

**DRAY PRESCOT: 29**

# **FIRES OF SCORPIO**

**KENNETH BULMER**

writing as

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**A Mushroom eBook**



**FIRES OF SCORPIO**

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**a Mushroom eBooks sample**

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## Fires of Scorpio

*Fires of Scorpio* chronicles the headlong adventures of Dray Prescott on the marvelous and mystical, beautiful and terrible world of Kregen, under the twin star Antares, four hundred light-years from Earth.

Dray Prescott's own words convey most strongly the sense of a powerful and dominating personality. He claims he is a "plain sailorman" and, certainly, he received his early education in the horrendous conditions of Nelson's Navy, but his character is complex.

He is described as a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage. He moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly, sudden.

The bright lands of Paz are threatened by the Shanks, reivers from over the curve of the world; yet most of the peoples of Paz continue on in their own feckless ways. As an adventurer who, among a list of titles, has collected the job of Emperor of Vallia, Prescott knows that he faces a dark future. At the moment he is on the island of Pandahem after a brush with adherents of Spikatur Hunting Sword and their witch leader in the

many recesses of a mountain, about to go hurtling into a fresh series of adventures.

Facing a dark future? Yes... But we know from what he says that for Dray Prescott no future can ever be totally dark, that he will never give up hope, while life holds Delia, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains, and he may clasp her in his arms under the mingled streaming lights of the Suns of Scorpio.

*Alan Burt Akers*

## Chapter one

### Seg learns what frightened me

Stumbling around at night in a jungle alive with ravenous monsters is not a pastime to be heartily recommended. Particularly when that jungle sprawls hungrily on the horrific if beautiful world of Kregen four hundred light-years from Earth.

The fetid stench of the place choked from rotting vegetation, putrid stink-flowers, decomposing — things — of indeterminate character. The darkness pressed down as black as the armpit of a demon from hell. All I wore was a scarlet breechclout and all I carried was a longsword. Those two items have seen me through many fraught adventures in the past. There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind they will see me through many more in the future.

Each step was a probing forward venture. Dagger-sharp spines, a mass of corruption, a razor-edged leaf or a killer vine all could lie waiting for the next unwary step.

An incautious movement might precipitate me into a spiny-ribcrusher, and the spines would close with a meaty chunk and the juices would melt me down to a puddle.

Ahead in the pervasive darkness a faint line of pinkish radiance fuzzed into view and a coughing roar growled menacingly at my back.

Instantly, I was down on one knee, crouched, glaring back. To anything following me I would be silhouetted against that faint wash of moonlight. The sword snouted.

Breathing lightly, unmoving, poised, I waited.

Waiting, patience, silence, these spell survival in the jungle.

The coughing grunt smashed out again to be followed by a piercing scream and a thrashing crunching pandemonium of noise among the trees. Whoever or whatever had hunted, stalked, leaped and fastened fangs on his victim had seized a tougher prey than he had envisaged. Bad cess to the both of you, I said to myself, and cautiously rose and shuffled along to the slot of light.

Keeping bent over to make myself as small as possible against the radiance, I moved on and I did not press too close to any vegetation.

A tentacular looping horror, a spiny vine insensate with blind hunger, slashed. There was just time to see the whiplash against the rosy moonlight. The longsword switched up.

The killer vine coiled and thrashed and half of it swished back among the trees and the other half wriggled underfoot like an overturned can of worms. I stepped over and went on.

Shadows moved across that slot of fuzzy pink and golden moonlight. I stopped stock still.

Without a sound, without a movement, I peered from the blackness of the jungle out into the moonlight of the tangled clearing.

A face showed clear in the radiance. Sharp, in focus, the face turned directly toward where I stood.

The skull-face, covered by a tightly stretched pebbly skin of gray and green granulated texture, was blunt of jaw with the roots of the teeth exposed, the nostrils sunken slits, and the eyes, overhung by bony projections, of a smoky sullen crimson. The radiance of the moon fell full on that face, illuminating the rotting teeth, the decomposed nose, the crimson demon's eyes. Out of nightmare, that face, out of the deepest levels of subconscious horror...

I stepped out into the clearing.

"Hai!" I said. "Now I am mighty pleased to see you!"

The rotting teeth parted in a gasp. A sword flashed.

Then: "Lahal. I thought you were dead."

"And I, you."

"You are alone?"

"Yes. I was told a falling block of stone parted you from the main company. Your people are nearby, Skort?"

Skort nodded that ghastly head which was merely the normal head and face of a Clawsang, one of the many magnificent races of Kregan who are not made in the image of *Homo sapiens*.

“Yes. I think we are thoroughly lost. It seems to me that block walled us off from the rest of you and when we followed obvious tunnels in the mountain we came out into the jungle through a cave exit. We are lucky to be alive.”

His people clustered a little way off and they had a shielded fire flickering. The smell of roasting meat made my mouth water. Skort saw the way I licked my lips.

“Come and sit down. It is little use trying to move off until dawn. Eat and drink.”

“Thank you.”

They had cleared an area of unpleasant jungle inhabitants of the smaller and creepier kinds, and I sat down on a tuft of dry ground. They made me welcome, and soon I was chewing on a bone. It was pointless to inquire what the meat might be. Some of Skort’s men were patiently cleaning their swords and spears. They were a hardened lot, tough and experienced, and by reason of their graveyard faces inured to the askance look, the repressed shudder. I asked Skort what he intended to do now.

He paused for a moment, and the moonlight caught in those crimson eyes. “First, tell me what befell you in that place of horrors.”

