

DRAY PRESCOT: 18

**GOLDEN
SCORPIO**

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

GOLDEN SCORPIO

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott is an enigmatic figure. Reared in the inhumanly harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy, he has been transported many times through the agencies of the Star Lords, the Everoinye, and the Savanti nal Aphrasöe to the terrible yet beautiful world of Kregen under Antares, four hundred light years from Earth. In chronicling his brilliant adventures on that exotic world I have been forced to the conclusion that there is much he does not tell us as he records his story on cassettes. A fresh supply has reached me and will form the subject matter for the next cycle of Dray Prescott's story.

His appearance as described by one who has seen him is of a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and powerful, even brutal, physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage. He moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly. On the marvelous world of Kregen he has fought his way to become Vovedeer and Zorcander of his wild Clansmen of Segesthes, Lord of Strombor, Strom of Valka, King of Djanduin, Prince

Majister of Vallia — and a member of the Order of Krozairs of Zy. To this plethora of titles he confesses with a wryness and an irony I am sure mask much deeper feelings at which we can only guess.

Prescot's happiness with Delia, the Princess Majestrix of Vallia, is threatened as the notorious Wizard of Loh, Phu-Si-Yantong, seeks to overwhelm the empire. Many factions rise to seize the supreme power and with the death of the emperor, Delia's father, and the burning of Vondium, the capital, Prescot and Delia are forced to flee Vallia. *Golden Scorpio* tells how Prescot reacted and how he came to terms with himself, if not altogether satisfactorily in his own estimation.

The volumes chronicling his life are arranged to be read as individual books. A clearly-marked change has overtaken the character of Prescot as he relates his story, and, indeed, the story itself reveals this, illuminating him in ways of which he himself is probably unaware. Future volumes can only be awaited with the fascination of the unexpected.

The next cycle of volumes in the Saga of Dray Prescot I have called the *Jikaida Cycle*, carrying the linking word Kregen in their titles. Life is a continuing process and the enigmatic figure Prescot presents of himself might lead us to imagine that he understands only the belief that the effort of life is soldiering on dauntlessly against Fate. There is more to him than that. I feel sure he is fully aware of the many other facets of human belief in understanding our natures and harmonizing them, in the theory of abnegation, in the idea of letting oneself

slide into the infinite, of bending with the current to cope with existence, of acceptance. But on the vivid world of Kregen under Antares, in the streaming mingled lights of the Suns of Scorpio, Prescott has had and will continue to have more than his share of setbacks and hurtful adventures. I do not think it is Dray Prescott's nature to allow the destruction of himself or those he loves.

Alan Burt Akers

One

Dragons in the Fire

We flew from burning Vondium.

Sulphurous masses of smoke rolling from the doomed city cast dark palls between the streaming mingled radiances of the fading suns. The spreading fans of jade and crimson light cupped the city below. Vondium burned. Along the wide avenues rivers of fire, across the canal-bordered islands lakes of fire, upon the terraced hills volcanoes of fire — incandescent, lambent, roaring with unchecked power, spurting yellow and orange flames, shooting myriads of sparks like discharges from Hell's furnaces, the fire burned.

Our airboat shook in the windrush.

“This was not planned,” said Delia, guiding the airboat out of the last swathing bands of smoke. The suns shafted light behind us and swiftly the emerald and ruby spears drained down across the sky, dwindling and shrinking as the pit of fire that was Vondium blazed up. She shivered. “Not planned—”

“The factions fight it out down there. They all struggle for the supreme power and,” I said, looking up, my fist closing on the hilt of the sword, “here come those who would dispute our passage.”

Two fliers spun out of the shadows ahead, the light glittering along their sides, glancing from their brazen embellishments. In the weirdly coruscating lights the two airboats looked dark and magical dragons, glinting with fire-jewels.

“Hamalese,” said the Lord Farris. He moved forward from the shelter deck aft, and his face lay shrunken in shadow.

At his side Lykon Crimahan spoke in words still slurred by witnessed horror. “They have destroyed all of value in life — I will have my due of them.”

“The queen?” said Delia, not glancing back, but guiding our airboat skillfully upwards so that the crampths of Hamal might not have the advantage of us. The airboats flitted up into the night sky and the smoke dropped away and the clouds were tinged in orange and gold about us.

