Pool would be jumping; perhaps it was too early.

She of the Veils had risen clear of the roofs now and as we reached the end of the Alley of Weights and saw the dark water before us a jaggedly rippling ribbon of pinkly golden light stretched, as though to welcome us back to the sea. Lights shone from the taverns and alehouses, for sailors' work is thirsty work. Again I fancied business was slack. The tavern I wanted, known to be the favorite of the Vallian seamen who had sailed here all the weary way across the Outer Oceans, was called *The Net and Trident*. I knew little of it, for, as you know, my former residence in Magdag had been once in the slave warrens and once in the Emerald Eye Palace.

In those old days I had spied out a deal of Magdag, as I have mentioned, with a true Krozair's eye for weaknesses in the defense against the great day when the call rang out and we of Zair went up against the hated men of Grodno.

Well, the call had gone out, and I had failed to answer the Azhurad, and so had been ejected, was no longer a Krzy, was Apushniad. I'd been on Earth at the time, banished for twenty-one terrible years; but how to explain that to a man of Kregen?

A couple of drunks staggered past. Our sectrixes let a silly snort escape their nostrils, and I kicked the flank of mine to remind him his work was not yet done. The third sectrix with our dunnage strapped to his back tailed along in the rear.

There were damned few ships tied up. I saw an argenter, one of those broad, stubby comfortable ships, probably from Menaham, although her flags were not visible in the harbor. Beyond her lay three of the broad ships of the inner sea, dwarfed by the argenter. Seeing both types of ship so close together gave me a true idea of the impressiveness of the ships of the Outer Oceans. The little merchant ships of the Eye of the World would never brave the terrors outside the inner sea.

There was no galleon from Vallia moored up.

I looked hard as we reined up outside *The Net and Trident*. No. No, it was sure. I could not see a single Vallian ship.

Well, I was annoyed. It meant I must wait until one sailed in from the Outer Oceans, sailing in through the Grand Canal and along to Magdag. I would wait. There was nothing else to do.

We tied the sectrixes to the rail, at which they showed their spite. Later, when I had asked the questions boiling in me, we could stable them properly. We pushed into the tavern and stood for a moment adjusting to heat and light and noise.

The place was not overly full, and the patrons were mostly sailors of the inner sea, with a mercenary guard or two, and at a

table beneath the balcony of the upper floor a group of men who might be merchants in a small way of business.

A few serving wenches — I dislike the name of *shif* commonly given to these girls — moved among the tables and benches. We moved farther into the room, letting the door swing shut at our backs. My right hand hung at my side, ready. The sawdust on the floor showed itself to be old and in urgent need of replacement. The odors of old grease and burned fat and sour wine clung about the room.

Nodding to a table in a corner where no one was likely to get at our backs, I went over and Duhrra followed. His right arm was buried in his green cloak. We wore the mesh mail beneath our green robes, but we had removed our coifs earlier. We sat down and stared about, rather as two hungry and thirsty travelers might do. And, in truth, that was what we were.

One of the girls hurried over, plastering a smile on her face. She was apim, and not happy, worn out and tired already even though the night's drinking had barely begun.

Duhrra began an argument about the wine she might serve, and he went dangerously near perilous ground by asking if they had any Zairian wine recently come in from a prize. She tossed her hair back tiredly and said they had none, and she could recommend the local Blood of Dag which, she said, as a wine was, as was proper, a bright and beautiful green. Duhrra's face did not express his distaste. But he started to speak.

"Excellent!" I said loudly. "And a rasher or two of vosk with a few loloo's eggs. And pie to follow — malsidge, if possible, or squish."

"Malsidge?" said Duhrra, not too pleased. "Make mine squish."

"We are taking a long sea voyage," I said. "Malsidge."

"Malsidge is off," said the girl. She wiped her mouth and smeared the red stuff over her cheeks. "Huliper pie today."

"Very well." I put my hand in one of the pockets of the robe beneath the cloak. I made a habit of carrying money spread out over my person. I let a little silver chink show through my fingers. Her brown eyes fixed on the silver as a ponscho fixes his eyes on a risslaca's eyes.

"Tell me, doma, what is the news of the ships from Vallia?"

She would know all the gossip, I guessed. Whether she willed it or not her life would be bound up with the men of the inner sea and their vessels. She would hear them talking.

"Vallia, gernu?"

Her tone had changed markedly since the gleam of silver between my fingers.

