

DRAY PRESCOT: 38

SCORPIO REBORN

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writing as
ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

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Dray Prescott

For those unfamiliar with the Saga of Dray Prescott, all that it is necessary to know is that he has been summoned to Kregen, an exotic world orbiting the double star Antares, to carry out the mysterious purposes of the Star Lords. To survive the perils that confront him on that beautiful and terrible world he must be resourceful and courageous, strong and devious. There is no denying he presents an attractive yet enigmatic figure. There are more profound depths to his character than are called for by mere savage survival.

He is 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, quiet and deadly, sudden.

Having won his princess, Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains, and having become the Emperor of Vallia with Delia at his side as Empress, Prescott has renounced the crown and throne. Any thoughts of a quiet life are foolish, as he well knows. Among the many

problems besetting him, the most important are uniting the lands of Paz and beating off the viciously hostile raiders from over the curve of the sea, the feared and hated Shanks.

Scorpio Reborn is the first volume of the Lohvian Cycle. Flying a kite one moment, battling through an inferno the next, Prescott is flung headlong into fresh adventures under the mingled streaming lights of the Suns of Scorpio.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter one

Handling a Valkan kite in any sort of breeze demands skill, nerve and strength. Young Inky had the first two in abundance; but the third... Well, now, young Inky was only a little lad, full of fire and spirit and years away from growing into his full strength. Every now and then I swear his feet left the ground.

He was laughing. The wind snatched his curls and tumbled them about his flushed cheeks. The breeze freshened and the kite swayed and rose and Inky really did go up.

That, I decided, was enough. I turned my back on the panorama spread out far below the clifftop. Valkanium's new buildings gleamed in the light of the suns and the waters of the Bay spread in glittering magnificence. Up here the air held the combined perfumes of sea and land, the fresh salty tang mingling with the aromas of shrubs and flowers as the ruby and emerald lights of the twin suns mingled in streaming radiance upon the world of Kregen. Looking at Inky, I turned away, too, from the clifftop fortress and palace of Esser Rarioch, my home.

Inky stared up, fascinated. His bare feet trailed across the turf as the kite pulled. I hastened my stride. If he went over the cliff...!

“Look!” he called, hanging onto the line, staring up. “Look!” His feet touched the turf and his bare toes curled and dug in. The line slackened. I looked up.

With sharp talons hooked over the top bar of the kite, a superb bird, all gold and scarlet, turned his fierce head sideways to glare down upon me. I knew him. Oh, yes, I knew this splendid bird. Inky could see him too and this did not surprise me. The Gdoinye, the messenger and spy of the Star Lords, may sometimes be seen by the innocent at heart as well as crusty reprobates like me. When he spoke, cawing down his truculent message, I do not believe Inky heard anything other than the cry of a bird.

“Dray Prescot! You are required *at once!* The Star Lords in their wisdom afford you this, for their demands are not to be questioned, yet—”

I felt the breath rush from my lungs. A mist fell over my eyes.

“No!” I started to shout, hearing nothing, seeing nothing save an all-encompassing blueness. Above me, gigantic, reared the phantom Scorpion, enormous through the swathing mists, his blueness enveloping me in coldness, darkness and a fate I could not avoid.

Head over heels, spinning, the Star Lords hurled me from the high clifftop by Esser Rarioch in Valka, hurled me — where?

The Star Lords were in a hurry. As I felt the coldness bite into my bones I knew what that haste meant. Someone had fouled up. A Kregoinye, sent to do the bidding of the Everoinye, had failed. So the Everoinye hoicked out their expendable, their trouble-shooter, the fellow they'd used many times to patch over a hole in their careful plans. I felt heat.

Flames roared and coiled all about me and smoke stung my eyes and choked in my nostrils. The transition had been quick, deuced quick, by Vox! I stood in a burning building. That was the emergency, then, and I had to find the person the Star Lords wanted rescued. Yet the first and most important item I noticed was simply this — I was fully clothed! I wore my decent russet tunic cinctured with my old leather belt with the dull silver buckle. This belt carried various pouches of use. From separate belts hung my rapier and main gauche. I wore no shoes or sandals, bare-footed as Inky had been.

