

DRAY PRESCOT: 27

MAZES OF SCORPIO

KENNETH BULMER
writing as
ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

MAZES OF SCORPIO

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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A Note on the Pandahem Cycle

Dray Prescott often calls himself a plain sailorman, yet the picture he paints of himself in these narratives is highly enigmatic. In *Mazes of Scorpio*, the first volume of the Pandahem Cycle, a completely new era in his life begins to develop. True, he was a powder monkey in Nelson's Navy, and clawed his way through the hawsehole to the quarterdeck to become first lieutenant of a seventy-four. But he was disappointed with his posting. When the Savanti, those mortal yet superhuman people of the Swinging City of Aphrasöe on far Kregen, called him to serve as a Savapim in their schemes, he crossed the gulf of four hundred light-years more than willingly.

Rejected by the Savanti, he in turn spurned them for the sake of Delia. Only through the machinations of the Star Lords was Prescott brought back to Kregen. He has fought his way on that marvelous and brilliant world of savagery and beauty, and has made a name for himself. But now all that changes.

Called to be the Emperor of Vallia, he, with his comrades, has vanquished poor old mad Thyllis, Empress of Hamal, and now seeks to create a fresh and lasting unity among all the nations of Paz. They all face a common

foe in the Shanks, the Fishheads who raid their coasts. And, there are worms within the bud, secret enemies who desire only to drag all down for their own selfish ends.

Dray Prescott has been described as an immensely broad-shouldered man of enormous vitality, a little above middle height, with brown hair and eyes, a man conveying an impression of passion held in check, moving with the savage grace of a wild beast of the jungle. From sources outside his own testimony we know him to be a man of complete integrity, holding within himself a cool center of calm; a passionate, dominant, commanding and yet truly humble man.

Prescott is chivalrous — in what many people would see as a comically old-fashioned way — to any woman deserving of chivalry. He acknowledges, and tolerates and attempts to be sympathetically understanding toward, any woman who is not.

A plain sailorman? Hardly. Life on Kregen under the mingled streaming lights of Zim and Genodras, the Suns of Scorpio, has changed and matured Prescott in ways unknowable to denizens of this Earth. We can guess that his headlong career has barely begun, that the many friends and foes surrounding him, the horrendous experiences he has endured, the future perils he must face, will continue to mold his character, hardening what is already harsh, softening what is already gentle. All we can say is — Hai Jikai!

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter one

At The Ruby Winespout

At the beginning of rhododendron time two of my spies were fished out of the river with their throats cut from ear to ear.

The banked masses of leaves, black-green and shining, burst — it seemed in the course of a single morning — into explosions of color. The blossoms scattered flecks and rushes, swathes and coruscations of all the colors of the rainbow across the dark green leaves. Color rioted and scents perfumed the air. And two good men were dead.

Anger and self-contempt were useless. Anger at the waste of human life, contempt that I had asked Nogan the Artful and Lifren the Soft to spy for me; and now they were dead. I told my friends what I intended to do. Their reactions were predictable.

“No!”

“It is impossible.”

“You cannot go running headlong into danger!”

But Seg Segutorio, regarding me with his mocking gaze much modified by thought, said, “You probably need to let some of the bad humor out, Dray. Your blood is getting thick. We’ll just toddle along to this infamous Ruby Winespout and exercise our muscles a trifle.”

Good old Seg!

“And our brains.”

“Oh, aye,” said Seg. “Brains.” His fey blue eyes regarded me with amusement, clearing both mockery and thought. “Between us, we’ve not used our quota all that well, have we?”

I was surprised.

In all the concerns pressing in on us as we sought to assist a shattered empire to regain its strength with one hand and with the other repel fishlike marauders from over the curve of the world, I had thought Seg secure. He had overcome his grief for his wife Thelda and was now, I was convinced, the most balanced of us all. Except and despite that he could become a wild and raving maniac if he got into a spot of hand-to-hand. As the best Bowman of Loh in all Kregen, in my view, Seg Segutorio could handle himself in any situation. He was a comrade, the greatest comrade any man could have, and I relied on him absolutely.

“I don’t know what you’re on about for yourself, Seg. But if you’re referring to the bother I’m having with Drak over this emperor of Vallia nonsense—”

He interrupted with the ease of valued friendship.

“No troubles you can put a shaft into. I’ve managed to steer clear of half a dozen designing families with marriageable offspring. Since Thelda — well, Dray, I’ll tell you. I feel like those flowers out there.”

