

**DRAY PRESCOT: 3**

**WARRIOR  
OF SCORPIO**

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writing as

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**A Mushroom eBook**



# WARRIOR OF SCORPIO

[Dray Prescott #3]

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBooks sampler

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## A BRIEF NOTE ON THE TAPES FROM AFRICA

Although this is the third volume chronicling the strange and fascinating story of Dray Prescott, the editing has been so arranged that each book can be read as a separate and individual volume.

After publication of the first two volumes<sup>[1]</sup> of the adventures of that remarkable man, Dray Prescott, on the planet Kregen beneath the Suns of Scorpio some four hundred light-years away, I was completely unsure of the reception they would be accorded. So far Prescott's story has been given to us in the form of cassettes he cut on Dan Fraser's tape recorder in that epidemic-stricken village in a famine area of West Africa. Having been afforded the privilege of editing the Tapes from Africa, I have kept the promise Fraser made to Dray Prescott, and I have already written of the profound impression that calm sure voice makes upon me, and of how I feel uplifted as that voice quickens as the fire of memory burns brighter in remembered images of passion and action and headlong adventure.

The response has been surprisingly profuse and laudatory and there has been no opportunity for me to make adequate reply. We feel, in truth, that it is to Dray

Prescot himself that we must look for that reply. The value of this account of life on Kregen is incalculable and the absence of certain of the cassettes containing portions of the story is a tragic loss. To my urgent inquiries, my friend Geoffrey Dean, to whom Dan Fraser had entrusted the Tapes from Africa and from whom I had received the cassettes in Washington, replied with sad and shocking news.

Dray Prescot had unexpectedly appeared in the famine area in West Africa and had been assisted by and then in turn had assisted the young field worker Dan Fraser. Now, Geoffrey told me, Dan Fraser was dead. He had died, mockingly, cruelly, wastefully, unnecessarily, in a stupid automobile accident.

With the death of Dan Fraser we lose the only direct link we had with Prescot. For Fraser was the only one of us ever to have seen Prescot in the flesh. Dan described him as being a man a little above middling height, with straight brown hair, and brown eyes that hold a light of incisive intelligence and a strange dominating quality that goes with the abrasive honesty of the man. His shoulders made Dan's eyes pop. And now Dan Fraser is dead and the whereabouts of the missing cassettes may never be known.

We must, it is clear, be thankful for what we do have. Of the transcribed material I have deleted as little as is necessary, and have edited lightly; but a few items remain to be mentioned. The first is the pronunciation of the word Kregen. Prescot rolls this out as though an acute accent rides the first "e" — Kraygen — with a

hard “g.” Despite his long sojourn on Kregen he often refers to things as an Earthman would — for instance he will say “sunshine” when, as Kregen orbits the binary Antares, he means “suns-shine.” “Sunshine,” however, trips more easily from the tongue.

Clearly, since Dray Prescott cut these tapes in the 1970’s, he must be possessed of much more information now about Kregen than he was at the times of which he speaks. The whole planet could have changed in character and the most powerful of impressions remains that if it has done so then Prescott himself will have had a large hand in that change. But those long-ago days were as new to Prescott then as they are to us now, and without artifice he recalls those stirring times as he felt and experienced them. But, nevertheless, there are two levels of story unfolding and we must be mindful of that as we read. I have sought the advice of a distinguished author of long experience whose help has been invaluable, and, good friend that he is, whose sage counsel will one day receive the acknowledgment that is its due. We agree that in speaking of his life, some scenes and impressions have remained more vividly with Dray Prescott; it is as though when he speaks into the microphone he is living through these episodes again.

Dray Prescott, born in 1775, presents an enigmatic picture of himself. Through his immersion in the pool of baptism of the River Zelfh he is assured of a thousand years of life, as is his beloved, Delia of the Blue Mountains, for whose sake he was first hurled back to Earth by the Savanti. I feel it is clear he has thought long and

carefully just what a millennium of life will mean and has come to adjust to and accept that fate. Returned to Kregen by the Star Lords — of whom he has given us no information — as a kind of interstellar troubleshooter, he rapidly rose to the position of Zorcander among his Clansmen of Felschraung in Segesthes, and then became the Lord of Strombor of the enclave city of Zenicce. At that point the Star Lords, apparently having no further use for him, returned him once more to Earth.

Some time elapsed before he was recalled to Kregen beneath Antares to find himself on the continent of Turismond, thousands of miles away from Segesthes, and up to his neck in problems. He witnessed the horrors perpetrated by the overlords of Magdag, escaped their slavery, became a corsair captain of a swifter — a Kregen galley — on the inner sea, the Eye of the World. We here lose portions of his story through the lamented absence of those missing cassettes, but we do know he was accepted into the mystic and military order of chivalry, the Krozairs of Zy, becoming Pur Dray. Returned to Magdag he organized the slaves and led a revolt which in the full tide of success was placed in jeopardy by the intervention of the Star Lords.

At the head of his slave phalanx he was surrounded by the lambent blue radiance that, together with the occasional appearance of a gigantic scorpion, accompanies a transition. In this case he was threatened with another ignominious return to Earth. However, once before he had managed by the exertion of a willpower we can only marvel at to negate the immediate effects

and to remain on Kregen. So, now, he exerted all his willpower to remain on Kregen.

This volume, *Warrior of Scorpio*, takes up his adventures from that point and in the process almost exhausts the cassettes in our possession, leaving only a very few to see publication.

Unless Dray Prescott is able in some way to reveal some of his story, and this of course assumes he can in some way be afforded the opportunity of seeing the volumes already in print, this incredible saga of brilliant action and high adventure, of chilling cruelty and superlative courage, will come to an end.

Geoffrey Dean called me on the transatlantic phone to tell me of the tragic death of Dan Fraser.

“I am firmly convinced Dray Prescott is determined to have his story told,” Geoffrey said over the line. “If it is humanly possibly — or superhumanly, given the intervention of the Star Lords — I believe, Alan, he will find a way of continuing to reach us and of carrying on with his story.”

Even if the story does end here — and somehow I believe Geoffrey is right in his assessment and I await the confirmation that will come with a fresh communication from Dray Prescott — still I am convinced that on Kregen four hundred light-years away Dray Prescott, Pur Dray, Lord of Strombor, Kov of Delphond, Krozair of Zy, will continue his own living story.

*Alan Burt Akers*

# Chapter One

## Pawn of the Star Lords

“I will stay on Kregen!”

In my nostrils stank the odors of blood and sweat, oiled leather, dust, and my ears rang with the sounds of combat as swords clashed and clanged and pikes pierced mail and crossbow bolts punched into armored men. I could smell and hear, but I could see only an all-encompassing blueness lambent about me, and my gripping fist closed on emptiness where I should be grasping the hilt of my long sword.

“I will not go back to Earth!”

Everything was blue now, roaring and twisting in my head, in my eyes and ears, tumbling me head over heels into a blue nothingness.

“I will stay on Kregen beneath the suns of Scorpio! I will!”

I, Dray Prescott of Earth, screamed it out in my agony and despair. “I will stay on Kregen!”

A wind riffled my hair and I knew that old vosk-skull helmet with its panache of yellow paint had vanished with my long sword.

I was lying flat on my back. The noise of combat flowed away, dwindling. The screams of dying men and wounded sectrixes, the grunt and harshly indrawn breaths of men convulsed with the passions of battle, the clangor and scrape of weapons, all died. And the blue brilliance of light about me wavered and I sensed the inward struggle as obscure forms moved and merged past the edges of my vision. Against my back pressed hard earth — but was it the dirt of Kregen or of Earth?

That last battle against the overlords of Magdag had been violent and emotional and transforming, but any taint of battle-lust or battle-fever in me had been banished at a stroke by the unexpected intervention of the Star Lords. I have, I confess, sometimes been overwhelmed by the lust of battle, not often, and have little time for those who prate of that red curtain that falls before their eyes and to whose existence they point as an excuse for actions of the most barbarous and savage kind. Oh, yes, the scarlet curtain before the eyes exists, but it is capable of manipulation by those whose humanity has not been destroyed.

You who listen to these tapes spinning through their little cassettes will know how often I have succumbed, to my shame, to that red-roaring tide of exultant conflict.

So it was that as I sat up on that hard-packed ground the blood-lust of battle had cleared from my

mind. But the fever of instant action still gripped my body. As I sat up, then, expecting I knew not what, a vast odiferous mass of squelchy straw laid me flat down on my back again.

Dung and straw smothered me. Spitting out a mouthful of vile-tasting straw I sat up, blinking, trying to see, vaguely making out a barn door black in the light as the blueness faded, and — smack down again I went as another heaping forkful of straw-laced manure slapped me across the face. I spat. I blinked. I cursed. With a roar of fury generated as much by indignation and a sense of the ludicrous as much by anger I leaped to my feet.

This time I could dodge the flying forkful of dungy straw.

Thoroughly annoyed, I started for the barn door. As I expected, I was completely naked. The Star Lords had snatched me from Magdag; where they had deposited me I did not know — but I had urgent problems before finding out, problems to do with people who threw dungy straw into my face.