The floor, I may say, was hot.

Wisps of smoke drifted from the floorboards to join the gusts of foul-smelling smoke jetting from the walls and ceiling. This was a sizeable hall with wooden pillars supporting a beamed roof. The wood flamed. The stink of some unnameable substance permeated the suffocating air. Blazing beams bent and collapsed and smashed down in smothering avalanches of sparks. Half-shielding my face and eyes I peered around, feeling as though I was a scrap of meat thrust too precipitately

into the fire. Smoke writhed like phantom snakes and sheets and fangs of fire darted everywhere.

Spouting sparks, a beam crashed down making me skip out of the way most smartly. Beyond the hedge of fire two bodies lay in contorted attitudes. This was the reason for my summary arrival here at the behest of the Star Lords.

Trying not to inhale the smoke and trying to shield my eyes I leaped the blazing beam. The man was nearest. He had worn a mail shirt and carried two or three swords and daggers; now he was just charring. I turned my attention to the girl. She had not yet burned and as I bent closer I saw she was not yet dead. She wore an odd-looking outfit consisting of a green slashed jerkin and tights, daggers snugged in sheaths at her waist. Sparks smoldered in her dark hair and I stopped to bash them out. Something bright and golden winked beside the man's curled fingers and swiftly I picked up a golden trinket and stuffed it away in my pouch. Then I hoisted the girl and started to find my way out of the furnace.

A pillar wreathed in tendrils of flame abruptly bent, broke and collapsed. The beam it supported smashed into the floor, through the floor, and took with it the best part of the aisle between the pillars this side of the hall. I suppose I must have looked like a beast at bay as I turned to seek another way out of this blazing bedlam.

Head down, cradling the girl, feeling the heat blistering my feet, I started for the nearest aisle between the columns. Spouts and gouts of flame licked up the

wooden pillars, scarlet and orange transparencies, moth wings of destruction. There was no way through there. I hauled up and a beam smashed down to join the burning wreckage cumbering the floor. There was no way out at my back and each side roaring columns of fire blocked off sight and sense. The incessant crackling noise battered at me. I realized I was doing a strange kind of dance, lifting one foot and then the other, performing a weird hornpipe trapped there in the fiery furnace.

No way out through the aisles or doors, certainly no way up — therefore the way out was down.

Smoke continued to jet from the joins in the floorboards. The floor had once been highly polished and the wood seethed with a brown boiling scum. I could see no railing around stairs down. By this time the smoke made seeing even more difficult, to add to the constant half-closing of my eyes against the ferocity of the light and the sheer heat of the place. I began to feel the Star Lords had this time landed me in it far up past my armpits.

“By Zair!” I said to myself. “There has to be a way down!”

Now, I’d no idea where I was. I did not wish to contemplate the awful possibility I might be back on Earth. No, I told myself sternly. No. I was still on Kregen, even if I didn’t know where. Buildings are erected in as many if not more styles on Kregen, as they are on Earth. Now where would the logical place be for the cellar steps?

Alongside an entrance hallway, for one. And all the entrances were mere pits of fire.

I took a mouthful of stinking smoke and gagged. From the feeling in my eyeballs I now knew just how two fried eggs feel in the pan.

There *had* to be a way out!

With a crash that vibrated the floorboards beneath my feet a whole section of the floor vanished into a spouting volcano, dragging blazing beams into the pit below. I squinted to see past the hellish uproar, tears distorting my sight and refracting scintillant rainbow colors around the edges of vision. The damned floor had split three or four paces off and if I was right only smoke coiled up there, before the pit of fire began.

There was only one way to test that theory.

Taking a firmer grip on the girl's lax body I took those necessary three and a half paces and jumped.

Even as I sailed down through the smoke-filled hole so a beam burst across above and showered down a rain of stinging sparks. I hit not too clumsily and rolled sideways to shield the girl. Smoke wafted. Ahead the blazing debris from above walled off progress that way; but with a feeling of thankfulness I saw that the opposite direction, luridly revealed in the fire glow at my back, remained clear — for now.

