

DRAY PRESCOT: 21

A FORTUNE FOR KREGEN

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

**A FORTUNE FOR
KREGEN**

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

Copyright © 1979, Kenneth Bulmer

Alan Burt Akers has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, to be identified as the Author of this work.

First published by Daw Books, Inc. in 1979.

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

www.mushroom-ebooks.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Contents

A Note on Dray Prescot.....	1
1 On a Roof in Jikaida City	3
2 Gray Mask Vanishes	23
3 I Hear of Moderdrin.....	33
4 I Refuse to Fight in Kazz-Jikaida.....	45
5 We Meet Drogo the Kildoi in the Jolly Vosk	62
6 Concerning a Shortcut	76
7 Execution Jikaida	87
8 Hunch, Nodgen and I Are Auctioned Off.....	102
9 Into the Humped Land.....	114
10 Down the Moder	131
11 Prince Tyfar	141
12 The Illusion of a Krozair Longsword	156
13 How an Undead Chulik Kept Vigil	172

14 Kov Loriman Mentions the Hunting Sword	188
15 Of a Descent Through Monsters	209
16 In the Hall of Specters.....	231
17 Out from the Jaws of Death.....	248
18 The Mausoleum of the Flame	262
19 Of a Gate — and Honor	282
20 The Fight over Vaol-Paol.....	303
21 Of the Powers of a Wizard of Loh	317
Notes.....	336
About the author.....	337

A Note on Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott is a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, an enigmatic man with enormously broad shoulders and superbly powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and indomitable courage. He moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly. Reared in the inhumanly harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy, he has been transported by the Scorpion agencies of the Star Lords, the Everoinye, and the Savanti of Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, to the unforgiving yet rewarding world of Kregen, four hundred light years from Earth, under the Suns of Antares.

Here he has made his home and has struggled through triumph and disaster, acquiring titles and estates on the way, which he views with a cool irony. Determined to relinquish the burden of being Emperor of Vallia when that island empire is once more united and at peace, he plans to hand all over to his son, Drak. Now the Star Lords have set to his hands a task in the exotic southern continent of

Havilfar, but, as usual, the meaning of the mission is veiled from him. To prevent a league headed by Vallia's bitter foe, the Empire of Hamal, from succeeding, Prescott has played in the deadly game of Death Jikaida. He has been sorely wounded.

Prescot records his story for us on cassettes and each book is arranged to be read as complete in itself. Now the future lies before him as he determines to return home to Vallia, and to Delia and his family and friends. But Kregen is not like this Earth.

Hurled once more into headlong adventure, Prescott must battle for his life — and sanity — but, this time, his struggles do not take place in the streaming mingled lights of the Suns of Scorpio, nor even in the fuzzy pink and golden radiance of the Seven Moons of Kregen...

Chapter One

On a Roof in Jikaida City

There are more ways than one hundred and one of stealing an airboat and this was going to be way Number One. Just walk up to the craft, step aboard, and take off — first making sure she was not tethered down.

That was the theory.

The guard stepped from a shadowed doorway on the first landing and stuck a glittering great cleaver under my nose.

“Stand where you are, dom, or your head will go bouncing down those stairs you’ve just walked up.”

Light from the lamp held in the hand of a bronze cupid at the head of the stairs struck sparks from his eyes. All he could see of me must be a silhouette. The muffling mask of gray cloth over my face and head and the dull baggy clothes were unrecognizable.

“Why, dom,” I said. “You’re making a mistake—”

No doubt he understood me to be attempting exculpation. When I lowered him gently to the carpet

with my left hand gripped in the fancy front of his uniform, and, my right hand tingling just a little, took away that murderous cleaver, he slumbered peacefully — but he'd wake up understanding the mistake I had pointed out to him well enough.

Stepping carefully over him I went on up the next flight of stairs. This hotel, a veritable palace in the Foreign Quarter of Jikaida City, was occupied by the great ones of the world who came here to play Jikaida without affiliation to the Blue or the Yellow. On the roof rested the only flying boat in the city. That airboat was my ticket out of here and, because it was owned by a man from Hamal, and Hamal was at war with my own country of Vallia, it was morally quite proper for me to steal the craft.

Well — morals take the devil of a beating when there's a war on. There are, to be sure, far too many wars and battles on the world of Kregen, four hundred light years from Earth, but I was sincerely doing what I could to lessen the number.

The time was just on halfway between midnight and dawn. The hotel remained quiet. The carpets muffled my tread. There must be a few more guards about and, sentry duty being what it is, there were bound to be one or two having a quiet yarn up on the roof, one eye on the airboat.

The quicker I got out of Jikaida City and, if the Star Lords permitted, back to Vallia, the better. A caravan across the Desolate Waste to the east would be far too slow for me in my mood. Vallia was in good hands,

that I knew; but I still felt the need to get home. Also, knowing the way fate — which is a poor second best in any confrontation with the Star Lords — has the nasty habit of hurling me headlong into adventures that are none of my seeking, I fancied I had a few sprightly moments in front of me before I reached home. Well, by Vox, that was true.

