

DRAY PRESCOT: 25

LEGIONS OF ANTARES

KENNETH BULMER
writing as
ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

LEGIONS OF ANTARES

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

Copyright © 1981, Kenneth Bulmer

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

First published by Daw Books, Inc. in 1981.

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

www.mushroom-ebooks.com

Originally published as by Dray Prescott, as told to Alan Burt Akers.

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

Dray Prescot	1
1 Concerns What Followed an Arrangement with the Star Lords	3
2 Strom Irvil Berates Zaydo.....	24
3 A Length of Lumber Instructs Flutsmen	39
4 Of a Spark in the Cells.....	50
5 Concerning Nulty’s Sword Arm	63
6 Of Freedom, Fires and Flyers	77
7 Some Artists of Kregen.....	87
8 In Ruathytu	100
9 Blades of Spikatur.....	115
10 Of a Crossbow Bolt	135
11 Lobur the Dagger Fidgets.....	145
12 Mathdi.....	160
13 Signs	174
14 “Zair does will it!”	184
15 Of the Power of Hamal	195

16	Fracas Under the Moons	210
17	Into the Hammabi el Lamma	221
18	I Am Peremptory With Princess Thefi.....	241
19	A Grand Tour Weaves the Net	253
20	The Empress Thyllis of Hamal	269
21	Phu-Si-Yantong.....	284
	Notes.....	300
	About the author	301
	The Dray Prescot Series	303

Dray Prescott

To survive on the savage and unpredictable world of Kregen Dray Prescott needed to be strong, resourceful, cunning and courageous. Prescott not only survived his headlong adventures on that exotic world orbiting the double star Antares, he has built there a life that has meaning, filled with the love of Delia and the friendship of his blade comrades. Yet his character is far more complex than mere savage survival would require.

Dray Prescott is a man above middle height with brown hair and eyes and a physique of exceptional power, and he moves like a giant hunting cat. He was educated in the harsh environment of Nelson's Navy, and by the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, the well-meaning superhuman but mortal men of the Swinging City who brought Prescott first to Kregen. Although he describes his face as "an ugly old beakhead," other sources state that his face is "noble and fierce." Expert with weapons and a master swordsman, he is aware of his own limitations. That he so often transcends them is a testament to his attitude toward life.

The Everoinye — the Star Lords — have employed Prescott over the years in pursuance of their own schemes for the world and he is now gaining insights

into their objectives. Prescott has acquired titles and estates over the seasons of his adventuring. The people of Vallia called him to be their emperor in times of troubles, and now the dawn appears to be breaking for that island empire. The hostile Empire of Hamal, ruled by the Empress Thyllis, is now markedly on the defensive. The Wizard of Loh Phu-Si-Yantong, who cherishes schemes equally as ambitious and insane as those of Thyllis, is now confined to the island of Pandahem. Now, as a fresh set of adventures begins, Prescott knows he must say good-bye to Delia in Hyrklana, an island of which their son Jaidur is the new king. With the dawn as the twin Suns of Scorpio rise, Dray Prescott knows he will be hurled into unknown perils...

Chapter one

Concerns What Followed an Arrangement with the Star Lords

You don't argue with the Star Lords. At least, if you make the attempt you'll regret it and that may exclude your chance of living to regret it. All the same, I've hurled some hard words at the Star Lords from time to time, and as for their messenger and spy, the scarlet-and golden-feathered bird of prey, he and I, the Gdoinye and I, have indulged in a few scathing slanging matches.

There can't be a winner from the ranks of mortal men, as I then believed, in any contest with the Star Lords, and I had learned caution.

The spangled stars of Kregen sparkled still in the night sky and the quietness of waiting in those moments before dawn cast an expectant hush over all the rolling world. Delia half-rose in the bed, leaning on an elbow. The sheets slipped down to her waist as she regarded me. Her hair lay in shadow from the bedpost and her face looked upon me woefully.

“When the twin suns rise, my heart,” I said.

“I hate the Star Lords!”

