

DRAY PRESCOT: 31

MASKS OF SCORPIO

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writing as
ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

MASKS OF SCORPIO

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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Masks of Scorpio

Masks of Scorpio, chronicling the headlong adventures of Dray Prescott on that marvelous world of Kregen four hundred light years from Earth, is, like all the volumes of the saga, arranged to be read as a book in its own right. Dray Prescott is a man above middle height, with brown hair and eyes, brooding and dominating, an enigmatic man with enormously broad shoulders and superbly powerful physique who moves with the deadly grace of a savage hunting cat.

The Star Lords, mortal but superhuman beings, have a grand design for Kregen and employ Prescott and his Khibil comrade Pompino to perform the derring-do sections of the plan. Often at cross-purposes with the Star Lords, Prescott is now wholeheartedly with them in their desire to stamp out the unholy cult of Lem the Silver Leem.

Down in the island of Pandahem, Prescott, using the alias of Jak, has burned a temple or two, has rescued his wayward daughter, the Princess Dayra, Ros the Claw. They have seized the treasure of an army outfitting to invade Vallia.

Always looking forward, Prescott must face this new relationship with Dayra. With the crew and mercenary

marines of Pompino's ship *Tuscurs Maiden*, they are sailing into fresh adventures under the streaming mingled radiance of the Suns of Scorpio.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter one

Gold

How do you get on to civilized speaking terms with a daughter you haven't met until she was a grown woman, a tiger-lady with Whip and Claw who once sought to rip your face off? It's not all that easy. No, by Vox, not at all easy!

We sat together in the mizzen top, looking aft. Far astern two shining triangles showed where the pursuit gained remorselessly upon us in the quartering breeze. Soon they would overtake us and attempt to board and we would fall to handstrokes in the red roaring madness of battle — but far, far more important than that were these first stumbling steps in building a relationship between father and daughter.

My daughter, the Princess Dayra of Vallia, known as Ros the Claw, could not be expected to become suddenly all Sweetness and Light. After all, she'd hated and loathed me all her adult life. To find out that she had been betrayed and deceived, lied to, misled, and that I

wasn't quite the rogue she thought — not quite, but nearly, by Krun! — must have hit her with a shock that might topple less resilient minds.

As our ship, the stout bluff-beamed argenter *Tuscurs Maiden*, sailed on across the Sea of Opaz, bursting the water to a dazzlement of foam, she said to me: “What am I going to say to mother? I feel such a — such a—”

“I'm prepared to take most of the blame there is floating around,” I told her. “Most, but, by the Black Chunkrah! not all! You've got to face up to it, too. And your mother shares no part of the blame. Frankly, I don't know how she has managed over the seasons, what with me going off and the children turning into a bunch of rapsallions — well, except for Drak—”

“Drak!” She laughed, high and perhaps a little too tensely. Her face — that gorgeous passionate face so much like Delia's face darkened by the undercurrents of character she must inherit from me — regarded me in a wild, self-hurting way. “Drak is a sober-sides! He's so high and mighty and filled with his own sense of integrity he'll — he'll...”

“He's a good brother to you, Dayra.”

“Perhaps he tried to be. He did try to speak to me a few times... But I was surrounded by brilliant and clever people who told me—”

“Who told you a pack of lies!”

She did not answer but held out her hand for the spyglass.

“They're catching us,” she said, the glass centered and swaying with our movement. “But they're slow about it.”

With that characteristic half-tilt of the head and a swift squint up she established the positions of the Suns. The great red sun, Zim, and the smaller green sun, Genodras, the twin Suns of Antares shed their streaming mingled radiance upon the face of Kregen and Dayra wrinkled up her nose and said: "I doubt they'll overhaul us before nightfall."

"The Maiden with the Many Smiles is due early," I pointed out. As the largest of Kregen's seven Moons, the Maiden with the Many Smiles would afford light enough for boarding.

"True. But there will be cloud."

"You're sure?"

"No. But it is likely. Zankov was always complaining about the clouds."

I made no reference to Zankov, the chief instigator of my daughter's ills. My comrade, Cap'n Murkizon, in breaking Zankov's back, had not quite killed him. I couldn't honestly say I wished greatly for the rogue's recovery.

As though the thoughts in our heads followed a similar train, Dayra said — and with a tartness that was not all mischievous twinkle: "Suppose I told this bloodthirsty crew you've gathered around you just who you are? If I told them you were the Emperor of Vallia — what d'you think they'd do?"

"That's easy. They wouldn't believe you. I'm just Jak, or Jak the Shot, or Jak the Whatever Has Recently Happened. They'd laugh in your face. But, still, if you care to, try it. Tell them."

“And your foxy Khibil partner, Pompino?”

“Well, I’ll allow he might believe it. He has heard the name of Dray Prescott mentioned before.”

She steadied the glass upon the two pursuing ships.

“Oh?”

