

DRAY PRESCOT: 36

OMENS OF KREGEN

KENNETH BULMER
writing as
ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

OMENS OF KREGEN

ALAN BURT AKERS

a **Mushroom eBooks** sample

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

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A Note on Dray Prescott

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

Dray Prescott, as described by one who has seen him, is a man a little above middle height with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage. He moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly. Reared in the harsh conditions of Nelson's navy, he is a man driven by forces he barely understands and at which we can guess only through what he tells us of his story.

Called to be the Emperor of Vallia, he is putting the finishing touches to the reunification of the islands after the Times of Trouble. The famed and feared Witch of Loh, Csitra, has Pronounced the Nine Unspeakable

Curses Against Vallia. Drawing constant strength from his consort, the Empress Delia, Prescott, together with his blade comrades, knows he must deal with the witch and her child, Phunik.

This confrontation, which the Vallians cannot guarantee to be final, they are all somberly aware will not take place under the streaming mingled opaline radiance of the Suns of Scorpio.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter one

Concerning the crime of old Hack 'n' Slay

Old Hack 'n' Slay, caught with his fingers in the regimental funds, went on the rampage.

He hurled the first three fellows out through the windows of the tavern. The clientele huddled away into corners, including even soldiers from various regiments who knew old Hack 'n' Slay and like the ordinary citizens wanted nothing to do with this fracas.

In a furious melee six of his fellows poured all over poor old Hack 'n' Slay. They heaved up and down like men clinging to a boat in a gale.

Scarlet of face, ferocious of eye, old Hack 'n' Slay roared his refusal to be taken into custody.

“Calm down, Jik!” yelled the Deldar who hung onto one arm and was flapped up and down like a bird's wing. “You're nabbed.”

Flagons of wine went every which way, strewing the floor with their pungent brews. The fumes coiled into

the nostrils of the combatants. Yet no one drew a pointed or edged weapon. This was a strictly regimental matter. The lads of the 11th Churgurs would settle this among themselves. Old Hack 'n' Slay might have dipped his sticky finger into the regimental funds, he remained Jiktar Nath Javed, the regimental commander, commanding also the 32nd Brigade, of which the 11th Churgurs formed a part, and he was well known and liked.

"I'll have the Opaz-forsaken money tomorrow!" bellowed Jiktar Nath Javed, throwing a bulky soldier over his shoulder. "Lemme up!"

"No good, Jik! Grab that foot, Ompey. His arm, Cwonley, his left arm, you great onker!"

Crash went a table, and jugs and bottles smashed into vinous ruin.

"Get his feet from under him."

"I'll twist all your ears off, you horrible—"

Up and down the length of the tavern, The Cockerell Winged, the struggle blistered on. Hack 'n' Slay was no man to be dragged down even by six of his own hefty lads.

"Listen to me, you pack of famblys. I'll—"

"Yowp!" gobbled a churgur as an elbow nudged his ribs. The rest piled on. In the end they coiled a cunning loop of rope around his ankles and he crashed over to hit his nose on the edge of the upturned table. He let rip a rafter-shattering roar. Then they were on him like ants on a honey pot, holding him down, lapping him in rope, trussing him up like a chicken for the pot.

He kept on roaring his head off so they stuffed a kerchief into his horrendous maw and then wrapped that up in a scarf. Seeing there was nothing else for it, old Hack 'n' Slay quieted down and they lifted him up like a rolled carpet and took him off.

Through the pleasant evening they went, with three of Kregen's moons high in the sky casting down their refulgent pinkish light and the scent of Moonblooms filling the air with fragrance.

People out to enjoy themselves turned to stare. The soldiers just marched grimly on, their commander slung over their shoulders, conscious of the indignity of these proceedings yet not giving a damn what the passersby might think.

This was serious. Jiktar Nath Javed, old Hack 'n' Slay, just given the command of the 32nd Brigade, had pilfered the funds of his own regiment. Only because the division inspectorate had called and found the discrepancy — hell, they'd dumped the empty cash box out onto the parade ground for all to see — had Jiktar Javed been caught out.

Dumped down in the cells he gave up all resistance. They removed his gag and bonds, they took away all his belts and harness, all his weaponry. Sitting slumped into a corner, head on hands on knees, he gave no more trouble that night.

