

DRAY PRESCOT: 19

**A LIFE FOR
KREGEN**

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

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On the Jikaida Cycle

A Life for Kregen is the first volume of the Jikaida Cycle chronicling the history of Dray Prescott on the fascinating world of Kregen four hundred light years from Earth. Reared in the inhumanly harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy, he has been transported through the agencies of the Star Lords, the Everoinye, and the Savanti nal Aphrasöe to the terrible yet beautiful world of Kregen under Antares, where he has struggled through disaster and success to make a home.

He is a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and superbly powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage. He moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly. He has acquired a number of titles and estates but now the people of the island empire of Vallia, which has been ripped into shreds by ambitious and mercenary invaders, have called on him to lead them to freedom as their emperor. Reluctant to accept the imperium, he shoulders the burden because, rightly or wrongly, he sees this as the lesser evil.

Dray Prescott is undeniably an enigmatic figure; but on the ferocious and lovely world of Kregen he has found headlong adventure, brilliant life and a deep and lasting love. Whatever lies in store for him — and we are fortunate that I have a fresh supply of the precious cassettes on which he records his narrative — life will continue to be a challenge under the streaming mingled lights of the Suns of Scorpio.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter One

Death Warrants

Signing death warrants is no decent occupation for a man. Yet there was no question in my mind that I, Dray Prescott, Lord of Strombor and Krozair of Zy, should delegate the wretched task.

The day had dawned bright and clear with the promise of a breeze to mellow the heat, and the drifting linking lights of the Suns of Scorpio bathed the early world through the windows in pastel tints of apple green and palest rose. By Zair! but this was a time to be alive. I breathed deeply and sat myself down at the balass desk and pulled the official forms nearer and forced myself to the job.

Nath Nazabhan, stony-faced, looked on. The small room was furnished with books and maps, chairs and the desk, and not much else. It was a room that suited me. But I had to sit there and scrawl Dray Prescott, Emperor of Vallia, in the abbreviated Kregish script, a mere DPEV, at the foot of each warrant, at the foot of what was a tree

and a dangling rope and smashed neckbones. The reality sickened me.

“Thirteen this morning, majister.”

“Aye, Nath. Thirteen miserable wights to be shuffled off.”

“You have pity for them?”

“Perhaps. I can’t afford pity for myself.”

“Vallia would have been finished without you. As it is we’ve a task on our hands to tax my mythical namesake.” Nath took up the first warrant as I pushed it across, signed. “The factions continue to squabble and the country is drenched in blood. The enemies of Vallia seem to grow stronger every day, by Vox, even though we hold the capital. Vondium is—”

“Vondium will stand!”

I looked up and I know my face held that leem-look of primeval savagery that so displeases me and puts the frights up those unfortunate enough to be loo’ard. Nath fingered his chin and fell silent.

He wore a square-necked tunic of a soft pastel tint, girdled by a thin belt from which swung one of the long thin daggers of Vallia. He wore normal morning dress, as did I, and the spread fingers of his right hand groped for the hilt of an absent sword. My gaze shifted to the arms rack. No one on Kregen, that marvelous and mystical world of terror and beauty, strays far from a quick snatch at a weapon. It is not healthy.

“Yes, majister.” Nath might be a fine limber young fighting man, commanding the Phalanx; he was a terror for strict discipline properly administered and main-

tained. Yet he could temper justice with mercy, as I well knew, understanding the ways of command. We had fought together to free Vallia from the enemies who had swarmed in to feast on a bleeding corpse, and his loyalty and devotion were unquestioned. The pen scratched as I signed, and then poised, the black ink glittering like an ebon diamond.

“Renko the Murais?” The name leaped out at me, written in that perfect script of Enevon Ob-Eye, my chief stylor. “I know a Renko the Murais. A tearaway, yes, very quick with an ax.” I looked at the charge. “But not, I would have thought, the man to slay a Relt stylor.”

“The charge was proved, majister.”

Very stiff and formal, on a sudden, Nath Nazabhan.

“You are satisfied? Renko said nothing in his defense?”

“The case was tried by Tyr Jando ti Faleravensmot. A hard man, yes; but just.”

I nodded. “You did not attend?”

“No, majister. The Second Jodhri was receiving new colors at the time, and I—”

“Yes. We were there together. The management of a city and what we have of an empire, quite apart from the army, takes up too much time.” I shuffled the warrant aside. “Have in this Renko the Murais. I’ll see him before I sign.”

“It may not be the same man.”

“Exactly my thought. But I must be sure.”

“Quidang, majister!”

The papers lay on my desk and the tiny breeze whiffled in through the open casement and lifted the corners. I

pondered. There just was not enough time. But — twelve men and the thirteenth might go free, if there had been a miscarriage of justice and Renko the Murais was the Renko I'd known in Valka. He'd been a Freedom Fighter then, when we'd cleared the island of Valka out and the people had fetched me to be their lord. Time would have to be found. I stared at Nath.

“Have Enevon send me in all the papers on these cases. Delay the executions,” I said. “I would like to satisfy myself...”

Without going on, I could see that Nath both fully understood why I did what I did, and despaired of me as an emperor who would have a fellow's head off in a trice.

The blurred shouts as orders were cracked out and repeated and the clink-clank of weapons drifted up from the court below where the guards worked at the drills that might keep them alive in battle. The flick-flick plant on the window-sill twined its long green tendrils hungrily, its orange cone-shaped flowers gaping empty. Later on a dish of fat flies would have to be brought in to keep the flick-flick happy and lush.

