

**DRAY PRESCOT: 2**

**THE SUNS  
OF SCORPIO**

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writing as

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**A Mushroom eBook**



# THE SUNS OF SCORPIO

Book Two of the Dray Prescott series

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sampler

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## A NOTE ON THE TAPES FROM AFRICA

Some of the strange and remarkable story of Dray Prescott, which I have by a fortunate chance been privileged to edit, has already seen publication (*Transit to Scorpio*). Yet still as I listen to my little cassette tape recorder the power of Prescott's sure calm voice haunts me. There is much in the incredibly long life of this man yet to learn and we must be thankful that we have been given what we do have available to us.

The cassettes my friend Geoffrey Dean handed me that day in Washington, cassettes he had received in Africa from Dan Fraser who, alone of us, has actually seen and talked with Dray Prescott, are incalculably valuable. Yet some cassettes are missing. This is quite clear from the textual evidence. That this is a tragedy goes without saying and I have urgently contacted Geoffrey to discover if he can trace any way in which the loss might have occurred. So far he has been unable to offer any explanation. It is too much to imagine that by some miraculous stroke of good fortune someone might stumble upon these missing cassettes — say in the baggage room of an airline terminal or a lost property office. If, as I fear, they are lying abandoned in some

pestiferous West African village, unrecognized and forgotten, someone may use them to record the latest ephemeral pop tunes. . .

Dray Prescott, as described by Dan Fraser, is a man a little above medium height, with straight brown hair and brown eyes that are level and oddly dominating. His shoulders made Dan's eyes pop. Dan sensed an abrasive honesty, a fearless courage, about him. He moves, Dan says, like a great hunting cat, quiet and deadly.

Dray Prescott, born in 1775, insists on calling himself a plain sailor, yet already his story indicates that even during his time on this Earth when he was attempting with little success to make his way he was destined for some vast and almost unimaginable fate. I believe he always expected something great and mysterious to happen to him. When he was transplanted from Earth to Kregen beneath Antares by the Savanti, those semi-divine men of Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, he positively reveled in the experiences designed to test him. Something about his makeup, perhaps his mental independence, his quick resentment of unjust authority, and most particularly his defiant determination to cure in the pool of baptism the crippled leg sustained by his beloved Delia in a fall from a zorca, made the Savanti cast him out of his paradise.

Subsequently, after he had been transported back to Kregen beneath the Suns of Scorpio by the Star Lords, he fought his way up to be Zorcander of the Clan of Felschraung. Then, after his enslavement in the marble quarries of Zenicce, he graced himself — in that same

enclave city of Zenicce — in the eyes of Great Aunt Shusha, who bestowed upon him the title of Lord of Strombor, giving him possession of all her family's holdings. All these experiences seem, to judge by what he says himself in the following narrative, to have touched him lightly. I cannot believe that to be true. During these early periods on Kregen Dray Prescott was maturing in ways that perhaps we on this Earth do not understand.

As to the editing of the tapes, I have abridged certain portions, and tried to bring some order out of the confusion of names and dates and places. For instance, Prescott is inconsistent in his usage of names. Sometimes he will spell out the word, and this makes transcription easy; at other times I have tried to spell the name phonetically, following what I hope are the guidelines he indicates. "Jikai," for instance, which he spells out, he pronounces as "Jickeye." He uses the word "na" between proper names, and I take it to mean the English "of" used rather in the French fashion of "*de*". But he also uses "nal." He says: "Mangar na Arkasson" but: "The Savanti nal Aphrasöe." I feel the usage bears no relation to the double vowel. Clearly there are grammatical rules on Kregen that diverge from those with which we are familiar on this Earth. Generally I have substituted "of" in these circumstances.

Prescott speaks with the characteristic lack of calculated forethought to be expected from a man recollecting past events. He will wander from one point to another as various enticing memories recur to him;

but I feel this lends a certain lightness and vigor to his narrative and, at some risk of displeasure from the purists of the language among us, I have in most cases merely amended the punctuation and left the train of thought as Prescott spoke it.

So far he has said nothing of note about the seasons, and he uses that word as a rule, hardly ever “year.” I suspect the seasonal cycles to be far more complicated astronomical, meteorological and agricultural affairs than we here are accustomed to.

Geoffrey Dean said to me: “Here are the tapes from Africa. I promised Dan Fraser I would honor what he had promised Dray Prescott, for I truly believe, Alan, there is a purpose behind Prescott’s desire to have his story read by people on Earth.”

I believe that, too.

*Alan Burt Akers*

# CHAPTER ONE

## Summons of the Scorpion

Once before I had been flung out of paradise.

Now as I tried to gather up the broken threads of my life on this Earth, I, Dray Prescot, realized how useless mere pretense was. Everything I held dear, all I wanted of hope or happiness, still existed on Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio. There, I knew, my Delia waited for me. Delia! My Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia of Delphond — for the Star Lords had contemptuously thrust me back to Earth before Delia could become Delia of Strombor. There on Kregen beneath Antares all I desired was denied to me here on Earth.

My return to this Earth brought me one unexpected experience.

Peace had broken out.

Since the age of eighteen I had known nothing but war, apart from that brief and abortive period of the Peace of Amiens, and even then I had not been completely free. What the new peace meant to me was simple and unpleasant.

The details of my wanderings after I managed to escape the inquiries after my arrival, naked, on that beach in Portugal are not important, for I confess I must have been living in shock. I had vanished overboard as far as the deck watch was concerned, that night seven years ago, disappearing forever from Roscommon's quarterdeck the night after we had taken that French eighty-gun ship. Had I, as far as the navy was concerned, still been alive I would in the normal course of events have expected to be promoted to commander. Now, with the peace, with a seven-year lapse of life to explain, with ships being laid up and men cast adrift to rot on shore, what chance had I, plain Dray Prescott, of achieving the giddy heights of command?

Through chance I was in Brussels when the Corsican escaped from Elba and aroused France for the final dying glory of the Hundred Days.

I imagined I knew how Bonaparte felt.

He had had the world at his feet, and then he had nothing but a tiny island. He had been rejected, deposed, his friends had turned against him — he, too, in a way, had been kicked out of his paradise.

It had been my duty to fight Bonaparte and his fleets; so it was without any sense of incongruity that I found myself at Waterloo on that fateful day of the eighteenth of June, 1815.

The names are all familiar now — La Belle Alliance, La Haye Sainte, Hougoumont; the sunken road, the charges, the squares, the cavalry defeats, the onslaught of the Old Guard — all have been talked about and

written about as no other battle in all this Earthly world. Somehow in the smashing avalanches of the British volleys as the Foot Guards hurled back the elite Old Guard, and I charged down with Colborne's 52nd, and we saw the sway and the recoil of the Guard and then were haring after the ruined wreck of the French army, I found a powder-tasting, bitter, unpleasant anodyne for my hopeless longings.

In the aftermath of battle I was able to render some assistance to an English gentleman who, being inopportunately pressed by a swearing group of moustached grenadiers of the Old Guard, was happy to allow me to drive them off. This meeting proved of no little importance; indeed, had my life been led as are ordinary people's lives — that is, decently, on the planet of their birth until their death — it would have marked a most momentous day. Our friendship ripened during the days he was nursed back to full health and on our return to London he insisted I partake of his hospitality. You will notice I do not mention his name, and this I do for very good and sound reasons. Suffice it to say that through his friendship and influence I was able to place my little store of money into good hands, and I mark the beginning of my present Earthly fortune as originating on the field of Waterloo.

But it is not of my days on Earth that I would tell you.

Feeling the need once more of wide horizons and the heel of a ship beneath my feet I shipped out — as a passenger — and traveled slowly in the general

direction of India, where I hoped to find something, anything, I knew not what, to dull the ever-present ache that made of all I did on this Earth pointless and plodding and mere routine existence.

There seemed to me then little rhyme or reason for the malicious pranks played on me by the Star Lords. I had no clear conception of who or what they were — I didn't give a damn then, either, just so long as they returned me to Kregen beneath Antares. I had seen that gorgeous scarlet and golden-feathered hunting bird, greater than either hawk or eagle, the Gdoinye, circling above me during moments of crisis. And, too, I had seen the white dove that had up to then ignored the scarlet and golden raptor. There were forces in play I did not and didn't want to understand as the Star Lords battled for what they desired in their mysterious unhuman ways with whatever forces opposed them; and the Savanti — mere human men after all — looked on appalled and attempted to move the pieces of destiny in ways that would benefit mere mortal humanity.

The forces that moved destiny chose to transport me to Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio during my first night ashore in Bombay.

The heat, stifling and intense, the smells, the flies, the cacophony of noise, all these things meant nothing to me. I had experienced far worse. And on that night, so long ago now, the stars above my head flung down a sheening light that coalesced and fused into a burning patina mocking me and closing me in. I had reached that point of despair in which I believed that never

again would I tread the fields of Kregen, never again look out from the walls of my palace of Strombor in Zenicce, never again hold in my arms Delia of Delphond.

