

**DRAY PRESCOT: 44**

# **INTRIGUE OF ANTARES**

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writing as

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**A Mushroom eBook**



INTRIGUE OF ANTARES

ALAN BURT AKERS

**a Mushroom eBooks sample**

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## Dray Prescott

With this volume, *Intrigue of Antares*, Dray Prescott begins an entirely new phase of his adventures on Kregen, that magnificent and terrible world four hundred light years from Earth. Since his meeting with the Star Lords, superhuman beings who brought him to Kregen to serve as a kregoinye in their schemes for the planet, he has told us nothing of what transpired. We do know that Delia, the glorious Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains, now also operates as a kregoinya for the Star Lords.

Dray Prescott has been described by someone who has seen him on this Earth as a man above middle height with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and powerful physique. He moves like a savage hunting cat, sudden, silent and deadly. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage.

Reared in the harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy, he failed to find success on Earth but has succeeded in winning fortune on Kregen. He is called the Emperor of Emperors, the Emperor of Paz, but he himself regards these titles as meaningless. Paz, a vast grouping of continents and islands, is inhabited by innumerable

races and nations — so why should they band together under Prescott? The Star Lords themselves have chosen him for this heavy task, for he has the yrium, that particular charisma that binds other mortals to his service.

Now the Star Lords have dispatched him to the town of Amintin in the continent of Balintol. Under the streaming mingled lights of the Suns of Scorpio, Dray Prescott must set forth on his new adventures.

*Alan Burt Akers*

## Chapter one

The two fellows following me down the noxious alley in Amintin made a reasonable job of skulking in the shadows. When they crossed the open mouths of side alleys through the fuzzy pink moonlight they'd fail even the most elementary examination for any Assassin's Guild. They were most likely common footpads who'd picked me up as a likely victim the moment I'd entered the alley. They might not be. They might have other and altogether more sinister reasons for dogging my footsteps. Well, bad cess to 'em. There was a task I had to do here set to my hands by the Star Lords that overrode petty considerations like a couple of thugs or assassins.

“You will make contact with a man named Fweygo,” the Star Lords had told me. “He will inform you of your duties.”

In these latter days of my dealings with the Everoinye they still retained a flavor of their old arrogance even though my whole relationship with them had changed. This adventure was a whole new start, a completely fresh departure in my rackets life on Kregen. What the

task was they had not deigned to tell me. Mind you, they had condescended to equip me with clothes and weapons and this unusual event still startled.

The hazy pink moonlight of The Maiden with the Many Smiles slanted into the unwholesome alley. The Star Lords had landed me just inside the dock wall of the river port. Some of the fortifications looked unusual to the eye of an old warrior; but this was a very foreign land. I'd chosen this dismal route to reach the tavern called The Net and Stikling as being less conspicuous than following the main street.

Amintin lay on the left bank of the river and was some ten miles from the coast. The stink of fish was not too pervasive. The two plug-uglies padding along in my footsteps probably smelled far worse.

I kept an intermittent observation on my back trail to make sure they didn't suddenly have a rush of blood to their tiny pointed heads and try to jump me.

A few massy clouds obscured the moon from time to time. Among the dingy buildings leaning over the alley no breath of wind disturbed the pools of muddy water between the cracked and ancient cobbles. Just up ahead a corner looked promising. There I could wait unseen and at precisely the right moment leap on my shadows. I had no interest in what their stories might be, not right now at any rate; I merely wished to get on with what the Star Lords had sent me to Amintin to accomplish.

The corner would conceal me admirably and I could stand without moving as the two men approached.

One of them was apim, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, like me. The other was a polsim with pointed ears and a narrow devil's face, with a deep vee-shaped mouth and the cunning lines of long and villainous experience engraved on his leathery skin. Still, like an apim, he had only two arms and two legs and did not have a flexible and deadly tail. Apim and polsim, they both wore raggedy garments that left their chests bare. The cudgels in their fists looked lethal enough and their knives would be sharp enough to pare skin from bone without drawing blood.

This alleyway led to the back entrance to The Net and Stikling. Dolorous though this little port of Amintin might be, one could sincerely hope that the parallel street would not be quite as narrow and sinister and the inn itself somewhat more salubrious. At the end of the next ramshackle building a blur of movement instantly stilled caught my eye.

Very well, I said to myself, that'll make three heads to knock together instead of two.

Going along silently and without any itchy feelings up my spine I saw a bulkier building thrusting a three storeyed wall against the alley. That must be the inn. A single amber light burned feebly over a closed doorway. All the windows had been pierced in the upper floors. That, to an old sea rover, was a significant factor.