A voice shouted something I didn't recognize, but even in the midst of intending to deal with dung-hurlers I took comfort from the conviction that the language was not of Earth. It had that ring peculiar to the languages of Kregen, and I felt a surge of thanksgiving.

A man stepped out of the barn door.

My vision cleared and I saw this man bathed in the mingled streaming light of the twin suns of Antares. Then, without doubt, I knew the Star Lords had not

snatched me from Kregen altogether and hurled me contemptuously back to Earth. Contemptuously, for I knew that in some way I had failed them, that I had not accomplished what they had brought me to Kregen and sent me to Magdag to do.

Staring at this man who stared back at me I was conscious only of a great and all-engulfing thankfulness. I was still on the same world as my Delia! I was not sundered from the only woman for me in two worlds by four hundred light-years of empty space. Somewhere in Vallia on this planet of Kregen my Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia of Delphond, lived and breathed and laughed and, I hoped and prayed, did not despair of me.

This man carried a pitchfork to which wisps of greasy straw still clung. He stood tall and lean, with the most infernal mocking smile taking in my nakedness and the dungy straw clinging to my skin and broom-sticking my hair — and then he saw my face. He lost his smile and the pitchfork came up in quick automatic response. He possessed a mane of intensely black hair. His eyes twinkled brightly blue upon me. There was about him an air of recklessness and of action-before-thought-of-consequences, and I judged he had not been slave for very long.

My thought of Delia had halted me — in the glory of knowing I was still treading the same ground as my princess — so that this man was spared time enough to speak.

“Llahal!” he said, in the universal unfamiliar greeting of Kregen. Had we been friends he would have said: “Lahal.” He went on without waiting for my reply or for the making of pappattu. “You look a sight, dom!” And then he laughed. It was a light laugh, all mockery of myself gone from it and filled only with a delight in the circumstances. Any man who cannot laugh at himself is truly dead. But, as I think you will know, I, Dray Prescot, do not, for others and out loud, laugh easily.

I started for him again with the intention of wrapping the pitchfork around his neck and then deciding what to do with the tines.

He skipped aside, still laughing.

His laughter changed to puzzlement.

“You must be one of the new slaves, dom. I am Seg Segutorio. If you’ve been sent to help me you’d better get started before we’re both in trouble and tasting ol’ snake.”

The tines of the pitchfork looked exceedingly sharp. This man, this slave, handled the implement as a warrior handles a spear. Now he had recovered from the first shock of seeing that expression on my face that I have heard many men call the look of the devil; he balanced easily with the farmyard weapon covering me, confident in his own prowess. About to disabuse him of that idea, I checked.

We stood in a farmyard, with low buildings surrounding this stable area, with the rustic odors of dung and straw, urine and dust, heavy on the air. Over all the glorious rays of the twin suns of Scorpio streamed down

in an opaline mingling of colors. Only moments before I had been leading the slave phalanx of my old vosk-skulls into headlong conflict with the mailed overlords of Magdag. Now, once more, I heard the shouts of men in furious strife and the screams of wounded, the shrilling of sectrixes, and the clamorous clangor of sword on sword.

A dog ran whining across the farmyard, his tail tucked down in between his legs.

Following him, a bedraggled band of slaves ran and fell and picked themselves up to stagger on. They were a mixed bunch of humans and half-humans, all wearing the gray slave breechclout, and their screams and crying panic made my hand reach out for a weapon. On Kregen a man without a ready weapon to hand is a man with a foot in the grave.

Flames shot up beyond the stable buildings and I guessed the great house itself would be burning. A rout of bloodied men-at-arms stumbled after the slaves, their mail coats ripped, their helmets dented and awry, some lost altogether. There were men and Rapas and Chuliks among the mercenary men-at-arms. Some had flung away their weapons in order to run faster.

“A raid!” Seg Segutorio hitched up the pitchfork. I didn’t like the look on his face. “Those Froyvil-forgotten rasts of sorzarts!”

Now I could see them pelting around the stable buildings, squat on scaled legs, bedecked with gaudy strings of clanking bronze and copper ornaments, befeathered, cockscombed of helmeted head, fierce and

predatory and shrilling war cries that struck absolute horror into the fleeing people of the peaceful farm. They wielded cut-down long swords and throwing spears not unlike narrow assegais, and they presented a sight calculated to overawe peasant opposition in the twinkling of the first blade. The few mercenary guards maintained by the farm had been powerless to halt this raid.

Although I had heard of these sorzarts, I had not previously encountered them. They inhabited a cluster of islands toward the northeastern end of the inner sea and were the subject of endless speculation among the other peoples of the Eye of the World as to who would instigate the great crusade against them and who would follow the Banners and when; but while the bitter enmity between the green north and the red south persisted the sorzarts were left unmolested. Their faces were vaguely lizard-like in their wide cheeks and virtual absence of forehead, but their eyes were quite unreptile-like, being dull and deeply set.

Everything, as is usual in moments of crisis, happened at breakneck speed and by the time Seg had leveled his pitchfork and broken into a run the sorzarts had mostly vanished beyond the opposite stable building. A woman clutching a child to her bosom ran into view, saw the last three sorzarts, swerved in her run, saw Seg Segutorio, and screamed at him. Her bared legs beneath the lavender gown covered the ground rapidly, but it was clear to us that the sorzarts would cut her off and catch her before she could reach us.

“Help me!” Even in her terror and despair the words cracked with the snap of habitual command. “Seg! Help me!”

“The mistress.” Seg bounded forward afresh. “She bought me ten days ago and I have no love for her — but — but she is a woman.”

That was an irrational thought in a culture possessed of many types of beast-humans and human-beasts encountered daily in ordinary social intercourse.

Now I knew why the Star Lords had condescended to keep me here on Kregen and why they had not flung me through the interstellar gulfs back to the Earth of my birth. They had found another task for my hands. As usual, they had dumped me down naked and defenseless in the midst of a situation of extreme peril. I knew that away in Magdag my slaves, wearing their old yellow-painted vosk-skulls and wielding the weapons I had created and taught them to use, were fighting with savage intent against the might of the overlords and, most probably now I had gone, losing. But I had been snatched from them and in return for not being banished to Earth had been presented with this crisis to resolve.

I scooped up a heaping double-armful of odiferous manure-fouled straw and sprinted after Seg. I passed him with ease and then I was beyond the woman and her child and facing the three sorzarts. They looked mean and ferocious and they held their weapons with the skill of long experience.

The nearest flicked his cut-down long sword at me and I angled my run so that he obscured the view of the second, who lifted his assegai in frustration, balked of his cast. I checked, lifted on my toes, and hurled my dung-straw full in the face of the first sorzart. He ducked lithely enough and avoided the straw. But his movement slowed him and then I was up to him. His back broke with a soggy snap and I had his sword and snatched it aloft to parry the assegai cast. The shaft rang against the blade. I lunged forward. The sword felt good in my fist. Longer than the short sword as used by my Clansmen, this brand balanced oddly; but it served its purpose and as I withdrew the blade befouled with the sorzart's blood there was time to meet the challenge of the third. He hesitated.

“Hai!” I said.

He eyed me warily from those deep-set eyes. Abruptly, like a striking lizard, with a bunching of muscles and a jangling of bronze and copper disks, he hurled his assegai. I brushed it aside. Seg saved me the final thrust, for, as I waited for the sorzart to draw his sword, the pitchfork flew past my ear and buried its two center tines deeply into the scaly neck.

“Why did you hesitate?” demanded Seg, panting. “You know these sorzarts are the most treacherous of beasts.”

I wiped the blade on the sorzart's brown apron.

“I have killed a man before he has drawn to defend himself,” I told Seg. “And, sink me, no doubt will do so

again, Zair forgive me, if it is necessary. In this case it was not.”

He looked at me oddly. Reckless and wild, as I was to find him, his ideas of warfare were also extremely practical.

The unpleasant sounds of raiding half-men reached us from beyond the stable block and the wind drew coils of greasy smoke from the burning house about our faces. The woman caught her breath. I had looked at her once, and then gone about my business. There has been more than enough in my life of seeing screaming women clutching their infants to them — the tears soaking into their dresses, their faces distraught, running blindly from rapacious reavers of all kinds — for me ever to treat such scenes lightly. People prate of the values of human life, and of how nothing outside the context of human activity is of worth, and on Kregen, willy-nilly, the existence of half-human, half-beast peoples must figure into that context, and yet I wonder how often such academic postulators have been presented with situations in which their actions must match their words. Of course I was not insensitive to this woman’s naked bloody feet, the tears on her cheeks, the infant mess around her child’s mouth and nose, his inflamed eyes and his crying blubbering. But raiders of the stamp of the sorzarts know well the weakness of men unmanned by women’s sufferings.

I said: “We must leave here. Now. Come.”

