

DRAY PRESCOT: 26

ALLIES OF ANTARES

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

ALLIES OF ANTARES

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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DRAY PRESCOT

To those unfamiliar with the Saga of Dray Prescott, all that it is necessary to know is that he has been summoned to Kregen, an exotic world orbiting the double star Antares, to carry out the mysterious purposes of the Star Lords. To survive the perils that confront him on that beautiful and terrible world he must be resourceful and courageous, strong and devious. There is no denying he presents an enigmatic figure. There are more profound depths to his character than are called for by mere savage survival.

Educated in the harsh environment of Nelson's navy and by the Savanti nal Aphrasöe of Kregen, he is a man above middle height, with brown hair and eyes, the quiet movements of a hunting big cat and a physique of exceptional power.

Taking on the job of Emperor of Vallia, with the Empress Delia by his side, Prescott is determined to press on with his schemes to unite in friendship all the peoples of their half of Kregen in the union of Paz. Vallia and her allies, Djanduïn, Hyrklana and some of the realms of the Dawn Lands, have defeated the puissant Empire of Hamal; but Hamal is not laid in ruins. From over the curve of the world dark and more

terrible dangers sail down to destroy the bright civilization of Paz. Together with Delia, his family and his comrades, Prescott sees this as a time to make a fresh start. This is the opportunity to forge new alliances against all perils under the Suns of Scorpio.

Chapter one

Ructions in the Peace Conference

During the second week of the Peace Conference only forty-nine duels were fought, so the delegates realized they were making real progress.

The main sessions took place in a long-disused assembly chamber of the palace of Ruathytu and here day by day the benches filled with vociferous people all determined to have their say about the horrible fate to be meted out to defeated Hamal. The people divided by nation and race, and each faction felt convinced its own solution was not only the perfect one, but the one to be adopted by everyone else.

This led to differences of opinion.

“A gold deldy per person,” shouted a king from the Dawn Lands. In the overheated atmosphere, with the drapes drawn away from the long windows and still the air stifling, his face looked a bronze mask of sweat. He shook his fist. “Nothing less—”

“Less?” A king from a neighboring realm of the Dawn Lands sneered, white lace kerchief to face, not bothering to rise to speak. “Less? Make it two gold deldys.”

“Aye!” called a high-ranking noble, gold-bedecked. “Hamal has the gold. Hamal can pay!” Then, no doubt feeling that although no king he must maintain his dignity, he bellowed: “And make it three gold deldys!”

Stylors wrote busily at long tables positioned near the center of the open space between the ranked seating. They covered reams of paper with what was said, proposals and counterproposals. They recorded very few agreements.

Other delegates joined in the raising of the indemnity, and shouts of “four!” and “five” and “seven” brought the blood flushing to forehead and cheeks, brought a sparkle to eyes, brought feathers ruffling dangerously and fur sparking with static. The punishment rose until there was scarcely gold in all of Paz, let alone merely the empire of Hamal, to pay what would be demanded. Then someone raised the question of saddle flyers being taken in compensation, demanding their fair share of zhyans in preference to lesser birds. This caused fresh outbreaks of acrimony. Another delegate banged his sword on the floor and demanded full restitution plus damages for all the airboats his country had lost.

“Take all the fliers that Hamal has!” he cried. “And—”

“You would fly your own airboats home and claim they were lost!” challenged a puffy-faced king with hair noticeable by its absence, for it had been torn off by a

wild animal seasons ago. "The Peace Conference demands a full accounting from you—"

"Aye! And from you, King Nodgen the Bald! We have sure proof you flew undamaged vollers back to your black-hearted kingdom and—"

The ensuing sword-flourishing and blade-whickering was dealt with by the marshals. On this day that task fell by rotation to four-armed Djangs, who had no trouble separating the combatants and escorting them back to their seats. Djangs, aside from being among the most superb fighting men of Kregen, are less in awe of kings and nobles not of Djanduin.

"You are not allowed to fight in the Peace Conference." The Djang Hikdar in command of the marshal detail carried off his duties with that Djang blend of competent military expertise and wild warrior fanaticism. He made sure the rival kings were both sitting in their seats before he marched his men off. No blood was spilled on that occasion over that particular quarrel in the chamber; blood flowed in the duel that followed. Outside.

All in all, the Peace Conference to decide what to do with Hamal presented a sorry spectacle.

From Vallia, Drak, the Prince Majister, and Kov Seg Segutorio made eloquent appeals for progress. King Jaidur of Hyrklana expressed his contempt for the delegates. His queen, Lildra, hushed him in her queenly way; but the feeling was abroad that the Peace Conference was doomed.

Young King Rogpe of Mandua announced that he did not feel secure enough on his throne to waste time in Hamal. He had only turned up after the battles, his armies being commanded by Kov Konec and Vad Dav Olmes, because his succession to his father had been challenged and the law had, tardily, upheld his claim. If everyone began to go home, Hamal was likely to be plundered without check in revenge for her own sins of the past.

The Kingdom of Djanduin was represented by O. Fellin Coper. As an Obdjang — equipped by nature with a cheerful pert gerbil-like face and only two arms and a keenly incisive brain — he was no fighting man. At his side sat K. Kholin Dom. As a Dwadjang — equipped by nature with a ferocious assemblage of fighting equipment and a brain completely at sea in the arcana of Higher Command — he was a warrior who upheld O. Fellin Coper's decisions. The aerial assault delivered on the Hamalian capital city of Ruathytu had decided the issue and won the battle. That assault had been a Djanduin affair. The forces commanded by Seg Segutorio had joined in the final assault.

Now that mere mortal kings and princes and kovs sought to put together a Peace Treaty, the actual course of the fighting was conveniently pushed aside. Everyone demanded an equal say. That proved perfectly acceptable, provided common sense prevailed. As the Prince Majister of Vallia said: "Common sense seems to have fled! By Vox! Are we all a pack of ninnies unable to agree on anything?"