This gray place was damned depressing and in my current mood I wanted none of that. By Vox! Wasn't I on Kregen, the most wonderful and terrible world where anything the heart desired might be found if you tried

hard enough? Get these three rogues off my back, walk into The Net and Stikling, meet up with this character Fweygo whoever he might be, get the job done and then, by the Black Chunkrah, it was Esser Rarioch, home, and Delia!

Yes — just there where the moon-drenched cobbles faded into deepest shadows would be the spot. The smells of cooking wafted along the alley, mingled with the odors of saddle animals. Erratic clouds swathed the moon momentarily and I leaped for the shadows.

Turning to face back and stilling abruptly into motionlessness, I waited and watched and listened.

I saw only the briefest flicker of action. I heard a sharp succession of meaty thwacks. I did not see any bodies tumble onto the slimy cobbles. I did see a fellow come strolling lithely along towards me, whistling softly between his teeth.

“Hai, dom,” he said in a strong musical baritone. “You must be Dray Prescott.” His indistinct form emerged into full moonlight as the clouds passed and I saw he was a Kildoi. He shook his head. “A chicken right for the plucking. The Everoinye warned me you’d be difficult.”

“Llahal, Fweygo.”

“Llahal and Lahal, Dray Prescott.”

“Lahal — I would prefer you to call me Drajak.”

“So the Everoinye said.”

He moved closer. He wore a simple buff colored tunic belted with weapons. His tail hand rested comfortably on his shoulder. I fancied he had not drawn a weapon to

deal with the two footpads. “Let us go into the inn. You could probably down a stoup or three.”

I did not sigh. I was perfectly used to this kind of attitude from other kregoinye, people who served the Everoinye, the Star Lords.

“Very well.”

We went along beside the inn away from the alley. Fweygo whistled almost soundlessly between his teeth. He walked with a lithe spring that belied his solid bulk. Those two footpads must profoundly regret they’d bumped into this golden Kildoi. That thought made me say: “You did not kill them?”

“Sore heads only. This place doesn’t have much law; but I do not wish to attract any attention I do not have to.”

I did not reply. My good comrade and shield bearer Korero in all the many seasons I had known him had given only a limited insight into the psychology of Kildois. They held to themselves, private and contained. That they were fighters of extraordinary gifts I knew only too well.

The street in front of the inn was only a modicum wider than the alley, at that. A slightly brighter lamp burned above the double doors and the smells lessened from saddle animal pungency to fragrances of cooking and wines. At least, I considered as we stepped up onto the stoop and entered, whatever alcoholic beverages passed as wine hereabouts.

The place engulfed us with warmth, closeness, odors, laughter and the sense of haven. The clientele looked

respectable, sitting at tables, eating and drinking, talking. The central space lay bare and I judged dancing would take place there at the appropriate times. Fweygo led me to one side and through a curtained opening leading to a stairway. He did not say a word until we reached one of the doors in the upstairs corridor. He lifted his tail hand to knock and then paused.

In the dim illumination of a single lamp his powerful face showed downdrawn brows, a thrust of chin, heavy golden eyebrows shadowing deep-set eyes. All Kildois in my experience were impressive; this Fweygo looked to be a man of parts.

“The Everoinye said you were difficult, Dray Prescott — Drajak. Those two footpads — you’ll have to sharpen up. And be respectful to the princess — Princess Nandisha.” He gave me a look as though bracing me up by the sheer power of his personality. “Do not address the princess as majestrix. She is incognito. Use my lady.”

I just nodded. He bunched that sinewy tail hand into a fist and tapped discreetly, twice, on the door panel.

Almost instantly the door flew open and a massive numim scowled down, his golden fur glowing from shadowed illumination, his lion features dominating. The sword in his fist glittered.

Quickly, Fweygo rapped out: “This is Drajak, Ranaj, a friend.”

The numim, Ranaj, visibly relaxed. He stepped silently aside and we entered the room.

Of the two people sitting down as we walked in, one stood up. She was a numim, as gloriously golden as Ranaj, beautiful in that special lion lady way that makes a numim man the envy of many other races of diffs.

The woman who remained seated must be Princess Nandisha. She was apim, with a face that I judged would normally be set in a serene look of self-possession. Now her dark eyes were clouded over and her low brow showed lines of concern. Her mouth was fixed into a closed line of determination. She wore a vast dark blue traveling cloak huddled about her, and one white hand, heavily jeweled, grasped the blue cloth tightly to her chin.