"Ships from Vallia sail into Foreigners' Pool. When is the next one due? Has she been signaled yet?"

She shook her head. She looked frightened. Still she had not taken her eyes away from that gleam of silver.

"No, gernu. Not for a long time. The ships from Vallia no longer sail to Magdag."

Chapter Two

The flash of a Ghittawrer blade

As I have said before, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the color green. It is a charming, restful color. Our green vegetation makes of our Earth a marvelous place. I know that if green suddenly vanished from the spectrum we would all be immeasurably the poorer for that. But as I sat there, in that squalid tavern on the waterfront of Foreigners' Pool in Magdag, so overwhelming, so bitter, so malefic a hatred for all things Green overcame me that I shut my eyes and gripped onto the inferior earthenware pot so that it smashed into shards and the bilious green wine ran and spread over the table.

"Gernu!" cried this poor serving wench.

Then sanity reasserted itself. Of course! She did not mean that Vallian ships never came to Magdag. The inner sea lies at the western center of the continent of Turismond. It is separated from Eastern Turismond by a devilish cleft in the ground from which spurt noxious and hallucinatory vapors, and also by The Stratemsk, so monstrous a range of mountains that men believe their summits reach up to the twin glories of Zim and Genodras, the red and green suns of Antares. There was no way, as all men knew, across The Stratemsk on foot. And — there were no airboats in the inner sea. Equally, it needed a ship of the Outer

Oceans to navigate in those stormy seas, all the way from the Dam of Days in the west, south and so past Donengil, and then north up the Cyphren Sea, sailing with the Zim Stream and so passing the northern extremity of the continent of Loh, and so at last due east for Vallia.

No. No, this girl did not mean the galleons from Vallia no longer sailed to Magdag.

She meant the seamen from the galleons no longer came to her tavern, *The Net and Trident*.

I told her this, in a gentle voice, but still she flinched back.

"Indeed, no, gernu. I speak sooth. Since King Genod, may his name be revered, told them not to sail here, they have not come back."

"He did *what?*"

"Gernu . . ." Her voice sounded faint.

The door opened and on a gust of fishy, fresher air, men bulked in, apims, diffs, laughing and talking, scraping chairs and tables, bellowing for wine.

The girl cast one last longing look at the silver between my fingers, and fled.

I sat like a loon.

Of course, I could take passage in an argenter. Sail to Pandahem. But — but there was no other answer. That is what I would have to do. I did not like it. There was no other way.

Pandahem, the large island to the south of Vallia, had always been in trade and military rivalry with the empire of Vallia. Pandahem was divided into a number of different nations. I had friends — rather, I used to have friends — in Tomboram. This new and evil king Genod Gannius here in Magdag had arranged a treaty with my enemies in Menaham in Pandahem. He wanted to buy airboats from Hamal and use the Menaheem to transport them to Magdag and so gain an invincible sky force to crush the Zairians. I had put paid to that scheme, at least for now. No doubt

he would try again. By then I would be well out of the Eye of the World, back home in Valka, my island off the coast of Vallia. But . . . in order to sail home I would have to ship in an argenter from Menaham.

By Vox! How the Bloody Menahem would crow if ever they discovered they had the Prince Majister of Vallia in their hands!

Duhrra was looking at me.

He put that moonface of his on one side, and a frown dented in the smooth skin of his forehead. His scalp was bald and gleaming, with that small pigtail dangling down his back.

"You show nothing on your face, Dak. Yet is not this news bad? It is not what you expected."

"No. It is not."

"Then you cannot return to your home in Vallia. You will have to return with me to Sanurkazz — or Crazmoz, which is my home — and we will have fine adventures on the way."

I could not answer.

This Duhrra, whom I had dubbed Duhrra of the Days, did not know all there was to know of me, even here in the Eye of the World, where years and years ago I had been a Krozair Brother and the foremost swifter captain of the inner sea. Those crampths of Magdag had trembled at my name. I knew it to be true. Nursing mothers lost their milk, strong men blanched, maidens screamed, if they thought themselves in danger from me, from Pur Dray, Krzy.

Duhrra called me Dak, for that was a name I had adopted in all honor, even though I believed he had heard me addressed by my real name. He never referred to it. The Krozairs are a remote and exotic breed of men, even among their own countrymen who have not aspired to the honor and glory of becoming Krozairs.