“As well hate the storms bursting around your head, or the thunder and lightning. They are not affected by our feelings or what we do. Although,” I said, bending to pick up the scarlet breechclout, “although I fancy what we do may have some small effect on the Star Lords. Their man in Hamal has failed and they need me urgently, yet they gave us this night together.”

“And I am supposed to love them for that?”

Determination in Delia is a live force. What she knows she knows, what she holds she holds.

“No, you cannot be expected to love the Everoinye. I believe they are beyond love or hate, although once they were mortal human beings like us.” I threw down the scarlet breechclout. “I shall not need that.”

“I think, my heart — there is light. There... On the window frame...”

The windows of this sumptuous bedchamber high in the fortress of the Hakal in the city of Huringa in Hyrklana were deeply set into the masonry. Rich damask clothed the harsh stone. I looked. A strigicaw embroidered in bright silks shone more clearly than he had before, his snarling muzzle lifted, his ears pricked. Yes, there was light. The red sun and the green sun, Far and Havil, were lifting into the dawn skies over Kregen and it was the time appointed.

Useless to try to stumble out words to say what I felt: Delia saw all that in me as I looked upon her, standing

drinking her in, feeling, feeling... She smiled. She made herself smile for me and she stretched out her arms.

I leaped for the bed and clasped her, warm and soft and firm and glorious, glorious. Then, with the feeling of the tormentors in their black hoods at work on me, I released her and stepped back.

All naked, staring forlornly upon Delia, I waited for the Summons of the Scorpion.

“Remberee, Dray, my heart—”

“Remberee, Delia, my love. Remember always, I love you and only you—”

Blue radiance dropped about me, blotting out the world and all I loved, and the bloated shining form of the Scorpion beckoned and whirled me up in the maelstrom of supernatural forces.

As I swirled up in the all-encompassing blueness I realized that, at the least, this time I had not lived with the doomed sense of insecurity, of unsettling expectancy that at any moment, at any damned inconvenient moment, I would be called on by the Star Lords to be flung miles away and dumped down into some barbaric spot on Kregen and hurled headlong into downright unhealthy action. That was like living on one of those half-forgotten islands of the Shrouded Sea, plagued with volcanoes and earthquakes, there one minute and blown up the next, and reappearing somewhere else a few years later.

“Delia!” I bellowed as I went up head over heels. She would not hear me. She would see — what would she have seen? I’d ask her when I got out of this little lot. If I

did. If, this time, I managed to scrape through and once more win my way back to my Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains.

The blueness roared about me. I felt the supernal chill. Somewhere in Hamal, the Everoinye had said they needed my help. Well that suited our plans. This time, I vowed, the parting from Delia would not be long. This time I'd do what the Everoinye required in double-quick time, and then I'd take the foul empire of Hamal to pieces and deal with mad Empress Thyllis as we had dealt with fat Queen Fahia. Those were the plans, simple and straightforward. Ha!

Anybody who didn't have a skull as thick as mine would by now have realized that on Kregen, that beautiful and terrible world four hundred light-years from the planet of my birth, nothing was ever simple and straightforward. There was to be a deal of skipping and jumping and skull-bashing before this imbroglio was anywhere near settled.

Naked and weaponless, I landed with a bone-jarring crash. The Star Lords had really flung me hard, picking me up from Hyrklana, that island realm off the east coast of the southern continent of Havilfar, and slamming me down in Hamal in the northeast of the continent. Gritty rock scratched under my hands and knees. I stood up. My head hit rock. All the famous bells of Beng Kishi clamored in my skull. Damned Everoinye!

Putting out a hand as the blue radiance died, I touched rock. I was in darkness so positively pitchy I

could see nothing, nothing except the flakes of light floating in my own eyeballs.

Rock under foot, rock over head. Rock at my sides, and rocky grittiness in front. Turning around cautiously and shuffling like an old gaffer in carpet slippers I tested the air. Only one way lay unblocked. I sniffed. Stale air, flat and dusty and in it a taint of some indefinable odor, gave me no clue to where I was. Slowly, testing every inch, I started to shuffle along this inky warren. The rocky sides of the tunnel narrowed and I started to feel a lively interest, and then — thankfully — they opened and widened so that I walked along with one hand trailing on stone and the other held up into emptiness to protect my head.