From the balcony, I looked up at the stars, with the night breeze susurrating great jagged leaves and the insects buzzing in their millions, and picked out, not without some difficulty, that familiar red fire of Antares, the arrogant upflung tail of the constellation of Scorpio. I stared longingly, sick with that inner crumbling of spirit that recognized with loathing that I did, indeed, despair.

In my agony and my desperation I had thought that India might provide a scorpion — as it had bred the one that killed my father.

Clearly, that long-ago night, I was light-headed. When I looked up at the stars, at the red fire of Antares, and the familiar blue lambency grew, swelling and bloating into the blue-limned outlines of a giant scorpion, I was drained of all the exultation that had uplifted me the last time this had happened.

I simply lifted up my arms and let myself be carried wherever the Star Lords willed, happy only that I should once again tread the earth of Kregen, under the Suns of Scorpio.

\* \* \* \*

Without opening my eyes I knew I was on Kregen.

The stinking heat of a sweltering Bombay night was gone. I felt a cooling breeze on my forehead. Also, I felt

a peculiar scrabbling tickling sensation on my chest. Slowly, almost languorously, I opened my eyes.

As I had half expected to be, I was naked.

But, sitting on my chest and waving its tail at me, a large, reddish, armor-glinting scorpion poised on its squat legs.

Without being able to help myself, moving with a violence entirely beyond my control, I leaped to my feet with a single bound. I yelled. The scorpion, dislodged, was flung out and away. It fell among a rocky outcrop and, regaining its legs with an ungraceful waddle, vanished into a crack among the rocks.

I took a deep breath. I remembered the scorpion that had killed my father. I remembered the phantom scorpion who had crewed for me aboard the leaf boat on that original journey down the sacred River Aph. I remembered too the scorpion that had appeared as my friends laughed and I had sat with Delia, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, with the red sunshine of Zim flooding the chamber and the greenish light of Genodras just creeping into the corner of the window, as we made the bokkertu for our betrothal, just before I had been flung out of Kregen. I remembered these times of terror and despair when I had previously seen a scorpion — and I laughed.

Yes, I, Dray Prescot, who seldom smiled, laughed!

For I knew I was back on Kregen. I could tell by the feeling of lightness about my body, the scent on the wind, the mingled shards of light falling about me in an opaline glory from the twin suns of Antares.

So I laughed.

I felt free, rejuvenated, alive, gloriously alive, the blood singing through my body and ready for anything this savage, beautiful, vicious, and beloved world of Kregen might offer. With a strange exalted kind of curiosity, I looked about me.

That blessed familiar pink sunshine bathed the landscape in glory. A grove of trees before me, bending in the wind, showed the white and pink blossoms of the missal. Grass as green and luscious as any that ever grew on Earth spread beneath my feet. Far away on the horizon, so far that I knew I stood upon a lofty eminence, the line of the sea cut cleanly into the brilliant sky. I breathed in deeply, expanding my chest. I felt more alive than at any time since I had been snatched away from my palace of Strombor in Zenicce. Once again I was on Kregen. I was home!

I walked slowly toward the demarcated edge of the grass near to me on my left hand, at right angles to that distant prospect of the sea. I was naked. If it had been the Star Lords who had brought me here this time, or the Savanti, those dispassionate, near-perfect men of the Swinging City of Aphrasöe, then I would not expect otherwise. Truth to tell, I think they understood how less in my estimation they would stand had they thought to provide me with clothing, with weapons, a sword, a helmet, a shield, or spear. I was brought to this planet of Kregen beneath Antares, as I believed, for a purpose, even though as yet I might not divine what that purpose might be. I understood something of the way of those

forces that had snatched me across four hundred light-years of interstellar space.

The grass felt soft and springy beneath my feet and the wind blew through my hair. At the lip of the precipice I stood looking out and down on a sight at once incredible and beautiful in its insolent power. However beautiful that sight might be and however incredible, I did not care. I was back on Kregen. Just whereabouts on the surface of the planet I had been placed I had no way of knowing, and I didn't care. I knew only that whatever faced me in the days ahead I would find my way back to Strombor in Zenicce, that proud city of the continent of Segesthes, find my way back to clasp Delia in my arms once more. If she had left Strombor, where she would still regard herself as in a foreign land, and had returned to her home by the Blue Mountains in Vallia and to her father, the emperor of the unified island empire, then I would follow her there too. I would go to the ends of this world as I would my own to find Delia of the Blue Mountains.

Below me extended a rocky shelf cut from the side of the cliff. Below that another extended. Each shelf was about a hundred yards wide. They descended like a dizzyingly disorienting giant's staircase, down and down, until the last shelf vanished beneath the calm surface of a narrow ribbon of water. Opposite me the shelves rose again from the water, up and up, stepped up and back and back, rising until I could look across five miles of clear air to the opposite lip. Here and there smaller stairways threaded the rock faces. I turned and

looked inland. The perspectives dwindled away and were lost in the distance.

The supposition appeared extraordinary — ridiculous, even — but from the order of the level steps, the block facings, and the uniformity of appearance, I judged this Grand Canal to be man-made. Or, if not entirely man-made, then certainly the hand of man had been laid on what was originally a canal linking the outer wave-tossed ocean with the calmer and smoother waters of an inland sea.

I could see no sign of any living thing. However, I felt that a projecting mass perched on the topmost level directly opposite me, a rocky edifice squared and minutely distinct in the clean air, must be some form of habitation. A tremor of smoke arose from its summit, black and thin at the distance, trailing away in the wind.

The last time I had arrived on Kregen I had heard Delia's scream ringing in my ears. This time, also, I heard a scream; but I knew instantly that it was not Delia's.

Running toward the bluff from which the breeze blew and the gentle sound of the sea could now be heard susurrating murmurously in the warm air, I saw a figure break through a screen of trees and, staggering a few steps forward, fall full-length on the sward.

As I reached him I saw he was not a man.

He was a Chulik, one of those beast-humans born like men with two arms and legs, with a face that might also have been human but for the twin three-inch long upward-reaching tusks, and who in nothing else

resembled humanity. His skin was a smooth oily yellow. His eyes small, black, and round like currants. He was strong and powerful, a mercenary warrior, with his mail coif from which the ventail hung open, and a hauberk that reached down to mid-thigh. He carried no weapons that I could see. His strength and power was attested to by the fact that he had screamed at all, with the red pudding that was his face all pulpy, lacerated, and bloody.

A silence descended.

I had no idea as yet which one of the many hostile and savagely ferocious predators of Kregen might have so ravaged his face. But I felt a familiar thrill of blood thump along my veins — and then I truly knew I had returned to Kregen beneath the Suns of Scorpio.

The only previous occasion on Kregen I had seen mail had been when the Princess Natema Cydones had tempted me. In an alcove a giant mail-clad man had stood, silent and motionless, bearing a rapier of such marvelous workmanship and balance, that same rapier I had captured and used in that final victorious fight in Strombor. Armor of any kind was a useful sort of clothing to wear on Kregen. Around the Chulik's waist was a white garment striped with green.

At sight of the green-striped material I frowned.

However, as you will have gathered by now, I am not overly squeamish about the small things of life, and so I stripped off the garment of green-striped white cloth and wrapped it about myself into a kind of breechclout.

Infinitely more important than clothes on Kregen are weapons, more important even than armor. This Chulik carried no weapon. This was exceedingly strange. Carefully, walking with that light springy tread that carried me soundlessly over the grass, I approached the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea.

The wind sported in my hair. I looked over and down.

The sea heaved gently a long way down the jagged cliffs. I could barely make out a curving beach of yellow sand where waves broke which I could barely hear. A few gulls and other seabirds wheeled; but they were strangely silent. That sea shone a refulgent blue. The seas that washed the shores of the continent of Seges-thes were green, or gray, sometimes blue with a hardness and coldness about that blueness; this sea moved languidly, smoothly, and its blueness struck back at the eye. I had seen that blueness of water in the Mediterranean. With a sailor's eye I studied the scene, and I took particular notice of a vessel half-drawn up on that narrow curve of yellow sand.

She was a galley. Her ram beak, her pencil-thin lines, the oars now drawn inboard, all proclaimed that clearly. But she was not like that galley that had welcomed me to Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, after my inaugural journey down the sacred River Aph.

I looked about the edge of the cliff, rooting among the bushes that lined the crest. I did not find any weapon the Chulik might have dropped.

I looked further along the cliff edge, seeking the probable path the mercenary would have ascended. I became very still.

A group of creatures squatted there half-hidden by the bushes. The bushes were thorn-ivy, thickets to be avoided by those with tender skin. These creatures snuggled within the thick thorn-encrusted loops, squatting on all sixes, their coarse gray pelts matted with dirt, leaves, and excrement, their heads all turned to look down the ascending pathway up the face of the cliff.

