

DRAY PRESCOT: 12

**THE TIDES
OF KREGEN**

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writing as

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A Mushroom eBook

THE TIDES OF KREGEN

Dray Prescott #12

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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A Note on the Krozair Cycle

With this volume of his saga, Dray Prescot is hurled afresh into brand-new adventures on the planet of Kregen, that grim and beautiful, marvelous and terrible world four hundred light-years away beneath the red and green fires of Antares, under the Suns of Scorpio.

Dray Prescot is a man of above medium height, with brown hair and brown eyes that are level and dominating. His shoulders are immensely wide and he carries himself with an abrasive honesty and a fearless courage. He moves like a great hunting cat, quiet and deadly. Born in 1775 and educated in the inhumanly harsh conditions of the late eighteenth century English navy, he presents a picture of himself that, the more we learn of him, grows no less enigmatic.

Through the machinations of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, mortal but superhuman men dedicated to the aid of humanity, and of the Star Lords, the Everoinye, he has been taken to Kregen many times. On that savage and exotic world he rose to become Zorcander of the clansmen of Segesthes, and Lord of Strombor in Zenicce.

Against all odds Prescott won his highest desire and in that immortal battle at The Dragon's Bones claimed his Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains. And Delia claimed him in the face of her father, the dread Emperor of Vallia. Amid the rolling thunder of the acclamations of "Hai Jikai!" Prescott became Prince Majister of Vallia and wed his Delia, the Princess Majestrix. One of their favorite homes is Esser Rarioch in Valkanium, capital of the island of Valka of which Prescott is Strom.

Far to the west of Turismond, the western continent of this grouping of continents and islands called Paz, lies the inner sea, the Eye of the World. There Prescott as a swifter captain became a member of the mystic and martial Order of Krozairs of Zy. He says he values his membership of the Krzy more highly than any other of his honors.

After a series of adventures on the continent of Havilfar, during which he fought in the arena of the Jikhorkdun and became King of Djanduin, idolized by his ferocious four-armed Djangs, Prescott managed to stay alive to thwart the plans of the Empress Thyllis of Hamal. In the Battle of Jholaix, Hamal was defeated and an uneasy peace ensued. Prescott and Delia and the children returned to Esser Rarioch in Valka looking forward to a happy and contented life.

Thus ends the Havilfar cycle. This volume, *Tides of Kregen*, opens the Krozair Cycle. Kregen is a world too rich in passion and action to allow a fighting man like Dray Prescott to rest for long. Once more, then, Prescott

is launched into fresh adventures, but this time there is a hiatus which, I believe, might easily break a man of lesser fire and spirit than Dray Prescot, Krozair of Zy.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter One

The Star Lords' warning

When two wizards begin quarreling it is time for sensible men to take cover.

"You young fambly, Khe-Hi!" Evold Scavander spluttered and fumed, his bewhiskered peppery features fairly glowing with baffled fury. "You lord of mumbo jumbo!" I fancied he would explode at any moment. He sneezed, powerfully, and Khe-Hi-Bjanching took a smart step backward, waving a hand before his young and handsome face.

"Now, old man, admit you have no powers to penetrate—"

"Powers! Powers! I've had more powers than you've had loloo's eggs for breakfast!" Evold swiped away at his face with a huge square of silk, all bright orange and red and brown. "I tell you, you arrogant puffed-up wizard of Loh, I put no store by this tomfoolery of appearances—"

"I saw, Evold, you ninny! I *saw*!"

"You saw the remains of last night's dopa, you young whippersnapper." He sneezed again, a veritable

gusher of effort. The handkerchief swiped fretfully. "I'm the wizard to the Prince and don't you forget it!"

"To the Prince you may be anything, old man, I do not doubt. But a wizard!" Here Khe-Hi-Bjanching, that young and superior Wizard of Loh, laughed most sardonically, cutting old San Evold to the quick. "I grant you do have a power, aye, a mighty fine power of drowning a man in your sneezes! But as a wizard you would do well sweeping out the zorcadrome."

"I'll — I'll—"

"What? Cast a spell and turn me into a toad? Well, go on. Try."

"That mumbo jumbo is for you young fools. I know what I know."

They were really going at each other now, there on the terrace of my high fortress of Esser Rarioch in Valkanium. Only by chance had I come on them, being troubled in mind and going to find old Evold Scavander. When two wizards quarrel it behooves a mere man to be circumspect about taking himself off, but I stood for a short space in the shadow of a pillar watching them, the pressure on my spirits a little relieved by their antics.

Khe-Hi-Bjanching waxed more vociferous, his white gown with the crimson rope around his waist a blaze of radiance in the streaming light of the suns. "And I know we have had a visitation. If you do not instantly let me pass to report to the Prince he'll have your head off and have you hanging by the heels from the highest battlements of Esser Rarioch."

"The Prince would not condone such barbarities. He'd as lief trim your height by a head."

They went on like fighting cocks. With shrill squeals my younger twins, Segnik and Velia, scampered around the corner. They could run well now and were involved in some activity that made them oblivious to the quarrel. By the time they realized what was going on, a realization matched to their understanding of funny old San Evold and clever San Khe-Hi, Turko the Shield appeared, his face grim, to seize them up with two muscular heaves, one under each arm. He did not see me and he carried the twins off with a gentle concern that pleased me, despite all their squawking for Unca Turko to let them watch the fight.

