

THE SAGA OF DRAY PRESCOT — THE KROZAIR CYCLE —



KENNETH BULMER
WRITING AS
ALAN BURT AKERS

THE KROZAIR CYCLE

**The Saga of Dray Prescot
Omnibus edition**

ALAN BURT AKERS

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“Wizard of Scorpio”

Wizard of Scorpio is the first story written about Dray Prescot that is not of novel length. It was written especially for the 200th DAW book, The DAW Science Fiction Reader, edited by Donald A. Wollheim, and in the epic of Prescot's adventures it falls between the Havilfar Cycle and the Krozair Cycle.

* * * *

Delia is the most perfect woman in two worlds. Had she not been so perfect on that particular day of mellow sunshine in Foke Lyrsmín's garden as we waited to witness his wedding with the lady Merle, then the subsequent harebrained adventures and headlong action that hurled me furiously through the sweet-scented air beneath the moons of Kregen would not have occurred. But, had I not gone through those

ordeals and fought those fights, then I would have been the poorer, as you will hear.

A merry group of nobles nearby on the lawn laughed and chattered and so the screams and shouts from the little marble pavilion where the airboat had just touched down reached me attenuated, distant and without menace. This was a cheerful wedding day and everyone was determined to enjoy the occasion to the utmost. The bride had been surrounded by an excited flutter of her friends, envious of her good fortune in marrying a kov, for to marry a noble of higher rank she must needs wed a prince or king, and I put the commotion down to high spirits.

The airboat lifted away, going fast over the trees. Her side flamed brilliantly as the polished brasswork caught the mingled streaming lights of the suns of Scorpio. Then she was gone from my view over the garden, for I stood talking to Foke Lyrsmin in his study, with the tall Windows thrown wide.

Foke had been showing me his latest rapier, an acquisition of which he was proud and which he intended to wear at the ceremony. Now he turned back from the window.

“These young people,” he said, spreading his hands. He was a cheerful little fellow, a trifle on the small side, wiry, and I had found him not unreasonable company on this first meeting. “Your father-in-law does me great honor, prince,” he went on. “But—”

“The emperor will arrive in his own time, Kov.”

That old devil, the Emperor of Vallia, father of my Delia, had not turned up yet and we were all waiting for him. Well, it may be the privilege of an emperor to be late; but I've always taught the emperor's grandchildren that politeness demands punctuality on parade.

This Foke Lyrsmín was the Kov of Vyborg, and Vyborg is a Kovnate province on the western edge of Vallia. By this marriage with the lady Merle, daughter of Trylon Jefan Werden, he reinforced the links with his northern borders. That puissant man, the Emperor of Vallia, approved, and as Merle was a girlhood friend of Delia's, we had left our children back home in Valka, away to the east, and come to the wedding in the hopes of relaxation and enjoyment.

The door at our backs burst open and Jefan Werden came hobbling in, his lined and dyspeptic face exhibiting all the agony of a man with gout having his foot run over by a tram.

"My daughter!" he shouted. He was genuinely angry and alarmed, his face sagging with shock. "Merle! Merle! She's gone!"

"Merle! Gone?" Kov Foke put out a hand. He looked not so much shattered as bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"What I say! Merle — she's been taken — kidnapped!"

They glared at each other, oblivious of my presence. That suited me. If someone had kidnapped the lady Merle and he was captured his head would roll. That

was for sure. I would do what I could to help. That, also, was sure.

The noise outside increased. People were running aimlessly amid a screaming and a shrieking. The facts must be established at once. But Merle's father burst out:

"Four men, all dressed in black — the crampths! They took my daughter — and they—"

"Who? Who?" yelled Kov Foke, interrupting, his face now as crimson as a moment before it had been green.

"They wore metal masks. But I know who hired them! I know who it was who paid them, the rast! Vangar Riurik! He's been sniffing around after my daughter for the last five seasons. I gave him his marching orders — and this is what he does! What the emperor will say—"

I stepped forward. This was suddenly more serious.

"You say it was Vangar Riurik. How can you be sure? He is the Strom of Quivir."