“We thought, Fweygo,” she said, and stopped, and wet her lips. “We thought you had deserted us.”

“Never, my lady. Just that I had to make sure Dray — Jak — reached here safely—”

“There was trouble?” Ranaj’s numim voice grated in the room.

The numim lady, who must be his wife, put a hand to her bosom.

“No, no, my lady.” Fweygo’s strong voice carried reassurance. “And no need to worry, Ranaj. As soon as the animals are here we will leave.”

The princess plucked fretting at the blue cloth. “I do wish they would hurry.”

Now it appeared clear to me what the Star Lords wanted Fweygo and me to do. We had to escort Princess Nandisha and her people to safety out of Amintin. Just why the Everoinye wished this was not, of course,

apparent to me. What they did stretched long results into the future. The people whom their kregoinye assisted might found dynasties, topple regimes, turn the whole world of Kregen on its ears. It was all one to me.

I said: "Where are we making for?"

"Be silent, Drajak, and speak when spoken to," said Ranaj. He spoke evenly, politely; but there was no mistaking the authority in his words.

Well, I said to myself, they'll get on well with the Kildoi, then.

The sense of tension, of fear barely suppressed, festered in the room. Something had either happened or was about to happen to these people that caused the presence of Fweygo and myself; something we had either to mend or prevent.

A thin high-pitched cry from beyond the far door brought the numim woman around instantly. She hurried to the door, saying: "That is little Nisha, the poor dear." She opened the door and went through.

Ranaj looked at me and said: "You are here to assist Fweygo and me. We have my lady's children, the princ— the little lady Nisha and lord Byrom to protect—"

"Also your children, Ranaj," interrupted Nandisha. "Your twins, Rofi and Rolan."

"Aye, my lady, I thank you."

H'mph! I said to myself, not well pleased. Four children to nursemaid through unknown perils — and however unknown the dangers might be, I knew as sure as Zim and Genodras rose each day over the eastern

horizon to shine upon Kregen, there would be perils ahead, plenty of perils, by Krun.

Fweygo, with surprising confidence in view of his disparaging remarks about me, said firmly: "Drajak will play his part."

"We must reach the capital just as soon as we possibly can." The princess's voice sounded choked up. "The children... We are not safe."

"As soon as we reach Bharang, my lady, we will find fliers," said Ranaj.

The troubled noise of the child from the inner room stilled. The feeling of apprehension among these people bordering on incipient panic did not please me. They were frightened of something or someone. Well, then, if they expected me to lend a hand they ought to tell me just what or who, surely? But then, that was not the way of your typical lordling, your proud princess. Common folk like me were told what to do, to keep our mouths shut and to die in welterings of blood just so that the princess did not suffer.

I caught Fweygo's eye and jerked my head sideways. He frowned and shook his head, looked away. Whatever plans were afoot, he was too conscious of his obligations to the Star Lords to cause unnecessary trouble.

Because this world was Kregen where just about anything can happen, and in the words of the immortal song, probably will, the opposition menacing us could range from monsters to demons to regiments of demented archers. A soft tap on the outer door caused Nandisha to start up, trembling. Her face turned pale.

Ranaj went swiftly to the door, the sword once more in his fist, and opened the panel a crack. A few words were spoken low-voiced and he turned back. "The animals are here."

Once action was upon them these people did not waste time. Ranaj's wife, whom he addressed as Serinka, brought the children out. They were all of an age, around seven or eight, and these unusual proceedings kept their eyes half-open despite their drowsiness. The four adults took a child each, leaving me the only childless person in the room. Ranaj led off out.

We went the opposite way along the corridor, through a low doorway and down an outside flight of steps. Moonlight tinged everything a mellow ruddy pink and I kept an eye on the shadows.

Two figures held the reins of five freymuls. No one spoke a word. The freymul, a useful saddle animal often called the poor man's zorca, comes normally in a chocolaty brown hide; these were more creamy. Assisted by the silent hostlers the party mounted. I felt the animal between my knees and although I guessed I'd have the worst animal, hoped he would prove not too bad. With a soft "tchk, tchk," Ranaj started off for the open gate of the yard. Smells of wine faded and the odors of the town strengthened.

Spots of rain started to fall. The children were swathed in the adults' riding cloaks. I had no cloak. My tunic began to get soaked.

Riding gently we went along the side alleyway towards that noxious alley where Fweygo had dealt with the two footpads.

I rode last.

Needless to say my head kept screwing around to survey the backtrail and every pink-tinged shadow was closely scrutinized.