Without bothering to await their reply I stripped a length of brown cloth from a dead sorzart — the

cleanest length — and wrapped it around my waist, pulled the end through between my legs, and tucked it in to form a breechclout. I balanced all three of the cut-down long swords and selected the one I felt the best. The belt and scabbard were neatly stitched from the skins of the little green and brown lizards called Tikos and as Seg picked up a sword and an assegai I thrust the sword I had chosen into the scabbard, took the third up together with the three assegais remaining. I ignored the helmets. This took but little time and during it the woman stood first on one leg and then on the other, hoisting her child up on her hip and shushing it, and staring at me with an uncertainty I had no time to bother over just then. She would know well enough I was not one of her slaves.

We set off in a line directly away from the burning house.

I felt completely confident that this woman and her infant were the people I had been sent here by the Star Lords to succor. Just why I should be so sure I did not know. My natural instincts sometimes coalesce with a darker and rarer judgment. I had saved Gahan Gannius and Valima there on the edge of the Grand Canal when, for the third time, I had found myself on Kregen. They had given me no thanks but had taken themselves off. Now I assumed they must play some part in the complicated games with destiny played over the years by the Star Lords — with assistance and interference from the Savanti. That these thoughts were true and just

how the world of Kregen was influenced by my own interference, you shall hear.

We spoke little. I was concerned to find a riding mount for the woman. The stables were empty — the men out on an expedition and leaving the estate vulnerable to just this kind of sudden raid — and the quicker we found a sectrix, one of the six-legged riding animals of the inner sea littoral, or a calsany, or even an ass, the better. When Seg asked my name I had no hesitation in choosing my own among the plethora of names I already possessed — a quantity of nomenclature I found, to be honest, more amusing than otherwise.

“I am Dray Prescott,” I said. And then: “Of Strombor.”

The name meant nothing to them.

It was unlikely that they would know of Strombor as a place, for until I had resurrected that enclave in Zenicce with the gift of Great Aunt Shusha — who was not *my* great aunt, I must remember — the name of Strombor had been obscured for a hundred and fifty years by the house Esztercari. But since they had not heard the name of Pur Dray, Lord of Strombor, Krozair of Zy, renowned corsair upon the Eye of the World, it surely indicated the cut-off nature of their life. I had convinced myself that I must still be within the sphere of occupation around the inner sea, as witness the sorzarts, and so I was not unduly alarmed. Had I been so minded I might have chuckled at the haughty reception such ignorance of their noble names and

deeds would have received from some of the swifter captains and Krozairs and Brethren of my acquaintance.

“This is the Lady Pulvia na Upalion,” said Seg Segutorio, and despite the situation and his clear detestation of his slave status, some respect was evident in his words.

I looked at the woman. Nothing about her impressed me so much as the way her head came erect and her eyes widened to meet my regard. She was in no sense beautiful, rather she was a sturdy, strong-limbed woman habitually in command, conscious of her position, and no doubt in normal times somewhat in despair over the hint of a moustache beginning to darken her upper lip. I reached out my hands.

“Give me the child.”

Instinctively she clasped the infant closer to her breast where tears and mucus stained the lavender material. She wore a gold and ruby trinket upon a slender gold chain. I gestured impatiently to her naked feet. She looked into my face and I saw her eyes darken in shock. Then, silently, she let me take the boy from her. He was no great weight. In a little group we left the stables and at once were among the standing crops, tall green-stemmed blain loaded with golden fruit in which we were hidden as though by a million tongueless cathedral bells.

From the rear, black and oily smoke rose and spread to cast dark shadows from the mingled light of the twin suns of Scorpio.

Any thoughts I may have had that my task for the Star Lords was thus easily accomplished were speedily dispelled. With the three spare assegais tucked under my left arm which cradled the child, the second sword naked in my right fist, I brought up the rear, with Seg in the van.

The sorzarts must have landed from their raiding ships — for they habitually disliked voyaging with only a single ship — and marched inland to fall on this estate of Upalion, which I had already seen enough to know was composed of broad acres and rich land, heavy with crops. Upalion, some distance from the sea, had considered itself secure, as the weak mercenary force of men-at-arms testified.

Now the sorzarts burst into the wealth of golden blain fruits, seeking our blood.

“You go on, Seg,” I said, and handed him the child, pushing past the woman unceremoniously. “I will hold them.”

“The mistress can take the child,” said Seg. His eagerness to stand to die with me was surprising.

“Sink me!” I exclaimed, not angrily but exasperatedly amused. I can find amusement in strange situations. “She can barely walk, let alone run with the child. You must get her away, Seg, for the sweet sake of Zim-Zair. Do not argue!”

“By the veiled Froyvil—” began Seg, his black mane of hair wild among the golden fruits.

I cut him off, with a rolling Makki-Grodno oath.

“Go on!”

I own, then, that a deal of that unpleasant rasp must have sharpened my tones, a dominating, domineering almost, way of talking I assumed in automatic response to opposition and that came from many years walking the quarterdecks of King's Ships, of handling my Clansmen as Zorcander and Vovedeer, of reaving as a Krozair captain of a Sanurkazz swifter. Seg took a look at my face. He took the child.

"There are ruins of the sunset folk about a dwabur south," he said. That was all.

I felt I could get to know this volatile yet practical man.

Seg and the Lady Pulvia vanished among the golden bells.

The swords I now held had once been regular long swords. Now they had been cut down and sharpened with wedge-shaped points into a blade-length of some twenty-four inches. For a tiny nostalgic moment I thought of those superlative Savanti swords with which we had so lightheartedly gone from Aphrasöe the Swinging City clad in our Savanti hunting leathers in bloodless pursuit of the graint. Maybe these sorzarts knew more of swordsmanship than I guessed, more, even, than the Krozairs of Zy, although in my pride that seemed so remotely possible as to be unthinkable. Well, I would soon find out.

Harsh cries rose into the air and the golden bells of the bloin hanging from stems curving in such subtle beauty from their straight green stalks waved and

twisted over our back path as agile scaled bodies thrust their way through.

A fighting-man's life is stitched together with vivid scarlet incidents patching the gray drabness of days and my experience had taught me that on Kregen the scarlet outweighed the gray. I thought of my Delia of the Blue Mountains, and prayed she would not despair of me away in her awe-inspiring Vallia.

Then, with weapons in my hands, I turned to face the dangers that had ensured my continuance on Kregen beneath Antares. It would need many swords to force me to flee from all that kept me on Kregen under the suns of Scorpio.

## Chapter Two

### Seg Segutorio

This was what life on Kregen was all about, this continuous challenge that set the blood pulsing through my veins, that brought all my alertness alive, that made me aware of myself as a man. Only moments before I had been fighting in the dust and sweat of my slave phalanx against the overlords of Magdag and then, because I had in some way unfathomable to me failed the Star Lords, I had been thrown into this new situation. Well — I thrust the second sword carefully down through the lizard-skin belt and hefted an assegai — well, the Star Lords or Savanti or scaled-skin sorzarts, all would meet my defiance distributed with an impartiality that held fast to one ideal only — I would win my way back to my Delia of the Blue Mountains. At that time the simplicity of this concept could hold no irony for me whatsoever.

The golden fruits waved and parted and the first lizard-man stepped through.

I waited.

He was followed by another and then a third. Still I waited. They had not seen me yet, concealed by the dark-green stems of the bloin, and I did not move. The first was very near now, so near I could see the way his scales grew smaller and smaller as they reached his neck and spread over his face in a kind of pseudo-skin in which his snout-nose and mouth protruded beneath those deep-set eyes. The mingled red and green light fell across the bronze and copper ornaments slung about him and sheened golden from the tall helmet with its arrogant bronze cock's comb. He held his assegai slanting over his shoulder in the ready-to-cast position.

I saved that one for my sword.

His three companions went down, shrilling, each with an assegai through him, sprawling kicking among the brittle hard stems of the golden bloin.

The first sorzart's cast assegai sprang for my chest. My sword flicked free from the belt and knocked aside the flung assegai with a vibrating twang in that swift wrist-roll we Krozairs of Zy so often practiced against arrows. Then I was on him. This time my scruples about killing a man or half-man before he had time to draw could be put aside, with whatever of morality remained in this situation. Other sorzarts were following fast; three or four assegais whickered past. I lunged, withdrew, leaped back to avoid the next clump of assegais.

So far I had made no mistakes. I had not spoken; the full-scented odors of the golden bloin bells and the smell of blood and dust among the brittle green stems

seemed to render out sounds, so that the dusty crackling of the stems as sorzarts sought my life came as through a golden afternoon haze. I did not know how many there were, but I did not intend to be chopped by their swords or struck by their assegais. I had no time, given what the Star Lords had brought me here to accomplish and that which I meant to accomplish for myself, to stay. In an instant I vanished from the lizard-men's sight among the silent golden bells of the bloin.

It would be useless just to scamper after Seg Segutorio and the Lady Pulvia. He would be hampered by her and the child and the sorzarts would catch up with them with results the Star Lords would disapprove of. So it was that those bold raiders of the inner sea were set on and bedeviled in their pursuit through the golden bloin and then — with more difficulty for myself — through orchards of gnarly-trunked samphron trees, whose juicy fruits with their glossy purple skins would soon be picked to be crushed into fragrant oil.