"I know, prince, I know!" Even as Merle's father shouted so the yelling outside went on and on. "And Quivir is a stromnate of the island of Zamra, and you, Prince Majister, are the Kov of Zamra. Riurik owes allegiance to you." He stared at me, and I saw the abrupt, crafty light in his eyes.

If he was going to suggest I'd had anything to do with this lover's argument, this romantic kidnapping of the bride just before the ceremony, then he'd picked the wrong man. He knew enough of me to still the tongue in his head. This was an affair of mine only in so far as I must discipline an unruly follower, who held the

stromnate of Quivir at my hands. I knew young Vangar Riurik, a right tearaway and a fine fighting man, and I knew also that this was a thing perfectly possible for him.

“He will no doubt fly back to Zamra with Merle,” I said, putting Foke’s rapier down on his desk and knocking over an inkwell. The bright red ink splattered the carpet — luckily the carpet was not of Walfarg Weave. “We shall follow at once. I will replace your carpet, Kov.”

I made for the door.

A mass of people spilled from the corridor, creating a tremendous noise. The whole household had been overturned like an ant’s nest with boiling water. I saw young Oby trying to force his way through. His face was contorted with the effort of wedging his lithe young body between a fat dowager stromni and an equally plump kotera whose violet dress caught about Oby’s ears. He pulled it with an anger that seemed to me to be quite out of proportion. A scamp, an imp of Satan, Oby; but his actions made me curious.

The Trylon Jefan Werden hobbled up at my back. He was still panting with exertion and anger and I half-turned to see what he wanted.

“Prince,” he began.

I have heard that tone of voice before.

“Prince, my daughter was talking to her friends — they were laughing and joking, and—”

“Well? Spit it out!”

“The Princess Majestrix—”

He had no need to go on. He licked his lips. He saw my face and he seemed to shrivel.

The crowd of people milling and pushing in the corridor, creating a babel of confusion, flowed around me as butter flows around a hot knife. I do not think I knocked anyone down. I do remember running outside onto the grass into that glorious mingled radiance from the twin suns Zim and Genodras. Oby ran at my side, yelling. I heard something of what he said. An airboat rested on a paved court by the ornamental fishponds. The neat petal shape of fabric-covered wooded frames, the windshield glittering in the light, told me the craft was a small four-place runabout. It would do. I leaped in and thrust savagely at the controls.

The flier leaped forward, rose perhaps four feet into the air, almost knocked Oby sprawling, nosed down and went with an almighty splash into the fishpond. Water smashed my face and lily-pads wrapped around my neck.

I did not curse.

Oby sprinted up, shouting, pulled the access panels out to get at the silver boxes that controlled the airboat. He looked back up. "Finished, my prince! Exhausted!" Since he had disavowed his ambitions to fight in the arena, Oby had taken up the study of the fliers, and was a useful hand. If he said the silver boxes were finished, they were. After a life of varying length the boxes would turn a leaden color, and then one must buy new.

"Another flier, Oby! As you love the Princess!"

“Aye, my prince!” And Oby was off, a limber young lad, full of fire and energy and deviltry.

Do not wonder that I let Oby fetch the flier. We had flown here from Valka in a small air boat with just a few people and I had talked Vangar ti Valkanium, my chief of fliers, into allowing Oby to pilot us. He would know where every flier was parked and to whom every voller belonged. Being an imp, he would fetch the fastest voller, no matter whose.

So for a few moments in which I forced myself — Zair knows how! — to remain calm, I had time to understand what had happened.

As I said, my Delia is the most perfect woman in two worlds. She is also the most beautiful. I say this in all humility. In addition she possesses a superb courage that matches the courage of a mother zhantil who will fight to the death anyone or anything that molests her cubs. So I had no difficulty in imagining that scene in which the kidnappers had leaped from their voller to seize Merle and just as they were bundling her aboard smothered in a cloak Delia had leaped forward. Yes! The sight of my Delia rushing into the fray with that thin slender dagger glittering is enough to make the stoutest of assassins blanch. So they had taken her as well. It had all been a scramble, a confusion, and the airboat had lifted off with my Delia aboard.