Now I knew what manner of creature it was who had torn out the Chulik's face.

They were not unlike the Segesthan rock-ape, the grundal, some five feet in height when standing erect, with thin spiderish limbs that in their agility could take them swinging with nonchalant ease across rocks that would defeat a mountain goat. I had seen them on occasion among the distant mountains bordering the Great Plains of Segesthes, when I had hunted with my Clansmen; these fellows were of a land: vicious, cowardly, deadly when hunting in packs. Their heads were all turned away from me, yet I knew what they would be like from a frontal view. Their mouths were incredibly large, closing in folds of flesh, and when open round and armed with concentric rows of needle-like teeth. They looked not unlike some of those single-minded predatory fish dredged up from the deep seas, all mouth and fangs.

Something like ten or a dozen waited in the bushes.

Sounds broke on the still air. The scuffle of feet, the rattle of stones, the quick chatter of people in animated careless conversation. Listening with ears trained as a warrior with the Clansmen of Felschraung, I did not hear the sound I wanted to hear. I could hear no chink of weapons.

Now the voices were close enough for me to understand what was being said. The language was a form of Kregish so close to what I knew that I was convinced Segesthes could not be far removed from wherever I was now.

“When I catch you, Valima,” puffed a light eager boy’s voice, “you know what to expect, I trust?”

“Catch me?” The girl’s voice was filled with laughter, clear, trilling, carefree, hugely enjoying herself and the moment. “Why, I declare, Gahan Gannius, you could not catch a fat greasy merchant at his prayers!”

“You will be at your prayers in a moment!”

Now I could see them as they laughed, puffing and toiling up the slope. The explanation for their words and the young man’s clear exasperation was simple. He pursued the girl up the trail zigzagging in the cliff face, and she, a laughing sprite, danced on ahead. She carried a twisted bundle of clothing over her head. From the bundle loops of pearls hung down over her ears, a leather belt, a corner of a green and white cloth, a golden buckle. Both she and the boy were naked; and despite her burden she was able to keep him at any distance she desired. She bounded ahead with a gay laugh that sounded by far too reckless for a young

naked girl on a cliff face with a dozen grundals lying in wait.

Their guard, the Chulik, lay with his face ripped out.

I picked up the first stone. It lay near the edge, a large, jagged stone, satisfactorily heavy in my hand.

A man, weaponless among a world of predators, must find what he can to defend himself. It is in his nature not to let himself die easily. I had proved that, many times.

I stood up.

“Hai!” I shouted. And, again, “Hai!”

I threw the stone. I did not stop to check its flight but bent immediately, seized another from the crumpled outcrop, and hurled it. The first stone, as I threw the second, cracked into the head of the nearest grundal. When the third was on its way I saw the second smite the next grundal a glancing blow, upon that round teeth-filled muzzle so like that of a deep sea fish.

“Beware!” I took breath to yell. “Grundal!”

Six stones I threw, six hard jagged bolts of pulverizing rock, before the grundals were on me.

They were not like the Segesthan rock-apes I had known before. Each one ran on his lower pair of limbs, claws scrabbling, and his upper pair reached out to grasp me and draw my face into that grinning orbit of teeth so that it might be bitten off. But, surprising me, each one carried in his middle limbs’ hands a stout stick, a cudgel perhaps three feet long.

Had they known it, that was their mistake.

Claws and cudgels and needle-sharp teeth raked for me. I sprang sideways, took the first upraised cudgel, turned, and twisted and bent, and the cudgel was mine.

A grundal screeched and leaped in from the side and I in my turn leaped and kicked him alongside his head, feeling the needle-fangs' pressure through those folds of skin. The cudgel broke the skull of the one in front.

“Your back!” a voice screamed from somewhere.

I bent and rolled and the lunging grundal went over me and the cudgel helped him on his way. I could not dispatch him for the next two who attacked; these I treated separately thus: the first was caught by his cudgel and pulled forward, the second was beaten over the shoulders and, also, stumbled forward and I, with a gliding motion at once graceful and very unpleasant to them in its consequences, removed my body from the point of impact. They smashed into each other and went down screeching.

I took two quick strokes to beat in their skulls and was facing the next when a Chulik, his yellow skin extraordinarily sweaty and shiny from the run up, smote downward with a sword and split a grundal down to his shoulders.

The rest turned, screeching, beginning to drop their cudgels and to dance on their four lower limbs, a dance of rage and frustration, a reversion to their near-savage ancestry.

Not many of them were left.

Another Chulik appeared and the two semi-humans charged the grundals. The rock-apes spat defiance, but

retreated and then dived over the cliff edge, swinging in fantastic overhand leaps across the rock face, disappearing into cracks and crannies and shadow-shrouded holes.

As a welcome to Kregen, I decided, staring at the girl and boy who were now hurriedly clothing themselves, at the sweaty Chuliks, and the dead grundals, this had been a fair old party. The boy, as soon as he was dressed, was cursing the Chulik guard commander. I took little notice, letting the old, familiar, hated tones of harsh authority flow over my head. Truth to tell, the Chuliks should have done their job better. They were regarded as among the best of mercenary semi-human guards, and they charged a higher premium for their services as a result. The dead one beyond the trees was no advertisement for them.

Looking at the girl was a much more rewarding occupation. She had very dark hair, not quite black, and a pleasant, open face with dark eyes. She was somewhat full about the jaw and her figure, for I had seen that whether I wished it or not, had been full, too, plump, almost; but this I suspected was merely youth and would trim off in a few years. The boy was slender, strong in his movements and gestures, with dark hair and eyes; but there was in his face a certain expression, a cast of character, a shadow I coldly felt upon me. At that time I did not brood upon him, this Gahan Gannius, for I had just come to Kregen and needed information.

He was giving orders now, harshly, meanly, the horror of what might have occurred to him still fresh in

his mind. The girl, Valima, looked at me. I remained standing, the cudgel still grasped in my hand. No one had spoken to me since that swift warning shout that a grundal was about to attack my back.

“We cannot picnic here, that is certain,” Gahan Gannius was saying, very disgruntled, almost sulky. “I suppose we had best go back to the shore.”

“If you command, Gahan.”

“I do so command! Is there any doubt?”

The Chuliks, a few more had now appeared, puffing, stood stolidly by. Their place as hired mercenaries obviated any form of inhibition from these young people, the master and the mistress. And still they had taken no notice of me.

The young master shouted at the servants who had been struggling up laden with food and wines, with tables and tablecloths, with chairs, with awnings, with rugs. Now they turned back to shore again, these men and women clad in brief gray garments with broad green borders. With the contents of a ship’s stateroom upon their shoulders, they trudged up the cliff and now down, so as to fulfill the whim of these insensitive young people for a foolhardy picnic.

When they had all gone down again I was left alone.

I stood at the summit of the cliff, abandoned, and I marveled. I marveled that I had done nothing about their bad manners.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Todalpheme of Akhram

From the summit of the opposite side of the canal I could look up and see the structure rising a half mile away. I had arrived here by the simple expedient of climbing down the myriads of stairs cut into the giant rock shelves, swimming the half mile stretch of water, and then climbing up again. The twin suns were low in the sky now and their light, still mingled, would gradually fade and turn into a purer greenish glow as the green sun, the one called Genodras, lingered a while after the larger red sun, Zim, had vanished.

Then the stars would come out and I might have a better idea of just where I was on the surface of Kregen beneath Antares.

The structure appeared a solidly constructed castle or hotel with stoppered windows; its many turrets covered a roof I felt sure was more than a simple closure of halls behind curtain walls. There were domes, minaret-like spires, and the gable-ends of lofty buildings. The opaline shadows fell across its gray walls. I

wondered if it had been built at the same time the canal had been straightened and faced with stone, or if its builders had, like those of Medieval Rome, plundered the ancient edifice for their own materials.

I walked slowly up toward the structure in the gathering green light.

From the dead body of the Chulik I had taken his mail coif, hauberk, and leather gear. The boy and girl, Gahan Gannius and Valima, evidently had not bothered to inquire into the fate of their guard, and his companions were under constraint. I had met the Chuliks before. I knew it was their custom to adopt the uniforms, accouterments, and weapons of those by whom they were hired. In Zenicce, where for a time I had been a bravo-fighter, the Chuliks carried the long rapier and the dagger; here, they carried the weapons suitable to mail-clad men.

The long sword had turned up at last, in my search, skewered into the ground beyond a clump of the ivy-thorn. It must have flung up, somersaulting, from the dead Chulik hand. I picked it up and studied it. Much may be learned of a people by a diligent study of their weapons.