In the morning, after he'd washed and dressed punctiliously, they gave him slursh with red honey stirred in, three fried eggs with a huge hunk of bread, and a

pottery dish of palines, whereat he swore they were trying to starve him.

Initially he was run up before the divisional commander, Chuktar Enar Thandon, a neat and dapper man, a Strom, with a clipped moustache, a mouth like a wound and eyes that could, so the swods in the ranks said, bore straight through the toughest armor around. Chuktar Thandon was flanked, in a matter of this seriousness, by the other two brigade commanders. They stared narrowly at Jiktar Nath Javed. For his part, Nath had little time for Lords.

The hearing was fully recorded by an almost silent Xaffer, who scribbled down his notes in his own particular method from which later he would write up a full report. Guards stood at the doors and windows of the commander's room, a place half office, half duty room, fully armed and armored after the churgur way.

The proceedings began with various witnesses establishing that the strongbox had been full of gold and silver coins, and was now empty. Other witnesses swore they'd seen old Hack 'n' Slay in such and such a place at such and such a time. The evidence bore in remorselessly.

Eventually, Nath Javed bellowed out: "I don't deny I borrowed the cash—"

"Borrowed?"

"Aye, borrowed—"

Old Hack 'n' Slay had risen through the full ten grades within the Jiktar rank. A Jiktar normally commanded a regiment. As a Zan-Jiktar, his next step was to become

the first grade within the Chuktar rank, an Ob-Chuktar. Normally, Chuktars commanded brigades and various higher formations as required. Just why old Hack 'n' Slay had not received the promotion he must have counted on was not apparent then. It must have been a sore point with him, though.

“You are a Jiktar, Nath,” said Enar Thandon. “A Zan-Jiktar. Are you telling us you have amassed debts your pay cannot honor?”

“Not debts — well, not just debts.”

“But,” put in one of the brigade Chuktars, Ongarr Fardew, commanding the bowmen, “you admit you stole the money?”

“No, you great fambly! I merely borrowed it—”

“Moderate your tone, Nath. We are all friends here.”

“Friends?” Hack 'n' Slay spat it out. “I wonder. Friends would listen to what I say, by Vox, and not sit in judgment overhastily.”

“We do not sit in judgment.” Enar Thandon rapped that out sharply enough. Then, with even more sharpness, he added: “Yet.”

“This is merely an inquiry to establish your guilt,” said Chuktar Ongarr Fardew. He spoke in a neutral way; Nath Javed scowled and, about to roar out the obvious reply to that, was interrupted as Enar Thandon in his acidulated way cut in.

“You admit you took the money from the cash box. You admit you have debts you cannot pay. I feel it would be inadmissible in officers of honor to find you anything less than guilty.”

“I didn’t steal the rotten money—”

“There is no other construction we can put upon your actions.”

“Agreed.” The Court of Inquiry was unanimous.

After a few further formalities, very necessary in matters of this kind to ensure that the legality of the proceedings could not be challenged at a later date, the court gave instructions for old Hack ’n’ Slay to be wheeled out and back to his cell.

As Enar Thandon said to the others, as they stood up and prepared to go about the more mundane business of the day: “Our new emperor is such a stickler for justice under the law, one dare not put a foot wrong.”

“Aye,” said Chuktar Bonn, commanding the 31st Brigade. “One gains the impression that after we smashed Hamal into the ground we have taken up their disease of laws and lawyers.”

“Hamal,” said Enar Thandon, in an off-hand, sneering way. “Them. They have been our enemies for many seasons, and now our new emperor welcomes them as allies and friends.”

“Some friends.” Ongarr Fardew expressed supreme contempt.

Talking amicably among themselves, the three Chuktars of the 30th Division of infantry went out into the streaming mingled radiance of the Suns of Scorpio. That glorious ruby and jade illumination lay athwart the land, drenching the world in color and light. These three were wrapped up in their own concerns, barely noticing the brilliance of the day.

All these events were witnessed by Deldar Naghan the Abstemious. A long, mournful-looking fellow with a suspicious cast to his features, he was a superb soldier and a man who served loyally. As a churgur, a man heavily armored, and armed with javelin, shield and sword, he possessed the powerful physique and bodily strength to serve in the ranks of the shock infantry.