“The lord of Bormark — whose coast is just visible to the southward — Kov Pando, and his mother, the Kovneva Tilda, knew me when I told them I was called Dray Prescott. They remain firmly convinced that I used the name as an impostor. They believe I am Jak, for they met the real Emperor of Vallia on an unhappy occasion for them. That, they tell me, was not me. So I think Pompino will take the same tack. It is not easy to persuade ordinary folk that emperors and princesses go wandering around among them — as you should know, Ros the Claw.”

“You call me Ros Delphor!”

“Agreed. I merely made a point.”

Mind you, young Dayra for all her artistry with the Whip and the Claw, the rapier and the dagger, for all her cunning and resourcefulness, was still not yet your fully accomplished spy. She unthinkingly used Vallian expressions. She swore by Vallian gods and spirits. Down here in Pandahem, whose various nations had over the seasons fought many costly campaigns against reivers from Vallia, Vallians were not welcomed with open arms. She’d chosen to adopt the new name of Ros Delphor. Now, I happened to know where Delphor was, although it boasted but one claim to fame, and that within the boundaries of Vallia.

Delphor was a tiny, insignificant, placid village situated in a pleasant and verdant spot in Delia's Imperial province of Delphond. Its one claim to fame was that, some five hundred years or so ago, the puissant and much-respected Sister of the Rose, Vasni Caterion ti Delphor, had been born in a tiny thatch-roofed tumbledown. As I say, this information would mean nothing outside the island empire and, one has to admit, precious little inside, except to those who cared. I just happened to know through the insights vouchsafed me into the Sisters of the Rose and allied sororities by the Everoinye, the Star Lords. The point was, Delphor was a Vallian name. It had the ring of Vallia. Dayra ought to have chosen a name either more neutral or positively Pandahemic in its associations.

So said I, watching those two bloodhounds forereaching on us, and gauging the descent of the Suns, and worrying over Dayra, and, in general, not overmuch enjoying myself.

"You all right up there, Jak?" bellowed up Pompino from the quarterdeck.

I leaned over. His reddish whiskers bristled, his arrogant fox-like face shone ruddily. I bellowed back.

"All all right. They gain on us steadily."

"May the black flux of Armipand suck them down!"

Dayra said to me: "Do I detect a querulous note in our proud Khibil?"

"Oh," I said. "Pompino's top class on land, and in a fight on the sea. But since he bought his fleet of ships he's turned into a worry-guts over them, coddling them

like a hen over chicks, always worrying that something will bring disaster—”

“Something usually does!”

Those sort of laws operate on Kregen as on Earth...

Dayra had only recently won free of her evil friends, and we had had little time together in which to pack all the talking necessary. Mingled with the wondering reflections on our previous conduct when we had met were all the painful readjustments we had both to make. There was no sense in trying to rush all this.

Pompino yelled again, and the lookout perched in the crosstrees screeched down the enlightening information that our pursuers gained on us, slowly but relentlessly.

“I’m for a wet,” I said.

“I’ll race you down.” With that Dayra hoicked a long and shapely leg over the side and started down the ratlines, going like a grundal of the rocks. To do what any self-respecting middy would do, and slide down the backstay, would see me on deck well in the lead. I did not. I clambered down after her and we touched the planks at the same time, flushed and with something of that mad helter-skelter enthusiasm that comes of rapid descents. Eiffeltoweritis, you could call it.

“Ha!” Pompino greeted us with a flourish, twirling up his mustache. “You two have something to cheer you up, then.”

“Unlike you, Pompino, who has the cares of a fleet of ships on his shoulders.”

“Aye! Well may you mock! Every time I put to sea I am beset with pirates, with storms, with everything to upset a fellow!”

“That’s the way of it when you’re a sailorman.”

No one aboard knew that Dayra was my daughter. She was known as Ros Delphor, a good companion, and handy with a rapier. If those two ships tracking us managed to board, Dayra would be in there, hacking and slashing with her Claw and thrusting with her rapier. She was worth two in a fight like that.

That I felt absolute horror at the prospect, that I heartily wished my daughter was not involved, is only half the truth. Certainly I wished that Dayra was not into all this fighting. But, as this was Kregen and she was a princess, a Sister of the Rose, and engaged on hazardous missions, then what must follow would follow and there was precious little I could do about it.

Captain Linson, master of *Tuscurs Maiden*, spoke in his brisk efficient manner. A valuable man, this, one who while seeking his own fortune enhanced the fortunes of the Owner. That Pompino would see this arrangement the other way around was, besides being amusing, a part and parcel of the relationship these two had.

“We’re in for a blow,” said Linson.

I stopped myself from the instinctive snuff at the air. For what may appear simple reasons, I had pretended to have no knowledge of the sea. This was a foible which amused me at the time I’d first begun it; now it dragged a trifle. All the same, I would persevere...

“You think so!” exclaimed Pompino. He bristled. He took it as a personal affront when the gods of the waves heaved in wrath and upset his insides.

“Green Nasplashurl of the Seaweed Mane will ride tonight, I think,” went on Linson with dry relish.

