

DRAY PRESCOT: 20

**A SWORD
FOR KREGEN**

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

A SWORD FOR KREGEN

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott presents an enigmatic picture of himself; reared in the inhumanly harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy, he has been transported by the Scorpion agencies of the Star Lords, the Everoinye, and the Savanti, the superhuman yet mortal people of Aphrasöe the Swinging City, to the demanding and fulfilling world of Kregen orbiting Antares, four hundred light years from Earth, where he has made his home.

He is a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and superbly powerful physique. There is about him an abrasive honesty and indomitable courage, he moves like a savage hunting cat, quiet and deadly. He has struggled through triumph and disaster and has acquired a number of titles and estates, and now the people of the island of Vallia, which has been ripped apart by ambitious and mercenary invaders, have called on him to lead them to freedom as their emperor.

His story, which he records on cassettes, is arranged so that each volume may be read as complete in itself.

There have been many questions about the role of Prescott on Kregen and particularly about the nature and purpose of his antagonists. I am firmly convinced he does see far further ahead than perhaps he is given credit for. His words inspire our belief, particularly in what he has to say about the Star Lords. He implies they are not as malefic as at one time we might have been led to believe.

Whatever the outcome for Dray Prescott, we are aware that he is conscious that he struggles against a far darker and more profound fate than is revealed in anything he has so far told us.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter One

Jaidur is Annoyed

“Do you bare the throat?”

“Aye, my love. I bare the throat.”

The brightly painted pieces were swept up and returned to the silver-bound box. I had been comprehensively defeated. The game had been protracted and cunning and fiercely contested, filled with shifts and stratagems on Delia’s part that wrecked my cleverest schemes. I leaned over the board awkwardly from the bed and picked up my right-wing Chuktar. He was the only piece of high value my remorseless antagonist had failed to take.

“You held him back too long,” she said, decisively, her face half-laughing and yet filled with concern for the instinctive wince I failed to quell as that dratted wound stabbed my neck.

“I did.”

He was a marvelously fashioned playing piece, a Chuktar of the Khibil race of diffs, his fox-like face carved with a precision and understanding that revealed

the qualities of the Khibils in a way that many a much more famous sculptor might well miss. Delia took the Chuktar from my fingers and placed him carefully in his velvet-lined niche within the box. When you play Jikaida, win or lose, you develop a rapport with the little pieces that, hard to define or even to justify coherently, nevertheless exists.

“You will not play again?” I leaned back on the plumped-up pillows and found that smile that always comes from Delia. “I am mindful to develop a new ploy with the Paktuns—”

“No more games tonight.” The tone of voice was practical. There is no arguing with Delia in this mood. “Your wound is troubling you and you need rest. We have won this battle but until you are fit again I shall not rest easy.”

“Sink me!” I burst out. “There is so much to do!”

“Yes. And it will not get done if you do not rest.”

The invasion of the island of Vallia by the riff-raff of half a world, and the onslaught by the disciplined iron legions of Hamal, Vallia’s mortal enemy, had been checked. But only that. We held Vondium the capital and much of the northeast and midlands; from the rest of the empire our enemies pressed in on us. I’d collapsed after this last battle in which we had successfully held that wild charge of the vove-mounted clansmen — I’m no superman but just a mere mortal man who tries to do the best he can. Now Delia looked on me, the lamps’ gleam limning her hair with those

gorgeous chestnut tints, her face wonderfully soft and concerned, leaning over me. I swallowed.

“You rest now. Tomorrow we can strike camp and fly back to Vondium—”

“Rather, fly after the clansmen and try to—”

“The wind is foul for the northeast.”

“Is there no arguing with you?”

“Rather seek to argue with Whetti-Orbium, of Opaz.”

I made a face. Whetti-Orbium, as the manifestation of Opaz responsible for the weather and under the beneficent hand of that all-glorious godhood, the giver of wind and rain, had not been treating us kindly of late. The Lord Farris’s aerial armada had played little part in the battle, the wind being dead foul, and only his powered airboats had got themselves into the action.

“Then the cavalry must—” I began.

“Seg has that all under control.”

Good old Seg Segutorio. But— “And there is—”

“Hush!”

And then I smiled, a gently mocking, sympathetically triumphant smile, as with a stir and a rattle of accoutrements, the curtains of the tent parted and Prince Jaidur entered.

He saw only Delia in the lamplit interior with its canvas walls devoid of garish ornament, with the weapons strapped to the posts, the strewn rugs, the small camp tables, the traveling chests. Delia turned and rose, smooth, lovely, inexpressibly beautiful.

“Mother,” said Jaidur. He sounded savage. “That rast found himself some flying beast and escaped.”

Jaidur, young and lithe and his face filled with the passions of youth and eagerness, took off his helmet and slung it on the floor. Through the carpets the iron rang against the beaten earth.

“Mirvols, I think they were. Flying beasts that cawed down most mockingly at us as they rose. I shot — but the shafts fell short.” His fingers were busily unbuckling his harness as he spoke, and the silver-chased cuirass dropped with a mellower chime upon the floor. Armed and accoutred like a Krozair of Zy, Pur Jaidur, Prince of Vallia. He scowled as Delia handed him a plain goblet of wine, a bracing dry Tardalvoh, tart and invigorating. Taking it, he nodded his thanks perfunctorily, and raised the goblet to his lips.

“Prince Jaidur,” I said in my old gravel-shifting voice. “Is this the way you treat your mother? Like a petulant child? Or a boor from the stews of Drak’s City?”

He jumped so that the yellow wine leaped, glinting over the silver.

“You—”

“You chased after Kov Colun and Zankov. Did they both escape?”

His brown fingers gripped the goblet.

“Both.”

“Then,” I said, and I gentled my voice. “They will run upon their judgment later, all in Opaz’s good time.”

“I did not know you were here—”

“Evidently.”

My pleasure at his arrival, because it meant I could go on taking an interest in affairs instead of going to sleep

at Delia's orders, was severely tempered by this news. There was a blood debt, now, between Kov Colun and my friends. For a space I could not think of Barty Vessler. Barty — so bright and chivalrous, so ingenuous and courageous — had been struck down by Kov Colun. And Zankov, his companion in evil, had murdered the emperor, Delia's father. But, all the same, vengeance was a road I would not willingly follow. The welfare of Delia, of my family, and of my friends and of Vallia — they were the priorities.