“The party adventured farther after gold and treasure. Some were killed. There is a Witch of Loh in there.” I

stopped. Skort flinched back when I mentioned a Witch of Loh. That is a very proper reaction to any reference to those powerful wizards and witches. Mind you, they are not your Satany black-magic kind of witch, who is not really a witch at all. A witch is merely the recipient of the old religion, attempting to carry on in face of the newer religions, abhorring the blasphemies of those who take her name in vain. Skort motioned for me to go on, and I pushed the finer nuances of nomenclature away for the moment.

Here we were, trembling in a clearing in a horrendous jungle outside a cave-riddled mountain in which lurked untold treasures and untold horrors. Any normal man would be forgiven for wishing to be gone from this accursed spot as fast as possible.

I said, "I have to go back in there to find out what happened to my friends."

In the short time I had known him, during this expedition, Skort had said little. He appeared anxious to talk now. His crimson eyes widened.

"I, too, must return. But — not for friends."

Waiting, not wishing to probe, knowing if he wanted to tell me he would, I gnawed on my bone. The Star Lords who had brought me to this wonderful world of Kregen to help in rearranging the planet's destiny had lifted me out of the caverns and tunnels to show me a vision of Delia. She had gone through experiences that had made me shout and bellow like a callow child, made me tremble and shudder. All I wanted to do now was leave this accursed spot and return to Vallia where I

would find my Delia, as she would find me. But, first — and I knew Delia would approve — I had to make sure Seg was alive and well. Seg Segutorio was a blade comrade. He and I — well, we'd been through the fire together, as the saying has it.

Skort addressed himself to some of his people, and they stopped making too much noise.

“You do not ask me why I wish to return.”

“You have your reasons. I have told you mine.”

His skull face turned fully toward me. He said, “Did you find the queen?”

“No. We found a cell block and a lady, the Lady Milsi—”

He nodded, quickly. “She is handmaid to the queen.”

Slowly, I said, “She is well but saddened. There was another woman in an adjoining cell who was dead. The Lady Milsi was sorely disturbed.”

Skort put a hand to his head.

“That then, is the end of my duty. I serve Queen Mab. She and the Lady Milsi were seldom parted. I sorrow for a great one of the world.”

He was moved, that was clear. Also, this did serve to explain why he had joined the expedition to venture into the area where first the king and then the queen had disappeared.

I spoke a few words of condolence, and then said: “This means you will not be going back with me?”

“I think not.”

Before I could make a fool of myself, or a faux pas, or say something else stupid — for Skort's decision was so

eminently sensible it warranted no comment — a shrill shocked scream ripped across the clearing. In a boil of shrieking confusion men spilled away from the fire.

A thing reared above them, swarming from the jungle in tendrilled bunches of horror, smashing down on waddling clawed feet, sweeping with those tentacled clumps. A man was seized up and stuffed whole into the maw slung low and rimmed in writhing feelers which swayed all together and so closed on him.

A smell as though a compost heap had been opened up prematurely belched from the monster. It reeked. And it scooped up men and stuffed them into its insides.

Skort ripped out his sword. He flung himself forward. He had a rapport with his people, and would account for every one. I did not fling myself headlong after Skort.

Instead among the bedlam of yells and shrieks and the confusing criss-crossing of shadows as men ran and fell and the monster-thing swept its tendrilled bunches of horror upon them, I dived forward. I kept low. I skirted the damn thing with its gray rotten hide and its hairs and its swinging tentacles. My target was the fire. That had been abandoned at once as the thing burst in from the jungle.

A whiplash flicked at me and I went head over heels along the ground. My ear went into a plate of cold porridge and I skidded. That — probably — saved me. The tentacle that slashed down to seize me completely misjudged my distance as I went sliding along on my ear. I hit the ground, let out a great “Ooof!” and then was up. The longsword flamed into my fist and a single

slice cut the tentacle into a little wriggler upon the ground.

But there were far too many tentacles for one sword to amputate in time. The fire! The longsword snicked back into the scabbard, blood and ichor or not, and I seized up a flaming branch and flung it full at the ghastly monster-thing. Another followed, arching in a wheel of flame, spitting fire. I tried for the thing's eyes; but they were well-protected under hanging mats of coarse hair. Tentacles flicked my way; I burned the first one off.

After that, Skort's men saw what was needed, and we simply threw firebrands at the monster thing until we drove it off. Either that, or we'd have burned it up. It was, said a man who knew about these things, an oiklt, and not a very big one at that. It made a strange mewling cry at the end, drawing off. It had lost tendrils, and much hair had been burned off, and it was discomfited. But the oiklt had eaten four of Skort's men, and this was cause for lamentation.

Despite that, we had seen the thing off relatively easily, and — truth to tell — I had experienced no feelings of imminent doom when we fought. Perhaps that was merely the after effect of our experiences within the mountain.

Carefulness for other peoples' feelings, as well as sheer common sense, made me draw away from the Clawsangs as they set about their tasks. They would observe all the necessary rituals for their lost people. This was all a part of life on Kregen, as of any world where men and women of sensitivity are to be found.

Their religious observances, although obscure to me and entailing a quantity of wailing and of plastering mud upon themselves and of doing nasty things with twig-made quirts, still conveyed their own deep appreciation of the sanctity of human life and of their grief that life had been wantonly spilled.

I kept an old sailorman's eye open in case the monster's mate happened by, or the first oiklt decided to come back and risk a burning for some more dinner.

The night passed thus, and presently Skort came across and said that having remembranced the dead, he would post guards and I could therefore go to sleep — if I wished.

Odd, the way a boon is presented. Of course I was deathly weary. Of course I wished to sleep. But if I did so I might never wake up. If I did not, I would insult Skort. All a pretty little entanglement of motive and feeling, race and race.