The serving girl bustled about seeing to the ribald and vociferous demands of the newcomers. They were mercenaries, and even seated at table they swaggered and boasted. Presently she

brought our vosk and loloo's eggs, and the huliper pie, together with a fresh jug of that ghastly green wine, the Blood of Dag.

I flipped the silver oar up. It glittered in the lamplight.

"You forget this."

She bobbed a quick curtsy, the same kind of submissive dipping of the head and bending of the knee as one saw on Earth, and caught the silver coin and dropped it safely down her blouse.

"Thank you, gernu. May Grodno smile on you."

Another man might have thought, *Zair certainly is not*. But I thought only of a scheme to return to Vallia and Valka and once more clasp my Delia in my arms, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia of Delphond.

"Eat," said Duhrra. "Eat, my master, and afterward you will feel better."

He was partially right, of course. I ate. The stuff tasted foul. I took up a handful of palines, for they are usually — although not always — to be found in a dish on every tavern table, and I munched moodily. Palines are sovereign cures for a headache, cherry-like fruits of exquisite taste, sweet firm flesh, and are an item sadly lacking on this Earth, this Earth of my birth four hundred light-years from Kregen under Antares.

This disastrous news had shattered me.

I had been through horrific experiences before, many times. But this feeling of being trapped numbed me. I had been trapped when the Star Lords had banished me to Earth for twenty-one years. Then there had been no possible way for me to do something and return to Kregen. I had made attempts and had scared up some response from the strange woman who called herself Madam Ivanovana on Earth and Zena Iztar on Kregen. But now I was actually on Kregen, my duties for the Star Lords for the moment discharged, and willing and able to travel at once to the only woman who means anything to me — and I was prevented

by mere geography. Distance and time separated me, as I then thought.

So be it. I remember I sat up and found myself looking at one of the mercenaries at the adjoining table. I would make my way back to my Delia, as I had before, and I would do so come hell or high water.

With that decision made and already plans for that damned Menahem argenter forming in my mind, I was aware of the mercenary rising from the table.

Duhrra sucked in his breath.

The mercenary was a Fristle. His powerful humanlike body was clad in the mesh mail. His catlike head, with the striped fur and the slit eyes and the bristling whiskers, lowered on me most evilly. He advanced from his table and he loosened his scimitar, which all Fristles use no matter what other weapons they chance to be issued with.

"You are looking at me, dom," said this Fristle, very menacingly. He was vicious and tough, that was evident. "I do not think I like that."

I knew what had happened. So wrapped up in my thoughts had I been I had allowed some of my anguish and my anger to show on that iron-hard face of mine, thereby destroying any illusion I might cherish of being an iron-hard man. The Fristle had seen this and with his quick catlike temper had taken this as a deliberate affront, a challenge.

I sighed.

"You are mistaken, dom," I began. "I was not—"

That was a mistake, to start with.

"You are calling me a liar?"

"Not at all." I searched around for words. This situation was not quite unparalleled. I had acted the coward and the ninny as Hamun ham Farthytu in Ruathytu, the capital of Hamal. Now I wanted to avoid trouble. For Duhrra's sake as much as mine, I

wished no brawling here. "No, dom. I would not call you a liar — unless you were, of course."

"Cramph!" he said. Even in the simple word *cramph* he insinuated a cat's hiss into his voice. Then, splendidly, hissing out into the tavern room and bringing everyone's attention to center on us: "Rast!"

A rast is a six-legged rodent disgustingly infesting dunghills. I have used the word a few times in my life.

I stood up. I stood up slowly.

"I was not looking at you with intent. In that you lie. You call me a cramph. You lie. You call me a rast. You lie." My right hand slowly crossed my waist toward the sword hilt. "It seems, dom, you are a chronic liar."

"By Odifor, apim! His scimitar flamed. "I must teach you your place!"

His comrades lolled back in their chairs, laughing, mocking, catcalling, telling this mercenary, whom they called Cryfon the Sudden, to be gentle with me and only knock one eye out and not to stick more than two fingers' breadth of steel into me and so on.

He had no fear of my longsword. In these confined quarters with tables and chairs to entangle legs, the quick and deadly scimitar would do its work wonderfully well. His Magdaggian longsword, no doubt with the initials *G.G.M.* etched into the blade, hung disregarded, scabbarded from a baldric.

I moved to one side so as to give myself room and whipped out the longsword. The lamps cast their glow upon the blade, for it had been newly cleaned and it shone lustrously.

