

DRAY PRESCOT: 1

**TRANSIT TO
SCORPIO**

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

TRANSIT TO SCORPIO

Book One of the Dray Prescott series

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a Mushroom eBooks sample

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A NOTE ON THE TAPES FROM AFRICA

In preparing the strange and remarkable story of Dray Prescott for publication I have become overwhelmed at times with the power and presence of his voice.

I have listened to the tapes Geoffrey Dean gave me, over and over again, until I feel I know the man Dray Prescott as much through his voice as by what he reveals in what he says. At times deep and reflective, at others animated and passionate with the fire of his recollections, his voice carries absolute conviction. I cannot vouch for the truth of his story; but if ever a human voice invited belief, then this one does.

How the tapes from Africa came into my possession is soon told. Geoffrey Dean is a childhood friend, a gray, prim, dedicated man of fixed habits, yet for the sake of old friendship when he called me from Washington I was glad to speak with him. He is a government man with one of these shadowy organizations related to the State Department and he told me three years ago he had had occasion to go to West Africa to supervise fieldwork in connection with a famine emergency. Many brilliant young men and women go out with the Foreign Aid programs, and Geoffrey told me of one, an idealistic

youngster, Dan Fraser, who had been working harder than a man should up-country.

Fraser told Geoffrey that one day when the situation was almost impossible with horrific numbers of deaths daily a man staggered out of the African forest. Men were dying everywhere around and there was nothing unusual in that. But this man was completely naked, badly wounded, and he was white.

I met Geoffrey Dean for lunch on a flying visit to Washington. We ate well at an exclusive club. Geoffrey brought the conversation around to his telephone call and went on to say that Fraser, who had almost lost control, was shaken and impressed, profoundly impressed, by this stranger.

The famine was killing people by the thousand, massive epidemics were being staved off by daily miracles, aircraft were encountering near-insuperable difficulties flying in supplies; yet in the middle of this chaos and destruction of human life Dan Fraser, an idealistic but seasoned field-worker, was uplifted and strengthened by the character and personality of Dray Prescott. He had given Prescott food and water and bound up his wounds. Prescott could apparently live on next to nothing, his wounds healed rapidly, and when he realized the famine emergency resolutely refused any special treatment. In return Fraser handed across his cassette tape recorder in order that Prescott might record anything he wished. Prescott had a purpose; Fraser said he could see.

“Dan said he was saved by Prescott. They were miles from anywhere and he’d been alone. The strength, the calmness, the vitality of Dray Prescott was amazing. He was a little above middle height with shoulders that made Dan’s eyes pop. His hair was brown, and so were his eyes, and they were level and, according to Dan, oddly dominating. Dan sensed an abrasive honesty, a fearless courage, about him. The man was a dynamo, by Dan’s account.”

Geoffrey pushed the pile of cassettes over to me across that expensive table with the wine glasses and the silver and fine china and the remains of a first-class meal. Outside that exclusive club Washington, the whole of the United States, seemed as far away, suddenly, as the wilderness of Africa from which these tapes had come.

Dray Prescott told Dan Fraser if he did not hear from him inside three years he could do as he saw fit with the tapes. The possibility that they might see publication gave Dray Prescott a deep inner satisfaction, a sense of purpose that Fraser felt held more significance than this mysterious stranger would reveal.

Fraser was extremely busy with the famine — I gathered more from what Geoffrey did not say that the end of the boy’s nervous resources was close — and only the appearance of Dray Prescott had saved an ugly situation from sliding into a disaster that would have had international repercussions. Geoffrey Dean speaks little of his work; but I believe a great deal of foreign health and happiness is owed directly to him.

“I promised to abide by the conditions laid down by Dan Fraser, who would, in any case, have absolutely refused me permission to take the tapes back to America had he not known I would respect his wishes and the wishes of Dray Prescott.”

Geoffrey, I had always thought and saw nothing to make me change my mind, had little imagination. He went on: “That famine was a bad one, Alan. Dan had too much to do. When I arrived, Dray Prescott had gone. We were both hellishly busy. Dan did say that he’d seen Prescott, at night, beneath those African stars, staring up, and he’d felt an unease at the big man’s expression.”

He touched the cassettes with the tip of his finger.

“So — here they are. You’ll know what to do with them.”

And so I present in book form a transcript of the tapes from Africa. The story they tell is remarkable. I have edited as little as possible. I believe you will detect from the textual evidence how Dray Prescott swings from the expressions of one age to that of another, freely, without any feeling of anachronism. I have omitted much that he says of the customs and conditions of Kregen; but it is my hope that one day a fuller transcript will be possible.

The last cassette ends abruptly in mid-sentence.

The tapes are being published in the hope that anyone who may be able to shed some light on their extraordinary contents will come forward. Somehow, and I cannot explain this, I believe that is why Dray Prescott told his story in the midst of famine and

epidemic. There is more to learn of that strange and enigmatic figure, I am confident.

Fraser is a young man dedicated to helping the less fortunate of the world, and Geoffrey Dean is a civil servant quite devoid of imagination. I cannot believe that either of them would have faked these tapes. They are presented in the conviction that however much lacking in proof they may be, what they tell is a real story that really did happen to Dray Prescott on a world many millions of miles from Earth.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter One

The Scorpion calls

Although I have had many names and been called many things by the men and beasts of two worlds, I was born plain Dray Prescott.

My parents died when I was young, but I knew them both and loved them deeply. There was no mystery about my birth and I would consider it shameful now to wish that my real father had been a prince, my real mother a princess.

I was born in a small house in the middle of a row of identically similar houses, an only child, and a loved one. Now I find myself often wondering what my parents would make of my strange life and how they would greet with delight or that delicious family mockery my walking with kings and my dealing as an equal with emperors and dictators, and all the palaces and temples and fantastic settings of distant Kregen, that have fashioned me into the man I am today.

My life has been long, incredibly long by any standards, and yet I know I merely stand at the threshold of

the many possibilities the future holds. Always, for as long as I can remember, ill-defined dreams and grand and nebulous ambitions enclosed me in a fervent belief that life itself held the answers to everything, and that to understand life was to understand the universe.

Even as a child I would fall into a strange kind of daze in which I would sit back and stare upward sightlessly, my mind blank, receptive of a warm white light that pulsed everywhere. I cannot now say what thoughts passed through my brain for I do not believe I thought at all during those times. If this was the meditation or contemplation so ardently sought by Eastern religions then I had stumbled on secrets far beyond my comprehension.

What is still vividly in my mind of my young days is my mother's apparently continuous letting-out of my clothes as I grew. She would bring out her sewing basket and select a needle and look at me with such an expression of loving helplessness as I stood there, my shirt once more torn across my shoulders. "You'll soon not be able to go through a door, Dray, with those shoulders," she would scold, and then my father would come in, laughing perhaps over my wriggling discomfiture, although we had, as a family, precious little to laugh at in those days.

The sea which boomed and thundered whitely at the mouth of the river had always conveyed to me a siren song; but my father, who carried his certificate of exemption with him day and night, set his face against my going to sea. As the gulls wheeled and called across

the marshes and swooped about the old church tower, I would be on the grass and ponder my future. Had anyone then told me of Kregen beneath Antares and of the marvels and mysteries of that wild and savage world I would have run as though from a leper or a madman.

The natural aversion my father held to the sea was founded on deep suspicion of the morality and system of those responsible for manning the ships. He had all his life lived with horses as his chief interest, capable of dealing with all aspects of their care and training, and when I was born in 1775 he was earning our living by horse-doctoring. During the time I spent with the Clansmen of Felschraung on Kregen long after my father's death I felt myself nearer to him than ever before.

Our spotless kitchen was always crammed with greenish bottles of mysterious mixtures, and the smell of liniments and oils struggled with those of cabbage and freshly-baked bread. There was always weighty talk of the staggers, glanders, pinkeye and strangles. I suppose, speaking logically, I could ride a horse and jump him moderately well before I could toddle safely from our kitchen to the front door.

One day an old hag woman with curious eyes and a bent back and dressed in rags stuffed with straw wandered through the street and suddenly it was the craze for our neighbors to have their fortunes told. It was on this day I discovered that my birthday, the Fifth of November, somehow turned me into a Scorpion, and that Mars was my planet of the ascendant. I had no idea

of the meanings of these strange words; but the concept of a scorpion intrigued me and possessed me, so that, although I was forced to indulge in the expected fisticuffs with my friends when they dubbed me The Scorpion, I was secretly thrilled and exultant. This even compensated me for not being an Archer, as I longed, or even a Lion, who I conceived would roar more loudly than that Bull of Bashan the schoolmaster loved to imitate. Do not be surprised that I was taught reading and writing, for my mother had set her heart on my being an office clerk or schoolteacher and so raise myself from that sunken mass of the people for whom I have always felt the most profound respect and sympathy.

When I was about twelve a group of sailormen stayed at the inn where my father sometimes helped with the horses, combing them and speaking to them and even finding raggedy lumps of West Indian sugar for them to nibble and slobber from his upturned palm. On this day, though, my father was ill and was carried into the back room of the inn and placed gently on the old settle there. His face dismayed me. He lay there weak and listless and without the strength to sup from the bowl of strong ale the kindly tavern wench brought him. I wandered disconsolate into the yard with its piles of straw and dung and the smells of horses and ale filling the air with an almost solid miasma.

The sailors were laughing and drinking around something in a wicker cage and, immediately intrigued

like all small boys, I went across and pushed between the burly bodies.