Eventually I thanked Skort and sat myself down and closed my eyes and Skort put a hand neatly on my shoulder and I woke up and it was full daylight. I had slept.

In the mingled streaming radiance of the Suns of Scorpio slanting into the clearing and lighting up the world for us, the dark events of the night passed away as though mere dreamstuff. I stretched and sniffed and Skort made that hideous grimace, all rotting teeth and glaring eyes, that is a Clawsang smile.

“Yes, you smell correctly. Breakfast.”

As we ate, I sensed some reservation on Skort's part. He clearly wished to say something, and nerved himself to utter the words, and then withdrew and said some inconsequential observation of our present situation.

So, guessing what he wished to say, I said: "I wish my duty was concluded, as is yours."

The green-slime around the exposed roots of the rotting teeth glimmered. Skort nodded. He was well-pleased.

"Yes. I must return to report the queen dead. It is a sad duty."

I swallowed the last of the food and took a last mouthful of tea. I stood up. All I owned was — one, a scarlet breechclout, and, two, a Krozair longsword.

Skort stood up. His people looked on. They were travel-stained with ripped and torn clothing; but at least they had escaped from the mountain intact. What my friends would be like — well, that I had to find out.

"Remberee," said Skort.

"Remberee," I said, and struck off along the trail leading from the clearing toward the mountain.

The face of the mountain, caught at this early morning sun angle, bewildered by its vastness and variety of carvings. Vines looped and trailed across the rock; but the very profuseness of decoration could not be concealed. The lake opened out to my left with the usual activity on the brown sandspit. One proceeds with caution under these circumstances. I did not leave the concealment of the trees at once, and with daylight and the twin suns I could see the damned vines that sought

to loop my neck and throttle me. I could see the nasties and the creepy crawlies, and that, by Vox! is a great help.

My skills as a hunter and stalker are not inconsiderable. Well, to stay alive on Kregen in some of the more robust spots such skills are de rigueur. But I have known men and women who can move through any terrain like ghosts, unheard, unseen, unsuspected until they strike. I do not profess skills of that high order; but, crouched unmoving in the cover of leaves that did not seek to choke or chew me, I was at a considerable advantage. So in the long level streaks of suns light as Zim and Genodras, the great red and the smaller green sun of Kregen, rose over the treetops, I blinked my eyes with shock.

A figure appeared soundlessly beside the track. It was concealed from all observation except from where I crouched, I judged, and that due to a casual alleyway between the leaves. I most certainly had not arranged that slot of vision. The figure did not move, made no sound, and had made no sound in reaching its present vantage point.

Often my comrades joyed in stalking one another, seeking to leap out with a joyous shout of surprise. Seg Segutorio was our master and our mentor. Inch and Turko and Balass — Balass the Hawk! — and Korero were very good indeed, and Oby had learned much. When we could we played pranks, one on the other, and led a riotous life. But that very life had sent us off about business in the world, and our days of laughter in

mutual comradeship were circumscribed by duties reserved to nobles and lords of the land.

So now I watched that alert figure beside the trail. The man carried a bow. The bow was a Lohvian longbow. It was held in a certain way. I own it, although the superhuman Star Lords had shown me a picture of Seg and the others escaping safely from that deadly maze within the mountain, I had barely dared to believe. Now I believed.

I pursed up my lips and fashioned a bird call. That bird would never be found in this jungle, here on the island of Pandahem, maybe; the call fluted across the space and the man beside the trail did not move, made no sign — but the return call whistled out, true and golden on the morning air.

Presently, after a long space of waiting, unmoving, silent, watchful, we judged that no one spied on us. We met in the shadows of an aromatic bush whose small blue and white flowers brought back the memories.

“What in a Herrelldrin Hell happened to you?”

“And you! I found a tunnel which led to the jungle—”

“As did we,” said Seg. He stared at me accusingly. “You were going back in there—”

“It seems to me you were in front of me going back—”

“Well, my old dom, I thought you were still in there somewhere.”

Seg’s dark hair bristled up, it seemed aggressively, and his fey blue eyes looked wild. Tough, competent, kind-hearted, the best archer in all Kregen, as I devoutly believe, Seg Segutorio was not about to become maudlin

over me. Rather, he'd take a deuced mocking line, and cut me down to size in no time.

"So you were going back into that ghastly place to look for me." I shook my head. "We're all maniacs, Seg, all of us, and I verily believe you are the biggest maniac of all."

"Well, Dray — it seemed like a good idea at—"

"Aye," I said, dryly. "I don't doubt it."

"The others are waiting farther along. I simply said I'd scout a little—"

"The Lady Milsi?"

"Fine. Still very quiet, of course, over the death of the queen. I think you saw how—"

"Yes." I knew that Seg and the Lady Milsi had, as they say on Kregen, been shafted by the same lightning bolt. I told him what Skort the Clawsang had told me. Seg looked thoughtful.

"There is a power vacuum now, in this kingdom."

"Well, Seg, I've told you. If you wish to become Emperor of Pandahem — now's your chance."

"Cretin!"

"Yes. I agree."

"Which hole did you discover? I saw only the one, and we came through that one. You could not have done."

I looked at Seg. We were blade comrades. Why should I not confide in him? I said: "There are things that I wish to tell you, Seg, and that you will not believe at first. When you get home to Vallia, ask Delia. She will confirm what I have to say."

At once he was almost serious, and made only a few mocking remarks about the chuckle-heads. I told him that I was never born on Kregen, that I came from a planet called Earth and, moreover, a world that possessed only one little yellow sun and only one silver moon and only apims, *Homo sapiens*, without any of the splendid array of diffs that make of Kregen so wondrous a world.

He shut his eyes and leaned back when I finished speaking.