“The queen sleeps.” Farris had already drawn his sword. In the encroaching darkness the bulky firmness of his body as he moved up struck me as mightily comforting. “She is exhausted.”

We were all exhausted. But only a fierce continuing, a savage determination to go on, an unyielding struggle against all odds would get us through now and save our necks.

In this airboat I had taken from the Hamalese were ready racked a dozen crossbows. I took one up and spanned it and said to Farris: "Put up your sword. Delia will outfly these rasts."

"Yes," said Farris. "The Princess — I mean, the Empress — has consummate skill."

The three airboats whirled about the night sky, leaves tossed in the maelstrom of the fire and the high winds of the night, darting and swooping, climbing to secure the height advantage. Delia swung us up superbly. I leaned over the wooden coaming and let fly. The bolt skewered into the dark mass of the Hamalian airboat below. In the wind bluster I could not hear a shriek of anguish, I did not know if I had hit; but I respanned the bow and let fly again as we circled in.

Farris and Crimahan joined in. They were unused to crossbows; but every bolt that hit the Hamalians would count.

And then in the way of these wild skirling affrays as fliers spin and grapple at night, one of the Hamalians flew awkwardly across and fell athwart our bows. Delia made a last frantic effort to avoid the onrushing mass. The two airboats came together with a great crushing of wood and ripping of canvas. But the craft I had selected was stoutly built, as one would expect from the damned Hamalese who made the things and denied us Vallians the right to make our own, and she was stouter than the other. Amid a shrieking splintering of wood the foeman's airboat tumbled full into our own.

Men spilled out to stagger and stumble across our deck.

Over our heads through a rent in the clouds the fat blue shine of the first star of the evening suddenly caught me up with a swift and entirely unexpected sense of the beauty of the night. That first star that Kregans call Soothe was not as large or as fat now, as the conjunctions of orbits opened out, for Soothe is a planet of Antares as is Kregen, but that blue lambent luminosity reminded me of the fabled Goddesses of Love of Kregen. And as no Goddess of Love of two worlds has ever been or can ever be as precious as my Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, I hurled the crossbow down and leaped yelling into action.

Delia was ready for the Hamalese from the wreck of their airboat. Together, we hit them. Like two perfectly-machined parts, we meshed, she taking her man with her rapier, I chunking the Krozair longsword around into his comrade's ribs. Armor crumpled.

"Hanitch! Hanitch!" The Hamalese kept up their battle yells, fierce, predatory and yet highly disciplined fighting men.

"Vallia!" yelled Farris and hurled himself forward along the deck, his sword a glinting blur. "Vallia and Vomansoir!"

These warriors of Hamal did not carry shields, although their Air Service personnel habitually did so, and I guessed the shock of the collision had not so much left them with no time to seize up that article of combat

as the demands of scrambling from the wreck of a flier about to plunge over into nothingness had made them concentrate wonderfully on having two hands free. Now, had they been Djangs, or Pachaks...

The little fight raged for a space. I squared off my man and thrust the next one through. Crimahan was bashing away and yelling all manner of frenzied insults and taunts, half off his head with grief for what had befallen Vallia and him.

With every blow he struck, Lykon Crimahan, Kov of Forli, took out a payment for his lost lands on the hides of his enemies.

“Hamal! Hanitch!” screeched the Hamalese, and fought and struggled and died. I feel the very fury of our vengeful attack threw them off balance. They had flown up from their empire to sack and burn and overthrow the Empire of Vallia, acting under the veiled orders of the Wizard of Loh Phu-si-Yantong whose maniacal ambitions knew few bounds, and if they were surprised at our vengeful resistance then they were fools. In that moment I felt the enormous weight pressing in on me that my own plans called for Vallia and Hamal to join hands in amity. To accomplish that with the blood-debt that now soaked the two countries seemed almost impossible.

So we fought.

Toward the end of the fight when but four Hamalese soldiers remained alive, the rest either slumped in death on the deck or pitched with a despairing shriek overboard, Queen Lushfymi tottered out of the aft cabin.

She held a poniard. She looked distraught, her dark hair disheveled, her violet eyes wide and drugged.

She would have rushed upon the last soldiers; but I got her right arm in my left fist. I held her very very carefully.

The poniard she brandished with drugged abandon had two dark channels cut into the narrow blade, and in those runnels clung a virulent poison...