As I stole up the next flight of stairs sounds floated down from above. I frowned. There was laughter, and high shrieks, and a tinny banging. A small orchestra was playing and trying to make its music heard over the din. I went on and came out onto the top landing. In the corner the small door that led onto the roof was unguarded. I had only to cross the stretch of thick pile carpet, open the door, close it carefully after me, and creep up the stairs, my sword in my fist...

More confounded theories.

A door opened and a man staggered out. He wore only a blue shirt and he was highly excited, his arms draped over the shoulders of a couple of sylvies half-dressed in tinsels. He roared, his head thrown back, warbling out a song whose words were unintelligible and whose tune was unrecognizable.

The wall at my back felt flat and hard. I pressed in as though trying to burrow through into the room beyond.

Beyond that suddenly opened door the lamplight glowed, spilling out and casting shadows over me. The noise in there racketed away and now the orchestra, no doubt having made up its mind to be

heard, howled and shrilled and scraped. Men and women shrieked with laughter and shouted over the music, determined to be heard. The clink of bottles and the crash of overturning glasses added a genial blend of bibulous accompaniment. The man and the girls staggered past, screaming with laughter, to disappear into a darkened room along the corridor.

Lamplight fell across the carpet in a butter-yellow lozenge.

To reach the door leading onto the roof it was necessary to pass that lozenge of light.

The orchestra and the people — all grimly determined to be heard — redoubled their efforts. The racket coruscated. The door remained open and people passed and repassed — or staggered and restaggered — from side to side. Another man came out. He crawled on hands and knees. A slinky little Fristle fifi rode his back, alternately hitting him with a slipper and giving him sips of wine from a glass. Most of the wine — it was a light straw color — soaked into the carpet. They were both yelling their heads off. I shoved another inch or two into the wall.

Somebody else reeled out of the door, tripped over the man on his knees and the fifi, and collapsed, howling with laughter. His wine went all over them. He had been drinking a deep red wine, and the color blazed up in the lamplight.

A voice yelled over the din.

“Hey, Nath! C’mere, for the sake of Havandua — these Hamalese have me—” The rest was lost in a gurgle.

The fellow who was being ridden by the girl stood up. He reeled. The girl clung to him, her naked legs wrapped about him. Making no effort to throw her off he went barging back, and the chap who had fallen over him lurched up, shaking his head from side to side and chuckling foolishly.

He looked at his empty glass, made a solemn clucking noise, and wandered off toward the open door. He hit the wall beside the door, bounced, shook his head, took a grip on himself and navigated back into the room.

Somebody shut the door.

Oh, yes, by Krun. They were all Somebodies in there...

Letting out my breath I eased from the shadows and started for the door. My hand was on the latch. I was pushing the door open — when the light sprang into being again at my back.

A girl’s voice, all giggles and hiccoughs, said, “Leaving already? You Hamalese are too solemn! Come and have a drink.”

Without turning, I said in as light a voice as I could muster, “You should try telling that to a Bladesman in the Sacred Quarter of Ruathytu.”

A man’s voice, heavier than most, said, “Hamalese? I don’t—”

There was nothing else for it.

I went through the opened doorway, slammed the wood at my back, and shot the bolt across. No time to catch a breath. It was up the stairs hell for leather and out onto the roof under the stars of Kregen.

The airboat was there — tethered down, of course! — and with a canvas cover thrown across her slim lines.

The first chain ripped free. The second chain was in my fingers. The scrape at my back sounded clearly. In an explosion of movement I dived sideways, recovered, hauled out my sword.

The two guards were in nowise chagrined that they had failed to surprise me. She of the Veils floated free of cloud wrack then and showed them to me — as the moon showed me to them.

A banging started below as the party-goers hammered on the door I had bolted.

The guards bore in, their swords held in the professional fighting man's grip. They wore the fancy uniform of employees of this establishment, a riot of ruffles and bronze-bound armor, the whole outlined in black and yellow checkers. They knew what they were about. They anticipated no real trouble from me. The gray cloth mask over my face would hearten them rather than not, for they would take this as a sign of one who wished to remain unknown in the shadows, and unwilling to face a fight.

And, by Zair, they were right!

The wounds I had taken in that last fight on the Jikaida board were nowhere near properly healed. I

was still weak. Yes, I could wield a blade and give some account of myself. But to engage in protracted swordplay, I knew, was beyond my present powers. This night's doings had been intended as a quick and furtive entry, a fast snatch of the airboat, and a remarkably smart getaway.

These two hulking guards had no intention of allowing me to carry on my plans for another moment.

As I say — so much for theory.

With the nerve-tingling scrape of steel on steel, the blades crossed.