"I will leave you," said Jaidur with a stiffness he cloaked in formality. He bent to retrieve his harness. He made no move to don the cuirass and the helmet dangled by its straps. "Tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow!" The surprise and scorn in my voice braced him up, and sent the dark blood into his face. "Tomorrow! I recall when you were Vax Neemusjid. What harm has the night done you that you scorn to use it?"

Delia put her hand on my arm. Her touch scorched.

Jaidur swung around toward the tent opening.

"You are the Emperor of Vallia, and may command me. I shall take a saddle-bird. You will not see me again, I swear, until Kov Colun and Zankov are—"

"Wait!"

I spat the word out. "Do not make so weighty a promise so lightly. As for Kov Colun, there is Jilian to be considered. You would do her no favor by that promise."

He looked surprised. "She still lives?"

“Thanks to Zair and to Nath the Needle.”

“I am glad, and give thanks to Zair and Opaz.”

“Also, I would like you to tell me of your doings since you returned from the Eye of the World.”

“I see you humor me, for whenever have you bothered over my doings?”

“Jaidur!” said Delia.

“Let the boy speak. I knew him as Vax, and took the measure of his mettle. I own to a foolish pride.” Here Delia turned sharply to look at me, and I had to make myself go on. “Jaidur is a Krozair of Zy, a Prince of Vallia. I do not think there can be much else to better those felicities.” I deliberately did not mention the Kroveres of Izstar, for good reasons. “His life is his own, his life which we gave to him. I, Jaidur, command you in nothing, save one thing. And I do not think I need even say what that thing is, for it touches your mother, Delia, Empress of Vallia.”

“You do not. I would give my life, gladly—”

I said the words, and they cut deeply.

“Aye, Prince Jaidur. You and a host of men.”

The color rushed back to his bronzed cheeks. With a gesture as much to break the thrall of his own black thoughts as to slake his thirst, he reached for the silver goblet and took a long draught.

“Aye. You are right. And that, by Vox, is as it should be.”

Delia wanted to say something; but I ploughed on.

“Go after Kov Colun and after Zankov. Both are bitter foes to Vallia. But do not be too reckless. They are

cunning rogues, vicious and cruel.” My voice trailed away. On Earth we talk about teaching our grandmothers to suck eggs. On Kregen we talk about teaching a wizard to catch a fly. And here was I, prattling on about dangers and cunning adversaries to a Krozair of Zy.

Jaidur saw something of that belittling thought in me, for his brows drew down in a look I recognized and with recognition the same familiar ache. How Delia puts up with me and three hulking sons is a miracle beyond question. And, thinking these useless thoughts, the tent spun about me, going around and around, ghostly and transparent. I fell back on the bed, all the stuffing knocked out of me.

“That Opaz-forsaken arrow,” said Delia, leaning across, wiping my face with a scented towel. I felt the coolness. I must be in fever. My throat hurt; but not enough to stop me from speaking; but the weakness made the tent surge up and down and corkscrew like a swifter in a storm.

“I — shall — be — all — right,” I said.

“I will fetch Nath the Needle.” With that Jaidur ran from the tent, dropping his gear and casting the wine goblet from him.

“All this fuss — for a pesky arrow.”

“It drove deeply, my heart. Now — lie still!”

I lay still.

Fruitless to detail the rest of that night’s doings. Nath the Needle, looking as he always did, fussing and yet steadily sure with his acupuncture needles and his herbal preparations, fixed up my aches and pains in the

physical sense. But my brain was afire with schemes, stratagems I must set afoot at once, so as further to discomfort the damned invading clansmen. Our enemies pressed us sorely, and they must be dealt with as opportunity offered. The chances of success here must be balanced against defeat there. The campaign against Zankov's imported clansmen had been waged with fierceness. But it was all to do. I, a clansman by adoption myself, knew that no single battle would decide the issue.

The Clansmen of Segesthes are among the most ferocious and terrible of fighting men of Kregen. That we had put a check on their advance must have hit them hard, hit them with shock. But they were clansmen. They would retire, regroup, and then they'd be back, thirsting for vengeance.

And here I lay, lolling in bed like a drunkard in the stews.

There were able captains among the Army of Vallia. Many of them bore names not unfamiliar to you, many there were who have not so far been mentioned in this narrative. Delia told me, with a firmness made decisive by the crimp in those seductive lips, that I must leave it to Seg and the others. For now, she told me severely, they could handle any emergencies.

So, because Delia of Delphond, Delia of the Blue Mountains, who was now Delia, Empress of Vallia, willed it, I was immured. The fate of the island empire was, for that space, taken from my hands.

Phu-Si-Yantong, one of the chief architects of the misery in which Vallia now found herself, would not rest, either. His schemes had for a time been thwarted. But he held the southwest and unknown areas of the southeast and many of the islands. His partnership—and then I paused. Yantong was too egomaniacal a figure ever to acknowledge anyone his peer or to admit them to an equality suggested by a partnership. Yantong wished to rule the roost, the whole roost, and he wished to rule alone.

First things first. Our tenuous hold on the link through the eastern midlands between Vondium and the imperial provinces around the capital and the Hawkwa Country of the northeast had to be strengthened. We must attempt to relieve the pressure on the western mountains where people devoted to Delia, as to myself, still grimly held out. And there was always the far north, Evir and the other provinces beyond the Mountains of the North, where his self-styled King of North Vallia held sway. The north had to be forgotten for now. First things first.

As soon as I was deemed fit to travel Delia had me carted back to Vondium.

During that period there were many visitors, representatives of the churches, the state, the army, the air service and the imperial provinces. The navy and merchant service also showed up; but they were dealing now almost entirely with flying ships of the air. The once-mighty fleet of galleons of Vallia was being rebuilt; but slowly, slowly.

These men and women who came to see me spoke all in soft voices, even the gruff old Chuktars of the army mellowed their habitual gruff barks. Always I was conscious of the presence of Delia, hovering protectively, and I guessed she had given strict injunctions on the correct sick-room behavior. And, by Zair, when Delia spoke it behooved everyone to heed, and heed but good.

So, as you will see, I must have been much sicker than I realized.

