

**DRAY PRESCOT: 45**

**GANGS OF  
ANTARES**

**KENNETH BULMER**

writing as

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**A Mushroom eBook**



**GANGS OF ANTARES**

**ALAN BURT AKERS**

**a Mushroom eBooks sample**

Copyright © 1994, Alan Burt Akers

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 Heyne Verlag in German in 1994.

This Edition published in 2008 by Mushroom eBooks, an imprint of Mushroom Publishing, Bath, BA1 4EB, United Kingdom

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

<b>DRAY PRESCOT .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOUR.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIVE .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>CHAPTER SIX .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN.....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>CHAPTER NINE.....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>CHAPTER TEN.....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>CHAPTER ELEVEN.....</b>	<b>122</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWELVE .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOURTEEN.....</b>	<b>148</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIFTEEN.....</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>CHAPTER SIXTEEN .....</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.....</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.....</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>CHAPTER NINETEEN .....</b>	<b>200</b>

<b>CHAPTER TWENTY .....</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....</b>	<b>230</b>
<b>THE DRAY PRESCOT SERIES.....</b>	<b>232</b>

## Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott, as described by one who has seen him here on this Earth, is 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, silent and lethal. Reared in the harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy he is a man who, relatively unsuccessful on Earth, is ideally suited to the new life to which he was called by the Star Lords.

Lit by the ruby and emerald fires of Antares, the planet Kregen, four hundred light years away, is a world harsh yet beautiful, terrible yet alluring. There any man or woman may achieve what the heart desires if they plan and struggle and keep faith with their innate purpose. Kregen has its share of weaklings and the faint of heart; but their names are not writ large in the footnotes to the Sagas to be found under the Suns of Scorpio.

Prescot has adventured widely over Kregen both at the behest of the Star Lords and to further his own vision. Now he is in the subcontinent of Balintol where strangeness unlike any that he has previously encoun-

tered awaits him. These volumes are arranged to be read as individual books, and we are privileged to be afforded the opportunity of reading further of the adventures of Dray Prescot upon Kregen under the streaming mingled lights of the Suns of Scorpio.

*Alan Burt Akers*

## Chapter one

They climbed up before dawn. Twelve of them, twelve young rascals clambering over the fallen boulders at the foot of the Hill of Dancing Ghosts. They slipped like wraiths into the hidden opening in the cliff face. Here torches were handed out. Young Dimpy grasped the rough wood of the handle, Big Balla lit the end from her torch half-blinding Dimpy, and he stumbled up the steps after the others feeling his heart thumping like a manic janzi pecker.

“Get on! Get on!” Slead gave Dimpy a vicious push which sent him staggering up the steps. The stink of Slead’s greased hair cut acridly through the smells of damp earth and burning torches and sweat. Slead was bigger than the others and unpleasant with it. He was known as Slead the Slick and was in command of this section of novices in the Hellraisers. “You’ll have to shape up if you wanna join us, you useless tanzy.”

Dimpy struggled on up the slippery ascent. He didn’t much mind being called a tanzy, for he knew he wasn’t. He didn’t care to be called Young Dimpy. Oh, sure, he was young all right, not as green as these scared novices,

but younger than Sled or Big Balla. Since the slide and the death of his father and brothers he'd matured in caring for his mother and sisters. The slide had knocked the heart out of his old gang, the Roaring Fifties, so that the Hellraisers had moved into the territory without serious opposition. Now, like it or not, he had to prove himself as a gang member all over again.

Screams splintered up from ahead and a couple of novices tumbled down the steps almost knocking Dimpy over. Confusion broke all along the line. Weird shadows fled across the stairway. Big Balla was already thrusting her way up and Sled, with his customary vicious shove, pushed past Dimpy and started after her.

"If'n it's them stinking Screaming Leems I'll—" What Sled intended to do to the rival gang was lost as his words drowned in the uproar. The Screaming Leems, considered Dimpy, had to be way out of their territory if they were mounting a raid here. He could feel the closeness of the walls, the slime underfoot, the dark stench of the place. The novices were caterwauling away, terrified out of their wits. Dimpy dragged in a gagging breath and started after Sled. He was thinking of Big Balla.

Pushing novices out of his way Dimpy reached the top of the steps where the uncertain light revealed Big Balla and Sled desperately using their torches to hold off a half-grown praxul whose three stalked eyes glinted red above the fanged slot between his jaws.

Dimpy knew about praxuls. Nasty beasts, squamous and scuttling, they inhabited the honeycombed interiors

of the hills along with a whole horrendous slew of fellow monsters. Much of the hill's interior was illuminated by a fungus which gave light enough for the praxul's three eyes. He didn't much like the orange glare of the torches.

"Get his eyes!" shouted Dimpy. He darted in, thrust and skipped back. He missed. Luckily for him, the praxul's sweep of claw also missed.

"I know! I know!" snarled Slead. "Get outta my way, tanzy." He jumped in, slashed his torch, missed and stumbled back.

The thing stood about waist high, warty of scaled hide, and its claws' reach made it difficult to get at. Like most denizens of the caverns the praxul could use other senses than sight to focus on its prey; taking out his sight was the priority. The stink of its ooze sickened in Dimpy's nostrils, used as he was to the aromas of the warrens in the runnels between the lordly hills of Oxonium.