The first object of scrutiny was the point. This was a true point, yet its wedge-shaped flanks, although reasonably sharp, were not those of a thrusting weapon. The point was known here, but, confirming the mail-clad armored Chuliks, was not favored. There exists the well-known fallacy that the point and thrusting were unknown during the European Middle Ages; the truth is

simply that thrusting is not the most effective way of disposing of a mail-clad opponent. So the long sword — I turned it over in my hands. It was straight, cheaply-made, well-sharpened, as I would expect of a Chulik mercenary, with a simple iron cross-guard and wooden grip, ridged and notched. On the flat of the blade, below the guard, was etched a monogram that I took to be the Kregish letters for G.G.M. There was no maker's name.

So. A cheap, mass-produced weapon, a trifle clumsy as to balance and swing; it would serve me until a better came along.

Now I stood before the strange structure with its many domes and cupolas, its square-cut walls, in the dying light of Genodras, the green sun of Kregen.

They came out to me. I was ready. If they came to greet me, all well and good. If they came to slay me or take me captive I would swing this new sword until I had made good my escape in the shadows.

“Lahal!” they called in the universal greeting of Kregen. “Lahal.”

“Lahal,” I replied.

I stood waiting for them to approach. They carried torches and in the evening breeze that would strengthen with the dying suns the torches streamed like scarlet and golden hair. I saw yellow robes, and sandals, and shaven heads in flung-back hoods. I looked at these men's waists and I saw ropes wound about them, with tassels that swung as they walked.

The ropes and the tassels were blue.

I let out my breath.

I had hoped they would be scarlet ropes and tassels.

“Lahal, stranger. If you seek rest for this night, then come quickly, for night draws on rapidly.”

The speaker lifted his torch as he spoke. His voice was peculiar, high and shrill, almost feminine. I saw his face. Smooth, that face, beardless yet old, with wrinkled skin about the eyes and puckering beside the mouth. He was smiling. Here, I thought then, and was proved right, is a man who thinks he has nothing to fear.

We walked back to the structure and entered through a great masonry archway which was immediately closed by a bronze-bound lenken door. I recognized the wood by its color, an ashy color with a close-textured grain; I suppose the lenk tree and lenken wood is the Kregan equivalent of our Terrestrial oak. If there were grundals out there, with jaws waiting to bite our faces off, the closing of that bronze-bound lenken door gave a comforting feel to our backs.

Conducted to a small chamber where I was offered warmed water for washing and a change of clothing — a robe similar to the yellow robes worn by the men here — and then invited to join the men for dinner in the refectory, I found everything well-ordered and calm. Everything proceeded as though governed by a routine so well established nothing would overturn it. A feeling of pleasure, quite unmistakably pleasure, began to steal over me. This might not be Aphrasöe, the City of the Savanti, but the people here knew something of that art of making everything seem important and part of a ritual of life that would go on everlastingly.

The food was good. Simple food, and I had expected that; fish, some meat I suspected was vosk cooked in a new way, fruits including the essential and beneficial palines, all accompanied by a fine bland wine of a transparent yellow color and a low alcohol content, as I judged.

All the men gathered in the refectory were dressed in the same way and they all spoke in the same high-pitched voices. There were about a hundred of them. The men who brought in the food were dressed exactly in the same way, and when they had finished serving they joined us at the long sturm-wood tables. Many lanterns shed a golden light on the scene. Halfway through the meal a youngish man mounted a kind of stand, scarcely a pulpit, and began to recite a poem. It was a long rigmarole about a ship that had sailed into a whirlpool and been caught up to one of Kregen's seven moons. I do not smile easily and I seldom laugh. I neither laughed nor smiled at the story; but it interested me.

I did not think I was in a Kregan equivalent of a monastery. Such things did exist, I knew, and there had been the order of the purple monks in Zenicce. However, something about these people, their lack of fuss or ceremony, convinced me their lives were dedicated to something other than the disciplines of the convent.

I imagine that you who are listening to my story, as you play the recordings I make in this African famine area, will guess at my thoughts. Was this the reason I had been brought back to Kregen? Had the Star Lords

brought me, or the Savanti? Tantalizingly, I had not seen either a scarlet-feathered raptor or a white dove to give me any clues.

One of the men spoke directly to me as I drained the last of my wine. He appeared older than the others, although there were many elderly men as well as middle-aged ones. The lines and wrinkles in his face belied the otherwise smoothness of his skin.

“You should retire now, stranger, for it is clear you have traveled much and are tired.”

Could he have known just how far I had traveled!

I nodded and rose. “I would like to thank you for your hospitality—” I began.

He raised a hand. “We will talk in the morning, stranger.”

I was quite prepared to accept this dismissal. I was tired. The bed was not too soft for comfortable sleep, and I slept; if I dreamed I no longer recollect what phantoms filled my mind. In the morning, after a fine breakfast, I went for a stroll along the battlements with the old man, whose name was Akhram. The name of the building too, he told me, was Akhram.

“When I die, which may occur in perhaps fifty years or so, then there will be a new Akhram in Akhram.”

I nodded, understanding.

Over the high parapet I could see, stretching out on all sides except for those where the Grand Canal and the sea cliffs hemmed us in, broad fields, orchards, tilled land, carefully tended agricultural holdings. This place

would be rich. In the fields people labored, mere ants at this distance. Were they slaves, I wondered, or free?

I asked my usual questions.

No, he had never heard of Aphrasöe, the City of the Savanti. I forced down the pang of disappointment.

“I once saw,” I said, “three men dressed as you are, except that they wore scarlet ropes around their waists, with scarlet tassels.”

Akhram shook his head.

“That may be so. I know of the pink-roped TodalpHEME of Loh, and we are the blue-roped TodalpHEME of Turismond; but of scarlet-roped, alas, my friend, I know nothing.”

Turismond. I was on the continent of Turismond. I had heard of Turismond. Surely, then, Segesthes could not be far?

“And Segesthes?” I asked. “The city of Zenicce?”

He regarded me. “Did you not ask these scarlet-roped TodalpHEME, yourself, what of Aphrasöe?”

“They were dead, the three, dead.”

“I see.”

We walked for a space in that wonderful streaming opaline radiance.

Then: “I have heard of the continent of Segesthes, of course. Zenicce, as I am given to understand, is a not too popular city with the seafarers of the outer ocean.”

I made myself walk sedately at his side as we patrolled the battlements in the early morning sun-shine.

“And of Vallia?”

He nodded quickly. "Of Vallia we know well, for their world-encompassing ships bring us strange and wonderful things from far lands."

I was as good as back with my Delia of the Blue Mountains. For a moment I felt faint. What of the Star Lords' intentions now — if in truth it had been the Star Lords, the Everoinye?

Akhram was talking on and out of politeness, that which had been so earnestly drummed into my head by my parents, I forced myself to listen. He was talking about the tide they expected that afternoon. As he spoke, I understood what went on here and what was the service in which these Todalpheme were engaged. The Todalpheme, in brief, calculated the tides of Kregen, kept accounts, and reckoned up with all the old familiar sailor lore I had learned back on Earth. I felt a wonder at the kind of calculations they must do. For Kregen has, besides the twin suns, the red and the green, her seven moons, the largest almost twice the size of Earth's moon. I knew that with so many heavenly bodies circling the tidal motions would to a very large extent be canceled out, the very multiplicity of forces creating not more and higher tides but fewer and less. Except when bodies were in line, when they spread evenly; then the spring or neap tides would be marvelous in their extent. Back in Zenicce I had seen the tidal defenses, and the way in which the houses along the canals had been built well above the mean water level. When tides ravaged through Zenicce tragedy could result, so the barrages,

defenses, and gates were kept always in good repair, a charge on the Assembly.

Akhram told me that a great dam stood at the seaward end of the Grand Canal that connected this inner sea with the outer ocean. There were closable channels through the dam. The dam faced both ways. It had been constructed, so Akhram said, by those men of the sunrise — he said sunrise, not suns-rise — in the distant past as they had faced and leveled the canal itself, so as to control the tidal influx and efflux from the inner sea.

“We are an inward-facing people, here on the inner sea,” he said. “We know that outside, in the stormy outer ocean, there are other continents and islands. Sometimes ships sail through the regulated openings in the Dam of Days. Vallia, Wloclef from whence come thick fleeces of the curly ponsho, Loh from whence come fabulous, superbly cut gems and glassware of incredible fineness: these places we know as they trade with us. Donengil, also, in South Turismond. There are a few others; otherwise, we remain willingly confined to our inner sea.”

Later I was allowed to visit the observatories and watch the Todalpheme at work. Much of what they did with ephemeris and celestial observation was familiar to me; but much was strange, beyond my comprehension, for they used what seemed almost a different kind of logic. They were as devoted to their work as monks to theirs. But they laughed and were free and easy.

They showed a certain respect for my own understanding of the movements of heavenly bodies and the predictable movements of bodies of water, with tides and currents and winds and all the hazards thereto attached.

This inner sea was practically tideless. There was little wonder in this, of course (the Mediterranean tides never exceed two feet), and these dedicated men spent their lives calculating tide tables so that they might warn the custodians at the gates of the dam to be ready when the outer ocean boiled and seethed and roared in with all its power. I gathered there was no other navigable exit from the inner sea.