Some of the delegates from the Dawn Lands left off arguing and quarreling among themselves long enough to shout answers. Then, they went back to slanging one another.

Seg said, “I suggest we take into consideration the views of those members of the conference—”

Jaidur interrupted. “We take no notice, Uncle Seg! We tell these idiots from the Dawn Lands what we decide!”

Drak — serious, intense, dedicated — leaned forward, frowning. “The Dawn Lands contributed greatly to the success. And to ignore them because we are united and thus stronger is illegal.”

Seg sat back, saying nothing. His blue eyes revealed nothing of his thoughts, and his reckless face was composed.

“Illegal!” Jaidur laughed. He was still a right tearaway despite having come to the throne of Hyrklana, a rich island off the east coast of Havilfar, and with the realm its queen, Lildra. His mother, Delia of Vallia, had great hopes that he would reform and become a dutiful king. Now he roared his enjoyment of the jest. “Illegal, brother! What we decide will settle the fate of Hamal for many seasons to come. We must decide in our favor. If these fools from the Dawn Lands—”

“Gently, Jaidur, gently,” said Seg.

King Jaidur sat back in his chair. He put a hand to his lips and Lildra put her hand down on his shoulder. Jaidur leaned back, closing his eyes, and he touched Lildra’s hand. He drew reassurance and strength from

the contact. Just so had his father gained reassurance and strength from Jaidur's mother.

"The problem is the Dawn Lands will not choose a spokesman. They are individuals, and are contrary for the sake of contrariness and drive everyone else into frenzy by their quarrels."

"True, prince," said Seg.

"We have complete agreement," said Ortyg Fellin Coper, brushing his whiskers, being brisk, "between Djanduin, Vallia and Hyrklana. That combination is, indeed, very powerful."

"Powerful!" shouted across that king from the Dawn Lands who had begun the escalation of the gold indemnity. "But we in the Dawn Lands can put more troops into the field, more vollers, more saddle flyers. Woe to anyone who forgets that."

Jaidur burst out: "More! Of course! And woe to you for forgetting it as Hamal destroyed you piecemeal!"

Seg moved with the speed of a Bowman of Loh. He stopped in front of Jaidur, half-bending as though talking, and he motioned to Lildra. It was nicely done. The fatuous king was left talking to Kov Seg's backside, Lildra was smiling at him, and Jaidur was being masked — and, no doubt, having a severe and nostalgic telling-off from his Uncle Seg. Had a duel been fought Jaidur would certainly have won, being a Krozair of Zy; but the deplorable publicity would have done Hyrklana and Vallia no good. Kytun Kholin Dom, clever enough in matters of this nature, rolled over to the Dawn Lands king and, taking him in comradely fashion by the elbow,

lifted him away, saying something like: “And I can show you a Jholaix we dug out of the wine cellars you’ve never dreamed existed.”

The Peace Conference survived these bruises; but no one was prepared to say how long such damage could go on.

In all these arguments and statements of opinion and position, no one bothered to think what the Hamalese might say. They had been beaten. Ergo, they must pay up and do as they were told and thank all their gods they were still alive. Yet to claim that no one bothered to think of the Hamalese is to avoid the real issue. Everyone shied away from the central point, the overriding question, the problem that put all the others — including the details of compensation and punishment — into the shade.

All the delegates to the Peace Conference were only too acutely aware that they must think of the Hamalese. And they kept fobbing off that dominant issue.

Who was to rule Hamal now that the old Empress, Empress Thyllis, was dead and buried?

“Dismember the damned place,” was a commonly voiced solution.

“Split it up into kovnates and vadvarates and Stromnates and do not allow a single kingdom. Divide and rule.” This was a solution favored of many. The rulers from the Dawn Lands would feel far more comfortable if north of the River Os lay, instead of a single huge nation, a whole series of little ones in reflection of themselves.

It was left to Drak to point out: “And have continual warfare between the little countries — as you do all the time?”

By Vox! You win a battle and take a city and have a peace conference — and you start to find out where the problems really are!

Seg said, “Little is beautiful, and big is beautiful. Big is unwieldy and little is plain suicidal. We have to find a median way.”

Because the invasion from Vallia had sidestepped the island of Pandahem and gone straight into Hamal, the future held problems there, also. As Drak said, “Now the nations of Pandahem have the dread of the devilish Wizard of Loh, Phu-Si-Yantong, removed, they will rapidly throw out the Hamalese occupation forces. I am sure they will want a say in what is decided for Hamal.”

One of the Dawn Lands rulers — King Nafun of Hambascett, who had begun the auction in increasing gold deldys — snorted his disgust. He reared up in his seat, glaring about, the sweat now appearing to be melting from a wax death mask. “Pandahem? Pandahem? Have they sent troops? Have they aided us? No! They have no right to sit at the table that decides the fate of Hamal. We who fought, we—”

His neighbor-king, wily King Harmburr of Ezionn, bellowed out at that. “Fought? Fought? I saw no troops of Hambascett the Treacherous when I fought the Hamalese mercenaries—”

“And I saw not a swod of Decadent Ezionn when I routed the Hamalese heavy cavalry—”

“By the Veiled Froyvil!” said Seg. He let rip a sigh that was more like a stentor blowing to gain passage for a swifter than a lovesick swain languishing for his lady. “Cannot you two either leave each other alone, fight it out, or just shut up?”

Now a kov does not ordinarily talk to two kings in quite those terms.

Drak sat forward anxiously, and Jaidur looked with swift concern over at Seg. Both Drak and Jaidur — with their brother Zeg — had known and loved Seg Segutorio from the moment they had been aware of his existence.

King Harmburr of Ezionn and King Nafun of Ham-bascett turned to look at Seg. He continued to sit. He had prevented a confrontation with Jaidur, only to precipitate a worse one on his own head.