The bells of Beng Kishi donged away to silence. I shook my head. It did not fall off, so that was all right.

Slowly, as my eyes adjusted, I began to see tiny spots of radiance festooning the walls. Peering closer, squinting, I made out little clumps of the phosphorescent lichen the Kregans call estilux growing clamped to the rock in crevices and folds. As I stumbled along, the light strengthened, both from the dilation of my pupils and the thickening clumps of estilux. By the time I reached the first carved cavern I could see reasonably well.

Not that there was much to see down here.

“Sink me!” I burst out. “Where’s this hell-spawned kregoinye I’m supposed to bale out?”

Although I’d once refused to be called a kregoinye, I was in fact one of those men and women selected by the

Everoinye to serve their mysterious purposes on Kregen. Whether I liked it or not.

As though in answer to my rumbled bad temper, a figure rose from a bundle of rocks ahead.

A thin stream trickled along there and he'd been filling a pottery bowl. He saw me. He was not a member of Homo-sapiens, having a beaked birdlike face with fluffy yellow feathers and goggling eyes. He was a Relt, one of those races of diffs on Kregen renowned for their gentleness and when slave more often used as stylors and domestics. The pottery bowl flew up in the air. The Relt let out a frightened squeak and ran stumbling and slipping away across the stream and into the shadows past a rocky outcrop.

I fumed.

The bowl was smashed so there was no use picking it up to return it. And, truth to tell, I suppose, I must have looked a most demonic figure, abruptly appearing all naked and hairy from the shadows. He must have thought me some demon from a Herrelldrin Hell.

Now my face has often been called an ugly old beak-head. In truth, when I look at people at times when I am feeling a little intemperate, I — again — am told that my scowl will stop a dinosaur in its tracks. So I consciously put into use the technique taught me by a master Wizard of Loh, who are a pretty scary bunch of sorcerers, old Deb-Lu-Quienyin, among the most renowned of all Wizards of Loh, and changed my expression. I put on a benign look. No — do not scoff. Dray Prescott, the rascal and ruffian, brawler, Blades-

man, Bravo Fighter and much else, including reiver and mercenary, can assume a face that masks all that violent energy. Mind you, a very different face if held for too long exacts punishment, for my face feels as though a million bees have been stinging away happily all night.

So, with a cheerful, friendly expression, I blundered on, shouting: "Hai! Relt! I mean you no harm! Where away are we?"

Only the echo of a squeak floated back.

Still wearing that silly grinning physiognomy, I rounded the outcrop. Fifty paces on, torchlights threw orange streaks from a buttress that soared into shadows.

This looked promising. I did not think the Relt with his soft ways and timid life-style would be the man I was looking for. The Star Lords use tougher material than that. Even so, he might be, for I was becoming more and more aware that the Everoinye's plans for Kregen were far different from those I might once have envisioned.

A rumble began in the ground. The rock all about me shook. Dust drifted down from high overhead and within the dust, chips and shards of razor-edged stone. The noise boomed and buffeted so that, staggering, choking in the dust, I put my hands to my ears. The earthquake roared on, filling the world with haze, rending at my senses, wrenching away at my primeval feelings of solidity with this land I loved. Perhaps only a dozen heartbeats the quake reverberated in that cavern; it seemed like a couple of lifetimes and more.

Dust stung in my nostrils and inflamed my eyes. I squinted, and took my hands away from my ears, and tried to hear and see again. I swallowed. A scrabble, barely heard, down by my right foot, attracted instant attention.

From a rocky crevice newly widened crept a thing like two soup plates jammed together, top and bottom, with a pair of stalked eyes and a long rapierlike proboscis twitching angrily. At the tip of that three-foot-long spiny shaft glittered a drop of poison, green and thick and evil.

This yenalk made a stab at my bare foot.

With a yelp I dodged away.