Pompino cast a hunted, a furtive look around.

“Is there no cove where we may shelter, captain?”

“With those two beauties on our tail, horter?”

“Oh, we’ll blatter them, good and proper, when the time comes. I’m thinking of my supper.”

“You mean, dear Pompino,” said Dayra, “that it is likely not to remain your property for long?”

A booming laugh brought Cap’n Murkizon, barrel-bodied, startlingly red of face, fiery-eyed, alongside. “I’ll warrant you’ll keep your supper down, horter Pompino, if we get to handstrokes with those fellows! By the decaying gums and putrescent eyeballs of the Divine Lady of Belschutz! There’s nothing like a little blattering to tighten up a fellow’s insides!”

I felt for my comrade. He and I both worked for the Star Lords and carried out perilous missions for them. We’d come to this strange, unspoken, understanding that each was responsible for the other in the eyes of the Everoinye. They might not see it that way, for they were superhuman, mysterious powers who spoke to us through the agency of a giant scarlet and golden bird. But we felt it. For sure.

“The pity of it,” I said, “is that this ship is from South Pandahem. Up here in the north — well, what do you

know of the shoals, the navigation points, the hazards? Cap'n Murkizon? Captain Linson?"

Both shook their heads.

"We sail without charts here — and that is a fool's pastime." Linson had not suffered to let his view on this folly be known.

"Unless we take charts from some wight or other..." Cap'n Murkizon let his words trail off, uncharacteristically.

"From them?" I said, and jerked my thumb sternwards.

The rascally leanings of these rapscallions were proving a joy to me, used as they were in the service of the Star Lords and Vallia. In the fertile loam of their scheming brains the idea rooted itself instantaneously, grew, flowered, and their reactions exploded in a thunderous chorus of: "Aye!"

I was, as the saying goes, showered in petals.

Since the time when he'd counseled us to refrain from fighting the hideous Shanks and then we went ahead to fight them, Cap'n Murkizon fancied his honor impugned and considered he continued on in life with a slur attached to his name. This was not so. What it did mean was that, the Cap'n Murkizon with us at the moment would not, most certainly would not, be the one to mention the odds. He would not point out that we would have to fight two ships. A few moments ago all we had been thinking of was running away from them and taking the treasure we had — liberated was the right word here, by Krun! — to where we could share

out the spoils; now we turned our scheming minds to the question of how best to ensure the destruction of our pursuers.

Well, that is not only the way of Earth as of Kregen, it is a way to gain your ends, or gain your end.

Wilma the Shot stepped forward. She and her sister, Alwim the Eye, had proved themselves fine varterists who could shoot their ballistae with great accuracy. Also they had fought with us with cold steel, and we valued them with their free ways and their ready comradeship in hard times as well as good.

“We cripple one of them,” said Wilma, with firm confidence in her and her sister’s expertise in loosing the rock or the dart from their ballistae. “Then we draw off and—”

“Take the other like a plucked fruit,” finished Alwim the Eye.

“Sound,” said Pompino. “Very sound. Your thoughts, Captain Linson?”

“I sail the ship, horter. I can handle her to run rings around those two.” He pointed a casual hand aft. The glint of sail was visible from the quarterdeck now.

No one was fool enough to comment that these two had the heels of *Tuscurs Maiden*. Argenters are built for carrying capacity and for comfort, not for speed.

The two varterist sisters, well-pleased, went off to check their weapons which needed no checking. Between them they could knock over just about anything those two sea wolves on our tail might put up against them.

The rest of our company would be as ready to fight as they ever were. An interesting little problem cropped up as clouds began to build and some of the refulgent glory of the twin suns dimmed. Our two pursuers would surely catch us before nightfall; if the brewing gale broomed in with any power before that the whole picture would change. If the storm held all night as it might well do, we might never see these two sea wolves again. And that, it was very clear, would suit us admirably. With the treasure we had won aboard and crying out to be divided up according to the customs, a fight would at best be merely a distraction from the important work, and at worst might mean we could lose the gold.

“Pantor Shorthush of the Waves holds a personal grudge against me. I am sure of it,” said Pompino. He spoke fretfully. Up here in Pandahem they called Shorthush of the Waves Pantor, instead of Notor, his lordly title down in Havilfar. He was one of the armada of Kregen lords who out of spite or mere idleness, mere mischief, send the gales to sink honest men’s ships.

“I think Pantor Shorthush may be smiling, if wickedly, upon us, Pompino, for if the outskirts of the gale strike us early we can use them to escape those two fellows back there.”

“Escape? I thought we were going to blatter them for charts—?”

“Oh, we will if we have to. But we have more important ends than that.” I stared up at the massing banks of cloud. “Anyway,” I added with deliberate carelessness,

“we can always buy, beg or steal charts at a more convenient time.”

“I suppose that is sooth...”

I wasn't about to tell my comrade that I wished devoutly to avoid a fight because Dayra was aboard.

