

**DRAY PRESCOT: 23**

# **BEASTS OF ANTARES**

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writing as  
**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**A Mushroom eBook**



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**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**a Mushroom eBooks sample**

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First published by Daw Books, Inc. in 1980.

Originally published as written by Dray Prescott,  
as told to Alan Burt Akers.

This Edition published in 2007 by Mushroom eBooks, an  
imprint of Mushroom Publishing, Bath, BA1 4EB, United  
Kingdom

[www.mushroom-ebooks.com](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com)

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## The Spikatur Cycle

Beasts of Antares is the first volume of the Spikatur Cycle chronicling the history of Dray Prescott on the marvelous and horrific world of Kregen four hundred light-years away under the red and green fires of the Suns of Scorpio. Reared in the inhumanly harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy, he has been transported to Kregen through the agencies of the Savanti and the Star Lords. Dray Prescott is a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and superbly powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage. He moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly. The portrait he presents of himself is enigmatic and attractive.

The people of the island empire of Vallia, cruelly oppressed by invaders, call on Prescott to shoulder the burden of leading them to liberty. This he has vowed to do to the best of his ability, and then thankfully relinquish the imperium, for there are other tasks set to his hands on the unforgiving and rewarding world of Kregen.

The Spikatur Cycle brings Prescott closer to the realization of many of his dreams and each book is arranged

to be read as complete in itself. He is determined to do what he feels is laid upon him; but he finds it is not so easy, particularly when the Empress Delia and his comrades are determined to keep him out of trouble. But — he is Dray Prescott, Lord of Strombor and Krozair of Zy, and that canny old leem hunter will not be prevented from buckling up the brave old scarlet breechclout and with a sword in his fist hurtling off beneath the Moons of Kregen into fresh headlong adventure.

## Chapter one

### At the Sign of the Headless Zorcaman

Naghan Raerdu was a most entertaining character. He had a remarkable penchant for laughing so much the tears squeezed out of his closed eyes and no one took much notice of what else he was doing. His face expressed habitual surprise that people never took him seriously, and his body, short, stout, robust, supported on thick waddling legs, conveyed an impression of undirected manic energy. He was apim, a member of *Homo sapiens*, with brown Vallian hair and eyes and a blobby chunk of gristle for a nose. He'd been a soldier in the Phalanx, rising from brumbyte to Relianchun. With his bright popping eyes, his highly colored cheeks, his glistening mouth from which a glass was seldom absent, he looked quite unlike what he was.

Naghan Raerdu had turned into a first-class spy.

His jolly red-faced exterior concealed the mentality more often associated with the gray, inconspicuous secret agent. And he liked to laugh.

He finished laughing now as he said, “This fellow Chuktar Mevek — leastways, that’s what he calls himself — means what he says. In a matter this important he will deal only with the emperor.”

“It’s a trap.” Turko spoke in a dismissive way, perhaps a little warm at having to state the obvious. He stretched his arms in which the sinuous muscles spoke eloquently of the enormous man-crushing power of him. He had the wrestler’s trick of emphasizing statements by physical movements. Since his elevation to the nobility he had flowered wonderfully and yet he remained a good comrade. Naghan Raerdu’s spying mission had been into Falinur, near the center of Vallia, Kov Turko’s new province.

“I think not, kov.” Raerdu spoke up stoutly. He was often called Naghan the Barrel for obvious reasons. “I took soundings.” He laid a chubby finger alongside that blob of gristle that passed for a nose.

“A trap,” repeated Turko. He half turned away, and his profile showed, keen as an eagle’s. “That unchanged villain Layco Jhansi wants to lure the emperor into his clutches by this story, and then — chop.”

“With respect, kov, this Mevek has suffered and has no love for Layco Jhansi.”

“He told you this?” Nath Karidge, that tearaway cavalry commander spoke up. He happened to be here because a new task was to be set to his capable hands.

Now his reckless face was thoughtful in the shadows under the trees. “Or — you saw for yourself?”

“Both, and yet it was the way Mevek spoke that impressed me. I have seen men’s faces when they talk like that. I was Relianchun in the First Phalanx at the Battle of Sicce’s Gates, and, after we were beat... That was a bad time for Vallia.” Naghan the Barrel did not laugh. “It is my view that Mevek speaks honestly and can do what he promises.”