“Let me go. I will slay and slay—”

She spoke in a slurred, drugged fashion, her words heavy. Her face showed demoniac devilishness and exhausted despair, struggling to gain the ascendancy.

“They slew the emperor, they murdered my beloved — let me repay the debt.”

That she had to be held back was quite obvious, although she was a queen — the Queen of Lome in Pandahem — and therefore might be expected to know how to handle weapons. But the Hamalese soldiers of the air were no amateurs. Their swords flickered in these dying moments of the struggle as they sought to take us and so win all — and, in truth, even now we could lose. I shook Queen Lush.

“Hold still. Do you want to throw your life away after the emperor’s?”

That, of course, was a stupid thing to say. I recognized that. I gave her a push back into the cabin, before she could screech out some cataclysmic determination to end it all and die to join the emperor, and slammed the door.

I swung back to the fight, raging.

Delia had taken her man out with that neat precision of effort girls are taught in the military establishments of the Sisters of the Rose. Crimahan missed his stroke and had to duck and dodge back, his left-hand dagger fending off a thraxter blow. Farris was in the act of withdrawing his rapier from the throat of his man. So that left the fourth, the one I should have been attending to if Queen Lush had not staggered out brandishing her poisoned poniard.

“By Vox!” I bellowed as I leaped. “I should have let the silly woman at these rasts with her poisoned dagger.”

Then the Krozair brand flamed left, twitched right, sliced and was still, sheened in blood.

Farris looked at me and Crimahan staggered back, shaking with the violence of these last few moments. Delia tut-tutted and caught at a dead Hamalese by his belt.

“They’re bleeding all over the deck. What a mess. Give me a hand to push them over.”

We did so, with a will. If you imagine this to be strange behavior, insane, then you are not correct. Death is a part of life. Delia fully understood that. But, even so, even so, no girl should have to go through the things Delia had been through, events and horrors that would have destroyed a being of lesser fiber. But Delia was right. We had a way to fly and we already had enough blood to clear up as it was.

Highly practical, highly professional, highly common-sense is Delia of Vallia — just as she is highly romantic. Her father, the Emperor of Vallia, had been slain this

night. No — Delia could not act completely normally, not for a space yet.

I made up my mind. You who have listened to my story as the tapes spin through the heads will know how wrought up I must have been to nerve myself, actually to pluck up the courage, to open the talk I had promised Delia for long and long.

Tentatively I spoke to her in one of the aft cabins as Farris took the steering, speed and height levers and Crimahan having indicated he wished to be dropped on his own estates, tried to sleep. Queen Lush slumbered, her demoniac energy temporarily exhausted.

So, Delia and I sat on a ponsho fleece spread on a bench and talked as the airboat slid through the nighted air of Kregen.

“A world with only one sun and only one moon! But you can’t expect anyone to take such a silly idea seriously.”

“Yes, I know it sounds a silly notion. But I’m asking you to examine the idea. After all, it’s not impossible, is it?”

“Impossible — one sun and one moon — we-ell — I suppose not.”

“Look, Delia, my heart. Try to imagine a world very much like Kregen — well, something like — but instead of Zim and Genodras shining down in glory there is only one sun, a little yellow sun.”

“But Opaz! The Invisible Twins visibly vouchsafed us in the fires of Zim and Genodras, the Eternal Spirit of

Opaz — how could that be if the world did not have two suns?”

“That’s a poser, all right. But say that the Eternal Spirit is manifest in some other form — that is possible.”

“You would run into charges of heresy at many of the religious colleges for that, Dray. People have been burned alive for casting doubts like this. And talking of only one sun in the sky is blasphemy—”

“To some people. But the TodalpHEME could discuss this as a proposition. The wise men, the Sans of the world — the Wizards of Loh.”

“Oh, yes, as a theory. But it runs dangerously close to blasphemy against Opaz, and that is something no honest person can possibly tolerate.”

I wanted to burst out into a roar of laughter, I wanted to shout aloud in frustrated fury, and I wanted to cringe away and have no more stupid talk of planets orbiting solitary stars. But I owed Delia an explanation, and so I ploughed doggedly on. This was one eventuality I hadn’t bargained for, that religion would rear its beautiful head to deny the possibility that I came from such a crippled world.