“I believe you, my old dom. You’ve always been more than a trifle apt to go flying mysteriously off somewhere. Next time you disappear, I refuse to worry my head about you. If you prefer one little yellow sun and one silver moon—”

“No!”

“—and only looking at people with faces like our own, then the best of Eos-Bakchi to you!”

“The Star Lords constrain me, that is all.”

“That is all!”

“No, Seg.” I made up my mind. As so often happens when confidences begin, others spurt out like a flood. “When I was up in Falinur of which at the time you were lord—”

“Yes, I was the Kov of Falinur. I am glad I gave it up and let Turko take it on.”

“When you returned to us from your adventures, I met a man called Lol Polisto.”

“Oh, old Lol,” said Seg. “I knew him — only a little. Something to do with wanting to be a farmer and having

nothing to do with politics or fighting. I marked him as a good likely man.”

I looked straight at Seg.

“He is now married to Thelda. They have a fine child. His Thelda is—”

Seg stared back. His expression stopped me.

Then he said, “You are hard on a man, Dray. When I had that great wound in my back, then, was it?”

“Aye.”

“Funny thing. I sensed there was more to your concern for my back than I could fathom—”

“Look, Seg. If you’d gone rushing off up there — you’d have killed yourself—”

“I wonder now — and this shocks me — I wonder if I would have gone rushing off. I thought Thelda must be dead. She was cut off in Evir; I had searched for her there.” He stopped speaking, and shook his head. Then, quickly, like a reptile striking: “She was happy with Lol Polisto?”

“Very. She thought you dead. She would never have married Lol if her first husband was alive. You know that.”

“I loved Thelda, in a funny way. Then she was dead. And I stopped loving a corpse, a ghost, and merely cherished a memory. Now there is the Lady Milsi. And, as you know, she is the first...”

“I know.” Then, to soften the stupid arrogance of presuming to know all of Seg’s life, I added: “That you have told me of or that I have seen.” And then, in case Seg began to feel something of what I’d expected him to

feel in this, and therefore to give him a chance to slang me, I said: “Anyway, a lot of folk predicted that you and Jilian would—”

“Jilian? Jilian Sweet-tooth?”

“That’s right.”

“She’s a bonny lass, what with her Whip and her Claw. But — not for me.” We sat more comfortably now under the leaves and we watched the trail both ways as we talked, and no one beyond three or four paces would have heard our voices. “And, I tell you, my old dom, I knocked out a fellow’s teeth who linked your name with that of Jilian’s—”

“One expects that kind of foul-minded slander from the meaner sorts of intellect. You’ve probably heard many filthy rumors of Delia—”

“So far,” said my blade comrade Seg Segutorio in a flat and neutral voice. “So far I have only had to kill four people who mentioned Delia in that connection.”

I was surprised. I stared at Seg.

“Killed four!”

“They were well rid of.”

Massive emotional overtones are not for Seg and me. But I knew. I swallowed. Good old Seg!

But, all the same, four deaths for mere words...!

If that is Kregen, as it is, it is, then, perhaps...?

“If it was my wound,” said Seg, in a ruminative way. “But, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I guessed you’d say that.”

“Well, why?” He wanted to know why I had not told him that his wife Thelda was not dead but was married

to another man and, apart from her mourning for Seg, was very happy with her new child. “Why?”

“I could say I don’t know why. That was true, once, after your wound had healed. But I’ll tell you the truth.”

“Yes?”

“I was frightened—”

“Frightened? You, Dray Prescot, *frightened!*”

“Too right, my old dom, too bloody right. I was frightened. Scared right through to the soles of my feet.”

He shook his head in amazement, a small gesture that would not be observed should hostile eyes be watching.

Now Seg is a man of parts. No one with normal human emotions is going to remain unaffected under the impact of news such as had just hit Seg. He had suffered a shock. He had loved Thelda, and she had, he thought, died, and he had gotten over that, and now had found the Lady Milsî. Life was going to be exceedingly unpleasant for Seg in the next week or so, or for however long it took him to adjust. That his marriage to Thelda was now over admitted of no question. That Thelda was happy with Lol Polisto was important. That Seg might find happiness with Milsî was also important.

I knew Seg would also consider as vitally important the happiness of the Lady Milsî. She, he would say, must not suffer on account of Seg’s past thrusting itself awkwardly into the present.

Eventually he heaved up a sigh and said, “When I tell the Lady Milsî, I believe she will understand. I’ve already spoken to her of Thelda, and she has told me that her husband is dead. Opaz rest his ib.”

The mention of Opaz made him go on: “And this story of yours of a world with only one sun and one moon — that is blasphemy in the eyes of the religious. What of Opaz? What of the Invisible Twins made manifest in Opaz, in the glorious light of Zim and Genodras?” He squinted up. The red sun and the green sun shone refulgently, and the streaming opaz radiance poured down splendidly.

I said, “Gods are not suns.”

“Agreed. But, all the same—”

“All the same, we’ll have to get back to the main party before they start after us and raise devils better left sleeping.”

Quickly, slurring details, I told him of the black sorcery within the mountain. “So we’d best be off. Nothing remains to detain us here.”

“And when you vanish in a puff of smoke, you’ll be gallivanting about somewhere else on Kregen?”

“Or Earth.”

“Aye.”

A lightness of spirits affected me now that I had told Seg. Two items of news had been dovetailed into a seeming one; and that economy pleased me in its use of emotional resources to the best advantage. Seg had killed to protect the honor of Delia, had filled a fellow’s mouth with blood and broken teeth in defense of mine. Deplore the violence though I might, in hard times on a hard world, honor — that tawdry bauble — sometimes has to be upheld to the utmost.