“All the same, majister,” said Nath, stroking his chin. “When you fight for your rights men must die. It is a law of nature. Death comes to us all — sooner or later — and—”

I smiled. I smiled at Nath Nazabhan and let the smile linger for a full heart-beat before my face resumed its usual craggy mask. I pushed the papers aside and picked up a fresh batch, details of weapons, stores, conditions of wagons. The paperwork was never-ending.

“You quote proverbs at me, Nath. Well, and so it may be true. But the state of the country demands we push out from Vondium and consolidate the midlands and the northeast. I do not know what rights there may be in this.”

“You have been fetched to be Emperor of Vallia.”

At my instinctive gesture of displeasure, he went doggedly on.

“Everyone shouts for you and they know why they shout. If we are to re-conquer Vallia—”

I glared up at him, sternly, and this time he paused. Then, without embarrassment, he said: “Yes, majister, I know your words. It is more liberation than conquest. But the facts remain and they cannot be altered. If our country is to find any peace at all we must unite ourselves under one flag. And that means the new flag of Vallia you have shown us.”

“You have heard me speak of the Wizard of Loh called Phu-Si-Yantong? Yes, well, he is a damned great villain filled with a maniacal desire to subdue and control and hold in his hand all the lands of Paz. It is an insane dream. But, in Vallia, where he has caused us so much trouble — what is the difference? Why should I take the throne and crown and not Yantong?”

Nath’s gasp halted me. His face screwed up into the most ferocious scowl, like a chavonth about to charge.

“Because we’ve seen how the rast treats those he enslaves! By Vox, majister, as soon consign us all to Cottmer’s Caverns as let that cramph Yantong rule us.”

“So we consolidate what we have and then bring war and bloodshed and misery to the rest of the country—”

He shook his head, angry at the way I was treating him, for which I couldn't blame him. The truth was, and I think he saw a little of it, that I carried the blood-guilt badly.

“We can move with safety in the Imperial provinces surrounding Vondium. The northeast and all the Hawkwa country stands firm for Jak the Drang, Dray Prescott, as emperor. The midlands will rise for us. The northwest — we must deal with the arch-traitor Layco Jhansi and after that teach the Racters a lesson. They fight each other, for which Opaz be praised.”

“The Blue Mountains,” I said, mildly, “and the Black Mountains are nearer than Jhansi's province of Vennar.”

He shook his head. “Only if we strike more westerly of north. And, majister, do not forget the Ochre Limits bar off Vennar and Falinur.”

My glance favored the map hung on the wall. The colors mocked me. The mountain chains and rivers, the canals and forests, the badlands and the lush agricultural heartlands, they all demanded attention. Movement of armies bedevils those who would bring overwhelming force to bear on their enemies.

“That is so, Nath. But the Blue Mountains—”

“The Empress, may Opaz shine the light of his countenance upon her, commands the hearts of all, and none more than those ruffians, the Blue Mountain Boys. I think whoever tried to subdue the Blue Mountains has rued the day.”

Again, I smiled. Well, Delia and her Blue Mountain Boys are enough to make any old sweat perspire a trifle.

“I had thought we would use the Great River and hit the northwest by curving in from the east.” My pointing finger described an arc in the air, extending those phantom lines of march on the map. “As we came in from the south. I had in mind a man to command that army.”

He knew exactly what I meant. And, the stubborn old graint, ignored that with sublime self-confidence.

“Any man would be proud to be appointed Kapt and command any army you entrusted into his hands. And there are many men in the army worthy of the task.” He looked at me, his eyebrows drawn down, almost challenging me. “As for me, majister, I command the Phalanx with your blessings and where you march there I march.”

I grumped at this. “And have I not explained to you, Kyr Nath, that the Phalanx is not best suited to mountain work?”

“Layco Jhansi, who deserves to be shortened by a head, does not foment his insurrections in a mountainous country. The land up there is ideal for my Phalanx.”

“And after you’ve seen off Jhansi, you’ll go haring after those damned racters north of him? Yes, well, they all deserve to be made to see the error of their ways.”

The papers before me now detailed the condition of the canal narrow boats I had ordered collected. From the famous canals of Vallia the vener were trudging in, hauling their boats, answering the call. The basins and pools of the capital were filling with the brilliantly painted boats. I needed a fleet, and the canalfolk, always

proud and independent and disdainfully removed from the petty party politics of the island empire, had decided that for the sake of peace and prosperity and the movement of trade their star must be linked with the new emperor in Vondium. I was happy about that. I had good friends among the canalfolk. And they would be invaluable in the coming struggles.

The future loomed dark and ominous — as so often it does on Kregen, by Zair — and everyone who would stand with us and strike a blow for freedom, in the cant phrase, was welcome.

I say “in the cant phrase.” But for the colossal task facing us more than cant would be needed. If we were to cleanse all Vallia, and the island was frighteningly large with many areas still virtually unpopulated, we must seek to make allies of all whom we could and only in the last resort take up arms against them. This was a view not highly regarded, I knew. But the new Dray Prescott saw the wisdom of it, even if my other persona, that wild leem Jak the Drang, was toughly contemptuous of shilly-shallying.

As though Jak the Drang flared up in me I pushed the papers away pettishly and stood up.

“By Vox! I need some fresh air.”