“How d’ye like that abed with ye at nights, lad?”

“See how it scuttles! Like a foul Sallee Rover!”

They let me look into the wicker basket, quaffing their ale and laughing and talking in their uncouth sailor way that was, alas, to be all too familiar to me in the days to come.

In the basket a strange creature scuttled to and fro, swinging its tail in the air like a weapon, rocking its whole body from side to side with the violence of its movements. Its scaly back and the two fierce pincers that opened and shut with such malice repelled me.

“What is it?” I asked, all innocently.

“Why, lad. ’Tis a scorpion.”

So this was the creature whose name I bore as a nickname!

I felt the hot shame course through me. I had learned that people like me, Scorpios, are supposed to be secretive; but there was no hiding my reaction. The seamen laughed hugely as at a joke and one clapped me on the back.

“He won’t get at you, lad! Tom, here, brought him all the way from India.”

I wondered why.

I mumbled out some kind of thank you — politeness was a drudgery of social custom my parents had drummed into me — and took myself off.

How these things happen are secrets well kept by heaven, or by the Star Lords. My father tried to smile at

me and I told him Mother would be coming soon and some of the neighbors and we would carry him home on a hurdle. I sat by him for a time and then went to beg another quart of ale. When I returned carrying the pewter tankard my heart seemed to stop.

My father was lying half off the settle, his shoulders on the floor and his legs tangled in the blanket that had been tucked around him. He was glaring in mute horror at the thing on the floor before him; yet that horror was contained within an icy mask of self-control. The scorpion crept toward my father with a hideous lurching roll of its obscenely ugly body. I dashed forward as the thing struck. Filled with horror and revulsion I mashed the tankard down on that vile body. It squashed sickeningly.

Then the room was filled with people, the sailors yelling for their pet, the tavern wenches screaming, ostlers, tap-boys, drinkers, everyone, shouting and crying.

After my father died my mother did not linger long and I stood beside the twin graves, alone and friendless, for I had no cousins or aunts or uncles I knew of, and I determined to shake off altogether the dust of my country. The sea had always called me; now I would answer that summons.

The life of a sailor toward the close of the eighteenth century was particularly arduous and I can claim no personal credit that I survived. Many others survived. Many did not. Had I cherished any romantic notions

about the sea and ships they would have been speedily dispelled.

With a tenacity that is of my nature, whether I will it or not, I fought my way up from the lower deck. I found patrons willing to assist me in acquiring the necessary education so that I might pass my examinations, and incidentally I ought to say that in finding navigation and seamanship subjects over which I seemed to have an instinctive command puts into a proper perspective my eventual arrival on the quarterdeck. It seems now, looking back, that I walked as though in a somnambulist trance through that period of my life. There was the determination to escape the foulness of the lower deck, the desire to wear the gold lace of a ship's officer, the occasional moments of extreme danger and terror, and as though to balance out emotion the nights of calm when all the heavens blazed overhead.

Study of the stars was required of a navigator and continually I found my eyes drawn to that jagged constellation of Scorpio with its tail upflung arrogantly against the conjunction of the Milky Way and the ecliptic. In these days when men have walked upon the moon and probes are speeding out beyond Jupiter never to return to Earth, it is difficult to recall the wonder and inner apprehension with which men of an older generation regarded the stars.

One star — Antares — seemed to glow down with a force and fire of hypnotic power upon me.

I stared up from many a deck as we crossed with the Trades, or beat about in blockade, or dozed along in the

long calm nights in the tropic heat, and always that distant speck of fire leered on me from where it jointed that sinisterly upraised scorpion's tail, threatening me with the same fate that had overtaken my father.

We know now that the binary Alpha Scorpii, Antares, is four hundred light-years away from our sun and that it blazes four thousand times as brightly; all I knew then was that it seemed to exercise some mesmeric power over me.

In the year in which Trafalgar was fought, the same year, I ought to mention, in which I had once again been disappointed of gaining my step, we were caught up in one of the most violent gales I had ever experienced. Our ship, *Rockingham*, was thrown about with contemptuous ease by waves that toppled, marbled with foam, to threaten our instant destruction should they poop us. The counter rose soaring against the sky and then, as each successive roller passed away, sank down and down as though it would never rise. Our topgallants had long since been struck down; but the wind wrenched our topmasts away into splintered ruin and slashed into ribbons even the tough canvas of the storm jib. At any second we would broach to, and still those enormous waves pounded and battered us. Somewhere off the lee bow lay the coast of West Africa, and thither we were driven helplessly before the fury of the gale.

To say that I despaired of my life would not be true; for I had as much irrational desire to cling to life as any man; but this was by now only a ritual act in defiance of a malignant fate. Life held little of joy for me; my

promotion, my dreams, had all faded away and were gone with the days that had passed. I was weary of going on and on in a meaningless ritual. If those sullen waves closed over my head I would struggle and swim until I was exhausted; but then when I had done everything a man in honor can do and should do, I would bid farewell to life with much regret for what I had failed to achieve, but no regret for a life that was empty to me.

As *Rockingham* lurched and shuddered in that tremendous sea I felt my life had been wasted. I could see no real sense of fate in keeping my spirit still alive. I had fought many times, with many weapons, I had struggled and battled my way through life, roughly, ever quick to avenge a wrong, contemptuous of opposition; but life itself had beaten me in the end.

We struck the sand shoals at the mouth of one of those vast rivers that empty out of the heart of Africa into the Atlantic and we shivered to pieces instantly. I surfaced in that raging sea and caught a balk of timber and was swept resistlessly on and flung half-drowned upon a shore of coarse yellow-gray sand. I just lay there sodden, abandoned, water dribbling from my mouth.

The warriors found me with the first light.

I opened my eyes to a ring of narrow black shanks and splayed feet. Anklets of feathers and beads indicated instantly that these black men were warriors and not slaves. I had never touched the Triangular Trade although tempted many times; but that would not help me now. To these blacks I was not a strange white apparition. As I stood up and looked at them in their

feathers and grotesque headdresses, their shields and spears, I thought at first they would treat me as a white man engaged in the Trade on the Coast and take me to the nearest factory where there would be others of my kind.

They jabbered at me and one thrust a tentative spear tip at my stomach. I spoke boldly, asking them to take me to the other white men; but after only a few moments I realized none understood English, and my pidgin had been learned in the East Indies. By this time in my life I had grown into full stature, a little above middle height and with those broad shoulders that had been the despair of my mother developed with ropes of muscle that had stood me in good stead before in the midst of storm or battle.

They did not overpower me easily. They did not attempt to kill me for they used their spears with the flat or the butt and I assumed they intended to sell me into slavery with the Arabs of the interior, or to cut my carcass up slowly over a stinking village fire, delicate in their torture.

When they had beaten me down I awoke to my senses lashed to a tree in an odiferous village set above the eternal mangrove swamps, those notorious swamps where a single false step would mean a slow and agonizing death as the rank water gradually slopped up over the distended mouth. The village was surrounded by a palisade on which bleached skulls added a grim warning to strangers, where cooking fires smoked and

cur dogs whined. I was left alone. I could only surmise my fate.

Slavery has always been abhorrent to me and I found a grim irony that I should be the recipient of racial revenge for a crime I had not committed. Again the feeling of destiny urging me on overwhelmed me. If I was to die, then I would fight every last step of the way for no other reason than that I was a man.

The bonds around my wrists cut cruelly and yet, as the day wore on in heat and stench and stifling dampness, by continual rubbing and twisting that left my wrists raw some slack became evident. During the afternoon two other survivors of the wreck of *Rockingham* were dragged into the village. One was the bosun, a large surly individual with reddish hair and beard who had evidently put up a fight, for his red hair was caked with dried blood. The other was the purser, still fat and greasy, a man whom no one liked and, as was to be expected, he was now in a pitiable state. They were lashed to stakes on each side of me.

With flies buzzing around us for company we hung and rotted until at blessed last the sun fell. Fresh hordes of insects then took up the task of sucking our blood. I will not dwell on what happened to my two unfortunate companions, hung one on each side of me on their trees of suffering; but their awful cries of torment forced me to chafe even more savagely at my bonds.

Looking back, it seems now that the reason I was left until the last came about because the blacks wanted to use the utmost of their diabolical arts on me, caused, no

doubt, because twice during the day I had bodily lifted my legs and kicked a too-importunate inquirer into my condition forcefully in the stomach. I understood as my two companions died why our feet had not been pinioned.

By now it was pitch-dark with the red firelight flickering from the crude walls of the huts and the palisade and grinning in jagged reflections from the naked jaws of the skulls atop their stakes. The blacks danced around me, shaking their weapons, shuffling and stamping their feet, darting in to prod with a spear, springing back out of reach of my kicking feet. Any tiredness of a normal kind is soon learned to be lived with in any life at sea. My fatigue was of a deeper kind. But, grim and unyielding, I determined, as my Anglo-Saxon forebears would say, to die well.

Despite the horror of my position I bore these blacks no ill will. They merely acted according to their lights. No doubt they had seen many a miserable coffle of slaves trudging down to the factory to be branded and herded like cattle aboard the waiting scows; perhaps I made a grave mistake, and these very men were members of the local tribes who bought slaves from the blacks and Arabs of the interior to sell at a profit to the traders on the Coast. Either way, it did not concern me. My one concern was to break that last reluctant strand binding my wrists. If I did not break free very soon I would never do so, and would die a mutilated hulk on the stake.