The second sword broke off short during one fierce interchange, but I came away with a replacement and with two more assegais that were almost immediately targeted off to good effect.

The blood that smothered my right arm was not mine. The two swords, I found, formed an interesting combination, rather like an overbalanced pair, a too-short long sword or broadsword for the right hand and a too-long main-gauche. The sorzarts probably shortened captured long swords because of the half-

men's somewhat short stature, but they were nonetheless swift and sturdy fighters for all that.

Swords, of course, are objects of worth and price and not easily come by in a culture without an extensive metallurgy, either of bronze or iron. The sorzarts' assegais — not the true assegai of Africa, I hasten to add, but an altogether slighter and narrower-bladed weapon — were their own natural weapon. Not all the lizard-men by any means possessed swords. Many of those swords I saw were easily identifiable as to previous ownership by their armory marks; weapons from Gantz and Zulfiria, from Sanurkazz and far Magdag.

The twin suns of Scorpio moved across the heavens and the streaming light settled more regretfully across the land. Soon darkness would fall with the temperate-zone twilight of not overlong duration. Somewhat to my astonishment the sorzarts kept up their pursuit. I no longer count the men or beast-men I have slain and so I do not know how many they lost in that long and agonized pursuit. Only when the twin suns at last sank beyond a distant ridge of mountains that ran down from the interior into the inner sea could I discern any reluctance on their part to continue.

Sharp trilling cries rose from one and then another. The last one I dispatched — without regret, for he had nicked me with his flung assegai and would have killed me without compunction had I allowed him to finish his sword-blow — fell headfirst into a little brook that meandered from the borders of the last orchard and

trended away through open meadowland toward the sea. Purple shadows gathered and the water glimmered like cold steel. Thoughtfully, I wiped my blade on the sorzart's breechclout, picked up all his weapons, and walked on south. Soon the darkness was complete and I could gaze upward at the Kregen night sky and see those strange yet blessedly familiar constellations wheel above my head.

A comfort could be taken from the distant chips of light that fancifully formed animals and people and monsters, pinpricks of light that could form meaningful patterns only in a man's mind, his own rationality plucking form from an inchoate star-spattered infinity. I saw the stellar images, and I stumbled over a thorn bush and I cursed, and thereafter kept my eyes fixed on my path with only the occasional navigating glance aloft.

All the warmth of combat had passed from me. I did not shiver, for the night was mild, but inwardly I felt once again the essential futility of blind killing. How often — I remember musing as I trod southward to fulfill whatever of destiny the Star Lords would allow me — I had seen men who appeared actually to enjoy inflicting pain on others. These were the uniformed men of the bludgeon and the whip, who recruited their own warped desires into the punishment of the unfortunate. Did I enjoy the sensation as I cut a man down? Did I thrill to the jolt as my sword pierced a man's guts? God forgive me if I did — but I did not then and do not now. Perhaps my punishment is that in a situation in which it

is kill or be killed I choose the easier path and kill to save my life and the lives of my loved ones.

Thus musing in a somber frame of mind — for I missed my Delia of the Blue Mountains beyond the mortal capacity to endure, or so I thought — I came to a rearing mass of toppled stone, twisted columns, broken arches, and collapsed domes all shining pinkly in the first of Kregen's nightly procession of moons.

The little stream broadened here and washed the worn steps of a landing jetty. Shadows jungle-hostile hung between truncated columns. I caught strange glimpses of pagan sculpture, serpentine forms that twined upon the surfaces of the blocks, hints of a demonology older than any current civilization thriving on this continent of Turismond.

The men of the sunrise had built their cities along the shores of the inner sea. Today, the shores lie mostly barren and untended except where the vicinity of a strong castle or fortified town or city affords some protection from corsair raids. I had raided the north shore myself, that shore of the green-sun deity Grodno; I had heard horrific tales of similar raids upon the red southern shore, dedicated to the sun Zim's deity, Zair. And the sorzarts raided both north and south and the eastern shore of Proconia — where I must now be — with the impartiality of the true unbeliever. I touched the hilt of one of my swords — for I remembered with affection the impressive armory of Hap Loder and my Clansmen of Felschraung — and went on.

“Stand and declare yourself — or you are a dead man!”

The voice sounded hard and confident and reckless. It was the voice of Seg Segutorio. I could not see him.

Undoubtedly, then, he was a warrior of skill.

“Dray Prescott,” I said, and did not stop.

Seg and the Lady Pulvia waited beside the stone lip of a wide and shallow basin, shell-shaped, into which an arm of the stream poured continually, pinkly silver in the moons’ light. Above them a chipped and defaced statue of a woman whose marble wings hung splintered from narrow shoulders cast a peaked shadow.

“You are safe, Dray?”

“Safe, Seg.”

We had fallen into names thus easily, then.

“Thank the veiled Froyvil for that, then!”

“And you — the Lady Pulvia?”

She lifted her head from above her child as I asked, and gave me a blank, unseeing stare that told me that we would have to support her on whatever further voyage we must undertake. She bent her head and crooned softly to the child, who lay, his soft mouth stoppered by a plump thumb, fast asleep.

For a moment I could not recall when I had last slept. In all my bones that laxity of alert feeling told me that I was tired, deadly tired, but a sea officer of a King’s Ship comes early to learn the knack of using his strength against long periods of wakefulness. I could go on for a space yet, but I considered the situation,

knowing that sleep now would set store of strength by for later emergencies.

A movement in the purple shadows beneath the statue's splintered wings brought my sword out instantly, but Seg laughed and said: "Easy, Dray, you wild leem! That is Caphlander. A stylor, one of my lady's servants."

The man stepped into the moonlight. Tall, he walked with a stoop, and his sparse hair glinted in that wash of pink light. He wore a white robe bordered with a checkered design of red and green — a sight I must admit bewildered me for a moment with all the fierce clash of red and green still echoing in my skull — and his face reminded me somewhat of the ugly bird-head of a Rapa. There were significant differences, however, and his humanity seemed to me more pronounced than the remnant left to a Rapa. He was a Relt. Numbers of these usually gentle people when made slave pined near to death; others found reasons for living in serving their masters as librarians, stylors, accountants. His bright bird-like eyes studied us from a face held to one side, so that I knew his sight was affected in one of those eyes.

"Llahal!" he said, and then waited, stooping, subser-vient.

Brusquely, Seg said: "And?"

Caphlander the Relt wilted. "All burned," he said. "All dead. Such sights—"

"There's no going back, then. The Lord of Upalion having gone on his expedition will return to dust and ashes and corpses."

The impression I gained then, briefly and fleetingly, was that Seg was not overly dismayed at this catastrophe to his master, the man who owned him as slave. And — no wonder.

“Is there no safe place for this woman, Seg?”

He looked at her and sucked in his lower lip.

“The city — that is the only safe place. And we would never reach it on foot now. The sorzarts must be out in force.”

“The day of our doom is here.” Caphlander spoke with complete subjection and acceptance of his fate.

“I do not believe that my day of doom is to be brought by a bunch of lizard-faced scaled beast-men. There are other ways to cities than by walking,” I told Caphlander and Seg.

“All the sectrixes were taken—”

I lifted my head and sniffed. On the night air, whose lush odors of nocturnal plant life told of many of those immense moon-drinking flowers twining among the ruins, the tangier smell I knew so well infiltrated like liquor at a funeral.

“The sea is not far. This city—”

“Happapat,” said Seg.

“This Happapat — is it a port?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

We reached the coast. Seg carried the child and I carried his mother. She lay in my arms, a soft flaccid sexless bundle, a human being for whom my only concern had been dictated by the Star Lords — whoever

they might be. We rested in a rock cave halfway up the cliff as the night passed.

With the gaining light, and refreshed by a few burs' sleep, we could plan again. I think, even then, Seg Segutorio had realized something other than mere concern over the safety of his mistress impelled me, for his people may be wild and reckless and filled with song, but they also possess that hard streak of practicality that has maintained their independence.

As the first sheening light of Zim spread in scarlet and golden radiance across the calm waters of the inner sea we looked out and down onto the ships of the sorzarts.

"Eleven of them." Seg spat. I did not waste good saliva. "They have to voyage in company, for they cannot face a Pattelonian swifter in fair fight."

On the curved beach the ships had been drawn up stern first. Ladders were lowered with the dawn and the anchor watch began their preparations to welcome back their comrades with loot and gold and prisoners. My hand tightened on the hilt of one of the swords. We could wait here until the sorzarts sailed away. . .

Call me a fool. Call me a windbag full of braggadocio. Call me prideful. I do not care. All I know is that while my Delia sought me from her island home of Vallia by rider and flier and I yearned above all things to hold her dear form in my arms once more, I could not thus tamely crouch hiding in a cave. On the hilt of the sword were marked letters in the Kregish script: G.G.M. That meant that a mercenary warrior employed by

Gahan Gannius had died some time in the past and his sword had been taken as battle booty by the sorzarts. I wondered what had happened to Gahan Gannius, whom I had rescued on my last return to Kregen, and if his manners and those of the girl Valima had improved.