“Instead of the seven moons of Kregen there is just the one—”

“Oh, Dray, Dray — if I didn’t know you I’d think you were determined to blaspheme. So — there is only one explanation. You are making fun of me.”

“No.” I was about to go on by saying I was in deadly serious earnest; but I paused. Tsleetha-tsleethi, as

Kregens say, softly, softly. “No, I would not do that. But what I have said merits thought...

This business about a world possessing just a single sun and a single moon was only the beginning. What would Delia say when I tried to explain to her the concept of a world that had no diffs, no splendid array of peoples, no enormous variety of morphology, no halflings; but only had a single sort of human being, apims, like ourselves? How could she accept such an absurdity?

For a space we were silent as the airboat sped on through the level air and Vallia passed away below. Poor Vallia. That was where our thoughts lay. Poor, proud Vallia, an island empire torn and savaged by implacable foes, by power-hungry maniacs, by coldly ambitious men and women — and we flew in all haste from a shattered city and a burning palace which provided a funeral pyre of somber magnificence for the body of Delia’s father the emperor. Yet it was precisely at this point that I chose to begin this my late and lame explanation. I tried to talk to Delia of Earth, of that strange planet distant four hundred light years from Kregen, and hoped these transparent means might provide the anodyne she needed. Mysteries partially revealed, I thought, might exercise her mind. But I miscalculated the power of Opaz, the pure religion that, I felt sure at the time, was one certain way to raise Kregen from its barbarity and savagery. Perhaps I was being selfish. All I know is that I was savaged by grief for Delia, whatever may have been my ambivalent

attitude to her father, and I was desperate to ease her suffering.

Up front the Lord Farris, Kov of Vomansoir, piloted the flier and left Delia and me to talk in privacy. He had witnessed the death of the emperor, for I had not been there, and had struggled with blood-stained sword to prevent that deed. Now he, like us, was a hunted fugitive.

Lykon Crimahan, Kov of Forli, had also been there at the emperor's death. He had never liked me, being bitterly opposed to my schemes to create a strong Air Service to withstand the attack from Hamal we knew must one day come across the sea. Well, that day had come and gone. Even if the whole power of Hamal had not been thrown into the battle, as I judged, the maniacal Wizard of Loh, Phu-si-Yantong, who controlled through his puppets all of Pandahem and plenty of other spots besides, had gained enough strength to do the work. And, as well as the Hamalese marching against Vondium, there had been traitors from Vallia herself. Layco Jhansi, Udo, the various factions, they were fighting and gnawing at the bones of empire, seeking to snatch the richest portions for themselves.

The Hamalese army that Phu-si-Yantong had somehow got out of the Empress Thyllis had possessed no aerial cavalry of any strength that I had seen. Maybe the flyers were away in another part of Vallia engaged in the campaigns that Yantong must surely carry out to bring us much of the island empire under his heel as he hungered for.

If there were no aerial cavalry mounted on fluttrells or mirvols flying over the corpse of Vondium, there would certainly be plenty of red meat there for the warvols, those vulture-like carrion-eaters. The thoughts and images rose into my mind, most unprettily, most pungent.

All over Vallia as the days passed there would be slaughter. Vallians are accounted a rich people, and most of their wealth comes from trading. They are great seafarers. Inland they are farmers and stockmen and woodsmen. When Vallia needed an army to fight some war or other she would hire mercenaries, and the mercenaries would be secure in the knowledge that Vallia could transport them safely in her fleets of galleons. But as for indigenous fighting men, warriors, they were few and thin on the ground.

That enormous wealth existed within Vallia herself was undeniable. The forests, the mines, the broad cornlands, as the emperor had once told me, they are the sinews of wealth and the muscles of power.

At Lykon Crimahan's request we dropped him off near his provincial capital of MichelDen. MichelDen lies a hundred dwaburs northeast of Vallia's capital Vondium. The provincial capital of Forli stands on the River of White Reenbays, an eastern tributary of the Great River. The kovnate of Forli extends from the Great River to the eastern coast opposite the Thirda Passage between the islands of Arlton and Meltzer to the north and Veliadrin to the south. We had taken a dog's leg

passage to Valka in order to let Crimahan off at MichelDen.

He stood with one hand on the coaming of the flier, looking up at us before he jumped down onto the grass. The stars glittered. She of the Veils cast down a sheening diffused golden light and the night was very still.