So that was it.

We were standing in the long room with the serried windows overlooking a panorama of gardens dropping away to the River Havilthytus. The imperial palace, the Hammabi el Lamma, rearing imposingly on its artificial island in the river, had now become a place I could tolerate. The profusion of flowers helped, for the place always struck cold and hard. Delia had with her usual skill contrived comfort from the rooms of the apartments in the Alshyss Tower given over to our use.

Here in Ruathytu, the capital city of the Empire of Hamal, we people of Vallia were never allowed to forget we were strangers. We had concluded a magnificent treaty with the Hamalese and their new emperor, Nedfar, and everything looked promising for the future. We had to patch the empire together again for the Hamalese, and resist with the last drop of blood in our bodies the devilish Shanks who raided us all.

Seg shifted his belt on his hips, settled it. He coughed. “The problem now is those rogues in The Ruby Winespout. They are a notorious gang—”

“So we’ll stroll along, as you suggest, and take a look.”

The protests from our people, the vehemence with which this hero and that vowed he or she would accompany us — well, I cut all through the babble.

“This is a task for one or two only. Kov Seg and I will go. That is all there is to say.”

Deft-fingered Minch, crusty, bearded, my camp commandant, said dourly, “Majister — if the Empress Delia were here she would stop you, for a certainty.”

“Well, Minch,” I said, somewhat testily, “as she is gallivanting off somewhere and is not here, she can hardly stop me, can she?”

So that decided *that*.

We were going deliberately to put our fool heads into a tavern notorious for murder, foul play and evanishments, where two of our best men had been cruelly done away with, and Seg and I tended to regard it all rather lightly.

We kitted ourselves up to look like mercenaries. This was not a disguise, for we’d both been mercenaries in our time. Our clothes were hard, sober, workmanlike, with much leather and a little metal, for we did not wish to appear grand.

Seg picked up the silken cords from which dangled the representation of a mortil’s head sculpted in silver. The ferocious snarling hunting-beast’s head looked devilish life-like, a miniature head of destruction. This mortilhead, the pakmort, signified that its wearer was a paktun, a mercenary who had gained fame and notoriety, who perhaps controlled his own freelance band, although that was more likely to be found among the wearers of the pakzhan, the hydr-paktuns.

“If you like, Seg,” I said. “A paktun wearing the pakmort will receive better service than a simple paktun.”

“All the same... I don’t fancy a knife in my back.”

“I agree. You are wise not to wear your pakzhan. The glitter of gold at your throat might tempt a blade.”

So, in the end, we hung the silken cords of the pakmorts around our necks and secured the cords to our shoulder points. No mercenary likes an enemy to grip a cord around his neck and choke him to death. Then, flinging short blue-grey capes over our left shoulders and pulling our floppy hats low over our eyebrows, we set off.

We elected to fly saddle birds from the palace.

“We’ll have to stable them in a commercial scratching bar establishment,” said Seg, “before we get anywhere near The Ruby Winespout.”

“True. One wonders if they’d steal ’em to sell as saddle flyers, or steal ’em to roast and feast on.”

The two saddle birds flew strongly through the late afternoon air. We flew high over the river and slanted down toward the southeast, leaving the Sacred Quarter to our rear. We flew over the Blind Walls and the little creek beyond. Ahead a maze of streets and alleyways surrounded the Eastern Arena. Here lay the homes and hovels of the working folk, the guls, who yet prided themselves they were far better off than the great mass of the clums, who although free and not slave were poor beyond poverty.

Work on the new aqueduct bringing water from the southeast had halted during the recent wars. There were signs around the piles of stones that the building would soon begin again. Like any civilized city of Kregen, Ruathytu consumed vast quantities of water.

We flew down well short of our destination and stabled the two fluttrells; inconspicuous saddle birds, fluttrells, in Ruathytu. The scratching-bar establishment appeared clean and honest. We set off walking in the last of the light from the twin suns.

The street — Seg said he was sure it was the Street of a Thousand Strangers — wore a faded look, with many of the shops and houses shuttered. The skyline was broken here by the looming overhang of the aqueduct, broken sharply at the point where construction had ceased. The clouds hovered overhead, tinged with crimson and jade. Shadows faded and disappeared and then grew again, hard-edged, twinned shadows from the roofs and walls.

“Well, my old dom,” said Seg. “And there it is.”