It trundled after me hungrily, rolling along on a multitude of thin short legs. It moved damned fast. There was only one thing to do, for it would persist in keeping after me until it sank its poisoned proboscis into me, and settled down to eating.

Leaping to the side, I put a foot down on a flat shard of stone. It started to spin around like a loco on a turntable... Without halting the movement I leaped clean over it. On its other side I bent, got my fingers under the lip of its shell and heaved it over onto its back.

It rolled like a dummy figure for a moment. All its legs waved like a forest lashed by a gale. I stared down.

“Rest there a space, yenalk, and if I am minded to come back for you, don’t go away.”

It rocked slowly to stillness, and its legs writhed helplessly.

Drifting dust still fell in patterns across the torchlights and as I walked up to the buttress I saw that this drifting light-irradiated dust was very beautiful. An odd, irrational thought, perhaps, but for all my uncouthness and barbarity I have, as I think you will understand, an eye for beauty found in places where beauty is not expected to be discovered.

A bunch of people huddled on the hard stones in the light and they were in bad case. Here, I said to myself, is where my labors begin.

The first thing I noticed as I walked among them was their cowed and beaten-down appearance. They were all of races that people on Kregen regard as the delicate and refined ones, the weak and unaggressive diffs. There were Relts and Xaffers, those remote and distant diffs, and Lamnias, shrewd merchants, and others like Lun'elshes[i] with soft black body hair, and Dunders, squat, thick-hewed, flat-headed men universally employed as carriers. A number of Ennschafften, whom folk normally call Syblians, huddled together, the men bundles of muscles, the women very beautiful, and all with simple naive baby-faces. I stood for a moment staring at this collection of the deprived of Kregen. Even then, Lamnias are not deprived in the sense of worldly goods, for they are wily merchants with the highest reputations.

As I stood thus looking about, a bull voice broke in a roar.

“A damned apim! Well, apim, and what kept you?”

Lying back on a spread cloak of black and yellow lozenges a numim bellowed at me. The lion-man's head was wrapped in a clumsy bandage ripped from the hem of the cloak, and the black and yellow interweavings, like the hide of a sanjit, were stained with blood. In his right fist he gripped a sword whose blade had snapped off a foot from the hilt. He looked to be in the most ferocious of bad tempers. His hide was so dark a brown as to appear black, and his bristling lion mane was a tawny umber. He was not of the golden numims.

“By Numi-Hyrjiv the Golden Splendor! You’ve been lollygagging around, and here I lie waiting for you! This is not to be born. And have the Everoinye then sunk so low as to send a naked unarmed apim?” His wrathful lion face grimaced then and he put his left hand to the bandage. “My head rings with all the bells of Beng Kishi, and you stand there like a cretin! Jump to it, onker, and fetch me water! I parch!”

About to bark out a choice remark that would cut this supercilious lion-man down to size, I checked myself. I still wore that foolish grinning face. Before I could speak he was ranting on again, acting merely as he usually acted.

“Onker! Why do you stand there? I am Strom Irvil of Pine Mountain. You jump when I speak to you, as any respectable body slave should jump when his master speaks. That fool Zaydo got himself crushed when the roof caved in and I am all alone and—”

“But—” I began.

In Strom Irvil's book that was a serious mistake.

“You never argue with your master, Zaydo! Onker! Nulsh! Get me water or I will stripe you most cruelly.”

“My name is not Zaydo—”

“All my body slaves are called Zaydo.” He tried to rise, forcing himself up with the broken sword as a crutch. He gasped. He fell back onto the spread cloak. “Water,” he said. “Fetch water, Zaydo, and you escape the flogging triangle.”

I saw his lion lips were dry and cracked. Without another word I cast about and found a pottery bowl and so went to the stream where I had startled the Relt, and fetched back water for Strom Irvil of Pine Mountain. One Pine Mountain I had heard of lay in Thothangir, in the far south of the continent.

I put the bowl to his lips and he drank, distressedly. I went to lift the bandage to look at his wound, but he knocked my hand away.

“Leave it, Zaydo. I will mend. But the Everoinye will not be pleased if I fail them. You must get us all out of here.”