“I give you the Remberee, Dray Prescott, Emperor of Vallia. I—” And here Crimahan paused, and swallowed.

I own it, the sound of my name coupled with the emperor’s landed with a strange sound in my ears, a leaden sound of doom. But Drig take me if I would let this fellow see all the hesitation and indecision tormenting me. I nodded; with a hard and curt gesture of my hand I hoped he would not mistake, I ground out in the old hateful way: “If I am the emperor, Kov Lykon, then your fealty I take and welcome. Now you will do what you can against these cramphs. I shall contact you.” His face bore that pained expression of unwelcome comprehension. I finished, surly and domineering: “And mind you don’t get yourself killed. May Opaz go with you. Remberee.”

The others called their Remberees as Crimahan dropped from the airboat and vanished into the uncertain shadows.

“Up,” I said to Farris. “Valka.”

The voller rose into the air as Farris hauled on the levers. “He may be going to his death, majister—”

“Very likely, Farris, very likely. But he wanted to go home and I forbore to prevent him. I know how he felt.”

“As do we all. I do not need to be told what has overtaken my kovnate,” went on Farris in his dogged way. “Vomansoir, like your estates, like Lykon’s, must have been marked down for destruction. All those about the emperor and who gave him their loyalty will find only grief in their homes. Once the structure of empire creaks and bends, once the first blows succeed, the collapse is swift.”

“There will be fighting and bloodshed all over the land,” said Delia, and her lovely face shadowed with the horrors we had seen and the fresh horrors to come.

“Not always,” I said in my intemperate, vicious way. “Sometimes an empire will hold out tenaciously. But, Farris, I hope you are right in your estimation when we return.”

I said this, and all the time I was totally unsure if I had the right, the moral right, to return to Vallia. But I went on speaking in that old savage way.

“So,” I said, only half-believing my own words. “Before we can do anything we must secure a base and see about men and resources — and that means Valka.”

The vollen rose against the stars and sped eastward.

“Only,” I told Delia. “You will take Didi and Velia and Aunt Katri and fly to Strombor. The continent of Segesthes is far enough away from Vallia and these troubles. There they will be safe.”

“But—”

I shook my head. Delia did not like the idea of leaving Vallia at this time, even for a short period and even for

so important a mission; but she saw the sense of it and agreed to go.

Below us under the glinting moonlight the coast passed away. We struck out across the sea.

We flew across the Rojica Passage that separates Vallia from Veliadrin. We flew along the Thirda Passage, eastward, to the north of Veliadrin. We did not fly over the land. To the south we could see fires burning in the night.

Delia took my arm and I could guess her thoughts.

“Veliadrin is attacked, like all our lands. No doubt the Qua’voils have stirred their prickly selves again. But there are good men down there, as well as evil. Our duty lies elsewhere this night.”

It was hard. No doubt of it. We could only guess at what devilry was going on down there to the south. But little imagination was required to understand that all of Vallia was in turmoil, with old grudges being paid off and with rapaciousness leading men and women on to blood-soaked excesses.

From MichelDen to Valkanium is about two hundred dwaburs in a straight line, what the Havilfarese call ‘as the fluttrell flies’. But we circled around over the sea to the north and so took longer over the aerial journey. The Maiden with the Many Smiles joined She of the Veils and although the night was cloudy the two moons shed their fuzzy golden pink light upon the sea.

In the sheening water sparkle below in the light of the moons the dark shadowed mass of Valka rose before us out of the sea. Valka. Valka, the place I had made my

home on Kregen. The place that, along with Strombor and the Great Plains of Segesthes and Djanuin, meant more to me at that time than anywhere else. Valka...

“Dray—”

I held her gently, for I knew what Delia intended to say, what pained her to say, how she had struggled and sought for the right words.

“Dray — Valka. All our lands have been attacked, we know that Phu-si-Yantong would not overlook Valka.”

I spoke cheerily, and with a certain confidence, for Valka was not quite as other lands of Vallia, because the island had fought its battles and won. “I would not expect that villain to do so. One day he will be chopped. But Valka is not the same easy prey to mercenaries and aragorn and slavers as the rest of Vallia. We have regiments of strong fighting men—”

“But Phu-si-Yantong is a Wizard of Loh. He will have employed sorcery—”

“Yes.”