The Street of a Thousand Strangers — if that was its name — opened into a small kyro and the square contained the last of a small outdoor conjuring act packing up. They had evidently not attracted much of a crowd. The fire-eater was disconsolately quenching his little brazier. A lady with spangles and not much else to cover her embonpoint stood with a little dark-haired fellow counting the takings.

Seg laughed. “They’d better be off with their gold before night falls.”

“Aye!”

Some jugglers slammed the wicker lids on baskets no doubt containing balls and hoops they could spin with dazzling skill. A little breeze whisked leaves and dust. Seg's nod indicated the tavern across the square. A single tree grew outside, a wilting, drooping, yellowish tree. The tavern was built of grey brick, well-weathered and mortared, and the windows were small and mean. It did not look an inviting place.

Seg's nod, besides singling out this dolorous building, stiffened my resolve. The dump looked the kind of place to pass in a hurry and not look back. A shuttered house stood to its right side, and on its left, an open space still showed the rotted teeth of a demolished building.

No reason, apart from the unfavorable aspect of this place, should have made me feel a breeze of alarm.

Seg started across.

I followed.

The smell? The feel of that little breeze? This place was wrong.

For all that feeling, I was determined and knew Seg shared my determination that we would not be overawed. We were out for a spot of enjoyment. If spying came into it, all well and good. But we'd been rusting for too long after the tremendous battles in which we'd managed to defeat and, for the moment at least, drive off the hateful marauding Shanks. Those Fishheads from the other side of Kregen were the menace for the future. Right now Seg and I were a couple of harum-scarum mercenaries, out for a night on the town.

Seg Segutorio, who hails from Erthyrdrin, is a wild fey brand of fellow, with black hair and bonny blue eyes, feckless and reckless and, with that otherworldliness of his people, shrewd and canny when he has to be. He and I had adventured a very great deal since Seg had first hurled a forkful of dungy straw into my face. I would not be without Seg for — well, for practically anything at all in two worlds.

As so often occurred, Seg must have picked up the empathy of my feelings, for as we approached the door he said, “Now if Inch and Turko were here, and—”

“Aye,” I said.

There was no need to lament between us the absence of our comrades. They had their work to do on Kregen, as we had ours.

A smell of roasting ordel reached us as we strode up the steps to the door. The smell of cooking was good. I cocked an eyebrow at Seg and he nodded, firmly.

“I am sharp set.”

So, as we entered the low-ceiled taproom, looking around at tables and chairs positioned about the sawdusted floor, we wrinkled our noses, sniffing the aromas. To the smell of roasting meat was now added the divine scent of fresh momolams.

A man with only three arms wiped his three hands on his blue and yellow striped apron. His jowly face and lemon-shaped head bobbed.

“Welcome, horters, welcome. You are hungry? We have the best meal this side of the River Mak. Come in, come, and sit down. Hey, Fluffi! Wine for the horters.”

At his call a little serving wench came up with feline grace, carrying a pitcher. If that was the wine, they were rough and ready here.

“A middling Stuvan, tart,” advised the little Och, wiping his three hands again. “But suitable. Oh, yes, suitable.”

As Seg and I sat down with our backs to the wall, Seg grumbled, “Anyone would think he was expecting us.”

“Trade is bad. We are two paktuns with gold. But what you suggest is worth considering.”

“So? How do we consider it?”

“For a start — do we trust the wine?”

“A middling Stuvan? Hard to judge.”

I laughed. Oh, yes, I can laugh.

“If we don’t we’ll be thirsty, and suspect—”

“And if we do we could be stuffed down in the cellars, with our throats slit, ready to go out into the river.”

“Pre-unfortunately-cisely.”

Seg slumped back against the wall and eyed with a most baleful stare the wine the little Fristle fifi had poured for him. I picked up my goblet.

“I’ll drink, Seg. You may claim indisposition, religion, temperance—”

“Why you? Why me!”

“You may rearrange the plan, should you wish.”

He stared at me.

In a low, a very low voice against eavesdroppers, he said, “You, Dray Prescott, as I have said, are a low-down, devious, cunning, rascal of a devil!”

And I laughed again.

“Landlord!” I called it out between laughs.

He appeared, the apron twisting around two of his hands, the third fidgeting with the table arrangements. “Horters?”

“Would you fetch a fresh bottle of Farfaril, for we have just enough silver between us to pay for a decent wine and our meal.” I spoke casually but with emphasis. “After that we will have a pair of copper obs between us.”

“At once, horters.” He did not sound disappointed.