The problem was a knotty one. Around the heap of tumbled ruins that had once been a pretty village, up here in the north of the province of Vindelka, the trees grew vigorously, thrusting their roots into crevices and completing the work of destruction. The streaming mingled radiance of the Suns of Scorpio fell in a muted, wavering undersea vision of green and russet gold. A short way off the animals snorted and stamped their hooves, tossing their manes. The cavalry escort waited beyond the line of trees. By the slanting rays from the twin suns the day was waning. Night would soon be here. A decision had to be made before the twin suns, Zim and Genodras, sank beneath the horizon and the first moon of Kregen, the Maiden with the Many Smiles, swam roseate and shining into the night sky.

Naghan the Barrel cocked his red face up and squinted at the position of the suns.

“Chuktar Mevek will wait for you, majister, at the Sign of the Headless Zorcaman until the hour of midnight.”

His golden beard glinting in that dappled light, his four arms and tail hand relaxed, Korero the Shield

coughed one of his dry little coughs. A magnificent golden Kildoi, a marvel with his shields, an adept of Disciplines, Korero was, like Turko, a valued comrade.

“Mevek may speak the truth,” said Korero, “but the risk is not worth taking.”

“I agree,” said Turko. “You’d be running your head into a noose.”

With a flick of his pelisse, furred and smothered in gold lace, Nath Karidge added, “Majister, the danger is too great.”

In that uncertain light they all stared at me. The scent of evening hung sweetly on the air, and insects buzzed. The zorcas snorted and stamped their hooves. Overhead the trees bowered us in shadow.

I stared back at them.

“Three of you,” I said. “Three right-roaring rapsca-lion hellions. Since when has a little danger, a few risks, bothered you?”

They each found it necessary to make immediate and finicky adjustments to their clothes or harness or weapons. I did not add, as in justice I ought, that if anyone trembled at risks taken and dangers dared, it was me. Korero the Shield, with four arms and a tail hand and an enormous competence in the midst of battle, with a dry humor and practical outlook; Turko the Shield who was now Kov Turko of Falinur, a Khamorro, a feared man who could break the strongest opponent, a man with a gently sarcastic manner; these two were good comrades, trusted friends, and right tearaways. And Chuktar Nath Karidge, the beau sabreur,

a cavalryman — no, a *light* cavalryman — who swore on Lasal the Vakka and had no great expectations of living beyond the next charge, he was here because I wanted him to put his talents to good use. And, all three, all three reckless daredevils, all cautioned me gravely, with long faces, direfully warning me of risks and dangers.

By Vox! It was enough to make a fellow laugh.

“With your permission, majister, I will have to take back an answer soon. Mevek is somewhat touchy in these matters.” Naghan the Barrel laughed his wheezing, tear-splattering laugh. “I fancy it is how he has kept his head on his shoulders for so long fighting his guerrilla actions against Layco Jhansi’s mercenaries.”

“Risks,” said Korero. He pulled his golden beard. “I do not hold with them.”

“Nor me,” said Turko.

They spoke seriously. I considered. Yes, it was true that both Korero and Turko were among the more sober headed of my boon companions. They were not as foolhardy as most, not as ready to jump in without a thought. Both had carried shields at my back in battle. Perhaps that was why they were less reckless, or perhaps their function as shield bearers to the Emperor of Vallia had made them more cautious. All the same, the humor of the situation remained.

“You say this Chuktar Mevek will deal only with me directly?”

“Yes, majister. And, in addition, he was firm on the point. We can take no more than three companions to the Sign of the Headless Zorcaman.”

“Five of us,” said Turko. “And I daresay he’ll have a little army waiting.”

“As much as any man may,” said Naghan the Barrel, and he spoke more strongly. “Chuktar Mevek has my trust.”

Nath Karidge put his fist onto the hilt of his sword. He carried a curved sword of a pattern of his own design, specially made for him. He looked at me. “If we go, majister, at least let me bring on my two half-squadrons in support.”

“Would that not be breaking faith?”

He stirred the dust with his cavalryman’s boot.

“Aye. But, by Lasal the Vakka, when you treat with rogues you must watch your back.”

The others nodded. There was no need for them to amplify. This view was one commonly held among my comrades concerning certain eventualities and certain people. What Karidge had said merely cloaked a deeper meaning.

There was no need to amplify, yet Turko said, “Honor is a precious commodity. Yet honor cannot stand in the way of our proper duty.”