Drak said, “We have done enough for the day. Let us depart and reconvene on the morrow when—”

“Softly, Prince of Vallia!” quoth Nafun. He wiped his face with a sodden kerchief. “I have been insulted—”

“You!” snapped King Harmburr. He was a waspish little fellow. “You! The lout insulted me—”

Seg stood up. He moved lazily. He smiled. “I shall not fight either of you, or your hired champions. You two are stupid cretins, and what is more, you know it. Aye!” He drowned out their protestations. “I can see ahead. I can see perhaps things that would not please you. You both know we must deal with Hamal fairly, or there will never be peace. So think. Act like kings. Even if it is difficult to act like men.”

“The kov speaks with the words of the gods,” said Drak. He knew when to bring religion into it. Cunning, resourceful, ruthless, Drak, Prince Majister of Vallia, and yet upright, honest, loyal, a man of the highest principles. Sometimes those high principles made life for lesser mortals damned uncomfortable. Jaidur, his brother, was of altogether more volatile a nature. As for Zeg, the middle brother, who was now King Zeg of Zandikar miles and miles away in the inner sea, the Eye of the World, I’d not heard from him for just not long enough to make me worried. Pretty soon, when this Hamal nonsense was cleared up, I was due a trip to the Eye of the World...

The two kings were in nowise chastened. But other delegates were growing tired of this incessant wrangling. Even rulers of countries of the Dawn Lands traditionally opposed to one another cooled in face of the problems ahead. Various candidates for various sections of Hamal were touted. We all agreed that those nations of the Dawn Lands with frontiers on the River Os, the southern boundary of Hamal, had a prior right in the decisions affecting the parcels of land across their borders. This seemed fair to the delegates.

Even that caused disagreement. A number of the nations right in the north of the Dawn Lands immediately to the south of the River Os, He of the Commendable Countenance, had been in subjection to Hamal for so long they had not contributed anything to the armies of the alliance. In fact, some of them had actually had their own men in the ranks of the Hamalian

army. These difficulties had to be discussed and agreements reached.

What at first glance seemed fair, on closer inspection turned ugly with imponderables.

Many of the delegates supported rival claimants. No one was aware of any legitimate issue of the Empress Thyllis and her nonentity of a husband. He had disappeared long ago. A number of relations existed: distant cousins aplenty, and a group of men and women claiming the emperor as their uncle. After Thyllis had been shot to death by a crossbow bolt, loosed by Rosil, the Kataki Strom, Phu-Si-Yantong had proclaimed himself as Emperor of Hamal. Now what seemed to many of the delegates a ludicrous legal situation arose. Did this brief occupation of the throne acquire legality, and, if so, how did it affect the claims of Thyllis's husband's cousins and nephews?

Intriguing.

Nothing would stop the lawyers from inflicting day-long speeches upon the subject with all the happy hunting ground of the inflexible Laws of Hamal in which to play — short of nipping the problem in the bud. Drak, Prince Majister of Vallia, did just that.

“No legitimacy accrues to the Wizard of Loh, Phu-Si-Yantong, now dead — thanks be to Opaz! — or any of his assigns or heirs through this illegal usurpation of the throne.” Drak looked around the chamber meaningfully. There was so much gold and silver displayed, so many gems, that the delegates could blind with radiance the unwary eye. “We have enough problems sorting out who

is to take over in Hamal without saddling ourselves with more.”

“Agreed!” The shouts were unanimous. On one subject, then, the famous Conquerors of Hamal could agree...

In the tiny hush of reaction to the outburst, young King Rogpe of Mandua stood up. He drew his sumptuous robes about him in the instinctive gathering of resources gesture of one about to plunge into unpleasant argument; almost immediately he loosened the fur-trimmed velvet, for Hamal was warmer than Mandua. “There is a matter I must have settled before I return.” He held up a hand as some delegates started to protest.

Young and uncertain, Rogpe might be; in what he had to say he was in deadly earnest and therefore articulate and convincing.

“Here me! I speak of the case of those countries who actively allied themselves with Hamal! Most notably that of Shanodrin!”

“Slay ’em all!” and, “Burn their towns around their ears!” The suggestions on what should be done with collaborators bubbled up merrily and uglily.

“Prince Mefto A’Shanofero, known as Mefto the Kazzur! He stands indicted before this assembly! He and his accomplices must be brought to trial.”

No one there in that glittering chamber was unaware that Mefto the Kazzur had sought through his alliance with the Hamalese to dominate much of the Dawn Lands. The Kingdom of Mandua had suffered. Now Rogpe put a hand to his quiff of fair hair. He smiled, a

nervous smile yet one which revealed his feelings of triumph at delayed revenge accomplished.

Puffy faced, impatient, King Nodgen the Bald leaped to his feet. He shook a fist at Rogpe.

“Yes, yes, my young fighting king, yes! We will deal with the traitor Mefto the Kazzur. But we have more zhantils to saddle here. There is no doubt that if Hamal is to be kept under proper control the empire must be given a Hamalese to rule. That man is King Telmont—”

Nodgen the Bald’s words were lost in a chorus of catcalls and fiercely amused expostulations and accusations.

“King Telmont is not related in any way to Thyllis—”

“He cowers in his kingdom in the far Black Hills—”

“He is spineless!”

The knowledge of family relationships and intricate blood ties and links and alliances through marriage were meat and drink to the rulers in the Dawn Lands. Such knowledge was of vital consequence. By understanding why one king did this and one queen did the opposite through the promptings of family loyalties enabled a tricky course of diplomacy to be set. The delegates had to keep themselves informed of the intrigues that fomented all the time. It was a matter of survival, along with always remembering names, for by forgetting a name one might lose a kingdom.

The rival king who had accused Nodgen the Bald of flying his airboats back home and then claiming compensation for their loss rose to shout with great scorn: “We know why you champion this King Telmont,

Nodgen the Bald! How much gold has he paid you? What promises has he made?”

The marshal Djangs eased forward, wary.