I’d do the same for Seg. That went without saying.

We went along the backtrail like a couple of savage hunting beasts — no. No, as I have said before, we were not *like* a pair of savage hunting beasts. We were.

Yet the chill conviction remained that against the dark sorcery within the tunnels of that gargoyle of a mountain, all our warrior skills would not prevail. We'd escaped, and had achieved a kind of victory. Now we had to make good our escape.

Seg's reference to my disappearance in a puff of smoke was uncomfortably close to the truth. When the Star Lords sent their gigantic blue Scorpion to fetch me away from wherever I happened to be and plonked me down somewhere else it must in all seeming appear to any onlookers that I did vanish in a puff of blue smoke.

The problems we faced immediately were simple. We had to get out of this pestiferous jungle and back to civilization. Seg had to see the Lady Milsi safely home. I wanted to return to Vallia and Delia. The Star Lords had shown me that she was safe and handling her problems — handling them! She's smashed the opposition that had enslaved her, and had taken command with all the imperial majesty and grace that makes her the supreme Empress of Vallia.

So that although Delia was safe and well, I hankered to get back to my island empire of Vallia and try to unify the place and make the place a real empire again, as it had been in the old days before the Times of Troubles.

"One sun, one moon," Seg said to himself, half disgustedly, half with the pleased confrontation with a new idea that sounded impossible.

“And no diffs.”

“I can’t see how a world can have only apims like us. It is against nature.”

“Yet the apims of Earth might call the diffs of Kregen menagerie men—”

“Bone-skulled idiots! Ask your pal Unmok the Nets about that. He’s in the beast-catching business.”

“Probably,” I said, cautiously. Unmok the Nets would for a surety be on a dozen different schemes at once, if I knew him. A small animal broke cover ahead of us, and darted away to vanish into the greenery to our right. A thin screen shielded the lake here, the carved wall of the mountain lay to our rear, and ahead stretched the way we must go to win free.

“You are a kov without a province to govern,” I said. “There are provinces in Vallia. Will you take the Lady Milsa there — if she wishes to go?”

“If she wishes it — yes. I regard Vallia as my home.”

“As do I...”

“But I shall have to fight for my province.”

“Would you wish it another way?”

He heaved up another sigh and slapped his bow up and drew the arrow already nocked, and let fly. The rumbling bulk of the dinosaur that broke the screen of bushes and started for us took the shaft clear through one yellow eye.

Before the enraged beast’s bellow crashed out again a second shaft followed the first. Seg loosed a third time. Blinded, stuck through the pulsing skin of his throat, staggered, the dinosaur — all scales and fangs and claws

— screeched and turned tail and blundered back into the bushes. A tremendous sloshing splash sounded. After that a succession of sucking noises, and splashes, and a screech or two, indicated where the denizens of the lake were feasting.

“Quick,” I said.

“No. The first shaft hit before I loosed the second.”

“True. Slow, then.”

“No. The third was in the air before the second struck.”

“True.” I cocked my head judiciously. “There was no wager on it, though. Had there been—”

“One, two, three,” said Seg.

And I laughed.

More than one person had judged this little foible of ours — of gambling on the outcome of shots in battle — as degrading, decadent, altogether horrible. In truth, it was some of those things. But, also, it served a deeper and more fundamental purpose in the horror of battle. My daughter, Princess Majestrix of Vallia, the Princess Lela whom we called Jaezila out of love, had instantly perceived the inner truths we men so clumsily sought to express by this betting on shots.

We had gone adventuring across the face of Kregen, Jaezila and I. Now, as Seg and I walked along the path leading to the camp where the rest of the party waited for us, I reflected that I was like to do much more of this adventuring than of ruling as an emperor. And, I would have it this way. My son Drak, the Prince Majister,

would run the Empire of Vallia, and run it well. We had superb advisers, men and women we could trust.

Echoing my thoughts, Seg said: “So we’ll be off adventuring again, then?”

“We will, Seg, if the Star Lords do not demand some fresh service from me. There is no way, as yet, that I can stand against them, for they are superhuman. But I am working on some few ways of attempting to resist them. One day, I hope, I shall be able to take charge of my own destiny.”

The smell of woodsmoke reached us. In daylight, away from the jungle, the air was freer, we could talk, and not feel the pressures of instant destruction all about us.

Seg laughed. “It seems to me you’ve run your destiny pretty much as you willed it. By the Veiled Froyvil, my old dom! Look what you’ve accomplished!”

“Titles, ranks, some property here and there. They mean little, all save one. I count as far more important the family and our blade comrades.”

Pursuing his thoughts, Seg said: “And you’ve no idea where you will be sent by the Everoinye?” He used the word Everoinye, Kregish equivalent to the Star Lords.

“None whatsoever. If I disappear, do not think harshly of me. Just remember I do all in my power to rejoin my family and friends.”

“There is a great deal still to be done in Vallia—”

“Yes. But the Star Lords pursue their interests over all of Paz, over all of this side of the world. To them, Vallia is no more important than this island of Pandahem, of the continent of Havilfar, or any of the others.”

“They must be a right weird lot. And you’ve never seen them?”

“Not one. They are superhuman. But not, I judge, immortal.”

“I wish,” said Seg, “I wish they’d take me along with you—”

“So do I!”

“A scorpion, did you say?” Seg pointed. “Look!”

He strutted out from a rock beside the path, reddish brown, glitteringly black, his stinger held arrogantly aloft, waving from side to side — waving at me.

I felt the familiar constriction in my throat.

The scorpion of the Star Lords — would he herald the Scorpion, the phantom blue Scorpion so huge he encompassed the world?

He did.