Crossing to the arms rack I took down a solid leather belt with a fine rapier and main gauche already scabbarded, the lockets of plain bronze. The weapons were workmanlike, nothing fancy, with silver-wire wound hilts. A matched pair, they were balanced to perfection. Belting the gear on I half-turned to speak to Nath and saw a

shadow move against the map. No shadow could be thrown there by the light from the window.

Nath leaped back and the slender dagger appeared in his fist. His face looked stricken.

“Daggers are useless here, Nath,” I said, on a breath, quickly. “I think.”

The shadow writhed and thickened and flowed, and smoked coiling into the semblance of a man, a hunched man in a black cowl, the hood drawn forward so that only the deep furnace-glow of feral eyes showed, demoniac, peering.

Nath shuddered, a deep hollow revulsion of flesh. The dagger shook.

The thought flamed into my mind: “Thank Zair I had not marked the map with my intentions!”

The projected image of the sorcerer wavered, as though his powers fought to coalesce his immaterial substance within the imperial palace. The whole structure had been sealed by my own Wizard of Loh, Khe-Hi-Bjanching, against such lupal projections; but that had been some time ago. The sealings must be weakening with the passage of time. And Bjanching, along with my other old friends, had been hurled back to his home by the mightier sorcerous powers of Vanti, the guardian of the Sacred Pool of Baptism in far Aphrasöe.

We needed sorcerous help here. But Nath Nazabhan after that first stricken reaction responded as a warrior responds. A streak of light hurtled across the room. The dagger glittered as it flew from his hand. Straight through that insubstantial image it whisked, to clang and chime

against the map, gouging out a chunk of Falinur, and so drop harmlessly to the floor.

“Devil’s work!” burst out Nath, moving back, going for the arms rack, his fist already raking out for a fresh weapon.

“That will do no good.” I stood quietly, feeling the blood in my veins, wondering what Phu-Si-Yantong intended now.

For, quite clearly, this lupal projection was Yantong. An evil emanation, certainly, and a dangerous one. He spied on us and he didn’t give a single block of ice from Sicce if we knew or not.

The ruby eyes within the enveloping hood would strike a cold chill into the stoutest heart. Narrowly I surveyed this sorcerous apparition of a hated enemy. A cripple — that was the part Yantong had played during the only time I had met him. And it had not been face to face. Always, he kept himself hidden, shrouded. Perhaps he was in very truth a cripple. Maybe that might explain his crippled ambitions. The shadowy form moved of and within itself, as smoke coils upwards. The colors of the map showed through the image, fragmentarily, their brilliance dimmed.

As always and with everyone, I attempt to see the best side. Always, the remembrance of the frog and the scorpion is with me, that a man no less than a scorpion must act to his nature. But, also, I do not forget that a man can judge the consequences, and although he might not fully comprehend all that will follow, must by the very nature of manhood understand that his actions will

inevitably be followed by results. Yantong could not, I thought, be all evil. There had to be some streak of better feeling in him. So I looked at the hunched shadowed shape and I pondered.

Nath remained transfixed by the arms rack, held there, I fancied, no less by my words than by the apparition.

For six heartbeats Phu-Si-Yantong's lupal projection hovered in the room. I know, for I counted.

The spell broke as a trumpet pealed outside, high clarion notes against the blue. The outlines of the figure shimmered as though bathed in invisible heat. The hooded head turned. The glitter from those ruby eyes dimmed, sparking feebly, paled. As the form vanished, the last of it to disappear was that pair of demoniac eyes.

I let out a breath.

Nath wiped the back of his hand across his forehead.

For a space neither of us spoke. We did not care to break the spiderweb of silence that fell after those silver trumpet notes.

Then I said, "By Vox! May Opaz rot the fellow. At least, he got nothing out of us."

A fraction unsteadily, Nath walked across to retrieve his dagger. He gestured with the blade.

"Falinur will never be the same."

I warmed to him. The experience through which he had just been would have left many a man gibbering.

"Seg wouldn't know whether to be glad or sorry."

"As to Seg Segutorio, the Kov of Falinur," said Nath, re-sheathing the dagger with a snick. "I know he was a blade

comrade of yours; but he is peskily absent from his kovnate when we need all the friends we can muster.”

It was not a rebuke. Merely a hard-headed comment.

I chose to say, with a little snap, “Seg is a blade comrade, not was.”

Nath half lifted his chin; but he chose not to reply.

“Now, Nath, not a word of this to a living soul.”

“Quidang, majister.”

“Good. Yantong spies on us with an advantage. We must cloak our designs in shadow, sheath our plans in subterfuge. We hew to the plans I have mentioned — unless unforeseen circumstances force us to alter them. If they do, we will.”

The clepsydra on its own shelf told me that the hour was almost up and we were due on Voxyri Drinnik. A small ceremony was to be held there to mark the presentation of medals, ‘bobs’ the swods in the ranks called them, like phalerae, and the importance of keeping the army happy outweighed much. The matter of Renko the Murais had been dealt with in court by one of the judges appointed to the task. It might be thought that presenting new colors to a Jodhri could not rank as importantly in a humanitarian scheme of government as being present in a court of justice. But a man has only so much time on Earth, or Kregen. No matter that because I had dipped in the Sacred Pool of Baptism I was assured of a thousand years of life, each day still contained only forty-eight burs. So we had been presenting standards when Renko had been sentenced. Now we must present

bobs when we had promised. The apparition of Yantong must be pushed into its proper perspective.