That was, indeed, an unpalatable thought. This damned Wizard of Loh sought to make himself the supreme lord of Paz. He didn't care what he did to achieve that insane ambition.

“If only Khe-Hi-Bjanching was with us — or had been in Valka.” Delia's hand trembled against mine. I did not think she trembled in fear. “But he will have been sent to Loh as all our other friends were sent home from—”

“There are other forces of superhuman help,” I said, cutting in briskly, over-riding Delia's words. I did not want Farris — or anyone who need not know, for that

matter — being apprised of what had happened to our friends. They had all been incontinently hurled back to their homes from the Sacred Pool of Baptism. So far they had not found their way back. That was a contributory cause to the misfortunes that had overtaken us; but we would have been overwhelmed even if all my friends had surrounded us. That I knew with a somber chill.

The dawn would soon be with us, and I suggested that Delia try to sleep. It was not so stupid a suggestion, for she was exhausted and despite her feelings, despite the grief for her father, she did sleep. I could soldier on for a space yet.

I fancied, in thinking of Yantong, that the cramp no longer cared if I lived or died. I had to examine the notion with great care. He had given orders that I was not to be assassinated. I did not know if he had canceled those instructions. Yantong had contrived the death of an empire. His tools fought in Vondium and over the land against the armies of other men, highly placed nobles and demagogues, who sought the throne for themselves. Of all those ambitious and greedy would-be-emperors, I fancied Phu-si-Yantong would be the eventual victor.

And, among his instruments, numbered in the ranks of those who fought for him, was our own daughter Dayra. Unwittingly, perhaps, she served the Wizard of Loh, thinking in all honor that she fought for the rights of self-determination for the North Eastern section of Vallia and this damned fellow Zankov; but she had served Yantong well. Dayra. I would have to tell Delia

about her, tell Delia about Ros the Claw, and of her entanglement with Zankov, that same cramp Zankov whose bloody brand had struck down the emperor, Dayra's grandfather.

This was a tangled web, and there was more, and I could not see a clear path to steer.

"Well," I said to myself, and if I had spoken aloud my voice would have cracked out harsh and ugly under the moons, "we will take Didi and Velia and Aunt Katri out of Valka if the place is closed up as tight as a sword's drum. We will see them safely to Strombor. And then—" And then — what?

If I did what I had said I would do, speaking in the heat of the moment and out of anger and foolish pride, there would lie seasons of campaigning ahead. Vallia would run as red with blood as ever it had. How could I justify this? I had pushed these thoughts away before, but they recurred. What moral right had I, what morality was there in it, if I raised armies, fought the usurpers, destroyed their armies, restored the throne of Vallia to its rightful heirs? Did my honor demand that? Can honor ever justify the deaths of thousands of honest people?

Perhaps, as I had wistfully half-suggested to myself, perhaps I would just stay quietly in Strombor, that beautiful enclave of the city of Zenicce, and live life the way life is intended to be lived and enjoyed.

We had taken all night over this flight. The flier was reasonably fast, having covered three hundred dwaburs, about fifteen hundred miles, and it would be full

daylight before we reached Valkanium and the Bay and the high fortress of Esser Rarioch.

Below us Valka fled past. Farris had gone back to sleep and as I cogitated with such melancholy with my tormented thoughts and watched the suns rise off to our larboard, I felt the soft warm hand creep into mine and felt again all the magic of my Delia enfold me.

“Dawn,” said Delia.

“Aye. And the Suns are rising on a sorry land this day.”

“But it is a new day, my heart. A new beginning. A new chance. In Valka—” She expected me to interrupt; but I did not. “In Valka we must find help. We must.”

“If we do not, if we do, it makes no difference. You and the children are for Strombor.”

The Suns of Scorpio, Zim and Genodras, rose into the clear air. The day would be fine, with perhaps a little rain after the Hour of Mid. Delia sighed.

“I have been thinking of your blasphemous suggestions of a world with one little yellow sun and one silvery moon. It is possible, I grant you. But where is the sense in it? Why do you raise a philosophical point? Is there anything more?”

“Oh, aye,” I said, turning so she could nestle into my free arm. “A lot more.” I spoke slowly and carefully, trying to make what I said sound sensible, which, to a Kregen, it did not, could not.