Seg Segutorio, that master Bowman of Loh, kept his reckless face composed as he sat at the bedside to tell me of the fortunes of the army. I had peremptorily thrust command on him at the height of the battle — that engagement men called the Battle of Kochwold — when Jilian had reported in the news of the desperate affray involving Delia at the Sakkora Stones. We had brought her safely out of there, from that miasmal place of ages-old decay and present evil. But our daughter Dayra, she who flaunted her steel talons as Ros the Claw, had once more disappeared. I did not know if she was with Zankov, who had slain her grandfather. Truth to tell, I did not know how to view that situation, just as I did not know how to contain within myself the ghastly news of Seg's wife, Thelda. I made myself agreeable to Seg, which is not a difficult task, and did not summon up the courage to tell him that his wife, whom he thought dead and sorrowed for, believed him dead, also, and had married another upright and honest man, Lol Polisto. So we talked of the army.

“The clansmen fight hard, and, by the Veiled Froyvil, my old friends, they led us a merry chase. They regroup now up past Infathon in Vazkardrin. We chivvy ’em and give ’em no rest. Nath is foaming to get at them with his Phalanx, but—”

“They may be amenable to an attack in their rear from the Stackwamors.” I pondered this. “Certainly we must keep them off balance. But reports indicate we may need the Phalanx elsewhere.”

Seg fired up at this. All the fey and reckless nature of his fiery race suddenly burst out, subduing the shrewd practicality.

“Where, my old dom? We will march — the men are in wonderful heart—”

“I am sure,” I said, somewhat drily. “With a victory under their belts.”

These audiences — if that is not too pompous a word to use of these discussions between the Emperor of Vallia and his ministers and generals — were conducted in a neat little withdrawing room off the old wing once inhabited by Delia and myself in the imperial palace of Vondium. There was a bed, in which I spent far too much time, tables and chairs and wine and food, with a bookcase stuffed with the life of Vallia. And, also, many maps adorned the walls. As a matter of course and scarce worth remarking, an arms rack stood handy. Handiest of all was the great Krozair longsword, scabbarded to the bedpost. Now I pointed at the map which showed the southwest of Vallia.

“There, Seg, again. The army which Fat Lango brought has been seen off. But others are landing. It seems that some countries of Pandahem are still desirous of carving a helping of good Vallian gold for themselves.”

“Vallia has something they deserve and which they will receive,” quoth Seg, without flourish. “Something that will last them through all the Ice Floes of Sicce.”

He referred, quite clearly, to the six feet of Vallian soil each one of her invaders would be dumped into. I smiled. Very dear to my heart is my blade comrade, Seg Segutorio. He and I have battled our way through some hairy scrapes since he first hurled a forkful of dungy straw in my face. And, by Zair, that seemed a long long time ago.

With that old memory in mind I said, and my voice, weak as it was, sounded altogether too much like a sigh: “If only Inch was here. Inch and all the others—”

Seg looked swiftly at me. He was not reassured by what he saw. He put a spread of fingers up under his ear and scratched his jaw. A very tough and craggy jaw, that jaw of Seg Segutorio’s.

“Aye, Dray, aye. But I think Inch will not forget Vallia, or that he is the Kov of the Black Mountains. His taboos — for my money Inch has been eating too much squish pie.”

That made me smile.

“When we were all slung back to our homelands by that sorcerous Vanti,” Seg went on, half-musing, his eyes bright on me, his hand rubbing his jaw. “I felt no doubt that every single one of us would make every

effort to get back to Valka or Vallia as soon as humanly possible.” His voice betrayed nothing of the agony he must still suffer over his belief in the death of Thelda. I had pondered that problem. For all the news we had, Thelda and Lol Polisto might be dead by now. They were leading a precarious existence fighting our foes as guerillas. They could so easily be dead. Until Thelda was proved still to be alive, why torture Seg with a fresh burden that was so different and yet so much the same as his belief his wife was truly dead?

“My son Drak is still down there in Faol trying to find Melow the Supple.” I spoke fretfully, for I wanted Drak back here in Vallia, with me, so that he could take over this business of being Emperor of Vallia. “But I think you have something else on your mind?”

“Aye. You have found a new marvel in Korero. He is indeed remarkable with his shields. So...”

“You don’t think I haven’t wondered what I’m going to say to Turko?”

His rubbing hand stilled. “What will you say?”

That was another poser for my poor aching head. The yellow bandage around my throat seemed to constrict in to choke me with problems. Turko the Shield stood always at my back with his great shield uplifted in the heat of battle. But, now, Korero the Shield, with his four arms and handed tail, stood always at my back with his shields upraised in the heat of battle...

I said sourly, “I’ll make Turko a damned Kov and find him a province and get him married to raise stout sons

for Vallia and beautiful daughters to grace the world. That's what I'll do."

"He, I think, would prefer to stand at your back with his shield."

"D'you think I don't know that!"

"Hum, my old friend, a very large and ponderable hum."

That was Seg Segutorio for you, able to cut away all the nonsense with a word. But he was smiling. By Vox! What it is to have comrades through life!

We talked for a space then about our comrades and wished them with us, and eventually returned to the subject of the army to be sent to the southwest and the knotty problem of choosing a commander.

Seg said, "I still have a rapier to sharpen with those rasts of clansmen. And, yes, before you ask me, I can spare a Phalanx, although preferring not to. Filbarrka's zorcamen make life a misery for them. And I am slowly becoming of the opinion that perhaps, one day, I shall manage to make bowmen of the fellows I have under training."

Well, if Seg Segutorio, in my opinion the finest archer of all Kregen, couldn't fashion a battle-winning missile force, then no one could.

We looked at the maps and pondered the likeliest routes the invading armies from Pandahem might choose. I would have to delegate responsibility in that area of the southwest, and make up my mind as to the numbers and composition of the army we would send. That would be the Army of the Southwest.

Presently I placed my hand on the silver-bound balass box.

Seg shook his head.

“Much as I would love to rank Deldars against you, my old friend, and thrash you utterly, I have another zhantil to saddle.”

“There is never enough time,” I said. And added, under my breath, “In two worlds.”

“Anyway,” he said, standing up and shifting his sword around more comfortably. “Delia tells me you have been playing Master Hork.”

“Aye. Katrin Rashumin recommended him, although he has been famous as a master gamesman in Vondium for many seasons.”

Once, I had interrupted a proposed lesson that Katrin was to have taken from Master Hork. He had returned to the capital city, and had, I knew, played his part in our victory. As for Katrin, the Kovneva of Rahartdrin, Opaz alone knew what had happened to her. Her island kovnate was situated far to the southwest and messengers we had sent had not returned. Perhaps our new Army of the Southwest might succeed in gaining news of her and her people.