Turko the Shield, a mighty Khamorro whose superb body and muscles could break men and destroy armed and armored foemen, felt that altogether sensible desire to place as much distance as he could between himself and a couple of wizards about to do each other mischief.

This quarrel appeared to me to be the outcome of the perfectly natural friction to be expected. Evold, who was the wisest of the wise men of my island Stromnate of Valka, shared the fears of the old when confronted by the eager zest of the young. But Evold had served me well and he ought to know he would never be cast off. Khe-Hi-Bjanching had yet to prove himself.

Turko's rumble, carrying off the younger twins, faded, and I smiled. Oh, yes here in my wonderful island of Valka in my high fortress of Esser Rarioch I could smile because I was with my Delia and my children; I

could smile even though I knew with a pang of misgiving just what the Wizard of Loh meant when he talked of an apparition, of an appearance. This, then, explained the trouble that lay on my spirit. Although I had not seen the apparition this time, I had felt it and its evil power, malefic and altogether horrible in that high palace of light and laughter.

The twin Suns of Scorpio flooded their jade and ruby lights onto the high terrace; the bees buzzed in the flowers; the whole scene in that clear limpid air was one to dizzy the senses with beauty. Young Yallan halted at the end of the terrace, the hefty jar of water on his shoulder shaking and slopping as he hesitated to dare to pass. Yallan worked in the kitchens — he was not a slave, for neither Delia nor I will allow slaves in our lands — and he was paid well. He was a man, an apim, for we did not consider the carrying of heavy jars of water up the flights of steps a girl's work. He saw me and he slopped more water.

The time for fun had gone.

"Sans, Sans," I said, stepping forward. I used a gentle voice, but they both switched around smartly, knowing just who it was who spoke to them, and instantly started in hurling their sides of the argument at me. I held up a hand. They fell at once to silence.

"For the sake of Sweet Merrilissa, let young Yallan past. He spills the water, and it is a heavy task to carry it up."

"Yes, my Prince," they said, together, looking at Yallan as though he had sprouted horns. Yallan

swallowed, walked past and turned and said, "My thanks, my Prince. Shall I call the palace guard? When two wizards . . ." He looked troubled.

"They merely riddle a puzzle, good Yallan. I thank you for your thought."

"Well, my Prince," he said, looking doubtfully at the two wizards, still standing on tiptoe and glowering at each other.

San Khe-Hi half turned his head, stared at Yallan and said with very much of a snake's hiss in his voice: "Be off, or I shall turn you into one of the little insects that crawl upon the floor!"

Yallan let out a screech and fled. He spilled drops of water as he went, but he did not drop the jar.

I said, "That was unkind, San. Unkind even if funny."

"There are important affairs of state, my Prince, that you must know—"

San Evold choked and sneezed. "Important! He wakes with a sore head from dopa and sees visions!"

"Not so, Evold. I know whereof Khe-Hi speaks. I have had visitations before, apparitions."

The Wizard of Loh nodded his head, the suns-light catching that blazing red hair and sheening brilliantly. "I told you so, you old dodderer! Go back to your chemicals and your cayferm and your silver boxes!"

But San Evold Scavander was not the wisest wise man in all Valka, just to be foisted off by a youngster, even if that young man was one of the famed and feared

Wizards of Loh. He looked at me closely and he no longer sneezed.

"You speak sooth, my Prince. I know that. Then I would like to know more — all there is to tell. For there must be danger here." Then, unable to resist a last dig at Bjanching, he added: "For if danger threatens in Valka, I would not like to repose much confidence in this young famby, for all he claims to be a Wizard of Loh."

"I'll show you!" began Bjanching.

I silenced them.

"Tell me what you have seen, San. All of it. And quickly."

He knew that tone of voice. As you know I had picked up this Wizard of Loh in the island of Ogra-gemush, when Delia and Merle and Bjanching and I had been put to the test of the two doors by that unhappy King Wazur of Ogra-gemush. He had heard me and he had seen me in very different circumstances from these wonderful surroundings of Esser Rarioch, so he answered up quickly and succinctly.

"I awoke with the sure knowledge that a Wizard of Loh in lupu had appeared here. I could sense the locus. I saw him, not a strong manifestation; but I know he was evil."

"Aye," I said. "Aye. Unless I am mistaken that is the manifestation of the Wizard of Loh called Phu-si-Yantong."

Bjanching drew in his breath with a hiss. I had spoken to him of Yantong, enough to acquaint him with that devil's evil intentions toward not only me and my

family here in Valka, but also of his insane ambition to rule the whole continent of Havilfar and the island Empire of Vallia also, of which my Delia's father was Emperor.

"The malefic force was great," said Bjanching. He was a young man, the only young Wizard of Loh I had seen up to then. Sometimes his spells did not work. He was eager and willing to learn, and highly contemptuous of those who put no store by his powers. "He was in lupu at a great distance."

"The greater the distance the better," I said. Lupu is that trancelike state into which the Wizards of Loh can place themselves and so see and observe over distances. Phu-si-Yantong had given orders that I was not to be assassinated, for he planned to use me in his evil schemes. From time to time he kept an observation on me. Now that I had my own Wizard of Loh I wondered if I might use Bjanching in more practical ways.