I refused to allow myself to think about this at the moment. Later on I pondered the implications deeply, as you shall hear; but, right now, the decision must be taken.

And, really — and as they knew only too well — there was only one conclusion I could come to.

I said, “We go. We go now. Rather — with Naghan *I* go.”

At once, speaking all over each other, they were baying out their outrage. I calmed them.

“If you wish to accompany, you will be most welcome. But, if you think the risks too great, why, then—”

In mercy I couldn't go on. Their faces expressed the utmost consternation and chagrin and downright fury.

They knew — I trusted they knew — that I merely baited them.

In the language spoken over most of Paz, the Kregish language which had, I surmised, been imposed on the people, there are many fine terms of abuse and contempt, many resounding oaths, many expressions of love and fidelity. Some have a reasonably exact counterpart in the languages of Earth; some are purely Kregan. To call a fellow a fambly is to express your opinion of him in gentle, friendly terms, and yet you also let him know you are giving him a little stick. When, half under my breath and turning toward the zorcas, I said, “Famblys!” these men of mine knew exactly what I meant. Mind you, the oafish of two worlds might misunderstand, that seems obvious. To call a man a fambly is not the same as calling him an onker, or a hulu, or any other of the colorful names available in the Kregish tongue.

“I shall station my two half-squadrons—” began Karidge.

“No. I judge Chuktar Mevek will scout the approaches. Anything like a follow-up cavalry force — and he'll be off.”

“Quidang, majister!”

Yet, as he spoke, Karidge indicated that he might bellow out “Quidang!” — a standard acknowledgment of an order — but he didn’t like the idea at all. He was a cavalryman. It was hard for him to grasp any idea that anything at all valuable could be accomplished without the exciting jingle of harness and the onrushing stamp of hooves.

We mounted up and Karidge gave orders to the cavalry to await our return, and we set off as the suns declined. Up ahead lay a rich and fruitful land between the generous arms of a loop in the Great River, She of the Fecundity. This part of Vallia was blessed with richness; the land sent forth its goodness in thickly growing crops, in trees heavy with fruit, in grasslands where cattle grazed and grew fat. Westward on the outskirts of the semi-desert Ochre Limits the land yielded many rich minerals. This land was called Vinnur’s Garden. It lay between Falinur to the north and Vindelka to the south. It was coveted by and laid claim to by both provinces.

Just who was the rightful claimant no one now could say. I had partially solved the squabble by an arbitrary parallel dividing Vinnur’s garden in half. The locals didn’t much like the solution, but had to acknowledge there was not much else to do. Falinur had been the kovnate province of Seg Segutorio until he had relinquished it and I had appointed Turko. Vindelka was the kovnate province of Vomanus, half-brother to Delia. Both were blade comrades. Neither would press his claim against the other.

Some of the annoyance felt by the southern Falinurese against Seg for not actively advancing their claims had led, coupled with his attempts to put down slavery, to the people throwing in their lot with Layco Jhansi. Jhansi had been the old emperor's chief minister, and he had betrayed him. The plot to kill the emperor had misfired, Jhansi had fled to the safety of his own province, Vennar, to the west of Falinur, and in the Time of Troubles he had waxed strong. He had troubles on his northern borders, but just lately he had attempted to invade southward into the imperial province of Orvendel, having subjugated Vindelka. We had bested his army at the Battle of Ovalia and had subsequently campaigned successfully northward to liberate Vindelka. My projected trip to Hyrklana had perforce been postponed yet again...

So, now my spy Naghan the Barrel brought word that the people of Falinur were grown tired of Layco Jhansi.

The time was ripe to strike the blow that would free the province. All the island empire of Vallia had been in turmoil, invaded by mercenaries and reiving barbarians and by the iron legions of our rival empire, Hamal. We had won back most of the south and the midlands, and the northeast stood for us. But there was still much to do. If Turko could take over in Falinur that would be another good step forward to the final liberation of all Vallia.

The twin suns sank as we trotted past fields rich with crops. Very few lights showed from farmhouses or villages; these people had grown to live with waves of

invasion. The miracle was the land was in such good heart. We moved on, silently.

Just what we were trotting so silently into did not bear thinking of. I looked ahead at the dark squat figure of Naghan, who clamped his short legs around his zorca and hunched down with your typical infantryman's handling of a mount. After the disastrous Battle at Sicce's Gates, where the Phalanx had been upset by the clansmen, Naghan had been cut off. He had lived off the country, saved his life, kept his spirits and had kept out of the way of our enemies. In the fullness of time he had reported back. His story had interested me, and on meeting him I realized that here was a man of parts, resourceful, hardy, and like a chameleon able to survive in places where no one would expect him to last a couple of heartbeats.