Now — now these two were fair swordsmen. They earned their hire by standing guard. And, also, it was perfectly clear they would kill me as a mere part of earning that hire. That was their job. There was no great panache in it, not a sign of lip-licking enjoyment in their work. They just went about the business determined to prevent me, a masked thief, from stealing the airboat they were paid to protect.

As I say, they were fair swordsmen. After a few passes I knew, weak as I was, that I had the mastering of them both.

The blades screeched and rang as I fended them off, and pressed, and retreated, luring them on to the final passage that would settle this thing. But — but they were just men earning their daily bread. They were doing what they did for purely economic reasons. Their morality encompassed my death as a thief so that they might earn their daily bread, in the

same way that my morality encompassed stealing this airboat in order to fly back to Vallia.

I could have slain them both; run them through in a twinkling.

Many a superior swordsman of the darker persuasion would have done so and thought nothing of it. There is enough misery in two worlds without adding villainy to it and calling it heroism. These two guards went to sleep after a flurry of blades and a rapid double thump — one, two — from the hilt.

The delay they had caused, slight though it was, had undone my plans and earned their hire.

Men boiled out from the stairway onto the roof, so I knew they had broken down the lower door. Some of them wore shirts, some of them wore trousers or breechclouts, and although very few were possessed of all items of clothing, they all possessed swords. They set up a howl as they saw me, a dark, masked, mysterious figure just stepping back from two unconscious guards. They charged, screeching.

I recognized the tone, the mood, the feeling of their yells.

Anger, of course — but, chiefly, a high delirious excitement, a sudden passion for the chase, the game, the feeling that in a spot of action would come the highlight of the evening's entertainments.

The chains tethering the flier remained fast locked.

Now there was no time to act as I have acted in other places and other times in circumstances not too dissimilar.

I ran.

The roofs of the hotel presented a bewildering jumble — a jungle of tiles and cornices and chimneys and spires.

Away we all went in a rout, and they were hallooing and yelling and prancing about back there, waving their swords, their naked legs flashing in the fuzzy golden and pinkish light of She of the Veils. Kregen's largest moon, the Maiden with the Many Smiles, lifted over the edge of the world and shone pink and rose down through shredding clouds. There would be plenty of light. As I ran and skipped from roof to roof I reflected that, by Vox, there would be far too much light.

This quiet, cautious, carefully planned exercise had turned into a right old shambles.

The fellows chasing me back there were not all apims, not all Homo sapiens like me. Among them the wonderful variety of diffs of Kregen was well represented. A loose slate which made me slither down a prickly roof almost did for me; with a convulsive lunge I hooked my fingers around the guttering and managed to hang on. Below me the gulf yawned. Far below, far and far below, light spilled across a cobbled courtyard as a door was opened. A voice bellowed up.

“What in the name of Vilaha's Tripes is going on up there?”

The pack yelled and caroled and they were creeping out along the roof ridge toward the spot where I had

slipped. They looked like a ghostly dance of death up there, silhouetted against the moon radiance, for some of them pranced out balancing as though they walked a tightrope. Others got down on their hands and knees and shuffled along. Only one had the hardihood — or foolhardiness — to slither down the tiles.

He came down rather too fast.

He started to scream as he picked up speed, sliding down the roof. His flailing hands sought for a grip, and scrabbled against the tiles, and slipped. He hit the guttering and it broke away with a groan, and dipped down. Only a bracket near me held the end of the guttering. It hung down like the snapped yardarm of a swifter, smashed in the shock of ramming.

The fellow was screaming now, clutching desperately to the angled guttering, and slowly — slowly and horribly — he was sliding down the guttering toward its splintered end.

In a few moments he would slip off the end, make a desperate and unavailing snatch at the guttering, and fall to the cobbles beneath. He'd go splat.

His death meant nothing to me, of course.

I got my other hand up to the secured guttering and hooked a knee. I looked up. His comrades were still yelling up there and most of them did not even know he had fallen. They were running on to get to the end of the slate walkway along the ridge. There was not much time.

The leather belt around my waist was thick and supple; it came off in a trice and I gripped the end and threw the buckle end around in an arc. It swung like a pendulum.

“Grab the belt, dom!” I shouted.

His white face looked like the head of a moth, in the moon-dappled shadows. I could see his mouth open; but he was too far gone to scream. His eyes were like holes burned in linen.

He made a grab for the belt on the next swing, and missed, and jerked back as the guttering groaned and inched down.

“This time, dom,” I shouted. “You will not miss.”

The brass belt buckle glittered once and then vanished into the shadows. He made an effort, the humping, thrusting strain of a too-heavy horse attempting to leap a too-high barrier. The brass belt buckle was grabbed; just how good a grip he had I did not know. My own pains were beginning to make me think I might not be able to hold him when his weight came on the line. There was only one way to find out.