“Master Hork has a great command of the Chuktar’s right-flank attack,” said Seg. “Personally, I incline to the left wing.”

“Mayhap that is because an archer must have something of a squint—”

“Fambly!”

“And Seg, do you take great care. Your back is healed, well and good; but I don’t want you—”

“I know, my old dom. May Erthyr the Bow have you in his keeping, along with Zair and Opaz and Djan.” Then Seg, turning to go, paused and swung back. “And, I think, may the lady Zena Izta also approve of our ventures. The Kroveres of Izta do little, to my great frustration; but we try—”

“There is a great work set to our hands with the Kroveres.” That sounded fustian; but it was true. “We must continue as we are, recruiting choice spirits, and remain steadfast. As the Grand Archbold, you have a double duty.”

So I bid farewell to Seg and ached to see him go, and presently in came Master Hork with his own bronze-bound box of playing pieces and we set the board, ranked our Deldars, and opened the play.

Master Hork held within himself that remote and yet alive inner sense of being that marks the Jikaidast. A Jikaidast is a man or woman who plays Jikaida on a professional level. Because of the enormous popularity of the game on Kregen such a person can make a handsome living and receive the respect that is due. I was most polite with Master Hork, a slender, well-mannered man with brown Vallian hair and eyes, and a face that one felt ought to be lined and wrinkled and which was smooth and untrammled. His movements were neat and precise. He wasted not a single scrap of energy. But he could play Jikaida, by Krun!

There was no point in my attempting to play an ordinary game against his mastery, so we went through the moves of a famous game played five hundred seasons or so ago. Outstanding games are usually recorded for posterity, and many books of Jikaida lore exist. The notations are simple and easily read.

This game was that remarkable example of high-level Jikaida played between Master Chuan-lui-Hong, a Jikaidast then in his hundred and twentieth year, and Queen Hathshi of Murn-Chem, a once-powerful country of Loh.

A Jikaidast will not deliberately lose a game, not even against so awesome a personage as a fabled Queen of Pain of Loh. But Chuan-lui-Hong had had to play with extraordinary skill, for Queen Hathshi might, had she not been a queen, have been a Jikaidast herself.

From the impeccable written record on the thick pages of Master Hork's ponderous leather-bound tome we re-created that famous game. It was, indeed, a marvel. The queen swept all before her, using her swods and Deldars to push on and deploying her more powerful pieces with artistry. At the end, Master Chuan-lui-Hong had played the masterstroke. By using a swiftly developed file of his own pieces, by placing a swod, that is, the Kregan pawn, into the gap between his own file and that of the queen's and so closing the gap, he was able to vault his left-flank Chuktar over the conjoined files into a threatening position that offered check. Check in jikaidish is kaida.

That spectacular vaulting move is unique to Jikaida. A piece may travel over a line of other pieces, either orthogonally or diagonally, using them as stepping-stones, and alight at the far end. The jikaidish word for vault is zeunt. The Chuktar moves in a similar fashion to the Queen of our Earthly chess. Master Hork read out the next move.

“A beautiful response.” I felt the pleasure inherent in a neat move. “Hathshi avoids the Chuktar’s attack and places her Queen on the only square the Chuktar cannot reach.”

Although Vallians call the piece a King, many countries use the names Rokveil, Aeilssa, Princess, and in Loh, much as you would expect, the piece is called a Queen. The object of the game is to place this piece in such a position that it cannot avoid capture. In the jikaidish, this entrapment is called hyrkaida.

“And if the Chuktar moves to place the Queen in check, he will be immediately snapped up by her Hikdars or Paktuns. Although,” I said a little doubtfully, “her position is a trifle cramped.”

A Jikaidast lives his games, and lives vicariously through the games of his long-dead peers. Master Hork allowed a small and satisfied smile to stretch his lips. Deliberately, he closed the heavy leather cover of the book. The pages made a soft sighing sound and the smell of old paper wafted. I looked at Master Hork across the board where the pieces stood in their frozen march.

“See, majister,” he said, and reached far back into Chuan-lui-Hong’s Neemu drin.

His slender fingers closed on the Pallan.

The Pallan is the most powerful piece on the board. He combines in himself moves that include those of the chess Queen and Knight, plus other purely Jikaidish possibilities. Chuan-lui-Hong was playing Yellow.

His Pallan stood in such a position that he could be moved up to the end of the long file of yellow and blue pieces — and vault.

The instant Master Hork touched the Pallan I saw it.

“Yes,” I said, and my damned throat hurt with that confounded arrow wound. “Oh, yes indeed!”

For the Pallan vaulted that long file and came down on the square occupied by his own Chuktar.

The Pallan has the power to take a friendly piece — excepting the Queen, of course.

Chuan-lui-Hong used his Pallan to remove his Chuktar from the game. Now the Pallan stood there, an imposing and glittering figure, and with the moves at his disposal he trapped, snared, detained, entombed Queen Hathshi’s own Queen.

“Hyrkaida!” said Master Hork. And, then, as Chuan-lui-Hong must have done all those dusty seasons ago, he said: “Do you bare the throat?”

“I fancy Hathshi bared her throat with good grace, Master Hork; for it is a pretty ploy.”

“Pretty, yes. But obvious, and one that she should have foreseen three moves ago when Hong’s Pallan made the crucial move to place him on the correct

square within the correct drin.” Master Hork screwed his eyes up and surveyed me. “As majister, you should have seen, also.”

With Seg, I said, “Hum.”

Casually, Master Hork said, “Jikaida players say I am the master of the right-wing Chuktar’s attack. This is so. But in my last ten important games, against Jikaidasts of great repute, I have not employed that stratagem. Not in the opening, the middle or the end game. There is a lesson there, majister.”

I was perfectly prepared — happy — to be instructed by a master of his craft. But what Master Hork was saying was basic to cunning attack. Be where you are not expected.

“You are right, Master Hork. More wine — may I press this Tawny Jholaix?” From this you will see the truly high regard in which we of Kregen hold Jikaidasts, for Jholaix is among the finest and most expensive wines to be obtained. As Master Hork indicated his appreciation, I went on: “I have likened all Vallia to a Jikaida board. But how you would denominate the Phalanx I do not know for sure, for where they are they are, and there they stand.”

“I saw the Phalanx, majister, at the Battle of Voxyri.” He drank, quickly at his memories, too quickly for Jholaix, which should be savored. But I understood. When the Phalanx sent up their paeon and charged at Voxyri it was, I truly think, a sight that would send either the shuddering horrors or the sublimest of emotions through a man until the day he died.