And, anyway, what was there I could do about the Wizard of Loh? He worked through human tools. His minions sought to enslave the country. In our turn we must resist them.

Anything else was fantasy.

The days were filled with hard work. There was everything to do. The country was still in turmoil and no one talked of the Time of Troubles being over merely because Vondium was in our hands. Vondium, the proud city, was mostly ruins, with the grandiose rebuilding schemes of Yantong halted in mid-execution because I would not flog on the people to work as slaves, and, also, because they insisted on flocking to join the colors and form fresh regiments to help clear out the rest of the island.

Walking out into the mingled streaming suns shine of Antares, I hoisted up the rapier to sit more comfortably. The chances of assassins, stikitches, still being active and seeking my life, in the pay of any number of crampths who would as lief snuff me out as they would snuff a last candle, remained high. A man must be ready always on Kregen to fight for his life, just as he is ready to sing or to drink, to eat or to laugh.

Many of my new comrades waited. Nath Nazabhan was a relatively new comrade, also, for we had been together since we had trained up the Phalanx in Therminsax ready for that great battle. My choice band waited for me. A right rough and tumble crowd, festooned with weapons, brilliant in a motley of uniforms, they greeted me with a

roar. I bellowed back, most affably, banishing the dark schemes of Yantong from my mind. Together we rode for Voxyri Drinnik where the great victory had been gained that gave over Vondium to our hands.

The last of the Hamalese prisoners were being sent off back to their homes in Hamal. This had aroused great controversy and acrimony, men saying why did we not keep the rasts as slaves. I would not execute them, for I knew the Hamalians, knew their army, knew the swods in the ranks. I would not kill or enslave, and so they were sent home to Hamal. We still had a debt outstanding with the Empress Thyllis of Hamal, the despotic ruler of the greatest empire in the southern continent of Havilfar. Yantong had used her to further his own schemes; but Vallia had been invaded by Hamalese, there was the matter of the defective airboats, and, also, there was the island of Pandahem to be liberated.

Every way I turned there was work to my hand.

And, always, the greater menace of the Star Lords hovered over me. At a whim they could dispatch me back to Earth, hurl me four hundred light years through the deeps of space, send me back to the planet of my birth and, perhaps, forget me and let me rot.

Fresh concepts about the Star Lords, the Everoinye, had been plaguing me. I had begun to wonder if their designs were so baffling, after all, for certain events seemed to me to bear of only one interpretation. I will leave the reasoning by which I reached this surprising conclusion until later, contenting myself with the simple remark that, if there was good in every man, might there not be a

greater good in the Everoinye, who were so much greater than men?

“Lahal, Majister!” bellowed Cleitar. He had once been Cleitar the Smith, and he bore his wicked war-hammer into action. But now he was generally called Cleitar the Standard, for he carried my own battle flag, that yellow cross on a scarlet field fighting men call Old Superb. He rode a zorca and his uniform was splendid.

I raised my hand in salute as we rode out. Vondium was a shadow of the great city it once had been. The other spirits in my choice band were mostly, at this time, from the provinces, for we had recruited there in our drive to the capital; but they were aware of the despoliation. We would rebuild; but our aim was to rebuild the heart of the country through the people and the agriculture and husbandry. Bricks and stones and mortar must follow that.

Volodu the Lungs, a leathery man if ever there was one whose appetite for ale could never, it seemed, be quenched, blew a stentorian blast on his immense trumpet. And that silver instrument was immense. With it Volodu had crushed in the head of a too froward Hamalese Hikdar, smashing through helmet and bone to the very brains beneath. The blast echoed through the streets and cleared a way for us as though we were a pompous procession of robed priests.

There was no need for lictors or any other street-clearing violence as the Emperor of Vallia rode out.

The ceremony passed off well, brilliant and dashing in the glitter of the Suns. I will not go into detail, save to say

the old sweats took their medals with a swagger, and no doubt, like Vikatu the Dodger, would trade shamelessly on their prowess to dodge the column for a few sennights to come. And good luck to them. They had risked their lives and limbs in the battle line.

Like any good Kregen who tells the time of day by the state of his innards, I felt the time was ripe for a meal and so we wended our way back to the palace. I had barely crossed the first of the twin canals straddled by the Bridge of Voxyri with the confused onward shrilling of that great fight ringing in echoing remembrance in my head, and Naghan ti Lodkwara was as usual engaged in a slanging match with Targon the Tapster, when the shadows fled in.

A lancer, Naghan Cwonin, reined across. Dorgo the Clis shouted. Cleitar the Standard began to furl up the flag. Naghan ti Lodkwara and Targon the Tapster took mutual breaths and, instead of slanging each other, yelled the alarm.

The airboats floated down as though guided by rails.

There were six of them, and each one was of a capacity to hold a dozen fighting men.

So — we were in for a fight.

The devils had chosen their place well. The troops back on the Drinnik would never be over the Bridge in time to assist us. The streets were filled here with ordinary folk about their business trying to put Vondium back together again. Phu-Si-Yantong's spying mission must have told him what he wanted to know, and this was a direct result.

Shades of Rafik Avandil, Lion-man!

I ripped out the clanxer scabbarded to my zorca. He was a fine black, mettlesome, whom I called Snowy out of stupid humor as much as contrariness, and I'd ridden him because he needed the outing. The stables were not too well provided as yet, and discretion had to be used. But the men tumbling out of the airboats almost before they touched down were afoot, and so we, mounted on zorcas, were by that much better off.