The plan must be nicely made and as nicely decided. Those eleven ships down there on the beach beyond the nearest crumbling wall of the Pattelonian fishing village were not swifthers nor were they broad ships. They were dromvilers. They had chosen to land directly at the fishing village — which are rare enough on the inner sea's coastline, Zair knows — to secure safe berthings. The coast here fell sheer into the sea. The people of the village, sentinels against just such raids, had been outwitted on this occasion, for a huddle of their fishing boats, the familiar muldavy with her dipping lugsail of the inner sea, were still drawn up on the beach by the wall. No one, then, had escaped.

But those ships of the sorzarts . . . I had heard of them, of course, during my seasons as a Krozair raider on the Eye of the World. But I had never before penetrated this far east. The dromvilers were, to phrase it loosely, a compromise between a galley and a sailing ship, although they were not galleasses. They were more like those classical ships sometimes remarked on by ancient writers, or the oared merchantmen of the Middle Ages used considerably in the trade to the Holy Land, shipping pilgrims.

Broader than a swifter, narrower than a broad ship, they carried single banks of twenty oars each crewed

probably by three or four oarsmen, and two masts. I felt reasonably certain that the masts could carry topsails, and a grudging respect grew in me for the sorzarts' sailing skills, for from topsails can emerge all the panoply of sails, skysails and stunsails and all.

A further sobering thought occurred to me. With that number of oarsmen — something between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and sixty, plus essential reserves — the sorzarts could not be using slaves as oarsmen. A large war swifter can carry a thousand slave oarsmen, and feed and water and clean them after a fashion, by extraordinarily careful management. But a merchantman exists to transport goods. There would be no room aboard the sorzarts' ships for slaves. The oarsmen, then, were free — that is, they were sorzarts capable of standing and fighting along with the soldiers of the crew. Maybe the sorzarts were not the savage barbarians the men of Grodno and Zair believed them.

“I am thirsty,” said the Lady Pulvia, breaking the silence. “And my son is thirsty. Also, we are hungry.”

I said: “So am I. I will bring you food and water as soon as it is possible.”

“And when will that be?” said Caphlander. He held his hands together, the long thin fingers intertwined. The veins stood out with a greenish-blue tinge.

I ignored him.

Why should I destroy these sorzarts? A peculiar feeling toward them of respect had been growing in me. They were small men — half-men — yet they fought

well. They had adopted topsails. They employed themselves as free men as oarsmen. But I saw the fallacy of this materialistic argument. The Vikings had been free men employed as oarsmen — yet I would have had no hesitation, given this situation, in utterly destroying every Viking longship I could. The child gave a whimpering cry, which swelled until against all his mother's shushings it broke into a torrent of sobs. The child was hungry and thirsty and he reacted as nature ordained he should.

Often I have been faced with a problem and reacted as I did because that was the way of my nature. That scorpion, that frog, they were impelled by forces stronger than themselves. Well, I have boasted that I can control my impulses, but I think that boast is on occasion an empty one. I stood up.

“Caphlander. You will remain here. Do what you can for the Lady Pulvia and her son. Seg, please come with me.”

Without giving any of them a chance to reply or argue I went out of the rock cave and began to climb to the cliff top.

## Chapter Three

### I dive back into the Eye of the World

Seg Segutorio looked at the bow in his hand and his mobile lips drew down in a lopsided grimace. The bow spanned about twelve Earthly inches. He had made it with swift expertise from a branch of the thin willowy tuffa trees in whose shade we stood. The string he had as rapidly fashioned from plaited strips torn from the living bark. I looked down over the edge of the cliff, squinting a little against glare striking back off the sea from the twin suns of Antares.

Our preparations were complete. It only remained to kindle fire.

Any distaste as a sailorman I felt for the task I had set myself had to be quashed.

Seg let loose a great sigh and lifted the bow to me. He shook his head. "Had I my own great bow I'd guarantee to pick off those sorzart rasts so fast they'd be pincushions before the first one hit the deck."

He surprised me. You must realize, you who listen to my story as these tapes rustle through your little machine, that despite Seg's black hair I had taken him to be a Proconian, who are, as I have said, mostly fair-headed. The remarks about his people I have made refer, of course, to his own true people; but they are remarks made from hindsight, a crime you must forgive a man who has lived as long as I have. "Great bow?" I said.

He laughed. "Surely, even you — who are a stranger of strangers — must have heard of the longbows of Loh?"

"You are of Loh?"

Again he laughed. "Yes — and no!" That ancient look of blood pride suffused his face, an arrogant, proud expression so familiar in those who trace their ancestry back and back into the dawn of their culture. I can understand it; but in many ways I am glad I do not share it, for that kind of pride so often leads to the chinless wonders who have so blighted life on our own Earth. But, with Seg Segutorio, as you shall hear, pride in race and ancestry burned with a steadier and truer flame.

"I am an Erthyr, of Erthyrdrin. . ."

Of Erthyrdrin, that convulsed mass of mountains and valleys forming the long northern promontory of Loh, I had indeed heard. I had used longbowmen from Loh as a special sniper force in my slave army when we went against the overlords of Magdag, and some of them had had red hair, and some had not, and all had been

superlative archers; but none had come from Erthyrdrin, although they had spoken of the place with some awe, some respect, and not a little bile.

Although tempted to contest a little in words with Seg over the relative values of my Clansmen's horn and steel compound reflex bows, I desisted. The wind was just right. The trees selected and bent and staked. The grasses gathered.

Now only the flame remained to be kindled.

"Go down to the Lady Pulvia, Seg. Prepare them. You know the boat. If I am delayed — do not wait for me."

"But—"

"Go, now—"

He handed me the bow, his face glowering. "I see that at a more suitable opportunity, Dray Prescott, I shall have to teach you some respect for a warrior of Erthyrdrin."

"Willingly, my friend. I trust the good Zair will grant it—"

"Pagan gods!" he said, with a flash of cutting temper. "The mountaintops whereon the veiled Froyvil sends out his divine music from his golden and ivory harp would soon teach you the true values, my sad and unhappy friend."

"As to that," I said, taking the bow and squatting down to work, "I make no claims for Zair beyond those his followers make. And," I added, looking up suddenly, "they have been known to claim by the edge of the sword."

He made some kind of exasperated snort and hurried off down to the rock cave.

I shook my head over Seg Segutorio. From what I had heard of Erthydrin, that mountainous promontory of the continent of Loh thrusting up into the Cyphren Sea between eastern Turismond and Vallia, he was a good representative of his race. They were reputed reckless and wild, forever screeching crazy songs and thrumming on their harps; yet I knew of the strong streak of realism stabilizing their characters and lending always the calculated risk to the actions that other men called foolhardy.

So Seg was a longbowman. That could prove interesting.

The little bow whizzed rapidly back and forth twirling the drill of harder sturm-wood against its sturm-wood hole wherein chippings and dry grasses awaited the first ember. Gently and then with greater boldness I blew on the glow. You, who are so accustomed to flicking your finger for heat or light or a naked flame must remember that I had known flint and steel from childhood; perhaps I was a little quicker and defter at thus creating fire than a modern civilized man would be. It is of little consequence.

By the time I had a twisted torch well alight, the flames pale and writhing in the twin suns' rays, I figured that Seg must have reached the rock cave and gathered up our companions. He should be creeping cautiously down toward the beach now and, as I had judged him aright, taking every opportunity for cover the way

provided. I walked across to the first bundle of grasses, wrapped and wadded around a flighting stone, where it lay poised on the forked-branch end of a sapling bent over and staked into the ground. Seg had sighted these rude catapults, and I had let him do that and had then merely checked them. He seemed to me to have done an excellent job. My ballistic knowledge had been gained at the breeches of twelve pounders and then all the way down to four pounders and up to thirty-two pounders, with one stint I looked back on with a grimace on the clumsy old forty-two pounders. In addition I had handled varters aboard swifterns from Sanurkazz, and added to all this a natural eye for estimating distance and elevation and trajectory, and I knew myself, with all the necessary modesty required, to be a first-class shot. As I sliced through the first retaining fiber and released the first weighted bundle of flame I knew Seg Segutorio, also, to be a great marksman.

That first flaming missile arced into the suns-lit air, some smoke trailed from it, then it was a roaring mass of consuming flame arcing high and over and down onto the deck of a sorzart vessel.

I ran along the line of staked-down tuffa trees, their supple stems bent into graceful arches, and I seemed somehow to sense all their necessary springing effort as they flung themselves erect once more. It seemed to me all of their essential nature was pent up in those supple stems. One after another the spouting missiles of destruction plunged down onto the decks of the sorzarts' dromvilers. A pure pang of relief pierced me

that the lizard-men would have no slaves chained to their dromvilers' benches. Already flames were licking malevolently at masts and rigging, shooting from oar ports; already the most dreaded foe of the seaman was consuming the wooden vessels and I knew, not without another pang, that nothing could be done now until the dromvilers burned down to the waterline — and their sterns were drawn up on the beach. . .