“What happened?”

He glared up at me, the water shining among the cracks of his lips.

“You call me master, Zaydo, and speak with civility and humility, else it is the flogging triangle. I am a great lord, and you are my body slave, sent by the Everoinye. Remember this.”

A strom, which is roughly equivalent to an Earthly count, is indeed a title of great nobility in some lands, if of a lesser stature in others. The notion grew in me like

a moon-bloom opening to the kiss of the suns' rays after a night of Notor Zan when no moons shine in Kregen's sky. Just why this affair amused me is difficult to say. I knew I would not act the poltroon in Hamal. But looking at this blowhard numim strom as he lay there, gasping, the bloody bandage incongruous on his head, I suppose I half-reasoned out that no good would come of browbeating him now. We had a job to do. If he labored under the delusion I was his body slave Zaydo, what difference would that make? I wanted to finish this thing off, and then get about wrecking Empress Thyllis's crazy ambitions. And, into the bargain, I could do with a good laugh, and this numim appeared to me to be able to furnish mirth aplenty.

So... "Yes, master, no master, very good master, and what has happened here that you are in such poor case and Zaydo is crushed to death?"

He blew his whiskers out and glared up at me.

"You are an onker! The roof fell in, that's what. And when I led these people out through the old mining tunnels, the earthquake brought more down, and so trapped us all again and knocked a damned great hole in my head. Vosk skull!"

"Mayhap, master, a vosk skull, being exceedingly thick, is a good thing to have down here."

"Do you mock me, ingrate?"

"Mock you, master? Why should a humble body slave do that?"

“I labor mightily for the good of the Everoinye. Why they should burden me with an imbecile like you I cannot imagine.”

Now this Strom Irvil was only the second kregoinye I had so far met. The first, Pompino, was no doubt either safely at home in Pandahem with his wife, or jaunting about Kregen derring-doing on an errand for the Everoinye. I'd have preferred Pompino here with me now. But as I set about finding a way out for the trapped people, I had to put up with Strom Irvil breathing down my neck.

The truth of our predicament was brought home to me quickly and its brutality made me ponder. We were trapped. We *were* trapped. These people, representatives of the weaker races of Kregen, had crept here secretly to hold a meeting and listen to the wise words of a wandering preacher. This man, this Pundhri the Serene, sat on a rock higher than the rest, his fist supporting his bearded chin, his face bent down, talking quietly to a group of people gathered about him. His voice came to me as a mellifluous burble whose individual words were lost. He was a diff of that race of ahlnims whose members have for century after century produced mystics and wise men. He looked the part, for his hair, like a Gon's, was chalk white. He did not, like a Gon, shave his head bald and polish it up with butter. His face bore that intent, concentrated look of a man absorbed with the import of what he was saying, determined to make his listeners understand and share his vision. He

wore a simple dark-blue tunic, and he held a thick staff, unadorned, although with a stout knob at each end.

Strom Irvil said, "Yes, Zaydo. He is the man the Everoinye wish saved. He is our charge — and me with a damned great hole in my head and a stupid thick-skulled onker of a body slave! It is enough to make a man turn to drink."

"We are trapped — master — but mayhap we can dig a way out. If—"

"We! You mean you will dig a way out, Zaydo! And there are monsters in the tunnels. The old mine workings were abandoned seasons ago. The shrine where the meeting was held has not been used in the memory of living man. But Pundhri the Serene called the meeting there out of the prying eyes of those who would destroy him and his work."

"And what work is that? Master."

He glared and winced. "You see what a miserable band these folk are. Not a fighting man among them..."

"The ahlnims fight, on occasion—"

"Aye! And by thus doing break the tenets of their faith."

I eyed Pundhri's knobbed stick. They call that kind of dual-skull-basher a dwablatte. I surmised that Pundhri had used it often enough before he was dubbed the Serene.

"And you say there are monsters, master?" I almost mocked, beginning to feel the need of opening my shoulders. "I suppose there are flame-spouting risslacas, and giant spiders, and—"

“The giant spiders are as big as two dinner plates and they can snap your leg off like a rotten twig.”