Big Balla lunged. Dimpy's reaction was instantaneous. In a single sweep his left fist gripped Big Balla's belt and a supple twisting turn span her away from the lethal slice of claw. A rip of cloth jagged off the girl's tunic caught in the claw. Big Balla yelped. In the same twisting motion Dimpy swirled his torch before them, blazing sparks in a fiery fountain. The praxul crouched back, weaving from side to side, hungrily seeking a way past the flame to his dinner.

"Let me at him!" Slead tried to sidestep and slash his brand in at an angle. The beast weaved back and sliced

and Sled just managed to topple back, falling to a knee as the girl used her torch to cover him.

That tiny interruption in the flow of jump, thrust and retreat gave Dimpy the opportunity he needed. His actions were fast — very fast. His torch connected with one stalked eye. The eye sizzled. The praxul's claw flashed past his thigh. The thing screeched. The stench grew worse with the sour taste of frizzled eye.

The praxul was not unintelligent, with the instincts of his kind. He valued his sight, despite his other senses. He backed off further, hissing, weaving from side to side, claws waving. He was in pain. Despite all, Dimpy felt a stab of pity for the praxul. Then, clearly deciding his dinner was not to be found beyond the flare of the torches, he turned and scuttled off into the dimness.

Dimpy and Big Balla let out simultaneous whoops of relief. Sled glared malevolently after the disappearing monster. He shook his torch. "I'd a done him good, by Ferzakl. Yeah — if he hadn't run off."

The girl touched Dimpy lightly on the shoulder. Her face became suddenly different, grave with the seriousness of sudden realization of just what had happened. "Thanks, Dimpy. He'd have had me, for sure." She tossed her hair back. "You were quick, by Ferzakl, mighty quick."

Dimpy felt it unnecessary to mention that he had acquired a reputation in the Roaring Fifties for the speed of his reflexes. He just let a small smile curve his lips. "Yes," he said.

Sleed swung about at the top of the steps. "Well, what are you tanzies waiting for? Come on! Come!"

The huddled novices with their torches quivering began to climb the last of the steps and venture along the uneven footing of the twisting, claustrophobic tunnel that lay ahead.

Noises echoed. The jagged roof lowered down over the scrambling party and splashes of torchlight glittered from condensation streaking the walls. Now Sleed the Slick had taken it upon his unlovely person to climb immediately abaft of Dimpy with Big Balla up front leading the way. She was no novice, being in training for the position of leader on a par with Sleed. At too frequent intervals Sleed prodded Dimpy on painfully. One of these days, said Dimpy to himself, controlling his anger with an almost physical shudder, one of these days I'll cut out this cramp's liver and lights and fricassee 'em in samphron oil and then feed 'em to the dogs — so help me!

The upward way turned into a level passage which opened out into a gallery. One side was slimed wall, the other was black emptiness. Noises seemed to be sucked out and down. Nobody spoke. The torches' orange hair shrank against the darkness.

The way eased when they left the galleried cavern and passed into an ordinary tunnel. A little further on they came to a blocked up side entrance with a Rapa skull gleaming ruddily yellow nailed into a crevice. Dimpy felt a pang. Somewhere through the maze of tunnels beyond that skull were the old ways of the Roaring Fifties. The

slide had brought down tons of rubble and solid rock which beside squashing Fat Nath and Lora the Leemkin had sealed off the secret ways.

The next junction did not need to be marked off in so sinister a fashion. The distorted opening in the wall reeked of sulphur. The hell-spawned stink gushed out to be sucked up into a crevice in the roof.

“Bad jangles, that,” remarked Big Balla, who stood passing the novices along.

“I’m in charge here, girl, and don’t you forget it.” Sled the Slick was a Khibil and although as a race they considered themselves vastly superior to all other diffs, even Khibils might have checked at this specimen. “I’ll tell these tanzies what’s what.”

Big Balla opened her mouth; then she closed it with a snap and jerked her jut of chin up. As a Hytak she knew her worth in the society of the gangs. But, also as a Hytak, she understood order and discipline even in so unruly a mob as the Hellraisers. And, as the second in command training to be a leader, she must, guessed Dimpy, feel ferocious distaste that she’d been stuck with this rast Sled. The way up turned and twisted along treacherous tunnels. Dimpy had no difficulty in committing the tortuous passages to memory. Darkness partially pierced by the flare of the torches, dankness, the sense of pressure, of a closing in and suffocating weight, oppressed the party. They stumbled and hurried along, the novice gang members new to this experience, Sled viciously impatient, Balla containing her emotions, and Dimpy clambering agilely along with them.

Those first trepidations as he'd entered the hidden opening at the foot of the Hill of Dancing Ghosts that had so pumped up his heart rate he put down in his youthful arrogance to mere nostalgia — to the last time he'd gone up a Hill and all those painful memories.

That had been the day before the slide. He'd lost good friends then and more in the last futile resistance of the Roaring Fifties to the Hellraisers. The odd thing was, Dimpy wasn't at all sure that he did have a burning desire to prove himself to these Hellraisers. His desires had always been straightforward — to do everything for his family and comrades, and to the Red Hot Gullet of Karbonar the Inevitable with any and everyone else. And, said young Dimpy resolutely to himself, if you condemned him for that then to the Red Hot Gullet of Karbonar the Inevitable with you, too, dom.