“I spit on your robe, King Nalgre the Defaced! I deny your accusations, I hurl them back into your teeth—”

Fresh fuel was heaped on the fire of enmity; the duel that would follow later might enlarge catastrophically to include two entire countries, at each other’s throats — as usual. These local wars had been contained in the mutual onslaught on Hamal. Now, with the sad inevitability of human nature, they would burst out again, raw and red and bloody.

The damping down of that squabble — a damping down only, for to extinguish it would take longer and demand harsher means — was left to Drak. By the grimness of his demeanor he left no one in any doubt of his anger and contempt. He tried to bring the Peace Conference back to considerations of what lay immediately to hand. “We each have a rapier to sharpen, and so accommodations must be made. If the delegates from the Dawn Lands insist on fighting among themselves, we deplore that but accept it as a burden of history. The future of Hamal must be assured. Let no one forget that all of us face a greater menace from the Shanks who raid us from over the oceans.”

“Aye,” said Jaidur. This was a matter touching him and his new kingdom nearly. “And I suspect the damned Shanks will soon stop raiding and attempt permanent settlements—”

Fresh uproar at this statement could not conceal the wave of dread that swept over the chamber. All men of this grouping of continents and islands called Paz who lived near a coastline were dreadfully aware of the menace of the Shanks. Fish heads, they called them, Leem Lovers, any scurrilous name a man could put his tongue to, all revealing the horror their name conjured up.

As though the mere mention of the Shanks put a pause to the precedent proceedings, a fresh session opened with a concerted attack on the delegates from Vallia, Hyrklana and Djanduin.

Nodgen the Bald, irked at the dismissal of his claims for King Telmont, pointed a forefinger at Drak. He swept that indicting digit around to encompass Seg, Jaidur, Kytun and O. Fellin Coper. The unmistakable result of the gesture was to isolate these men and to range the other delegates against them.

“You sit there fulminating against us. You sit there pompously pontificating. Yet who are you? You are not of Havilfar North and Central—”

Kytun bellowed: “We are of Havilfar South West!”

Jaidur said, “We are of Hyrklana off Havilfar East!”

Drak and Seg remained silent, very sensibly.

“Look at you!” Nodgen wagged that forefinger. “All of you, lackeys. Aye, lackeys!”

Kytun’s four arms windmilled and Ortyg, with a squeak of alarm, tugged at his comrade’s military cape. “Let him chatter, Kytun!”

“Lackeys!” roared K. Kholin Dom, fearsome, ferocious, a warrior four-armed Dwadjang. “Explain yourself — king!”

“That is not difficult!” shouted another delegate.

“No! Lackeys — all of you — lackeys of one man!”

“Let me blatter ’em!” pleaded Kytun, his face a black sunburst.

“Hold still, Kytun, do!” Ortyg’s gerbil-face expressed concern for Kytun, nothing for the shouted accusations.

Nodgen the Bald bellowed: “One man commands you, the father of the King of Hyrklana; the King of Djanuin; the Emperor of Vallia. One man — and where is he? Why is he not here to talk to us — does he think himself so far above us—?”

The picture wavered.

As though heated air rose before the scene in the assembly chamber the whole glittering assemblage shivered and undulated.

“Your pardon,” said Deb-Lu-Quienyin. “I must admit I allowed my concentration to lapse.”

The Wizard of Loh’s eyes encompassed the world. I stared into those eyes and looked through the sorcerous power of Deb-Lu into the Peace Conference. People in there were shouting and waving fists although, I was thankful to observe, no one was foolish enough to draw a sword.

“It is all right, Deb-Lu,” I said. “I must be tiring you. And what they say is right, in one way. I do not wish to go down and sit among them for these dreary proceedings.”

“Very practical.”

“And if that is being high and mighty — so be it.”

“Shall I go on?”

“It is hardly worth it. They will decide nothing. But Drak tries hard. No, I need a wet and—”

The picture I saw through the Wizard of Loh’s eyes came into focus. We sat comfortably in a small aerie high in the Mirvol Keep of the palace of Ruathytu, the Hammabi el Lamma. Whoever had lived here before, probably a Chuktar of saddle birds, had done himself well. There was ample provision of wine and fine fare. The picture steadied and the resplendent assembly came back into focus. Deb-Lu-Quienyin had arranged a signomant, a device which eased his powers of observation at a distance, and its placing discreetly in the chamber allowed us excellent vision all around, if in a little foreshortened a fashion.

The wet I promised myself had to wait for the double doors at the far end of the assembly chamber crashed open. The Djangs on duty there recovered swiftly and their stuxes thrust steel heads at the man who burst in. They halted their instinctive reaction at once, for the man was clearly a merker, a messenger who had flown hard. His leathers were glazed with dust.

He held up a hand and shouted so that all could hear.

“Lahal, notors! King Telmont has gathered a great army and marches on us. He vows vengeance. He has sworn to retake the city of Ruathytu and to place the crown of empire upon his head. And his chief promise is

this: he will seize by the heels and utterly destroy the man called Dray Prescott.”

Deb-Lu let out a cry and the picture I saw through his eyes vanished instantly. I blinked.

“Jak!” said Deb-Lu. “This is serious—”

“What?” I said. “Not you, too? You did not think, like those delegates down there, that by one battle and the taking of their capital the whole puissant Empire of Hamal would be conquered?”

Chapter two

We Fly For the Mountains of the West

“But we must find him! From what you say of him he is the only one. It is certain this King Telmont is a buffoon.”

“Drak is right,” said Jaidur. “We must find him — and damn quickly.”

The Peace Conference had closed the session for the day and those delegates who had been so scathingly denounced by King Nodgen the Bald gathered with Deb-Lu and me in one of the apartments given over to our use in the Hammabi el Lamma.

“I can vouch for him,” said Deb-Lu. He still wore his turban, and it was still lopsided; but for all that he looked what he was — a Wizard of Loh and among the most feared and respected of sorcerers of all Kregen. “Yes. Prince Nedfar is all your father has said.”

“And,” said Jaezila with a force that for all its passion did scarce justice to the tumult within her, as I could see

and, seeing, feel for her, “if we do not quickly tell Tyfar the truth, I, for one, will not answer for the consequences.”