My Delia! My Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains, flew through the bright skies of Kregen in the grip of kidnappers who did not want her along. What might happen made my heart a stone, made my

fist grip onto my rapier, made me even more of a devil than I already am.

Here came Oby with the voller, swirling down directly to land before me without a wasted moment. He stepped out and handed me my scabbarded longsword and a glossy black flying fur made up from foburf skins. I leaped in.

He yelled at me, skipping around to the other side. “My prince!” he bellowed, and I knew what he was saying before he shouted. “I’m coming too!”

“No, you’re not, young Oby. You will raise all Valka, all Zamra, all Delphond, all of the Blue Mountains! Tell the emperor! Riurik will probably fly seaward of Rahartdrin. I’m relying on you, Oby!”

“Aye, my prince.” But he looked mighty chapfallen, all the same.

By the time I was airborne a number of other vollers were being crammed with men and were taking off. But Oby had chosen well. I did not know whose this voller was; she was a fleet craft and flew like a dream. If Vangar Riurik chose to return to Zamra by flying between the mainland and the island of Rahartdrin I would miss him. But I suspected he would attempt to avoid pursuit by going out to sea. I smashed the voller’s controls hard over and the little craft soared into the mingled lights of the Suns of Scorpio.

The blue, blue sea of Kregen flashed past below.

Rahartdrin was a brown smudge on the southern horizon. I saw the dots of fliers there. If Riurik had gone that way the pursuit would bay on his heels. I kept my

ugly old face turned seawards. Oxkalin the Blind Spirit must guide me now.

Onwards through the thin air with the slipstream blattering about my ears, on and on! Ahead two black dots... Vollers! Two — had Riurik chosen to meet Merle and her abductors here, pay them off and carry the girl in triumph back to Quivir? It was a plan.

One flier ahead span away, turning end over end, dropped to the sea. I stared. I felt the pains gripping my chest, eating at my guts. Dots with tiny arms and legs spread-eagled fell away from the voller. Uselessly I forced the levers over, urging the voller to the limit. Now the second flier was speeding away — speeding directly away, straight out to sea. That was a strange course to steer for a man wanting to fly east, to Quivir. Maybe he had seen me. If Delia had fallen — and I did not believe she had — then the cramp would see nothing else after I caught up with him.

I could not believe that of Vangar Riurik. Rather, I would believe that the moment he saw the ghastly mistake his hired men had made he would turn and in all humility bring Delia, the Princess Majestrix of the Empire of Vallia, straight away back to her ugly great leem-slayer of a husband. At once!

Those two glorious suns of Scorpio, the red and the green of Antares, sank into the ocean and those constellations so strange and yet so familiar to me burned overhead. Soon Kregen's first moon appeared, the Maiden with the Many Smiles, casting down her

fuzzy pink and golden light, and I could make out the distant glitter of light that was the voller I pursued.

There was no gaining on the distance; the two fliers were matched for speed. I cursed and raved, was deathly quiet, fingered my rapier and left-hand dagger, smashed at the control levers, and cursed again. We bore on through the moon-drenched night over Kregen, the wind in my face.

The time passed away and still no impression could be made on the gap and Kregen's fourth moon, She of the Veils, rose and added to the light so that I could see that damned flier ahead with all the tantalizing clarity of the untouchable. My Delia *must* be aboard, alive, vibrant, and I *would* reach her! I would!

If we persisted in this course long enough we would reach the Hoboling Islands that fringe the northern tip of the continent of Loh. Viridia the Render would be somewhere ahead of me, pirating away among the islands. There were other isolated islands I did not know well to the east of the Hobolings. And, long before dawn, the flier ahead began to slant down to a black mass sparsely speckled with lights upon the face of the sea.

We had flown a long way, for they were both fast vollers; I felt keyed up to fighting pitch as I gently eased the levers and sent my craft hurtling down in pursuit.