Blueness caught me up in a chill embrace. Unseen winds howled. I was falling. End over end, stark naked, winded, I was seized up by the Everoinye, tossed end over end and dumped down blinded and gasping upon some other part of Kregen to sort out a problem for the inscrutable purposes of the Star Lords.

If... if they had not contemptuously tossed me back through four hundred light-years of space to the planet of my birth.

## Chapter two

### Of the donning of a Silver Mask

The sea bellowed and roared less than a hundred paces off across a sandy beach, spuming in white foam fountains against jagged rocks that stuck out into the surf like the teeth of a Clawsang. Inland the jungle began where the beach ended, its greenery lush and profuse and deadly. Was I, then, still on the island of Pandahem?

The Star Lords make no great fuss over the people they select to do their dirty work for them. As usual, I was stark naked. The scarlet breechclout and the Krozair longsword were gone. No doubt Seg was even now stooping to pick them up, bewildered by my disappearance. Well, now he knew who had taken me up and why I was gone...

Farther along the beach a headland walled off what lay beyond and the jungle dripped over the beach. In the shadows lay an upturned ship.

She was an argenter, a broad comfortable trading vessel, and clearly she had been there some time. Her upper works were vanished away — I did not think they extended down into the sand — and her keel was well-covered with green growing things. A group of people clad in brown robes hurried toward the ship and vanished into the dark opening cut into her side.

Feeling exposed, I ran swiftly up the beach into the treeline. The vegetation here based on sand was sparse; I wondered which would win this eternal natural battle, the sand or the jungle.

A pathway opened out onto the beach a few paces along and a further group of people walked out from the trees into the radiance of the suns shine. They talked together quite naturally, their voices a mere rumble, so that I judged they had no fear either of hostile denizens of the jungle or of enemies lying in wait for them.

Now, being dumped down naked and unarmed to sort out a problem for the Star Lords has been my lot for a long time. I was not prepared to take it for granted. An order of precedence had to be established. First — just what was it that the Everoinye required of me this time? Second — I had to find a weapon. Oh, I am privy to the Disciplines and can throw people about in unarmed combat; but on Kregen a man without a weapon in his fist remains at a disadvantage. Only last would I worry about clothes.

Edging closer to the trail, I stopped as three people walked along, deep in conversation. Their words came

muffled. But, clearly, striking out as a risslaca's tongue licks out, the words hit me.

“My Flem! It is not to be borne!”

And the quick answer uttered in temper: “You are right, By Glem! We will tell Pudor and have done.”

“I am with you, in the name of the Silver Wonder!” said the third.

I felt sick.

Now I knew what I was up against. These people were worshippers of Lem the Silver Leem, an evil cult — evil as judged by ordinary people with ordinary morals and outlooks on human life — a cult dedicated to the overthrow of every other religion and the enslavement of all those who did not bow down to Lem the Silver Leem.

The three men wore brown robes, decked with silver.

They carried weapons.

In that upturned ship they had set up their secret temple. Their confidence was plain. No one was likely to interfere with them here. And, also, if they were acting as they always acted during their religious observances, they'd have a baby in there, a child, and they'd slit its throat and disembowel it and offer up its heart to the blasphemous silver image of the leem.

The task of stopping them from indulging in their other obscene practices and their orgies could wait. Right here and now I had to get that child away to safety. If this was not the task the Star Lords had set to my hands, then it was the task I set myself.

And, as usual, this would be a task of the most difficult and dangerous nature.

Once I had rescued the child and restored it to its mother — it, of course, because the baby could be male or female and of any race of diffs or apims — then I could set my face to the north and start off for home.

The three men stepped out onto the sand and began slurping their way toward the ship temple.

Belted to their waists they carried swords. A glance showed me these weapons were the Pandahem pallixter, a straight cut and thrust weapon very much like the familiar Havilfarese thraxter. More often than not these swords were called thraxters. It seemed to me that I would need a sword in the immediate future.

The chance of cutting these three down had gone. They were in sight of anyone watching from the ship. I turned quietly back to the jungle. Some more of these perverted worshippers of a vile creed would be along soon.

The next two worshippers came in sight along the trail not long after, and of the two one was a woman. Well, as women claim equality in most things and more than equality in the rest, that made no difference.

The man went to sleep most peaceably, and the woman followed him before she had time to cry out. I dragged them off the trail into the bush. They would slumber for some time but I judged it best to tie them up. The brown robes ripped easily enough — I used those from the woman — and I gagged them for good measure. Pulling on the robes and adjusting the

fastenings and the silver tassels, I quelled a feeling of distaste. From a leather pouch I drew out the man's silver mask. This was a quality item, stamped and fashioned into the likeness of a leem's snarling face and covering forehead, eyes, nose and cheeks and sweeping down to cover the jaw bones. It was held by leather straps. I put it on. I fancy my eyes glared as madly from the eye slots as those of any leem.

The suns shine lay warm and mingled in radiance across the sands, mocking what went forward in that upturned ship. There would be guards, heavy men, sweaty in leather harness, and well-armed. They would have to be dealt with.

The woman carried a canvas bag of provisions — white bread, cold meats, cheeses, fruits, and the man a straw-wrapped flagon of a middling Stuvan. Their purses yielded golden deldys and silver dhems, and a mixture of other coins, so what with the Pandahem pallixters, I judged I must still be on the island of Pandahem.

From the position of the suns I was on the south coast of the island, and the jungle at my back confirmed that. Where I'd left Seg at that Opaz-forsaken mountain was in the southeast corner of the island, so I was farther along to the west. So, very well. After this little lot I'd simply walk along toward the east. If I could find a riding animal, even better. I would not, I fancied, find an airboat very easily. They were still rare in Pandahem.

