

DRAY PRESCOT: 39

**SCORPIO
ASSASSIN**

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

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a Mushroom eBooks sample

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Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott has been described as a man 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 — swift, sudden and lethal.

The superhuman Star Lords have brought him to Kregen where, in pursuance of their schemes for that marvelous and terrifying world, he has managed to be successful on his own account. Reared in the harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy he was not successful on Earth. Now he has abdicated the throne of the Empire of Vallia. The empress, the divine Delia, agreed wholeheartedly in this decision — but she has been busy about affairs for the Sisters of the Rose, and Prescott has been sent on a hair-raising mission for the Star Lords.

Down in the southern half of the continent of Loh, in an isolated desert land where the belief in reincarnation as a punishment is firmly accepted, Prescott and a new comrade battle intrigue and assassins and attempt to follow the desires of the Star Lords. This new kregoinya is Mevancy nal Chardaz, a most spirited lady who means to keep Prescott thoroughly in his place.

Not completely sure if the guardian Tuong Mishuro is the man the Star Lords wished protected, Prescott and the guards have been hoodwinked. Prescott races to Mishuro's assistance, to arrive too late.

At this point the volume called *Scorpio Reborn* ended. Now this volume, *Scorpio Assassin*, takes up the tale.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter one

Absolute dismay gripped me. I had failed the Star Lords!
Utter disaster!

Those unpredictable and intolerant superbeings did not tolerate failure.

Blueness grew around me in that bed-chamber of death. I swear blueness grew and thickened around me. I stood there, empty-handed, my sword still buried in the throat of San Hargon who slumped by the bed. Beside him, the still form of Pulvia lay face-down on the floor. On the bed rested the body of San Mishuro, freshly slain, the man I believed the Star Lords required me to protect. So I stood there waiting for the enormous spectral blue form of the Scorpion to materialize and seize me up into the whirling coldness between the stars. The Everoinye would send their Scorpion to snatch me back to Earth, to leave all I loved on Kregen — perhaps forever.

I swear that bedchamber was irradiated with the blue radiance.

Perhaps I could defy the Star Lords, not as I once had done, stubbornly, foolishly, and so been banished to

Earth for twenty-one years. Perhaps I could this time fashion those defenses of the mind I had been working on to deflect the wrath of the Star Lords, divert their desires? As I stood there, panting, seeing the corpses and the blood as through a blue mist, I screamed silently inside my head: “No! No! I will remain here on Kregen!”

After all, the Star Lords required my help here. They had told me that. There were so many things to be done the problem was where to begin.

A voice, shrill with passion, ripped through my tangled thoughts.

“There he is! He has killed the san! Cut him down!”

The blueness vanished and the mist cleared.

Through the open door of the bedchamber leaped two black-clad men disguised in black masks and brandishing swords. San Hargon, sprawled by the bed with my sword through his neck, had, indeed, brought reinforcements, and here they were ready to avenge the death of their employer.

The sword sticking in Hargon was a local weapon, a Lohvian lynxter, given to me by my fellow kregoinye Mevancy. The two assassins must have seen my empty hands as they rushed on me, and no doubt this pleased them.

I must admit I felt the blood in my head. I ripped out my rapier, a foreign weapon in these parts, and charged full tilt at the assassins. I admit it. I yelled with ferocious venom, charged with the awful anticipation of a horrendous future parted from Kregen, I shouted like

any frightened spear-carrier in the ranks. I was considerably wrought up. I still believed I was due to be hurled contemptuously back to Earth and I didn't intend to land up there badly wounded, no by Vox!

So I just tore into these two assassins, stikitches of some quality, and our blades met in that spine-tingling screech of steel on steel.

They quite clearly had no conception of rapier work. Their cut and thrusts faltered and fell short as I showed them a few sword tricks that probably would not be of the slightest use to them where they were going. The rapier slid on — one, two — and I stepped back. The bodies slumped to the thick carpets. I own I felt very little shame — far less than a similar performance in other circumstances would have warranted — very little at that petty performance. There would have been no point in trying to question them. What had happened here was plain to see in the blood-smearred corpses.