Ahead a wider street with a few lamps guttering and splintering the falling rain into lances of multicolored fire offered better going. Fweygo gentled his freymul alongside mine and we rode stirrup to stirrup.

The child he carried had at last fallen asleep. He spoke so that only I could hear.

“We should get a voller at Bharang. After that the trip to the capital should not be difficult. Bharang’s about eighty or so dwaburs off. Keep your eyes and ears open.”

One useful thing about having four arms like a Kildoi is that you can grasp the reins, hold a child, and still have spare hands to grip weapons. In addition that cunning tail hand can give your mount a thwack or two to get him moving along smartly. Apims like me with only two arms and no tail are sometimes at a severe disadvantage on Kregen.

I said: “Who are these people afraid of? Who’s chasing them?”

“Their flier broke down and they made an emergency landing here. Nandisha’s uncle just died. There are dynastic problems. The Everoinye were vague on the point.”

I refused to say anything like: “By Krun! How unusual!”

Mind you, the Star Lords probably confided a whole encyclopedia of information to this golden Kildoi Fweygo. They usually didn’t even bother to let me look at the first page.

Even so, even so, they had acted in a vastly different way of late. Gently gently was the way ahead in my relations with the Star Lords.

“We’ll have to cross one of the bridges to head west.” Fweygo did not sound too concerned. “Unless Ranaj has organized a boat.”

Looking rearwards along the street I could make out a few people moving about and a party of riders just appearing around a corner some hundred yards off. There were four of them and they were muffled in cloaks. That, I told myself, was because of the rain. They trotted gently along after us.

Our little party turned left down a street where the overhanging wooden houses cast deep serrated shadows. The center of the roadway ran with water. Ahead the river wall showed a humped tower block guarding the gateway.

That part of the problem of tonight’s expedition was down to Ranaj in the lead. I fancied he’d carry enough authority and conviction for the task. A glance back confirmed the four riders had followed us around the corner. In the lead Ranaj turned left again at a slight angle away from the bridge. Here we passed between miserable buildings, little more than tumbledown huts,

sagging in the rain. Mud squelched beneath the freymul's hooves. I hunched down in my soggy tunic and watched the backtrail.

The four riders did not appear. If they were following us, and given the usual desperate nature of these ventures of mine upon Kregen, they probably were, they could have cut down a parallel alleyway to reach the river.

“A boat, then,” said Fweygo.

I said: “Four riders. They may be following.”

Fweygo instantly switched around to look back. He shook his head. We went on through the rain towards the river.

The tangle of huts ended untidily against a shining expanse of mud where the town wall reared black by the river bank. Nets were hanging up on wooden racks. Small skiff-like boats lay pulled up onto the mud. Their exit onto the river lay through a small gate of iron bars beneath an arch under the wall. The whole set up would not be tolerated in Vallia. All the same, that was our way out.

The man who shambled across to meet us was a Gon with a cloak pulled up over his bald head. His eyes were red, his nose was red, and from time to time he sneezed like one of Congreve's rockets going off.

He indicated the boat we were to use. We never used it.

Even as Ranaj had one foot on the mud, the other still in the stirrup, a most ferocious bellowing uproar spouted up. Dark figures appeared over the wall directly

to our front. In the glinting pink spears of the rain other and far more lethal spears glittered. A single glance, a simple deduction, were all that were required to assess the situation.

The Gon shrieked out: “Pirates!” and dashed madly back into the shadows past the nets.

Ranaj yelled: “Numi Hyrjiv! Back, back, now!”

He regained his saddle still cradling the infant. The princess stuttered out some incoherent cry. Ranaj seized her bridle and in an instant whisked the animal about, fairly dragging freymul and rider by main force.

Fweygo snatched at the other animal, leading Serinka as her husband led Nandisha. The whole party spurred back towards the huts.

The raiders swarmed over the wall, dropping down like ripe black flies. They made huge squelching sounds. Maybe they did not expect to find this expanse of mud within the walls; no doubt I would not have, it was not usual. Whatever — the obstacle gave us time to start off. The freymul is a willing animal if not as powerful as one might wish, and these five responded. We dashed back past the nets towards the low huts.

A few arrows went flick flick past; but the rain would interfere with serious shooting this night.

The raiders must have pulled up the river after dark and were now intent on butchery and pillage. Pirates were the reason Amintin was situated ten miles up river from the coast and why no windows were pierced in the lower floors of larger buildings. No doubt the watch on the walls had been sheltering from the wet. What

mattered now was that the pirates were in the town and we had not found a way out.