He did not spit as the three Chuktars strutted off. But he did say to one of his swods: “They’re all jumped-up, young Dolan. Mark me, when we get up north where the action is they’ll sing a different tune.”

Dolan, young, freckle-faced and green, couldn’t help but say: “If they hear you, Deldar, they’ll fritter your hide.”

“They can try. I wonder what’ll happen to old Hack ’n’ Slay.”

That the 30th Division of infantry was a raw outfit was manifest. They had been stiffened by a cadre of experienced swods and Deldars. Too many of their Hikdars, men who commanded the company-sized pastangs, had come in to that rank direct instead of being promoted up through the grades of Deldar. There were very many young lads in the ranks, eager youngsters, maybe, but callow and not yet hardened into the requisite toughness required of swods who went into battle and put their lives on the line.

Deldar Naghan the Abstemious wiped his mouth and went about his duties with punctiliousness. He could feel sorry for old Hack ’n’ Slay, with whom he had served before; but then, Jiktar Nath Javed, old Hack ’n’

Slay, had been caught with his fingers in the regimental chest. That was not like the old fellow; but it was not a clever thing to have happened in a well-regulated regiment.

What did happen to the Jiktar whose fingers had been so careless as to scoop up gold and silver belonging to the regiment was educational. With the summary findings of the court of inquiry, written out fair in the flowing hand of the Xaffer, to guide it, the court-martial could only bring in a verdict of guilty.

Nath Javed said, in mitigation, that he had expected to receive his promotion to ob-Chuktar from the moment he took over command of his new 32nd Brigade. This had not happened and he had not therefore received the increase in his pay.

“I needed the money for a personal matter and merely borrowed it to be repaid when I received my pay.”

“But you were not promoted ob-Chuktar and therefore—”

“And therefore I was left stranded!” roared Javed. “No cash in the strongbox and no pay to replace the gold!”

With the verdict of guilty, the next burning question was the punishment.

In the end the Divisional commander commuted a harsh prison sentence and corporal punishment to a mere Reduced To The Ranks.

Zan-Jiktar Nath Javed, in sight of promotion to Chuktar, commander of a brigade of churgurs, now became plain Nath Javed, a swod in the ranks.

The only real expressions of regret were heard in the ranks of the 11th Regiment.

The parlous situation of the Empire of Vallia, even as late as this with most of the islands brought back under the control of the emperor, could not condone a man being discharged. He'd serve out his time in the ranks.

The 30th Division was due to march north soon to reinforce the armies up there tackling the upstart and fraudulent King of North Vallia. Enar Thandon expressed himself of the opinion that he did not really wish to see old Hack 'n' Slay serving, even in the ranks, in any of the regiments under his command.

He was, therefore, packed off — as a mere swod — to a depot where he spent his time training raw recruits.

The money was not recovered. Javed would not say what had happened to it, apart from the statement that he had used it to pay an unjust debt.

Under these blows of fate he withdrew into himself, becoming harder and more harsh with all those about him. As a first-class fighting man he knew how to train up youngsters, and was invaluable in the depot. He said he would repay the entire amount of money to the 11th Regiment, and every pay day he deposited what he could of his pay to that end.

He continually badgered his new superiors for a transfer to an active regiment in the field. They regarded him as far too valuable for their purposes in training up fresh troops to part with him.

So Nath Javed, old Hack 'n' Slay, soldiered on.

And the days passed.

Deldar Naghan the Abstemious took it upon himself to find an excuse to visit the depot where Javed labored.

The place was situated a few miles outside the capital, Vondium, and consisted mainly of huts, cooking lines, and mud. Also, the assault courses were fiendish in their difficulty.

After Naghan had watched a few coys being driven through their paces, he managed to have a few private words with Javed.

“Nath Javed!”

“Here, Deldar,” said Javed, standing at attention, hardly looking at the Deldar, who wore medals upon his chest as rewards for valor in battle. Naghan the Abstemious, long and hard and much experienced in the ways of swods, rapped out in exasperation what he felt deeply.

“Nath Javed! When you were a Deldar I was a swod, and then you were a Hikdar and then a Jiktat, and I became a Deldar. And now—”

“So it is you, Naghan. Well — and now it is as it is.”