And that reason, of course, was highly ludicrous. Ros the Claw was a formidable fighting phenomenon, well able to take care of herself. All the same, in the brutal slog of a boarding action even the finest swordsman of any number of worlds — and I am not that one — can get a knock on the head and drop into the sea with a splash that ends all...

And, I admit to a fascination in finding out just how good Dayra was. That she was very good indeed was obvious from her training with the Sisters of the Rose, from her exploits, and from the simple fact that she was still alive.

Tuscurs Maiden ran on in her lumpy wallowing fashion and Captain Linson kept casting black looks aloft to match the gathering sky. He was reluctant to take in any canvas. If he did so the pursuers would race up to us; if he did not and the breeze increased with sudden ferocity he could lose a sail or two, perhaps a spar. The situation was tricky.

Down in the Shrouded Sea in the great continent of Havilfar, south of the equator, sailors have to deal with volcanic disturbances almost as often as gales. Down there they call on Father Shoshash the Stormbrow, imploring him through Mother Shoshash of the Seaweed Hair not to destroy them. Up in Vallia the seamen of the

superb Vallian galleons call less on the gods and spirits of the sea in terms of supplication, demanding a live and let live policy. Vallian sailors trust to their ships and their nautical skills. They apostrophize Corg from time to time; but he and they rub along.

Had we been in a galleon of Vallia now, I would not have been so concerned. As it was, I owned to a lively feeling of imminent disaster. And this, as you will perceive, was because I sailed with my daughter as shipmate.

So it was that when the blue-glimmering apparition appeared on the forecastle of the ship I was among the first to leap eagerly for the help promised.

“Mindi the Mad!” yelled those who knew her. She had helped us before and now she was going to help us again...

We crowded up. She stood on the castle which, in an argenter was a real castle-like construction containing vartars and not the low lean fo’c’sle of a galleon.

“Mindi! Mindi the Mad!”

She stood there in her usual pose, head downbent and her auburn hair shining from a light that never came from the suns above us. Her pale blue gown reached in its straight folds to a circle about her feet. Her arms were folded in the gown.

Yet her figure wavered. She shimmered. We all knew the witch was not really standing on our forecastle; but her apparition presented far less of the solid reality it had shown before. A dark blur of the bowsprit showed through her, until her blueness coalesced and she was

fully fleshed before us; then the image flickered and wavered erratically.

Naghan the Pellendur who ran our guards with admirable correctness in the absence of the cadade, said: "She is having great difficulty. And there is no wonder at that!" He spoke with a crisp disdain which embraced the sea and all things to do with the ocean.

The blue-gowned apparition lifted an arm. A pale hand pointed landward.

We all craned over the bulwarks to look.

A shadow raced across the sea. Clouds massed above and the radiance of jade and crimson lay low across the water beyond the shadow. Rimming the horizon the coast of Bormark lifted jagged peaks.

Captain Linson said: "If we sail inshore I will not answer for the shoals—"

"Yet she clearly intends us to do just that." Pompino tugged at his whiskers.

"She must know a way of safety." Naghan the Pellendur looked decidedly unhappy. He was a Fristle, and it is notorious that that race of catlike diffs are not enamored of the sea. They make atrocious sailors, and are generally not employed aboard ship. Naghan, for one, would dearly love to set foot safely on dry land once more.

Cap'n Murkizon let rip a bellow.

"Put good men in the chains, Captain Linson! Go craftily. If this witch leads us, we can find a safe passage. By the unwholesome armpit of the Divine Lady of

Belschutz! For an expert captain such as yourself the risk is not so great!”

The mockery with which Linson habitually treated Murkizon was now being turned back on his own head. It was amusing. The situation itself, also, held amusing overtones. I simply stood back and didn’t even bother to take a mental wager on the outcome.

An abrupt blast of wind that stretched our canvas and heeled *Tuscurs Maiden* settled the issue.

We were convinced that Mindi the Mad knew the coast and that she would not send us hurtling down onto rocks driven helplessly by the wind. There was a secure cove there sheltered from the gale. That had to be so...

In the refreshing way of your rascalion Kregan they would have fallen into a sprightly argument, well-spattered with flowery oaths, before deciding to do what was obvious.

For some unfathomable reason — no doubt connected with my thoughts of Dayra — I was jolted into a memory of the time I’d spent as a kaidur in the Jikhorkdun of Huringa in Hyrklana. The arena’s silver sands had wallowed in spilled blood and I’d fought as a sworder against horrific beasts and wilder men. In those days I’d dreamed of my baby twins, Drak and Lela, for the rest of the children had not yet visited Kregen. I’d thought, even then, that babies grow up and face their own problems. Well, by Zair! My children had grown up and they did, indeed, face their own horrific problems. The amusing kicker here was that Dayra’s twin brother,

Jaidur, had grown up to become the king of Hyrklana. I could never have expected that when I'd fought in the arena in Huringa's Jikhorkdun!

So, impelled by these old thoughts, and perhaps with more of that old, lowering, black, devil's mask that was the real Dray Prescott, I stepped forward.

