

DRAY PRESCOT: 4

**SWORDSHIPS
OF SCORPIO**

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writing as

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A Mushroom eBook

SWORSHIPS OF SCORPIO

Dray Prescott #4

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A Note On The Tapes From Rio De Janeiro

I had assumed, along with thousands of readers who I am sure shared the same genuine sorrow, that the saga of Prescott of Antares must come to an end with the final transcriptions of the tapes from Africa. The editing of the tapes that chronicle the incredible story of Dray Prescott on Kregen beneath the Suns of Scorpio, a task which by a fortunate chance had fallen to me, had been so arranged that each volume might be read as an individual story in its own right.

But this meant that there were but few pages left to see publication after the first three volumes.

After that — nothing. I had hoped that Dray Prescott might in some way have been able to see a volume of his saga and perhaps be moved to contact me. So far this hope has proved vain.

But the ways of the Star Lords, no less than the Savanti, are passing strange and beyond the comprehension of mere mortal men.

I had just written the words, “. . . and then I yelled,” and pushed back in my chair in my old book-lined study, feeling as though I had screwed down the coffin-lid on the face of an old friend, all glory fled from two

worlds, when the telephone rang and it was Geoffrey Dean, long-distance from Washington. The coincidence affected me profoundly for it had been Geoffrey, an old friend and now connected with the State Department, who had given me the tapes from Africa. He had received them from Dan Fraser, a young field worker, who had provided Dray Prescott with the cassette tape recorder in that epidemic-stricken village of West Africa where Prescott had saved the situation. Geoffrey was wildly excited.

His first words were: "I have more tapes from Dray Prescott, Alan!"

By the time we both had calmed down, I had arranged to fly out to see him at once. A mysterious box had that moment arrived, and he had opened it, all unknowing; but he began to suspect as he saw the packed cassettes, played the first one for a few seconds only — and then had phoned me. There was a letter he was having translated. The box had been all over the world, it appeared, but had been mailed from Rio de Janeiro. Geoffrey met me at the airport and I drove with him to his Washington hotel in an impatience I could barely control. As soon as we entered his room I saw them. The box had been left as he had opened it. The manila-wrapped cardboard box, carelessly slit open, rested on a chair, and paper and string hung down. From the box a whole heaping pile of tape cassettes lay tumbled — and I knew that they contained a great wonderful El Dorado of exotic adventures on Kregen beneath Antares, that fierce and beautiful, mystic and

awe-inspiring planet four hundred light-years from our Earth.

Geoffrey was waving a letter in my face.

“Read this first, Alan!”

The letter in translation was curt to mystification.

Dear Mr. Fraser:

I have been asked by Mr. Dray Prescott to forward to you these cassettes. Mr. Prescott was instrumental in foiling a skyjack attempt upon a jet liner in which I was a passenger. The bandits were after ransom without political aims in their act. We crashed in the jungle. None of the passengers would be alive today if Mr. Prescott had not guided us all to safety and taken care of us along the way. We would have done anything for him. All he required was the use of my tape recorder - and a large number of cassettes. And a promise to send them to you. With great pleasure this I now do. I regret I have been unable to listen to any of them as my English is imperfect. Mr. Prescott has now left Rio de Janeiro. If you see him please convey my deepest regard and warmest admiration.

(signed) Francisco Rodriguez.

“And a hotel address in Rio,” I said.

Geoffrey sighed. “No trace of Rodriguez, I’m afraid.”

I looked at the heaping pile of cassettes and my hands shook as I placed that marked *One* in the machine. The opening was garbled; but then a voice sounded out clearly. I knew that deep, powerful voice; I would know it anywhere. I cannot vouch for the truth of his story, but that calm sure voice inspires confidence — more, it demands belief.

The precious box had been sent by sea mail to Dan Fraser's address in Africa, had been shipped back to Washington by the agency and, because Dan had been tragically killed in an auto accident and had no relatives, had found its way to Geoffrey Dean, Dan's boss. Geoffrey had made inquiries about this skyjacking, but had discovered nothing at the various embassies he approached. "Whatever happened down there in South America we may never know. No one is talking."

But, beside this wonderful cache of undreamed-of treasure, I did not care. Now the world could once more share the adventures of Dray Prescott on Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio and revel in the barbaric color and headlong action of his life.

As described by Dan Fraser, Dray Prescott is above middle height, with straight brown hair and intelligent brown eyes that are level and oddly dominating, compelling. His shoulders made Dan's eyes pop. Dan sensed an abrasive honesty and a fearless courage about him. He moves, Dan said, like a great hunting cat, quiet and deadly.