“That settles it,” I said. We were all supposed to be relaxing after a hard day, and we were all tensed up and unhappy and aware of the pressures. The idiot King Telmont had scraped an army together and was marching on Ruathytu. The delegates from the Dawn Lands squabbled among themselves. And everyone wanted the business finished quickly so they might go home to the problems that awaited them there. “We must find Nedfar. He is the man who will be emperor. Just how we convince the others is another problem.”

“We will convince them, Dray,” said Kytun, using all four arms to express his feelings and to feed himself.

“Not by edge of sword.”

“Of course not!” said Ortyg. His shrewd face expressed pained surprise at my suggestion. “We will discuss this—”

“I’ll discuss it,” promised Kytun.

“And Tyfar?” Jazila was really worried. She and Tyfar were at one and the same time madly in love and forever at loggerheads, a most intriguing situation.

“I’ll fly out, Jazila,” I said.

Drak looked cross. “I do wish, Father, you wouldn’t call Lela Jazila all the time. She is my sister, and your daughter, and she calls you Jak and you call her Jazila. Most unsettling.”

“We were blade comrades, Drak. I know Jaezila as Jaezila more than I do as Lela. Anyway, Tyfar must be told.”

Jaidur swallowed his drink and said, “And where was this Prince Nedfar during the Taking of Ruathytu?”

I said, “I do not know. But I give thanks to Opaz and to Djan that he was not here. I do not like to contemplate what would have happened had we met in battle.”

Kytun’s fierce Djang face contained an amazingly placid look as he said, “I am glad we did not meet in the fight.”

There was no mistaking his meaning. My Djangs would allow no harm to come to their king. I did not make the mistake of assuming I could overrule their loyalty by my desire to promote a new emperor in Hamal, for all my admiration of the emperor-elect and my affection for his son.

“Well, then, Jak,” Jaezila stood up, tall and graceful and superb in her hunting leathers and in no mood to stand any nonsense from her father. “If you’re flying out with me, let’s get started.”

“Lela!” exclaimed Drak, outraged.

“We can’t shilly-shally around. Tyfar is stuck out there by the Mountains of the West and being attacked by those confounded wild men, I expect, and getting all kinds of garbled messages about what’s happened to Ruathytu. What do you think he’s imagining, feeling? By Vox! Have you no heart!”

Not one of those fighting men who swore allegiance to me even thought of saying that, well, Prince Tyfar was a

Hamalese, after all. They had fought the Hamalese; now they understood my dreams and desires for the future.

I stood up. I put the wine glass down.

“Wenda!”[\[1\]](#)

So, when we’d sorted out who was going and who staying to attend the tiresome Peace Conference, we all went up to the most convenient landing platform where a selection of captured Hamalian airboats rested.

Drak could not be released from his lynch-pin position in the conference. Lildra was reluctant to let Jaidur go as they were comparatively recent newly weds, and this appeared to be just. Ortyg was not too keen on Kytun going, preferring him rather to stay to keep an eye on the unruly elements here.

Seg said, “I’m going, my old dom, and joy in it.”

I admit I felt a leap of my spirits as Seg spoke. What it was to go off adventuring with a blade comrade, a true friend, the greatest Bowman in all Loh!

Drak looked stern. He could have stood for a portrait of an elder judging a tribe, a statesman adjudicating on empires — well, he was all those things, of course; but he so looked the part. “I do not like the idea of you going haring off all over the place, Father. It is — it is undignified.”

“I’ve never, save in one instance, bothered about dignity.”

“But you are the Emperor of Vallia! Emperors do not go off flying—”

“This one does. Oh, and don’t forget to mention when Kytun and Ortyg are here, the King of Djanduin.

Anyway, Drak, you will have to shoulder the burden of being Emperor of Vallia soon.”

This, as you will readily perceive, was one of my very good reasons for leaving Drak. He had to be made to understand I meant it when I said he was to take over. He was perfectly capable. It was only his damned rectitude and sense of what was fitting that made him declare he would never become emperor while his mother, Delia, and I lived.

“You know my thoughts on that—” he began.

“Enough! Let us take off—”

Drak went doggedly on. “And we are supposed to be concerning ourselves about this Prince Nedfar you have selected to be the Emperor of Hamal. Where is he? He is who—”

“Listen, Drak! It is my guess Nedfar has flown to the Mountains of the West. He’s visiting his son, Tyfar. That’s what I think. If we hang about he will be rushing back here and no doubt become embroiled with some stupid idiot from the Dawn Lands, or this King Telmont, or anything untoward—” I finished speaking somewhat more lamely than I’d begun. I could hear myself talking, and that is always fatal to ordered thought.

Over our heads a few clouds scattered pink and golden light from their edges, radiant whorls of darkness, as they obscured the face of the Maiden with the Many Smiles. The stars clustered thickly, fat and bright and twinkling merrily, and a tiny night breeze blew the scents of moon blooms festooning the walls of

the landing platform. I breathed in deeply. The air of Kregen is sweet, sweet...

Everything had been prepared. Now that the decision had been made I was anxious to be off, for I well knew what would happen if word of this got around to my people. There would be an instant outcry. To tell the truth, I found it uncanny how well my decision to fly off was being taken. If my lads of the Emperor's Sword Watch, or the Emperor's Yellow Jackets, got wind of an adventure in the offing — well! And Delia's warriors of the Empress's Devoted Life Guard — they'd want to come, too. And, I saw, if we didn't get off sharpish, nothing was going to stop Kytun from leaping aboard the flier and joining us.

Drak looked up at us three lining along the rail of the airboat. He gave us a smile. Suddenly, I wondered if he was pleased to see me go, to get me out of his hair. Well, if that was the case — and I doubted it — then it would be mutual only in the sense that what I was going to do where we were going was all a part and parcel of what had to be done for Hamal and Vallia.