Firelight reflected redly from the eyeballs of the savages and darted pinpricks of blinding light from their spear blades. They closed in, and I saw that this was the moment when they would begin their devilish practices on me. I put out a last desperate effort; my muscles bulged and the blood thundered in my head. The last strand parted. My arms were afire with the agony of returning circulation, and for a long moment I could do nothing but stand there feeling as though I had dipped my arms in a vat of boiling water.

Then I jumped forward, seized the spear from the first astonished warrior, clubbed him and his companion down, let out a shrill shriek followed by a deep roaring bellow as we used to do when boarding, and raced as fast as my legs would allow between the huts. The crude palisade gate could not stop me, and in an instant I had ripped away the line lashing it to the upright, flung it ajar and bounded out into the jungle night.

Where I was going I, of course, had no real idea. Escape impelled me on. The warriors would be after me this very moment, their shock overcome, running like hunting dogs and with their spears held ready for the deadly cast that would bury the blade in my back.

The instinct that drove me on was so deeply-buried in my subconscious that I could barely comprehend why I ran. That I would die was obvious. But that I would struggle and seek every means to prolong life, that, too, given the nature of the man I eventually understood myself to be, is equally obvious.

When one can run along the fore-topgallant yard-arm in a gale on a pitch-black night, one could cross the footbridge to hell.

I ran. They followed and yet, I fancied, they did not follow as fast or with as much vigor as they might and the idea occurred that they might be more frightened than I was myself of this jungle night. But follow they would and capture was inevitable. Where lay safety in this predatory jungle aprowl with unknown dangers and festering with poison? Reaching a cleared space where a tree had fallen and dragged down some of its neighbors I clambered up onto the rotting trunk, dislodging some of the residents as I felt a trickle across my feet like grains of sand blowing in the wind. I kicked out. Up I climbed and there, above me, riding clear of the surrounding vegetation, shone the stars of heaven.

The stars glowed above me and as the familiar constellations met my eyes I turned instinctively to seek out one well-known shape that among all the rest had insistently drawn me with hypnotic power I could neither understand nor explain.

There sparkled the arrogant constellation of Scorpio, with Alpha Scorpii, Antares, blinding my eyes. All the other stars of heaven seemed to fade. I was feverish, light-headed, weak, knowing my sure death followed on stalking feet through the jungle. I had thought to use the stars to guide my escape as they had guided me over the trackless seas. I had thought to use the stars to navigate my way back to the beach. What I hoped to do there God knows. I stared at Scorpio malevolently.

“You killed my father!” Sweat stung my eyes. I was half off my head. “And you seek to do the same to me!” I have no real, coherent memory of what followed, for sweat blinded me, and my breathing pained. But I was aware of a shape like a giant scorpion limned in blue fire. I shook my fist at the Scorpion Star. “I hate you, Scorpion! I hate you! If only you were a man like myself. . .”

I was falling.

Blue fire coruscated all around; there was blue fire in the stars and blue fire in my eyes, in my head, blinding me, dazzling me. The blue changed to a brilliant malignant green. I fell. I fell with the blue and green fires changing and pulsing brilliantly into red as the red fires of Antares reached out to engulf me.

Chapter Two

Down the River Aph

I awoke lying flat on my back.

With my eyes closed I could feel warmth on my face and the flutter of a tiny breeze, and beneath me a familiar motion told me I was aboard a boat. This information did not seem at all strange; after all, had I not spent the last eighteen years of my life at sea? I opened my eyes.

The boat was simply a very large leaf. I stared like a man staggering from Copley's taproom in Plymouth stares owlshly on wan daylight. The leaf sped along the center of a wide river whose green water shone splashing and rippling very merrily alongside. On either bank extended a plain of greenish-yellow grass whose limits were lost beneath a horizon shimmering in heat. The sky blazed whitely down on me. I levered myself upon my elbows. I was stark naked. My wrists chafed and the irritation plucked untidily at my memory.

Then I became extremely still and silent, frozen.

The leaf was large, being a good eighteen feet in length, and its curved stalk rose in a graceful arc like an ancient Greek galley's sternpost. I sat silent and rigid in the bows. Where the sternsheets would be in an ordinary Earthly boat crouched a scorpion fully five feet in length.

The monstrous thing was of a reddish hue, and it pulsed as it swayed from side to side on its eight hairy legs. Its eyes were set on stalks, round and scarlet, half-covered by a thin membrane, and they moved up and down, up and down, with a hypnotic power I had to force myself to conquer. Its pincers could have crushed a fair-sized dog. The tip of its sting-armed tail rose high in the air in a mocking blasphemy of the graceful arc of the leaf-stem — and that tip dripping a poisonous green liquid aimed directly at my defenseless body.

Around its mouth clumps of feelers trembled and its mandibles ground together. If that mandibular array once seized on my throat. . .

That macabre tableau held for what seemed a very long time as my heart beat with a lurching thump very distressing to me. Scorpion! It was no blown-up Earthly scorpion. Within that grotesque body covered by its exoskeleton-like plates of armor a real vertebrate skeleton must exist to support the gross bulk. Those ever-moving eyes were no eyes a scorpion would use. But those pincers, those mandibles — that sting!

Scorpion! I remembered. I remembered the African night, and the firelight and the gleaming spears and the mad flight through the jungle. So how could I be here,

floating down a river on a giant boat-shaped leaf with only a monstrous scorpion for crew? Antares — that red star that had blazed down so powerfully upon me as I sought to escape — Antares at which I had hurled my puny mortal hatred, without a single doubt I knew that some uncanny force had drawn me from my own Earth and that Antares, Alpha Scorpii, now shone luridly in the sky above my head.

Even the gravity was different, lighter, freer, and this I saw might give me some slender chance of survival against this fearsome monster.

Scorpions feed by night. By day they skulk beneath logs and rocks. Stealthily I drew back first one leg and then the other, lifting myself slowly onto my haunches. And all the time my eyes were fixed on the weaving eye stalks before me. One chance I had. One fragile chance to leap forward, first to avoid the scything gripping blows of the twin pincers, second to duck the downward darting sting, and then with a heave and a twist to topple the thing overboard.

My empty hands clenched. If only I had a weapon! Anything, a stout root, a broken bottle, an oar loom, even a cutlass — a man who has lived as I have lived knows the meaning of personal weapons, respects them for their meaning to him. However smartly I could break a man's back with my bare hands, orgouge out an enemy's eyes, a mortal human's natural weapons are a poor substitute for the weapons of bronze and steel with which mankind has struggled out from the caves and the jungles. I felt my nakedness then, my soft flesh and

brittle bones, my puny human muscles, and I hungered for a weapon. Whatever force had brought me here had not with kindly consideration also provided me with a pistol, or a cutlass, a spear or shield, and I would have suspected weakness had that mysterious force done so.

No thought entered my mind then that I might dive overboard and swim to the river bank. I do not know why this thought did not occur to me and I think, sometimes, that it had to do with my reluctance to abandon my ship, to betray my own trust in myself, and the feeling that no animal should be allowed to conquer me and that if we were to battle then the prize was this simple leaf boat.

I drew a long slow breath and let it out and drew another, filling my lungs. The air was fresh and sweet. My eyes never left the scarlet rounded eyes at the ends of their stalks as they moved up and down, up and down.

“Well, old fellow,” I said in a soft and soothing voice, still not moving in any way that could be the signal for the monster to pounce. “It looks as though it’s you or me.” The eye stalks weaved up and down, up and down. “And believe me, you ugly Devil’s Spawn, it is not going to be me.”

Still speaking in a low soothing voice, as I had often heard my father speak to his beloved horses, I went on: “I’d like to rip your belly up to that fat backbone you’ve got in there and spill your tripes into the river. Sink me, but you’re a misbegotten lump of offal.”

The situation was ludicrous and looking back now I marvel at my own insensitiveness, although I realize that much has happened since and I am not the man I then was, fresh from the inferno of life aboard an eighteenth century sailing ship, and no doubt prey to all the superstitious nonsense plaguing honest sailormen.

And, truth to tell, I talked not only to soothe the beast but also because talking delayed the time when I must act. I could see the sharpness and the jagged serrations of the pincers, the crushing power of the mandibles and the oozing greenish liquid dribbling from the poised sting. The frog believed the scorpion and gave him passage across the river, and the scorpion stung the frog, because, said the scorpion, it was in his nature. "Well, scorpion, it is in my nature not to let anyone or anything best me without a struggle and loathsome though you are to me I allow it is in your nature to kill me, therefore you must allow it in mine to prevent you. And, if necessary, to kill you to protect myself."

The thing swayed gently from side to side on its eight legs, and it pulsed, and its eyes on their stalks weaved up and down, up and down.

With the palms of both hands flat on the greenish membrane of the leaf between the darker green of the veins, I prepared to hurl myself forward and risk that formidable armament and heave the thing overboard. I tensed, holding a breath, then thrust with all the power of corded muscles in thigh and arm. I shot forward.

The scorpion heaved itself up, its tail curling and uncurling, its pincers clashing — then in a single giant leap it flung itself end-over-end out of the boat. I rushed to the gunwale of the leaf and looked over. A splash surrounding an eight-pointed outline with a stinging whip of tail — and then the scorpion vanished.

It was gone.