“But it needn’t be!”

“You would have me appeal?”

“By Vox, I would. There must be an explanation for what you did—”

“There is; but I cannot give it. Let it be for now, Naghan. Come. For the sake of our old friendship, let us go for a wet.”

Naghan the Abstemious did not acquire his sobriquet because he did not drink. Like any soldier in the new armies of the emperor, he drank in quantities sufficient

to make him happy and merry and never to make him drunk. Idiots got drunk. They did not last long in the new armies raised by the Emperor of Vallia.

Settled comfortably with their tankards on the scrubbed sturmwood table between them, Naghan persisted.

“If you appeal, Nath, you must be heard. That is the law. You can appeal direct to the emperor himself and he will—”

“He is up north fighting this King of North Vallia, who is an unchanged rogue if ever there was one.”

“Yes, my friend, like others closer to home I could name.”

“Oh, they have had it in for me, I know that. Why did I not receive the promotion that was my due? But for that, all would have been as happy as a sennight of the Lady Soothe herself.”

“You could explain to the emperor.”

“What? D’you think he knows about the tribulations of ordinary folk like us? He is far away and busy and far too high and mighty to concern himself over matters like this.”

“I have heard differently.”

“Oh, aye! There are stories put around. Have you ever seen the emperor?”

“Well, I was on a parade once where he—”

“You see! On a parade where he was merely a glittering figure seen through a haze. I mean close up, like you and me, to talk to. He has no time for unlucky folk like me.”

Naghan the Abstemious expressed himself as entirely dissatisfied with the whole affair. He tried and failed to persuade Nath Javed, old Hack 'n' Slay, to lodge an appeal.

"I'll soldier out my time trying to teach these youngsters the tricks of the trade. By Vox! They try my patience at times."

"Well, my friend, I will not insult you by expressing my concern and my regret. Just that — well, by the cropped ears of Vikatu the Dodger, I shall miss you when we march north."

Javed glanced up over the rim of his tankard.

"Aye, Naghan, and I you. I may have been a Jiktar; I hope I did not forget my friends."

"Would I be here, else?"

They drank companionably for a space, then a few kreutzin, training up to be light infantry, skirmishers, started a fight, and Nath Javed and Naghan the Abstemious, as befitted old campaigners, kampeons both, quaffed their draughts and took themselves off out of a common tavern brawl.

Javed escorted Naghan the Abstemious back to where his hired preysany stood with drooping head awaiting the ride back to Vondium.

As Naghan swung up into the saddle, among good wishes and remembrances, he said: "And your sister, Nath, the lady Francine. She is well, I trust?"

A spasm crossed Javed's fierce face.

"I pray you do not speak of her, Naghan, nor her husband, Fortro."

“As you wish. They had a daughter, did they not—?”

“Please, Naghan. By Vox! I do not wish to talk about little Sassy. No, Never!”

The Abstemious was not entirely blind.

“If I have offended you, Nath Javed, then I apologize. I bear you only well. And — you stubborn onker — if you will not appeal to the emperor, what more can I do?”

“Remember, you are a Deldar and command ten men or more, and I am a swod in the ranks.”

“May the light of Opaz shine upon you, Nath Javed, and the keenness of sword and the cunning hand of Vox ever defend you from your foes.”

“Opaz go with you, Naghan. You have my gratitude.”

Riding his hired preysany under the light of the Moons of Kregen, Naghan the Abstemious, as he said afterward, felt strongly the mystery surrounding old Hack ’n’ Slay’s fall from grace. Whatever had caused him to steal the money, or borrow it, wrought significantly upon him.

Still, there seemed nothing to be done. The world would roll around and the twin suns, Zim and Genodras, would rise in the eastern sky on the morrow, and life would continue.

Perhaps there was no great mystery after all.

Poor old Hack ’n’ Slay, there did not seem much of life left to him. So Deldar Naghan the Abstemious rode soberly back to Vondium pondering the vicissitudes of fate and the wayward turns a fellow’s life took before they shipped him off to the Ice Floes of Sicce.

**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
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29. Fires of Scorpio
30. Talons of Scorpio
31. Masks of Scorpio
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33. Werewolves of Kregen
34. Witches of Kregen

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