The floor above sucked up smoke through the joins, and tendrils of orange fire ran all along under the boards. In almost no time at all that floor where I had been standing would burst into an inferno. I put my

head down and ran swiftly through the last of the smoke, heading for the end of the building.

A narrow alleyway led between vast stone vats, rotund and gleaming in the firelight. The pungent smell of wine, full-bodied, ripe, permeated the air. At the end a wheelbarrow containing a spouted pot together with sundry measuring ladles and jugs revealed the purpose of this place.

The air was a trifle clearer here and I paused for a quick breather. Then it was past the wheelbarrow and up the narrow stone stairs beyond the trapdoor in the ceiling. As I mounted so the air grew hotter and the roar of the fire closer. Still, there was no going back. I had to go on.

The stairs turned sharp left and ended at a closed door.

This I kicked open and plunged through, bursting into a sheet of flame and trying to shield the girl as best I could. I roared on and through the flame and burst out into a corridor which was about to explode into fire in the next instant. Like a maniac I raced for the far end. A pair of double doors stood half open. A white and leprous light glowed beyond. The ceiling fell in an avalanche of sparks and spinning blazing brands at my back, making me hurl myself forward for the double doors. The girl moved in my arms and abruptly struggled with shocking strength. For that moment I was distracted, fearing her injured, and something ugly and hard — and hot! — struck me alongside the ear.

I fell down.

The complete blackout could not have lasted long. I was aware of heat and of hands dragging me and of my back scraping along and scratching confoundedly irritatingly on splintered boards. There was no smoke about me. No smoke choked down into my lungs. The heat materially decreased. My back scraped over stone and then grass. Above me lifted a tall blue sky with not a cloud in sight as my eyes cleared.

I was out of the inferno, and — someone had dragged me out.

My head felt as though it was not there, or had been lent out to someone else who had stuffed it with feathers and hung it out to dry.

When I shook my head I did not hear the familiar carillon of the famous bells of Beng-Kishi, rather, there echoed only a dull and empty shushing.

A juicy voice said: “And your friend?”

A girl’s voice, very crisp: “He is dead.”

I turned that empty noddle of mine to see what might be seen.

The girl I’d carried from the burning building and who then presumably had dragged me out in turn stood looking with an expression I could not then fathom at a stout, florid, important individual with a girth swathed in golden scarves. His face glowed and yet, even in my muzzy state of half-awareness, I sensed there was little of good humor in this man.

In the slanting rays of the twin suns shadows did not stretch far. As a backdrop to the important principals discussing the fire the crowd clustered with that

particular air of satisfied fascination peculiar to crowds watching the destruction of a building by fire and flame.

The stink of burning smothered everything with the dry taste of ash. My eyes burned. Just how much skin I'd had burned off I was reluctant to discover. Another voice, hard-edged with habitual command, a woman's voice, said: "I am in his debt, for he carried me to safety. I could wish him alive so that I could reward him."

"I," said the girl from the fire, "could wish him alive, also."

I did not miss that sharp rebuke.

By turning my head and ignoring that dull emptiness between my ears, I could see the woman standing on the other side. Yes, she was clearly important, and not just self-important, either. Clad in a chequered gown of green and yellow with enough gold to indicate her status, she bulked with good living. Her face did not partake of that plumpness of form, being hard-edged like her voice, with a rat-trap mouth and a narrow nose that, whilst it was not exactly a witch's hook, nevertheless gave one that impression.

A few burned rags on the ground at her feet and two slave girls hovering near explained the clean crisp appearance of her gown.

What in the name of Opaz had been going on here? The dead man in the burning building had rescued these people; as far as I had been able to see there had been no one else inside, so why had he gone back and thus caused this spritely young lady to risk her life hauling him out? He must be the kregoinye who had failed, and

his friend had gone in to save him and the Star Lords had called on me to assist. Well, all that fitted.