"Let us follow Mindi's direction and seek a safe cove and to Sicce's Gates with these rasts who follow us! Then we can divide up the treasure and see each one of us obtains his just share and reward."

Pompino glanced at me with a perplexed look. Then, at once, he shouted: "Captain Linson! Kindly steer the ship where the witch directs. As soon as we find a safe anchorage we can—" here he brushed up his whiskers in a way which said that, by Horato the Potent, he might not know much about ships; but he was the Owner, and he knew a bit of sea-going jargon or two "—where we can drop the hook."

Some of the old sea salts down in the waist laughed at this; but the situation eased dramatically.

As for me — I felt the relief that Dayra was going to be kept out of another fight. She was a trained fighting girl, a mistress of the Whip and Claw. She had sheathed her Talons for a space. Those wicked razor-sharp talons affixed to her Claw that could rip a fellow's face off as soon as look at him, they would remain sheathed if I had my way.

And that, as any onker could tell you, was as unlikely a happenstance on Kregen as anything else. The future would not hold that Sweetness and Light I craved, and

yet the darkness would be illuminated by flashes of that lightning that comes only from good companionship and stout hearts and a brave striding on against fortune.

Running before the wind we sped rapidly toward the coastline. Any skipper in his right mind would have nothing whatsoever to do with this madness — running freely down onto a lee shore! Insanity! But we trusted the pale-blue glimmering apparition of the witch-woman, Mindi the Mad.

The moment an upflung headland of gaunt striated rock passed away to starboard the wind moderated spectacularly. Our canvas flapped. We moved on sluggishly in the wayward eddying currents of air spilling over into this wide expanse of sheltered water.

We had way enough to continue and to enter the mouth of a funnel-shaped bay. The land swept away and upward into mountain crests, and all clothed with strongly green vegetation. A river no doubt spilled down between those hills. The thought occurred to me, idly, that in all probability the water we now sailed was perfectly drinkable.

Islands scattered reflections of themselves, many islands, and flocks of birds, driven to seek shelter by the oncoming gale, wheeled and squawked in the preliminaries of settling down. The shafting light of the Suns lay low and bewilderingly, glittering up refulgently from the water.

Selecting one of the islands we rounded to in a good depth of water off a yellow beach. Here we did as

Pompino in his newly won nautical expertise had prescribed and dropped the hook.

“A goodly shelter, this, far from prying eyes,” said Captain Linson. He was well pleased. He, it was clear, saw no sense in risking his ship in a combat against twice his number. And also, he like us could foresee the time when we’d come by charts of these waters, honestly or otherwise.

When a ruffianly crew of us went ashore for fresh water and firewood, Pompino roundly declared that, by Horato the Potent, he would spend the night on honest solid ground. A tent-like shelter was rigged, the fires were started, and the ship’s cook, the superb culinary artist Limki the Lame, with his assistants, prepared our evening meal. An anchor watch was left aboard *Tuscurs Maiden*, and we had to promise them their partners would oversee their share in the gold.

Sharing out the treasure!

Ah! That was now the single most important fact in all the universe to this bunch of rascalions.

The apparition of Mindi the Mad vanished to our shouted remberrees. We could not hear her speak when she was in this trance state that allowed her spirit to visit us, and we doubted if she could hear us, but being good Kregans we shouted the remberrees in good heart. The two pursuing ships might snuffle about these scattered islands all night; we had no doubt that they’d never spot our fires, and if their captains had any sense, they, too, would anchor up for the rise of the Suns.

The general opinion, heartily shared by Pompino and the Fristles, was that we ought to make camp here and spend some time reorganizing ourselves. Fresh water tinkled in the brook, game abounded, we were well-provisioned. This little paradise would mightily suit us for a spell.

The chests were dragged across the sand and ranged in neat rows. The men clustered in the firelight. Their faces — well on the faces of the apims, members of *Homo sapiens* like me, the avaricious gloating could be plainly read. On the faces of those folk who were diffs, races of those splendid people of Kregen who are not fashioned like people of Earth, the expressions might differ. There was no doubt that everyone here looked forward with the keenest anticipation to dipping their hands into the gold and silver...

Treasure!

Well, I in my dour sour cynical old way anticipated trouble. I was right; but not as I'd anticipated...

"We will do this thing according to immemorial custom."

"Aye!"

The proportions to be taken by each and every person were regulated by rank, position and prowess. We had upward of two hundred thousand gold deldys to distribute, made up of various gold and silver coins. There was no rush. This could take all night and still the rascals would be on their feet with a flagon in their fists, gloating. Pompino stood on a chest with the list

prepared by Rasnoli, his gentle Relt staylor, and read out the distributions.

Each name was met with a cheer or a groan, a chorus of good-natured banter. The firelight glistened on flushed faces and whiskered cheeks, glittered in eyesockets, caught the rows of jagged teeth. Dayra and I stood together, a little in the background. She had brought the treasure to us, taken from the enemy led by Zankov; she would come into a handsome share.