He had proved ready to take employment with me, as a spy, a secret agent — the name did not matter overmuch. The interesting aspect of this was that Naghan Vanki, the emperor's chief spymaster, did not know of Naghan the Barrel or the other agents recruited in similar ways. A small corps of intelligence men was being built up, quite distinct from the large-scale organization controlled by Vanki and which served Vallia to the best of its ability in dark times and in good.

We halted on the brow of a hill where the road, dim and barely visible before the rise of the Maiden with the Many Smiles, trended down toward the shadowy and misshapen lumps of darkness that indicated a village. Not a light showed.

“Chuktar Mevek risks much in coming this far south to meet you, majister.” Naghan the Barrel wiped his face with his neckerchief, a gaudy article of red and lilac and green with brown spots. That kind of neckerchief the Kregans call a flamanch, and very useful it is, too. Usually it is fastened at the front by a brooch or a pin or a nolp, and now, having wiped his face, Naghan slid his nolp up and down as he spoke. “We are in good time. And his men have us under observation already.”

Not one of us showed the least surprise or consternation. We were old campaigners. If Mevek had not scouted the approaches and kept a lookout we would have been far more concerned.

“All the same,” said Turko, following on that line of thought. “It means we may have some difficulty if we have to pull out quickly.”

Although we had only Naghan’s assertions to guide us in this enterprise, we felt we were not going in entirely blind.

I, for one, felt confidence in Naghan Raerdu the Barrel, and his opinion was that this Chuktar Mevek would hold to his word, even if we did not reach agreement. If Naghan was wrong, why then it could easily be a quick scramble to get free...

I nudged my zorca.

“No sense in hanging about.”

We rode slowly down the path which glimmered into smokey grayness as the first moon lifted. The Maiden with the Many Smiles shone bleakly, it seemed to me, cutting a pallid sickle in the sky. Soon she would take on

her usual pinkish hue and the shadows would warm to a russet fuzz. We rode on.

This little village was called Infinon of the Crossroads, and the inn with the sign of the Headless Zorcaman squatted in one angle of the cross. The other houses were fast shuttered. The stillness and the ghostly moonlight were broken as men rode out with a clatter, casting bars of shadow across the road, to surround us. A few quick words between their leader and Naghan and we went on, riding up to the inn and dismounting.

A warm fug of ale fumes and cooking and sweat met us as we entered. The place presented the appearance one would expect from a small village in a prosperous countryside, and the ale would be good.

The floor was swept clean. That floor was made from sawn planks, not beaten earth. Pots glittered. The enormous fireplace gaped black and empty, save for a brass jar filled with dried flowers. The men who escorted us and the others who awaited our coming wore ragged clothing of a raffish, free-flowing kind. They were much burdened with weapons. Almost all were apims. They sat about on the settles and benches, and I surmised they would keep quiet as their chief spoke. If there was trouble — I gave them a glance that appeared casual and which totted them up and assessed them.

Twenty. Twenty ruffians, guerilleros, as ready to slit your throat as to greet you with a pleasant Lahal.

One of them, a fellow who wore a gaudy sash of a color I took to be plum, so dirty and festooned with gold

lace was it, walked forward. His face looked like an old boot. His hair was lank. But he smiled.

“Llahal, koters,” he said, giving us the name of gentlemen of Vallia. “The Chuktar will be here in but five murs.”

Karidge would have started hotly demanding to know why the emperor should be kept waiting, but I silenced him. I looked about, saw a long lanky lout with his feet on a bench. Walking over, I pushed his legs off, so that his heavy Vallian boots crashed to the floor, and sat on the bench. I took off my wide-brimmed hat, placed it on the table, and said, “I will wait five murs.”

As a mur is shorter than a terrestrial minute, the ball was, as they say, in Mevek’s court.

The long lanky lout glowered, but he said nothing and straightened himself up. The eyes of the others in the taproom — by Krun! You could feel them, like a pack of drills.

My companions remained standing. The fellow with the unmentionable sash and the face like an old boot swallowed.

“I am Vanderini the Dagger. I will fetch the Chuktar—”

He went out through a rear door in something of a hurry.