That sobered me, I can tell you.

He threw the broken sword at me.

“Get on with it, get on with it, then, Zaydo, you useless lazy hound!”

“Yes, master.” I stared about, a trifle vacantly. “Where shall I begin?” After all, if he was the master and I the slave then let him sort out the brainwork.

“Over there where the first tunnel starts, onker!”

The stone chipped away fairly easily at first as I dug the broken blade in and twisted and scraped. A couple of jolly Sybli girls held torches. They had a fair supply of these, being cautious folk. But they would not last forever. There were lanterns, cheap mineral-oil lamps, and these were being saved. Then, after about two arms’ lengths, the rock firmed up into mother bedrock. The steel chimed.

I crawled back and stood up, my head and chest covered with rock dust.

“What are you stopping for?” The lion-man roar burst out. “Get on with it.”

“No way through here. Master.”

“Fool! Then try somewhere else.”

“Yes, master.” I didn’t bother about any more fun and frolic. A careful look around in the uncertain illumination revealed the way the cavern sloped down at one end, with arching rockfalls fanning out from ancient subsidences. One or two of the dark slots looked promising. I marched across to the nearest. I passed

near the group listening respectfully to Pundhri the Serene. At the rock face the slot proved too narrow for my shoulders and I turned, intending to go on to the next.

A small ahlnim woman approached, carrying a length of brown cloth. Her hair was pinned neatly at the nape of her neck, as I saw as she bowed her head. Her robe was torn and smeared with dust, and I fancied that was unusual for her. She looked calm and competent and capable of running a household.

“The master offers you this, and all his prayers are for your success.”

I took the cloth. “Thank you, hortera,” I said, giving her the courtesy title of lady.

She ducked her head and went back to sit comfortably on a flat rock just to the side and rear of Pundhri. I wound the brown cloth about my nakedness and, spitting on my hands, set to work with the broken sword.

At that, I did not fail to complain that the Star Lords habitually sent me off to do their dirty work for them stark naked and weaponless. For this high and mighty Strom Irvil, they supplied clothes and weapons — and a personal body slave!

Some of the Dunders came across and began helping to shift the chips and chunks of rock I flaked off. Squat knots of muscle, short in stubby leg, thick of arm, the Dunders have been blessed — or cursed — by nature or the meddling hand of genetic manipulation with heads as flat across the top as billiard tables. Do not imagine

they can be brilliantly intellectual; but they do think, they do suffer from emotions and they are men. Carriers of burdens, the Dunders, and there had been a number of them with us down the Moder before the monsters finished their work forever.

Pausing for a breather, I said to the nearest flat-headed Dunder: "Is the San a healer, dom?"

He shook that strange head. "No, dom, no. I do not think so." Then he added in perfect explanation of his race's outlook: "No one told me he is a healer."

San Pundhri the Serene continued to talk. The title of san, which means master, dominie, sage, was accorded him as by right. He held a magnetic attraction for these poor folk. Not many were slaves, and this, presumably, because slaves of other slave-owners would have been unable to get away to the meeting, and the free folk here could afford few slaves. I went back to rock bashing.

The way opened after considerable effort and a torch, thrust through the first chink to appear onto the rocks tumbled into the tunnel, revealed an empty openness.

"A cavern," I said. "Once we're into that we'll be well away."

The rocky fall was cleared and it was time to try to rouse these people to movement. With a barrage of groans and snorts and burstings of bad temper, Strom Irvil got himself up. He swayed on those dark-furred legs. I gave him an arm for support and he brushed it away, pettishly.

"I can stand, Zaydo, you onker!"

I went across to Pundhri.

“San,” I said with due formality. “Will you help to move the people? They are frightened—”

He stared at me and I saw his eyes resting on me with calculation. He grasped his knobbed stick and stood up.

“They have reason to be frightened. You are Zaydo?”

In for a zorca, in for a vove. “Yes, San.”

“We have no weapons against the monsters.”