I looked at him. He was well aware of his enormous good fortune in being still alive and, into the bargain, of having a standing at my court in Esser Rarioch.

"Tell me, San. Is it possible to counter these intrusions in some way?"

"Yes, Prince," he said quickly. Too quickly, for his face clouded and he thought, then said: "It depends on the strength of the wizard."

"He is very powerful. With no disrespect to you, I hazard the guess he is the most powerful Wizard of Loh outside Loh itself, at least as far as I can judge."

"Then I can set up a defense which will slow him down. I can fool him, for a space. After that . . ."

"He has purely physical ambitions. He wishes, quite insanely, to assume powers of overlordship in as many countries and nations as he can contrive. I think that weakens him."

All this time San Evold had been spluttering and sneezing away in a minor key. Now he burst out: "Well, by Vox! Why do you not take a great armada and crush him, my Prince?"

I smiled. "The question is, San, where is he? What are his powers? I do not forget he is in alliance with two evil men I know: Vad Garnath of Hamal, a man who would benefit the whole of Kregen by dying, and the Katakis Strom, the personification of devilment."

"Katakis." Khe-Hi-Bjanching pursed his lips. "They are bad business, by Hlo-Hli!"

"Then begin at once, San. Call on my chamberlain Panshi for whatever you require. I would have my house cleansed of these visitations. One day Phu-si-Yantong may appear with a greater desire than mere observation." I turned to Evold. "And, San Evold, you would greatly oblige me by rendering assistance to San Khe-Hi."

Evold's old stained smock quivered. He sneezed. But he got out, "Right gladly, my Prince," well enough. I knew I could trust him, and he would provide a useful check on Bjanching until I was fully satisfied as to that young Wizard of Loh's credentials.

As they went off, to go by way of the long hall of the images to that lofty room given over to San Evold as a laboratory, I was pleased to see they had forgotten their quarrel. Already they were talking as wizard to wizard, in their two very different disciplines, anxious to hatch out a likely scheme to foil this Opaz-forsaken Wizard of Loh who was trying to play dirty tricks on their ruler.

I sighed. Truly, I had to be thankful to Zair for the quality of my friends and companions.

That made me itch for Seg — for Seg Segutorio had taken his wife Thelda and their children and gone flying off to pay a call on his homeland of Erthyrdrin. That was a visit long overdue. As for Inch, he was up in his Black Mountains of Vallia working like a beaver on a new dam that would bring prosperity to one of his valleys and its people.

There was nothing I could do about Seg and Inch, for I never forgot they had their own lives to lead, both being Kovs of Vallia, and for the moment there was nothing more I could do about foiling that rast of a Phusi-Yantong. So, throwing off these cares that were, after all, only dreamlike in quality, I went off to find Balass the Hawk and my eldest son Drak and see how they fared. I was most interested in Drak's education. He was growing up now, he and his twin sister Lela, and while my Delia had indicated very firmly that she fully intended to take care of Lela's education herself, it was my responsibility to see about that rapscaillon Drak. I had not smothered him with titles and honors, as so many powerful men of the Empire suffocated their sons.

Delia and I had created the rank and title of Amak in Valka. This was, in Hamal, the lowest rank of nobility. We possessed a tiny island just off the north coast of Valka, a place no more than a dwabur across and three dwaburs long. It was called Vellendur. So with a small and deliberately low-key ceremony we had created our son Drak the Amak of Vellendur. The people there were apims, a simple fisher and weaving folk, who had sent as many stalwart sons — aye, and daughters — as they could when we had freed Valka from the evil grip of the slave-masters and the aragorn.

An ample gift had seen to many of their wants and they were grateful for what had been done for them, for they had suffered when the aragorn had ridden in, powerful and haughty, to drag away their people into slavery. So now Drak was the Amak of Vellendur. I fancied he was pleased. But I'd told him in no uncertain terms that he wasn't to begin to get puffed-up ideas of his own importance, and his allowance was kept very low. Delia handled that; I felt it was perhaps a trifle too low and so from time to time I would slip him a handful of valens, or buy him a zorca colt or a stavrer pup. When Delia found out she was angry, but I thought that Drak was learning the lessons he must learn for life not only on Kregen but on any world where men traffic together and there are lords and those who are not lords.

Balass the Hawk, that fierce hyr-kaidur, was giving Drak all the benefits of the higher arts of swordsmanship as it affected Balass. He'd been a hyr-kaidur in the

arena of Hyrklana with me and was a supreme secutor. This meant he understood the ways of sword and shield. For others of the arts of war we went to others of my friends and companions.

So, going down the stairs that led to the walled-in sandy enclosure where Balass sweated away, I paused, looking out under the steaming rays of the twin suns.

I felt shock.

It was quick — far too quick, by Zim-Zair!

Against that opaline radiance floated a dark shadow. I saw the widespread wings, the squat head, the raked-forward talons. This bird of prey was not large enough, or shaped correctly, to be a flutduin, the superb saddle bird we in Valka were adopting slowly. This was a bird I had seen many and many a time during my life on Kregen, this planet four hundred light-years from the world of my birth, this glorious world of Kregen under Antares which held all of life I held dear.

This marvelous world of Kregen held also the Gdoinye, the messenger and spy for the Everoinye, the Star Lords.