The rapier was wiped clean on a black facemask, then I crossed to Hargon and retrieved my lynxter. Standing like that, running the black cloth up and down the blade to remove every last smear of blood, I heard the trampling noise of armored men advancing along the corridor towards the bedchamber.

There was probably a secret way out; there was certainly no time to search for and find the hidden catch to open the secret door. Somewhat like a savage beast at bay I glared around, determined to smash a way through these confident armored men, and belting them

left and right tear off into the darkness. That was the plan.

The first man through the door was Trylon Kuong.

My sword described a brief arc in salute, then I thrust the clean blade back into the scabbard.

“What goes forward, Drajak—?” he began, and then saw the shambles, and so checked. Men closed up to his rear and all stopped, staring into that bedchamber of death.

“We were tricked, Kuong.” I spoke harshly. He was a trylon, an exalted rank of nobility, and I wanted to get on simple straightforward terms as soon as possible. I did not intend to kowtow to him. He was very young still, and I had taken a liking for him. With his clear eyes, ruddy cheeks and firm lips he looked every inch your high-spirited young tearaway, a rip-roaring bladesman, a noble spark. I fancied he might be all of these things, given time; but his upbringing so far at the hands of his guardian, San Caran, had produced a young fellow more moody than he should be, even allowing for the peculiar circumstances of his many lives on Kregen.

“San Tuong is dead — and so is San Hargon — Drajak — what—?”

I gestured around the room. The raw stink of spilled blood has always been offensive in my nostrils, although, Zair forgive me, I have smelled that stink often and often. The warmth of the place clogged. “As you see, Kuong, San Hargon used this poor woman as a tool. She tricked her way past the guards and stabbed Tuong Mishuro to death. Then Hargon stabbed her.

When we all rushed off to your villa to stop your precious San Caran killing you, that was half of the plan. This half worked.” I eyed him. I had no compunction in reminding him of his debt, for I saw his use to me and to the plans of the Star Lords for the future. “The half that entailed your death, thankfully, failed.”

“Thanks to you, Drajak!” he said at once, impulsively, openly. “You have my thanks and gratitude. If there is anything—”

“First we must think what to do with the corpses. You are sure no retribution will fall upon us for slaying dikasters?”

He laughed scornfully, and I am sure he was reliving those fraught moments, only a short time ago, when the assassins tried to slay him. His laugh sounded brittle. He put a hand to his cheek where the bright blood showed the nick he had taken in the fight in his villa. “Absolutely sure, Drajak. By their actions, Hargon and Caran are no longer fit to be considered as dikasters. They took their oaths to the college to become Repositers and faithful to the dictates of Tsung-Tan. They broke those oaths. I doubt if they will even receive a perfunctory burial.”

Chiako the Gut, the dead Tuong Mishuro’s captain of his bodyguard, having so signally failed in his duty, blustered. “Throw them in the river!”

The River of Drifting Leaves on which stood the city of Makilorn contained among many varieties of fish the twin-finned and voracious stranks. Anybody attempting

to bathe in the river would rapidly become a strank's lunch.

"Aye!" rumbled those crusty guards clustered in the doorway.

I was not surprised.

The dikasters, both Repositers like Hargon and Caran, and Diviners like Tuong Mishuro, were regarded as sacrosanct. Poor Mishuro had not believed that any dikaster would break his solemn vows. Now the plot's hatching was complete, he was dead of his trust.

Again Kuong fingered his blood-dappled cheek. "It is very warm here," he said. I leaped and caught him as he fell. His eyelids fluttered.

"Water!" I bellowed.

The collapse of the young trylon seemed to break the spell of that bedchamber of death. Chiako, no doubt consumed with anxiety for his personal future, took charge. He acknowledged me as Walfger Drajak, a friend of Mishuro's. He did not recognize me as Chaadur, a name and disguise I had adopted, and he bustled around organizing. Trylon Kuong's own guards carried him back to his villa. I was sympathetic. The events of the evening were enough to cause a grizzled veteran to topple over, given that the basic tenets of these people's religion had been violated.