“Gold,” she said. “Ha — the Little Sisters should be pleased.”

I did not inquire which particular set of Little Sisters she referred to.

I did say: “In your own time, Dayra, you would do well to return to the Sisters of the Rose. They would welcome you—”

“What do you know of them! You cannot tell me that!”

“I do not seek to uncover the sorority’s secrets, my girl. But you could do worse than seek their blessing once more.”

“I will think on it.”

Now the treasure was being divided. It had all been counted, every last silver piece. The men formed up, and the women took their places. Each one held out a sack, or a cap, a stout wooden box, and the coins were counted out by Rasnoli as Pompino, Captain Linson, Cap’n Murkizon and other of the more trustworthy members of the crew stood by. The process took time. No one minded that.

Gambling began at once, of course.

The slaves we had freed and who had fought with us were entitled to their share. Also we had agreed that the multitude of girl sacrifices we had rescued should also receive each one her share. There was a certain amount of self-serving in this, for as soon as we reached civilization we could unload the girls with a small fortune each. That was the general consensus of opinion. Dayra, I had told, and she had agreed, that I wanted to look out for these waifs more particularly. If they were simply cast adrift with a pocketful of gold they'd be dead or slave again in a twinkling.

The share-out went on. The principals, in which number Dayra and I were included, would receive their portions later. The amounts were known. This was not a scheme to defraud our shipmates, merely an example of the protocol in which Kregen abounds.

This amused me. Limki the Lame stomped past, his nose in a flour bag. The bag bulged with the shape of coins.

“By Llunyush the Juice!” he said, coming up for air, his face whitened in splotches. “As fine a sight as any honest man can hope to see!” We agreed. Cooks are important folk.

A vast amount of jollity broke out around the campfires. Wine passed freely. Every man felt himself a king and every woman a queen. There were quarrels. Inevitably so. One or two knives flashed; but it was noticeable that these were mainly gripped in the fists of the newcomers to our band, and the old stagers moved in swiftly to break up the disturbances.

Pockets bulging with gold coins, men and women strutted from the pay-out table to join in the celebrations. If trouble was to come, I was thinking, a few of us retained clear heads — I was thinking that when the lambent blue glow spread across the level sands by the water's edge.

For two heartbeats, and two heartbeats only, I thought the Star Lords were sending their enormous blue Scorpion to snatch me away from this island beach and hurl me down all naked and defenseless on some other part of Kregen where I would sort out a problem for them. For two heartbeats only...

Other folk yelled. Some screamed. A panic movement away from the beach began and Rondas the Bold fell all sprawling on those yellow sands that were stained with the indigo fires spurting from the apparition.

This was not Mindi the Mad.

A face stared out at us from the center of the deep blue fire. A walnut-crevassed face surrounded by whiteness, a face sharp and piercing, a face of illuminated sorcery. Dayra took my arm. We stood, scarcely breathing, watching. And the hooded eyes in that grotesquerie of a face looked out in a gleam like summer lightning. Those eyes saw the beach and the campfires, the carousing people, the heaps of gold and silver, the broken open chests.

“D’you recognize her?”

“No,” Dayra answered, on a breath.

The spectral image of the witch remained hard and fiery edged, studying us. The outline of blue flames

expanded. The woman's body rose into view. She wore a white form-fitting gown after the fashion of the Ancient Egyptian women of our Earth, banded under her breasts, which were small and hard and cone-like. The gown emphasized the shape of her figure, the swell of her hips, the slight protuberance of her stomach. Around her neck a massive circlet of interlocked gold lozenges, studded with gems, stood out vividly against the mahogany-colored skin. Her hair was remarkable. Frizzed and fluffed in the Afro fashion, it surrounded her head in a sheen of chalk-whiteness — startling and yet in no way incongruous. A tiara of blinding light crowned her forehead against that chalk-white mass of hair. The sound of a multitude of tiny tinkling bells shivered in the night air.

In the fashion of many ladies of Kregen she wore a glittery linked chain from a bracelet on her left wrist. But the other end of the chain did not attach to a necklet on some friendly furry little creature, a doted-on pet, a warm cuddly bundle — oh, no. That necklet fastened up a winged, fanged, scaled reptile of hideous appearance, who yawned widely, revealing a scarlet mouth and serrated teeth and a forked tongue that licked wickedly this way and that.

The witch gazed upon us on the beach and we stood, petrified after the first frantic moments of panic. Not a sound disturbed the night except the tinny tintinnabulations of the silver bells.

As though an artist wiped a chalk mark clean with a single swipe of a wet cloth — the sorceress vanished.

No one had the strength to speak.

We trembled in the night air as the sounds of the crackling fires, night insects, the gentle susurrations of the sea, returned to the normal world. An after-scent of musk hung in the air. I felt Dayra's fingers gripping my arm.