I stared up at the silhouette of the bird and the Gdoinye flicked his wings and so dived directly for me.

My hand jerked spasmodically to the rapier scabbarded at my side. But, even then, I wondered of what use mortal steel would be against this gorgeous scarlet and gold raptor. The bird wheeled before me with a harsh and raucous cry. I knew that if anyone looked on this scene they would not see the bird, for the Star Lords, who had brought me across the interstellar gulfs,

protected their servants, although they took scant heed for my hide.

"Dray Prescott! Idiot! Fool! Onker!"

"Aye!" I shouted back. "I am all of those things, for I do spit you through!"

The bird screeched again, windblown laughter or a mere bird's cry I knew not. "You are a high and mighty man, these latter days. You are a noble, a prince, a Prince Majister, no less."

"These things have come to me through no seeking of mine." I hurled the words at the Gdoinye but I know now that I spoke of my humility with pride, with foolish pride.

"Nonetheless you hold high position here in Valka, and in Vallia, no less than in Strombor or with your clansmen of Segesthes. And, Dray Prescott, are you not also the King of Djanduin?"

"You know it, you cramp of a bird."

"You are the cramp, onker, for you forget why you were brought to Kregen at all."

"I never knew, you get-onker!"

The bird screeched again, and this time, I swear, the mocking amusement at my own stupidity sounded clearly in the cry.

"You were never meant to know. And you think you may defy the Star Lords, you puny human mortal?"

I made no reply. The Star Lords, who could hurl me away from Kregen and all I loved back to Earth four hundred light-years off through space, had never bothered themselves about my welfare, only calling on

me to perform tasks for them. But they had not troubled me for a very long time now. Although it would be foolish to say I had forgotten them, their eternal menace had drifted into the back of my mind. Now I was being reminded of my true position.

"Have I failed you yet?" I spoke quickly as the Gdoinye swerved, all a shimmer of scarlet and gold beneath that streaming opaline radiance from the twin suns.

"You fail at your peril! There is work to your hand!"

"And if I refuse?"

"You may not refuse, Dray Prescott. You are not a pawn nor yet are you the master of your fate. Think on it, Dray Prescott, think on these things."

The Gdoinye said *swod* and not pawn, but I knew damn well what he meant. But I did not know what he meant by saying I was not a pawn. I had struggled against the Star Lords in the past and felt I had gained some advantage over them; I fancied there was a great deal more to learn before I could banish them from my scheme of things.

"You are a great man, Dray Prescott, with your string of titles and your lands and money and power. The Star Lords exact strict obedience from those they select to serve their ends."

"You nurdling great onker!" I bellowed. "What are these ends and what are the Star Lords trying to do here on Kregen?"

This time I was certain the damned bird laughed at me in a great cackling cry and a ruffling of feathers. He bore up and his pinions beat widely and he soared up

and away. As I stared up after him his departing cry wafted down, hoarse and mocking.

"The Star Lords are most considerate of you, Dray Prescott. They send me to warn you, to give you time. Think how puissant are the Star Lords, and how generous!"

Then he was a mere dot against the radiance and then he was gone.

Feeling in a foul mood I went down to the sandy arena. Drak was thwacking away at Balass, making his shield gong. Every now and then Balass would reach out and touch Drak with his wooden sword, just to remind him and make him jump about a bit.

"Father!" said Drak, leaping back most agilely and turning to me. "Father! I saw a monstrous great bird, all red and gold, in the sky, making a most terrible noise."

I just stared at him.

"There was no bird, Drak," said Balass. "I saw nothing."

"No," I said, most heavily. "No, Drak. I saw nothing."

Chapter Two

Shanks against Valka

Delia was swimming when I walked into our private walled garden high on the flank of Esser Rarioch. Below the far wall the expanse of the Bay was visible, with a small portion of the city of Valkanium and ships sailing to and from the harbor with white sails burnished by the sun's glow. I stood for a while on the flags watching as Delia lazed through the water.

Every time I look at my Delia, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, my Delia of Delphond, I feel that thump of blood at my heart, that constriction of my throat. I may be accused of many things on two worlds, and if I am accused of saying the name of Delia more often than most, then I defend my right to that — no! I do not defend! I scorn anyone cloddish enough not to understand the glory and the magic and the love her name evokes — my Delia, my Delia of Strombor, my Delia of Vallia!

Thinking these savage and chauvinistic thoughts I walked down the wide shallow steps into the garden

until the flower-covered wall concealed all the vista below so that Delia and I were completely alone in our own private garden.

She saw me and waved a bare arm and dived and swam under the water to the marble edge of the pool. I waited for her and bent to lift her out while she caught me cunningly and pulled, dropping back. With a mighty splash we both went in.

I spluttered and tried to catch her, but she was eel-like, flashing, glorious, and for a while we swam and played and I forgot the cares of government and high politics and the snares and entrapments of my enemies.

That gorgeous brown hair of Delia's with those enraging chestnut highlights floated on the water as she lay on her back, kicking with her feet. She splashed me, so I splashed back, and we met, breast to breast, without struggling, and sank down into the blue water. When we came up for breath she said: "And have you seen Segnik and Velia, Dray? They both deserve a spanking for what they did to poor Aunt Katri."

"They only hid her wool, dear—"

"They must learn to behave themselves."

"Yes."