“Why do you live here, on the inward end of the Grand Canal?” I asked.

Akhram smiled in a vague way and swung his arm in a gesture that encompassed the fertile soil, the orchards, the smooth sea. “We are an inward-facing people. We love the Eye of the World.”

When Akhram referred to the dam he called it the “Dam of Days.” I realized how much it meant. If the outer ocean got up into a real big tide and swept in through the narrow gut of the Grand Canal, it would sweep like a great broom across the inner sea.

That great Dam of Days had been built in the long-ago by a people now scattered and forgotten, known only by the monuments in stone they had built and which time had overthrown, all except the Grand Canal and the Dam of Days.

I saw a stir in the fields. People were running. Faintly, cries reached up. Akhram looked over and his face drew down into a stern-lined visage of agony and frustrated anger.

“Again they raid us,” he whispered.

Now I could see mail-clad men riding beasts, swooping after the running farm people. I saw a man stagger and go down with a great net enveloping him. Girls were snatched up to saddlebows. Little children, toddlers even, were plucked up and flung screaming into ready sacks.

The long sword I had found by the thorn-ivy was below, in the room I had been assigned. I started off along the parapet. When I emerged by the massive lenken door it was just closing. A frightened rabble crowded in, the last just squeezing through the little postern cut in the main doors. I lifted the sword.

“Let me out,” I said to the men bolting and barring the doors.

I wore the green-striped material taken from the dead Chulik. I had been unable to don the hauberk or coif; my shoulders are broader than most. I held the sword so the men at the doors could see it.

“Do not go out,” they said. “You will be killed or captured—”

“Open the door.”

Akhram was there. He put a hand on my arm.

“We do not ask visitors for their names or their allegiances, friend,” he said. He stared up at me, for I am above middle height. “If they are your hereditary foes,

you may go freely forth and be killed for your convictions. But I take you for a stranger. You do not know our ways—”

“I know slaving when I see it.”

He sighed. “They are gone by now. They sweep in, when we do not expect them, not at dawn or sunset, and take our people. We, the Todalpheme, are inviolate by nature, law, and mutual agreement; for, if we were killed, then who would give warning when the great tides were coming? But our people, our loyal people who care for us, are not inviolate.”

“Who are they?” I asked. “The slavers?”

Akhram looked about him on the frightened mob of peasant folk in their simple clothing, some with the pitchforks still in their hands, some with infants clinging to their skirts, some with blood upon their faces. “Who?” asked Akhram.

The man who answered, a full-bodied man with a brown beard to his waist and a seamed and agricultural face, spoke in a tongue I had difficulty in following. It was not Kregish, the universal Latin of Kregen, and it was not the language of Segesthes, spoken by my Clansmen of Felschraung and Longuelm, and by the Houses and free men and slaves of Zenicce.

“Followers of Grodno,” Akhram said. He looked weary, like a civilized man who sees things with which civilization should be done. Then, quickly, as he saw me open my mouth to ask, he spoke. “Grodno, the green-sun deity, the counterpart to Zair, the red-sun deity. They are, as all men can tell, locked in mortal combat.”

I nodded. I remembered how men said the sky colors were always in opposition.

“And the city of these people, these slavers, these followers of Grodno?”

“Grodno lies all to the northern side of the inner sea; Zair to the south. Their cities are many and scattered, each free and independent. I do not know from which city these raiders came.

I said, lifting the sword again: “I shall go to the cities of Grodno, for I believe—”

I did not say any more.

Suddenly I saw, planing high in the air and descending in wide hunting circles, the gorgeous scarlet plumage of a great bird of prey, a raptor with golden feathers encircling its neck and its black feet and talons outstretched in wide menace. I knew that bird, the Gdoinye, the messenger or spy of the Star Lords. As I saw it so I felt that familiar lassitude, that sickening sense of falling, overpower me, and I felt my knees give way, my sword arm fall, my every sense reel and shiver with the shock of dissociation.

“No!” I managed to cry out. “No! I will not return to Earth! I will not. . . I will stay on Kregen. . . I will not return!”

But the blue mist encompassed me and I was falling.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Into the Eye of the World

North or south . . . Grodno or Zair . . . green or red . . . Genodras or Zim . . . Somewhere a conflict was being fought out. I did not know then and even now I must in the nature of things be unaware of all that passed as I sank down in a stupor in the courtyard of the tidal buildings of Akhram with the frightened rabble of peasantry about me and the massive lenken door fast shut with its bronze bolts and bars. I was aware of a vast hollow roaring in my head. This perturbed me, for on my previous transplantations from Kregen to Earth, or from Earth to Kregen, the thing had been done and over with in mere heartbeats.

I seemed detached from myself. I was there, in that courtyard with the kindly concerned face of Akhram bending over me. And, also, I was looking down on the scene from a goodly height and the scene eddied around like a whirlpool, like that whirlpool into which I had plunged in my leaf boat going down the River Aph. I shuddered at the thought that I might be seeing that

scene from the viewpoint of the Gdoinye, the scarlet and golden bird of prey.

As I looked, both upward and downward, simultaneously, I saw a white dove moving smoothly through the level air.

I thought I understood, then.

I thought the Star Lords, who I imagined had brought me here to Kregen on this occasion, did not want me to go to the north shore cities of the followers of Grodno, the cities of the green sun; but maybe the Savanti, whose messenger and observer the white dove was, would prefer it if I did go.

I hung as it were in a kind of limbo.

With a hoarse scream the scarlet bird swung toward the white dove.

This was the first occasion on which I had seen either bird take any notice of the other.

The white dove moved with that deceptively smooth wing-beat and climbed away, slipping past the stooping bird of prey.

Both birds turned and rose in the air. I followed them into the opaline radiance of the sky where the twin suns shed their mingled light fusing into a golden pinkish glory whose edges shone lambently with a tinged green. Then I could see them no longer and I sank back and fell, and so opened my eyes again on the dust of the courtyard.

Sandaled feet shuffled by my nose. Hoarse breathing sounded in my ears and hands reached down to lift me. I guessed I had not lain on the ground for half a minute.

The friendly and concerned peasants were trying to carry me. I hauled out an arm and waved it and then, still groggy, stood up. I do not smile often, but I looked not without pleasure on the courtyard of Akhram, on the peasants, on the great lenken door, and on Akhram himself, who was staring at me as though, truly, I had risen from the dead.

There remains little to tell of the rest of my stay in Akhram, the astronomical observatory of the Todalpheme.

I learned what I needed of the local language with a fierce obsessive drive that disconcerted my teacher, a Todalpheme with a gentle face and mournful eyes. His voice, as high-pitched as the others, and his face, as smooth as those of the younger brethren, unsettled me. I learned quickly.

Also, I learned that if I wished to cross the wide outer ocean to reach Vallia, it would be necessary to take a ship from one of the ports of the inner sea. Few ships ventured past the Dam of Days, and it would serve my purpose to go to a city rather than wait meekly here for a ship from the outside world to pass on her way home.

Finally, Akhram spoke gently to me, pointing out my knowledge of the sea, tides, and calculations over which we had amicably pored together. Navigation has always come easily to me, and by this time I had fixed in my head the geographical outlines of the inner sea as well as Akhram could teach me with the aid of maps and globes kept in his own private study. I was also able to

give him some sage advice on the higher mathematics, and his grasp of calculus also was thereby strengthened.

What he proposed was obvious, given the context of our relationship.

He now knew my name, Dray Prescott, and used it with some affection. Because of my somewhat stupid and vainglorious attempt to rush outside and deal with the raiders, alone, with my sword, I understood he felt that he owed me gratitude. I owned no particular loyalty to any set of codes; codes, in a general sense, are for the weaklings who rely on ritual and formula; but I granted their use at the right times and places; that had not been one of them. Had I got outside I would have been killed or captured and, very probably, only further annoyed the mail-clad men of Grodno.

“You are at heart one of us, Dray,” said Akhram, then. “Your knowledge is already far advanced over that normal for one of your years in our disciplines. Join us! Join us, Dray Prescott; become a Todalpheme. You would enjoy the life here.”

In other days, in other climes, I might have been tempted. But — there was Delia of Delphond.

There were the Star Lords; there were the Savanti; but most of all there was Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia.

“I thank you for your gracious offer, Akhram. But it cannot be. I have other destinies—”

“If it is because we are all castrati, and you would of necessity have to be castrated likewise, I can assure you

that is of little importance beside the knowledge gained—”

I shook my head. “It is not that, Akhram.”

He turned away.

“It is difficult to find the right young men. But, if the Todalpheme were no more, who, then, would warn the fisher folk, the sailors in their gallant ships, the people of the shore cities? For the inner sea is a calm sea. It is flat, placid, smooth. When storms come a man may see the clouds gather and sense the change in the wind, and sniff the breeze, and say to himself a storm is due and so seek harbor. But — who can warn him when the tides will come sweeping in to smash and crush and destroy if the gates are not closed on the Dam of Days?”