Two fliers landed in our rear, cutting off a flight back the way we had come.

Cleitar had the flag furled and stowed away now, and his hammer glittered as he lifted it.

Nath Nazabhan drew his clanxer and called across to me, "Ride, majister — there is an alley mouth there—"

I looked at him.

"Well," he said, huffily, swirling the straight cut and thrust sword about, loosening up his muscles. "It was just an idea."

We numbered about twenty or so, bright rollicking companions of my choice band. We faced about four times our own numbers. Well. Yes, a situation in which I had found myself more than once, and usually through my own block-headedness. I lifted in the stirrups. I'd gone out for a breath of fresh air. I was like, and my companions also, to taste blood as well as air. And the air we tasted might well be let in through our ribs.

"Straight through them!" I bellowed. "Slap bang and no tickles. No man stands for handstrokes. Ride like the agate-winged jutmen of Hodan-Set!"

We clapped in our heels and in a rampaging bunch
roared into the forming ranks of our Chulik foemen.

Chapter Two

Assassins at the Gate of Voxyri

Oh, yes, they were Chuliks all right. Ferocious, yellow-skinned fighting men with ugly three-inch long tusks jutting cruelly up from the corners of their mouths. This bunch was as well-trained in the martial arts as any Chulik mercenary band on Kregen. Reared from their earliest infancy to the bearing of arms, trained to be cold and merciless killers, Chuliks can handle any variety of weaponry they need, and in that heartless and iron-hard discipline they had forgotten if ever they had known the softer virtues of humanity.

They are loyal mercenaries if they are paid and fed. They command higher fees than most, excepting Pachaks and Khibils and a few other, not many, of the vast variety of splendid humans on Kregen. They have always been and continue to be formidable opponents.

But my choice band recked nothing of that. Yelling and cursing they clapped in their heels and went racketing down.

The Chuliks with their oily yellow skins and long dangling pigtailed from their shaven heads formed a line swiftly. Their faces remained blank and impassive. They knew exactly what they were doing and they did it well.

Their uniforms were simple tunics of brown cloth over which they wore armor of a scaled form, bronze-studded, highly barbaric and flaunting their power. Their helmets bore black and green feathers, but shorn short, workmanlike, a badge of identity clamping each tuft in place. Black and green. Well, they were colors I knew Yantong had used at least once, and so by their use now he seemed to be openly proclaiming his power and contempt for me.

Truth to tell, in that hectic moment as we belted along, I wondered if we would have done better for Cleitar to let Old Superb float free, a ringing challenge to the power confronting us. But that way lay the hubris, the megalomania, the self-importance I detest so much. I had sworn, as I was called to be Emperor of Vallia, that I would do a good sound workmanlike job. Pride is for the vainglorious, in excess, and its unbounded license has caused great sorrow in two worlds.

And then we were among them and Cleitar's hammer lifted dripping crimson, and so that answered that question.

At my back Korero the Shield bore a single targe, a small parade ornament, but with its yellow and scarlet trceries he fended a sweeping blow and lashed back with the blade gripped in his tail hand. Ferocious, Korero the Shield, a Kildoi whose four arms and handed tail both protect and devastate.

With a jolt and a crack we overbore the first line.

Chuliks sagged back — and when a Chulik sags he is either dead or dying.

The zorcas responded nobly as only those superb four-spindly-legged steeds can, all fire and spirit. Never meant for the charge, they flowed on and over in a fleetness of rhythm that bore us on and up. Like hunters at chase we cleared the first line and slammed into the second. But the Chuliks were ready, well-knowing the business of tackling a zorca-charge. Their weapons glittered. We sliced and drew our blades reeking in crimson as we leaped ahead. But the fray thickened and grew denser and Largo the Astorka was down, a spear through his throat. We yelled and swirled our blades and pressed on. But our progress slackened. The impetus of the charge dwindled.

The noise bellowed up, echoing in rolling confusion under the Gate of Voxyri. Volodu put three distinct dents into his massive silver trumpet, and each time burst out with genuine anguish at that desecration. But three Chuliks dropped as though the trumpet had been a poleaxe.

The third line of yellow-tuskers swayed, and men went down. But they held us. The zorcas drew back, pirouetting from a hedge of steel. Furiously I bellowed it out.

“Reform! Break out over the Bridge!”

We swung the zorcas about, their nimble hooves clicking on the cobbles where blood ran between the time-worn stones. The Chuliks back there were unlimbering crossbows, and this made me frown.

“Heads down!” I yelled and clapped in my heels and Snowy surged on, picking up speed, elegantly avoiding tumbled bodies.

The bolts would have had us but for the Gate. The trajectory intersected the masonry and the bolts chinked and tumbled like chicks disturbed in the nest. In the next mur we were out in the sunshine again and bearing down on the men from the two guarding fliers. It was all nip and tuck. Korero surged ahead, despite my yell, and his little yellow and red shield whipped up.

I urged Snowy to greater efforts. In a bunch we crashed out and the Chuliks rose to meet us.

Naghan Cwonin’s lance tip was a clotted red mass. He lowered that steel wedge of death and then he was hurled back off his saddle, trailing blood, yelling, a stux clear through him. The Chulik who had hurled that spear did not hurl another, for a streaking dagger crossed the narrowing space and chinked in most neatly over the brass-coiled rim of his corselet.