I'd made no move to put my hand on hers, to give her that physical comfort, for I felt sure she would not welcome that, regarding it rather as a patronizing gesture. But I did look at her, and as I turned my head a man yelled down by the beach, and then another shrieked in agony, and a chorus of agonized howls burst out.

Dayra jumped.

"The devil! Vomer the Vile take it!"

She clawed frantically at her tunic, tearing at her pocket. I smelled burning. She had to rip the tunic off and hurl it down and jump on it to extinguish the blaze.

All over the beach men and women were leaping about, yelling blue bloody murder, ripping off burning clothes. I saw Limki the Lame's flour bag burst into flames and a lava stream of blazing gold run swiftly across the sand, molten, to hiss in eruptions of steam into the sea.

So, of course, we understood what had happened.

All the treasure had turned molten.

Gold and silver alike, it melted into puddles and then wisped and shrank and vanished. We were left, dazed, smelling the stinks of scorched flesh and burned

clothing, left with not a single coin of all that marvelous treasure.

Dayra said it.

“By Chusto!” she said, her eyes bright. “That gold soon burnt a hole in our pockets!”

Chapter two

Pompino simplifies the future

“She may have been a Gonell, for they have white hair they do not cut off.”

“She suffered from chivrel—”

“Powdered with flour—”

“The witch! I’d like to powder her with hot coals!”

“With red honey and let the ants—”

Oh, yes, as you can see, the company of *Tuscurs Maiden* was not at all enamored of the witch who had so summarily reduced our worldly wealth, whoever or whatever she might be.

We sat moodily around the decaying fires as the Suns rose. Someone would have to stand guard and the rest would try to sleep. No one felt like doing anything. We were in all truth a most depressed bunch of desperadoes...

“Well,” declared Dayra. “I never expected to be rich in this life.”

“But that is always an objective, a dream, something one can yearn for,” protested Pompino. “Although, mind you, I own my disappointment is in not seeing my dear lady wife’s face when I emptied the gold chest before her.”

It was in my mind that I ought to do something about the Lady Scaura Pompina, just to give my comrade the sight for which he yearned. But then, being a haughty Khibil, he’d resent at once the implication that he was accepting charity.

That reminded me of something I had to tell Dayra. I drew her a little off and we sat down as Pompino selected off the unfortunates to take the watch.

“Well,” she said. “I am disappointed. But, at least, the enemies of Vallia do not have the gold. They cannot pay their soldiers or for their ships to invade us at home.”

“True. There is something that may make you smile, although I am always heartsick when I recall—”

“What?” She cut into my maundering. I braced up.

“Barty Vessler—”

“Oh. *Him!*”

I felt the rage mounting, and quelled it. Barty Vessler was one of your true koters of Vallia, a gentleman in every sense, filled with notions of honor and duty and with a sense of proportion in everything except risking his own neck. Delia and I had both liked him immensely, for he was upright and honest and if foolhardy of his own person in pursuit of his ideas of honor was always considerate of those with whom he came into contact.

“Barty was a fine—” I began.

“Oh, yes. He told me he loved me and I believed him, I think. But he was so — so — and, anyway, he wouldn’t come out with the companions and—”

“Smash up a few taverns? Terrorize a few innkeepers?”

“And so?” she flared. “Life was so *boring!*”

I wasn’t going to get into the strict parent bit at this stage. I held on doggedly to what I wanted to say.

“I shall speak of your antics later, my girl. Now I must tell you what Barty has done for you—”

“Done for me? He’s dead, isn’t he?”

I felt the pang.

“Aye. Barty’s dead. When your mother was hung up in chains by that rast Zankov, Barty roared in to the rescue. Kov Colun Mogper of Mursham killed Barty, treacherously stabbed him in the back. It was...” I held my breath for a moment and Dayra had the sense to say nothing. Then I went on heavily. “Jilian Sweet-tooth has a personal score to settle with Mogper. I believe she has come here to Pandahem—”

“Jilian in Pandahem!”

“We are hardly likely to meet up with her. The island is as large as Vallia.”

“I have had words with Jilian. You know her well?”

“We have fought shoulder to shoulder — but she is her own woman and your mother’s good friend. Now, Barty said in his Will that you were to have his strom-nate of Calimbrev—”

“He did!” She stared at me in genuine surprise. “Barty Vessler left me his stromnate! But — but there must be relations to claim the title and the lands, surely?”

“No.”

“But I was not there. You know that tenure must be established. Inheritance has to be fought for.”

“I know. I sent good men there to hold Calimbrev for you.”

“Oh, yes, I can see that.” She tossed her head. “The great high and mighty Emperor of Vallia would send an army to gain land for his family.”

“Yes,” I said.

She looked away.

“So — you are the Stromni of Calimbrev, Dayra.”

“You won’t be calling me Stromni here — and do you forget I am Ros Delphor?”