Sounds reached along from the trail. More worshippers were hurrying to their blasphemous rituals. I heard

a heavy voice saying: “And after we’ve consulted him, we’ll sew him in a sack and dump him in the sea.”

“Agreed!” cried a second voice.

If they were talking about this fellow called Pudor the first group had been contuming, he was in for a bad time. Consulting someone is to deliver him a tremendous buffet about the heart, either physically or psychically. It is not a pleasant experience.

Consulting, though, was just the kind of experience that would suit these worshippers of Lem the Silver Leem.

Letting this next batch go past and keeping well down, I waited until they were well out across the sands. With a most careful check of the backtrail, I rose to my feet, stepped out onto the sand and started off for the upturned ship.

She had once been a fine craft, broad and bluff-bowed and high-pooped, able to breast the waves and send the white spume scudding. Now she was just an upturned keel. It seemed to me there was another sacrilege going forward here, that a once-fine ship should have sunk into so low and degrading a function.

The followers of Lem have themselves branded upon a sensitive portion of their anatomies. Down south in the city of Ruathytu, capital of the Empire of Hamal, I’d once been dragged out of a nasty situation by Nath Tolfeyr. At that time he was still a figure of mystery to me. He’d hauled me into a secret temple of Lem, and there I’d perforce gone through the disgusting rites to make me an initiate. The brand I’d suffered had long

since worn away, owing to my immersion in the Sacred Pool of Baptism in the River Zelph. That was in far Aphrasöe, the Swinging City of the Savanti. If anyone asked to see my brand — and I much doubted anyone would — then the action would begin that much sooner.

The thought occurred to me, as it had done off and on, that perhaps Nath Tolfeyr was a Kregoinye like me, a person doomed to serve the purposes of the Star Lords. I did not think so. But he could be...

Anyway, all that mattered at the moment was that I was in possession of the ritual information that would allow me to pass muster as a follower of the Silver Wonder. The priests and the acolytes, the initiates and the hierophants, all had their grades and ranks. They had their secret signs and secret formulae. My knowledge was of a temple in Ruathytu down by the aqueduct by the Jikhorkdun of the Thoth. Well, what I knew would have to serve.

The silver mask proclaimed me as a Hyr-Jik, a fairly middling rank in the cult. I'd have to browbeat those below, cringe to those above, and stick anyone who argued.

The ship neared. A little breeze got up and blew grains of sand in silken patterns before me. The twin suns would soon be gone, down past the western horizon. Already the sea sheeted with crimson and jade. I fancied there came a touch of coolness upon the air. I breathed in deeply.

Once in a temple of Lem the Silver Leem a fellow would breathe the stink of incense and the raw choke of

spilled blood. Thinking back to that unpleasant interlude with Nath Tolfeyr in the temple of Lem, I realized that in all probability the reason the Star Lords had chosen me to handle this situation was precisely because I'd gone through that initiation. The Star Lords, although they had done me a deal of harm in the past, had done so through sheer indifference. They were not actively malignant. They were not chuckleheads, either. They knew a good sound tool or weapon to be used in the heat of combat when they saw one. And, by Zair! they'd used me!

A movement beside the opening cut in the hull of the ship took my attention. Two guards in their harness of brown and silver stood there, spears slanted, on guard.

They passed me through without comment and I brushed aside hanging curtains of brown with silver tassels and so entered the antechamber. Racks and hooks were here provided for the impedimenta not required within. I stacked the canvas bag and the flagon. I drew the robe about me, and, a hand on the hilt of the sword, marched on.

The place was just the same as the temple in Ruathytu, and vastly different.

Constrained by the shape of the upturned ship, the temple had been cunningly laid out. The arching ribs of the vessel lent the space the appearance of a fane. Brown and silver hangings covered the old wooden hull. Torches flared from tall silver stands, four and five torches arranged around each stand in brilliant clumps.

The incense was being burned in strength. I kept my mouth shut and tried not to breathe too deeply.

The people stood about in casual attitudes, talking quietly. Every now and then a star glitter would strike from the corner of a silver leem mask. The air of ease here struck me painfully. These debased characters waited for their diabolical rites to begin, and as they waited they chatted together, of this and that, and took a delight in the expectation of coming pleasures.

To one side of the altar stood the tall iron cage. It was not empty.

The sacrifice was a girl child, not above three or four years old. She wore a white dress, short to her knees, and flowers in her hair, which was left free and shining softly brown in the lights from the cressets at each side. That light shone on the black basalt slab.

I looked away. High over the altar reared the shape of the leem — silver, glittering, rampant, ferocious. The image, I judged, was formed of beaten silver over a wooden core. The sculpture was not of the first quality; but it captured the sheer ferocious impact of a leem. Leems have wedge-shaped heads equipped with fangs that can strike through solid oak. They have eight legs and two hearts and they are feral beasts who kill and joy in the killing.

A normal weasel-shaped leem is of the size of a full-grown large leopard; this image was over one and a half times life size. The torchlights glittered from its ruby eyes. I looked away.

The sacrifice was not crying. She was eating sweets of some kind, trifles of sugar and honey and candy in brilliant sticky whorls children love to buy from the local banje shop. Sticky goo ran down her chin.

I tapped the heel and then the toe of the sandal I wore, a simple enough artifact suitable for hot climates. The fellow, now tied up in the bushes, from whom I'd taken the sandals favored solid leather soles, with rope thongs. The sole made a sharp tap through the sand strewn the floor.

These people had used the deck of the ship, then, as their floor, interesting.

Priests with golden decorations superimposed upon the colors of Lem moved about, preparing the knives and flails. The congregation talked in hushed tones, at ease, the incense stank and the torches and cressets burned brightly. I kept the hood of the brown robe half across the silver mask.