From squelchy sloshings to staccato raps the freymuls' hooves traversed mud and cobbles. Uproar surrounded us as the good folk of Amintin awoke to the ghastly realization of what was about to befall them.

Of one thing I felt sure as we racketed along towards the main street: this unholy lot ravening at our heels would not be the only pack of reivers to climb the walls this dark and stormy night.

As though Pixirr the god of mischief listened to my thoughts a mob of terrified Amintins stumbled up from the next side street and pursuing them with zest and venom a whole horde of reivers barred our way ahead.

Ranaj roared: "This way!"

He yanked his animal around and dragging Nandisha's freymul hurtled straight across the muddy street. Fweygo followed with Serinka. Knowing my place in their scheme of things I, as usual, brought up the rear.

Where the arrow came from that pierced Nandisha's freymul not even the most senior and devoted follower of Erthanfydd could have told. Quite possibly the shaft had been let fly by a frenzied townsman or woman. The result was Nandisha and the child toppling into the mud and Fweygo having the dickens of a job avoiding a catastrophic collision.

The poor freymul lay kicking his legs in spasm. Ranaj was rumbling incoherently and Serinka started to climb

down to attend her mistress. I was there before her. The princess started up, still clutching the child.

“You are unharmed?”

“I — I think so—”

The bedlam at our backs increased. There was no time. I lifted her, and in Zair’s good truth there was not much to her, and hoisted her onto my animal. Through it all she did not relinquish her grasp on the child.

Fweygo snarled something and I hurled back at him: “Ride, Fweygo!”

I gave the freymul a thumping great thwack over his rump and he started off with Nandisha holding on like a drunk holding onto a bar stool.

“Drajak!” yelled Fweygo.

Ranaj dropped the wounded freymul’s reins and sent his animal after Nandisha. Serinka said nothing. “Drajak!” shouted Fweygo again.

“Ride!” I roared up at him. “You know why!”

Even then I saw his Kildoi face twisted in indecision. Maybe he had never been disciplined by the Star Lords as I had; he certainly would not be banished four hundred light years across empty space in punishment. Running from a fight and abandoning a friend, of however recent an acquaintance, was not in his nature. But, as a good kregoinye, he understood what must be done when the Everoinye ordered.

“I’ll see you later.” As I spoke I dragged out the sword furnished me by the Star Lords.

“Yes, Drajak,” he said, turning his animal and hauling Serinka along. “Yes. Make sure you do, make very sure.” Then he galloped off.

So I turned to see what the devil I could make of this perilous situation.

Pirates were, it seemed in the erratic pink moonlight, running everywhere. Townsfolk screamed and fled and were cut down. One or two houses were already alight despite the rain and there would soon be illumination enough to see how to get oneself killed with no trouble.

The reivers had to be stopped from following Fweygo. That was my job. That task was down to me.

Objects became easier to see as the fires gained and the rain eased. The smell of wetness and of burning hung over the town. Directly opposite me the mouth of the alley down which Ranaj had led the rest of our party was where I had to make my stand. I had no bow, unfortunately. Well, if this was the way of it on Kregen, and this my doom and fate, then so be it. I'd do what I could before they cut me down.

Pulling back my shoulders I started off. I, Dray Prescott, Lord of Strombor and Krozair of Zy, strode off to make a valiant last stand.

My foot slipped on a patch of evilly glistening mud and over I went, twisting to regain my balance, to land smack on my back like an upended turtle.

So much for gallant exhibitionism!

## Chapter two

I stood up. I said nothing — absolutely nothing.

The tunic and breechclout given me by the Star Lords were soaking wet and clogged with mud. Glutinous mud squelched in the shoes. The scabbard, a cheap affair of thin leather, wood and green brass, was bent, shrunken and distorted. The sword, a reasonable weapon of the straight cut and thrust variety, had a wire-wrapped wooden handle, flimsy quillons, and a point that made it primarily a cutting weapon. I hefted it and looked around through a hedge of drenched and mud entangled hair.

With a gesture as much of resignation as irritation I shoved my hair back from my forehead, wiped a paw over my face, and glared about for anybody who wanted to pass by.

The situation was familiar and ugly enough. Pirates infested the coast and now the menace of the Shanks had been removed, even if only temporarily, the sea rovers ranged far and wide. People ran about crazily. The noise lifted and sank almost, it seemed, in rhythm to the drifts of smoke wafting over the roofs. Amintin

was a poor enough place, Zair knew; it still had attractions for those damned renders. I knew about renders, having served with Viridia the Render, that most charming lady pirate, and my feelings were that this unhealthy lot were both the dregs and the scum of society.