We talked on, mostly about Jikaida, and it was fascinating talk, filled with the lore of the game. As ever, when in contact with a Jikaidast, my memories flew back to Gafard, the King's Striker, Sea Zhantil. Well, he was dead now, following our beloved Velia, and, I know, happy to go where she led, now and for ever.

"Many a great Jikaidast," Master Hork was saying, "set store by the larger games, Jikshiv Jikaida and the rest. But I tend to think that there is a concentration of skill required in the use of the smaller boards. Poron Jikaida demands an artistry quite different in style."

"Each size of board brings its own joys and problems," I said, sententiously, I fear. But my head was ringing with sounds as though phantom bells tolled in my skull. I felt the weakness stealing over me, and growing, and pulling at me.

Master Hork started up. "Majister!"

There was a blurred impression of the Jikaida board spilling the bright pieces to the floor. That resplendent Pallan toppled and tumbled into a fold of the bed-clothes. Master Hork made no attempt to save the scattering pieces. He turned, his face distraught, and ran for the door, yelling for the doctors.

His voice reached me as a thin and ghostly whisper, faint with the dust of years.

That Opaz-forsaken arrow wound! That was my immediate thought. By the unspeakably foul left armpit of Makki-Grodno! There was much to do, and all I could turn my hand to, it seemed, was playing Jikaida and lolling in bed.

And then...

And then I saw a shimmer of insubstantial blueness.

The radiance broadened and deepened.

So I knew.

Once again I was to be snatched away from all I held dear and at the behest of the Star Lords who had brought me to Kregen from Earth be flung headlong into some strange and foreign land. The injustice of this fate that doomed me rang and clangored in my head with the distant sounds as of mighty bellows panting. And the blueness grew and brightened and took on the form I knew and loathed.

Towering over me the lambent blue form of a gigantic Scorpion beckoned.

Once again the Scorpion of the Star Lords called...

Chapter Two

The Star Lords Disagree

Around me the blueness swirled and I knew no doctors or Kregan science could save me for I was in the grip of superhuman forces that made of human aspirations a mere mockery. Yet I had thought the Star Lords possessed a superhumanity in keeping with their superhumanness. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they were entirely inimical. Still, as the gigantic Scorpion leered on me, blue and shimmering with all the remembered menacing power, I saw the betraying flicker of greenness suffusing through the blue.

That Star Lord whose name was Ahrinye and who was evilly at odds with the rest of the Everoinye had his hand in this. He it was who summoned me now.

He was the one who wanted to run me hard, to run me as I had never been run before. I made a shrewd assessment of what that would mean. My life, over which I had been gradually assuming some kind of partial control, would never again belong to me. Ahrinye would have me continually at his beck and call.

“You are called to a great task, mortal!” The voice was as I remembered it, thin and acrid, biting. In those syllables the power of ages commanded both resentment and obedience.

“Fool!” I shouted, and my voice brayed soundlessly in that bedchamber. “Onker! Do you not—”

“Beware lest I smite you down, mortal. I am not as the other Everoinye.”

“That is very clear.” My bravado felt and sounded hollow, false, a mere mewling infant’s bleatings against the storms of fate. “They would soon see in what case I am.”

The idea that the Star Lords couldn’t actually see me when they summoned me was not worth entertaining.

The blueness sharpened with acid green. The green hurt my eyes, and that, by Vox, is far from the soothing balm that true greenness affords.

“You are wounded, mortal. That is of no matter. I speak to you. That is something that you cannot grasp, for the Everoinye speak to few.”

“Aye,” I bellowed in that soundless foolish whisper. “And I’d as lief you didn’t speak to me.”

The shape of the Scorpion wavered. I knew that for this moment out of time no one could see what I saw, that no one could hear what I heard. Master Hork would, for all he knew, run out to fetch the doctors. When he returned he would find an empty bed and I would be banished to some distant part of Kregen to sort out whatever problem this Ahrinye wished decided in his favor.

That was, and I realized this with a sudden and chilling shock of despair, if he did not smash me back contemptuously to Earth, four hundred light years away. I must keep a civil tongue in my head.

Yet, for all that, I was involved in some kind of dialogue with this Star Lord. Many a time I had engaged in a slanging match with the gorgeous bird who was the spy and messenger of the Everoinye. But that scarlet and golden bird, the Gdoinye, was merely a messenger, and we rubbed along, scathing each other with insults. But this was far different. Never before, I fancied, had I thus talked to a Star Lord and, too, never before — perhaps — had a Star Lord been thus spoken to by a mere mortal.

“Your wound is not serious and you merely sulk in bed and play at Jikaida.”

“That is what I say, and not what the doctors say.”

Was it possible to argue with a Star Lord? Was it perhaps conceivable that one might be swayed by what I said?

That had hitherto seemed a nonsense to me.

The Everoinye did what they did out of reasons far beyond the comprehension of a man. They had brought the fantastic array of diffs and strange animals to Kregen, upsetting the order established by the Savanti, who had lived here millennia ago. Why they had done this I did not know.

But, clearly there was a reason.

“You cannot refuse my will, mortal.”

“I do not accept that.” As the blueness shimmered like shot silk waved against a fire, I went on quickly: “I cannot obey your orders if I cannot fight — for that, I take it, is what I must do for you?” And then, from somewhere, the words sprang out, barbed and sarcastic. “For I assume you Star Lords are incapable of fighting your own battles on Kregen?”

“Whether we can or cannot is of no concern of yours. We choose to use mortal tools—”

A voice broke in, a thin, incisive voice that yet swelled with power. “Ahrinye! You have been warned. This man is not to be run by you, young and impetuous though you may be.”

I felt the draining sense of relief. When one Star Lord called another young he probably meant the Everoinye was only four or five millions years old. A wash of deep crimson fire spread against the blueness. The Scorpion remained; but I sensed he was removed in that insubstantial dimension inhabited by these superhuman beings.

“I have a damned great arrow wound in my neck,” I shouted without sound. “And a fever. And bed sores, too, I shouldn’t wonder. Let me get on with my tasks in Vallia, that you, Star Lords, promised me I might undertake. Of what use am I to you now?”

“Your wound,” the penetrating voice said, “is of no consequence. You may remove your bandage, for your neck is whole once more and your fever dissipated.”