The voller did not malfunction as so many vollers still do on Kregen; it was all the fault of my own idiot self. The craft ahead plunged down towards a grouping of lights. Glimpses of stone walls and domes and towers, all pink and golden beneath the moons, rolled away

beneath. Clouds banked ahead, visible by their blackness and the absence of stars. The voller plunged through them and I followed. The lights vanished. I was hurtling through darkness as pitchy as the cloak of Notor Zan. Wind tugged at me and I did not see but rather felt the embracing mass of trees ahead and sought to lift the voller and she rose, rose a fraction, rose to crash rendingly through the bristly branches of thick-trunked trees.

Then the real cloak of Notor Zan enveloped me and I span away into blackness.

* * * *

“You’re all right, dom. Just a crack on the head.” The voice whispered to me over the shushing of an invisible sea. “By Opaz! You must have a head like a vosk skull!”

I opened my eyes. Pain clawed at my head and I put my fingers up, into my brown hair; they probed and felt no wound, they came away without blood. But my head rang with all those famous Bells of Beng Kishi.

About me the darkling forest rustled gently in the night wind. I lay on a rough pallet of branches with leaves for mattress and pillow. The little fellow peering down at me in the light of the Moons was apim, a *homo sapiens* like me, with bristly light brown hair and a nutcracker face and rags for clothes all liberally smeared with ash. I could guess what he was without trouble, and as I lifted myself on an arm, wincing, he helped me up, chattering away the while. Clearly, having a stranger fall on him was a novelty.

“It seems your hut has been demolished, dom.”

He cackled at this, finding it amusing. The hut of withes and sods had been as neatly cracked as a loloo’s egg under a spoon. Moonlight sifted down between the leaves. His snaggle teeth showed raggedly in his gash-grin, his lips wide in the pleasure he took in having his hut squashed by a voller.

“Soon build another. You are all right? Got a bottle of dopa here, somewhere...”

He rattled on. He was Nath the Ash, a charcoal burner, and the evidences of his craft stood about in clearings between the trees. Charcoal burning is a highly skilled task. The neatly cut logs, first in their tripod shape, then in the triangular interleaving up to a man’s height, and then the careful stacking of thick and thin logs into the pile and the packing with clay and sods, demand concentration. The actual burning for a day and a night or so, depending on size, and the putting out of the fire, are matters of high art within the craft.

I said, “Did you see another flier?”

“Aye, dom, aye.” He bustled about trying to find the dopa. I hadn’t the heart to tell him I wouldn’t touch the stuff. “Went across so low afore you came down.” He chuckled, highly amused. He would move to another spot for wood and make another hut there, anyway, so he had suffered no real loss. “Went down over in the ruins.”

“Ruins?” I licked my lips. Perhaps just a sip... “Where is this, by Vox!”

“Why, dom, this is Ogra-gemush—”

“I know it. King Wazur — he grows fat from the chemzite quarries and—”

“Aye,” chuckled Nath the Ash, throwing broken sticks and mangled sods about and still not finding the dopa. “And what he makes out o’ trading with the renders. I know!”

“Where away are these ruins?”

He pointed without looking, still searching for the dopa, a fiery drink calculated to make a man fighting drunk in no time. I padded off towards the flier. The thing had been punctured and splintered and stood now on its nose half leaning against the wreck of the hut. It might fly again. I took out the longsword and strapped it to my back. Then I said, “Thank you for your hospitality, Nath. Remberree.”

He jerked up like a steel trap unspringing. “Hey, hey!” he called after me. “Here it is!” He was still waving the dopa bottle over his bristly head the last time I looked back in that mingled flood of pink and gold moonlight.

I knew of this King Wazur of Ogra-gemush but had never met him. We in Vallia had bought a consignment of chemzite, for the mines here produce a marvelous yellow-tawny tinged stone, much prized. Also I knew he was the provider of one of the entrepots in which the pirates disposed of their gains. He was a rich man and although his island kingdom might be small, he would have many hired mercenaries. Why had his men taken the voller with the lady Merle and my Delia aboard? I felt the longsword on my back and I plunged recklessly through the forest until the jagged columns and

shattered stones of the ruins glimmered palely before me, the crumbled outlines festooned with vines, the light of the moons pallid upon this wreck of time.