This was a sight I need not stop to watch; this was a sight I did not care to stay to watch. It sickened me.

The necessity of the act alone could make me burn a ship. Halfway down toward the rock cave I halted and looked over the drop toward the beach. All eleven ships were blazing, although the one farthest away, which we had had to reach with a smaller incendiary missile, showed signs of resisting. Gangs of sorzarts were running like crazy people with buckets of seawater; others manned the pumps and streams of water jetted. I doubted they would hold back the flames. Once fire gets a hold aboard a wooden ship with her paint and tar and canvas and wood dried internally, there is practically no hope of extinguishing it.

At the cave I paused again, just to make sure they had gone. They had. On again and so down out of sight of the beach and around the last corner over the bluff above the fisher-folk's jetty wall.

Down there three figures struggled toward the boat we had chosen. The Lady Pulvia fell and Seg thrust the child at Caphlander and snatched up his mistress, slung her over his shoulder as he must have slung the bags of

feed oats on her farm. They would reach the boat safely — and then I saw the group of sorzarts running from the heat and the smoke of their burning fleet.

I looked down.

It was a long way — a hundred and fifty feet in Terrestrial measurement. The sea looked blue and calm and serene. Shadows flitted across that surface as smoke clouds wafted by. The twin suns shone in all their resplendent glory. And, away in distant Vallia, my Delia of the Blue Mountains waited for me. . .

You have probably read of experiments carried out to test from what distance a man can safely fall without a parachute. There are remarkable cases on record. Impact velocities of the order of a hundred feet per second have resulted in the survival of the person — in what state depending very much on the angle of impact or entry into the water. I knew nothing of that, then. All I knew was that I had to get down to the beach rather quickly. There were things to be done down there which if left undone would bring the wrath of the Star Lords down on my mortal head.

Without stopping further to cogitate I put my arms out and dived.

Even now I can remember the sensations.

Free-fall diving from aircraft is a modern sport.

I have practiced it and enjoyed it.

Then, when I dived off the cliff in Proconia above a Pattelonian fishing village, with the sorzarts running with naked swords, I just dived and let what fates held me in their hands take control.

Mind you, I did assume a diving position, and I entered the water straight. Confused images of that immense waterfall in the sacred River Aph billowed and echoed in my mind, and my whole body felt as though I had been compressed in some giant vise. Then I was cleaving through the water, down and down, seeing the daylight fade, feeling the growing resistance in the water, curving up, rising and rising until my head popped out and I could shake my hair and look back at the beach.

That first gulp of air tasted very sweet.

The Lady Pulvia, Caphlander, and the child were in the boat. Seg had just hurled an assegai and brought down the leader of the band of vengeful sorzarts. I started to swim.

When I scrambled out Seg accounted for four more and was crossing swords with the sixth.

I must admit I had been extraordinarily lucky since neither the Star Lords nor the Savanti had taken a hand to preserve a life they might consider of use to them. Certainly the risk had been entirely of entry. The almost vertical cliffs of this coast had told me the water would be steep-to right up to the rock, deep and commodious enough for me to avoid knocking my brains out on the bottom. The overhang of the bluff assisted also. I had merely to swim around the tiny spit of land to reach the beach and Seg and the others.

“Hai Jikai!” I yelled. I drew my sword and slogged into the lizard-men. Seg circled a sword, thrust, recovered, shouted: “What kept you?”

A joke, a reprimand, mere bravado — I do not know. I never asked. But I felt a warm glow of elation at the presence of this black-haired and reckless man from Erthydrin.

There was no time for nicety in that fight. We had to dispose of this band of sorzarts — there were about eight left — very rapidly before their comrades left off hurling ineffectual buckets of water over their burning ships and hastened to their assistance. No niceties — that meant hard, fierce, dirty fighting. Tricks I had learned boarding enemy ships of the line in the battle-smoke of Earth, tricks I had picked up with my Clansmen, even a few passes from those days as a bravo-fighter in Zenicce came in useful. All the miraculous-seeking swordplay given me by the disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy, of course, enabled me to stay ahead of my opponent, but some of the stunts I pulled would have turned a young college boy fencer of this Earth green.

Seg and I — we very quickly cleared the sorzarts away.

“The three boats on your side, Seg!” I yelled.

Without a word he did as I directed, and together we stove in the bottoms of the boats lying in this huddle. One boat, the largest, a fifty-footer, lay some distance off, toward where the bonfires of the dromvilers spouted flame and smoke.

I started for it, waving Seg back to the boat we had selected.

The Lady Pulvia na Upalion stood up in the bows of the boat. Very erect, she stood.

“Leave that boat!” she shouted. “They are coming! Look! Hurry back and push this boat into the sea! Hurry!”

A further group following the non-reappearance of those sent to investigate, no doubt, was indeed running from the burning ships along the beach toward us. Sunlight glinted on their bronze and copper ornaments, from their tall golden helmets, and winked back from their naked weapons.

I turned to the Lady Pulvia.

“Get out and help Seg and Caphlander push the boat out! Move yourself! Hurry!”

Then, before she could give vent to her outraged anger and surprise, I yelled at Seg: “Get the boat off, Seg! Make her help — and the Relt. I will swim out to you.” Then I hared off toward the remaining boat and the swiftly advancing party of sorzarts. When they saw me they shrilled their horrid war cries — but mere yelling has not so far harmed me at that distance.

Reaching the fifty-footer I stove the bottom in with four quick blows — not without once more that pang of displeasure at myself for this destruction of property that gave livelihood to the poor fisher-folk — and glared out to sea to get the best line for my swim.

The boat had not moved. The Lady Pulvia still stood in the bows, gesticulating to the two — Seg and Caphlander — who were vainly attempting to thrust the boat’s keel into the water.

I kept down the immediate icy welling of rage. That, if I so chose, would come later.

The boat felt thick and hard beneath my hands as I reached it. At any moment the sorzarts would be within assegai-casting range.

“All together!”

We heaved. The boat lurched, the keel screeched, it stuck — we all bent and thrust with desperate effort — and then the boat jerked and slid free into the water. I took Caphlander around the waist and fairly flung him up into the boat. Seg went in over the other side and I, after a last fierce thrust that sent the craft surging out into the tiny waves, leaped in after him.

At once I seized the oars Seg had readied and fell to. I rowed with a long swing and now all those horrific days of labor when I was an oar slave aboard the swifterns of Magdag paid handsome dividends. The boat clove the water. Spray danced inboard. I bent and pulled, bent and pulled, and only incidentally was aware of Seg snatching an assegai from where it had plunged into the transom and, standing and balancing awkwardly, flinging it back into the throat of a sorzart prancing in fury on the beach.

A few more assegais plunged in alongside and then they were hissing into the water astern of us.

I steadied the rhythm of my stroke and glared with a most uncharitable wrath upon my Lady Pulvia na Upalion.

She saw that look, and her chin came up; then a deep flush spread over her cheeks and she lowered her eyes. She breathed unsteadily.

“The next time I give an order,” I told her, knowing that infernal rasp was back in my voice, “you will obey instantly, do you understand?”

She made no reply.

“Do you understand, Lady Pulvia?” I repeated.

Caphlander started to burble something about being respectful to the mistress, but Seg shut him up. At last she raised her eyes. She had evidently made up her mind to be cutting, authoritative, contemptuous. But she saw my face and her resolution and no doubt her set speech faltered. She opened her mouth.

“Obey — understand,” I said, not ceasing from rowing.

“Yes.”

“Very well.”

I rowed then in a simple long rhythm that sent the little boat out across the suns-lit waters of the Eye of the World.

## Chapter Four

### Rashoons command our course

I took no pleasure — on the contrary I experience no little shame — in thus browbeating a woman rightfully concerned over her child and attempting to uphold her own dignity and not give way to the fears that must have been clamoring to turn her into a sobbing ball of defenseless weakness. But there can be, as I know to my cost, only one captain aboard ship.

And — she was a slave-holder, and a representative of that class of authority most distasteful to me after my experiences in far-off Zenicce, and more lately in Magdag.

We sailed the muldavy with her dipping lug rig safely to the town, the port and arsenal and fortress of Happapat, and delivered the Lady Pulvia na Upalion into the hands of relations who cooed over her and the child and whisked her off to their palace.

When their guards — fair-haired Proconians clad in the iron ring mail of warriors all around the coasts of the inner sea, and armed with long swords that were not

cut down — marched Seg and me off to the local barracoon, I felt no surprise whatsoever.

This kind of attitude on the part of slave-holders seemed inseparable from their nature, as abhorrent to Seg as to myself.