The guttering screeched, rivets pinged away, and the guttering fell.

The man swung, like a plumb-bob, dangling on the end of the belt.

Scarlet pain flowed over my body, from my arm and shoulder where Mefto’s sword had cut me again and again, and down into my very guts. I shut my eyes for a moment — and held on.

With a clanging roar like fourteen hundred dustbins going over a cliff, the guttering hit the cobbles.

The man swung and dangled.

Presently I started to haul him in. He came up, gasping, his face like the ashy contents of those fourteen hundred dustbins, his eyes black and bruised in the fleeting pink light.

“Get your knee — over — the damned guttering.”

He wore a gray shirt. His knee was skinned raw. But he got it over. Better a bloody knee than the squash on the cobbles.

With his weight half on the guttering alongside me I transferred my grip to his shoulder and half-pulled half-twisted him to safety. He lay there panting. His body heaved up and down with the violence of his breathing.

The yells of his friends receded. Only three were left up there on the slate walkway. I ignored them.

“You’re safe now,” I told him. I spoke sharply, to brace him up. “Brassud!” I said. “Get a grip on yourself.”

“You—” He gasped it out, shaking now, looking down at the gulf and that distant rectangle of light from the open door, and back to me. “You — why?”

“I’m not an assassin. Get your breath back.”

“By Krun!” he said, which told me he was Hamalese. “I’d never believe it — not even if—”

“Believe. And give me my belt back. Unlike you, I wish to retain my trousers.”

And he laughed.

The night breeze played along the roof. The man below yelled again, coming back out the door with a lantern. The men up on the roof answered him, shouting down. There was a deal of confused yelling.

“Can you make your own way along the guttering? You’ll be safe when you reach the gable end — the ornamentation there is profuse, if in bad taste.”

He stared at me. He was a young fellow, with dark hair cut long and curled, and with a nose rather shorter than longer, and with eyes — whose color was imponderable in that light — which, it seemed to me, stared out with forthright candor. He had a belt fashioned from silver links in the shape of leaping chavonths, and a small jeweled dagger; he had lost his sword. He regained control of his breathing.

“I think so.” He screwed his face up. “And you?”

“I—” I started to say.

“Stay here. I shall make my way to that zany lot and tell them nothing of your presence. Then, when we have gone, you may get away.”

“You would truly do this?”

“Yes. And I give you my thanks. Lahal and Lahal — I am called Lobur the Dagger.” He laughed again, and I saw he had recovered himself and was much taken with this night’s adventure, now that it had, miraculously, turned out all right and not with his untimely death. “I do not expect you to make the pappattu—”

“I think not. In the circumstances.”

“By Havil, no!”

The noise from his comrades had passed over and the three who had remained on the slate walkway above our heads had gone. The man and his lantern below were visible, just, at the far end of the building. The jut of a dormer window obscured him. We were alone under the Moons of Kregen, sitting on the gutter of a roof, talking as though we shared tea and miscils in some fashionable hostelry in the Sacred Quarter.

“There were three of your friends on the roof above — they are gone now — but I think they saw you did not fall.”

“Friends? Oh, yes, friends.”

He was clearly getting his wind back and setting himself for the scramble along the gutter. I am sure the thought stood in his mind, as it stood in mine, that there was every chance another section of guttering would give way under his weight.

There was no point in urging him to hurry. I fancied the hunt would bay along the next roof and courtyard. But, all the same, I had no desire to sit here all night.

The opportunity to gather information ought not to be overlooked and he might well be in the frame of mind to say more than in other circumstances he would allow himself.

“You are Hamalese. I hope you have enjoyed your Jikaida here. Do you return home soon?”

We were sitting side by side on the edge now, dangling our feet over emptiness. He laughed again.

“Jikaida! No — I have no head for the game. I wager on — on other things. As to going home, that rests on the decision of Prince Nedfar, and he is, with all due respect, besotted on Jikaida.”

“Most people are, here in Jikaida City.”

“And live well on it, too—” He cocked his head on one side, and added, “Gray Mask.” He laughed, delighted at the conceit. “That is what I shall call you, Gray Mask. And the people here know well how to take our money. The whole city is full of sharps and tricksters.”

“So, Lobur the Dagger, you believe I am not of the city?”

He looked surprised. “Of course not! Didn’t think it for a moment. Who, here, would know aught of the Sacred Quarter of Ruathytu?”

So either he had heard my quick remark to the unseen girl at my back, or had been told. So, he must think I was Hamalese like himself, perhaps a wandering paktun, a mercenary. This could be awkward or could be useful.

I spoke with more than a grain of truth as I said, “Ah, yes. What I would give to be able, at this very moment, to be sitting on the roof of that sweet tavern of Tempting Forgetfulness in Ruathytu instead of here, on The Montilla’s Head.” And then I thought to prove myself a very cunning, very clever fellow indeed. I added, most casually, “But the commands of the Empress Thyllis are not to be denied.”