The crowd shuffled feet and remained mostly silent. No one made any attempt to extinguish the blaze. The building was too far gone for that. It stood in an open dusty area by itself, so the flames would not spread. Four wide streets intersected here, flanked by white flat-roofed buildings. Trees grew everywhere, bright green and yet lacking the profusion of foliage of trees in Vallia or Valka. I began to form opinions about where I might have been flung by the Everoinye. Kregen is a whole world.

The important man said to the important woman: “Do not distress yourself, Lady Floria—”

She interrupted sharply: “I do not, Lord Nanji. Although, by Loncuum, when a pleasant evening’s entertainment during a long unpleasant journey is thus summarily ruined, one is entitled to a little pique, sus?”[\[1\]](#)

Despite the fog swirling in my head the woman’s words were confirmation that the burning building had been a dancing rostrum. That was easy enough to understand; but the long unpleasant journey? That sounded promising.

“Assuredly.” This fellow, Lord Nanji, let his fruity voice make of the syllables a veritable squish pie. “I will escort you to our lodgings.”

Her hard face ridged.

“I think not, Nanji. We have few pleasures on this abominable journey. I intend to take every opportunity to enjoy myself before the lights.”

“Very well. Then I shall accompany you—”

“If you wish.”

She turned to her slave girls, decently clad in gray frocks with clean faces and not too many bruises, saying: “Follow.”

Lord Nanji walked into my sight. He strutted. Well, that was to be expected. Following him a couple of husky guards, well-armed, lounged along as though saying there is nothing in this for us.

A number of interesting items had been learned in this short space of time. By talking of an evening’s entertainment when by the position of the suns it was middle afternoon, mention of the lights, and the long journey, made it clear these people were part of a caravan and would turn in early and start early. Problem was: just whereabouts on Kregen was this caravan marching?

The guards’ weaponry gave some clues. They carried broad-bladed spears, a weapon often associated with mercenary caravan guards. They had no shields; but then, most Kregans do not carry shields about in civilized towns. Their swords were decently scabbarded, one a thraxter the other a lynxter.

Their harnesses were brass-studded leather with boiled-leather helmets reinforced with iron strips. Perfectly standard attire.

The crowd parted respectfully for them. The dancing rostrum would take some time yet before it burned out. I guessed the people were waiting to see the final crashing fall of the roof, always a high spot in fire watching.

I tried to sit up and could not.

The hollow emptiness of my skull was shared by my bones and muscles; truth to tell I could feel very little of myself right then.

Another voice spoke, a softer voice, yet one without hesitation, a voice accustomed to speaking thoughts well-formed before utterance.

“I add my thanks to your friend, my lady—”

“I am no grand lady. My name is Mevancy.”

“Mevancy.” Did I detect a tinge of pleased irony? “He pulled me out. He was a brave man. I grieve when the world loses a single person not of Tsung-tan. I shall intercede for him in my prayers. It may be Tsung-tan in his gracious benevolence will smile and admit your friend to paradise. What was his name?” A little cough. “Mine is Tuong Mishuro.”

“Rafael,” she said. “Just Rafael.”

“And you knew him well?”

“Passing well. We traveled together. I grieve...”

By this time I’d managed to get my head rolled the other way and so could see these two. The girl, Mevancy, had her hand to her eyes. Not a nice time, when a friend dies, not nice at all.

Tactfully, the old buffer kept silent. He wore a decent enough gown, dark brown, open at the throat to reveal

pure white linen blackened by smoke. His feet were encased in curly slippers in red velvet which delighted me more than I can say at that not auspicious period. His face was just such a face as you may see carved on Buddhas in many temples of our Earth. He wore no jewelry and no cap; probably that had been lost as he'd been carried from the conflagration by Rafael, who was a kregoinye working for the Star Lords and who was now dead in their service.

The thought occurred to me, and not for the first time, that maybe the Everoinye were remembering their humanity. Rafael had died and his friend and companion Mevancy had ventured into the blaze to rescue him and been overcome. With Rafael's work done, there had been no need for the Star Lords to concern themselves further. I was confident no one else remained in the dancing rostrum and Rafael had lost his life searching frantically for others to rescue. I knew what he must have felt. I, too, had searched for the person or persons the Star Lords wished me to assist. Would they, I wondered, have bothered to send another kregoinye after Delia if she had been overcome trying to drag me out? And the thought occurred, yes, perhaps they would. Perhaps the Everoinye were remembering their lost humanity.