Born in 1775, Dray Prescott had clawed his way up through the hawsehole to become a ship's officer; but thereafter had little success in this world. I believe it is clear that, even then, he perceived with an inner conviction that he was destined for some vast and unimaginable fate. When he was whirled away to Kregen he positively reveled in the perils set to test him, and through his immersion in the sacred pool of baptism in the River Zelph of Aphrasöe he is assured of a thousand

years of life, as is his beloved, Delia of the Blue Mountains. Banished to Earth he was recalled by the Star Lords — of whom he tells us nothing — as a kind of interstellar troubleshooter, and he quickly rose to become Zorcander of his clansmen, and then Lord of Strombor, an enclave house of the city of Zenicce on the west coast of the continent of Segesthes. Hurlled through the void once more he suffered the horrors of the overlords of Magdag and was instrumental in raising his army of slaves and workers in an attempt to overthrow them. In the midst of his final onslaught he was whisked to another part of Kregen's inner sea, and plunged once again into the Star Lords' schemes. He had become a member of the famous Krozairs of Zy, entitled to be called Pur Dray, dedicated to the red-sun deity Zair.

Determined to reach Vallia, and Delia, he set off toward the east. But Delia had set her emperor father's air service in motion to find him, and had come herself to the inner sea in search of her lost love. Delia and Dray Prescott flew through The Stratemsk, as Prescott describes them a truly horrific range of mountains walling off the inner sea from the land to the east, the Hostile Territories. With two companions, Seg and Thelda, they crash and go through adventure after adventure until, at last, with the death of the beast-man Umgar Stro at Prescott's hands and the rescue of Delia, they make a dash for it astride Umgar Stro's own impiter — a gigantic coal-black flying beast. Seg and Thelda, so Prescott relates with great sadness, had been ridden down by a host of half-men. A Vallian Air Service

airboat picks them up; but there is treachery aboard this flier, *Lorenztone*, for Prescott awakes beneath a thorn-ivy bush. He has been drugged. He finds weapons and food tossed down to color the impression that he has fled because he is frightened to face Delia's father, the emperor. This is the work, he believes, of the Vallian Racter party, who do not wish the Princess Majestrix of Vallia to wed him, a man not of their choice.

At this point Dray Prescott picks himself up and says: "On my own two feet, then!"

At this point the present volume, *Swordships of Scorpio*, takes up the narrative. At the junction where the tapes from Africa end and the tapes from Rio begin, I have made a note. They do not run consecutively on; there is a gap. From study of the cassettes I am sure there are other gaps to come in the story we have. I repeat, we are superlatively lucky even to have what we do of the fascinating and pulse-stirring saga of Prescott of Antares.

Kregen under the Suns of Scorpio is a real world, savage and beautiful, marvelous and terrible. Dray Prescott is there now, I feel sure, carving out fresh adventures by the side of his Delia of Delphond, his Delia of the Blue Mountains.

Alan Burt Akers.

CHAPTER ONE

I march toward Vallia

On my own two feet, then, I would march all the way across the Hostile Territories and take ship at whatever port I came across and sail to Vallia, and there I would march into the palace of the dread emperor of that proud empire and in sight of all claim from him my beloved, my Delia, my Delia of Delphond, my Delia of the Blue Mountains.

I would!

The deadly Krozair long sword felt good in my fist.

My head still ached from the effects of the poison and my insides felt as though an insane vintner of Zond were trying to stamp a premier vintage from my guts. But I went on. There was no stopping me now — or so I thought then, wrapped about in rage and frustration and the unhealthy desire to smash a few skulls. . .

The plain continued on in gentle undulations to the low hills ringing the horizon. Long pale green grasses blew in the wind sweeping past. Over all the scene that streaming mingled light of the twin suns of Antares

scorched down. The water bottle was half-full. Evidently, whoever had poisoned me and thrown me into the hole beneath the thorn-ivy bush had tossed down the scarlet silk wrapped about weapons and food to fool those aboard the airboat. The food and water had not been meant to keep me alive; I had a shrewd idea that the poisoner thought me dead.

If I, Dray Prescot, with weapons at my disposal could not live off this land, then I did not deserve to survive.

As you will know I was no soft innocent from a big city who always walked on stone sidewalks, who took automobiles everywhere riding on concrete pavements, who pressed buttons for light and warmth, who ate pre-packaged food. Although I am a civilized man from Earth, I was then and have remained when circumstances require as much a savage barbarian as any of the primordial reavers ravaging out from the bleak northlands.

The first river I came to I swam across and the devil take what monsters might be lurking beneath the water.

Along the banks were mounds of bare earth. These I skirted respectfully.

Ahead the tall grasses gave way to a lower variety, and the ground lay bare and dusty in patches here and there. The long black and red-glinting column I did not wish to see advanced obliquely from my right. I had no hesitation whatsoever in turning in my eastward tramp and heading off to the northeast.