Although he was a cripple, having only three arms, he was deft enough in removing the two goblets of the Stuvan. Farfaril is a full-bodied red wine, not too sweet. I am not overfond of the wines of Hamal, although a few of their top vintages are superb by any standards.

The little Fristle fifi brought the bottle of Farfaril. It was brought quickly enough, the dust still upon it, and the seals intact. I judged there would not have been time to tamper with it. If it had been drugged ahead of time, and laid by, in store to wreak a mischief, Seg and I would have lost our gamble...

The tavern began to fill up as the twin suns sank beyond the Walls of Repentance. The jugglers came in to spend what little they had earned. A man with a chained Munfoon, all hair and eyes and lolling tongue, came in to make the poor creature dance to the sound of a pipe. The girl who played the pipe was clad in mere rags, her naked feet raw and red, her face a pinched white blot. The Munfoon danced a little jig and a rattle of copper obs fell about the girl. She snatched them up, and

together with the man and the chained pathetic creature shuffled to a dark corner. All evening other entertainers would perform their shows. Some were better not spoken of.

There was no doubt about it. The roast ordel and the yellow momolams were superb. We ate hugely. Our silver insured us good helpings and a second bottle. We sat, watching, waiting for the arrival of the man or woman who had caused the deaths of our two spies.

We had chosen our own dark corner, against the walls. There was a certain amount of horseplay — leeming, Kregans call it — and one or two fights. Only one dagger was used, and that only inflicted a minor wound. The blood was mostly from a slashed scalp, and scalps bleed like broken hearts.

“I suppose your information was reliable, Dray?”

“We thought so. That great rogue Hamdi the Yenaker told us. He swore the man to see was regularly here in The Ruby Winespout. A man with three black pigtails, a nose bent to larboard, and missing his left ear.”

“If true, bizarre enough to spot.”

“We thought so.”

“Well, Hamdi did help us before. He would turn his colors the moment a new lord appeared. How long do we give this fellow with the pigtails and the bent nose and the missing lughole?”

“As long as it takes.”

“By the Veiled Froyvil, my old dom! And to maintain our cover we’ve ordered two bottles, and two bottles only. It will be thirsty work.”

And this time we both laughed.

“As for the woman, Hamdi was less precise. Not a serving wench, not a shishi, yet a girl who would come here. With a sword strapped to her waist. And coiled hair. Not an easy mark.”

“If she does come here, we’ll know her.”

The first bottle emptied.

We both felt fine.

We started in on the second bottle.

On Earth, where I was born, and which was some four hundred light-years away, a tavern like this would have been wreathed in tobacco smoke. Thankfully, there were no smokers on Kregen.

At least, not tobacco smokers...

A nasty little fight broke out two tables along, and a fellow was carried out feet first and hurled on his head onto the cobbles outside.

The victor, breathing hard, sat back at his bench.

“Stupid tapo! As though one could not see his dice were obviously loaded.”

Another man joined them, flicking his little rods of many colors. If he cheated, he was not discovered as the game of Flick-Flock proceeded with much swearing and bangings of the tables.

Seg looked at the clepsydra perched on a shelf above the door. The water dropped steadily. It was a dark lustrous green.

“If he does not come soon, my old dom, my tongue will begin to crawl about seeking sustenance among the tankards.”

“Maybe we could discover, with cries of joy, another few silver pieces?”

“Why not?”

In the manner of old campaigners we had automatically appraised the metal of the roisterers and swaggerers in the wide main room of The Ruby Winespout. Rough artisans, mostly, with tradespeople sitting together along the angled wall to our corner. Three tables along, past the gamblers at Flick-Flock, the five men sitting with their heads together had not escaped our notice. We kept a quick glance on them from time to time. They were not artisans or tradesfolk; they carried weapons and three of the five wore brigandines, the other two wore jacks.

“Hey, Landlord!” exclaimed Seg, half-rising and extending his hand. “Lookit that! A real beautiful silver sinver graced with the head of the Empress Thyllis, no less.” He puffed his cheeks, and added: “The late Empress Thyllis.”

The little Och trotted over, looking pleased.

“Late or not, horter, it is all good silver.”

“Aye! Another bottle!”

From the corner of my eye, my attention centered amusedly on Seg’s antics, I caught movement approaching from the tradespeople’s tables. Seg was bellowing: “Caught in the lining! Foul stitching by a half-blind wight, I don’t doubt, but I’d kiss his bald pate for him now!”

The movement from my side abruptly manifested itself.