That Chulik bore a golden image of a grascent on his breast, suspended by golden chains around his neck. The dagger protruded above the golden image of the risslaca for a heart beat, and then the Chulik walked forward, as a dead man walks, blindly, walked forward three paces, four, and almost a fifth before he tumbled under the hooves of the zorcas.

The weapons flamed. The Suns beat down. The dust lifted. And the blood spurted.

The pandemonium was, for a brief moment, akin to the last dying scenes in a sinking ship where the crew panic.

Blades clashed. Korero's shield split asunder and he used the half in his hand to dash a Chulik away. But another leaped for him, his yellow tusks dripping, and my clanxer only just swept down in time in a precision-controlled arc that kissed death across a corded neck.

"My thanks, majister—"

"There's another devil, Korero—"

"Your back, Nath!"

"On, on!"

The shouts racketed as we forced our way on. And then we were through. Before us stretched the Bridge of Voxyri, and the open plain with the distant lines of men coming on swiftly. We could have ridden on. We might simply have nudged the zorcas to a further effort and ridden away.

But, as one man — as one man — we turned.

We turned back, raging, and tore once again into those murderous Chuliks and their yellow tusks and their ferocious military skills.

The mellow stone of the Bridge and the Gate, the coolness of blue shadows and the piercing brilliance of the suns light, the clatter of hooves, a distinctive, brittle, rousing sound, the pants of men in combat and the yells of the wounded, the stink of rawly spilled blood — yes, yes, it struck responsive chords in me. But until we were done with scenes of this ugliness Vallia would never be the peaceful country we all intended her to be.

Well — Nath Nazabhan and a few others might question that assumption — but it was what I intended.

The Chuliks saw their attack had failed. They had killed or wounded a number of us, and they had lost more men than they liked. With that quick appraisal of the situation that had earned them as much contempt — in this case misguided contempt — in the past as praise, they took their airboats aloft. The fliers lifted off, swiftly rising and turning to head toward the north.

North.

That made a kind of sense, although they might have been expected to head for the southwest, where no one seemed to know what was happening. Equally, they might have gone southeast, for the situation there was confused. The truth was they might have headed anywhere in Vallia, for we were ringed.

And, even so, this northward flight might be a mere subterfuge.

We were plagued by the lack of airboats. All the vollers had been confiscated by the victors, and we, late into the fray, had to make do with what sorry remnants we could scrape up. As for aerial patrols, they were carried out by a skeleton force that had no chance to halt any determined aerial attack.

Before the troops from the Drinnik reached us we were off our mounts and tending our wounded.

Those who had already started on their last journey to the Ice Floes of Sicce were Naghan Cwonin, Largo the Astorka, Nath the Flute, Aidan Narfolar ti Therduim, Roban Vander and Nath the Mak, sometimes known as Nath the Waso.

We had another five with wounds, great or small, from which only one, Larghos Shinuim the Fortroi subsequently joined his comrades among the ice floes.

So we were cut down by a half.

Nath's face bore a grave look that I saw was compounded as much of worry as of grief and anger.

I attempted to rouse him.

"You, it was, Nath, who told me that all men must die in their time. Praise Opaz for those who survived."

"Wounded or slain," he said. "A half of us. Some will rally, of course. But it is not good enough."

I was not sure what he meant; but in the nature of the circumstances as the first of the men from the Drinnik reached us, I forbore to inquire. Had I done so I know now he would have given me no answer, or would have evaded the issue. What was planted in his mind then was subsequently made plain. And, I may add, to my own personal pleasure and profound gratitude to my comrades.

Looking up from the sprawled body of Nath the Flute, Dorgo the Clis contorted his scarred face into a grimace of anger. He was cut up by Nath's death, seeing they had been friends from boyhood, and however much of death a man sees in his life, the passing of a friend carries a heavier weight.

"Here they come," growled Dorgo, "making a right hullabaloo and late, too damned late, by Aduim's Belly."

"They ran as fast as they could, Dorgo," said Magin, who philosophically bound up a spear wound in his arm. His son, who had been unable to find the excitement he

craved in his native Vallia and had gone to be a paktun, would have found all the nerve-tinglers he wanted now, in Vallia. And we could do with all those brave sprightly young men who had left sea-faring, trading Vallia to be mercenary swods overseas.

The men from the Drinnik came up, puffing a little, for they had run fast, as Magin said. They were Hakkodin, axe and halberd men who flanked the regimented files of the Phalanx, and they were raging that they were too late.

At their head came Barty Vessler, his shining, red, smooth, polished face a scarlet glow. No overemphasis can possibly convey the gorgeous color of Barty's face in these moments. He was infectiously impetuous as usual, and spluttering with mingled joy and rage.

"Jak," he bellowed. "Dray, I mean, majister! You might have been killed. Oh, my aching ribs. Oh for a zorca!"

Everyone laughed. There was no stopping that unleashing of pent-up emotion.

Gravely, I regarded him; gravely, for I was the only one not to laugh. Mean, tight-lipped, yes, if you will. But I looked with great favor on this young man, Barty Vessler, for all his incautious ways and feckless moments. And I knew well enough that if he'd had his zorca between his knees he'd have come bolting in from the rear upon the Chuliks and, for almost a certainty, got himself chopped for his chivalric notions.

His brown Vallian hair flopped wildly as he gesticulated. Young and filled with notions of honor, Barty Vessler, the Strom of Calimbrev, yet a fellow who saw the

way that honor led him and unflinchingly followed it even if it led through Cottmer's Caverns.