Strange blossoms clustered thickly upon the vines, wax-like blooms glimmering palely under the moons like entwined ropes of severed heads. The silence hung about these ruins as though undisturbed since the sunset people passed by. I padded silent as a hunting leem along the broad broken avenues, looking past the corpse-like remnants of buildings, peering into every pink shadow, wary in case real leems should be lurking ready to pounce with their deadly wedge-shaped heads gaping vicious fangs at my back. I did not tarry overlong in any part but pressed on to where what had once been a domed and towered palace hung now in time-blasted wreckage against the face of the Maiden with the Many Smiles. She was almost gone. Soon the twin suns would rise. She of the Veils would float for a few burs in the daytime sky, a sign and an omen. I heard nothing as I passed along, and yet that intense prickly feeling of a presence, intangible, manifest, unseen, made my fingers itch.

An abrupt and unexpected noise made me swing about, the longsword scraping from the scabbard at my back. The moons light struck along the blade, turning it pink-gold. The noise chinked again, much like the sound of leathern armor striking against stone. In the shadows, I waited, fierce, predatory, more vicious than any of the wild beasts of Kregen, for I could not wait long.

I could see no movement. The sounds ceased. With a muffled Makki-Grodno oath I glided swiftly from the shadows and over the last steps across a shattered paving into the black archway. The archway led into gloom as deep as Cottmer's Caverns. I halted and turned. Now I was looking out onto the moon-drenched shadows of the paving. If anything followed me I would see. Nothing moved. There was no sign of the flier; there was nothing here for me. If I had to search until all the Ice Floes of Sicce melted into the fires I would search; I would never give up my Delia, my Delia of Delphond.

If this ancient ruin was indeed a city then I would search every smashed alley, every ruined street. I stuck the longsword back into the scabbard and put my foot out into the moonlight — and froze.

A whisper ghosted at my back.

I whirled.

Against the darkness I could see the moon reflections striking from the long slender blade of a rapier — a rapier darting directly for my heart!

Even as I swayed aside my own rapier leaped into my fist and the blades scraped and rang as I parried that treacherous blow. Instantly I was engaged with an unseen adversary, fighting for my life.

My dagger parried the next successive flurries. Whoever the attacker might be, and still I could not make him out in the gloom, he was good. Unless he wore a black mask, he must be a black man, probably from Xuntal. Now his main gauche caught my thrust and twisted, and I leaped back and flashed a fainting stroke

and so cut with my own blade. I knew I had him. I have some reputation as a swordsman; now was no time for fancy work. Now was a time for speed and more speed, so that I might seek for the flier and my Delia.

The cut missed.

Without a curse to slow me down I dazzled a succession of passades, took his blade and thrust him through.

The rapier licked back, bright and clean; I felt no shock of bodily encounter. The two blades against my two continued to lick in and out and seek to spit me through the guts. I had to hop and skip with great cunning and fury. I circled on the cracked stone, working my way around. Now I would have this fellow with his uncanny swordplay silhouetted against the light of the moon. He was very good for he had avoided a cut and a thrust I had thought lethal. Perhaps, here in this moon-shot darkness on the isle of Ogra-gemush, I had at last met my match and was about to die. I would not let that happen. I would fight until they screwed me down, and then I'd as lief shove the coffin lid up for a last go at them all.

Around him I circled and so brought the bladesman fronting me with his back to the arched opening and the moon-light dappled shadows outside.

I let out a furious yell. Yes, I shouted — in anger, in fear, in panic — I shouted. “By Zim-Zair!” I bellowed. “There’s only one way to deal with you!”

And, skipping back out of arm’s reach, I threw down the rapier and dagger so that they rang and bounced on the stone.

For — against that silhouetting light showed only the rapier and dagger of my opponent. No living hand wielded those blades! They hung unsupported in mid air. Moving by some uncanny power they went through all the motions of swordsmanship and had rung and scraped against my blades, and yet no mortal hands grasped them, no flesh and blood urged them in cunning combat. No wonder my blade had passed so easily through nothing!