We climbed out and sat on the grass to sun ourselves dry. The glory of the suns fell on the garden and on the fairest flower within that garden — well, I will not maunder on. All this made me feel the agony of what might befall if the Star Lords called on me again. I meant to speak to Delia. But how to explain to your wife that you had never been born on the world where she

was born? How to explain that you came from a speck of light in the sky four hundred light-years away, a world that possessed only one sun? Only one moon?

How tell that on that world lived men, apims, Homo sapiens, and there were none of the other races of men that made Kregen so marvelous and horrible a place? How could she be expected to believe? One sun only? A solitary moon? Only apims? She would shake her head and laugh and push me in the pool.

I said: "I may have to go away again."

It was brutal.

She turned to me.

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Dray! Can you tell me? Long ago I made up my mind never to ask. I remember the strangeness of our first meetings, the time I spent in the Opal Palace of Zenicce, and the time you said you had spent with our clansmen. Dray! I am frightened to know, and yet, and yet I must know . . ."

"I will tell you, Delia, my heart, one day. I promise."

"And how you made yourself the Strom of Valka, and yet there was no time, for we marched through the hostile territories of Turismond, with Seg and Thelda, and that awful Umgar Stro, and—"

"Hush, hush. It will not hurt you, save for the parting."

"That is like a death."

"I know."

Banal words. But then, banal words mean so much when the hearts of those saying them tremble so in agitation and unspoken apprehension.

We spoke then of the ordinary familiar things of our life, those items of consuming importance to us. Segnik and Velia must be spoken to. Lela was to visit friends in Quivir, where that rip Vangar Riurik, the Strom owing allegiance to me as the Kov of Zamra, was throwing a party. For Drak I had other plans, and as I spelled them out Delia nodded, her sweet face downturned and her hair spreading in a glowing brown and golden flood. She knew from our experiences together that what I suggested was not only sensible, it would give Drak the best of all possible chances on this terrible world of Kregen. We spoke of the new watercourses to be sculpted into the gardens, and I slowly suggested that we change the plans to a pump to bring water up higher still, a wind-driven pump, so the kitchen staff might be relieved of one burden. Delia agreed at once.

She lay back, glanced under the suns and rubbed her bare tanned stomach. "I am hungry."

"Yes, and I have a meeting with my Elders after the meal . . ."

"After! Why didn't you invite them?"

"I wanted to be with you and the twins."

"Oh."

So we stood up and, our arms around each other, went slowly up out of that scented garden back into the high fortress of Esser Rarioch and, after one of the

essential meals of Kregen, got to the business of running the country.

There was much to discuss but I will not weary you with a recounting of the measures we took, for although they were of consuming interest to me then — and still are, by Zair! — they were much of the stuff of government in many places and worlds, I dare say. Zamra was still giving us a little trouble over the question of slaves. I ruled — if that is not too strong a word to use — from my palace of Esser Rarioch in Valkanium, the capital of Valka, not only Valka herself, but Zamra and the other islands also. These included Can Thirda. So far no one had agreed on a new name for the island since it had been pacified after the troubles and then given to me as a gift by the Emperor. I had vetoed Prescottdrin and Dray-drin, regarding the latter as downright ugly. I thought then that I would never have a land named after me, in which I was wrong, as you shall hear. I wanted Deliadrin. My word carried much weight, of course, the chief opponent being Delia herself.

She rather fancied Can Drak, but then again perhaps Leladrin would be nice, or maybe . . . and she would pause and put her chin on her fist and gaze around the table, her laughing eyes sizing us up, one by one, until those solid, respectable — aye, and some ruffianly too! — men of mine would shuffle their feet and then, despite all, smile broadly in response. I think we had a good life then. I know it. I knew, very positively, that I did not wish to leave.

So we discussed and decided on the cares of statecraft until a messenger burst in, wild-eyed, disheveled, thrusting past the guards who had the sense to let him pass.

"My Prince!" he bellowed. Blood stained down his face, brown and cracked, oozing where the sweat ran across the bright wound. "Leem Lovers! They have razed Fossheim! The village burned — burned—" He staggered and would have fallen but a guard caught him and quickly carried him to a seat.

Delia brought wine herself. He swallowed painfully. "My Princess—"

"What of Fossana?" I said. I spoke more roughly than I intended, for the man braced up in the seat staring with wild eyes.

"The island—" He choked and swallowed and began again. "We fought. There were ten of us, ten and a Deldar — lookouts — we fought — Deldar Nath the Shiv — they were devils, devils! Fishheads! They cut us down!"

Tom Tomor ti Vulheim, an old blade comrade and a man with whom I had happily fought when we took Valka from those damned aragorn, was already running for the door, the sword on his hip banging. He was yelling. Tom, whom I had made take the name of Tomor from the battle we had fought under Tomor Peak, and who was the Elten of Avamar, was now the general of my armies of Valka. I could trust him to take what were the immediately necessary measures against these fishheads, these weirdly repellent diffs sailing around the

curve of the world from the other grouping of continents and islands of Kregen to rape and plunder and burn.

The full significance of this latest assault was not lost on us. We were to the north of the equator, and the Leem Lovers sailed up generally from the south, to attack the continent of Havilfar and its associated islands down there. They had penetrated to the north of Havilfar and over to the west up the Hoboling Islands. For them to have come this far north could only mean they had stepped up their activity. Why they had done so still remained a mystery. Our immediate task was to drive them back and prevent their making a base on the sweet little island of Fossana.