With these profound meditations finding tentative lodgment in the vacuum that was my brain, I returned my attention to what was going on now. At the side of the old buffer, this Tuong Mishuro, stood a youngster in a ragged brown robe tied up with string, with bare feet.

There was no straw in his hair; I felt there ought to have been. His face was heavy and dark with the beginnings of a beard, and his lips were full and red.

Very humbly, this youngster said: "Master, I must fetch clean linen for you. It is not seemly—"

"Yes, yes, Lunky, I agree. But there are more important things in life than clean linen."

"Of course, master. Good food and wine—"

"I shall fetch my switch, Lunky, if you continue."

"Yes, master."

Mention of wine did not afford a clue to my whereabouts. Well, not much of one. Wine is carried enormous distances on Kregen, of necessity, to those regions which do not grow grapes.

Tuong Mishuro half-turned and spoke in a friendly and enquiring tone of voice to a newcomer just out of my vision. "How are they, doctor?"

"They'll live, they'll live. Thanks to the man who pulled 'em out."

Now I could see the doctor, a short, stout, bandy-legged man with sweat drops glittering on forehead and cheeks. He carried a leather bag, was clad in decent blue robes and was your Needleman to the life.

He saw me. "Oho. You've found some more, then."

Everyone turned as though operated by clever springs to stare down on me. The odd thing was, aware of their stares and that I ought to stand up, I felt no inclination to do so. I just remained sprawled out on my back. Equally, I felt no desire to talk to them. Oh, yes, I wanted to know whereabouts on Kregen the Star Lords had

thrown me; but that could wait. Now, if only there had been a pillow under my head I'd be able to nod off most comfortably.

The doctor knelt and placed his bag on the ground. I was aware of his fingers, soft and strong, probing at me. He tut-tutted to himself and when he had concluded his examination, he stood up, puffing with the effort.

"Nothing wrong with him. A big fellow like that, no problem. I'll put some ointment on his feet; but he's not badly burned, not like lynxor and lynxora Shalang." He shook his head. "Lynxora Thyllis will take some time to mend, I'm afraid."

Tuong Mishuro made a deprecatory clucking noise of sympathy. "A terrible tragedy, terrible. Still, in the expert hands of Doctor Slezen both will recover, I feel sure."

"I'll do my best," said this Needleman Slezen. "Do my best."

"And," said Mevancy, who had been looking critically at me. "This fellow?"

"I'd rather he didn't walk just yet. Carry him to your lodgings." At that moment the roof of the dancing rostrum collapsed with an almighty roar and blast of displaced heated air and showers of sparks that gyrated and whirled upwards like an exploding volcano. To my surprise a great cheer broke out from the watchers. Well, fire watching is an obsessional pastime.

Tuong Mishuro said: "That is easily arranged. Lunky, find four stout fellows who wish to earn a silver khan between 'em, and a blanket."

“At once, master.”

Now I do not mind spiders as a general rule, unless they're poisonous or any of the many varieties of giant killer spiders of Kregen. So when a spider crawled up my arm and headed steadily for my face I took no real notice. I'd just shoosh him off gently, for I cannot abide louts who stamp on any little scurrying creature they see. He crawled up my chin and circled my mouth. I did not raise a hand to shoosh him off. Just as I thought to lift my hand Tuong Mishuro bent to me, not smiling but immensely polite.

“Llahal. I am Tuong Mishuro. Would you favor us with your name?”

I'd tell them some name or other. By Krun! I had plenty! I thought I'd just brush that little spider off my face first and then tell them the name I'd choose.

My hand did not move. My mouth did not open. I made no sound.

The reason for the lack of sensation all about me and inside my head became at once crystal clear.

I could not move or speak.

I was paralyzed.

**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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2. The Suns of Scorpio
3. Warrior of Scorpio
4. Swordships of Scorpio
5. Prince of Scorpio

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