He drew a quick breath. He cocked an eye at me. “Prince Nedfar — who is the Empress’s second cousin — is here on state business. This is known. But a second embassy?” He sucked in his cheeks. “I do not think the prince knows — or would be pleased if he did know.”

Well, that wouldn’t worry me. Any confusion I could sow in the minds of the nobles of Hamal I would do and glee in the doing. If this Prince Nedfar, who had come here to talk of alliance with Prince Mefto, grew angry at the thought he was being spied on at the commands of the empress then I would have struck a blow, a small and near-insignificant blow it is true, against mad Empress Thyllis.

So, quickly, I said, “The Empress is to be obeyed in all things. That many of these things are such that an honorable man must recoil cannot affect their consummation. I have no grudge against the prince.”

“But you sought to steal his airboat.” He shifted at this and looked hard at me. “And by Krun, Gray Mask! That would have stranded me here in this dolorous city!”

“Mayhap, Lobur, you would have come to a delight in Jikaida.”

“Hah!”

The time had run out and I began to entertain a suspicion that he kept me here talking so as to detain me for his friends. They’d be back, soon, hunting over the back trail. Yet I fancied I might sow a little more discontent and, into the bargain, reap more informa-

tion, for which I was starved. The risk was worth taking.

So I said, again in that casual way, “Many men murmur at the empress. You must have heard of plots against her. And, anyway, things go badly for Hamal in Vallia, do they not?”

He hitched around and as the guttering gave an ominous groan, stilled immediately. His pride would not allow him to take any notice of that menacing creak from the rivets and brackets.

“Aye, I have heard of plots.” This was good news — by Vox! Excellent news! He went on, “And we do not prosper in Vallia. They are devils up there — I have heard stories that are scarcely credible. They have a new emperor now, the great devil Dray Prescott, who was once paraded through Ruathytu at the tail of a calsany—”

“You saw that?”

“Yes. By Krun — the man is evil all through and yet, and yet, I felt a little—” He paused and hawked up and spat. We did not hear the splat on the cobbles far below. “Enough of that maudlin nonsense. If I could get my dagger into him I would become the most famous man in all Hamal.”

“Indubitably.”

“But the chance is hardly likely to come my way.”

“No. And I think it is time we moved off. Much as I am enjoying this conversation—”

“Yes, Gray Mask, you are right. I owe you my life. I shall not forget.” He looked at me. “You will not give me your name?”

“If you were to call me Drax, I would answer.”

“Drax?”

“Aye.”

“Hardly a Hamalese name—”

“What did you expect?”

“No. No, of course, Drax, Gray Mask, you are right.”

We had been sitting thus and talking companionably for a time, and he was sitting on the side nearest the broken guttering and farthest from the gable end that was our goal. He inched back and leaned against the tiles, making ready to pass behind me. I got myself two very secure grips. As he eased himself sideways he could easily give me a sudden and treacherous kick and so spin me out into the void.

He saw that instinctive movement as I secured myself. When he reached the other side he stooped.

“You thought, perhaps, I might push you over?”

“The thought was in my mind.”

In the pinkish glow of the moons his face darkened. “You impugn my honor! D’you think I would—”

“No.”

“I owe you my life.” He suddenly trembled, and I saw the tremor pass through him as a rashoon shudders over the waters of the inner sea, the Eye of the World. “By Krun! When I was slipping down that damned gutter — sliding to the end to fall and squash

— I tell you, Drax, Gray Mask, it was awful, awful. I thought — and then—”

“If we ever meet again we will drink a stoup or three together.”

“Aye! That we will.”

We spoke a few more parting words, and then we gave the remberees, and he edged his way cautiously along the gutter, making each step a careful probe for weak spots, until he reached the gable end. He vanished in the shadows of sculpted gargoyles and zhyans and mythical beasts. A macabre, a weird, little meeting, this conversation on a roof. But I had learned a little and I hoped I had sown a few seeds of doubt.

Damn the Hamalese! And double damn mad Empress Thyllis. But for her and her megalomaniacal schemes we'd have had Vallia back, smiling and happy, after the Time of Troubles by now.

The moment Lobur the Dagger disappeared into the twisted shadows I started along after him. There was no point in waiting. If he intended to betray me then the quicker I got in among them the better. Hauling him in had taken its toll of my feeble strength. Yes, yes, I had been a stupid onker in thus chancing all when I was not physically ready; but I needed that airboat on the roof. The voller that belonged to Prince Nedfar.

Looking down over the next courtyard from the concealment of that garish profusion of sculpture I could see no sign of Lobur or his cronies. The

shadows lay thickly. The moons shafted ghostly pink light down and painted a pale rose patina across the lower roofs and walls. Around me LionardDen, the city of Jikaida, lay sleeping.

Very well.