“No—”

“I suppose you are so accustomed to being the emperor now that grandfather is dead. No doubt you are majister this and majister that — it makes one sick—”

This, clearly, was a part of what had gnawed away at Dayra when she was younger. I said: “My friends at the palace usually just call me majis. And there’s an interesting development in the services, where they’re using jis to address superiors.” I couldn’t say that this use of jis was similar to our Earthly use of sir in that context. Some time would have to elapse before Dayra learned her father had never been born on Kregen, but on a funny little world four hundred light years off with

only one yellow sun and one silver moon and not a diff in sight.

We spoke on for a space and the hurt in Dayra hurt me, also. I hewed to my purpose. Tsleetha-tseleethi, softly-softly, as the saying goes.

Pompino came across looking put out, as he had every right to be.

“This is a fine mess! By Horato the Potent, Jak! I believe the gods have aligned themselves against us.”

“Not the gods, Pompino. Just a witch.”

“Just a witch!”

“I’d like to know her interest in all this.”

“I,” said Pompino the Iarvin, “am not often wrong in anything. But I own that when I said this would be simple, I erred.”

I didn’t laugh; but you had to hand it to my comrade.

“You said, if I recall, that we would recruit a fine gang of rascally fellows, go across and bash Strom Murgon, burn all the temples to Lem the Silver Leem, sort out who married who, and then go home.” I counted off the points on my fingers. “We have a few fine fellows; we could do with more. Strom Murgon more bashed us than the contrary. We have burned one temple here, and there are more hungry for the flames. And as for who marries who—”

“Tell me,” said Dayra, “about that.”

“Oh,” said Pompino. “Kov Pando and Strom Murgon both lust after the same girl, the Vadni Dafni Harlstam. Both want her estates. There are the Mytham twins, Poldo who himself yearns for Dafni, and Pynsi who

wants Pando to marry her.” He gave his whiskers a fierce upward brushing movement. “It is all very simple, as I said.”

Dayra put a finger to her lips and regarded Pompino calculatingly. “Simple?”

“Of course.”

“And the rest of it. You really do go around burning temples of the Silver Wonder?”

“The quicker they are all burned the sooner the air will smell sweeter.”

I made a small sound, a hesitant beginning to an expression of my personal doubts that burning the temples of the evil cult would change the minds of the worshipers.

Pompino glared. “Oh, yes, Jak, I know your views! But if there are no temples—”

“They will build more,” said Dayra.

“Then we’ll burn them and perhaps deal more harshly with the crampths who chant the praises of torturing and cutting up small girls into smaller pieces, may Armipand take ’em all into his black jaws!”

As he spoke so my comrade looked at Dayra. His foxy face showed a shrewd scrutiny. No fool, Pompino the Iarvin, as his name testified; I thought he would not penetrate very far into her secrets. He waited a moment, and as neither of us spoke, he nodded. He was about to go on when I interrupted his train of thought.

“We may burn temples as much as we desire. We must win over the credulous fools who believe the nonsense they are told. And that means—”

“That means,” said Dayra, interrupting in her turn, “finding who gives the instructions.”

By the way she used the word we understood she meant instructions to imply far more than simple orders.

“The priests, the chief priests,” said Pompino. “Aye, we’ll find them. And I, for one, know what to do with ’em!”

He spotted Captain Linson approaching, and finished: “Well, we’d better see about sailing again. Now we’ve lost the treasure these sea-leems will be a fine cutthroat crew, I think. Anyone who crosses them will rue the day.” He went off to speak with Linson about resuming our interrupted voyage.

Dayra said: “Jak — when mother was chained up, there at the Sakkora Stones. And Barty died—”

“Was treacherously stabbed in the back with a poisoned dagger, girl!”

“So you say—”

“So it was!”

“I had to go off — if you were there—”

“Oh, yes, I was there, with a damned great arrow through my neck. You were concluding the legal wrangle about marrying Zankov—”

“I do not think I ever really wanted that, for all my words at the time. At any rate, I never did.”

She looked splendid with her heightened color and the spirit in her; I remembered how she had warned Zankov not to harm Delia. As they say in the Eye of the World, only Zair can tell the cleanliness of a human heart. She

spoke in a rush, emptying herself of this particular emotion.

“And Barty? I know it sounds stupid, banal; but tell me, for I must know. Did Barty suffer at the end?”

“The poison worked swiftly. He might well have died from the blow alone; he did not suffer, thanks be to Opaz.”

She made a sideways, empty gesture. Down by the water’s edge they were hauling a boat out, and splashing, and calling to one another. The camp site was being broken up, and we were due for the off again.

“We had to fly from the Sakkora Stones. I found out at once that mother still lived. I did not hear about Barty until much later. I didn’t know.”

“And you had no feeling for him?”

“Oh, yes, I liked him, as one would a puppy.”

As though it had no bearing on what we were saying, I said: “I was slowly curing him of his ideals of honor. They killed him before I could—” I couldn’t go on. I turned away and stomped off and got my shoulder to a boat and so shoved her savagely out into the water.

“Come on, you lubbers!” I roared. “We’ve lost one treasure! Let us go and find another!”

**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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