And, as the words were spoken, damned if the aching nag in my neck didn’t vanish and my whole sense of

well-being shot up wonderfully. I ripped the bandage free and explored my neck. The skin felt smooth and without blemish where a jagged hole had been left when they'd taken out the arrowhead.

"My thanks, Star Lord." And, if I meant that, or if I spoke in savage sarcasm, I could not truly say.

"We are aware of the emotion called gratitude. It has its uses."

"By Vox," I said, "d'you have ice water in your veins?"

Even as I spoke I wondered if they had veins at all. I was not unmindful of the enormous risks I ran. These were the beings who had brought me here and who could banish me back to Earth. They had done so before now, to punish me, and on one occasion I had spent twenty-one miserable years on Earth. I was not likely to forget that.

The next words shocked me, shocked me profoundly — although they should not have done.

"We," said the Star Lord, "were once as human as you."

Well, now... .

This bizarre conversation with superhuman beings had lulled me into a false idea of my position. With genuine and I may add fervent interest I asked the question that had long burned in me, gradually losing its intensity in my realization that the Everoinye, being superhuman, had no need to care over my welfare.

"Why, Star Lords? Why have you summoned me? Why have you demanded I save certain people? Where is the sense in it all?"

With lightning-strokes of rippling crimson bursting through the blue radiance, I was rapidly reminded of my true position and disabused of the notion that I might speak with impunity to the Everoinye.

“What we do we do. Our reasons are beyond your understanding. The Gdoinye carries our orders. We speak with you only because you have served faithfully and well. There is another task set to your hand. We will apprise you nearer the time. The warning you now receive is in earnest of our benign intentions toward you.”

If I say I found it extraordinarily difficult to swallow I think you will understand me.

Yet I could not in all caution make the kind of impudent and insulting reply I would surely have hurled at the Gdoinye as he whirled about me on flashing wings, all scarlet and gold, superb, a hunting bird of the air. So, instead, I took a different tack.

“Very well, Star Lords. You seem to be implying a compact between us and one I will honor if you honor it also. I will do your bidding and rescue the people you wish saved. Although,” I added, and not without resentment, “I might take exception to your habit of plunking me down naked and unarmed—”

“This we do for reasons beyond—”

“Yes. As a mere mortal I cannot be expected to understand.”

Then I hauled myself up to standing. Softly softly! I dare not infuriate these unknown powers or I would

find myself banished back to Earth. And Vallia called. And — Delia...

What had happened to Ahrinye I never knew nor cared. But the greenness withered and died, and the blueness of the Scorpion faded. The crimson washed all over my vision, there in the sickroom, and I looked in vain for the mellow flood of pure yellow light that would herald the presence of Zena Izta. That the Star Lords respected her powers I knew. Just what the relationship was I did not know. But Zena Izta, I fervently believed, worked for other ends than those sought by either the Star Lords or the Savanti, and they were ends, I fancied, that we Kroveres would find most congenial.

There in that close room the sense of the infinite moving about me dizzied my senses anew. The thin whispering voice attenuated as though withdrawing across the vast gulfs of space itself.

“Go about your business in Vallia, mortal. But when you receive our call — be ready!”

With an abruptness that left me sprawling blinking and still dizzied on the bed, the blueness returned, the crimson vanished, the Scorpion faded and, with a final swirl as of the wings of fate closing, the blueness dimmed and was gone.

Despite my feeling of physical well-being I felt like a stranded flatfish.

Momentous events had passed, of that I felt sure. Never before had such a conversation been held between the Star Lords and myself and, guessing they did nothing without good reason, I wondered what the

reason could be. It would take a little time before I got over this little lot.

Then the door burst open and Nath the Needle and Master Hork were there. And, with them, Delia, her face strained and worried, hurried in ready to fuss over me as only she can.

Despite all my protestations Nath insisted on a full examination, and when he pronounced me fit and well and the wound healed, I, for one, was heartily glad to be rid of the sickroom aroma.

“I have work to do, and work I will do!”

“But, my heart — so soon?”

“Not soon enough.”

“The wound has healed with remarkable rapidity,” said Doctor Nath. He shook his head. “Your powers of recuperation, majister, are indeed phenomenal, as I have observed before.”

Well, he did not know that I, along with Delia and our friends, had bathed in the Sacred Pool of Baptism of the River Zelph in far Aphrasöe. That little dip, besides giving us a thousand years of life, also conferred great recuperative powers. But that would by itself not account for the complete disappearance of all traces of the arrow wound. The Everoinye had accomplished that.

I said, “There is work to do. I am going to do that work and you, good Doctor Nath, have my thanks for your care and attention. As for you, Master Hork, I do not think I shall have the pleasure of your instruction in the more arcane aspects of Jikaida from now on.” I stretched, feeling the blood beginning to find its way

around my body and go poking into long disused corners. “And for that I am truly sorry. But with Vallia as the Jikaida board, well...”

“My help is always at your command, majister.”

“And valued.” I bellowed then, a real fruity old-time bellow in my best foretop hailing voice. “Ender!”

When Ender came in, smiling at my recovery, he very quickly organized the essentials. A most valuable and self-effacing man, Ender, what you might call a valet and butler and personal attendant — I disliked to call him a servant — a man whom I valued as a friend.

Enevon Ob-Eye and his corps of stylors were soon hard at work writing out the orders. The Pallans were seen and their doings checked up on. The Presidio met and agreed on much, and disagreed on a number of points, also, which was healthy.

It is not my intention to go into details of all the work that had to be done, and that was done, by Vox. But being an emperor, even an emperor of so small an empire as I then was, takes up more time than Opaz hands out between sunrise and sunrise.

The news from Seg was that he was keeping the clansmen in play, baiting them with Filbarrka’s zorcamen. The zorcas, being so close-coupled and nimble, could ride rings around the more massive voves with their eight legs; but I felt that itchy feeling anyone must when he tangles with vove-mounted clansmen. Seg had started the Second Phalanx on their way back to Vondium and the Lord Farris was ferrying them in a detached part of his fleet of sailing skyships.

When the Second flew in, Kyr Nath Nazabhan flew with them.

Delia and I and a group of officers went out to meet him as his sailing flier touched down on Voxyri Drinnik. The wide open space outside the walls beyond the Gate of Voxyri blew with dust, the suns shone and streamed their mingled lights of ruby and jade, and the air smelled sweet with a Kregan dawn.