Karidge chuckled nastily. A chuckle can express many profound emotions.

Turko and Korero looked as though offensive smells were obfuscating the pleasures of life. Naghan the Barrel

let one of his wheezing laughs shake him up, the tears pouring from his eyes. He clapped his belly.

“I am parched. Will no one fetch a stoup, for the sweet sake of Mother Dikkana, who brought forth the saint who gave us ale?”

Someone laughed — that was easy to do with Naghan the Barrel — and tankards were forthcoming. I sipped.

Four and a half murs, all that took. On the fifth, as the calibrated clepsydra on its shelf above the mantelpiece showed, Chuktar Mevek walked into the taproom.

To sum him up in a single glance would be easy, and probably completely wrong.

This Mevek, who called himself a Chuktar, the equivalent of a brigadier general, was quite clearly hard as nails, hard-bitten, hard as old leather. He was strongly built, with a flat, impassive face in which his brown Vallian eyes were deeply set. He looked like his men, save that he wore more ornamentation. Yet I judged that to have accomplished what he had, in raising so many people willing to stand against Layco Jhansi and his mercenaries, he had a spark, a charisma, a touch of that genius Kregans call the yrium. He looked at me carefully. He reminded me by that stare, by his impassivity, of a wild animal in the moments before it leaps.

Then: “Llahal, majister. I will not give you the full incline as all emperors are due. I hear you have banished such flummery.”

“You are right. Llahal.”

“They say the kov who ran off is a friend of yours.”

“You are right and wrong.”

He merely lifted one dark eyebrow.

“Kov Seg Segutorio is a friend of mine. He did not run off.”

“He was not here when—”

“I have heard this before. It is unworthy of you if you wish to prove your friendship. Kov Seg Segutorio was about business for the empire — for the old emperor — and those to whom he confided the care of Falinur failed him. He did not fail them.”

“You fight for your friends—”

I broke in. “This wastes time. The past is dead.” Well, that is not strictly true... “What do you wish to tell me?”

Now he did not exactly lose that coolness, but he reached out and fingered one of the many loops of precious gems encircling his neck and depending on his harness. His eyebrows drew down.

“Perhaps it is you, majister, who has somewhat to tell me.”

I stood up.

“Shilly-shallying, Mevek, is for those who have all the time in the world. I do not. There are mercenaries, reiving rasts, cramphs from Hamal, abroad in Vallia. The people called me to be their emperor and free them from tyranny. That I will do, although I did not seek the task. If you can help me win back Falinur, all well and good. If you are powerless, then we have nothing to say to each other.”

He digested that. Then, as I had suspected he would, he picked out the item that touched him most nearly.

“Powerless? Me? Oh, no, majister, I am not powerless.”

“Do not think these men here can stop me from leaving.” And here I put on a little of the bravado I detest and which, sometimes, serves well. Sometimes it is a disaster. “I do not think you could stop me if you had twice as many men,”

He wiggled those eyebrows of his again, and I came to the conclusion that, impassive as his flat face was, those eyebrows were weather indicators to his state of mind.

“I have been told you are Jak the Drang.”

“Yes.”

“Then I believe you.”

I nodded. “Then we understand each other.” I pulled my riding cloak off and tossed it on the table. I sat down. “I do not think you are powerless. Now, let us Rank our Deldars and see what we can agree.”

At that familiar opening challenge from the famous game of Jikaida, Mevek, nodding in his turn, visibly relaxed. We had sparred. His amour propre had been maintained. Now we could get down to cases.

His story followed the lines I expected. When Jhansi’s mercenary troops deteriorated in quality with the hiring of more and more of them from dubious sources, the country folk began to suffer. That was a normal risk run by any commander who hired mercenaries. The defeats in the south were almost matched by unhappy encounters with the Racters in the north.

The Racters, once the most powerful political party in Vallia, were now penned in the far northwest where a concentration of their estates gave them a base. Jhansi fought them and the battle did not go well.

“What you are saying is now that Jhansi’s fortunes are at a low ebb, you wish to change sides.”

His eyebrows flared.

“No, majister, not so. Many of us have opposed the Kov of Vennar from the moment he crossed our borders.”

“As I am the emperor, you may understand that Layco Jhansi is no longer the Kov of Vennar. His province lies under an interdict. His head is forfeit to the empire. He is a traitor.”

“Just so. But he still runs his kovnate, whether he is kov or not, and he still sends his damned mercenaries to keep us down.”