“Only apims?” She stared up at me blankly. I leaned down and kissed her. For a space nothing else mattered. Then—

“Only apims. People like us. No diffs, none at all.”

“Now I know you make fun. Such a world would be — would be flat, would be — dull!”

“Well — no,” I said, defending this our Earth which is so marvelous a world in its own right. “Not flat or dull. Just that Kregen is so much — so much — more,” I finished lamely.

She drew a deep breath.

“Very well, husband. Since you choose to mock all the religion and the learning of the wise men — suppose, just suppose a world could exist like that. Then what?”

It was my turn to swallow.

Below us Valka began to show all those myriad colors of her forests and lakes, the mountains of the Heart Heights, the wide open spaces, the serene areas of ordered cultivation, the thread of rivers and the glint of waterfalls. The air breathed sweet and clean, that glorious air of Kregen. This was my own island of unsurpassed beauty, wild and rugged, tranquil and fertile, rich with the goodness of the earth. I drew another deep breath and the fragrant dawn air of Kregen dizzied my senses. For this I would give much, give very much...

Delia looked up at me, her brown hair catching the radiance of the suns so that those outrageous chestnut tints glinted. The richness of her lips, the clarity of her brown eyes, the perfect purity of her face and form — I swallowed again and opened my mouth.

“From such a world, distant a long long way, my heart, I—”

She broke away from me and her chin firmed and the danger signals flashed from those brown eyes that changed from melting tenderness to hard authority. “Flyers! Hamalese! They see us!” I swiveled about, checking my words, stared out Flyers lifted toward us, their wide wings spread against the light, the flyers on their backs shaking their weapons.

“Not Hamalese,” I said after that first flashing glance. “Flutsmen.”

The mercenaries of the skies wheeled their flying mounts up toward us like a gale-driven whirlwind of leaves.

Ahead of us the Bay opened out, and the City of Valkanium spread in beauty up the slopes where vegetation bowered my home in verdant beauty. The massive pile of Esser Rarioch reared above the city and the Bay. The light picked out every detail.

Our own flags of Valka still flew from the battlements of Esser Rarioch. But ugly smears of smoke rose from the city. There were sunken galleons in the Bay. Flames spat spitefully from warehouses and from the villas along the shore and overhanging the water. A confused mass hurled up and forward against the fortress and the wink and glitter of weapons splintered shards of light into the morning.

“Esser Rarioch is attacked,” I said, and the bitterness choked me with bile.

“But it still holds out.” Delia leaped for a crossbow. “We must break through these flutsmen and reach the fortress.”

Feathered wings flickered about us. Feathers streamed back in those clotted clumps from their helmets that give to flutsmen their devilish, reiving, headlong appearance. True mercenaries, Flutsmen of Kregen, hiring out to the highest bidder and ready to betray him for a price. They share nothing of the high honor of nikobi that give Pachaks their unmatched reputation as paktuns. Flutsmen often band together and simply reive on their own account. Now, with Vallia torn by strife, these aerial devils struck out for themselves.

I slammed the control levers over to full and bellowed for Farris. The voller lanced up into the air, spraying flutsmen away. Delia, braced against the coaming, loosed, and bent at once to respan the bow.

Some remnants of honor still cling to some flutsmen. I had no way of knowing of what calibre were these aerial foes; but I knew with everything I held precious that I would never allow Delia to fall into their hands.

Farris lumbered out and belted up the deck to the controls. Flutsmen were urging their flying steeds on. For a space we outclimbed them. I shoved my head over the side and looked down. The dark mass of men attacking Esser Rarioch had broken through the first portals of the long stairway and were forcing their way up. The pavises borne before them bristled with arrows. Esser Rarioch was due to fall soon. And the flutsmen bore in toward us, screeching, their weapons glittering.

“Down, Farris!” I bellowed. “Straight down — straight for Esser Rarioch!”

The Lord Farris flung me a single questioning glance. He saw my face, that ugly, demoniac, headstrong old face of mine with the look of the devil, and he thumped the levers over.

Straight through the whirling cloud of flutsmen we plummeted, down and down, hurtling toward the fight raging on the long stairway leading up to Esser Rarioch.

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

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

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

Bulmer was also active in science fiction fandom, and in the 1970s he edited nine issues of the *New Writings* in

Science Fiction anthology series in succession to John Carnell, who originated the series.

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

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