Despite my physical weakness, despite all that had happened — was not this the moment to strike?

On that I started to climb up the gable end, handing myself up from stone beast to stone beast, working my way back to the slate walkway along the ridge.

Once up there I would retrace my steps to the roof where the airboat lay.

Maybe I would again be unsuccessful. Maybe there would be so many guards, so many obstacles, that I just would not be able to overcome them all. But that made no matter. I do not subscribe to the more stupidly florid of these notions of honor, particularly of rampantly displayed honor. But, here and now, there was a deal of that juvenile and exhibitionistic emotion mingled with the shrewdly practical idea that they'd be off guard up there. This was a chance.

Climbing along the roof back the way I had come, I knew the chance had to be taken.

Chapter Two

Gray Mask Vanishes

The kennel containing the two stavvers I had passed in something of a hurry showed up ahead in the moonlight as I leaped — not too nimbly — up onto the coping. The stavvers had been aroused by the uproar. They stretched out to the full extent of the chains fixed to collars about their necks. Chunky, are stavvers, fierce and loyal watchdogs, with savage wolf-heads and eight legs, the rear six articulated the same way, and they can charge with throat-ripping speed. After a distance they flag; but that stavver charge, bolting all fangs ready to rip and rend, is quite enough to protect an honest man's house.

Now these two set up a fearful howling.

Two helmeted heads popped up over a nearby roof ridge among that jungle of roofs. Two arrows were loosed at me. They were not Bowmen of Loh shooting at me — chances are that I would not be here talking had they been — and I went flying down into a leaded

gully between tiled slopes and so scabbled along like a fish in a stream trap.

This was all beginning to get out of hand. A guard jumped down from a chimney pot and tried to take my head off with his axe, and I ducked and got a boot into his midriff, and he went yowling away, holding his guts. The axe clattered down over blue slates and vanished into emptiness.

Other men were shouting, there was the shrilling sound of whistles, and more barking, from stavvers and other kinds of domestic animals nicely designed to rip the seat out of your pants, or to rip off other more important parts of your anatomy. Feeling incredibly like a fool, and beginning, also, to feel the humor of the situation breaking down all the silly anger, I went charging down a roof slope, came around a chimney corner and saw the uplifted coping of the roof whereon rested the airboat.

Any hope of stealing the vollen vanished instantly.

She lay there bathed in the light of many lanterns. The men had turned out — some still without shirts or trousers, but all with swords. There was one young fellow there, with wide black moustaches, turned out as though for Chuktar's Parade — fully accoutered in harness and with shield and thraxter at the ready. His helmet shone under the lights of the moons.

So I debated. The debate was very short.

The stavvers were baying at my heels, the guards were massed in front, the moons were casting down more and more light as they rose — the Twins, the

two Moons of Kregen eternally orbiting each other — had been early this night, and The Maiden with the Many Smiles and She of the Veils were late. The light would strengthen in rose and gold until the first shards of light from the twin suns, Zim and Genodras, illuminated the horizon. Then this exotic world of Kregen would be revealed in radiance of jade and ruby and the light would increase and burn and any fellows foolish enough to be hopping around on the roofs of high-class hotels would get all they deserved.

Home — rather, back to the tavern at which I was lodging for the moment — seemed to me the order of the day — or night, seeing that the day's orders would be so uncomfortable.

Mind you, if in retrospect I make it seem all light-hearted and if, truly, I did feel that light-headedness then, do not misunderstand me. I was raging with anger and frustration. Oh, yes, my island empire of Vallia, cruelly beset by predatory foemen, was in good and capable hands. I could go gallivanting about having adventures for as long as I wished; but I felt the deep tide drawing me back home. I had to get back to Vallia and make sure, make absolutely sure, that all was well. That I intended to hand it all over to my lad Drak as soon as possible was merely another reason for return. He was there, in Vallia, and I had not the slightest inkling what he was up to.

And, too, my half-healed wounds must have contributed to that feeling of light-headedness, as though this was all one gigantic jest.

So, bitterly angry, and stifling my laughter, I hopped off the roof down onto the next one and scuttled like an ancient crab along the ridge and slid down a drainpipe to the courtyard with its arbora trees. They are called this because their flowers look much like arbora feathers. If I thought I was on ground level I was seriously mistaken.

I remember I was thinking that I'd just let all this fuss blow over, and rest up a bit and get my strength back, and then I'd be back here to The Montilla's Head and this time I'd really lay my avaricious paws on Prince Nedfar's airboat. But really.

A door made from sturmwood and the bottoms of old bottles ahead looked promising, the roseate moonlight catching in the bottles and whirling hypnotically. I eased across with a quick glance aloft and then the door opened and disaster walked out — rather, disaster reeled out, shrieking and yelling.