Upwards the party climbed, following the ways marked with the secret signs of the Hellraisers. Dimpy committed all to his memory as Sled and Big Balla counseled the novices. Dimpy did not know for sure if all the great Hills of Oxonium were honeycombed with passages; he'd admitted he'd be surprised if they were not. As for the Hills themselves where the lordly ones of the city lived, there lay the fat ponshos ripe for the plucking. His Uncle Petegland had once suffered an unpleasant experience with a Hill and from then on resolutely referred to them as Contours. A brown and black crawzer like a man size centipede had taken Uncle Petegland into its ashy jaws when for an instant he had been looking the other way.

Now Dimpy used a trick his father had taught him. His surroundings remained clear to him and he took note of all that went on; but he could think of other things, of what he intended to do with his life, of just how he would dispose of Sled the Slick, of regrets that Big Balla was a Hytak, for although apim and Hytak could marry and produce beautiful children, he would — again in his youthful arrogance — have much preferred her to be apim like himself.

The boy in front turned his ankle on a loose stone and would have fallen had not Dimpy caught him in a supple grasp. He hauled the lad up with a quick: “You’re all right, Staky. Just use your eyes—”

Sled gave Dimpy an almighty shove in the small of the back. Dimpy staggered forward, still holding Staky, and the two collapsed.

“You useless tanzky! You stupid rast! Get on, get on!”

Even then — even then young Dimpy helped Staky to rise as he stood up himself. His fist closed around the handle of the short curved knife at his belt. Sled saw that instinctive, betraying gesture.

The bigger lad’s foxy face tightened. He was not yet old enough for his bristly whiskers to be more than stubble; but all a Khibil’s pride in his race, all a Khibil’s self-superiority, blazed out in an expression of utter hatred. Dimpy controlled himself in a way he found strange to him, swiveled, stony-faced, and went on up the rough passage. He found that look on the Khibil’s face to be overdone, melodramatic. But young as he was he recognized that look’s deadly intent.

Not quite as much in control of himself as he imagined, he banged his head against a low outcrop. Dimpy said something in reference to ibmas of the vilest kind and pushed on. His father had always said he had a skull like a vosk. The bang served merely to irritate him further with his surroundings, with his company, with the purpose of this raid.

Although the city of Oxonium existed on two general levels of altitude, there were many levels within the class structures of the higher and lower. From the warrens in the steep-sided canyons, calculating eyes studied the aristocratic inhabitants of the contours. From the summits, intolerant and suspicious eyes watched the human garbage festering in the runnels. The great lords employed guards and paid the infamous Katakai Watch to police the vermin below. The gangs trained their young people in all the arts of deception, theft and murder.

Here and there within the tortuous ascent the route had been cut by humans to link chambers. Some passageways were even paved and lined with masonry blocks. How long ago this work had been carried out no one really knew. Apocryphal stories abounded, of course, in the true Kregan way.

Sleed the Slick carried a broad dagger at his waist, and, like Dimpy and his curved knife, had had the sense not to use that against the praxul. If, said Dimpy to himself, if the cramph prods me with that I'll — well, and what would he do — here underground and surrounded by aspiring members of the Hellraisers? He

clenched his teeth and went on and up in a most foul mood.

Water dropped from the roof to splash into a stream alongside the footway. Far up ahead a spark of light glittered.

“Quiet,” snarled Slead.

The spark turned into a lantern perched on a ledge. A youngster wearing a ponsho skin stood up as the party approached. His sallow face looked peaky under the hood and his eyes gleamed. Silently he motioned upwards.

Big Balla took the lead and began the climb. Rough-cut steps, ten to a flight, zigzagged back and forth from landing to landing. Dimpy counted six flights before he followed Staky through an open trapdoor to step onto a wooden floor.

A stale musty odor surrounded him; but the cellar was dry. A pile of long sausage-like sacks stood against one wall. Steps led up.

The formalities here were very similar to those Dimpy had been accustomed to with his old gang. They climbed into the back room of a store. Rolled carpets everywhere indicated the nature of the establishment. The tenseness in the recruits might have affected Dimpy had he not been so wound up and irritated by what he considered the totally unnecessary ritual test in his case. The novices, yes, let them prove their fitness to join the gang. He'd been a fully qualified gang member and chapter deldar, young as he was.

A fat Rapa with mangy feathers looked them over with his beak high. He sniffed. "You know what you have to do. Do not return until you are successful. On no account return here if you are followed." He touched the dagger at his waist. "Remember."

One by one the urchins left the shop to join up at a discreet distance. When it was Dimpy's turn he felt at once the strangeness of an alien place and the familiarity of crowded streets filled with people bustling about their daily lives. The clamor of people chaffering and laughing and shouting beat at him. The clatter of hooves and the grinding of bronze rimmed wheels added a touch of unreality to a lad brought up in the dens below. The air — ah, the sweet, sweet air of Kregen!

The breeze blew cleanly, scented with baking bread and cakes and the juices of fruits, sullied only slightly by the coarser smells of commerce. The air tasted good to young Dimpy.

The Hill of Dancing Ghosts was also known as Barter Hill and whilst the folk up here might not be the great and lordly ones they were well fed and clothed and walked with confident steps. Their slaves and servants, of course, did not share these attributes.