A vivid, a scarlet, lightning bolt of memory hit me. I could see just such a scene as this, out in the open air with the priest about to plunge his knife into the body of the sacrifice. And then a flier swooping in with me whirling a Krozair longsword and Barty Vessler leaping out and severing the child's bonds. An elegant, refined, very proper young man, Barty Vessler, the Strom of Calimbrev, a man with high ideals of honor and duty. A fine young man now dead, struck down by the cowardly blow of a kleesh whose come-uppance had been too long delayed. Vengeance is for fools. But some redress for Barty's death was long overdue.

Moving slowly, head half-bent, I approached the iron cage. Chains lapped the stone slab. The light threw contorted shadows from the bars across the girl child within the cage. The sweet stickiness ran down from her mouth and shone.

She had to be freed. Also, to perform this duty properly, another act must be done. I eyed the priests.

One of them, bulky in his robes, wore more gold than anyone else. He would be what they called the Hyr-Prince Majister, or some such nonsensical title. I marked him. Keys swung at his waist, and he wore a sword.

An under priest approached.

“Not too close,” he warned.

“I would have words with the Hyr-Prince Majister—”

“Who?”

“I said—” Then I stopped. I saw that I had blundered. That was not the title of the chief miscreant.

A cresset flared in its bronze cage hard by my left shoulder. Another stood a few paces to the right. Between them stood the cage. The basalt slab under the idol stood to the side of the cage, at the center of attention by the altar. I moved forward, striking like a leem.

I kicked the priest twixt wind and water. The left hand cresset went over backwards from a single sweep of my arm. Without pausing I slashed across to the right-hand cresset and knocked that flying. Live coals hissed out to scatter across the floor. The stink of smoke thickened.

I took the chief priest's neck in my left hand and I stuck a finger in his eye.

"Open the cage, rast! Move quickly and quietly, or you are dead."

He could not gobble his fright because his air was choked off in my fist. He scrabbled at the keys. He was useless. I dumped him down, raked off the bunch of keys and selected the largest. It did not fit the lock.

Now shocked shouts burst up in the confines of the ship's hull. People were running and screaming. I intended them no good. I did not look back. I sniffed. The smell of burning grew. There would just be time...

Three keys later the lock snicked open.

The girl child looked up, past me, staring in wonder past my shoulder. Brown drapes burned fiercely. The fire spread. If the floor was well alight by now, fine. The ship was old, her timbers tinder-dry. She should burn well. That would be a more fitting end for a proud ship than this blasphemy.

I scooped the girl up. She started to cry.

Flames broke up in my face as I swung back from the cage. The uproar was now prodigious. So far no guards had burst through the smoke to find out what was going on.

And, still, I had not drawn a sword...

"It is all right," I said to the girl. "I am taking you home."

She just cried.

Cradling her in the crook of my left arm I took hold of the chief priest by the ear and dragged him along.

I spoke to the girl again.

“What is your name?”

She did not answer; just cried. Perhaps she had been chosen with smiles and garlands of flowers and had been happy to be given sweets and taken off. Perhaps. That could be attended to. I gave the priest a kick up the rump as he wriggled and dragged him along past the wafts of black smoke.

Ahead hung a blue and brown curtain, in checks. The way lay forward. Through that curtain extended the bow section of the old ship. My plan — such as it was — was to make my way forward and escape through the hawsehole. I had not failed to note that the hawsehole still existed, just a few feet above the level of the beach.

Once, years and years ago upon this planet Earth, I had clawed my way through the hawsehole to stand, brave in gold lace, upon the quarterdeck, an officer in Nelson’s navy. That effort had been immense. It differed merely in kind from the effort needed now to escape from this stinking den of iniquity.

Two guards blundered up through a narrow corridor lit only by a torch in a becket. They looked wild. Their leather brass-studded armor was spattered with grease.

It was necessary to let go of the chief priest to deal with the two guards, that and shield the child. The guards went over, yeowling, and I trod on them as I dived after the Chief priest. He tried to duck and scuttle away, screaming.

“C’mere, you rast!”

The collar of his robe felt hot and greasy. I hauled him back. He squirmed like a trodden-on lizard, and howled, and held one hand to his injured eye. His noise did not muffle the ululations and hullabaloo going on beyond the blue and brown checked curtain. The two guards rolled away as I kicked them out of the path and went on, head down shielding the child, dragging the chief priest.

At the end of the corridor an open door against the roof reminded me the ship was upside down. A narrow slot had been sawed in the bulkhead to allow passage. I stepped through and dragged the priest after. The space out there, dark and suddenly chill, stank of old rast's nests. I forged ahead.

From some way to my rear a sudden burst of shouting indicated the congregation had recovered from their surprise.

Just how long it would take for the ship to catch well and truly afire, or for the Leem lovers to quench the flames, I had no way of telling. Certainly, the flat tang of smoke persisted, slick on the tongue among the stink of rasts.

Knowing your way around a ship comes naturally to anyone who has served some long time at sea; even upside down as the old vessel was, the ways remained familiar. Up ahead, in the sweep of the bows, lay the hawsehole I sought.

Through the darkness ahead a light glimmered. The light was sickly, sallow; but it shone as a welcome.

I hurried on.

Hurrying was a mistake and there was no welcome awaiting me when I debouched into the forward hold and saw what lay in wait for me.

The stench of leem filled the air.

The chief priest was shrieking in soul-destroying fear. I took a pace forward — and stopped.

There were two leems.

They snarled. In that sickly light their jaws opened widely, and the blackness of their gums showed their yellow fangs in glistening horror. They hissed and leaped.

**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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