Out came the longsword, ripped from the scabbard over my back. This was not a true Krozair longsword; but it had been forged in cunning and beauty by Naghan the Gnat and me in the smithy of Esser Rarioch, and was a true blade. This was the blade with which I had led on my aerial troops to victory in the Battle of Jholaix. I did not waste time.

Using that subtle and deadly Krozair two-handed grip I flicked the brand left and right, brought it back with just the right amount of force and smashed it down squarely upon the jeweled hilt of the rapier. The rapier blade snapped across and the hilt shattered, spraying jewels. The blade dropped to clang against the floor. Over that sound I heard a gasp. Without a pause, instantly, the superb longsword slashed down in a short and wicked arc and served the main gauche in similar fashion.

The beautiful rapier and dagger lay in shards upon the stone.

I lifted my head, and I know my face must have shown all that evil and ugly malefic power that so

transfixes those upon whom I gaze in that diabolical fashion. I shouted:

“Come out, you miserable cramp! Come out before I cut your heart from your body and tear your liver smoking from your guts!”

A slither, a scrape, the sound of pebbles falling, and into the shaft of moonlight stepped a young man with a face expressing the most extreme surprise. No fear, no horror, just surprise.

Decently clad in a white robe cinctured by a crimson cord, with sandals upon his feet, with golden bracelets about his arms, and a face of great handsomeness, he might pass as any noble idler in the more riotous quarters of any city of Havilfar. But I saw his hair and I knew. For his hair shone with that peculiar gleaming red-black in the pinkish light of the moons. I knew him and what he was.

“A damned Wizard of Loh!” I shouted. “By the disgusting diseased intestines of Makki-Grodno! What are you trying to do?”

His surprise increased. These famous Wizards of Loh are accustomed to receiving the most perfect respect from men, respect and fear, for, indeed, they do possess weird and uncanny skills — as, by Vox! — I had just witnessed.

“I am Khe-Hi-Bjancking,” he said, in a voice like chiseled steel. “I have great powers — you had best beware and—” Here the rapier scraped evilly against the stone. “Swordomancy.”

“I’ve heard of your damned swordmancy, or gladio-mancy, call it what you will, wizard. It has not served you well.”

“And I have awful powers to blast the eyes in your skull!”

“You’re not skulking in these ruins for nothing!” I bellowed at him. I made the longsword tremble so the moonlight snaked down the patina. “Tell me where the voller is, cramp!”

He shook his head in amazement, and half lifted a hand.

“You are a strange man, of a kind new to me. What is your name?”

I did not hesitate.

“I am Dray Prescott, the Lord of Strombor, and if you do not answer, your head will skip about right merrily on these stones.”

“Yes, I brought the fliers to earth. I caused a cloud — oh, only a small one, a mere nothing—”

I put my left hand on his throat and I lifted him and glared madly into his eyes. The longsword poised above his head.

“Where, wizard? *Where?*”

One should address a Wizard of Loh with all reverence as San, a sage or dominie, a master. He gobbled a trifle and choked and his cheeks took on a dark plum color in the moon’s light. I let my gripping fingers relax a trifle — not much.

“By the Copper Cylinder—” he squeaked. I let him breathe. I am a humane man in these things. “It is

ruined — but the flier went down by the Copper Cylinder.”

“Then we will go there now, together.” I dragged him along, running through the shadows with the last of the moons light falling about my heels, with the promise of dawn and the rising of Zim and Genodras in my face. The Copper Cylinder reared ahead, sliced off diagonally some hundred feet from the ground. As we ran over those ancient stones the first brilliance broke through the eastern horizon and a single copper gleam, red-gold, burst like a star against the upflung jagged point of the Copper Cylinder.

My own rapier and main gauche were back in their scabbards; we had left this Wizard Khe-Hi-Bjanching’s smashed weapons on the stones. I had no fear of him stabbing me in the back as I hauled him along.

Shadows still clung darkly about the base of the Cylinder; but now that shaft glowed, the light slowly running down the copper which gleamed red-gold with no trace of green patina. I saw the wrecked voller. I let out a yell, a furious joyful shout: “Delia! Delia of Strombor! Delia of Vallia!”