The aspirant gang members moved into their pre-arranged groups slinking as they had been taught to merge and become invisible among the slaves, eyes downcast. Dimpy owed to a genuine feeling of pleasure that Big Balla stood at his elbow.

Splitting one from the other as they trod ways they had never seen before save in the scratched markings in

the dust of their den, the novices penetrated deeper into the clustered buildings of the Hill of Barter. Other young lads with respectable clothes, the Perfume Patrol of Oxonium, dashed past. Crowds jostled everywhere. Smells floated in the warm air, varying from one street and bazaar to the next. Dimpy rescinded his original decision to get this whole farce over with as quickly as possible. He was fully aware that Slead would be keeping a very personal and hostile eye on him, so he decided to make the cramph wait. He kept to the shady sides of the streets, head bowed in the universal servitude of the slave, eyes picking up everything that went on.

From the corner of a plaza he saw one of the gang members over the way sneak up to the rear of a self-important-looking Fristle. Lolalee was quick. Her curved knife flashed once in the lights of the suns. Then she was running fleet as a hare with the sword she had slashed from its hangings already concealed under the rags clothing her thin body. The Fristle swung about, his cat-face mean, and began yelling. By the time that happened and the crowd started to think of pursuit, Lolalee had vanished.

“Well done,” said Big Balla, softly.

“I like her style.”

“There’s Staky over there looking — looking unhappy. The idiot’s dithering. You be careful, Dimpy.” With that, she was off.

From his knowledge of the city and this Contour, Dimpy knew the next square was the Kyro of Nath the Haggler. The platz was busy, its stalls well patronized.

Dimpy rounded the corner to see Slead running towards him holding out a sword hilt-first. Instinctively Dimpy took the weapon into his fist and Slead, without a word, hared off.

Dimpy did not, just did not, believe what happened next.

The big, ugly and altogether unpleasant Katakai to whom Slead spoke reacted at once. From the crowds a shrill cry shocked up.

“My sword! Thief! Thief!”

The Katakai ran lumberingly for Dimpy.

Without thinking, Dimpy threw down the sword and ran.

## Chapter two

If you think my short sojourn in the mysterious continent of Balintol gave me an understanding of that exotic land then you are completely misinformed. The world of Kregen abounds with remarkable tales of Balintol. In the bazaars and at the corners of public buildings you can always find storytellers with their clusters of gawpers bending close. The fables of Balintol are among the perennial favorites of Kregen.

Just at the moment I was cautiously following a Rapa thief along the crowded Avenue of Lochrivarn trying not to lose him and at the same time prevent his cunning dark eyes from spotting what I was up to. Where you have classes so very far apart in wealth you have thieves, or so it seems on Kregen as on Earth. The Rapa's accomplice, a mangy-appearing Fristle, had snatched Tiri's purse as she'd been about to pay for a trifle in the Souk of Laces. The Rapa had received the purse with such calm aplomb that no one could possibly imagine him involved in anything remotely illegal. As for the catman, he'd used a slender blade to cut the purse strings and flicked his tail to snatch it. That tail

possessed a cunning little bronze hook attachment strapped to it in place of the fashionable dagger. Oh, yes, an accomplished pair of cutpurses, these two. Also, the ancient racial animosity between Rapa and Fristle, so common when I'd first arrived on Kregen, was dying down as this double-act so eloquently proved.

The thief slipped across the avenue with a sudden dart that took him beyond a passing string of calsanys. Not wishing to upset these patient animals and suffer the noisome results I scuttled across abaft the last one's tail, narrowly avoiding an imperious fellow astride a much-decorated zorca, and reached the far side. The dratted Rapa thief was not visible among the passing throngs.

Useless to curse, the fellow was a master of his craft. All the same, I did not feel inclined to abandon my pursuit.

Anyway, I said to myself, I needed some exercise after the last few weeks of inaction. All hell was due to break out in the country of Tolindrin, and the city of Oxonium, as the capital, was like to receive more than its share, that seemed obvious, by Vox. Carrying on at a brisk pace and looking as far ahead through the crowds as possible I could still see no sign of the thief. Barter Hill tended to be more crowded and confused than many of the Hills of Oxonium by reason of the multitude of markets traditionally setting up shop here. The noises were not unpleasantly clamorous and the smells were kept down by the Perfume Patrol. These lads went around spraying scents and disinfectants, their services

paid for by a city levy on the stallholders and shopkeepers.

Among all this hullabaloo, where had the dratted fellow got himself to?

The avenue debouched onto a sizeable square, the Kyro of Nath the Haggler. The twin Suns of Scorpio slanted their emerald and ruby fires down onto the mass of humanity busy bargaining, peddling, swindling and making livings varying from fairly honest to downright villainous.

Perhaps because my senses had been heightened by detecting a couple of professional thieves at work, I noticed at once what was going on at the corner of the adjacent street.

A young lad, an apim like me, sidled with exquisite casualness alongside a portly and gesticulating fellow haggling over the purchase of a length of azure silk. The vendor, narrow of eye and hooked of nose, kept one of those eyes constantly swiveling. Both vendor and purchaser must have been well aware of the provenance of the merchandise, by Krun. All the same, hook-nose's roving eye failed to detect the ragged lad's activities.