We wasted no time in breaking out, whooping, cracking a few skulls in the process, and with a couple of wineskins and a vosk thigh tastefully cooked and browned, we helter-skeltered off to the harbor. The fishing muldavy we had stolen in order to rescue the Lady Pulvia and her child and Caphlander lay still tied up where we had left her. In her, I knew, there was a full breaker of water. We tossed our meager belongings in and cut the painter — a gesture of defiance, that — and rowed out. We had the lugsail up and were foaming off into the sun-set long before the guards had pulled their scattered wits about them.

“And so, Dray Prescot,” said Seg Segutorio, “what now?”

I stared with a glad affection at this volatile man with the lean tanned face and those shrewd yet reckless eyes. He was a good sword-companion, and for a moment I remembered with a choked nostalgia all those other good companions I had known. I am essentially a lonely man, a loner, one who stands or falls on his own merits and I take ill to being beholden to anyone. This is a fault in me. I thought of Nath and Zolta, my two oar comrades, those two rascals who could not keep away from wine and women. And I remembered how Nath would lean back and quaff a full tankard, and wipe his

forearm across his shining lips, and belch, and say: "Mother Zinzu the Blessed! I needed that!" and how Zolta would already have the prettiest girl in the inn perched laughing on his knee.

Sitting resting on the oars and looking at Seg Segutorio with an awakening awareness — I cannot dwell on that, as you will come to understand — I remembered Zorg of Felteraz, my other oar brother, and I thought of Prince Varden Wanek, and of Gloag, and of Hap Loder — and — and remember I was still young at the time as age is measured on Kregen — I wondered how it was that Seg Segutorio could sit on the opposite thwart and look back at me so cheerfully and say so matter-of-factly: "Well, Dray Prescott, and what now?"

These memories of my comrades affected me, and I admit to a tired, dejected, defeated feeling creeping over me then. You would be forgiven if, from all I have so far said, you jump to the conclusion that Kregen is essentially a man's world. Despite the Princess Natema Cydones, and the Princess Susheeng, and other highborn ladies of enormous power, including among their number the Lady Pulvia na Upalion whom we had just rescued and delivered safely to her kinfolk, you might well think that Kregen is dominated by the male principle where brawn and muscle and fighting ability count for everything.

You would, of course, be wrong.

Through this sudden gloom on my part for my old comrades I never for a single instant forgot my twin destiny on Kregen beneath the suns of Scorpio.

Whatever plans the Star Lords had mapped out for me as a troubleshooter, I held to my own purposes. First, I would find my beloved Delia of the Blue Mountains. And, when that had been accomplished, I would travel this world of Kregen to find my way back to Aphrasöe, the City of the Savanti, the Swinging City, for there I believed paradise awaited me. In all these simple and primitive emotions and ambitions I could still find joy that I did not seek vengeance.

We sailed out into the waters of the inner sea, and Seg appeared perfectly satisfied to allow me the conn and to run the muldavy. As he said, with a laugh: “We Erthyr are a mountain people. The sea is not a second home to us.”

The night breathed gently about us. The sea ran with a calmness that cradled the little boat. The stars glittered above our heads. The wind blew a mere zephyr.

I looked at the stars. I knew them well. I had studied them night after night from the deck of my swifter as we sailed in unexpected nocturnal raids against the overlords of Magdag, or any of the green cities of the northern shore. I had often shocked my crew by this nighttime sailing; their ideas were those of daytime sailing only and a safe beach at night.

I steered to the west.

It was necessary that I return to Magdag as soon as possible. From thence, before the rebellion, I had sent the Vallian Vomanus back to his home island with a message for Delia. He would return — that I knew with fair certainty — and if he landed at Magdag now, his life

would be snuffed out in an instant as a friend of the arch-criminal Pur Dray of Strombor, Krozair, arch-fiend and deadly foe to Magdag.

We steadied on our course west and the wind gusted up suddenly and heeled the muldavy so that water creamed in over the lee gunwale until I let her pay off a trifle. I frowned. The wind veered and strengthened. Now the stars were being blotted out in great clumps at a time as clouds gathered. A brilliant zigzag of fire split the heavens. The thunder, when it reached us, rolled and reverberated around our ears. Rain started to slice into the sea in an abrupt and deafening uproar. In moments we were soaked, our hair tangled about our ears. Seg started to bale. The wind blew directly from the west.

I knew.

This storm not only confirmed my fears that the Star Lords would not allow me to return to Magdag, it also strengthened my suspicion that after my summary ejection from the fight as my slave phalanx in their old yellow-painted vosk-helmets raged on to tear the mailed overlords of Magdag to pieces the battle had swung against us. Perhaps I had overstepped my authority when I had really and truly organized the slaves and workers of the warrens so that they could actually win the fight against the overlords? Perhaps the Star Lords did not want the overlords of Magdag crushed and banished? It could be their plans called for whatever I had done to slumber a while, to gather subterranean strength, to smolder until at some time in the Star Lords' plans for Kregen that spirit I had kindled with

the help of the Prophet could burst out in renewed fury. I did not know.

What I did know was that I could not reach Magdag.

Very well, then. Gradually a kind of structure of devices for coping with the Star Lords — if this was truly their work and not the mortal but nonetheless superhuman work of the Savanti — was being wrought out in my mind. I had successfully appealed and been granted reprieve the last time, in that I had been permitted to stay on Kregen, in a dissimilar fashion to the way in which I had been reprieved at Akhram. The idea began to grow that provided I did not actively contest the dictates of the Star Lords — The Everoinye — I might go about my own business on Kregen beneath Antares.

Yes — very well, then. I put the steering oar up and we surged away on the starboard tack. I would go to Pattelonia. Vomanus would be there if I was lucky, and I could stop him from going on to Magdag. Then — then we would take over the Hostile Territories to Port Tavetus from whence we could sail direct for Vallia.

And then — Delia!

Immediately our bows swung to the eastward with the necessary touch of southerly in the heading for Pattelonia, the wind eased off and the rain ceased. Amid a last grumbling of thunder I heard the harsh croaking shriek as of a giant bird. I looked up. In the darkness I could not see the Gdoinye — but I knew without shadow of a doubt that the gorgeous scarlet and golden raptor of

the Star Lords had swung over us in its wide hunting circles.

“In the name of the veiled Froyvil himself!” said Seg. He looked about. “What was that?”

“A seabird,” I said, “caught in the gale. It seems, friend Seg, we must sail to Pattelonia — rather the chief city on the eastern coast of Proconia than any other, yes? — and we will reach it safely, never fear. You asked me what now — this is your answer. What do you say?”

“Pattelonia.” Seg spat the name. “That may be the chief city, but the fighting-men disgust me.”

“Oh?”

He swaggered up a wineskin and stoppered his mouth to the spout very expertly, as the boat surged along, considering he considered himself no sailor. When he had gulped and wiped his mouth and said, “By Blessed Mother Zinzu, that fires up the cockles of my heart!” — and what a pang of Nath there was in that for me! — he went on to say: “I hired out as mercenary to Pattelonia in one of their infernal wars, you know?”

I nodded. “I know.”

His story was commonplace, ugly, and painful. Men of Loh could usually find employment as mercenaries without trouble, for their prowess as archers was renowned throughout the known lands of Kregen. Seg had entered the inner sea by the western end, through the Grand Canal past the Dam of Days. I reflected that he had seen that colossal construction; I had not. I forbore to mention that to him; it would arouse too many questions. His fighting career had been of the

normal routine and monotonous kind associated with mercenary fighting; when the Pattelonians had been defeated by a combined force of a number of the Proconian cities assisted by Magdag, he had been captured and sold as slave.

“So Pattelonia fell,” I said.

“Mayhap. I did hear that Sanurkazz was coming to our assistance, but I tripped into that damned thorn-hole and was scooped up by a diabolical overlord before it did me any good.”

I made suitable sympathetic noises.

“There are friends in Pattelonia, Seg, although I have never been there. We will be returning to Vallia.” This was a lie. I could never return to Vallia for I had never been there in the first place; but as I had told Kov Tharu of Vindelka, I thought of Vallia for all its frightening reputation as home simply because my Delia lived there.

“Vallia?” Seg drank more wine, his shape a dark expressive blot beneath the starlight. “I took passage aboard a ship of Pandahem. The Vallian was too dear. But I know Vallia — they maintain a great fortress depot on the northernmost tip of Erthyrdrin. Many times have my people gone down against them.”

“You don’t like Vallians?”

He laughed. “That was in the past. Since Walfarg broke apart like a rotten samphron the Vallians have been markedly more friendly toward us, and now we tolerate their fortress depot and it has grown into a

sizable city, and we do business with them, for they are essentially a nation of traders.”

Walfarg was a name I had heard here and there, a mighty empire of the past which had broken apart. It had originated in Walfarg itself, a country of Loh, and some of the stories of Loh hung about its faded glories. There are many countries in the continents and islands of Kregen; only Vallia, as far as I know, boasts that it is a single land mass under one government.

And that boast was to cost it dear, as you shall hear.

“So you are for Pattelonia, then?”