I said, “You have intelligence of the battles we have won? You know our armies have cleared Vindelka?”

“Aye.”

“Then you must realize that the time will soon come when we will march north, through this very spot, and go on into Falinur and west into Vennar, and Layco Jhansi will swing very high indeed.”

In a low tone, almost surly, he said, “You will need my help.”

“I welcome your help, Mevek. As to needing it — that may be a different matter.”

Vanderini the Dabber, he with the sash and the face like an old boot, stepped up. That face wore a scowl.

“By Vox! But this new emperor has a stiff neck! If I did not hate Jhansi so much, why—”

“There will be a place for you, Vanderini,” I told him, without a smile. “In the new Falinur after we have

liberated the province. At least—” And here I judged the time had come to apprise these desperadoes of their new lord. “At least, if the new kov I have appointed listens and approves of you.”

They swung to glare at me on this.

“New kov?” growled out Mevek. “What new kov?”

“Kov Seg Segutorio is about vital business for the empire. He has relinquished Falinur. Your new lord is appointed. He is Kov Turko, whom you will obey in all things.”

Now, as you know, the rights and the law on Kregen regarding titles and property and inheritance are not quite the same as on this Earth. Necessarily, they must differ.

Mevek hoisted his eyebrows. I began to suspect that he was well aware of his eyebrows, and used them on purpose, to fool credulous folk into thinking they could read his mind.

“If this Kov Turko proves himself—”

“He will.”

“Then we will give him the welcome that is his due. But I recall the old kov, Naghan Furtway, and his nephew Jenbar. They had little love for the emperor. Their seed still grows here.”

Perhaps this was the root cause of the disaffection in Falinur. The past is not dead, its tendrils twine and choke the new bright growths...

“You know Naghan Furtway proved a traitor and fled overseas. He is allied with the Empress Thyllis of Hamal,

and that mad woman seeks only evil for Vallia. You know.”

“I know.”

“So that Kov Turko will bring a new light and spirit to Falinur. You will see.”

Now, all this time Turko had been standing there silently. I could see him. His face, that handsome Khamorro face, remained impassive. But the muscles in his arms roped and jumped. He would wait just so long for me to fiddle around like this and then, why, then Turko the Shield would start to show these hardy, near-bandit guerrillas that he was their new kov and they'd better get to like it...

Korero the Shield stroked his beard with his upper left hand in a most judicious way. He had kept his two lower arms well inside his cloak, and his tail with its powerful grasping hand was tucked up out of the way, so that he did not look like a diff but could pass as an apim like us. Now he smiled.

“It seems to me we are all agreed, but we cannot reconcile ourselves.” His voice carried that tinge of mockery he knows so well how to intimate; goads to infuriate his listeners.

Mevek almost bit.

“Agree! Of course we agree that Jhansi must be put down, but as for this new kov—” And then he caught himself, and that dull, impassive look settled again on his features.

“Good,” I said brightly. “When do you think the Kov of Falinur should show himself to the people? I do not think he is a man to wait until after the victory.”

“Indeed, no,” put in Korero.

Turko said nothing.

Mevek said, “If he is the kov for us he will lead us in battle. I have Freedom Fighters, in hiding. We lack weapons of quality, but we fight. Send for this new Kov Turko and bid him join us — if he dares!”

Turko opened his mouth. I lifted my hand.

“We will send weapons. Our armies will march north. They will be commanded by Kov Turko of Falinur. You will send word to your people. They will rise. Together, we will sweep Jhansi and his mercenaries back to Vennar. Then...”

I had overlooked a point. Not all the Falinurese felt the same fierce detestation of Jhansi shared by the men in that room.

As Turko looked at me, his head up, his handsome face verging on a scowl — for I sensed he was not completely sure of what I was about — I went on in a heavy voice, for what I had to say did not please me.

“When we beat Jhansi’s men at Ovalia, they were led by a damned Hamalese, a Kapt Hangrol, and by Jhansi’s toady, Malervo Norgoth.”

“Hangrol has gone back to Hamal—”

“Poor devil,” I said, whereat they looked at me strangely. They did not know the kind of punishment the Empress Thyllis handed out to people who failed her.

“And Tarek Malervo Norgoth skulks somewhere in Vennar. He is out of favor, serve the rast up stewed black.”