I let out that held breath. For the first time I noticed that the thing had not exuded any smell. Had it been real? Or could it have been an hallucination brought on by the fantastic unreality of my experiences? Was I still chasing madly through the African jungle, demented and doomed? Was I still lashed to the stake and was my mind winging into a fantasy world to escape from the agony being inflicted on me? People always pinched themselves in this kind of situation; but I had no need of that crude analysis. I knew I was here, on some other world than Earth, beneath the giant red sun of Antares. I knew it, without a doubt.

Shielding my eyes I looked up at the sky. The light streamed down from the sun, tinged with a reddish hue, warming and reassuring. But a new color crept across the horizon turning the yellowish-green grass more green. As I watched with streaming eyes and sparks shooting through my brain another sun rose into the sky, glowing a molten green, suffusing the river and the plain with light.

This green star was the companion to the giant red star that made up the star we called Antares — later I understood that the words “red giant” were a misnomer

— and the quality of the light did not discommode me as much as I would have expected. And, too, there were more surprises in store for me in this new world that explained the more Earthly-type of lighting we receive from our own yellow sun shining here. The leaf had ceased its rocking now and my little command had shipped very little water. I scooped up a handful and drank and found it clean and refreshing.

The best thing to be done now was to allow the leaf to carry me down the river. There would be habitations along the river, if there were people in this world, and I found it all too easy to drift with the current and let things happen as they would.

The river wound in wide sweeping reaches. Occasional shoals of sand shone yellow. There seemed to be a complete absence of trees of any stature, although tall reeds and rushes grew in many places along the banks. By dint of much splashing with my hands and with a seaman's instincts to take best advantage of the set of the current, I eventually drove my craft ashore onto a shelving beach. I ran her up well above the water mark. I did not much fancy walking when I had a perfectly adequate boat at my command.

The reeds were of many varieties. I selected a tall straight-stemmed specimen and by much levering and cursing managed to break off a ten-foot length. This would serve as a punt-pole in the shallows. One variety attracted my attention because I accidentally nicked my arm on its leaf. Again I cursed. Swearing is an occupational disease at sea. This reed grew in clumps with

straight round stems perhaps an inch or an inch and a half in diameter; but the thing that attracted me was the leaf, which sprouted upright from the top of each stem to a length of perhaps eighteen inches. This leaf was sharp. The width was of the order of six inches, and the shape was — not surprisingly — that of a leaf-bladed spear. I broke off a bundle at a softer node some six or eight feet from the leaf, and I then had a bundle of spears that I wished I had had when my boat's crew had been aboard an hour ago.

The reeds rapidly dried into a tough hardness under the sunshine and the edge of the blade was sharp enough to allow me to hack down more samples.

Taking stock, I looked across the shining surface of the river. I had a boat. I had weapons. There was abundant water. And by splitting reeds lengthwise I could fashion lines with which to catch the fish that were undoubtedly swarming in the river, waiting with open mouths to be taken. If I couldn't fabricate a hook from a sharpened reed or thorn, I would have to construct fish traps. The future, with people or without, appeared giddyingly attractive.

What had there been in life for me back on Earth? The endless drudgery of sea-toil without reward. Hardship inconceivable to the mind of scientifically-pampered twentieth century man. An eventual certainty of death and the dread possibility of maiming, of having an arm or leg taken off by a roundshot of grape or langrage smashing into my face, hideously disfiguring me, unmanning me, tipping out my intestines onto the

holystoned decks. Yes — whatever force had brought me here had done me no disfavor.

A flutter of white caught my eye. A dove circled around, fluttering inquisitively nearer, then taking fright and circling away. I smiled. I couldn't remember the last time I had made so unusual a grimace.

Above the dove I saw another shape, more ominous, hawk-like, planing in hunting circles. I could see the second bird very clearly. It was immense, and it glowed and sparkled with a scarlet coat of feathers, golden feathers encircled its throat and eyes, its legs were black and extended, their claws rigidly outstretched. That bird flaunted a glorious spectacle of color and power. Although at the time it would have been impossible for me to have recalled the lines, now I can only leap to those magnificent words of Gerard Manley Hopkins as he reacts with all a man's mind and body to the achievement of, the mastery of, the thing that is so essentially a bird in the air. And more particularly, knowing now what I could not know then, Hopkins' words have a deeper meaning as he calls the windhover "Kingdom of Daylight's Dauphin."

I shouted and waved my arms at the white dove.

It merely circled a little way farther off and if it was aware of that blunt-headed, wing-extended shape above it gave no sign. The deadly hawk shape with its broad wings with their aerodynamic fingertip-like extensions, the wedge-shaped tail, the squat heavily-muscled head cried aloud their own warning. The nature of the

hunting bird is to kill its prey; but I could at least warn the dove.

A piece of reed tossed at the dove merely made it swerve gracefully in the air. The eagle or hawk — for that magnificent scarlet and golden bird was of no Earthly species — swooped down. It ignored the dove. It swooped straight for me. Instinctively I flung up my left arm; but my right thrust forward one of my spears. The bird in a great cup-shaped fluttering of its wings and a powerful down-draft effect of its tail, braked in the air above my head, hovered, emitted one single shrill squawk, and then zoomed upward with long massively powerful beats from its broad wings.

In a moment it dwindled to a dot and then vanished in the heat haze. I looked for the dove only to discover that it had also vanished.

A strong feeling came over me that the birds were no ordinary birds. The dove was of the size of Earthly doves; but the raptor was far larger even than an albatross whose shape in the sky above our sails had become familiar to me in many southerly voyages. I thought of Sinbad and his magical ride aboard a bird; but this bird was not large enough to carry a man, of that I was sure.

As I had promised myself I caught my dinner and with some difficulty found enough dry wood. By using a reed bow I made fire by friction, and almost in no time at all I was reclining and eating beautifully-cooked fish. I hate fish. But I was hungry, and so I ate, and the meal compared very favorably with salt pork ten years in the

barrel, and weevily biscuits. I did miss the pea soup; but one couldn't have everything.

I listened very carefully and for some considerable time.

With no knowledge of what hostile creatures there might be in the vicinity I judged it advisable to sleep aboard the boat; my patient listening had not revealed the distant thunder of a falls which would bring to a premature end this river journey. For I was now convinced that I had been brought here for a purpose. What that purpose was I did not know and, truth to tell with a full belly and a pile of grasses for a bed, I did not much care.

So I slept through the red and green and golden afternoon of this alien planet.

When I awoke the green tinged crimson light still flowed from the sky, deeper now but the color values of objects still true. After a time I came to ignore the pervading redness of the light and could pick out whites and yellows as though beneath the old familiar sun that had shone on me all my life.

The river wound on. I saw many strange creatures on that uncanny journey. One there was, a thin-legged animal with a globe-like body and a comical face set atop it, for all the world — this or the Earth — like that of Humpty Dumpty. But it walked on eight immensely long and thin legs — and it walked on the water. It skimmed by me, its legs pumping up and down in a confusing net-like motion. The thin webs on its feet must each have been three feet across, and there must

have been some kind of valvular action to break the suction created as its weight came on each pad in turn. It skittered away from the leaf boat and I laughed — another strange and somewhat painful movement not only of my mouth but also of my abdomen — as it tiptoed over the river surface.

One of the spears made an excellent paddle by which the boat could be steered. Counting days became meaningless. I did not care.

For the first time in many weary years I felt free and relieved of burdens — of care, of fear, of frustration, of all the intangible horrors that beset a man struggling to find his way through a life that has become meaningless to him. If I were to die, either soon or at a more distant date, well — Death had become a companion all too familiar

Drifting thus in a mellow daze down the river, not bothering to count the turn of days, there occurred times of sudden emergency, of stress and of danger, like the occasion when a great barred water snake attempted to clamber with its stunted forelegs aboard the leaf boat.

The battle was short and incredibly ferocious. The reptile hissed and flicked its forked tongue at me and gaped its barn-door jaws open to reveal the long slimy cavity of its throat down which it intended to dispatch me. I balanced on the leaf, which danced and swayed and tipped in the water, and thrust my spears at the water snake's hooded eyes. My first fierce thrusts were fortunate, for the thing let loose a squeal like swollen sheets shrieking through distorted blocks, and flicked

its tongue about and threshed those stumpy forelegs. This creature emitted a smell, unlike that scorpion of my first day in this world.

I stabbed and hacked and the thing, shrieking and squealing, slid back into the water. It made off, curving like a series of giant letter S's laterally in the water.

The encounter filled me only with a fuller awareness of my good fortune.

When the first distant roars of the rapids whispered up the river I was ready. Here the banks rose to a height of between eighteen and twenty feet and were footed with black and red rocks against which the water broke and cascaded, spuming. Ahead the whole surface was broken. Standing braced against a thwart constructed from a number of reeds broken to length and thrust between the sides of the leaf which were amply strong enough, and with my body in a bracket of more reeds attached higher up, I was able to lean out and down and thus gain tremendous leverage with the spear-paddle.

That swirling rush through the rapids exhilarated me. The spray lashed at me, water roared and leaped everywhere, the boat spun and was checked by a thrust of the paddle; the black and crimson rocks rushed past in a smother of foam and the lurching, dipping, twisting progress was like Phaëthon riding his chariot upon the high peaks of the Himalayas.

When the boat reached the foot of the rapids and the river stretched ahead once more, placid and smoothly running, I was almost disappointed. But there were more rapids. Where a prudent man would have

beached the boat and then made a portorage, I exulted in the combat between myself and the river; the louder the water roared and smashed against the rocks, the louder I shouted defiance.