Only then was the realization borne in on me that I was still in Mishuro's villa, in the city of Makilorn on the River of Drifting Leaves, in the land of Tsungfaril in the continent of Loh on the world of Kregen.

By this time I'd quite expected to find myself chucked down naked in some far and forgotten corner of Earth.

The Star Lords most certainly had started the blue radiance in the room, I felt sure of that. But I had not been transported between the stars back to the planet of my birth. Yet San Tuong Mishuro had been the most likely candidate among the score or so for the position of the person we had to protect. I call Mevancy a fellow kregoinye; she was of course a kregoinya, a lady employed by the Everoinye to carry out their tasks. She might crow a trifle that I'd been wrong about Mishuro. She'd feel damn sorry the old boy was dead; but she'd be all the more keen to find out who our real target was. The Star Lords wanted us to protect someone around here; now it had turned out not to be Mishuro — so I thought — then who was it?

I took a breath outside in the arcade. I must see that Llodi the Voice, a comrade stabbed by Pulvia before she went on to stab Mishuro, received proper attention. Then I would travel back across the desert west to the Springs of Benga Annorpha and find Mevancy and bring her up to date with the news.

Oh, yes, she'd be mighty cutting about my views that Mishuro had been the target. Mind you, he might have been and the Star Lords might be biding their time before they punished me. The Everoinye were unaccountable. They had once been human beings and now were advanced far beyond the normal state of flesh and blood. I'd no idea what they looked like, how they lived, if they still needed to eat and drink. I did know they

made mistakes. If they were as old as I thought, and they admitted to being old, perhaps they were becoming senile? That, as you may well imagine, was a most uncomfortable thought. Most, by Krun!

They wanted Mevancy and me to do something down here in Tsungfaril in Loh. Now I could see how gullible I had been in the past. I'd simply taken my lead from what the Star Lords presented. I'd attempted to defy them and they'd hurled me back to Earth for twenty-one horrible miserable years. Could my desperate attempt to thwart their efforts to send me back have succeeded? I decided not to bank on that. Rather, my work for the Star Lords was not over and I was still of use to them. That, I reasoned, was a far more logical explanation of events.

So it was imperative that I speak with Mevancy as soon as possible.

One result of the death of San Hargon and the understanding of his villainy was the calling off of the law from my neck. I was no longer a wanted fugitive. I own, I felt grateful for that. Having to disguise myself, having to keep under cover, while interesting pastimes, tend to add unnecessary difficulties in doing the job for the Everoinye.

Llodi's splendid fissured nose did not glow with its usual brightness as I found him lying on his back on a couch. A Needleman was working over the dagger hole in Llodi's side, concentrating on his work, his yellow smock already stained with Llodi's blood.

I said: "Will he live, doctor?"

“Hey!” yelled Llodi. “Don’t shuffle me off so fast, dom.”

The Needleman spoke without turning. “The wound is not serious.”

“Thank Tsung-Tan for that.”

“And no thanks to that murdering she-devil!” burst out Llodi.

“You heard?”

“I heard.”

“I do not think she was essentially an evil woman, Llodi, just misguided and easily led into evil ways.”

“She fooled me with her pretty ways, that’s for sure.”

“Well, you must get well soon. I do not think this affair is finished. Not finished by a long chalk, by Zair.”

He nodded and then yawned as the Needleman neatly inserted a needle and set fire to the herbs at its tip. Llodi felt no pain. Once his side healed up he’d be good as new. Llodi’s eyelids closed.

The doctor stood up and brushed his knees.

“He’ll sleep twelve clepsydras. Then he’ll be on the mend.”

“Your name, doctor?”

“Wei Fwang. I care for Trylon Kuong.”

“You will not be insulted if I ask you to accept this trifle of gold?”

“I might have been, when I was young. No longer.”

I gave him the gold. He was alert, thin-faced, with surprisingly large bags under his eyes for so thin a countenance. He was apim like me.

He went off smartly to see about Kuong's fainting fit and I walked slowly towards the main gate of Mishuro's villa.