Here, on this hallowed ground, the Freedom Fighters and the Phalanx had won their victory against the Hamalese and brought Vondium the Proud back once more into Vallian hands.

Nath Nazabhan jumped down and walked most smartly toward us. He wore war harness, dulled with use, and his fresh and open face showed tiny signs of the care that had been wearing at him. But he was his usual alert, cheerful self, and a man I valued as a friend and a commander. Mind you, he never forgave himself for the debacle at the Gates of Sicce where a Phalanx had been overturned by the clansmen. But he had more than made up for that.

We had not seen each other since the Battle of Kochwold. "Majestrix! Majister!" He thumped the iron kax encasing his ribcage, its gold and silver chasings dulled. "Lahal and Lahal!"

We greeted him, Delia first, and the Lahals were warm and filled with feeling. In a little group we mounted the zorcas and rode into the city. There was much to be said.

He told me he had instituted a thorough inquiry into the reasons for the temporary breaking of the Second Phalanx. This amused me. The idea that anyone should inquire why men should be broken by a vove-mounted clansmen's charge was in itself ludicrous; but Nath was enormously jealous of the reputation and prowess of his Phalanx. And, of course, now that they had won so convincingly, nothing would change their minds and they remained convinced that the Phalanx and the Hakkodin could best any fighting force in the world.

The men of the Phalanx might be convinced; I still did not share that conviction.

But there was no reasoning with Nath.

As we rode through the busy streets where the people gave us a cheer and then got on with their tasks, the grim men of the Emperor's Sword Watch surrounded us. No need for their swords to be unsheathed against the people of Vondium. The ever-present threat of assassination had receded; but there were foemen in Kregen who would willingly pay red gold to see me dead.

As I have remarked, that sentiment was returned.

We all congregated in the Sapphire Reception Room where fragrant Kregan tea and sweets were served. For those who needed further sustenance, the second breakfast was provided. I looked at Kyr Nath Nazabhan.

His father, Nazab Nalgre na Therminsax, was an imperial Justicar, the governor of a province, and Nath took his name from his father. I felt it opportune to improve on that, not in any denial of filial respect but

out of approval and recognition of Nath's own qualities, of his service and achievements.

When I broached the subject he looked glum.

"Truth to tell, majister, I have become used to being called Nazabhan—"

"But a man cannot live on his father's name."

"True, but—"

"Our son Drak," said Delia, radiant in a long gown, her hair sheening in the early radiance. "Before he went off to Havilfar—"

What Delia would have said was lost, for the doors opened and Garfon the Staff, that major-domo whose arrow wound in the heel still produced a little limp, banged his gold-bound balass staff upon the marble floor. They relish that, do these major-domos and chamberlains. He produced a sudden silence with his clackety-clack.

Then he bellowed.

"Vodun Alloran, Kov of Kaldi!"

More than one person present in the Sapphire Reception Room gasped. It was easy to understand why. The kovnate of Kaldi, a lozenge-shaped province in the extreme southwest of the island, had long been cut off from communication with the capital and the lands hewing to the old Vallian inheritance. Down there Phusi-Yantong's minions held sway.

It was in Kaldi that the invading armies from Pandahem and Hamal had landed.

The stir in the room brought a bright flush to the kov's face as he marched sturdily across the floor. I did

not fail to notice the discreet little group of the Sword Watch who escorted him and his entourage. A tenseness persisted there, a feeling of waiting passions, ready to break out. I placed my cup on the table and composed my face.

Naghan ti Lodkwara, Targon the Tapster and Cleitar the Standard happened to be the officers of the Sword Watch on duty that day. Their scarlet and yellow blazed in the room as they wheeled their men up. The men and women with the Kov of Kaldi kept together. They looked lost, not so much bewildered and bedraggled as approaching those states and not much caring for the experience. They must have gone through some highly unpleasant times, getting out of Kaldi.

“Majister!” burst out this Kov Vodun, and he went into the full incline, prostrating himself on the rugs of the marble floor.

“Get up, kov,” I said, displeased. “We no longer admit of that flummery here in Vondium in these latter days.”

Before he rose he turned his face up and looked at me.

A man of middle years, with a shrewd, weather-beaten face in which those brown Vallian eyes were partially hidden by heavy, down-drooping lids, he was a man with depths to his being, a man of gravitas. His clothes were of first quality, being the usual buff Vallian coat and breeches with the tall black boots. His broad-brimmed hat with those two slots cut in the front brim he held in his left hand. He stood up.

He, naturally, wore no weapons. My Sword Watch would not tolerate strangers, even if they claimed to be

kovs, the Kregan equivalent to dukes, carrying weapons into the presence of the Emperor and Empress of Vallia. That was a new and unwelcome custom, over which I had sighed and allowed, for as you will know we in Vallia are more used to carrying our weapons as a sign of our independence. But times change. Weapons were a part and parcel of life now, and we would soon be back to the old days, I hoped.

Kov Vodun's retainers wore banded sleeves in maroon and gray, the colors of Kaldi. Their badges, sewn in drawn wire and in sculpted gold for the kov, represented a leaping sea-barynth, that long and sinuous sea monster of Kregen. I looked closely, for by the colors and badges a man wears may he be recognized again.

You can, also, tell his allegiances. There were no other colors — no black and white of the racters, for example — and from what I knew of Kaldi I believed the province to be out of the main stream of power politics. There were many provinces of the old Vallia whose hierarchy preferred to keep aloof from intrigues.

I considered. Then: "Lahal, Kov Vodun. You are welcome."

He did not smile; but a muscle jumped in his cheek.

"Lahal, majister. I praise Opaz the All Glorious I have arrived safely."

As you will see, I had cut through the Llahals straight to the Lahals. A small point; but I fancied this man needed encouragement.

"You will take refreshment?" I indicated the loaded tables and, instantly, a cup of tea was brought forward,

for it was far too early for wine. "There is parclear and sazz if you would prefer."

"Tea, majister, and I thank you. Those devils from Pandahem drain the country dry. We are fortunate to be alive."

He was laboring under some powerful emotion that made the cup shake upon the saucer. I assumed what he had gone through had left an indelible mark. He told me his father, the old kov, had been slain by the enemies of Vallia, and that all the country down there was firmly in the hands of Rosil Yasi, the Strom of Morcra. At this name I sucked in my breath. I knew that rast of old. A Kataki, one of that whiptailed race who are slavemasters par excellence, the Kataki Strom and I were old antagonists and I knew him as a man who bore me undying enmity. He was, also, a tool of Phu-si-Yantong's, and he had worked in his time for Vad Garnath of Hamal, a man who had his come-uppance waiting for him if ever we met again.