“The Todalpheme will not die, Akhram. There will always be young men ready to take up the challenge. Do not fear.”

When it was time to go I promised the Todalpheme that I would halt on my journey to the outer ocean and give them Lahal. I also promised myself the sight of this wonderful Dam of Days and its gates and locks, for judging by the Grand Canal it must be an engineering work of colossal scale.

They gave me a decent tunic of white cloth, and a satchel in which were placed, lovingly wrapped in leaves, a supply of the long loaves of bread, some dried meat, and fruit. Over my back I slung a profusely berried branch of palines. Then, with the hauberk and coif rolled up around my middle and the long sword

depending from a pair of straps at my side, sandals on my feet, I set off.

They all crowded to see me go.

“Remberee!” they called. “Remberee, Dray Prescot.”

“Remberee!” I called back.

I knew that had I tried, now, to take any other course I would have been flung back to Earth. Much though I wanted to rush to Delia, much though I yearned to hold her in my arms again, I dare not take a single step overtly in her direction.

I was trapped in the schemes of the Star Lords, or the Savanti — although I suspected that those calm grave men wished me well, even though they had turned me out of paradise. If I tried to board a ship for Vallia, I felt sure I would find myself engulfed by that enveloping blueness and awake on some remote part of the Earth where I had been born.

Being unprovided with either a zorca or a vove, those riding animals of the great plains of Segesthes, I walked. I walked for the better part of six burs.[\[1\]](#)

I had absolutely no concern over the future. This time was different from all the other times I had gone forward into danger and adventure. I might seek to hire myself out as a mercenary. I might seek employment on a ship. It did not matter. I knew that the forces that toyed with me and drove me on would turn my hand to what they had planned for me.

Do not blame me. If you believe that I welcomed this turn of events, then you are woefully wrong. I was being forced away from all that I held dear in two worlds. I

had more or less resigned myself to the truth that I would never again return — or be permitted to return — to Aphrasöe, the City of the Savanti; and all that I wanted on Earth or Kregen was my Delia of the Blue Mountains. Yet if I took a single step in her direction I felt sure the forces that manipulated my destiny would contemptuously toss me back to Earth. I felt mean and vengeful. I was not a happy man as I walked out in the mingled suns-shine to seek the city of Grodno; the man or beast who crossed my path had best beware and walk with a small tread when I passed by.

The shoreline presented a strangely dead appearance.

I passed no habitations, no small fishing villages, no towns or hamlets bowered in the trees that grew profusely everywhere. Trees and grass and flowers grew lushly all along my way; the air tanged with that exciting sting of the sea, salty and zestful; the green sun and the red sun shed their opaline rays across the landscape and over the gleaming expanse of smooth blue sea. But I met no single living soul in all that journey.

When the provisions given me by the TodalpHEME were exhausted I used my acquired Clansman's skills and hunted more. The water in the streams and rills tasted as sweet as Eward wine from Zenicce. I was slowly working on the hauberk, unfixing the linked mesh along the spine and the sides and lacing it up again to a broader fit with leather thongs. I did not hurry the work; I did not hurry in my walk. If those dung-bellied Star

Lords wanted me to do their dirty work for them, then I would do it in my own time.

I could not be sure it was the Star Lords who had arranged this. I did feel sure, though, that if they did not wish me to travel where I was traveling they would stop me. I had the idea that the Savanti, powerful and mysterious though they were, could not, when all was said and done, overmaster the Everoinye, the Star Lords.

No matter who was forcing me to take this course (I did not discount the emergence of yet a third force into the arena where actions and conflicts were being battled out quite beyond my comprehension), I was being used on Kregen. I had been used in Zenicce to overthrow the Most Noble House of Esztercari. I had done so, and in the doing of it had become the Lord of Strombor. Then, in my moment of victory when I was about to be betrothed to my Delia, I had been whisked back to Earth. Oh, yes, I was being used, like a cunning and shiftless captain will use his first lieutenant quite beyond the bounds of duty. So. I can remember the moment well, as I walked along a low cliff line above the sea, that smooth inner sea of Turismond, with the breeze in my face and the twin suns shining brilliantly down. If I were to be used in a fashion that the modern world, the world of the twentieth century, would call a troubleshooter, then I would be a troubleshooter for the Star Lords, or the Savanti, or anyone else, on my own terms.

Nothing I did must interfere with my set purpose to find Delia. But, equally, I could do nothing to seek her

until I had settled the matter in hand. Accordingly, then, I walked along with a heart if not lighter, at least less oppressed. Still, I hungered for some tangible opponent to face with steel in my hand.

I had not led a particularly happy life. Happiness, I tended to think in those far-off days, was a kind of mirage a man dying of thirst sees in the desert. I had found great wonder and pleasure among my Clansmen, and had striven for the achievement of Delia of Delphond only to lose her in the moment of gaining; I wondered if I would ever be able to say with Mr Valiant-for-Truth, out of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: "With great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am."

The days passed and I had seen no human life, only avoided a pack of grundals. I had looked out on an empty sea and walked through an empty countryside.

What I had seen at Akhram and my knowledge mainly gained from long hours reading during off-watch periods made me take a long swing inland. The Todalphemes' maps had shown the inner sea, the *Eye of the World*; it was marked down in the cursive script on the ancient parchment, as being bean-shaped, humped to the north, and something over five hundred dwaburs<sup>[2]</sup> long from west to east. Because of its indented coastlines, it was studded with bays, peninsulas, islands, and the river deltas. Its width was difficult to measure accurately although proportionally a bean-shape gives a good impression.

The average width might be something in the order of a hundred dwaburs; however, that would not take into account the two smaller but still sizable seas opening off the southern shore, reached through narrow channels. I was in the northern hemisphere of Kregen still, and I had gathered that Vallia lay across the outer ocean, the sea that in Zenicce we called the Sunset Sea, east with a touch of northing in it from here. Between the eastern end of the inner sea and the eastern end of the continent of Turismond lay vast and craggy mountains; beyond were areas inhabited by inhospitable peoples around whom had gathered all the chilling and horrific legends to be expected from a land of mystery. I gathered also that these people of the inner sea, the Eye of the World, relished a tall story as much as the folk of Segesthes.

So I struck a little inland, away from that shining sea.

On the third day I was rewarded by finding myself among cultivated rows of sah-lah bushes, their blossom incredibly sweet, bright like the missal I had seen by the Grand Canal. This particular season was burgeoning with the promise of a rich, ripe harvest and every chance of a successful second crop.

I watched carefully, for I had enough experience of savage Kregen now not to rush in headlong without a surveillance; alas, a stricture I was continually forgetting in the stress of one emergency after another. Here, however, there seemed to be no emergency; in fact I would then have hazarded a guess that stress and

danger were unknown. I would have been wrong; but not for the reasons I advanced to myself as I crouched in the bushes and stared out on the orderly rows of huts, the busy men and women in the fields, the sense of discipline and order everywhere.

When I had satisfied myself that this must be some kind of farm on a colossal scale, with all the usual muddle and filth inseparable from farm life removed in some magical way, I decided I had best wash myself before making an appearance. I found a stream and stripped off and thus, all naked and streaming water, I saw the mailed man ride into sight over the bank. I was to be caught more than once swimming, naked, to mutual misunderstandings, for men shed more than clothes when they strip. On this occasion I was given no chance at explanations, no chance to talk, no chance to prove myself a stranger here, not one of their people.

A man clad in steel mesh leaned from his mount and swung his sword down toward my head.

I ducked and turned, but the water stinging my eyes had betrayed my accuracy of vision, the water around my waist hampered me, and the blade caught me flatly across the back of the skull.

I have a thick skull, I think, and it has taken enough knocks to prove it tough and durable and obstinate, too, I admit. All my poor old head bone could do on this occasion was to save my life. I could not stop the sudden black swoop of darkness and unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Magdag

“I have persuaded Holly,” said Genal, looking up with a squint from where he slapped and shaped a mud brick, “to bring us an extra portion of cheese when the suns are overhead.”

“You’ll ask that poor girl to do too much one day, Genal,” I told him with a severity that was only half a mockery. “Then the guards will find out, and—”

“She is clever, is Holly,” said Genal, slapping his brick with a hard and competent hand. The sounds of bricks being slapped and patted and the splash of water, the hard breathing of hundreds of work people making bricks, floated up into the stifling air.

“Too clever — and too beautiful — for the likes of you, Genal, you hollow-bricker, you.”

He laughed.