Having arrived in this world naked and carrying nothing with me I had no tie for my pigtail and water-drenched as my hair was it now hung freely down my back past my shoulder blades. I promised myself that I would have it cut to a slightly shorter length and never again adopt the required queue and its tie. Some of the men aboard ship had had pigtails that reached to their knees. These they kept coiled up most of the time, only letting them down on Sundays or other special occasions. I had put that life behind me now — along with the pigtail.

Gradually from the horizon into which the great river vanished a range of mountains rose, growing higher day by day. I could see snow on their summits, gleaming cold and distant. The weather remained warm and glorious, the nights balmy, and the skies covered with stars whose constellations remained an enigmatic mystery. The river was now over three miles in width, as best I could judge. There had been no falls for a week — that is, seven appearances and disappearances of the sun — but the sound of thunder now reached my ears in a continuous diapason, swelling in volume perceptibly as the current of the river increased in velocity. The width of the river narrowed sharply; in a morning the banks closed in until they were no more than six cables' length apart, and narrowing all the time.

When the river was two cables' wide I paddled furiously across to the nearer bank, almost deafened by the continuous roaring from ahead. There the river vanished between two vertical faces of rock, crimson as blood, streaked with ebony, harsh, and raking half a mile into the air.

I pulled the boat out of the water and considered. By the smooth humped surface of the river I could tell the enormous power concentrated there. The river was now very deep, the water pent between those frowning precipices. The bank was a mere ledge of rock, above which the cliffs rose towering out of my sight. A bush grew there that I recognized, of a deep green with a profusion of brilliant yellow berries the size of cherries; it was a welcome sight. I picked the yellow cherries and ate them — they tasted like a full-bodied port — while I considered.

After a time I took a spear and set off for the falls.

The sight amazed me. By clinging to a rock at the extreme lip I could look over and down that majestic expanse of water as it slid out and over into nothingness and then arched down until far, far below it battered into the ground once again. A solid sheet of spray sleeted from the outward face of the waterfall and obscured what lay beyond. Below, the pool was like a great white lily spreading in widening circles of foam, with the roaring cataract toppling smoothly downward into its eye.

There was no climbing down the rock.

Again I considered. A force had brought me here. Had it brought me merely to stand and marvel at this waterfall? Must there not be something beyond to which I must go? And if I could not climb down the rock — was there no other way of descent? The sheer volume of noise fashioned itself into words: *“You must! You must!”*

Chapter Three

Aphrasöe — City of the Savanti

Still munching those delicious cherries whose delights I had found and often savored higher up the river, I went back to my leaf boat. It was hard with the same kind of tough fibrous hardness the reeds had displayed when cut. But also it had a sinuous suppleness about it that stemmed from its leaf-construction. It would twist and squirm through the rapids, as I had found to my satisfaction.

But would it withstand the battering it was bound to sustain? Would I, a mere mortal human, remain alive under such colossal punishment?

To haul the boat back up the river against that smooth powerful current would be an enormous task. I could not stay here. I ate some of the meat left from the last animal I had brought down with a flung spear higher up the river. On both banks vast herds of various kinds of animals, many of them resembling cattle and deer, had roamed and I had pleasantly varied my diet

between them and fish and the other vegetables and berries and cherries — but no animals roamed here.

Thoughtfully I took out of the bottom of the leaf the flat stones I had used as ballast to give better stability. As I did this, as I bundled the spears in a lashing of split reed and secured them to the sides, I knew I had made the only decision fate or whatever other forces involved had decreed.

The leaf boat would float upside-down, this I knew. I strapped myself in with split reeds, flat to the bottom, with the ten-foot long pole to hand. The boat rushed down the current. I knew when we took off and sprang out into thin air.

The boat dipped. The air whistled from my lungs. My ears pained. I was aware of a floating sensation. Just when we hit I must have lost consciousness, for the next thing I remembered was of the boat upside-down, pitching and tossing and going in circles, and of myself hanging in my reed strappings above the greenish gloom of foaming water. It hurt to breathe and I wondered how many ribs I had fractured. But I must get out of the whirlpool. There was not even time to feel thankful I was still alive.

Freeing myself was easy enough with a spear-blade. To right the boat took a little more time; but those broad shoulders of mine did the job and I tumbled in and seized a spear-paddle and, with a series of vigorous thrusts, pushed myself from the dangerous vicinity of the foot of the waterfall. In an instant I was floating free and being whirled away down the river once more.

I breathed in deeply. The pain was not severe. Bruises only.

Only a fool or a madman — or one beloved by the gods — would have dared do what I had done. I looked up at the sheer descending wall of water, at the powerful smooth descent and the foaming caldron where the water struck and bounced in a frothing frenzy, and I knew that luck or no luck, mad or not, beloved of the gods or the prey of the Scorpion, I had come through alive what few men could have survived.

Now I could see what lay on the other side of the mountains.

They extended in a chain all around the horizon, gradually diminishing in size as they trended in a circle until directly before me they were a mere purple thread on the horizon. But obstructing the view directly ahead was a — was a — even now it is difficult to adequately convey that first breathtaking sight of Aphrasöe, the City of the Savants.

The rim wall of mountains formed a crater as vast as a crater on the moon and in the exact center the river flowed into a wide-spreading lake. Rising from the center of the lake grew tall reeds. But their reality dwarfs words. They were each of various thicknesses, ranging from newly-growing specimens of a yard in diameter to mature growths of twenty feet across; at intervals up their stems bulbous swellings grew like Chinese lanterns strung on cords. Up and up soared the reeds, and I was reminded of kelp with its bulges growing up underwater.

From the gracefully arching tops of the reeds long filaments descended again, and I was soon to understand the use to which this multiplicity of lines was put.

I have lived a long life and seen the marvelous steel and concrete towers of New York, have ascended the Eiffel Tower and London's Post Office Tower, have explored the cliff hanging palaces of Inner Tibet; but in no other place in no other world have I found a city quite like Aphrasöe.

The very air was scented as my leaf boat bore me on.

From starboard another river wended across the plain pent between the circular crater walls and joined my river in a wide confluence some three miles from the city and the lake. The lake itself I judged to be five miles across, and the height of the vegetable towers — at that time I could only sit and stare upward, baffled.

How could one call those serene vegetable giants reeds? From the clusters of filaments growing from their tops, down past the protuberances swelling from their stems, many of them the size of an Indian bungalow, many the size of a solid Georgian mansion in old England, right down to the massive girth of their trunks which vanished into the water, they were of themselves, independent, isolate, retaining their own essential nature despite anything that might occur around them. The nearer I approached, the bigger they became. Now I had to crane my head back to stare up at them, and could no longer see their tops for the froth of fronds depending. Those fronds were in perpetual motion, swinging in every direction. I wondered at this.

A boat was approaching me up the river.

Naked as I was, all I could do was smooth my drying hair back and lay hold of a spear, and wait.

Like any sailorman I studied the craft approaching with a critical eye. She was a galley. Long silver-bladed oars rose and fell in a rhythm, feathering perfectly together, giving that short sharp chopping stroke that is the Navy way of driving a boat through water. That was needful in a seaway, where there were waves of consequence; within this landlocked water a longer stroke could have been used. I surmised that the rowing arrangements — to use a landsman's phrase — precluded a long stroke and recovery.

The bows were finely molded and high-raked, with much gilding and silver and gold work. She carried no masts. I waited in silence. Now I could hear, above the sounds of the oars and the bubble of water from her stem, shouted commands; the starboard bank backed water, the larboard continued to pull ahead, and the galley swung around smoothly. Another order was followed by the simultaneous lifting of the oars — how often had I given a similar command! — and the galley drifted gently broadside on as I swung down on the current.

From this angle her lines were clearly apparent; long and low as was to be expected, with that high beak and with a high canopied quarterdeck and poop. People thronged her deck. Some of them were waving. I saw white arms and a multitude of colored clothing. There was even music, wafting gently on the breeze.

Had I wanted to escape there was no escape possible.

As I drifted down, a single oar lowered. My boat ran alongside. Still gripping my spear, I leaped out, onto the blade, and men ran lightly up the loom toward the gunwale. It was a stroke oar. I vaulted the rail to land on the quarterdeck. The canopy overhead rustled in the breeze. The deck was as white as any on a King's Ship. The only person visible here was a man wearing a white tunic and duck trousers who advanced toward me with outstretched hand, smiling, eager.

"Dray Prescott! We are glad to welcome you to Aphrasöe."

Numbly I shook hands.

Above the quarterdeck the poop rose in a splendor of gilt and ornamentation. Up there would be the quartermasters at the tiller. I turned to look forward. I could see row after row of bronzed upturned faces, all smiling and laughing at me. Brawny arms stretched to the oars and muscles bunched as a girl — a girl! — nodded and beat lightly on a tambourine. In time with her gentle strokes the oars bit into the water and the galley smoothly gathered way.

"You are surprised, Dray? But of course. Allow me to present myself. I am Maspero." He gestured negligently. "We do not take much pride in titles in Aphrasöe; but I am often called the tutor. But you are thirsty, hungry? How remiss of me — please allow me to offer you some refreshment. If you will follow me—"

He led off to the stern cabin and, dazed, I followed.

That girl, with her corn-colored hair and laughing face, banging time with her tambourine — she had not taken the slightest notice of my nakedness. I followed Maspero and once more that sense of foreordained destiny encompassed me. He had known my name. He spoke English. Was I, then, in truth in the grip of a fevered dream, hanging near to death on a torture stake in the African jungle?