“A pity, Dray Prescott, your friends could not await you at a point nearer the Dam of Days. From Pattelonia we have — oh, I am not sure of the distance, five hundred dwaburs, is it? — to cover before we even reach the outer ocean. Then we must sail south past skeleton coasts to Donengil and thus swing around up the Zim-Stream and so to the Cyphren Sea — and there, before us, lies Erthydrin!”

For the moment I was content to let Seg believe this.

He said, with a sharpness to his voice, “You are not a Vallian?”

Vallians, I knew from the example of the glorious hair of my Delia, were often brown-haired, as I am. I had successfully passed as Kov Drak in Magdag, acting the part of a Vallian duke. But I did not wish to lie unnecessarily to Seg Segutorio.

“I am Dray Prescott of Strombor,” I said.

“So you have told me. But — Strombor. Where might that be?”

Of course — what was now the enclave of Strombor would have been Esztercari for all Seg’s life. A fierce joy welled up in me as I thought of my Clansmen riding across the Great Plains of Segesthes, of the way with good friends’ help we had taken what was to become my enclave fortress of Strombor within the city of Zenicce.

“Strombor, Seg, is in Zenicce—”

“Ah! A Segesthan — well, even that I wonder about, for I call you a stranger of strangers, and I know what I know.”

“What do you know, Seg?”

But he would not answer. That fey quality associated with mountain folk must have alerted his senses; but I was doubtful that he could guess I came from a planet distant from Kregen by four hundred light-years.

He swung away from that as the muldavy creamed through the night sea and the stars once more reappeared above. The twin second moons of Kregen, the two that revolve one about the other as they orbit the planet, sailed above the horizon and in their wash of pinkish light, strengthened by the presence of two more of Kregen’s seven moons, I saw Seg watching me with an enclosed and contained look on his lean face. He brushed a hand through his black hair.

“Very well, Dray Prescott, of Strombor, I will go with you to Pattelonia.” He chuckled. “For all that the army in which I served lost the fight, the Proconians still owe me my fair hire, and they shall pay me.”

“Good, Seg,” was all I considered necessary to say.

“And I refuse by all the shattered targes in Mount Hlabro to return to slavery.”

We slept on and off during the night and when the twin suns rose to burn away a few patches of mist, there, broad on our larboard beam, lay one of the many islands that dot the inner sea. I steered to pass it with plenty of sea room, for islands are notorious as the lair of pirates and corsairs — I had used them enough times myself — when Seg noticed what I had seen and mentally filed as part of the habitual stock-taking of a sea officer the moment he reaches the deck.

He pointed aft where a low black and purple cloud like a massive bruise against the gleaming sky whirled onward.

“A rashoon!”

At the moment I was more concerned with the identity of the swifter shooting out from the lee of the island. She was large, that I could tell — and then as flags broke from her mast and flagpoles I saw their color. My lips compressed.

Every flag was green!

“A Magdag swifter,” I said to Seg. “Hold on — we are going into some fancy evolutions now—”

And then the rashoon enveloped us and we fought the lug down until I could control the muldavy in the screeching wind. The seas piled and knotted about us. We went sweeping on, and the swifter was left floundering. Even then I noted the seamanlike way in which her skipper brought her around and scuttled back with all his double-banks of oars stamping the sea in neat

parallel lines, back into the shelter of the island. We were sent weltering past and out to sea. When the rashoon had blown itself out and we could get back to an even keel and rehoist the lugsail and take stock, I found Seg with an expression on his face which, allied to the green tinge around his jaws, gave me an odd feeling of compassion and unholy glee.

I offered him a thick juicy slice from the vosk thigh.

He refused.

It pains me now, in recollection, to think how badly I treated Seg Segutorio then as we hauled up for Pattelonia across the Eye of the World.

We called in at various islands on the way to water and to acquire fresh provisions, mostly fruit and vegetables, for we avoided the habitations of men and half-men. Seg told me much of his home in Erthyrdrin — which I shall relate when it becomes necessary — but one fact he told me made me think on.

“Arrow heads?” he said one day as we burbled across the sea with the limpid sky above. “You won’t find an Erthyr archer using steel in an arrow head. By Froyvil, Dray! Steel is hard to come by in my country.”

“So what do you use, bronze?”

He laughed. “Not a chance. It’s a pretty metal, is bronze, and I have an affection for it. But we use flint, Dray, good honest Erthyryn flint. Why, we kids could flint-knap as pretty a point as you could wish to see when we were three years old! And, mark you, flint will pierce solid lenk better than almost anything. Perhaps

your steel is better, but not bronze, certainly not copper, or bone or horn, or even iron.”

I stored that away in my mind, thinking of the sleeting rain of arrows my Clansmen could put down. But then, the city of Zenicce controlled what was in effect a vast metallurgical industry, with immense iron deposits nearby with woodlands to furnish charcoal. The same was true of both Magdag and Sanurkazz here on the inner sea.

In talking into this little cassette tape recorder in these heartrending surroundings of famine and despair I have sometimes found it difficult to give a coherent account of Kregen. The planet is real, it is a living, breathing, fully-functioning world of real living people, both men and women and beast-men and beast-women besides all the monsters you could desire. Things happen there as they do on Earth, because necessity impels men to invent and to go on developing these inventions. There could be no long crisp loaves of Kregan bread without cornfields opening to the twin suns, with back-breaking labor to plow and plant and hoe and harvest, with mills to grind and bakers to bake. No man who values life can take anything that life offers for granted — even the air he breathes must be tended and cared for, otherwise the pollution that so worries you here on Earth will poison the uncaring hosts.

So Seg and I talked as we sailed toward Pattelonia, the chief city of Proconia, and the city to which I had been posted as a swifter captain of the forces of Sanurkazz before I had taken off in that abortive

journey to Vallia that had terminated back in Magdag, hereditary foe of Sanurkazz. Whoever ruled now in Pattelonia ruled by right of sword, whether red or green or Proconian. Navigation was simple; the suns and the stars kept me on course over seas I have never traversed before, and soon I calculated we must be approaching waters in which more traffic must be expected.

By this time Seg could take a trick at the steering oar and he it was who was conning the muldavy when another of those inconsiderate rashoons whirled down upon us in a whining torrent of wind and a lumping roaring sea.

At once I leaped to the dipping lug and rattled the yard down, leaving a mere peak to give us steerage way. White water began to sluice inboard and I took up the baler and started in on flinging it back from whence it had come. We steadied up and I could look back at Seg Segutorio. He clung onto the steering oar with a most ferocious expression on his face. He fought the waves with the same elemental force as he would expend in hunting among his beloved mountains of Erthydrin. He fought a new element with a courage and a high heart that warmed me.

Smiling and laughing do not come easily to me, except in some ludicrous or dangerous situations, as you know; but now I looked on Seg Segutorio and my lips widened in a mocking smile, an ironic grimace to which he responded with a savage wrench on the steering oar and a rolling string of blasphemies that burst about my head as the rashoon was bursting.

We rolled and rocked and I baled, and Seg hung onto his oar and kept our head up and steered us through. Again I look back in sorrow at the way I treated poor Seg Segutorio. He was a man to delight the heart.

When we came through it, Seg heaved in a tremendous breath, blew it out, glared at me, and then ignored me altogether. I did not laugh; now I am sorry I did not, for he expected it.

Following the wild moments of the tempest in the inner sea — the rashoons varied as to name and nature — we glided on over a sea that fell calm with only a long heaving swell.

The broad ship lay low in the water, wrecked by the rashoon, her masts gone by the board and her people running about her decks in panic. Then we saw the cause of that alarm.

Circling in toward the broad ship — a merchantman Seg told me by her devices as being from Pattelonia — the long narrow wicked shape of a swifter cleft the water in absolute and arrogant knowledge of her own power. As we watched, the swifter broke her colors. All her flags were green.

A swifter from Magdag! Attacking a broad ship from Pattelonia. From that I deduced that Sanurkazz had succeeded in retaking the city, and I felt a bound of delight.

Now if I have not made it clear that Seg Segutorio was reckless to the extreme, despite that streak of practicality, then I have not drawn the man aright. He

stared at the green-bedecked swifter and his nostrils tightened up. He turned the steering oar so that our head bore on the two vessels.

“What, Seg, and you’re going to attack a Magdagian swifter on your own?”

He looked at me as if he had not heard.

“She’s a big one, Seg. A hundred-and-fiftyswifter. I’d judge, by her lines, she’s a seven-six-six.”

The faint zephyr of wind bore us on.

“We don’t even have a knife, let alone a sword, Seg.”

Our prow rustled through the water.

Oh, how I regret baiting Seg Segutorio!

Perhaps, just perhaps, then, when I was young, I had not forgotten that forkful of dungy straw smacking me full in the face.

“They’re from Magdag,” Seg said. “They made me slave.”

We bore on over the sea and now the sound of shrieks and screams reached us, the ugly sound of metal on metal. I was a Krozair of Zy, dedicated to combating the false green Grodno — no other course occurred to me.

**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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## About the author

Alan Burt Akers is a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer. Bulmer has published over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction.

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## Notes

[1] *Transit to Scorpio and The Suns of Scorpio.*