Deft-Fingered Minch stared up at us, his bearded face as crusty and concerned as ever, for he was a kampeon I counted as a comrade, and I have no doubt at all that he was running over in his mind the preparations he had made for us. We had given him little time; but Minch was not called Deft-Fingered for nothing. I had no doubts that the airboat had been stocked, and fully stocked, with all that we would need.

Seg suddenly leaned even farther over the rail and shouted down to a fiery-haired fellow with wide shoulders clad in sober russet who looked up in just such a way as Minch.

“Lije!” shouted Seg. “Did you put in that knobbly stave I have in pickle?”

“Aye, I did that. And you shouldn’t be flying off alone without me—”

“By Vox!” said Drak, as though struck by a shaft from Erthyr the Bow himself. “That is right! What am I doing allowing you and Lela to fly off—”

“By the Veiled Froyvil!” sang out Seg. “Your mother and father, and Thelda and me, walked all through the hostile territories of Turismond together—”

“And Jak and Tyfar and I have gone adventuring, Drak,” called Jaezila who was Lela to her brother. “So stop worrying.”

I shot a hard look at Seg. He had the grace to brace his shoulders back and tilt his head, but he knew he had roused a storm that might delay us. “Get her up, Seg!”

“Aye, my old dom. Let’s get away from all these nannies.”

As the remberees were shouted and our voller lifted up into the night sky, I looked closely at Drak. Already he was swinging away, cape flaring, to bellow at his people standing further back on the landing platform.

“Make it fast,” I said to Seg at the controls. “Drak will send half the army after us.”

“More likely your Sword Watch,” said Jaezila.

“If that rascalion bunch get half a chance to go off aroving you won’t see their tails for dust. And,” I said, feeling the injustice of it all, remembering Delia’s father and his complaints about the way his pallans and guards cramped his fun, “and they’ll stop us enjoying ourselves.”

The flier sped swiftly into the moonshot darkness, speeding above Ruathytu, heading due west.

ESW and EYJ had been formed to protect the emperor. They did this with such devotion that a wall of bodies stood between me and danger. Only by an impassioned call for their loyalty to Drak, who was doing the fighting, and to Seg, who led the major portion of Vallia’s forces, had I managed to keep my guards off my neck. Delia had given Nath Karidge permission to take three quarters of the Empress’s Devoted Life Guard off to the war against Hamal. Nath wouldn’t hang about if he could follow me, well knowing he’d see action. Into the equation I must add the crew of *Mathdi*, the voller used to such good effect in the days leading up to the Taking of Ruathytu.

So we slammed the speed lever over to the stop and we hurtled beneath the Moons of Kregen, for now there were four shining between the clouds, the Maiden with the Many Smiles, the Twins, and She of the Veils.

In an attempt to shake off these forebodings — which were selfish and ungrateful, to be sure — and lighten our mood, I said to Seg, “Why bring a bowstave you have in pickle, Seg? Surely it is better to keep it in a vat?”

“So some bowyers claim. You know I’ve been used to pickling ’em on the move.” Here Seg glanced sideways at Jaezila, her face flushed in the rose and golden light of the moons. “And this is a very special stave. I want to keep an eye on it.”

“Oh?”

“It is not yerthyr wood. I’ve learned a very great deal since I left Erthyrdrin, believe me. For one thing, the rose-colored feathers from the zim korf of Valka are as good as the blue feathers of the king korf of my own mountains.”

“As good as?”

Seg laughed. “Well, my old dom, you can’t really expect me to admit they are better!”

“And the other thing?”

“Why, that the wood of the lisehn tree of Vallia is as good as yerthyr wood—”

“As good as?”

And Jaezila laughed.

Seg composed himself, for we all knew we’d tease him over these arcane points of archery and bow-building. “This brave young prince of yours, Lela — you say he is a bowman?”

“Yes, Seg, but—”

“For a Hamalese,” I said, and ducked away in mock reaction as Jaezila struck out in mock buffet. “He is an axeman, Seg, superb. Not like Inch, though. But Jaezila can best him with a bow.”

“She can best just about anyone,” said Seg. “I know. I trained her.”

“Then, Seg,” I said, speaking comfortably. “Tyfar owes you his life, for Jaezila — Lela — feathered a thing all fangs and jaws in a swamp. It would have chomped Tyfar’s head for dinner; but Jaezila’s shot was precisely through one red-slitted eye.”

Jaezila looked at me over a shoulder, all round and firm under her russets. “Aye, Jak! And in the next heartbeat you sworded the monster’s mate that would have had me for its dinner.”

“I remember. You asked me if Tyfar was my son—”

“I did. And you were my father all the time! Opaz plays strange tricks on us, to be sure.”

Seg laughed, turning back to the controls. “And if all I hear and see is true then this Prince Tyfar will be your son Dray, after all.”

“If he has any sense,” I said in more of a growl than I intended.

The airboat bore on marvelously, for to Seg flying a voller without constant fear that she’d break down at any minute was liberating. We rummaged in the wicker hampers provided by Minch and Lije and munched and talked and ate and talked and drank and talked. Seg expressed himself as of the opinion, by the Veiled Froyvil, that it would be capital if Inch was with us.

“But I knew he had a stern task up in those Black Mountains of his. He has done very well to clear out the mercenaries and slavers. With Korf Aighos to the south clearing out the Blue Mountains, and Turko to the east managing to make something of Falinur—” Here Seg

paused, and Jaezila started to say something and, behind Seg's back, I cautioned her to silence.

Presently, Seg went on speaking. "Turko will make those Falinurese understand what is required of them. But, had I to do it all over again—"

"You did the right thing, Seg. Turko will be harder than I could wish for; but we must work with what we have. In Hamal, for instance, do you think we can stamp out slavery even when Prince Nedfar is emperor?"

This was a stumper of a question, and we ate in silence for a time. Slavery at the moment was an intractable problem. One day, in the light of Opaz, one day, we'd be free of the blight.

Jaezila said, "And as well as our friends what of our foes?"