Delia glanced at me and I saw that she was moved.

There was more than mere agony over the despoiling of one of the islands which looked to us for protection. For the island of Fossana, to the south and east of the island of Valka, had been marked out by me as so charming and delightful a spot that the title of Amakni of Fossana should be the proud title of our daughter Lela, to match her twin brother Drak. But Delia had put a slender finger to her lips and shaken her head and said, "Not yet, my great grizzly graint of a husband. You always rush into things headlong. Let Drak have the glory for a space, for he will . . ." And then she had paused and bit her lip.

So I finished for her: "One day, if we were ordinary people, he would take my place."

But, speaking thoughtlessly, she had forgotten that by virtue of a dip in the Pool of Baptism in the River Zelph of far Aphrasöe, she and I were assured of a thousand years of life.

The fuller implications of that situation must wait their rightful place in this telling of my life on Kregen.

For now Delia was indicating to me that, had we let Lela become the Amakni of Fossana, she might have been there now, when the shanks came in their swift strange craft. She might have . . .

I said, "We must drive them out of Fossana rapidly. I believe they seek a secure base here." I looked down on the swod and his blood-caked face. "You have done well to reach here. Your name?"

"Barlanga, my Prince. I took our patrol flier. I ran from them — I flew away—" He choked and then got it out. "My comrades were dead. I was the last. I should have—"

"No, Barlanga. You did the right thing. Now we know and may fall on these devil shanks with great force."

Then I was out of the conference chamber and yelling.

Very few burs after that the fliers took to the air, all the airboats crammed with fighting men, raging to hurl these hated shanks, these evil Leem Lovers, these fishheads, back into the sea where they belonged.

"We were slow, by Vox!" Vangar ti Valkanium, my chief of fliers, grumbled away as he gripped the rail of the high deck, peering over the head of the timoneer at

the controls. Men massed forward on the main deck of the flier, armed and armored men, raging to get at the shanks. This flier was one we had acquired in the old days and so far she had failed us less often than others. Those fliers I had taken from Hamal, built for the Hamalians themselves, formed an elite squadron and they were well ahead with Tom Tomor in command.

I fretted at the delay, but I said, "We must have sure knowledge before we attack, Vangar. The onslaught on Fossana could easily be a ruse. These devil fishheads are not fools."

"You are right, Majister. I meant we were slow assembling and forming and taking to the air."

My ugly old face does not smile easily when I am not with Delia and the children. "We did well, Vangar, and you know it. Does the title of Elten then sit so heavily on you?"

"You have created me an Elten, my Prince; that is the least of my worries."

The air streamed past, whirling the banners and pennons high, blowing the bright arbora feathers in helmets into riotous color. Up there on a gilded staff my flag flew, the yellow cross on the scarlet ground, that battle flag fighting men call Old Superb. It felt good to have that war banner flying there. Ahead the sky remained clear and blue and the sea below lapped deep and calm. Ahead lay horror and battle and sudden death.

The parting with Delia had been brief, for I had kissed her and then run to don my trappings of war. She

had insisted I wear armor, and not only to please her but because it was a sensible precaution I wore a breast and back. The short scarlet cape flared in the wind of our passage. The old scarlet breechclout was wrapped securely and pulled in with a broad plain lesten-hide belt with a dull silver buckle. I do not, as you know, care to have straps around my chest or shoulders, and generally hang my varied collection of swords from whatever number of belts is necessary around my waist. I had a rapier and main-gauche of fine Vallian manufacture. That particular sword which Naghan the Gnat, a superb armorer, and I had made in imitation of a Krozair longsword hung scabbarded down my back under the cape. These were weapons enough, but in addition I had belted on a fine thraxter that had come into my possession after the Battle of Jholaix. As for headgear, I wore a plain steel cap with a rim of trimmed ling fur and with a rather more flaunting scarlet tuft of feathers than I would ordinarily relish. The thing had a most Tartar air about it, but Delia had insisted I wear some helmet, and the tall scarlet tufts of feathers would show my men where I was.

That made me glance at Turko, massive and muscled, where he stood with the enormous shield he would bear in action to protect me. Where Turko the Shield went, men knew, there went Dray Prescott, Prince Majister of Vallia, Strom of Valka.

As the aerial armada pressed on I had time to consider, somewhat ruefully, that Valka's own fleet of great sailing fliers could not hurtle across the wind as we were

doing. I had assigned them to defense of the island. One day I must return to Havilfar and go to Hamal, that puissant Empire under its evil ruler Thyllis, who was now crowned Empress, and discover the final secrets of the silver boxes that powered, uplifted and directed the fliers.

Our fleet of airboats pressed on. Now we flew over the scattering of islands called the Nairnairsh Islands, from the huge numbers of nairnair birds that made of every rocky headland a cawing, fluttering colony of white and brown feathers. I could see a few small ships sailing, fishermen, local traders, and I looked — thankfully in vain — for a sight of the tall, wing-like banded sails of the shanks.

"Not far now, my Prince."

Balass the Hawk stood at my side, fully armored, his visor thrown up, grim and yet splendid, with his hawklike black face a great comfort to me.