The chafe in my wrists had all gone. There was nothing now to chain me to reality.

A last look back over my shoulder at this amazing galley revealed that our prow now pointed at the city. We moved forward with a steady solid motion very strange to a sailor accustomed to the rolling and pitching of a frigate in the great waves of the ocean. A white dove flew down from the bright sky, circled the galley, and alighted on that upthrusting prow. I stared at the dove. I remembered that it had flown into my view many times since that first occasion; but the gorgeous scarlet and golden raptor had not returned. The people I had seen were now drifting back onto the deck and their clothes blazed brilliantly in the sunshine as they laughed and gossiped like merry folk at a fair.

The man called Maspero nodded, smiling and genial. “We attempt always to respect the mores and behavior of the cultures invited to Aphrasöe. In your case we know that nakedness can cause embarrassment.”

“I’m used to it,” I said. But I took from him the plain white shirt and duck trousers — although as my fingers

closed on the material I realized I had never encountered it before. It was not cotton or linen. Now, of course, that Earthmen have discovered the use of artificial fibers for clothing, the garments or their like could be found in any chain store. But at the time I was a simple seaman used to heavy worsteds, coarse cottons, and the most elementary of scientific marvels could astonish me. Maspero wore a pair of light yellow satiny slippers. Most of my life — until I eased my way through the hawsehole — I had gone barefoot. Even then my square-toed shoes had been graced by cut-steel buckles, for I could not even afford pinchbeck. Gold buckles, of course, were waiting on the taking of a prize of real value.

We walked through the aft cabin with its simple tasteful furniture constructed from some light wood like sandalwood and Maspero motioned me to a seat beneath the stern windows.

Now it was possible to take stock of him. The first and immediately dominating impression was one of vivacity, of aliveness, alertness, and of an abiding sense of completeness that underlay all he did or said. He had very dark curly hair and was clean-shaven. My own thick brown hair was in not too conspicuous a disarray; but my beard was now reaching the silky stage and was not, I venture to think, too displeasing to the eye. Later on, when they were invented, the name torpedo would be given to that style of beard.

Food was brought by a young girl clad in a charming if immodestly brief costume of leaf-green. There was

fresh-baked bread in long rolls after the French fashion, and a silver bowl of fruit including, I was pleased to see, some of the yellow port-flavored cherries. I selected one and chewed with satisfaction.

Maspero smiled and all the skin around his eyes crinkled up. "You have found our Kregish palines tasteful? They grow wild all over Kregen wherever the climate is suitable." He looked at me quizzically. "You seem to be in a remarkable state of preservation."

I took another cherry — another paline, as I recognized I would have henceforth to call them. I did not understand quite what he meant by the last part of his sentence.

"You see, Dray, there is much to tell you and much you must learn. However, by successfully reaching Aphrasöe, you have passed the first test."

'Test?'

"Of course."

I could become angry now. I could lash out in fury at being wantonly dragged through dangers. There was a single redeeming feature in Maspero's favor. Speaking slowly, I said: "When you brought me here did you know what I was doing, where I was, what was happening to me?"

He shook his head and I was about to let my anger boil.

"But we did not bring you, in that sense, Dray. Only by the free exercise of your will could you contrive the journey. Once you had done that, however, the voyage

down the river was a very real test. As I said, I am surprised you look so well.”

“I enjoyed the river,” I told him.

His eyebrows rose. “But the monsters—”

“The scorpion — I suppose he was a house pet of yours? — gave me a fright. But I doubt if he was really real.”

“He was.”

“Sink me!” I burst out. “Suppose I’d been killed!”

Maspero laughed. My fists clenched despite the gracious surroundings and the goblet of wine and the food. “Had there been a chance of you losing your life you would not have been entered on the river, Dray. The River Aph is not to be trifled with.”

I told Maspero of my circumstances when the red eye of Antares had fallen on me in the jungle of Africa and he nodded sympathetically. He began my education there and then, telling me many things about this planet called Kregen. Kregen. How the name fires my blood! How often I have longed to return to that world beneath the crimson and emerald suns!

From an inlaid cabinet Maspero took a small golden box, much engraved, and from this box he lifted a transparent tube. Inside the tube nestled a number of round pills. I had never had much time for doctors; I had seen too much of their bungling work in the cockpit, and I steadfastly refused to be bled or leeches.

“We of Aphasöe are the Savanti, Dray. We are an old people and we revere what we consider to be the right ways of wisdom and truth, tempered with kindness

and compassion. But we know we are not infallible. It may be you are not the man for us. We have many entrants seeking admittance; many are called but few are chosen.”

He lifted the transparent tube. “On this world of Kregen there are many local languages, as is inevitable on any world where growth and expansion is taking place. But there is one language spoken by everyone and this you must know.” He extended the tube. “Open your mouth.”

I did as he bid. Do not ask me what I thought, if perhaps the idea of poison did not cross my mind. I had been brought here, of my own free will — maybe — but all this effort, like the provision of the leaf boat, would scarcely be wasted the moment they had seen me. Or — might it? Might I not already have failed whatever schemes they had in mind for me? I swallowed down the pill Maspero dispensed.

“Now, Dray, when the pill has dissolved and its genetic constituents habitate themselves in your brain, you will have a complete understanding, both written and oral, of the chief language of Kregen. That tongue is called Kregish, for clearly it could bear no other name.”

To me, a simple sailorman of the late eighteenth century, this was magic. I then knew nothing of the genetic code, and of DNA and the other nucleic acids, and of how imprinted with information they can be absorbed into the brain. I swallowed down the pill and accepted what new marvels there might lie in store.

As to the business of a world having many languages, this was natural and anything else would have been a foolish dream. We on our Earth almost had a common language which might be spoken and understood from the farthest western shores of Ireland across to the eastern frontiers against the Turk. Latin was such a language; but that had vanished with the rise of nationalism and the vernacular.

The galley rocked gently beneath us and Maspero jumped up. "We have docked!" he cried gaily. "Now you must see Aphrasöe, the City of the Savanti!"

Chapter Four

Baptism

Aphrasöe was Paradise.

There seems to me now no other way of describing that city. Many times I wondered if in very truth I was dead and this was Heaven. So many impressions, so many wonderful insights, so much beauty. Downriver wide acres of gardens and orchards, dairy farms and open ranges, provided an abundance of plenty. Everywhere glowed color and brilliance and lightness, and yet there were many cool places of repose and rest and meditation. The people of Aphrasöe were uniformly kind and considerate, laughing and merry, gentle and compassionate, filled with all the noble sentiments so much talked about on our old Earth and so much ignored in everyday life.

Naturally, I looked for the canker in the bud, the dark secret truth of these people that would reveal them to be a sham, a city of hypocrites. I looked for compulsions I suspected and could never find. In all honest sober truth I believe that if Paradise ever existed among

mortal men it is to be found in the City of the Savanti, Aphrasöe on the planet Kregen beneath the crimson and emerald suns of Antares.

In all the wonders that each day opened out to me one of the greatest came on that very first day when Maspero led me into the city growing from the lake.

We left the galley and stepped down onto a granite dock festooned with flowers. Many people thronged here, laughing and chattering, and as we passed toward a tall domed archway they called out happily: “Lahal, Maspero! Lahal, Dray Prescott!”

And I understood what Lahal meant — a word of greeting, a word of comradeship. And, too, as the language pill dissolved within me and its genetic components drifted into place within my brain, I understood that the word “Llahal” — pronounced in the Welsh way — was a word of greeting given by strangers, a word of more formal politeness.

Stretching my lips, which are of the forbidding cut of habitual sternness, into the unfamiliar rictus of a smile, I lifted my arm and returned the greetings. “Lahal,” I said as I followed Maspero.

The entranceway led into the interior of one of the enormous trunks. Having left the Earth in the year of Trafalgar, I was not prepared for the room in which I now found myself to rise swiftly upward, pressing my feet against the floor and bending my knees.

Maspero chuckled.

“Swallow a couple of times, Dray.”

My ears performed the usual antics as the Eustachian tubes cleared. It is unnecessary now to describe lifts or elevators, save to say that to me they were another wonder of the city. During my stay in Aphrasöe I found myself, against my will as the days passed, continually searching for that flaw in the gem, that canker in the bud, that worm in the heart, that I suspected and that I dreaded to find. Then, I knew that ways of compulsion existed that I understood and had used. The press gangs would dump their unsavory human freight at the receiving ships, and from the slopships they would come aboard, miserable, seasick, scared, angry. The cat would tame them and discipline them along with Billy Pitt's Quota Men. The discipline was open and understood, a stark fact of life, given the circumstances a necessary evil. Here I suspected forces that worked in darkness away from the sight of honest men.

Subsequently I have seen and studied many systems of control. On Kregen I have encountered disciplines and methods of enforcing order that make all the notorious brainwashing indoctrinations of Earth's political empires seem as the strictures of a gray-headed mistress at a girls' school.

If any brainwashing system or any other method of indoctrination and compulsion existed in Aphrasöe I was not then, and never since as my knowledge has expanded, aware of any secret controls.

When the elevator stopped and the door opened by itself I jumped. I knew nothing of selenium cells and

solenoids and their application to self-opening doors. It now sounds droll that among the vagaries of my memory I knew that there existed a thing — whether substance, liquid, fluid or what I knew not and nor did anyone else — called *vis electrica*, named by the English physician Gilbert, obtaining his derivation from the Greek word for amber — electron; and that also I knew that Hauksbee had produced sparks. I had heard of the men Volta and Galvani and their work had excited me — and then the thoughts of making a frog's leg twitch abruptly reminded me of that froggy thought I had had on my leaf boat as that damned great scorpion had sat staring at me with his eyes going up and down, up and down, rather like the elevators within the tree trunks.