For answer a shattering roar reverberated from the mildewed stones. The very ground seemed to tremble beneath my feet. I ran on; the voller lay on her side, crumpled, and a body clad in the black leather trappings and metal of a flyer lay sprawled alongside, his head a mere mass of clotted blood and brains.

“Delia!”

The roar smashed out again and into the rising glory of the Suns stepped a tralk, his six legs scrabbling against the stones, his horse-sized armored body glowing brick-red in the light. His wide horny mouth, designed to crush armored monsters like himself, opened. Before his flat head his two enormous pincers opened and closed in deadly menace, their serrated edges able to rip and puncture the armor of his natural enemies. I sought no fight with him; but again that angry roar smashed out. The pincers, each as large as a kitchen table, clashed. Down went his head, the six legs bunched for a swiftly savage charge, the horny crushing mouth opened — and with a last and stone-shattering roar the tralk charged.

“Run, man, or you’re done for!” screamed the Wizard.

It was nice of him to worry over my safety. I’ve fought worse monsters than a tralk before and, no doubt, Kregen being the marvelous and wonderful, terrible and horrific world it is, will fight many more before I take the last journey to the Ice Floes of Sicce.

The longsword snapped into my fists. The Wizard ran, screeching. I poised, ready to deal with the tralk as he deserved. The only enmity I bore him lay simply in that he delayed me in my search for Delia. The tralk, for all his fierceness, and he is a fearsome risslaca among risslacas, acted merely out of his nature; what he was doing was what he was born and intended for.

That first rush with the intention of seizing me up in one of his iron-hard pincers and so crushing me into that horny mouth was met by me in the old barbaric

ways of Kregen. I skipped to the side at the last minute and that superb longsword swished and bit deeply into the joint abaft the pincer. It did not cut through. The tralk's armor was thick and horny. But I knew what a real Krozair longsword would do; now I was testing what the sword Naghan and I had made would do. Again I slashed and got an eye. The thick pus and mucus ran out. The tralk screeched; but pity him though I might, my mind hungered to press on, filled with horror for the fate of Delia. Nothing in two worlds can stand against the well-being of my Delia. I have waded through lakes of blood, as you know, and would see two worlds mere oceans of blood to preserve my Delia. This makes me a sinner. I am. But then, that is me, Dray Prescott. As for this poor dinosaur; he lasted no time at all after his second eye burst like the first.

He thrashed about, his pincers clashing open and shut with a pathetic sound. Then he screeched, as though understanding, and lumbered away, crashing into walls and stones as he went, for his two remaining eyes were both on the left side of his head.

“You are a devil!” panted the Wizard. “By Hlo-Hli! A very devil!”

“Aye!” I said, snatching up a handful of ferns to cleanse the sword. As you know, I do not like thrusting a sword fouled with blood into a scabbard given to me by Delia. “Aye, wizard. I am a very devil. You brought the voller to ground. The woman I seek is not here. If you do not go into lupu and tell me where she is — now! — I

swear you will find out your ideas of a devil are a pallid nothing beside the reality I'll show you.”

This was not empty boasting. Boasting is for fools. I simply told this Wizard of Loh, Khe-Hi-Bjanching, what I would do to him if he failed me. He believed me. When I wish, I can have that effect on people. As I say, I am not a nice man.

And then, after all this arrogant display of petty power, I heard the slither, and turned viciously, and the whole world of Kregen fell on me and even Notor Zan had time for only one swirl of his cloak before I fell into the deep darkness.

* * * *

“Dray!” said my Delia, her voice making me curse myself for the greatest onker in two worlds. “Dray!”

“Sink me!” I said. “I don't like making the acquaintance of Notor Zan so often, by Zair!”

We were chained up in a dungeon with the lady Merle and the Wizard. I have spent some interesting times in dungeons, Kregen being a world where dungeons are a way of life to some kings, and I detest them all. I looked about for the way out. The chains would not be broken had I ten times the strength I have, which is not inconsiderable. We were all naked save for our breech-clouts. Delia and I wore the brave old scarlet. That cheered me, at least.

“I thought you would never — they must have hit you hard.”

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