The girl — she was a kitchen maid — was not apim but one of those charming diffs with the faces of apim infants, all soft rounded curves and chuckles and dimples, permanent baby-faces, naive and simple and delightful. The men folk have harder faces, it is true, but they, too, carry that hint of undeveloped childishness about them. For all that, the men have tough, muscle-hard, brawny bodies. The womenfolk have been blessed with female bodies that are marvels of curve and symmetry, sensuous, fascinating, endlessly alluring, intoxicating to any man — whether apim or diff — who shares our common heritage. This race of

diffs — I once used to miscall diffs beast-men or men-beasts, halflings, not understanding — are often given the name Syblians; although the name they give themselves, not wishing to be confused with Sylvies, is Ennschafften.

The drunken lout chasing the girl was calling, in between hiccoughing and belching, yelling to her to stop.

“Mindy, miundy,” he called, staggering out of the door, his shirt tangled around his waist, his face enflamed with drink and passion, his eyes fairly starting out of his head. “Miundy, Mindy — wait for me, you little — come back — or I’ll—” And he staggered against the doorjamb, and bounced up, reaching out after the shrieking girl.

Now in these and similar situations a fellow had best keep out of the way until he knows exactly what is going on. Many an upright citizen stepping in to rescue a maiden in distress has been turned on by what seemed victim and attacker, both containing him with insults for coming between a family squabble of man and wife. So I waited quietly in the shade of the arbora tree. The scent was delicious, and I breathed in — thankful, I may add, for the rest.

The Sybli caught her foot in a gray old root of the tree and she stumbled forward three or four paces, off balance, her arms spread out to try to save herself. She wore a tattered old blue and yellow checkered dress, badly torn as to bodice and skirt, and her feet

were bare. She almost saved herself, and then she lost her balance and fell.

The man laughed and staggered forward. He was apim, a big, husky, full-fleshed fellow who knew what he wanted — and took it.

The girl Mindy tried to rise and gave a gasp as her ankle twisted under her. Her face showed babyish terror. The man leaped forward and she kicked out. I felt like giving a cheer as he yelped and reeled back, cursing.

“Never, you beast, never!” she cried. Her body was shaking.

“You will or I’ll—”

She bit him as he came in again, sinking her sharp teeth into his hand. He let out a fearsome yell. It was quite clear that this secluded courtyard was sound-proof and that with all the hullabaloo on the other side of the hotel this fellow was perfectly confident that the girl’s cries would not be heard.

She bit hard. He managed to drag his hand back and he stuck it in his mouth. He did not look so drunk or so amorous now.

In the confusing lights of the moons reaching ghostly pink and gold fingers into the courtyard the girl tried again to draw away. Her baby-face glistened with terror.

“You leave off, Granoj, you hear! You keep away—”

Granoj shook his head, took his hand out of his mouth and leaped on her. She kicked and struggled and screamed and I slowly straightened up from

leaning against the tree. He wore a sword, a thraxter, the straight cut and thruster of Havilfar, and he was probably a soldier off duty, judging by the belt and his boots.

And then, so swiftly I was almost too late, his mood changed. He saw, clearly, that the girl Mindy was not going to do as he wished, and he turned ugly. And, too, she had hurt him. She had kicked him shrewdly.

“I’ll show you, you stupid Sybli! You can’t make a fool out of me—”

He ripped his sword free and swung it up. That he was going to strike her with the blade was crystal clear.

I stepped out, with a sigh, and caught his arm.

“This has gone far enough,” I said, and I tried to put the old snap into my voice.

But I felt that treacherous light-headedness, I felt the weakness, and with an oath he stepped back, having not the slightest difficulty in breaking my grip on his arm.

“You rast! You first — and then the girl!”

With that, he charged full at me, the sword up-raised.

My own thraxter cleared the scabbard with what seemed to me agonizing slowness.

He was bull-strong, enraged, the drink lending him a reckless passion. He swung and chopped and hacked, and I had to dance a right merry little jig evading his savage attacks. The girl stopped screaming. The swords rang and clashed. He forced me back,

and I felt the tree at my back, and I could not retreat any farther. And he laughed and taunted me most vilely, and rushed in. His words boiled around, his sword flickered cleverly, and he used a swordsman's trick that is well-known in fighting circles, and he would have had me had I not known the trick.

Without thought — for thought was too laggard now — my own sword arm did what a sword arm must do if it wishes to retain a body from which to hang, and this Granoj staggered back, suddenly, and as he staggered back so he pulled free of my blade. That steel glimmered darkly wet. He put a hand to his side, and he looked down, and lifted the hand, and the blood dripped, dripped...

So Granoj fell.

Whether or not he was dead I did not know. I felt the weakness on me, and I staggered and the Sybli was at my side and I thought she would berate me, and attack me for the deed. She put her hand around my waist, and held me, and said, "You must hurry, Jikai! You must go away from here, quickly, and go with the thanks of Mindy the Ennschafftena. Hurry!"