With a movement fluid and fast the rascal cut the leathers of the purchaser's sword. So engrossed in the enjoyable business, the portly one failed to notice at once. The short sword vanished into the ragged robes swathing the boy and he turned to run.

He must have seen the Katakis at the same time I did.

Katakis are bad news at the best of times. For this sword snatcher, now was a very bad time, a very very

bad time. The Whiptail did not wear uniform but a simple dark shamlak and I surmised if he was not a member of the City Watch up here to buy he could be a hired thug employed to protect a local business. He'd just love to grip his fist into the lad's frayed collar and flick him a few times — hard — with the flat of the dagger strapped to his tail.

A second young lad, slightly smaller but just as ragged as the first, rounded the corner. The youngster with the stolen sword moved swiftly. Crossing to the newcomer he whipped out the sword and thrust it forward, hilt first. The sword was taken in that instinctive way anyone will grab at an unsharpened object poked at them. As I watched, by now fascinated at these goings on, the lads parted. The boy with the sword stood there looking at the blade in what I could clearly see was stupefaction, surprising though that seemed to me in the circumstances. The thief ran across to the Kataki guard.

At that juncture the rotund purchaser of dubious azure silk woke up to the fact that his sword no longer weighed down his belt. Immediately he set up a-braying.

“My sword! Thief! Thief!”

I shook my head. This was just life as it was lived in Oxonium in Tolindrin in the continent of Balintol on the planet Kregen four hundred light years from the world of my birth and no business of mine.

The sword thief jabbered briefly and excitedly to the Kataki.

He pointed.

The lad holding the sword stood there for two heartbeats with that accusing finger pointing at him. Then he threw down the sword and started running as the Whiptail lumbered for him.

The real sword snatcher stood still and even at this distance the look of satisfaction on his swarthy face repelled me. After the theft he could have dodged off with absolute security with no one the wiser until the shout of "Thief!" went up. Instead, he had deliberately framed the second youth and dropped him right in it up to the ears.

As the boy raced swiftly in my direction finding clear spaces among the crowds with eel like grace, sometimes hidden from view by bartering figures, the look on his face was quite different from what one would expect. By Vox, yes! There was no fear there, no hunted look of terror. His expression was one of such fury as to scare off a leem. He raged with anger as he leaped along pursued by the Katakai guard.

The cry of 'Stop Thief!' rang as loudly and as many times in the souks and markets of Oxonium as of any other bustling commercial city of Kregen. Chaffering people looked around smartly, hands flying to purses. Fists gripped sword and dagger hilts.

The athleticism of the victim of this obscure plot to have him arrested proved instructive. He hurdled stalls, ducked under awnings, swerved like a veritable racing zorca around knots of folk all staring whichways. Those fables of Balintol recurred to me in the famous story which opens with just such a young lad flying through a

crowded marketplace clutching a chicken by the legs, his warning colors flaming before his inward eye. I admired this young rapsallion's dash and still that dark expression of fury drew his face into a compressed knot.

A man wearing a green shamlak whisked out his rapier. The fellow's spiky ears stuck up almost to the crown of his head. An Ift, he regarded himself as sharp and knowing enough to strike shrewd bargains in this bustling city market as of living comfortably in the forests of his home, that was perfectly clear. His rapier slashed.

The tip sliced down the lad's thigh as he swerved a fraction too late.

He did not cry out.

"You blintz!" yelled the Ift. He waved the rapier with its point bloodied. But he did not run in pursuit.

Dark redness stained down the boy's thigh. The scratch, light though it was, tumbled him off balance and he staggered helplessly into a wheeled stall. This immediately upended and sprayed everything with ripe vegetables. A little Och woman threw up her apron in dismay.

When I next caught sight of the fugitive he had a patch of blood on his forehead and he limped. Yet, still he eluded them all.

The Ift's act had been a trifle over the top, I fancied. Some of these highbrow forest folk can be a mite spiteful. The youngster's tribulations were not yet over. Trying to maintain his pace he skidded askew a wet patch and where normally he would have recovered with

natural grace and gone haring on, now the two wounds troubled him enough to make him lose his balance. He skidded and toppled full length into a caldron mess strewn the ground. The effort he made to spring up instantly told on him. He disappeared from my view past a line of stalls. I let out a little sigh.

This was no business of mine.

No business whatsoever. The best thing to do was simply to step back around the corner and then walk off. The Rapa cutpurse had long since vanished and among the throngs there was now no chance of finding him.

Tiri's purse must be consigned along with many another votive offering to the greater glory of Diproo the Nimble Fingered.

So I stepped back around the corner into the slanting shadows where Zim and Genodras, all flushed crimson and deep emerald light upon the opposite buildings, pooled darkness in doorways and windows. The ferociously angry lad rounded the corner and hurled headlong down on me.

Beyond the jut of the building and for the moment out of sight the hue and cry howled on making an unholy racket. The boy staggered. The rapier slash must be paining him now and his head must be ringing where he'd clouted his skull against the hard wood of the barrow. The muck coating his legs plastered the blood into a paste so that he did not leave a betraying trail of blood drops.

Sink me! I said to myself in vast annoyance. By the Black Chunkrah! No business of mine or not, this despicable frame up and the ugly pursuit smelled to the highest heaven or the lowest hell of Kregen.

Like a wrestler catching his opponent bouncing from the ropes, I stuck out my arm and clothes lined him in.