Bells started up a-ringing and citizens came flocking down. The uproar was worse than the fight. I glanced at Nath and Barty and jerked my head. Volodu picked up the little sign and immediately slapped that silver trumpet to his lips.

Volodu the Lungs blew the Clear.

Well, the citizens wouldn't know the calls blown by the Phalanx, of course. But the silver notes cleared a way and having sorted out both the quick and the dead, and seen to the wounded, we trotted our zorcas on into the city. Barty took a spare mount and came with us, for he was of that choice band, without a single doubt.

Barty rode with Nath, and scraps of their conversation reached me. Barty was saying: "...quite agree with you, Nath. It just is not good enough."

And Nath, gravely, answering: "Time something positive was done about it, and done quick, by Vox."

They were up to some deviltry, I fancied, and left them to it. I needed a drink of tea, and that was doing something positive, and the quicker the sooner. So we trotted through ruined Vondium the Proud, and the people gave us a cheer as we passed, and so we crossed the wide kyro before the imperial palace, and passed through the gates where the guards slapped their three-grained staffs across, most smartly, and we let the hostlers take the zorcas in an inner court where purple flowers hung down in a scented profusion. The zorcas had done well, and we patted them affectionately as they were led off.

“Let us meet in the Sapphire Reception Room,” I called to them as they prepared to trudge off to their quarters. “That is informal enough and yet formal for what we must decide.”

I met their puzzled looks with a benign disregard that made them all the more curious.

Barty and Nath exchanged quick, puzzled looks.

But I shouldered off and into the inner apartments of the palace, looking for a rapid bath to wash off the muck and blood, and then for the tea and a repast that would keep the leems of hunger at bay for a bur or so. It was still too early for wine.

The Sapphire Reception Room and most of the wing which housed that informal chamber for semi-formal gatherings had been spared the fire that had gutted a very great deal of the old palace. Yantong had rebuilt much; but the place sagged as though tired, towers and spires toppled inwards and walls slaked along the entrenchments, so that the skyline that had once lifted so arrogantly now looked like a haphazard collection of tooth-stumped jaws. The imperial palace of Vondium looked rather like a tent with the central pole chopped down. Some essential work still went on so as to house conveniently the people involved in the type of government I intended — if that is not too strong a word for the still stumbling ideas I entertained on running the country — and carpenters and masons and brickies gave a pleasing air of busy activity. No one was slave. The reverberations of that stringent policy to which, despite all opposition, I clung, had made, was making, and would

continue to make life unpleasant in silly and petty ways as much as large and ponderable fashions.

A party brought in the uniforms and equipment of the dead Chuliks. They had taken their wounded with them. As I say, Chuliks are fighting men.

Giving instructions for the lot to be dumped in the Sapphire Reception Room and for tea in immense quantities to be prepared, I carried on into the small suite we had managed to make habitable. The rooms were not large; but they possessed walls and ceilings, and the water still ran, pumped up by windmills hastily erected on the roof. If you looked out of the north window you saw the charred stump of the old Wersting Tower where they used to keep kenneled those fearsome hunting animals. Already green growing shoots clambered across the blackened crevices and specks of brilliant color lightened with blooms the sere gauntness of the wrack.

Delia was not to be found in the outer rooms, and her handmaidens told me she was in the bedroom. Like me, Delia kept only a very few personal servants, and if I do not mention them overmuch it is because they were so good that they had become a part of our life. Fiona and Rosala tended Delia, and they were girls formed for the delight of the gods, smiling, bright of eye, brilliant of lip, with natures that decked the world in sunshine. No obstacle would be placed in their path when, as is the way of the world, they would wish to marry the young men of their choice. The same openness applied to Ender, a quiet-spoken, gentle, dextrous and extraordinarily competent man who looked after most of my material

wants. If you wish to call him a valet, the description matches perhaps half of his duties. He was a treasure and I valued him as a friend.

“Bedroom?” I said. Then, already stripping off the bloodstained clothing: “The empress is not ill?”

“Oh, no, majis,” they chorused, and laughed.

Only in the most deeply felt personal relations could the diminutive majis be substituted for majister. Nath Nazabhan would not allow himself the usage, although the offer had been made.

“Well, then, you pretty shishis — out with it!”

Ender, smiling, gathering the clothing, slinging my crusted clanxer harness over his shoulder, said, “The empress has never been better, praise Opaz. The bath is drawn—”

One of my own rules is that because so many times I have presented myself to Delia in a shocking state, hairy, filthy, bleeding, almost done-for, whenever it is possible for me to bathe and change and look at least halfway respectable I will do so. I took the bath first before discovering what the laughter and the little mystery was all about.

Feeling refreshed and still toweling my hair I went through to the bedroom. A pang struck me as no familiar and horrific form arose to check on everyone daring to enter the room where Delia, the Empress of Vallia, took her ease. Melow the Supple, that horrendous and sweet-natured Manhound, had been sorcerously sent back to her native Faol and my eldest son Drak was off there now, trying to find her, and with her her son Kardo. By Krun! A

few Manhounds in our ranks would do wonders for the discomfiture of those who opposed us.

Inside the doorway with my bare feet sinking into Walfarg weave rugs, the towel dangled over into my face. I could see nothing and gave the towel a swipe out of the way as I walked on. When the yellow toweling whisked away I stood gaping more than a trifle foolishly at Delia.