Oh, yes. The work people here in the city of Magdag could laugh. We were not slaves; not, that is, in the meaning of that foul word. We worked for wages that were paid in kind. We were supplied from the massive

produce farms kept up by the overlords, the mailed men of Magdag. Of course we were whipped to keep up our production quota of bricks. We would not receive our food if we fell behind in output. But the workers were allowed to leave their miserable little hovels, crowded against the sides of the magnificent buildings they were erecting, to travel the short distance to their more permanent homes in the warrens for weekends.

I made a scratch with my wooden stylus on the soft clay tablet I held in its wooden bracket.

“You had best move at a more rapid rate, Genal,” I told him.

He seized another mass of the brick mud and began to slap and bang at it with the wooden spatula, sprinkling it with water as he did so. The earthenware jar was almost empty and he cried out in exasperation.

“Water! Water, you useless cramp! Water for bricks!”

A young lad came running with a water skin with which to replenish the jar. I took the opportunity to have a long swig. The suns were hot, close together, shining down in glory.

All about me stretched the city of Magdag.

I have seen the Pyramids; I have seen Angkor; I have seen Chichen Itza, or what is left of it; I have seen Versailles and, more particularly, I have seen the fabled city of Zenicce. None can rival in sheer size and bulk the massive complexes of Magdag. Mile after mile the enormous blocks of architecture stretched. They rose from the plain in a kind of insensate hunger for growth.

Countless thousands of men, women, and children worked on them. Always, in Magdag, there was building.

As for the styles of that architecture, it had changed over the generations and the centuries, so that forever a new shape, a fresh skyline, would lift and reveal a new facet in this craze for megalithic building obsessing the overlords of Magdag.

At that time I was a plain sailor lightly touched by my experiences on Kregen, still unaware of what being the Lord of Strombor would truly mean. For years my home had been the pitching, rolling, noisy timbers of ships, both on the lower deck and in the wardroom. To me, building in brick and stone meant permanence. Yet these overlords continued to build. They continued to erect enormous structures which glowered across the plain and frowned down over the inner sea and the many harbors they had constructed as part and parcel of their craze. What of the permanence of these colossal erections? They were mostly empty. Dust and spiders inhabited them, along with the darkness and the gorgeous decorations, the countless images, the shrines, the naves, and chancels.

The overlords of Magdag frenziedly built their gigantic monuments and mercilessly drove on their work people and their slaves; the end results were simply more enormous empty buildings, devoted to dark ends I could not fathom then.

Genal, whose dark and animated face showed only half the concentration of a quick and agile mind needful

in the never-ending task of making bricks, cast a look upward.

“It is almost noon. Where is Holly? I’m hungry.”

Many other brick makers were standing up, some knuckling their backs; the sounds of slapping and shaping dwindled on the hot air.

An Och guard hawked and spat.

Now women were bringing the midday food for their men.

The food was prepared at the little cabins and shacks erected in the shadows of the great walls and mighty upflung edifices. They clung like limpets to rocks. The women walked gracefully among the piles of building materials, the bricks, the ladders, the masonry, the long lengths of lumber.

“You are fortunate, Stylor, to be stylor to our gang,” said Genal as Holly approached.

I nodded.

“I agree. None cook as well as Holly.”

She shot me a quick and suspicious look, this young girl whose task was to cook and clean for a brick-making gang, and then to take her turn with the wooden spatula of sturm-wood. The sight of my ugly face, I suppose, gave her pause. Because I had been discovered to possess the relatively rare art of reading and writing — all a gift of that pill of genetically-coded language instruction given to me so long ago by Maspero, my tutor in the fabulous city of Aphasöe — I had automatically been enrolled as a stylor, one who kept accounts of bricks made, of work done, of quotas filled.

Stylors stood everywhere among the buildings, as they stood at seed time and harvest in the Magdag-owned field farms, keeping accounts.

For that simple skill of reading and writing I had been spared much of the horror of the real slaves, those who labored in the mines cutting stone, or bringing out great double-handfuls of gems, or rowed chained to galley oar benches.

Magdag, despite its grandiose building program that dominated the lives of everyone within fifty dwaburs, was essentially a seaport, a city of the inner sea.

And here was I, a sailor, condemned to count bricks when the sea washed the jetties within hearing and the ships waited rocking on the waves. How I hungered for the sea, then! The sea breeze in my nostrils made me itch for the feel of a deck beneath my feet, the wind in my hair, the creak of ropes and block, the very lifeblood of the sea!

We all sat down to our meal and, as she had promised, Holly portioned out a double-helping to Genal, who motioned to her to do likewise for me. We were all wearing the plain gray breechclout, or loincloth, of the worker. Some of the women also wore a gray tunic; many did not bother, wanting their arms free for the never-ending work. As Holly bent before me I looked into her young face. Naïve, she looked, dark-haired, serious-eyed, with a soft and seemingly scarcely-formed mouth.

“And since when has a stolor deserved extra rations, stolen at expense and danger?” she asked Genal.

He started up hotly, but I put a hand on his shoulder and he went down with some force.

“It is no matter.”

“But I think it is a matter—”

I made no answer. A man was running toward us through the gangs of workers eating their midday meal. He thwacked a long balass stick down on shoulders as he ran, his face angry.

“Up, you lazy rasts! There is work. Up!”

With a snarled yelp of indignant anger Genal rose, his young face flushed, his eyes bright. Holly took a quick step to stand beside him. Her head came just to his shoulder. Both of them had to look up if they wished to stare into my face.

“Pugnarses,” said Genal disgustedly. He would have said more, but Holly laid her slender hand upon his arm.

The man was an overseer, a worker like ourselves but selected out from our miserable ranks to be given his tithe of petty authority, a balass stick — balass is similar to Earthly ebony — and a gray tunic with the green and black badges of his authority stitched to breast and back. He was a tall man, almost as tall as me, burly, with unkempt black hair and pinched nostrils, his eyebrows shaggy and frowning above his malice-bright eyes. He was the gang-boss of ten gangs, and he would never tolerate underproduction or skimped work. Always, the threat of the whip hung over Pugnarses as it dominated our lives.

We all rose, grumbling and stretching and bolting the last mouthfuls of our food.

Pugnarses thwacked his stick down with a ferocity I clearly saw came from his own simmering anger at what he did. He was a man born into the wrong area of life. He should have been a son to some high overlord, to strut about wearing his mail armor, his long sword at his side, giving orders in the midst of battle rather than orders as to quantities and qualities of mud bricks.

We could now hear the high yells of other overseers and the long moaning chants of hundreds of workers and slaves. As we ran down among the scattered confusion of the brick works and out past where the masons were looking up from their midday meal, we could see the winged statue fully three hundred feet tall, being dragged by hundreds of men and women. The colossal statue towered above us, magnificent in its barbarity of inspiration and cultural attainment. Many days had been spent carving those immobile features, that cliff-like forehead, the feathered crown, the folded arms with their implements of semi-divine authority, those spreading wings of minutely carved feathers. Beneath its footed pedestal massive rollers of lenk creaked with the weight. As the slaves pulled and hauled and struggled in the heat, dragging that whole awful mass by long ropes, other workers lifted their rearmost roller in turn and carried it to the front. There the great overseer — with the blaze of color on his white tunic and a coiled whip in his right hand — could direct its accurate placing for the forward rolling weight.

We were hurriedly positioned onto a rope and we toiled on as Pugnarses, sweating, shouted and lifted his balass stick. In time with the convulsive heavings of the other slaves we dragged the monstrous statue up the gentle incline that had been the cause of its momentary hesitation and the consequent calling out of fresh draft-animals — us — men and women, workers of Magdag.

Between us, with much breath wasted on cursing and swearing and the calling on Grakki-Grodno, the sky god of the draft-beasts, and with the balass sticks and the whips of the guards falling upon our sweating naked backs, we hauled that divine effigy up the slope. We dragged it clear of the incline and halfway toward the shadow-darkened gateway, four hundred feet high, into which it must pass to be set against the wall and serve as just one more reminder of the majesty and power of Magdag.

In the long lines toiling on the ropes alongside I saw numbers of the half-humans of Kregen. There were Ochs; and Rapas, those vulturine-like people whose smell was so offensive in the nostrils of men; there was even a handful of Fristles. I saw no Chuliks among the slaves, although there were other beast-humans whose forms were new to me.

Other men and Ochs and Rapas with swords and whips guarded and goaded on men and Ochs and Rapas. Truly, creation on Kregen had leveled the species. Humanity, although apparently everywhere in the ascendant here in this section of Kregen, was not the only Lord of Creation. I saw a number of men greasing

the ropes near their fastenings, and inspecting each roller in turn as it was dragged clear for cracks and weaknesses. Many of these men had red hair, and so might well have come from Loh, that continent of hidden walled gardens and veils, that lay southeast of Turismond in the Sunset Sea, nearer to Vallia than the eastern tip of Turismond, where only isolated cities flourished in a sea of barbarity. The thought of Vallia with its island empire I had never seen brought unbidden other memories from which I could never shake free, and I bent to the rope with a curse.