Given my situation, standing like a loon in the mouth of an alley was a fine way of being chopped. Swiftly crossing into the shadows of the nearest house I checked the alley, which was now empty, and then faced the street again.

If any pirates had seen our party ride off none of them for the moment strutted along to investigate. I began to think I might pull back and scuttle along the alley and see about transport to catch up.

By this time during my life on Kregen I fought only when I had to and then reluctantly. But, like any seasoned warrior, once a fight was inevitable and joined then I'd go in with the ferocious determination to finish it as quickly as possible.

Most of the noise racketed from further back in the town. My guess was the renders had put in their surprise attack and had closed in past this spot. They'd be making for the fat and juicy targets. The people in the Net and Stikling, for instance, would be well barricaded in and ready to put up a stout resistance.

The decision made, I wasted no more time.

Padding along the alley with the sword in my fist I kept both eyes wide open, very wide open, by Krun.

The rain had appreciably lessened and the Maiden with the Many Smiles shone down her fuzzy pink light through gaps in the clouds. There were even one or two of Kregen's stars visible, twinkling away up there and vastly indifferent to what went on below.

Even then, sharply though I was keeping a lookout, they nearly had me. But I am an old leem hunter and am not easily ambushed.

Four of them leaped at me from a black-beamed doorway. They tried to degut me with spears and tridents and for a moment there was a swift and deadly series of passages, of cuts and slashes, of twists and evasions, before they all went down. The sword was a damned unhandy affair. I shook it in disgust.

From the next house along the sounds of combat spurted into the night. Your normal plunderer likes to help himself to loot with as little trouble as possible. No doubt these reivers had blood in their eye. It happens. Cautiously I padded along towards the fight.

The moon washed pink light across the house wall. Seven or eight renders were prancing about in the street trying to cut down the four men backed up against that rosy-glowing wall.

A number of bodies lay sprawled on the muddy cobbles.

There was no question of indecision here. I leaped forward.

Of course, they had their backs to me so I had no compunction in laying into the first of them to come to

hand. One, two, three went down screeching before the others realized a new element had entered the equation.

A long spear with a bearded pirate at the other end of it thrust hard for my midriff. With a left hand that had hauled me up the rigging in hurricanes to daze the senses, I took the spear away. Economically I used it to clout its late owner over the head. He fell down.

Somewhere in the fracas over by the wall I heard a laugh. A light, peculiar, distinctly amused laugh, clear as a crystal chime through the hullabaloo, was not altogether unexpected. It told me someone was not taking this little scrap over seriously. Without a moment's conscious reflection, engaged as I immediately was by a fresh customer, I formed an estimate of the laugher's character and personality and — well, that you must judge for yourself.

The renders mostly wore leather armor of sorts, bits and pieces. The fellow who challenged me now, a damned Chulik as ever was, wore metal. His yellow tusks were banded in silver. His chunky body strained against metal breast and back as we clashed weapons and then drew back so that I judged the armor he'd looted from somewhere was not a perfect fit.

Someone yelled: "Watch your back!"

The advice was not meant for me, so I reasoned; but you do not stay alive for very long if you ignore the slightest warnings. I leaped sideways and swung about, instantly reversing to slide the Chulik's venomous thrust. I sidestepped and he blundered past so that I

gave him a thwack and the confounded sword broke in two.

He reared up, massively competent with weapons as all Chuliks are.

They do possess humanity, do the Yellow Tuskers, a modicum. This one showed obvious delight at my predicament. His round black eyes and oily yellow skin did not differentiate him from a thousand of his fellows. But he sneered at me and said: “Come sneaking up at my back, would you! By Likshu the Treacherous, you have been rewarded!” He bored in with the sole intention of transfixing me upon his blade.

A movement to the right and a swaying reverse allowed me to use my forearm to force his sword arm away to the side. I put a fist into his snub nose and followed that by a crafty kick as taught very early on in the unarmed disciplines of the Krozairs of Zy. He yelled.

He yelled blue bloody murder.

He didn't have any metal armor there — he didn't have any armor there at all, just a dingy brown breech-clout.

He doubled up so that my fist making contact with his chin received extra momentum from his own movement.

Then, as usual in these affairs, it was vitally necessary to keep low and spring away without thought.

The single-bladed axe swished down where my head had been and clanged into the cobbles. So fierce had the blow been the axe was twisted clean out of the grip of the Rapa who'd tried to cleave my skull in two.

In a matter of less than a second the Chulik's sword was in my grip and in the rest of the second was buried in the Rapa's side.