From a low hillock — a natural hillock — I could see the seemingly endless stream of ants. I give them their

Earthly name, for the Kregen names for the varieties of ants would fill a book. These were shining black, active, prowling restlessly toward some destiny of their own. The twin suns sank slowly behind me and the land ahead filled with the flooding opaline radiance from Zim and Genodras.

The first screams ripped from the gathering shadows. Now I knew where the stream of ants was headed.

Soldier ants, large fierce fellows, their mandibles perfectly capable of shearing through ordinary leather, kept watch on the flanks of the columns of workers. The soldier ants, I judged, were all of six nails in length. Six nails make a knuckle. A knuckle in Kregen mensuration is about four-point-two inches, say one hundred and eighty millimeters.

These were big fellows.

The screams continued.

I hurried on, parallel to the column, seeing the sinking suns-light glancing off armored bodies, glinting red from joint and mandible.

Ahead the column spread out. It seemed to me like some blasphemous inkblot, spreading and pooling, ever-fed by new streams.

The man had been staked out.

His wrists and ankles were bound with rawhide to four thick stakes, their tops bruised and battered from the blows of hammers. He twisted and writhed; but the tide of black horrors swarmed over him, a living carpet eating him to the bone.

There was only one way to get him out of it.

My Krozair long sword had been in action against mighty foes before; now it would have to go up against tiny killers four inches long.

Four quick slashes released the thongs. I bent and hoisted the man, holding him in my left hand, swatting with the sword. Already the horrors were scuttling up my legs, over my back, along my arms. Agonizing pains stabbed my flesh. I danced and jumped and ran and shed crushed black bodies like a mincer.

The man was clearly dying. I had merely saved him from the kind of death the people — or things — had planned for him.

By the time I had got rid of the last ant, and had rubbed my skin and felt the slick blood greasy there, and had placed the man down gently against a grassy bank, I knew he had mere moments to live. Most of his lower abdomen and legs had been eaten away, his chest cavity was partially exposed, only his head — with the exception of the eyes — remained to appear as a reasonable facsimile of a man.

He was trying to speak, now, croaking sounds from his throat, gargling, his useless arms attempting to lift toward me.

“Rest easy, my friend,” I said in the universal Kregish. “You will sleep soon, and have no more pain.”

“So—,” he said. “Sos—” He choked the words out. “Sosiel!”

“Rest easy, dom.” I uncorked my water bottle, filled it at the river, and poured water over his face and

between his lips. His tongue licked greedily. Some of the blood washed away.

“Save my Sosie!”

“Yes.”

He knew he was dying, I think, and his voice strengthened.

“I am Mangar na Arkasson. Sosie! She — the devils of Cherwangtung took her — they took her — they — the ants! The ants!”

I moistened his lips again. “Easy, dom, easy.”

His black skin shone now with a sweat-sheen in the pink radiance from She of the Veils, the fourth moon of Kregen. He had been a proud and imposing man. His face, despite the contortions his agony wrought in his countenance, still showed hauteur and pride. His features were not the hawk like ones of Xoltemb, the caravan-master I had met on the plains of Segesthes, who came from the island of Xuntal. This man, this Mangar na Arkasson, had features more Negroid in their fashioning, hard and firm with a generous and mobile mouth.

“Swear!” Mangar na Arkasson whispered. “Swear you will save my Sosie from those devils of Cherwangtung. Swear!”

He was dying. He was a fellow human being.

I said, “I will do all I can to save your Sosie, Mangar na Arkasson. You have the word of Dray Prescot, Krozair, the Lord of Strombor.”

“Good — good—”

His mind was wandering now and although I knew he did not have the slightest notion what a Krozair was, and had never heard of Strombor, yet I believe that he took with him into the grave the conviction — and I hope the comforting one — that I was a man who would do as I had sworn.

When he died, after a few mumbled and almost incoherent blasphemies and pleas, cries of strange gods, and, at my questioning, the statement that Cherwangtung stood at the confluence of two rivers, by a mountain, away to the northeast, I buried him. There was no way of judging what marker or memorial he would want, so I contented myself with manhandling a great stone over his grave. That would hold the plains lurfings at bay, for a time at least.

Few lurfings would attack a single man, even, unless there were a round dozen of them. Low-bellied, lean-flanked, gray-furred scavengers are lurfings, equipped with probing snout-like faces well-suited to the tasks nature has set them.

I stood up.

Four moons wheeled across the sky now, and their combined radiance lit up the night-land of Kregen, here on the eastern plains of Central Turismond. Far away to the east lay the coast. On the coast stood port cities, of Vallia, of Pandahem, of Murn-Chem, of a number of trading countries from overseas. I had to reach one, take ship, sail to Vallia. . .

But, first, I had given my word to a dying man.