The wind bluster cracked Old Superb above our heads. The suns glittered from armor and weapons. I turned and, looking ahead, said, "Not long now, Balass."

In those days I felt no admiration for the true courage of the shanks, those fishheads who sailed in their superb craft around the curve of the world, sailing from their grouping of continents and islands to sack and destroy the fair cities of our continental grouping of Paz. These shanks, these Leem Lovers, were superb seamen. Yet I knew, as an old sailor, that after their immense voyage across the open sea they would need a secure base, a good anchorage, a place to careen and

refurbish their ships, a place to get their breath back after the voyage. Fossana would be such a place. They must not be allowed to make a base so close to Valka . . .

"We must stop them here," I said, still looking across the sea, willing the volder to fly faster and bring us to the battle quickly. "They must not be allowed a chance to fester here."

A voice spoke at my back, a voice that made me go cold from the very first syllables.

"We will fight them, Father, and we will win!"

Slowly I turned around.

Young Drak — my son — Drak — stood there in brave panoply, all scarlet and gold, staring up at me with a set and defiant expression across his face. He knew what he had done. He had no fear of the terrible shanks, but he was most uneasy about my reaction.

With him — Delia!

She smiled at me.

My heart leaped. She wore a scarlet breechclout, a breast and back, and a helmet very much like the one she had insisted I wear. She carried her rapier and main-gauche scabbarded to her slender waist, and I knew how well she could use them, the Jiktar and the Hikdar.

"Delia," I said. "You should not have allowed him."

"He is like you, Dray. A wild leem. And is this not to be his portion in life?"

"Aye."

Oby stood there also, accoutered, smiling away at me, relishing his part in the coming battle. As a young rip he had a most dubious effect on Drak. Young Oby

had mended much of his wild ways when he had been my assistant in the arena; now his passion was all for vollers and the mysteries of aerial navigation, but it was clear he intended to get into the coming fight.

"And Naghan the Gnat?"

"I am here!" shouted Naghan and, in truth, there he was, loaded down with choice specimens from his own armory, smiling away like a loon. I shook my head.

"Mad, the lot of you . . ." I looked past Naghan. "And you, Tilly, you are here also."

"Yes, my Prince," said Tilly, her glorious golden fur glowing in the light of the Suns of Scorpio, for Tilly was a most delicious little Fristle fifi.

A mewling and harshly screeching roar told me that Melow the Supple had also come with us. I stared at Melow and the ferocious manhound stretched her neck up, then put out a fearsomely clawed hand to keep her son Kardo from beginning one of the interminable fights he was always into with Drak. Well, I welcomed Melow and Kardo, for the jiklos are terrible and ferocious, mighty in their strength. Although really human beings, they have been changed so that they run on all fours and possess the fighting ferocity of the leem.

"Melow, your son Kardo will be with Drak?"

"Yes, Dray Prescott. For that is where he wills he should be."

"And you will be with the Princess Majestrix."

Melow lolled her red tongue between those horrific jagged teeth, and I felt a little more easy. Mind you, once I had this circus home I would let them know just what

my true thoughts were on this foolhardy rushing into danger. Didn't they understand the sheerly awful power of the shanks? Didn't they realize they could all be killed?

A lookout shouted from forward and I swung around to look ahead. A cloud hung in the sky athwart our passage, a cloud that must have grown with incredible swiftness, for only murs before the sky had been clear.

A dun shadow swept across the glittering sea below and in an instant we plunged into the cloud. Dank tendrils of vapor brushed us, clinging and unpleasant. Vision was reduced so that I could see only those faces near me; beyond the quarterdeck the ship vanished.

Shouts and yells arose. That cloud — how could it have formed so quickly?

The voller jerked. I knew that feeling. The flier lurched and skidded sideways. Her nose went down. We were falling.

"Those Opaz-forsaken cramphs of Hamal!" yelled Vangar, incensed that once again his duty as chief of fliers was to preside over a crash.

"Silence!" I bellowed.

In the ensuing hush we heard the wind bluster and roar as we fell. Slowly the haze cleared and we dropped free of the cloud. I looked up. The rest of our fleet was winging swiftly on, arrow-straight for Fossana. Now it would all be up to Tom Tomor, and it would be to him the responsibility would fall. I looked down. An island below showed creamy surf breaking on a beach. Massive

trees crowded close, and there were at least three village clearings visible. Men were running below. Men like myself, apims, and also weird forms with grotesque fish heads, scaled and armored, running with vicious tridents flashing in the suns, weapons stained with the blood of my people.

"Shanks!"

The voller hit the sand. Ahead the wooden palisade of a village offered shelter. Everyone leaped from the stranded voller, running fleetly for the village. Heads appeared over the stockade.

A flight of arrows rose and I cursed. Then I realized the arrows curved away, falling into a body of fishheads who were trying to cut us off.

"Run!" I bellowed.

Straight for the village gate we raced. The valves were dragged open. We tumbled through the opened portal and the villagers slammed the heavy lenken logs back with a thunk. Iron bars dropped. The headman came running up, distraught, wringing his hands. Simple fisher folk these, used to landing fine fat fish in their nets, and now they faced man-sized fishheads raging at them, armed with tridents, swords and bows, their plunder from the sea revenging itself horribly on them.

He knew me.

"Majister! Majister! Monsters — they—"

"Man the walls! Keep your heads down!" I shook his shoulder. "It will be all right, Koter, all right."