Well, there was enough of them about, by Krun!

We flew this leg of our course a few degrees south of west and, to the south of us and about halfway to the River Os, rose the Black Hills. From this range of heights flowed the River Mak, to empty into the Havilthytus at Ruathytu. King Telmont, then, must be marching along from the kingdom, a part of the Empire of Hamal, which gave him his name. Jaezila mentioned our foes; there was a man down there, a vad from Middle Nalem to the west of the Black Hills, who would as lief put me in an oubliette as kill me out of hand. This fellow, Garnath ham Hestan, Vad of Middle Nalem, had been associated with two other scoundrels, the Kataki Strom and Phu-Si-Yantong. Well, Yantong was dead, blown away by the

Quern of Gramarye. Now, I suspected, Vad Garnath had transferred his evil allegiance to King Telmont.

Jaezila lowered her goblet and the wine shone on her lips.

“Jak — would you think it weak of me if I said I wished Shara was here?”

“Not in the least,” I said at once. “I always feel more at ease when Melow the Supple goes with your mother, and Kardo with Drak.”

Melow the Supple and her twins were safely out of Faol. They were Manhounds, horrific beings genetically structured to run on all fours and to rip and rend and destroy, more fearsome than hunting cats. Yet they were as essentially apim as I was. Chance had given Melow the opportunity to win free of her malign masters, and now she, and Kardo and Shara, were our friends. And the truth was that with a Manhound at your side you could wish for very few better comrades in a fight.

The voller proved a swift craft and we took turns to sleep, and before dawn threw ruby and jade sparks onto the lesser heights we closed with the Mountains of the West.

Not as lofty or awe-inspiring a range as the Stratemsk, but the Western Mountains of Hamal present a solemn and splendid spectacle. Probably not every hidden valley has been trodden by the foot of man. There are secrets in those interleaved folds of crag and scarp still. We aimed our flight for Hammansax where Tyfar had said he could be reached.

Color throbbed in the early morning. The air held a tang. Seg knuckled his eyes and stared all around and stretched, elbows back, spine arched, chest expanded, all the physique of a master bowman eloquent of his strength and skill, I clapped him on the back.

“Hai! Seg! A day for deeds!”

“Since our dip in that magical pool I feel like a youngster. May Opaz witness that it is good to be alive!”

Jaezila called from the side, turning to face us, still half leaning over. “There is a stream down there. I’m for a swim.”

So, down we went in that dawn light and stripped off and plunged in, our daggers belted around our waists. Had there been any of the wonderful gallery of nasty creatures of Kregen swimming around hungry for breakfast he, she or it would have had short shrift from us three.

Dripping wet, we shouted and laughed and threw handfuls of water about and generally acted in a way that might have made Drak dub us undignified. I had a shrewd idea he’d join in...

By the time we’d dried off and cooked up some breakfast and stuffed ourselves to repletion with vosk rashers and loloo’s eggs and masses of tea and palines, we felt in remarkable spirits.

Hammanx lay over the next ridge, far enough from the main mass of the mountain chain to afford it warning when the wild men attacked. As I told Seg, “It’s not a question of if the wild men attack. It’s always when.”

Seg looked up, squinting against the morning light.

“Like now?”

We whirled.

They were there, flying in long skeins, sharp and dark against the brightness. The wings of their saddlebirds beating up and down, up and down, and the wink and glitter of weapons and armor, the flare of feathered decorations driving home with force their power and contempt for opposition. Not one of the civilized races, these moorkrim, these wild men.

“They haven’t seen us.” Jaezila threw her cape onto our little fire and the few last wisps of smoke died. “That was a nice cape. I particularly liked the zhantil-motif edging.”

Still staring into the sky at those distant malefic figures, I said, “You can pick out the edging and stitch it back onto a new cape.”

“They’re flying away,” said Seg.

“Aye.”

“They’ve been up to mischief, then, if they’re like any reivers I’ve known.”

“Aye.”

Jaezila bent for the cape and bashed it on the ground. Seg and I turned our heads to watch her, and I felt the quick spurt of love for her as she banged the cape on the dusty ground. The wild men up there, so like flutsmen and yet not civilized to any degree that would enable easy parleys to be held, undulating on beating wings, flew away, far away to the west.

“So we’d better go and see.”

“If—” said Jaezila, and she held the burned rag between her fists. “If Tyfar is—”

“Let us go and see.”

Like any sensible Kregan in unfamiliar territory with a voller to consider, we’d concealed the airboat in the trees. The wild-men had not spotted her. We scuffed the fire out and Jaezila marched off to the voller. She let the cape fall to the ground. It was of a russet color, with a high velvet collar and those golden zhantils entwined and leaping as edging. Seg started after Jaezila.

I picked up the burned cape. I rolled it up. I shoved it under my arm. I started for the airboat. Jaezila was damned upset and I didn’t like that.

She took the controls and sent the little craft up in a violent surge. We swung over the trees and pelted for the ridge. The gray rock and the trees whipped away below and we looked over the ridge into the valley folded between the mountain arms.

Fire, smoke, destruction...

Hammansax burned.

“Tyfar—”

“He’ll be all right, Jaezila. You know how resourceful he is.”

“That’s the trouble. He’s likely to go rushing out and get himself killed.”

We did not speak much as the voller shot down toward burning Hammansax.

The town had been a small prosperous frontier post — the sax in the name indicated that — and the raiders had failed to destroy the character of the place. Walls

still stood, a few roofs remained unfallen. But smoke choked everywhere and people ran and yelled among the flames. They had come out of hiding after the wildmen flew off and now strove to save their town from further destruction.

In a flierdrome to one side, the wreck of a green-painted Courier voller lay twisted grotesquely, the flames little blue devils amid the smoke along her frame. Beyond her the flierdrome was empty.

“No one here when the wildmen struck,” said Seg.

“Perhaps Tyfar wasn’t here.” Jaezila hurled the airboat down into the principal square. Only two sides burned, the other two containing stalls remained intact. People looked up and shouted as we landed on the beaten earth of the square.