He came reeling in like a shining sliptinger hooked from the torrent. I swiveled with his momentum like a weathervane and bundled him into the slot of darkness and turned about and pressed my back against him in the cleft of shadow.

“Stand still, lad!” I snarled. “Make not a sound if you value your life.”

They were lines from a famous play he’d probably never heard of let alone seen, and melodramatically colored though they were, they fitted this tempestuous situation. He made a single effort to wriggle out and run off and I shoved back hard and growled: “Stay still, you fambly. The damned Katakis on his evil way.” His slight form lurched against me and then he stilled, panting softly.

The shouting pack led by the Katakis guard stormed into view.

Their blood was up. There was a thief to be caught. This was a hunt, they had the scent and they were out for the kill.

Innocence before guilt had absolutely no part in their thought processes. The Katakis stared hotly down the street where people were turning to look enquiringly for the source of all this hubbub. To my great satisfaction

the Whiptail saw no sight of his quarry. He hauled up opposite me and the crowd piled on abaft. He saw me, leaning negligently against the wall. His eyes squinted.

“Where did he go?” he rapped out in that ugly Katakai way.

“Who?” I said, quite pleasantly, considering the circumstances. “Oh, you mean the lad running.” I gave a casual gesture with a languid hand. “He dodged down the next alley I think.”

“By Chezra-Gon-Kranak! I’ll jikaider the blintz!” He gave me a hard stare. Then: “What d’ye mean, you think?”

I returned that hard stare with interest. Some spark of that evil expression folk call the Dray Prescott Devil Look must have flashed into my face for his dark brows drew down and he sucked in a sudden quick breath between his snaggly teeth. I spoke levelly.

“What I said.” My voice hardened. “Why?”

He got the message all right. If he hadn’t been in hot pursuit he’d have loved to have taken up the challenge. As it was he simply swung away and started running off towards the next alley with the mob following him all a-yelling and a-waving of fists and daggers. The rout caterwauled down the next alleyway.

A voice in my ear said: “What in the sweet name of the Lady Balsitha is going on, Drajak?” The voice was light and mellifluous and tart, oh, yes, by Zair, very tart.

“Your purse is stowed away in the bronze-bound chest of Diproo the Nimble Fingered, Tiri,” I said, without

turning around. "I lost the Rapa. I found a lad who needs our assistance." Then I turned to face her.

At that moment an Aephar woman walked past with her daughter, both of them incredibly beautiful as Aephar women are. They saw the filthy and blood-smearred boy as he emerged from the shadows. The beauty of their faces changed only in a subtle fashion to express pity. Their smoothly undulating walk did not falter. The Aephar women went on around the corner into the bedlam of the market.

Tiri and I exchanged glances. Beauty of outward form is not the only beauty possessed by Aephar ladies.

With an eel like squirm and a sudden dart the lad tried to run off. That, by Krun, was a perfectly natural reaction. A fist in his collar hauled him up.

"Whoa, lad. You're safe now. And the muck you have in that wound must be attended to."

"Lemme go!" He spat it out, wriggling and squirming. His injured leg jarred up as he tried to break free and scamper off. His face, already twisted in the anger suffusing him, contorted with the sudden stab of pain. This sobered him. Panting only a little he ripped out: "I know why you saved me. Slaver!"

"Oh, no!" broke in Tiri. "You do us an injustice."

He sagged in my grip. "Not slavers? You really saved me? Then may Mother Saphira of the Gutters bless you with my thanks. But I must go back—"

"You're going nowhere my feller me lad until that leg is seen to."

At least he had spoken his thanks with a courtesy not often found in the stews. He relaxed even more in my grasp so that I was forewarned. With an abrupt and defiant leap he tried suddenly to break away as my attention and hold on him, as he supposed, slackened.

Even as I halted that last desperate surge, Tiri took his arm.

“Best come along with us. We’ll soon have that leg fixed.”

Do not ask why I thus persisted in the attempt to aid this young lad. Perhaps it was the cut of his jib, perhaps the injustice he had suffered. Opaz knew, hadn’t I been just such a youngster harshly treated by an insensitive world? Even though that world was four hundred light years away from Kregen. He wore sandal-like shoes, it is true, where I had gone barefooted. The lad himself settled the argument. Like a sack of flour dumped down into the bakery he slumped and would have fallen but for our supporting holds. After that it was a mere matter of swathing my shamlak as a cloak over him and assisting him along. We went the other way avoiding any further meetings with the unpleasant Whiptail and the mob.

Having said that I realize the tautology. Who ever knew a pleasant Kataki? Well, perhaps I had, once, far away in the Eye of the World in Turismond.

I looked at my two companions. They were of an age. Tiri had reacted in the way I had come to expect of her in our relatively short acquaintance after she had first flung a jeweled dagger at my head. Her fair hair was

neatly combed back and gleamed golden. As a temple dancer she walked with the grace of an Aephar girl, her lithe whipcord tough body rounded and beautifully graceful. Her bright face with that determined little jut of chin would do the business for many and many a poor love-besotted oaf under the Suns of Scorpio. Oh, yes, a most wonderful young madam full of high spirits and a bubbling aliveness that enchanted and a tongue as sharp as a rapier. She danced to the greater glory of Cymbaro the Just and of that religion I had formed a higher opinion than many upon the face of Kregen.