The mercenaries at the table suddenly fell silent.

The Fristle, who a moment before brandished his scimitar with every intent of giving me a good thrashing, short of slaying me, stopped stock still. His breath hissed between that catlike mouth.

"By the Green!" he said.

Duhrra moved at my back and I guessed he was swathing up his stump again.

"Gernu!" said this Fristle mercenary, Cryfon the Sudden. "I did not know — I had no idea. Your pardon, gernu, a thousand thousand pardons."

Where before he had been calling me rast and cramph, as well as dom, which is a friendly salutation, now he called me gernu, which is the Grodnim way of saying *jernu* or lord.

One takes one's chances on Kregen.

"I was not staring at you with intent."

"Indeed not, gernu. In that I lied. I lied most foully, as Odifor is my witness."

One of the mercenaries, a bulky numim whose golden fur glowed gloriously in the samphron oil lamp's gleam, called, "You always could pick the wrong 'un, Cryfon." The numim rose, bowing to me. "Gernu — you will pardon the poor onker and take a sup of wine with us?"

He was a Deldar, and the leader and spokesman of this little gang. I turned to face him and realized I still held the looted Grodnim longsword. I swished it in a little salute and sheathed it. Its flash was scabbarded. But in that movement I caught at some of the meanings here. The device! The lairgodont and the rayed-sun emblem. At the time I'd picked it up on the Dam of Days, with its headless late owner sprawled by the valve wheels, I had considered the problems of that device. I'd chipped out the emeralds and given the device a rub with a rough stone, but the quick eyes of these men had picked it out, and recognized it — and, too, no doubt, they had seen the condition, the lack of jewels, and had drawn conclusions from that consonant with a Green Brother patronizing a low-class drinking tavern like *The Net and Trident*.

Even a Green Brother, a Ghittawrer of Grodno, down on his luck was a man not to be trifled with. And, too, it was not only

because of the longsword, which they now knew would have chopped the Fristle mercenary, Cryfon the Sudden, very surely, scimitar or no scimitar, close quarters or no close quarters. Also, there was in these men's shocked deference to a Ghittawrer Brother the subservience to power and authority vested in mystic disciplines, the force of religion, the aura of invincibility.

I had seen similar, although not so violent, reactions in Sanurkazz when an unthinking carouser came face to face with a Krozair Brother. But the Zairians are a ruffianly lot anyway, and they tend to joke more and to make rough good humor out of the mystic disciplines — making very sure first that no Krozair is within earshot. These Grodnims, in line with their religious character, took a more narrow view. They believed more fanatically. They were more fervent in their observances. For them the Green was all.

Was this, I wondered, one reason why now the Green rose in ascendancy over the Red?

"I thank you, Deldar," I said, speaking stiffly, as a Ghittawrer Brother would. Truth to tell, I had been speaking as a Krozair might, and that seemed to serve. "You are kind. But I must go about my business."

He nodded at once, quickly. "I understand, gernu. May the blessed light of Grodno go with you."

"And with you."

Well, if he meant it — so did I!

We threw down coins to pay for our meal and wine and went out. Duhrra took a tremendous breath once outside, under the stars, with She of the Veils rising up into the night sky.

"A po-faced lot, these Grodnims!"

"Aye. And you had best be, too."

He rumbled and moved his wing, but he remained silent.

We had come out of that well. But I determined to get rid of the device. I would not care to part with the weapon, for it was the finest I was likely to get my hands on for some time.

Those mercenaries in there came from the galleys in the adjoining harbor. No doubt they found *The Net and Trident* more hospitable since the withdrawal of Vallian ships. There would be more room and better service, and a discount, too, I shouldn't wonder. But they were hard, tough men. I had fought their like on the Eye of the World. How long would it take them to arrive at the truth? That the insolent apim who had fronted down their comrade, Cryfon the Sudden, had merely found the Ghittawrer sword? Stolen it, most likely, with a knife in the back of the Brother in Grodno.

Even if they reached that conclusion I fancied they would not be too anxious to rush out and test it.

The power of the Green Brotherhoods is long and terrible, in ways quite foreign to the powers of the Krozairs.

Then I thrust all this petty business away.

Here I was, aching to return home, and stranded in the inner sea, thousands of miles from Valka.