We soon discovered the story. Prince Tyfar had not been in Hammansax for a time. The stink of raw ashes, hot and shiny, got up our nostrils. Whirls of black cinders swept into the air from the burning houses. The people were dazed. This was a disaster which, although always a possibility in their imaginations, had really arrived and with it — horror. No matter these folk lived on the frontier and expected trouble; when that trouble came it was always fresh and terrible and so much greater than the anticipation could prepare. Yet we could not stop and help.

“We have sent off messengers,” one of the chief men of the town told us. “The army will follow the moorkrim and try to get our people back; but the wildmen will fly

far, far.” He wiped black soot around his eyes, which were red and inflamed. “May Havil rot their wings.”

Despite all the ridiculous toughness I am supposed to have, be and represent, despite all the aloof power and authority vested in me, despite all this flummery, I felt the keen dagger of guilt. This was my fault. By invading Hamal we had drawn off vitally needed men to guard these frontier posts against the wildmen. Oh, yes, the burdens hanging on the shoulders of men and women foolish enough to rule empires crush their victims unless resisted with other weapons than simple brute force.

If you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs, then one innocent person will save a city of guilty people.

We did what we could to help the people, but that was little enough, Zair help us.

They were aware that their empire had been defeated in a battle in the capital city. But that was a long way away. Cultivation and husbandry and constant vigilance against the wild-men from over the mountains was the reality, was the here and now.

They'd go on living this way, living their lives, and whoever ruled in Ruathytu would demand taxes and would send not enough forces to help in defense. We had done little for Hammansax. Prince Tyfar, we were told by the landlord of what had been The Jolly Vodrin — now a pile of rubble and burned timbers — had taken what the Empress Thyllis had left him of his army to a high pass in the mountains called the Jaws of Laca.

“How do you know that for certain?” demanded Jaezila.

She looked splendid, fierce and radiant and burning with anger and anxiety.

The landlord, half of whose hair had burned away, wiped blistered hands gently on an ointment rag. He was Hamdal the Measure.

Seg said, very gently, “He will know, Lela.”

What Seg did not say, what I did not say, was that Jaezila would also know why a landlord of an inn popular with the soldiers would be aware of their orders. This is a fact of military life in certain quarters. Cautious generals must legislate against it by counter-cunning.

“Where is the Lacachun?” asked Jaezila.

Hamdal the Measure held up one blistered hand, pointing to the southwest. “Between the two tallest peaks within view from that peak, the Ivory Cone. You can’t miss it.”

I said, “How many men did Prince Tyfar take?”

Hamdal made a face, and winced. “Two regiments? I do not know. Perhaps more. A lord came asking these questions just before the wildmen attacked—”

“Another lord?”

“Aye, notor. Another great lord. He sought Prince Tyfar with great urgency — just as you do.”

Seg looked across at me, questioning.

“Thank you, Hamdal the Measure,” I said. “We must leave you. But help will reach you soon—”

“Aye,” said the landlord. “Aye — too late, as usual.”

We went back to our flier.

“Another lord—” said Seg.

“Prince Nedfar,” said Jazila. “It must have been.”

“Yes.” The coaming of the veller struck warm under my hands. “Probably.” The twin suns burned down. “Possibly. Let us hope that it was Prince Nedfar.”

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

Alan Burt Akers was a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer, who died in December 2005 aged eighty-four.

Bulmer wrote over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction, both under his real name and numerous pseudonyms, including Alan Burt Akers, Frank Brandon, Rupert Clinton, Ernest Corley, Peter Green, Adam Hardy, Philip Kent, Bruno Krauss, Karl Maras, Manning Norvil, Chesman Scot, Nelson Sherwood, Richard Silver, H. Philip Stratford, and Tully Zetford. Kenneth Johns was a collective pseudonym used for a collaboration with author John Newman. Some of Bulmer's works were published along with the works of other authors under "house names" (collective pseudonyms) such as Ken Blake (for a series of tie-ins with the 1970s television programme *The Professionals*), Arthur Frazier, Neil Langholm, Charles R. Pike, and Andrew Quiller.

Bulmer was also active in science fiction fandom, and in the 1970s he edited nine issues of the *New Writings in Science Fiction* anthology series in succession to John Carnell, who originated the series.

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at www.mushroom-ebooks.com, and at wikipedia.org.

The Dray Prescott Series

The Delian Cycle:

1. Transit to Scorpio
2. The Suns of Scorpio
3. Warrior of Scorpio
4. Swordships of Scorpio
5. Prince of Scorpio

Havilfar Cycle:

6. Manhounds of Antares
7. Arena of Antares
8. Fliers of Antares
9. Bladesman of Antares

10. Avenger of Antares

11. Armada of Antares

The Krozair Cycle:

12. The Tides of Kregen

13. Renegade of Kregen

14. Krozair of Kregen

Vallian cycle:

15. Secret Scorpio

16. Savage Scorpio

17. Captive Scorpio

18. Golden Scorpio

Jikaida cycle:

19. A Life for Kregen

20. A Sword for Kregen

21. A Fortune for Kregen

22. A Victory for Kregen

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25. Legions of Antares

26. Allies of Antares

Pandahem cycle:

27. Mazes of Scorpio

28. Delia of Vallia

29. Fires of Scorpio

30. Talons of Scorpio

31. Masks of Scorpio

32. Seg the Bowman

Witch War cycle:

33. Werewolves of Kregen

34. Witches of Kregen

35. Storm over Vallia

36. Omens of Kregen

37. Warlord of Antares

Lohvian cycle:

38. Scorpio Reborn

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42. Scorpio Drums

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44. Intrigue of Antares

45. Gangs of Antares

46. Demons of Antares

47. Scourge of Antares

48. Challenge of Antares

49. Wrath of Antares

50. Shadows over Kregen

Phantom cycle:

51. Murder on Kregen

52. Turmoil on Kregen