I shook rock dust off the broken sword.

He moved off his flat rock. “I will help these people, of course. You need not have asked. But I do not think your broken sword will avail us here.”

“It has opened the way. It may yet serve.”

He stopped and bent his brows on me. “And you are slave?”

I did not answer but went bashing back to a group of silly Xaffers who wanted to go the wrong way in the confusing torchlit darkness. When we were sorted out and moving through the gap broken in the fall and into the next cavern, I fancied Pundhri might have other things to occupy him besides the character of the slave called Zaydo.

The next cavern echoed hollowly to our voices. The torches, held high, showed the craggy rock at our backs and an empty darkness ahead. Everyone stopped. There was no doubt at all that this place held an eerie atmosphere that worked on the susceptibilities. People spoke in low tones. A subdued apprehension made movements awkward. At any moment horror could burst upon us from the darkness.

“Zaydo!” brayed the lion voice. “Get on, get on! And give me my sword. Slaves do not carry swords.”

“There are some countries where slaves carry swords, master.”

“If I had my strength I’d knock you flat on your back! Impudent tapo! Insolent yetch!”

Handing the broken sword across, I said: “You will not stripe me, master?”

“I don’t see why I should not. My head! You are an ingrate and I am too kind to my slaves. Now get on, and go that way, for I feel a draught there.”

There was a draught, a tiny current of air, and so this Strom Irvil wasn’t as incapacitated as he wanted to think. Off we went, stumbling and clattering over the uneven floor. The torches lost the rocky wall at our backs, and showed nothing ahead. In darkness, rock underfoot, the torches flaring their orange hair, we staggered on.

Eventually we reached the far wall and squeezed through a crack where air flowed, and came into another cavern, and crossed that. We might spend a dozen lifetimes down there, creeping through the tunnels and struggling across caverns.

“Up!” growled Strom Irvil. “We must go up!”

San Pundhri glanced up, not squinting. Irvil bellowed.

“Zaydo, you useless yetch! Find a way up! By Havil the Green, what a straw scarecrow I’m lumbered with in you, brainless onker!”

I was about to let out a fluent torrent of abuse, when Pundhri cut in quickly.

“You use hard words on your slave, strom. He has done well so far. Can we not—”

“No! Not until we are out of this infernal hellhole.”

I walked across to the wall and a Sybli maiden carried a torch, which was near to expiring, and we looked at the fissures within the rock. One or two looked promising. Once we had broken our way back into the mine workings we ought to find it easier going. I reached back for the torch. The Sybli handed it to me, smiling her silly, naïve, endearing Sybli smile, and I eased sideways along the gray stone, the torch picking out veins and spiracles of crystal. Along I went, the torch thrust ahead. The flames flickered, so there was some kind of draught here. The rock pressed against my back. There was barely room before my chest to move my arms. The way tended up.

The ground shook.

The walls moved.

The solid rock groaned as though the very stone labored in agony from unimaginable pressure. Chips of stone flaked off and fell, unheard in that world-shaking rumble. The walls closed together. Arm up holding the torch, arm down levering on, one leg flexed, the other contorted awkwardly, I stopped moving, pinned. Fast fixed within the vise of stone, I could not budge. The jaws of the world snapped on me, closer and closer. I felt my ribcage bending. The torch glared full upon a single glittering drop of green. The drop of poison at the tip of a thin proboscis oozed from the slot beside my head. The yenalk showed as a flat outline, the dust glittering

upon his shell. It inched forward along its fissure, aiming at me, aiming that poison-tipped sword straight at my eye.

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

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

About the author

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

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

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

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

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

The Dray Prescott Series

The Delian Cycle:

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

Havilfar Cycle:

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

The Krozair Cycle:

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

Vallian cycle:

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

Jikaida cycle:

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

Spikatur cycle:

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

Pandahem cycle:

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

Witch War cycle:

33. Werewolves of Kregen
34. Witches of Kregen

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

Lohvian cycle:

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

Balintol cycle:

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

Phantom cycle:

51. Murder on Kregen
52. Turmoil on Kregen