The thoughts tortured me. We mounted up. I had no real idea what to do now, for all my plans had envisaged my going aboard a Vallian galleon this night. I had not even seriously considered the alternative I had thought on, that I would have to wait a sennight or so.

Now, no galleon would come at all. . .

We rode past the argenter.

I said, "It seems, Duhrra of the Days, that we shall have to take passage in her."

"I will still sail with you, Dak."

"Aye." Duhrra had been earning a living as a wrestler when I first met him. I had a good idea he was no stranger to the sea. "It may well be I shall have to pay passage money."

"That seems just. Use the money you would have paid the Vallian captain."

I humped along on the sectrix for a space, avoiding all the usual impedimenta of a waterfront. Then: "There will not be enough for a captain of Pandahem." I could not explain that as the Prince Majister of Vallia all I needed to have done was convince the Vallian master that I was who I was. I could do that, all right.

"It would seem, master, that the Pandaheem are more greedy than the Vallians."

That was a reasonable assumption on the facts.

"Probably. Let us find an inn and get some rest. I will talk with the master of the argenter in the morning."

"We must slit a few throats and gain ourselves some gold."

"Let us talk to the master first, and discover his price."

"As you say, master."

I reined in and Duhrra's sectrix snorted and shied away. Both animals we rode and the pack animal were annoyed they had not been fed and watered, rubbed down, and bedded for the night.

"Listen to me, Duhrra of the Days. You act the part of a Grodnim here in Magdag. You understand that reason well enough."

"Aye. They'd draw out our tripes if they discovered—"

"When we go aboard the Menaham argenter, forget all mention of the word Vallia, except to give the place a round curse every now and then. Menaham and Vallia do not get on."

His heavy-lidded eyes regarded me in the flaring torchlight from over a nearby dopa den.

"I see. That makes the problem a little clearer."

"Just remember — it's my neck as well as yours."

We slept that night at the hostelry of *The Missal Tree* just off the waterfront but still in the harbor area. We were merely two weary travelers seeking a bed. The sectrixes were seen to by a lame Relt, one of that race of diffs who are cousins to the Rapas.

The Rapas seem to have taken all the ferocity, the Relts all the gentleness. We turned in and, as I say, we slept. Old campaigners both, this Duhrra of the Days, and me, Dak.

Duhrra's stump was well concealed, and the Ghittawrer emblem likewise was covered with a flap of green cloth.

The argenter captain did not ask our business or why we wished to sail out of the Eye of the World, for which I was grateful, for I had been cudgeling what brains I have to find a reason that would stand inspection. He stroked a hand through his broad black beard and stared at us with sober calculation showing on his heavy, seamed face. He wore a gold ring in each ear, which offended my aesthetic sense. He was a hard man, as he would have need of being, and he drove a hard bargain.

When we left him amid the bustle of his ship's company preparing for sea, with the seabirds calling, those ill Magbirds of Magdag, with the mixture of stinks of tar and oil and seaweed in our nostrils, and went down the gangplank, Duhrra favored me with a look that spoke volumes.

On the quayside and heading for the tavern three along from *The Net and Trident*, Duhrra said, "A large sum, Dak."

"We will find it."

"Oh, aye, I never doubted that."

We found the money, and a couple of overlords of Magdag awoke with thick heads and a garbled tale of assault in the night as they rode beneath an archway, so I guessed, for I had not cared to slay them, realizing the furor that would cause. With their gold we bought passage, for they had been staggering home well loaded after a night's gambling. Their luck was now our luck. The link-slaves had run, screaming, at the first sight of sword-twinkle.

A fair northeasterly breeze bore us on bravely after the towing boats had cast us off. With all plain sail set — and the argenters had only plain sail — we creamed along, leaning over only a little on the starboard tack. Our cabin was as well-appointed as one

might expect. It was, to tell the truth, luxurious by many of the sea-standards I have known. The twin suns shone, the sky lifted high and blue above us, the seabirds were dropped astern, and ahead of us lay only the Grand Canal, the Dam of Days, and then the long haul south and east and north, to Pandahem. From thence I would find a way to reach Vallia.

When the first of the black clouds appeared, boiling on the southern horizon, I felt the sudden gripping sensation at my heart. When I had been living in the inner sea before and had attempted to sail to Sanurkazz and to Felteraz, the Star Lords had sent a most violent rashoon. Rashoons, those sudden and tumultuous gales of the inner sea, are known and accepted as part of life. What the Star Lords sent was greater and more vicious, huge black clouds swirling, winds that tore canvas to ribbons, that smashed a ship over onto her beam ends.