Then a thought occurred to me that made my old beakhead of a face scowl and then crease into a grimace that could have been mistaken for a smile.

“Your guts paining you, Drajak?” Oh, how sweet the words!

“I was just thinking what our comrade Fweygo will say when we report we lost your purse to a—”

She tossed that imperious little head. “As a Kildoi, Fweygo will surmise — aloud — how we could be so easily gulled and where was the Watch. They believe in law and order.”

“Sometimes.” I thought of Mefto the Kazzur...

What Tiri didn't know was that Fweygo and I were kregoinyes sent to Tolindrin to protect the numim twins. She thought we worked for Princess Nandisha who employed the numim twins' parents to care for her and for her twins, lady Nisha and lord Byrom. The intrigues fomented by the death of the king and the appointment of his successor had not been resolved.

Rather, they had grown worse and would become diabolically more troublesome in the immediate future.

Right in the middle of it all, for our sins, stood Fweygo and I.

We paid the few coppers for our fare in the cable car from Barter Hill. I had heard the place referred to as the Hill of Dancing Ghosts but I had not pursued the question as to why. We reached Nandisha's palace without incident and the moment we were inside, here came Fweygo, clad in armor and wearing swords, a most sullen annoyed Kildoi expression on his handsome Kildoi face.

His tail hand, I saw, grasped a dagger of which he was particularly fond. A great deal of shouting and screaming echoed from further inside the palace.

"What—?" began Tiri.

"The young prince, lord Byrom. He is missing. It is certain sure he has been kidnapped."

Instantly I saw why my comrade was so annoyed. Our task, given to us by the Star Lords, was to protect the numim twins. Now, though, we would have to divert all our efforts into rescuing the little lord for whose mother, nominally, we worked.

"The princess?" Tiri showed her concern.

"Badly shaken and upset; but her people are with her. She is resting." A lion roar battered around our ears. Ranaj, the powerful father of the numim twins was girt for battle like Fweygo, and his energy blazed. "You are ready? Don't stand gawping, Drajak. What a hulu! Come on, and you, Fweygo. They've taken the prince to the

Clipped Rhok. A den of ancient evil. Come on! Come on!”

Perforce, willy-nilly, Star Lords or no, we were hustled out to do the duty we owed Princess Nandisha and her son.

## Chapter three

“Tiri!” I yelled back over my shoulder. “Look out for our smelly young friend.”

“Yes. You — I hope the young prince is — all right.”

There was no point in recovering my shamlak, that had already pinched in the nostrils of my friends. There was just time to grab a replacement and then we all hurried out and down the steps from Nandisha’s palace. People in the normal course of the day do not walk about clad in full plate armor and carrying an arsenal of weapons; when they do so other folk know they are engaged on urgent business of a lethal kind. All I had was the new shamlak — a tasteful mid-blue in color — and my rapier and main gauche, with the heavy knife over my right hip. Fweygo, Ranaj and the bunch of fighting men from Princess Nandisha’s guard were armored and armed — I assure you — up to the eyebrows rather than merely to the teeth.

The Clipped Rhok, a most unsavory hostelry, was situated on the Hill of Lurking Shadows and we drew only cursory glances of enquiry as we took the necessary cable cars to reach our destination.

Fweygo filled me in on the details of what had happened and, as is often the case in these disasters, simple human error was to blame.

One guard late, another feeling unwell, the prince with just a single guardian, the sudden rush of black-clad forms, one dead guard and the result — here we were hot on the rescue trail.

Fweygo nodded towards one youthful guard running with us.

“At least Sammle the Erkanstater kept his head. He was too late to intervene. He followed the kidnappers, saw where they went, and rushed back to report to Ranaj.”

“Good for him.”

Lurking Shadows turned out to be an apt description of the hill. The slanting rays of Zim and Genodras, here in Balintol called Mabal and Matol, seemed only to draw deep crimson and emerald shadows into the narrow and winding streets. Buildings leaned over us. No-one offered to stop us, an armed and purposeful body of men; had that happened I would not have been surprised.

The impression of these mean streets drove out the mood of farce that had been strong with me since the episode with the young lad despite the underlying seriousness of it all. The kidnap of the prince had merely served to add to that unreal feeling of comicality. Now, the chase was serious, the stakes high — and both Fweygo and I expected that at any moment the Evero-inye would reach down and pluck us aloft and so hurl us

down to where we should be — guarding the numim twins.

Ranaj didn't intend to go roaring like a blustering lionman into the tavern. He sent a small party ahead, some pressed on to seal the rear exits, and we stalked on, wary for every shadow.

Although the buildings of the Hill of Lurking Shadows were oppressive enough and the narrow streets winding and treacherous, this place was in no real way comparable with the runnels of the warrens between the hills. Up here might not be heaven; down there was well on the way to hell.

Ranaj with his golden fur and his superb lionman physique performed many functions within Nandisha's household; butler, major-domo, footman, quartermaster. As her cadade, the captain of the guard, a position of the utmost responsibility in every noble household, he perhaps took this task as his most important. He'd hired on Fweygo and me as temporary reinforcements during a time of particular difficulty, and now, having seen us operate, was evidently reluctant to part with our services. Certainly, he did not treat us like two ordinary swods of the palace guard.