The sword possessed a strong curve to the blade, almost as much as a fancy sabre, and it slid in snugly enough doing the Rapa's business for him.

A swift glance around showed me the rest of the pirates sprawled in the mud. The Chulik lay doubled up and moaning. I confess I had kicked rather hard.

"My thanks, friend. Llahal." The voice was light and amused.

So I stared at him as he came forward from the wall, the bloodied rapier in his fist, the left-hand dagger its match. Dandified, oh yes, in the way a predatory bird's bright coat of feathers gives it a handsome appearance, he was all that and more. He was like the cold steel of his rapier with the charming colored jewels adorning the hilt.

"Llahal," I said.

His three friends were visibly relieved still to be alive.

He saw the Chulik groaning on the ground. One elegant dark eyebrow lifted. His lips although red were thin and firm. He stepped across and with delicate precision drove the blade through the Chulik's heart. As the Yellow Tusker was doubled up this fine amusing fellow thrust through from the back. I knew well enough the point of his rapier had struck straight past backbone and ribs and with unerring aim burst the heart asunder. That, I knew.

“Better to clean up any mess. I like to be neat and tidy.”

His face was barely flushed after the combat. Over that thin mouth he affected a thin black moustache. Once he had cleaned his weapons the first thing he would do was run a forefinger along that elegant moustache.

Other sounds began to percolate into our attention as the immediate fury of the fight subsided. A devil of a lot of noise was erupting from the town. Orange glare reflected from the low clouds. The Maiden with the Many Smiles shone down to add her pink luster to the scene.

“What are we to do now, notor?” The fellow who spoke, short and wiry and with a shock of straw-colored hair dangling from under a round leather cap, clutched a hefty short sword with a smidgeon of blood upon the blade. His face showed all the marks of dependence on another, coupled with an animal cunning in twist of lip and slant of eye.

“Do, fambly, do? Why, we shake hands with this gentleman and thank him for his help.”

The other two men who were already cleaning their weapons were clad in tough leather armor and their function in life as guards was patently apparent. They’d earned their hire, for they had killed well.

The lord eyed me calculatingly.

“Your name, my friend?”

“Drajak.” I spoke pleasantly. “And yours?”

His servant sucked in his cheeks.

Notor is how one addresses a lord in many parts of Paz upon Kregen. I'd had my fill of kowtowing to lords of late and I had no intention of beginning again right now. I had urgent things to do — like following Fweygo and the rest and trusting to all the Beneficent Spirits of Uttar Soblime they had not been slaughtered.

His eyebrows drew down for an instant and then that light amused laugh eased the situation — at least, it eased the situation for him and his servant. I didn't give a damn who he was. I wanted to get on.

“I am Amak Dagert — Dagert of Paylen. Lahal.”

“Lahal. Now, if you will excuse me I must—” He'd drawn a yellow cloth from under the short cape he wore over metal armor and was about to clean his sword. He wrapped the cloth again and stuffed it away with a gesture as elegant as a court dandy's. His voice chirred like oiled steel clearing scabbard.

“I think, Drajak, you must do something other than you intended.”

Philosophically I turned around and followed his gaze. A whole bunch of renders crowded down the alley towards us. Now the rain had stopped they'd lit torches and the lurid lights glanced and danced off wet walls and cobbles, glinted redly from the black blood at our feet.

The two guards stood very still, staring at Dagert of Paylen. Their eyes looked like pebbles. The amak's servant trembled. He licked his lips and kept flexing his grip on the short sword.

I looked around for another and possibly better weapon.

That amused low laugh, almost a self-satisfied chuckle, broke from Dagert. He looked back. The alley led off into a darkness relatively deeper than that in the opposite direction. It seemed to me as I picked up a sword of somewhat better construction than those I'd already used, that this Dagert of Paylen was deliberately tantalizing his servant. He was making the poor devil suffer. Well, that was between them.

"Notor—" The fellow's wet lips shone as he licked them again.

"Oh, you know me by now, Palfrey. When the odds are right — not otherwise. It has been pleasant meeting you, Drajak, and once more I offer you my thanks. Now it's time to depart."

With that and without more ado he turned abruptly and darted lithely away down the alley.

Mind you, he was right, assuredly, he was right, by Krun!

One thing you noticed about Dagert of Paylen that lingered in the mind was his eyes. Liquid and dark, they hid unfathomable depths. What he said was one thing, what he thought quite another.

There was no point my hanging about here any longer. My duty lay with the charges the Star Lords had placed in my care. Swiftly I followed Amak Dagert into the shadows of the alley.