An exceedingly large and extraordinarily hairy man fairly hurtled at me. He knocked over an intervening table. He was purple of face, bulging of eye, foaming of mouth, and screeching something like: "I'll have your tripes out and strangle your scrawny neck in 'em, so help me Uldor the Mighty!"

There was time to observe he wore a shaggy old pelt-like garment, by its bulk probably concealing armor beneath, before he hit our table. Seg toppled away, with his catlike grace recovering instantly. I leaned away from the blow of a ham-sized fist. I dodged. I shouted.

"What the—?"

The hairy mass shoved the table away. The remains of our bottle splashed. The fist swung again, and the maniac roared out: "I know you, Planath the Sly! Now you have reached the reckoning." He lashed out again.

I dodged.

"I'm not—"

"Stand still, Planath, rast, yetch! I am going to scrunch your scrawny neck between my hands! I, Dahram the Bold! Accept your just punishment like a man, cramp!"

He got himself entangled in the wreckage of the table. He kicked out, stumbling, windmilling his arms. He had just the two arms, and was an apim like me, a member of Homo sapiens. But he was large, and hairy, and wrought up. There were precious few options left open to me, by Zair!

His purple face and bulging eyes bore down again. He did not have three black pigtailed, his nose was not bent to larboard and his ears were both present and correct.

“Now as Uldor the Mighty is my witness, I have sworn to take payment out on your hide, Planath the Sly! Now is your hour of doom—”

He stopped bellowing rather suddenly.

This was mainly because I placed a hand around his throat and pressed a little. My other hand caught his left arm and bent it back — not cruelly, not viciously, just enough to make him stoop very smartly and rub that squashed and fiery nose against the edge of the overturned table.

I spoke into his ear.

“I am not Planath the Sly, Dahram!”

He grunted. I eased the pressure.

He spluttered. “I know you are not Planath the Sly! He could never do what you have just done! My apologies, dom, sincere apologies — but that physiognomy of yours—”

Seg laughed.

“That’ll teach you to monkey with nature!”

Seg knew that I could make subtle adjustments to my face, after a fashion, taught me by a famed Wizard of Loh. I’d altered my own fierce features into what I thought would be a face that would not upset Seg too much. I must have put in too much of the sly look.

I let Dahram the Bold up.

He rubbed his throat and eyed me. He was a fine tall bulky man. There was indeed armor under the pelt. His sword was scabbarded into a plain leather sheath, bronze-bound.

The little fracas had loosened the shaggy pelt at his throat. I caught the glitter of gold.

I said, “Cover your pakzhan, Dahram. We do not wear ours here—”

“Aye,” said Dahram. “But I sold my pakmort when I became a hyr-paktun, sold it to the brotherhood.”

We righted the table and, as though he’d been waiting for the outcome of the little fracas, the Och landlord appeared with the bottle paid for with Seg’s sinver he claimed he’d found lodged in his lining.

Dahram the Bold cocked a bushy eyebrow at me.

“Join us, dom, and tell us your story. I own I would not relish being in the shoes of this Planath the Sly.”

We were fated not to drink that third bottle of Farfaril.

The five men at the table we’d been casually observing chose that moment to make their move.

As I have said, only one dagger had flashed in the fights so far.

These five men descended on us with naked steel.

The patrons of The Ruby Winespout drew themselves away. Some looked. Most went on with what they were doing, only sparing a glance to see how the fight would go, making their wagers on the outcome. Murder and mayhem occurred too commonly in The Ruby Winespout to raise an alarm.

And, all this in defiance of the strict Laws of Hamal...

I did not think Dahram the Bold was the betrayer, delivering the metaphorical kiss of betrayal by his antics. The five opened out as they rushed along the cleared space before the tables. One of them pushed his

enveloping hood away from his face in order to see better. And, lo! He had three black pigtails, and a nose bent to larboard, and only one ear. And, lo! again. One of the five men was a woman, with coiled hair under a steel cap, and a sword which was now a bar of glitter in her gloved fist.

“So that’s the way of it!” quoth Seg.

Dahram the Bold didn’t waste time. He ripped his sword free of that plain scabbard. The sword was the straight cut and thrust weapon of Havilfar, the thraxter. The swords swinging against us were thraxters, also. There were no rapiers and no main gauches in evidence in this tavern brawl.

Seg and I drew. Now we happened to have strapped on drexers, the superior sword type developed in our home of Valka, a blend of the best aspects of the thraxter, the native Vallian clanxer, and the superb and mysterious Savanti sword. Without another word, we set to.

**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, 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