It seemed to me that Ranaj would be as unlikely to accept the human error explanation for the kidnap as I would be in his position. One guard late, one unwell, and the poor devil left on duty murdered? Oh no, by the disgusting diseased liver and lights of Makki Grodno! Those two dubious characters would be up and facing an enquiry instanter. Sammlle the Erkanstater, a numim,

had been late because he'd been sent along to replace the sick dutyman; no, it was the other latecomer and the fellow with the gut ache who'd be questioned.

From the advance party, Naghan the Twist, a Gon, reported back. He told Ranaj the tavern was only lightly patronized at this time of day, and the best chances were that prince Byrom was being held in one of the upstairs rooms. He gave a rapid rundown on the layout of The Clipped Rhok.

Speed, quite obviously, was essential and Ranaj went for the direct solution. Some of us would keep the patrons entertained whilst others stormed up the stairs. Any escape would be blocked off front and back and all windows would be covered.

Ranaj said very curtly: "Fweygo, Drajak. You stay with me."

We nodded our assent. Mind you, I did wonder if we would be able to obey if the Everoinye decided differently, yes, by Krun.

The Clipped Rhok turned out to be an impressive structure in these surroundings, although on other hills it would look a wreck.

At the front hung a white flag with a black circle surrounding a white center. This was the kaotresh, the flag of death, and even the semi-criminal fraternity inhabiting this place had the sense to fly the kaotresh to mourn the passing of the king. Only when the new king, King Tomendishto, was crowned would his bright flags be unfurled.

The advance party under Naghan the Twist's orders from the cadade went inside as we approached and when we entered we had a clear run to the stairs. Any possibility of someone running up to warn those aloft was instantly checked. No one made the attempt.

The lionman went up the blackwood stairs three at a time. Fweygo and I followed, with Sammlle and the rest at our backs.

A pot-bellied fellow with a huge beard appeared at the top of the steps and Ranaj simply hit him over the head and Fweygo caught him as he fell. I passed the limp body on down. All this was done in silence, apart from the soft thwunk of the blow.

A corridor dimly lit by a dirty window at the far end revealed closed doors each side. Ranaj motioned with his drawn sword. We all took up our positions outside the doors and looked at the cadade. He nodded his head with a look of the utmost determination on his golden-whiskered face and we smashed the doors in and sprang inside.

My room contained an apim and a Sylvie closely entwined on the grimy bed. To anyone with fastidious tastes there was nothing in the sordid room to interest in the slightest. I shot back into the corridor and now shouts and screams broke out. Fweygo catapulted out of the next door and shook his head. Others of our party were re-entering the corridor, Ranaj among them. Noises blurted from the end.

We all ran along in a jumbled mass, picking up other men as they found empty or innocuous rooms. Directly

in front of us Neap the Traiky came flying out of the end room to land on his ear in the corridor. He yelled. A flung dagger went ‘zip!’ past his head as he tried to sit up. Traiky means Lucky, and surely Neap was most fortunate in that the dagger missed his polsim head and even more lucky, immeasurably so, when we burst into the room and saw just who had thrown him out.

Two of our men lay unconscious where they had been thrown into a corner, and a third was shaking like a leaf, hands in front of him empty and his sword tossed down at his feet.

The four Chuliks had evidently been playing one of their obscure Chulik games, for dice and cards strewed a small table, wine and snacks stood ready to hand and they’d been enjoying themselves in ways strange to those who were not Chuliks.

The four Yellow-tuskers glared at us with their round black eyes showing annoyance. They had not drawn weapons. Their smooth oily yellow faces glistened in the lamplight. Apart from them and our unfortunate fellows there was no one else in the gaming room.

Ranaj bellowed a curse and then: “We apologize for intruding. We have no quarrel with you — unless you know the whereabouts of the young prince.” He sounded wrought up and dangerous.

Before the Chuliks could answer, a burst of light slashed into the room from the window, half-blinding us. An enormous thunder clap followed so rapidly that the storm must be directly above us.

I felt a force seize me up. The window was as black as a Herrelldrin Hell. That force lifted me and hurled me straight at the window. Glass and wood smashed away as I hurtled through. A crazy glimpse of Fweygo flying at my side and a blurred impression of darkness beneath sped away. Surrounded by a roaring maelstrom I went flying through thin air.

No rain spattered me. I could see nothing apart from blackness. Over and over I flew, suspended, deafened, exasperated.

My feet hit hard marble. I staggered forward and my sight cleared. Fweygo spluttered at my side. We stood in a corridor of Nandisha's palace. Directly before us the princess struggled in the grip of two hefty Brokelsh, all hairy and armored. A Rapa swished his sword about facing — facing the cause of our supernatural flight through some other plane of existence.

Serinka, Ranaj's numim wife, lay on the floor with a dribble of blood from the corner of her mouth. She stared up with horrified eyes, staring at her twins. Young Rofi and Rolan, slender daggers in their fists, were poised to hurl themselves upon the despoilers of their mother.

“So that's it!” grated Fweygo.

In the next instant the numim twins who were the charges given into our protection by the Star Lords would rush in to protect their mother and Princess Nandisha, and these fine bully boys would cut them down without mercy.

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

**For more information about Mushroom  
Publishing, please visit us at  
[www.mushroompublishing.com](http://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](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com), and at [wikipedia.org](http://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