“We were attacked by hordes of screaming savages — yet they were once ordinary citizens of Vallia. This is sorcery.” I did not miss the flicker of fear in many faces. “This displeases me. Can you contain this? Can you handle these misguided fanatics? Will you succumb to the sorcery of Rovard the Murvish?”

This did not go down at all well.

Many were the protestations, many the oaths, many the knotty fists thumped on tables. But these men had felt the breath of fear. Rovard the Murvish, an initiate in the Brotherhood of the Sorcerers of Murcroinim, an adept of real powers, had almost trapped me in a web of sorcery. Jhansi had a trenchant tool in this sorcerer.

At last Mevek said over the hubbub, “We have seen the misguided men this wizard has spelled. Yes, they fight like crazy animals. But, they may be killed.”

This, then, was the nub of my displeasure.

We talked for a space, with Turko growing more and more tense and showing every symptom of blowing up, quite unlike his usual distant mockery of me. I inquired about various people whose welfare in Falinur obsessed me, including Lol Polisto and his wife Thelda and their child, and learned he was known in this part by reputation; but his guerrilla deeds took place dwaburs away across the hills. The problem of the men under the thrall of thaumaturgy, fighting like maniacs for Jhansi, would have to be faced. When we fought and met them

in battle, they would, as Mevek had so crudely said, be slain if we were to free the country.

“At the least,” I said, “you can always smell Rovard the Murvish a bowshot off.”

They ventured hesitant laughs at this. Sorcerers, to the ordinary man, are no joking matter.

A man wearing a fur cap poked his head in the doorway and said, “Nath says there are men skulking about to the north of the village.”

My first thought was that I’d misjudged it badly when I’d tallied Mevek’s band at twenty. He still had outposts.

Mevek jumped up at once.

“That will be that damned rast Macsadu and his foul masichieri.” Masichieri are very low-class mercenaries, barely better than bandits. “He has been scouring the countryside for us. Well, we owe him, and tonight he’ll bite off more than he can chew.”

Vanderini walked quickly to the door, drawing his sword. The others followed, their weapons making a fine show.

Mevek eyed me, “It is best, majister, if you remain here where you will be safe. Macsadu does not know I have more men than usual, more than he expects.”

“No,” I said in a mild voice. “I do not skulk—”

“You are the emperor!” Now Mevek looked astonished, and his eyebrows formed a black bar. “Emperors do not—”

“Jak the Drang does,” I said.

He nodded, convinced at once. He jerked his head at Turko. "The stylor had best hide when the fighting begins."

Because Turko bore no weapons, Mevek had judged him to be a stylor, outside the scope of fighting men, a stylor being a man who can read and write and as a scribe carries pen and ink and paper instead of sword and spear.

Now Turko's mouth opened in earnest.

I said, "This Macsadu. I hear he is a by-blow of Jhansi's."

"Aye. A vicious man-hunter. He slew his own mother when Jhansi tired of her. Now he extorts taxes and tortures for pleasure. We have a score to settle."

Turko got out, "I'll be at your side in the fight, Mevek, and judge how you conduct yourself."

The guerrilla chief gave Turko a puzzled look, started to say something, changed his mind, said, "Please yourself, stylor. If you are chopped, do not blame me."

Nath Karidge drew that curved sword of his. "It appears to me, Mevek, that you have been lax in your scouting and have sucked us into a trap. You had no business arranging this meeting if you were being followed."

Very quickly I stopped the argument. Outside the inn the sudden sounds of combat flowered in the night. Perhaps Mevek had made a mistake; we were in for a fight and that was that.

Somewhat surlily, Mevek said, "I have enough men to thrash that cramp Macsadu, do not fear—"

Vanderini catapulted through the doorway. His old boot of a face bore a huge bloody gash. He was yelling. He twisted and slammed the door, shoving the bar across.

“Scores and scores of the bastards! They’ve tricked us!”

The noise outside faded and then increased. The door bulged. The bar broke. In a smashing welter of splinters fierce armed men thrust through. Their weapons glimmered darkly with blood.

“You stupid onker!” yelled Karidge.

He fairly hurled himself forward, shouting, “Into them before they deploy!”

Korero threw back his enveloping cloak. His four arms raked up and his tail hand curved. Steel glittered.

With a whooping rush the mercenaries charged.

In the next instant a confused and murderous struggle began across the cleanly swept floor of the taproom in the Sign of the Headless Zorcaman.

**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](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com), and at [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org).

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