“By Zim-Zair,” panted a burly slave, entirely naked, next to me on the adjoining rope. “I’d have this accursed heathen statue topple and split into a thousand fragments!”

“Silence, slave!” A Chulik flicked a cunning whip in a welting blow down the man’s back. “Pull!”

The slave, his mass of curly black hair wet and glittering in the sun-shine, cursed but had no spittle to express his contempt. “Loathsome beasts,” he grunted, low, as he hauled with cracking muscles. His skin was tanned and healthy, his nose an arrogant beak, his lips thin. “By Zantristar the Merciful! If I had my blade at my side now—”

On and on we hauled and heaved that mighty colossus into its appointed resting place. It would make, I knew, another fine haunt for spiders.

As we crowded out through that towering opening, jumbled together, the workers talking and laughing now

the work was done, the slaves moody and silent, I made it my business to get alongside the curly-haired man.

“You mentioned Zim,” I said.

He drew a brawny forearm across his bearded lips. He looked at me cautiously.

“And if I had, would that surprise a heretic?”

I shook my head. We moved into the light. “I am no heretic. I thought Zair—”

“Grodno is the sky deity these poor deluded fools worship when all men living in the light know it is to Zair we must look for our salvation.” His eyes had measured me. “You have not been a slave long? Are you a stranger?”

“From Segesthes.”

“We know nothing of the outer ocean here in the Eye of the World. If you are a stranger, then in peril of your immortal soul I counsel you to have no truck with Grodno. Only to Zair can men look for salvation. They took me from my galley, the overlords of Magdag; they branded me and made me a slave. But I shall escape, and return across the inner sea to Holy Sanurkazz.”

We were thrust apart in the throng, but I caught his arm. Here was information for which I hungered. The name of Sanurkazz caught at my imagination. I have mentioned how, when I first heard the name Strombor, my blood thumped and I felt a golden splendor unfolding. Here, now, was an echo of that feeling as the name Sanurkazz fell for the first time on my ears.

“Can you tell me, friend—” I began.

He interrupted me. He looked down at my hand on his arm.

“I am a slave, stranger. I suffer the whip and the irons and the balass. But no slave or worker lays a hand on me.”

I took my hand away. I did not remove it swiftly. I did not express an apology, for I have made it a rule never to apologize, but I nodded, and my face must have given him pause.

“What is your name, stranger?”

“Men call me Stylor, but—”

“Stylor. I am Zorg — Zorg of Felteraz.”

We would have gone on speaking, but the overseers whipped the slaves away and shouted at the workers, and so we parted. I had been impressed by this man. He might be a slave; he was not broken.

By the time we had returned to the brick works, a temporary site among the colossal buildings all around, the time for our midday meal break had long passed and we were put immediately onto brick making again. As I checked the production and made the neat marks in the Kregish cursive, for there was always a strict accounting, I pondered on this man, Zorg of Felteraz. He, most clearly, did not share in the worship of the green-sun deity, Grodno. He was a follower of Zair. So, that was why he was a slave and not a worker. The differences between the two conditions were small; they existed and were either resented or proudly proclaimed; but for a free man the pride involved was a pitiful thing.

My days among the megalithic buildings of Magdag passed.

The sheer scope of the complexes amazed me. Men would be perched atop crazy scaffoldings of wood executing marvelous friezes along the architraves, five hundred feet in the air. The statuary varied from life size to enormous creations of many artificially interlocked masses of stone. So much art, so much skill, so much painstaking labor, and all to decorate and beautify vast and empty halls. Some of these buildings were truly gigantic. I heard odd comments about the time of dying, the time of the Great Death and the Great Birth, but little added up beyond what might be a simple agricultural death and re-creation cycle.

I was sure of one thing. These were not giant mausoleum sacrifices of the living to the dead: they were not tombs; they were not Kregan Pyramids.

Most of life aboard ship is occupied in waiting, and so I slipped easily into that life among the megaliths of Magdag, having been well-schooled in waiting. I knew that if I tried to break away without the permission of the Star Lords — I had by now convinced myself they must be the instruments of my present position — I would be punished by transferral back to Earth.

As a stylvor I could move among the buildings with some freedom, and I spent some time searching for the man of Zair, Zorg of Felteraz, but I did not find him. However, I will speak only of those things immediately touching on what followed, leaving out most of the unpleasant punishments; the starvings that followed low

production or the lack of height in a wall by a certain date; the sporadic revolts ruthlessly put down by the half-beast, half-human guards; the infrequent days of feasting; the fights and quarrels and thievery of the warrens. They made a life savage, bizarre, demanding: a life that no man or woman should have to endure.

I said to Genal: “Why do you and your people slave and suffer for the overlords simply so as to build them more empty monuments? Don’t you wish to live your own life?”

To which he would reply, his fists knotted: “Aye, Stylor, I do! But revolt — that must be carefully planned — carefully planned—” He looked about him uneasily.

Many men and women talked of revolt. Slave and worker, all spoke of the time when they could become free men through rebellion. At this time I do not think one of them thought beyond a rebellion to a true revolution.

Maybe I do the Prophet a disservice in saying this.

Perhaps, even then, he had a glimmering of the true ideals of revolution over the bloody gut-reaction of rebellion, for afterward he proved himself nobly. He was called only the Prophet; he must have had a name, but it was forgotten. Slaves might be called what their master wished; in my case I had been called Stylor for the task I performed without my even being aware of that until the name was in habitual use. Among the close-packed warrens on the landward edge of the city, outside the gay and noble sections where the overlords lived in luxury with the sea breeze to cool them in the heat of

the day, the Prophet moved with a sure tread, preaching. He spoke simply that no man should own another in slavery, that no man should cringe to the whip, whether slave, worker, or free, that men should have some say in what happened to them in life.

I met him from time to time wandering the warrens among the slaves and the workers, speaking in words of fire, to be met with lackluster eyes and disillusioned shrugs, the sloughing away of all hope. He was constantly on the run from the guards. He was an object of pity and some affection to the workers, like a blind dog they would not see killed, and so they hid him and fed him and passed him along from hideout to hideout. In those runnels of ancient brick and mud walls, of crazy roofs and toppling walls and towers, an army could have been lost. The guards ventured into the ulterior at their peril, only in force.

For two days in every twelve the workers might return to their homes in the warrens, although often they contrived to spend more time there than that, until roused out by guards. Then the Prophet would speak to them, trying to inflame them, trying to arouse them.

Because he was an old man, even by Kregan standards, being, I suppose, about a hundred and eighty, his hair was white. His white mass of hair, his white beard, his white moustache, were merely the ordinary features of an old man, and their remarkable similarity to what one conceives of as a prophet's appearance was merely coincidental. His old eyes fairly snapped at me like a barracuda as he spoke, his voice a hoarse resounding

trumpet easily audible a quarter of a dwabur away. Such men are known on our own Earth.

The guards, whether human or beast, seldom ventured into the slave warrens. Holly, Genal, and I were standing in a doorway listening to the Prophet, and both young people's faces were alight with their inner passions. They, at least, saw sense in what the Prophet said. Beneath scattered torchlight the mass of workers and slaves before us listened as at an entertainment; their spirits had been whip-broken. Then the shouts and shrieks broke out, the trample of iron-shod hooves, the clash of arms.

A party of mail-clad men rode in heavily from a side street, deploying instantly, yodeling and shouting, to come smashing into the mass of people. They were using their swords' edges. Blood spouted. The Prophet disappeared. Holly screamed. I grabbed her arm and Genal took her other hand and we dived back into the doorway. Even as the warped boards closed on us the mounted men hammered past.

"They're not after the Prophet," said Holly, her breast heaving, her eyes wide and wild. "This is sport for them, a great Jikai!"

I winced to hear that word in this contemptible context.

"Yes," said Genal viciously. "It is time for them to come hunting for fun." His eager voice broke. "For fun!"

"There is work for me tonight," said Holly. I stared at her. I had no idea what she meant. I was to find out.

**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](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com).**

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## Notes

[1] A bur is the Kregan hour, some forty Earth minutes long. It is divided into fifty murs, the Kregan minute. Discrepancies in the year caused by the orbit of Kregan about a binary are ironed out at festival times. There are forty-eight burs in the Kregan day and night cycle. I have omitted much of what Dray Prescott says of mensuration on Kregan and have considerably amended his account of the technical activities of the tide-watchers, the Todalpheme. *A.B.A.*

[2] I have left Prescott's use of the Kregish "dwabur" here. A dwabur is one of the standard units of measurement and is approximately five Terrestrial miles. Its origin, according to Prescott, comes from the sunset people's army marching disciplines: they would continue for two of their hours, that is, burs (the Kregish word for two is dwa), with a halt. Their speed must therefore have been something over three and a half miles an hour. More usual are the local lesser fractions of the dwabur. *A.B.A.*

## 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.

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at [www.mushroom-ebooks.com](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com)

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