There was no chance of starting for the Springs of Benga Annorpha tonight. I'd have to go along to Wayfarers' Drinnik and see about finding a caravan going west to the springs. I pondered. Perhaps I could chance the journey alone astride a good mount. Perhaps. I'd ridden in from the springs alone and had not been killed, so there appeared no good reason why I shouldn't return. Apart from one. There had been rumors of raiders from the north filtering down along the river, and at least two caravans had been attacked. The lone traveler was asking for trouble.

Well, I'd leave that decision for the morning.

Now it seemed to me with the people of Mishuro's villa busily clearing up that I stood in dire need of that wet I'd been about to take when the alarm had sent me haring for Kuong's villa. Well, I'd calmed down a trifle now and could look more reasonably at what had transpired. They'd tricked us beautifully. The attack by Caran on Kuong had brought us all rushing there with me in the lead, and the way was left open for Pulvia to stab poor Lodi — no doubt in the act of kissing. Then Hargon and his bully boys had burst in and the end result was the bedchamber of death. All that followed the laws of logical reasoning. What did not follow was the inevitability of the incident now being closed.

Caran and Hargon had been in it together, in cahoots, as they say.

I felt most strongly that there were other and more powerful forces and personalities involved. Shadowy figures, hovering in the background, pulling the strings that worked their puppets. Puppets like Sans Caran and Hargon!

The nightlife of this riverside city of Makilorn, while not like the raucous nightlife of Vondium or the riotousness of the Sacred Quarter in Ruathytu, was highly colored and racketed away under the stars. What it most certainly was not like was the night life of Sanurkazz. By Zair! Is there any other place on Earth or Kregen quite so rowdy as Sanurkazz when the swifsters pull in?

I went along to a stucco-fronted place where people sat at small round tables drinking the local beverages. You could get imported wines, of course; but they cost money. Also imported ales were popular in this land of near-desert aridity, whose soul was the river. I took a flagon of Shenlitz and sat in a shrouded corner and watched.

My back itched.

That meant something I couldn't quite bring to mind was troubling me.

Very well. The Star Lords had pitched Mevancy and me here in Tsungfaril. I'd bet that we had to protect Mishuro and now Mishuro was dead and I was still here so that proved me wrong. There were the others who'd come in with our caravan who had been rescued by Mevancy and who therefore logically could qualify for further protection.

That was elementary. I felt with the utmost conviction that the Star Lords were interested in this remote country with its steadfast belief in a heavenly paradise to come. Why the Star Lords should be interested I didn't know. What they knew and what they did, they knew and did. What it all boiled down to was this: Mevancy and I had to find the person or persons the Everoinye wished to care for and protect them with our lives.

Simple.

Ha!

The things to do were to finish up this flagon, find a bite to eat, and then crawl back to Mishuro's villa, find my pallet, and go to sleep.

Everything would come clear by morning.

The last drop of Shenlitz went down glug-glug and I stood up from the table, the flagon still in my fist.

A man clad in the universal fawn clothes, with a yellow turban above a swarthy face, brilliant eyes and a hooked nose, halted by the table.

I noticed the brooch gathering up a corner of his cloak, a glinting bauble representing a swordfish in a hoop. In the next instant his brown hand shot from the sleeve of his robe and I caught the evil glitter of steel. He threw with unerring accuracy. The dagger flashed straight for my throat.

**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.

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48. Challenge of Antares
49. Wrath of Antares
50. Shadows over Kregen

Phantom cycle:

51. Murder on Kregen
52. Turmoil on Kregen

Notes

- [1] walfger: gentleman, herr, mister. Pappattu: introduction. *A.B.A.*
- [2] Wr.: Abbreviation for walfger, herr, mister. *A.B.A.*
- [3] Gdoinyi: Prescott spells this out. It is the plural form. *A.B.A.*
- [4] gherimcal: small carrying chair, sedan chair. *A.B.A.*
- [5] wenda! Let's go! *A.B.A.*
- [6] kharrna: sorcerous power, thaumaturgical energy. *A.B.A.*