She looked like a twisted bundle tied up ready for the laundry.

Instinctively, for this was Kregen, I leaped forward and even half-naked straight from the bath a dagger dangled at my side. This I drew.

Delia laughed.

“You silly old fossil. Just stand still and let me get out of this slowly and properly.”

“By Zair—”

“Wait.”

I waited.

She sat on the rug with her right leg bent over her left, the left foot tucked in and pointed and her left arm stretched down her right foot from knee to ankle. Her upper body twisted right around from the waist, although she sat firmly on the floor, until I thought she could look back over her own shoulders. Her right arm was bent behind her back. And that rounded right knee was jammed tightly up under her left armpit. She looked — well, she looked marvelous, of course, all tied up like that of her own volition — but the power and serenity flowing from her took my breath away.

Carefully, moving with a grace that caught at my throat, she unwound herself.

At last she lay back, her arms at her side, and for all anyone would know she might be laid out ready for her last journey to the Kregen equivalent of the Valley of the Kings.

Then, with a smile, a small, cheeky smile, she sat up and said, “I’m ravenous!”

“There is tea in the Sapphire Reception Room. Shouldn’t you wear a leotard for that kind of thing?”

“In my own bedroom? With only a grizzly old graint of a husband to blunder in?”

“Well, you run perilous risks—”

“Not now — I don’t. I am for tea and miscils and palines—”

“What was that?”

She told me the Kregish for the Spinal Twist, the equivalent to the Sanskrit Ardha-matsyendrasana.

“That’s all a part of the Disciplines of the Sisters of the Rose? We have similar although far less seductive exercises in the Krozairs.”

“Hardly exercises, Dray. A way of tuning in with Opaz, I think; a way of getting through material worlds to what really matters beyond them.”

“I know.”

Shaking my head at the marvel of Delia I saw about getting dressed. A simple tunic sufficed me, and Delia wore a soft laypom-colored tunic girded with a narrow belt fashioned from interlinked silver flowers. We both swung daggers from the belts. She looked gorgeous. The

dress in its magical way set off the glory of her face and those brown eyes that could be so melting or so imperious, and added a special luster to the chestnut tints in her brown hair. Fit, she looked, radiant. As they say on Kregen, she had the yrium for an empress.

We went together through the hastily refurbished corridors and past blackened and windowless openings in the walls to the Sapphire Reception Room. My people were already there, changed and foaming for the meal. They waited for us, as was decent; but we were not late. We might have been, had Delia not been of so determined a nature.

In the absence of any properly organized palace retinue and court dignitaries, the rump made do as best they could. A major-domo — old Garfon the Staff — hobbled up to me, for he had taken an arrow in his heel and it was slow to heal, and banged the balass, golden-banded staff down on the flags by the door. I stopped his yell at once. If the people in there didn't yet know me, then, by Vox, I was in the wrong business. And, yet, they could know only the outward me, the Dray Prescott who banged and barged about and thumped skulls and got things done. They could know nothing of the Dray Prescott who for long hours agonized over what to do for the best, and hoped he could do it, and trembled in doubt.

“A strange happenstance, majister,” old Garfon the Staff boomed. He was a mite put out, as all major-domos are, that he hadn't got around to bellowing out titles. “Two embassies await audience and crave your indulgence.”

“Spit it out, Garfon, for my mouth is like the Ochre Limits.”

“They await audience in the Second Enrobing Chamber — that was spared except for the northeast corner of the roof — and, well, majister, it is indeed passing strange.”

Delia put her hand on my arm. So I just said, “Well?”

“One embassy is from the Racters.”

“Those cramphs. Well, they deal legally, or, at least, most of the time. Go on.”

“The other is from Layco Jhansi.”

A gasp broke from my people who listened.

My brows drew down.

“A deputation from the most powerful political party in Vallia — or, at least, the party that was the most powerful. And a deputation from the old emperor’s chief pallan, who betrayed him and tried to assassinate him. This is, good Garfon, exceedingly interesting.”

“It does not take a wizard to divine what they want,” said Delia.

Barty Vessler bubbled over, half-laughing, half-enraged at what he saw as the effrontery of it.

“Each is prepared to offer you an alliance, majister. That is the gist of it. One against the other, I’ll warrant.”

“Aye,” I said. “Each offers alliance, for they are at each other’s throats up there in the northwest.”

Delia laughed, a pure tinkle of sound.

I nodded.

“And, seeing they are like savage leems, one with the other, you have put both deputations, Garfon the Staff, both of them together in the same chamber.”

Chapter Three

Two Deputations Amuse Us

The aftermath of that damned vision of the Wizard of Loh, Phu-Si-Yantong, clung unpleasantly. I would not forget what he had attempted against me during the Battle of Voxyri when he had sent me a personal and hideous vision of Delia betrayed by the arch-seducer, Quergey the Murgey. That plot had failed and in nerving me to take a fateful decision had brought Vondium into our hands. That was the battle in which the Phalanx had finally decided it could go up against any kind of army and win, without doubt, against my stern admonishments.

So my anger was still fizzing and undirected, for Yantong could be anywhere in Paz, manipulating his puppets at a distance. I could, for the moment, do nothing against him.

So it behooved me to contain and control anger against the masters of these two deputations. They deserved anger — and the people of Vallia opposed to them would call it righteous anger — but I tried to look into the

**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

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