The problem now was to get out of Amintin and that meant scaling the wall somewhere where that was

practicable and preferably out of sight of townspeople and renders alike. The clouds were drifting away across the stars and if the sky cleared much more many of the comforting shadows would disappear.

The pirates had entered the town across more than the one wall over which we had seen them clambering and now they infested the whole place. The unholy noise racketed on. Flames twisted against the thinning clouds. There were people running about aimlessly, desperately seeking shelter. What the Amintin Watch might be doing, what the local lord in command might be ordering, appeared to me to be completely unimportant. This dreadful night the renders owned Amintin and did as they pleased.

The nearest wall now would be the one over to the east. More than once I had to skip smartly down an alleyway to avoid roistering mobs of pirates. Their domination had been swift and sudden and was now total.

Soon I entered an area of warehouses where no doubt the goods coming in and out along the caravan trails were stored. Other, more interesting odors competed with the stink of fish and mud.

Naturally, a quarter of the town holding goodies like this was not going to be overlooked by your conscientious looter. Oh, dear me, no!

Carefully sliding along by a painted wooden wall and looking everywhere about, I spotted parties already at work hauling out Amintin's wealth. Just past the end of this warehouse and past the opened double doors from

which streamed yellow lantern light an open space fronted an inland gate. Undoubtedly the gate had a name. What it might be I neither knew nor cared. I did know that it did not represent my way out of the raped town. Further along would be the place, where steps led up to the ramparts.

I did not proceed without a plan. The chances of success rested firmly on the very speed with which the renders had entered and conquered.

Moving swiftly yet cautiously I skirted the open space where during a normal working day the pack animals and the carts would muster and cut across between the two end warehouses. The wall lay only a scant fifteen paces off.

The route I had followed, dictated both by my desire to avoid pirates and to reach the east wall, channeled other fugitives to the same point. Pink moonlight momentarily illuminated agile figures clambering up the steps onto the ramparts with the oddly-cut openings of the battlements beyond. I halted. There was no doubt I expected a shower of arrows or crossbow bolts to sleet into those refugees.

Nothing happened and they ran excitedly along the top of the wall and vanished into one of the small towers erected at intervals. I frowned. That did not look promising.

“Sink me!” I snarled to myself. “In for a ponsho in for a leem!”

I gathered myself up and started at a dead run for the dappled shadows at the foot of the steps. Before I

reached the wall a group of people appeared from the side, racing along with bent heads. For all their apparent blind panic, weapons snouted in their fists.

We reached the wall together.

Dagert of Paylen called: "Up, up, you hulus. Bratch!"

In a bunch we panted up the steps. Moonlight filtered down and dimmed and shone. Dagert's lean handsome face with that trimmed moustache and dark eyes looked perfectly composed. He said: "We must be swift, Drajak." And, instantly: "Get on, get on, Palfrey, confound you!"

They started to run along in the shadow of the battlements towards the nearest small tower. I stopped and looked over the outside of the wall.

Praise be to Zair! My plan had come right! Dangling from the walls hung the rope ladders up which the pirates had swarmed to despoil Amintin. Dagert and his three followers were helter-skeltering along towards the tower. I called: "Dagert! This way is surer!"

He halted and swung about, a lithe, tense figure in that moon-dappled confusion.

I swung up into the gap and took the ropes into my fists. I wasn't prepared to hang about to be feathered waiting for anybody around here. Starting down, I called up: "Ladders, Dagert."

His voice cracked out like two flat boards striking together in one of those Shensi plays, all puppets and buffoonery. "This way!"

Before I'd reached halfway down I felt his weight above me on the ladder. Glancing up I saw the nimble-

ness with which he negotiated the rungs. By the time I'd dropped into the dry moat — which was sticky with odiferous mud — he was halfway down and the rest of his party tumbled down after him.

Even then I had time to reflect on the illuminating fact that his followers had chosen the same ladder he had, the same one I'd chosen. There were other ladders dangling down. That told me a great deal.

He sprinted up to me as I hauled myself out on the other side of the moat.

“We'll have to reach the cover of those trees quickly.”

A couple of hundred or so paces off the dark mass of trees did promise shelter.

“Aye,” I said and started running over the muddy grass.

“My flier is parked to the north—” he was saying, and then stopped and saved his breath for running.

At that moment the first crossbow bolts began to whicker past our heads.

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

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

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

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

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

More details about the author, and current links to other sources of information, can be found at [www.mushroom-ebooks.com](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com), and at [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org).

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