His retainers were taken care of and the other people in the Sapphire Reception Room were soon engaged in general conversation with him, trying to learn all there was to know of the situation. News, as always, was eagerly sought after.

Introductions were made as necessary and when the cordialities had been completed and he had described graphically how he and his people had fought from the hills until all their supplies had gone, and they were ragged and starving, so that they had at last stolen an

airboat and made good their escape, Nath Nazabhan drew me privily aside.

Seeing that Nath had something he wished to get off his chest I moved quietly with him to a curtained alcove. I had been watching one of Kov Vodun's people with a puzzled interest. This man — if it was a man, for in the enveloping green cloak and hood the figure could as easily have been a woman — moved with a slow stately upright stance. He (or she) carried his (or her) hands thrust deeply into the wide sleeves of the robe, crossed upon the chest. The waist was cinctured by a narrow golden chain from which the locket for rapier and dagger swung emptily. There was merely black shadow within the hood, and a fugitive gleam of eye.

Upon the breast of the swathing green cloak, and very small, appeared the maroon and gray and the leaping Sea-Barynth. So I turned away, guessing this personage to be an adviser to Kov Vodun. If he (or she) turned out to be a Kataki in disguise, or some other evil-minded rast, my people would soon find out.

Nath said: "I suppose he is genuine? I mean, the real kov? He could be a spy, still working for Yantong."

"He could be genuine and the real kov and still be working for Yantong."

"By Vox, yes!"

One of the clever tricks an emperor has to know how to perform is judging character. So many people judge character by a person's relations with society or established social orders; to perform the difficult task properly you have to judge if a person is being true to

his own basic beliefs. This is fundamental. What goes even beyond that, penetrating into the unknown depths beyond the fundament — if, truly, that be possible — is to judge not only a person's adherence to his own beliefs and therefore his own qualities of character; but to judge if those beliefs match up to what you yourself believe. If the two square — fine. If they do not — beware!

A part of the puzzle was solved for us almost at once. The least important part, to be sure.

A Jiktar walked across the Kov Vodun and he moved a little diffidently, I thought. He wore a smart uniform of sky-blue tunic and madder-red breeches, and because he was Nath Orcantor, known as Nath the Frolus, and a well-liked regimental commander, he wore his rapier and main gauche as a matter of uniform dress.

He had raised a regiment of totrixmen for the defense of Vondium, and because he was from Ovvend he had insisted on clothing his regiment in blue tunics and red breeches, a combination unusual for Vallia. Now he halted before the kov and was introduced by Chuktar Ty-Je Efervon, a wily Pachak who was Nath the Frolus's Brigade commander.

"Orcantor," said Kov Vodun. "Of course. Your family is well known in Ovvend — shipping, I think."

"That is so, kov. And I remember you when you visited Ovvend with your father. I am saddened at his loss, for he was a fine man and a great kov."

"His death shall be avenged," said Vodun, and he spoke between his teeth. All who watched him saw the

flash of insensate rage. "I shall not rest until the devils are brought to justice." His left hand dropped to his belt and groped, and found no familiar rapier hilt. But we all understood the message. Justice, from Vodun Alloran, the Kov of Kaldi, would be meted out with the sword.

"So he is the real kov," said Nath.

"It would seem so. I think it is high time Naghan Vanki earned his hire." Naghan Vanki had come in from his estates and was prepared to resume his position as the emperor's chief spy-master. We had crossed swords in the past, and come to rapprochements. Now, with Delia to smooth the way, Naghan Vanki, Vad of Nav-Sorfall, was prepared to work with me. "He must sniff out all he can of this Kov Vodun."

"Agreed. Vodun has a way with him, a presence. The ladies are quite smitten."

And, by Krun, that was true, for the ladies were clustered around Kov Vodun now and were hanging on his words. Vodun had a story to tell, of hair-breadth escapes and disguises and swift flights in the lights of the Moons of Kregen. That flash of rage we had seen in him had struck like a lightning bolt, and had as quickly vanished. But Vodun would not rest until his father had been avenged.

"Well, Nath, I cannot shilly-shally about like this all day. I have a new flour mill to inspect, and then, I fancy you may feel it incumbent on me to take a look at the Second. Is this in your mind?"

He laughed.

“They are in good heart, now. It is only miserable skulking sorts of formations that do not relish showing off for their emperor.”

We had barely touched on that awful moment when the Second had recoiled. They had broken at the junction of Kerchuri and Kerchuri, the two wings of the Phalanx. They had been forced back on their rear ranks, a seething sea of bronze and crimson and many of the pikes had gone up. A pikeman whose pike stabs air is of little use in the front ranks. But the Third's Sixth Kerchuri had swung up and held the torrent of voves, and the Second had closed up, reformed, and held.

That, as I pointed out to Nath, was the achievement.

After the break, they had taken a fresh grasp on courage, had breathed in, and then smashed back, file by file, and the pikes had come down all in line, and they had driven the clansmen recoiling back.

“There are many bobs to be distributed, majister.”

“We shall make of the ceremony something special.” The men had earned their medals, and if they called them bobs in fine free-and-easy fashion, they valued them nonetheless.

Making my excuses to the company — which had thinned now as the people went about their work — I slipped away without ceremony. The Sword Watch were there. Delia gave me a smile and I said: “I must talk to you this evening, my heart.” Whereat her face grew grave and she understood that I did not talk thus lightly. But I went out and mounted up on a fine fresh zorca,

Grumbleknees, a gray, and took myself off to the flour mill.

The original mill had burned in the Time of Troubles and the new structure incorporated refinements the wise men said would increase production as well as milling a finer flour.

If I do not dwell on this flour mill it is precisely because this inspection was typical of so many that had to be undertaken. Everyone wanted to shine in the sight of the emperor, and although I could, had I wished, regard that as petty crawling lick-spittling behavior, I did not. We all worked for Vondium and for Vallia and my job was to make sure we all did the best we could.

The streaming mingled lights of the Suns of Scorpio flooded down as the waterwheel groaned and heaved and turned over as the sluice gates opened and the white water poured through. I looked up. Feeding the people would be by the measure of this mill that much easier. So I looked up, and with a hissing thud a long Lohvian arrow sprouted abruptly from the wood, a hand's breadth from my head.

**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