I stepped out into fresh scented air. All about me stretched the city. The city! Such a sight no man could see and possibly forget. At this height the lake revealed its almost circular shape, cut into by the many tall trunks — I found myself calling them tree trunks; but they were surely of an incredibly more ancient order of vegetable life than trees. From their tops the massed bunches of tendrils drooped. I admit to a shaming thought then, for the appearance of these dangling lines was faintly similar to those of a cat-o'-nine-tails as it lifts in the fist of the bosun's mate at the gratings.

In the railing of the platform before us a gateway led out onto thin air. Maspero started forward confidently. He touched one of a number of colored buttons set in a small desk with, inscribed above it, the name *Aisle South. Ten*. A platform large enough to accommodate

four people within an encircling railing flew toward us through the air and notched itself against the opening in the platform on which we stood. It had come swinging up toward us. I noticed a line extending from a cradle in the center of the aerial platform leading aloft — and guessed at once that this line was really a tendril of the great plants. Maspero politely motioned me aboard. I stepped on and felt the resilience as the line took my weight. Maspero jumped on, released the locking device and at once we swung out and down and gained a tremendous acceleration like a child on the downward arc seated in a playground's swing.

We swung through the air, the line arcing under the wind-pressure above us, flying between the tall trunks and their bulbous houses, and as we swung so I saw many other people swinging past in all directions. Maspero had sat down so that his head was below the transparent windshield and he could speak to me. I stood, letting the wind hurtle past my ears and stream my hair out behind me like a mane.

He explained that a central system prevented tangling; it was complicated but they had machines capable of the task. Computers were unknown — except in their most basic ancient forms — to sailing ship officers. The experience of standing on that platform and swinging dizzily through the air was one of the greatest liberating moments of my life. We curved up in a great graceful arc and docked ourselves against another high platform. At perigee we had skimmed the surface of the lake. We transferred to another platform. This time Maspero had

to manipulate the translucent vane, rather like a vertical bird's-tail, that trailed away from the line above our heads. He corrected our course so that we passed in a flash another flying platform. I heard a delighted shriek of girlish laughter as we hurtled by.

"They will play their pranks," Maspero sighed. "She well knew I would give way, the minx."

"Isn't it dangerous?" was my foolish question.

We swooped down on our line, swinging grandly toward the lake, and then up and up we climbed dizzily until once again we notched into a platform around a trunk. Here other people were climbing aboard platforms, pushing off to swoop down like playful children. We covered perhaps a mile in this fashion, and all without a single error or tangle. There was a pattern observable in the line of swinging so that right-angle confrontations were obviated. I could have gone on swinging all day. Swingers, the flying platforms were called, and Aphasöe was often referred to as The Swinging City.

On one high railed platform a party waited for our swinger and one of them, after the greeting: "Lahal, Maspero," and a quiet, polite word to me, said: "Three graints came through Loti's Pass yesterday. Will you be there?"

"Alas, no. I have matters to attend to. But soon—soon—" The party boarded the swinger and then for the first time I heard the words of farewell that came to mean so much to me. "Happy Swinging, Maspero," called his friend.

“Happy Swinging,” replied Maspero, with a smile and a wave.

Happy Swinging. How right those words are to express the delight and joy in life in The Swinging City!

Among the many people swinging from place to place I saw youngsters sitting astride a simple bar, holding in one hand the downward-pointing handle of their guiding vane and with the other waving to everyone they passed as they twisted and turned. It looked so free, so fine, so much a part of the air and the wind, this rushing arcing swinging that I yearned to try my skill.

“We have to sort out the tangles they make from time to time,” said Maspero. “But although we age but slowly, age we do. We are not immortals.”

When we reached our destination Maspero ushered me into his house fashioned from a gigantic bulbous swelling. It must have been five hundred feet from the lake. Up the center went the trunk containing its elevator, and around it extended a ring of rooms with wide windows overlooking the city and the plants and the lake glinting through the trceries of trunks and swingers.

The place was furnished with impeccable taste and luxury. For a man whose ideas of comfort had been formed by moving from the lower deck into the wardroom I gasped. Maspero made me at home very kindly. There was much to be learned. During the days that followed I learned of this planet Kregen, and dimly sensed the mission the Savanti had set themselves. Put

into simple terms I could grasp it was their task to civilize this world but coercion could not be used, it must be done by precept and example, and there were very few of them. They recruited — as far as I could understand — from other worlds of which they seemed to know, to my great surprise, and I was a candidate. I wanted no other future.

The Savanti possessed a driving obligation to help all humanity — they still do — but they needed help to fulfill this self-imposed task. Only certain people would be capable and it was hoped I would be one of them. I find it painfully difficult to detail all the wonderful events of my life in Aphrasöe, The Swinging City, the City of the Savanti. I met many delightful people and was absorbed into their life and culture. On excursions I saw the extent of their cut-off little world within that giant crater. Here they were fashioning the instrument that would bring a similar level of happiness and comfort to all the world.

I saw their papermills and watched as the pulp gradually changed through their whining spinning machinery into smooth velvety paper, beautiful stock, fit to commemorate the loftiest words in the language. But there was a mystery attached to their paper manufacture. I gathered that on certain times during the year they dispatched caravans of paper which would find its way all over Kregen. But the paper was blank, virginal, waiting to be written on. I sensed the secret here; but could not fathom it.

Very soon I was told to prepare for the baptism. I use the English word as the nearest equivalent to the Kregish, intending no blasphemy. Very early we set out, Maspero, four other tutors whom I now knew and liked, and their four candidates. We took a galley which pulled steadily up the other river, not the Aph but the Zelph. The oarsmen laughed and joked as their brawny arms pulled. I had discussed slavery with Maspero and found in him the same deep hatred of that ignoble institution as burned in me. Among the oarsmen I recognized the man who had asked Maspero if he were hunting the graint. I had myself taken my turn at the oars, feeling the muscles across my back slipping into familiar power lines as I pulled. Slavery was one of the institutions of Kregen that the Savanti must needs change if they were to fulfill their mission.

We pulled as far up the River Zelph as we could and then transferred to a longboat pulled by all of us in turn. I had seen no old men or women, no sick or crippled, in Aphrasöe, and everyone took a cheerful hand at the most menial of tasks. The galley turned back, with the girls at the tiller waving until we were out of sight between craggy gray walls. The water rushed past. It was of a deep plum color, quite unlike that of its sister river Aph. The ten of us pulled against the current.

We then went through rapids, portering the boat, and pressed on. Maspero and the other tutors held instruments that revealed themselves to be of potent power. A giant spider-like beast leaped from a rock to bar our way. I stared rigidly at it — and Maspero calmly

leveled his weapon; a silvery light issued from the muzzle that quietened the monster until we were past. It clicked its jaws at us, its great eyes blank and hostile; but it could not move. I do not think even the science of Earth can yet reproduce that peaceful victory over brute force.

One of the candidates was a girl, of a clear cast of feature with long dark hair, not unprepossessing but in no way a great beauty. We pushed on, passing many horrific dangers that were quelled by the silvery fire of the tutors.

At last we reached a natural amphitheater in the rock where the river plunged down in a cataract that was a miserable imitation of the one over which I had plunged on the Aph; but which was nevertheless of considerable size.

Here we entered a cave. This was the first underground place I had been on Kregen. The light streamed in with its usual warm pink glow; but it gradually faded as we advanced and that pinkness was slowly replaced by an effulgent blueness — a blueness that reminded me vividly of the blue fires that had limned my impression of the Scorpion as I had stared upward from the African jungle.

We gathered at the brink of what seemed a simple pool in the rocky floor of the cave. The water stirred gently, like heating milk, and wisps of vapor arose from its surface. The solemnness of the occasion impressed me. A flight of stairs was cut leading down into the pool.

Maspero took me to one side, politely allowing the others to go first.

The candidates, one after the other, removed their clothes. Then, with uplifted faces and firm tread, we all walked down the steps into the water. I felt the warmth enclosing me and a sensation like a warm mouth kissing me all over, a sensation like a billion tiny needles pricking my skin, a sensation that penetrated to the inmost fibers of what I was, myself, unique and isolate. I walked down the rocky steps until my head sank beneath the surface.

A great body moved in the milky fluid before me.

When I could hold my breath no longer I returned up the steps. I am a good swimmer — some have said I must have been spawned from a mermaid (and when he got up with a black eye and apologized, for I admit of no reflection upon my father and mother, I had to admit he meant nothing ill; that in truth what he said could be proved by the facts of my swimming ability). Now I can see they were joking; but in my young days jokes and I were rough bedfellows.

I was the last out. I saw the three young men and they seemed to me strong and healthy and fine-looking. The girl — surely she was not the same girl who had walked with us into the pool? For now she was a resplendent creature, firm of body, with bright eyes and laughing face and red lips ripe for the kissing. She saw me and laughed and then her face changed expression and even Maspero said: “By the Great Savant Himself! Dray Prescott — you must be of the chosen!”

I must admit I felt in better health than I could ever remember. My muscles felt toned up and limber; I could have run ten miles, I could have lifted a ton weight, I could have gone without sleep for a week. Maspero laughed again and handed me my clothes and clapped me on the back.