The hands took the canvas in smartly enough. We snuggled down. I recalled that the woman — so marvelous in her scarlet and ruby and gold clothing, astride a white zhyan, the woman whose use-name was Zena Iztar — had promised me I would not leave the Eye of the World just yet. She had said I would be prevented, and when I had asked if the Star Lords would prevent me, she had answered no. I stared at those ominous clouds, hanging dark and angry, and I cursed.

The master, Captain Andapon, appeared confident. His beard lifted arrogantly.

"It is only a rashoon. That is a mere nothing to a sailor who has sailed the Outer Oceans."

He was right, if it was only a rashoon, a local storm.

"It will pass, never fear."

And he *was* right. The black clouds rose a hand's breadth into the sky above the horizon. The light shone strangely over there. I stared. The clouds were dwindling, were thinning, were withdrawing. I stared harder. A white speck appeared, diving down on

the argenter. The ship wallowed. Captain Andapon bellowed and his men swarmed aloft to cast loose the canvas. The air felt still and warm, the breeze dying. Still that white speck flitted nearer. No one else aboard appeared to have seen it.

The suns shone on that flying dot. And as I looked up so I recognized the white dove of the Savanti. Long and long had I seen this white dove, the Savanti's counterpart to the bird of prey sent by the Star Lords to be their messenger and spy. I gripped the rail. I could not look away.

The white dove hovered. I knew the Savanti, those mysterious men, mortal but superhuman, of the Swinging City of Aphrasöe, were once more taking an interest in me. They were the ones who had first brought me to Kregen. They had wanted to make of me a Savapim, an agent to work for the humanization of the world. I had failed them because I had cured my Delia; her baptism in the Sacred Pool of Baptism of the River Zelfh in Aphrasöe not only cured her crippled leg but conferred on her, as it had on me, a thousand years of life.

What could they want of me now? Why did the Star Lords stand aloof? Was this what Zena Izta had meant?

The argenter, *Chavonth of Mem*, wallowed and rolled in the windless sea. The sky cleared. The suns blazed forth and no speck of cloud obscured that wide expanse.

"This will not last for long," said Captain Andapon. I had to admire his hard grittiness, even though he was a member of the country I familiarly knew as the Bloody Menahem, those people who had allied themselves with Hamal against Vallia.

The watches changed and the bells rang and the lookout screeched from the maintop.

"Sails!"

"They bring a wind, Pandrite be praised!"

We all stared up uselessly at the lookout. He pointed to the south. His voice reached us, hoarse with yelling. "Swifters!"

Captain Andapon stamped upon his own deck, and swore.

"May the vile Armipand take 'em! Swifters!"

He meant they would be pulling, using their banks of oars, sailing independently of the wind. We were still becalmed.

The men of Menaham had no fear of the bitter struggle between the Red and the Green, for they were neutrals. Swifters flying the red or green flags would treat them merely as passing strangers upon the sea.

Soon the swifters hove into view over the horizon. As they neared it became clear they had seen us and were bearing down to investigate this lone ship. That made sense. Captain Andapon bellowed and the Menaham flag rose up not only to the mizzen, but also to the main and foremasts. I looked at the colors: four blue diagonals and four green diagonals from right to left, divided by thin white borders. I thought back to the Battle of Jholaix when the yellow saltire on the red ground, the colors of the empire of Vallia, had borne down and trampled the colors of Menaham along with those of Hamal.

Now those colors would protect me from the Red and the Green; for to the Greens I was a hated enemy Krozair, and to the Reds I was Apushniad, an unfrocked Krozair.

The lookout bellowed again.

Captain Andapon leaped nimbly, for all his bulk, grasped the larboard shrouds, and climbed a dozen ratlines. He shaded his eyes and peered at the swifters. Before he descended to the deck he looked down at us, all standing there and looking up at him. His voice cracked, flat and brutally.

"They showed neither red nor green. They are small craft, less than ten oars a side. You all know what they are." His voice smashed at us. "Beat to quarters! Stand to arms! They won't take us without a fight"

So I knew, too.

Renders, pirates, sea-wolves of the Eye of the World. They took and looted and burned Zairian or Grodnim; it was all one. This fine fat ship of Menaham, all becalmed and idle, would be served up to them, like ponscho on a plate!

**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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