"Yes, Majister, yes — but the fishheads—"

We could hold this place until my fliers returned. We must hold this place! Nothing else would do. Nothing.

The Leem Lovers were in force, roaring in to attack, hurling spears and tridents, shooting arrows. My men replied with the cool precise shooting Seg Segutorio had drilled into them. These men were Valkan Archers, but they used the great Lohvian longbow and they could outshoot the compound reflex bows of the shanks. Spare supplies of shafts had been brought from the flier, for Jiktar Orlon Llodar in command of the regiment was an officer in whom I reposed confidence. He did not have his full regiment with him, for half had been embarked on another flier, packed in like fish in a barrel. With three pastangs of sixty men each we must hold off an unknown number of fishheads.

I leaped up onto the parapet around the stockade. The village possessed a stockade because these islands were often the scene of raids from Pandahem, or from a dissident nation of Segesthes beyond Zenicce, or, in the old days, from the slavers and aragorn. Along the beach the voller lay stranded, and shanks were already clambering and running there. I cursed. From the trees other shanks were running. The devils must have beached their ships and marched overland. There had not been a sign of a shank ship as we crash-landed.

A circuit of the stockade brought me back to the parapet over the main gate. This faced along the beach, as I have said, and not out to sea or inland. Defensive considerations dictated that choice. A small protected

harbor held a few fishing boats, little better than dories. The circuit of the walls had shown me we could hold. A stream trickled down from the forest so we would have water, if the Leem Lovers did not divert or dam the stream.

"Now, Jiktar," I said brusquely to Orion Llodar. "Now is the chance to show that the Second Regiment of Valkan Archers can do better than the First."

Before Llodar could answer, young Drak, who had followed me around most carefully, sniffed. "I would like very much to see that," he said. I glared at him. As you know, Drak is the Hyr-Jiktar — colonel in chief — of the First Regiment of Valkan Archers. Lela was Hyr-Jiktar of the Second.

Orion Llodar smacked his buff-sleeved arm across his breastplate. He wore a bob there. "We shall, my Prince, and with due respect to Prince Drak, outshoot the finest the First could offer this day."

"I believe you. These yetches of fishheads will try to fool us. They will feint an attack on one flank and then drive in on another. All faces of the stockade must be kept under observation at all times. Have a party of swordsmen handy to rush to the threatened wall. And watch out for their Opaz-forsaken tridents. They are vicious."

"My Prince!" he bellowed, in the old soldierly way.

Barbaric and savage are my warriors of Valka and they love little better than a rousing fight, but we had been knocking drill and discipline into them. They would have full need of all their courage and skill now.

But we could hold. With determined and skillful leadership we could defy the Leem Lovers. I was determined enough, Zair knows, and as to skill . . . well, this bore the appearance of a militarily simple defense of the fortified place. If they tried to burn us out . . . I bellowed for the headman, one Remush the Trident, for he was a noted fisherman, and got him to organize fire fighting parties of his people with all the buckets and containers they could find. This was the village of Panashti on the island of Lower Kairfowen. I fancied these names would be remembered henceforth, filling men's mouths.

"I wish, my Prince, that my pastangs were at full strength." Jiktat Llodar stared with venom at the shanks as they massed at the forest edge.

"All the more glory, Jiktat, for those who are here."

That was cheap enough, Zair knows, but it fitted the occasion.

The gate looked sturdy in construction, with square towers and a walkway across the gap. "Here, Planath," I said, pointing. "Raise the standard here."

Planath Pe-Na, my standard-bearer, was a Pachak and a man of exceptional virtues. He rammed the standard pole into a crevice in the wood and then lashed it upright. Dead or alive, Planath would stay by the standard. I turned to Kodar ti Vakkansmot, the chief of my corps of trumpeters. "Give a few good bracing calls, Kodar. Rouse the blood in 'em!"

"Aye, Majister."

The lilting peals of the trumpet sounded over the small stockaded village of Panashti on the island of Lower Kairfowen. I fancied the men would brace up at the sound, grip their weapons more firmly, glare the more murderously at their antagonists.

The blueness stole in quietly. It muffled the bright, brilliant sounds of the trumpet. It wrapped its baleful coils around me. I saw the blue radiance churning everywhere. The world was slipping away, I was falling, the whole world turning into the semblance of a giant Scorpion, come from the Star Lords to carry me far and far away.

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

Alan Burt Akers is a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer. Bulmer published over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction.

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Notes

- [1] *Dbs*: dwaburs per bur. A dwabur is five miles and a bur is forty minutes. Dbs is the usual measurement for fliers. Land or sea transport speed is more often given in ubs, ulms per bur. An ulm is about 1,500 yards. [A.B.A.]
- [2] See *Warrior of Scorpio*, Dray Prescott #3. Prescott's account of how he escaped the Phokaym and crossed the Klackadrin on foot is, unfortunately, lost. [A.B.A.]
- [3] *Jernu*: This word for *lord* belongs to the Zairians and is not often used by Prescott. It equates with the Vallian *Jen* and the Hamalian *Notor*. Its correct use is clear in this context. *A.B.A.*
- [4] *Weng da*: Who goes there?
- [5] *Roz*: title of nobility similar to outer oceans' *Kov*, *Duke*.