The walls of the courtyard wavered like curtains in a breeze. The whirlicue stump ends of the bottles of the door gyrated at me. I choked up phlegm. I fancied my wounds had opened and were bleeding again.

"Yes — must go — you are — all right—"

All the frivolity of the night's proceedings had turned nasty and ugly.

Death beat his black wings — as the quondam poets say — and I was feeling like one of the warmed-over corpses served up fresh from the Ice Floes of Sicce. If I did not get away, and me with a gray cloth mask over my head, I'd be done for.

“I am all right, Jikai — hurry, hurry — there is a wicket and stairs — the Street of Candles — there will be no one there now — my thanks—”

Staggering, sword in fist, hardly seeing, I was steered toward the little wicket in the corner. She threw open the gate and the slimy stairs led down, little used. I started at the top and the next moment I was at the bottom and with a pain there, too. I clawed up to my hands and knees and looked back. I could just see her outline.

“Remberee, Jikai — again my thanks — hurry!”

The wicket shut with a flat slap, like curtailed applause.

An arched opening gave egress onto the Street of Candles. No one was about, as Mindy the Sybli had promised. The shuttered doorways and windows added a ghostly note of desolation. A stray gyp went whining along, his brown and white coat wavering through the shadows. First things first. I wiped the sword on the gray cloth mask and then carefully folded it, bloodstains inward, and thrust it into my shirt. Clues... clues...

Then, sword scabbarded, all of Jikaida City going up and down and corkscrewing around me, I lurched off. By the time I had reached an avenue I recognized

and could take my bearings the city was coming alive
and the thin radiance of Zim and Genodras pulsed
warmly in the sky to the east.

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
If you would like to find out what happens next, you
can buy the complete Mushroom eBook edition from
the usual online bookshops or through
www.mushroom-ebooks.com.**

**For more information about Mushroom
Publishing, please visit us at
www.mushroompublishing.com.**

About the author

Alan Burt Akers was a pen name of the prolific British author Kenneth Bulmer, who died in December 2005 aged eighty-four.

Bulmer wrote over 160 novels and countless short stories, predominantly science fiction, both under his real name and numerous pseudonyms, including Alan Burt Akers, Frank Brandon, Rupert Clinton, Ernest Corley, Peter Green, Adam Hardy, Philip Kent, Bruno Krauss, Karl Maras, Manning Norvil, Chesman Scot, Nelson Sherwood, Richard Silver, H. Philip Stratford, and Tully Zetford. Kenneth Johns was a collective pseudonym used for a collaboration with author John Newman. Some of Bulmer's works were published along with the works of other authors under "house names" (collective pseudonyms) such as Ken Blake (for a series of tie-ins with the 1970s television programme *The Professionals*), Arthur Frazier, Neil Langholm, Charles R. Pike, and Andrew Quiller.

Bulmer was also active in science fiction fandom, and in the 1970s he edited nine issues of the *New*

Writings in Science Fiction anthology series in succession to John Carnell, who originated the series.

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at www.mushroom-ebooks.com, and at wikipedia.org.

The Dray Prescott Series

The Delian Cycle:

1. Transit to Scorpio
2. The Suns of Scorpio
3. Warrior of Scorpio
4. Swordships of Scorpio
5. Prince of Scorpio

Havilfar Cycle:

6. Manhounds of Antares
7. Arena of Antares
8. Fliers of Antares
9. Bladesman of Antares
10. Avenger of Antares
11. Armada of Antares

The Krozair Cycle:

12. The Tides of Kregen
13. Renegade of Kregen
14. Krozair of Kregen

Vallian cycle:

15. Secret Scorpio
16. Savage Scorpio
17. Captive Scorpio
18. Golden Scorpio

Jikaida cycle:

19. A Life for Kregen
20. A Sword for Kregen
21. A Fortune for Kregen
22. A Victory for Kregen

Spikatur cycle:

23. Beasts of Antares
24. Rebel of Antares
25. Legions of Antares
26. Allies of Antares

Pandahem cycle:

27. Mazes of Scorpio
28. Delia of Vallia
29. Fires of Scorpio
30. Talons of Scorpio
31. Masks of Scorpio
32. Seg the Bowman

Witch War cycle:

33. Werewolves of Kregen
34. Witches of Kregen

35. Storm over Vallia
36. Omens of Kregen
37. Warlord of Antares

Lohvian cycle:

38. Scorpio Reborn
39. Scorpio Assassin
40. Scorpio Invasion
41. Scorpio Ablaze
42. Scorpio Drums
43. Scorpio Triumph

Balintol cycle:

44. Intrigue of Antares
45. Gangs of Antares
46. Demons of Antares
47. Scourge of Antares
48. Challenge of Antares
49. Wrath of Antares
50. Shadows over Kregen

Phantom cycle:

51. Murder on Kregen
52. Turmoil on Kregen