“Welcome, again, Dray Prescott! Lahal and Lahal!” He chuckled, and then, casually, said: “When you have lived for a thousand years you may return here to be baptized again.”

Chapter Five

Delia of the Blue Mountains

A thousand years!

I stammered in confusion. We were back in Maspero's house. I could not believe it. I only knew I felt as fit and healthy as I ever had. But a thousand years of life!

"We are not immortals, Dray; but we have work to do and that work will not allow us to die off after three score years and ten."

The wonder of that stayed with me for a long time; and then I pushed it away. Life was still lived from one day to the next.

Maspero apologized for the Savant's atavistic attitudes when we went hunting the graint. From time to time huge wild animals would wander through the few passes into the inner world of the crater and because they would damage the crops and kill the people, they must be caught and returned. But the Savanti had once been warlike and fierce like any Kregan of the outer world. They joyed in the dangers of physical combat;

but they would not allow of any danger to their quarry. The dangers where they existed were to the Savanti.

So, like a Kregan war party we went forth onto the plains upriver to hunt the graint. I should mention that Kregen, the planet, Kregish, the language, and Kregan, for the inhabitants of Kregen, is pronounced as though there were an acute accent on the letter “e” in the French fashion. I wore hunting leathers. Soft leather cinctured my waist and was drawn up between my legs. On my left arm a stout leather arm guard might prevent slavering jaws from ripping that arm off. My hair was bound back by a leather fillet. There were no feathers in that band, although Maspero, had he wished, could have filled his fillet with feathers — what the Indians called calling coup — and he joyed and delighted in the hunt, and at the same time woefully deplored his savage and primitive behavior.

I carried the sword Maspero had given me. This sword was not designed to kill. The Savanti delighted in meeting the monsters with various weapons; but their chief joy lay in the Savanti sword, a beautifully balanced arm, straight, not a shortsword, not a broadsword and not a rapier; but a subtle combination that I, for one, would not have believed possible had I not seen and wielded one. I felt it to be an extension of my arm. Of course I did not then know how many men I had killed with cutlass, tomahawk or boarding pike. Pistols at sea almost always became wetted or damp and refused to fire; it was not until two years after my translation to Kregen that, on Earth, the Scottish Reverend Alexander

Forsyth perfected his percussion caps. I knew how to use a sword and I had used them in action among the smoke of broadsides in the wild plunge to an enemy's deck. I was not one of those fancy university fencers with a foil like a maid's feather duster; but that old Spaniard, Don Hurtado de Oquendo, had taught me well how to use a rapier, and he had been broad-minded enough to allow me the French as well as the Spanish grip and system. I took no pride in the number of men I had spitted as I took no pride in the numbers whose skulls I had cleft through with a cruder Navy cutlass.

We hunted the graint. The beasts somewhat resembled an Earthly bear with eight legs and jaws that extended for over eighteen inches like a crocodile's. Our only chance against them was speed. We would take turns to dart in and parry those wide-sweeping vicious paws armed with razor-sharp claws. We would parry and duck and then cut or thrust and the Savanti sword would inflict a psychic wound that was directly proportional to the power of our blow. When a graint was subdued the poor beast would be carefully tended and taken back over the hills. To accomplish this the Savanti used what was to me then another miracle.

They possessed a small fleet of flying petal-shaped craft powered in a way that I was not to understand for some time. The graint was strapped down and with a plentiful supply of food and water would be flown back over the passes and deposited in a favored place. If he was stubborn enough to retrace his steps then the

Savanti could logically accept his decision and once more we would don our hunting leathers and sally forth.

On one such bright day of summer we sallied out ready for a day's sport that would not injure our quarry and would not harm ourselves if we were quick and lithe enough. I had seen a man brought back with a badly slashed side from which the bright blood poured; he was up and about the next day none the worse. But one could be killed at this game, and this the Savanti accepted as a spice to life. They recognized their own weakness in this desire; but they accepted it as a phenomenon of their human character.

We had subdued two graint and I had wandered a little off on my own seeking the spoor of a third. My friends were resting and eating at our little camp. A shadow passed over my head and, looking up, I saw one of the petal-shaped flying boats skimming close. I ducked and it continued on and hit the ground, bounced, lurched, and skidded askew. Thinking that the Savanti taking a monster back would need help, I ran across.

At that moment the graint I hunted bounded from a low hillock and charged the airboat.

Aboard the airboat were three dead men clad in strange coarse garments of some yellow stuff, hooded, and girdled with a scarlet rope with tassels. Their feet were sandaled. There was also a girl, who cried out in terror.

She was blindfolded.

Her hands were bound behind her and she struggled in a silvery tissue gown. Her hair was of the auburn-tinged brown I have always found attractive. I had no time to look further at her for the graint was clearly intent on eating her for his dinner. I shouted, high and hard, and leaped forward.

Somehow, by continuous struggling, the girl had managed to slide the blindfold down from her eyes. As I charged I cast her a single swift glance. Her large brown eyes were terrified; but as soon as she saw me an entirely different expression filled them. She stopped her screaming at once. She shouted something in a fierce excited tone, a word that sounded like: "Jikai!"

I did not understand; but her meaning was plain.

The graint was a large fellow, a good eight feet tall as he reared back on his hind two pairs of legs and pawed at me with the upper two pairs. His long crocodilian snout gaped and the teeth looked extraordinarily hard and sharp.

I might be playing a game; but he was not, and he was hungry, and the soft flesh of the girl represented a nice juicy dinner to him.

I darted in and instantly leaped back so that his responding blow sliced the air where my head had been. I thrust quickly; but he turned and I had to dive forward and roll over as his other paws clapped together in an attempt to imprison my body. I scrambled up and faced him again. He grunted and snuffled, put all his paws to the ground, and charged at me. I skipped aside at the last moment and slashed down as he passed. The blow

would, had the Savanti sword not been charged with its miraculous powers, have lopped off his forequarter. As it was the stun lost him the use of that paw. It was erroneous to call his parts quarters, they were eighths; but my father's horse-training died hard. A damned sight harder than this pesky graint. I jumped in again, ducked the gaping fangs, and thrust. This time his other foreleg went out of action. He roared. He swiped at me and I met the blow with a parry; the edge did not cut into him but again that stunning power drained the strength from that limb.

But I had been slow. His fourth upper limb raked down my side and I felt the blood spurting down my flesh. I also felt the pain; but that had to be pushed aside.

“Jikai!” shouted the girl again.

A blow had to be landed on his head. I had scorned to use the superior leaping ability the slightly lessened gravity of Kregen afforded my Earthly muscles as unsporting. These beasts were only doing what was in their nature. But now this girl's life was at stake. I had no choice. As the graint charged in again I leaped up, a good ten feet, and slashed him across the eyes and snout. He went down as though a thirty-two pounder had caught him between wind and water. He rolled over and stuck his eight clawed paws in the air. I felt rather sorry for him.

“Jikai!” the girl said again, and now I realized that the three times she had used the word had been with a different inflection. It was a Kregish word, I was sure,

yet, for some reason, it had not been dissolved into my neural net along with all the other words of Kregish I had acquired.

Now Maspero and our friends ran up. They looked concerned.

“You are unharmed, Dray?”

“Of course. But let us see to the girl — she is bound—”

As we untied her Maspero grumbled away to himself sotto voce. The others of the Savanti looked with as much ill will as that people ever could look at the bodies of the three men clad in the yellow gowns.

“They will try,” Maspero said, helping the girl up. “They believe it, and it is true; but they will take such risks.”

I stared at the girl. She was a cripple. Her left leg was twisted and bent, and she walked with an effort, gasping at each painful hobble. I stepped forward and took her up in my arms, cradling her against my naked chest.

“I will carry you,” I said.

“I cannot thank you, warrior, for I hate anyone who despises me for my crippling. But I can thank you for my life — Hai, Jikai!”

Maspero looked remarkably distressed.

She was remarkably beautiful. Her body was warm and firm in my arms. Her long silky brown hair with that enraging tint of auburn hung down like a smoky waterfall. I could plunge over that waterfall with great joy. Her brown eyes regarded me with gravity. Her lips

were soft, yet firm and beautifully molded, and of such a scarlet as must have existed only in the Garden of Eden.

Of her nose I can only say that its pertness demanded from me the utmost exertion not to lean down and kiss it.

I could not dare to dream of kissing those red lips; for I knew that were I to do so I would drown and sink and succumb and I would not answer for what would happen then.

An airboat flew out from the city. It was a pure white, which surprised me, for all the airboats used to carry the animals back through the passes were brown or red or black. Savanti came from the flier and gently took the girl from me.

“Happy Swinging,” I said, unthinking.

She looked at me, obviously not understanding.

“Remberee, Jikai,” she said.

Remberee, I knew instantly, was Kregish for *au revoir* or *so long*, or *I’ll be seeing you*. But Jikai?

I forced my smile and found to my amazement that to smile on her was easy — too easy.

“Am I not to know your name? I am Dray Prescott.”

The white clad Savanti were carrying her to the airboat.

Her grave brown eyes regarded me. She hesitated.

“I am Delia — Delia of Delphond — Delia of the Blue Mountains.”

I made a leg, as though I were in my admiral’s drawing room in Plymouth among his great ladies.

“I shall see you again, Delia of the Blue Mountains.”

The airboat was lifting.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, Dray Prescot. I think you will.”

The airboat soared away to the City of the Savanti.

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