

DRAY PRESCOT: 22

**A VICTORY
FOR KREGEN**

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

A VICTORY FOR KREGEN

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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A Note on Dray Prescott

Dray Prescott is a man above middle height, with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, an enigmatic man, 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. 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 of the Savanti nal Aphrasöe, the Swinging City, to the savage and exotic world of Kregen, under the twin Suns of Scorpio, four hundred light-years from Earth.

Here, in the unforgiving yet rewarding world of Kregen, struggling through disaster and triumph, Prescott has made his home. Called on to shoulder the burden of being the Emperor of Vallia and of freeing the islands from the cruel grip of invaders, he is determined, once the country is once more united and free, to hand all over to his son Drak. But the Star Lords have dispatched him on a mission for them in the southern continent of Havilfar, and Prescott and eight comrades have barely escaped with their lives from an under-

ground labyrinth of horror. Now Prescott must battle his way home to resume his work for Vallia.

Dray Prescott relates his story on cassettes, and each book is arranged to be read as complete in itself.

Chapter one

Tyfar Wields his Axe

The gray-beaked fellow flourishing his bronze decapitator fondly imagined my name was written on that wicked curved blade. His one desire in life was to keep my head as a precious souvenir. He even provided himself with a wicker basket swinging at his belt all ready for the trophy.

“Hai! Apim — now you die!”

The path down the side of the artificial mountain led here under overarching branches and the mossy-trunked trees stretched about us, ancient and gnarled, patched and puddled in the light of the suns.

As is my custom in a fight, I do not waste breath replying to taunts or battle chants, unless base cunning indicates the advantage of an even more coarse taunt in return, so I bent my head beneath the horizontal slash of the decapitator. The sword in my fist thrust once. The wicker basket, the bronze-studded armor, the leather boots, and the decapitator all fell away to the side,

sloughing like too-wet dough, slid off the path and away down the slope between the trees.

The fellow was not alone.

Other headhunters pressed on, yelling, screeching their taunts, seeking to take the heads of us nine — who sought merely to escape off the mountain with our lives.

By chance it happened I led the descent of the mound and so these decapitating warriors met me first. They were not apim like me but those hard, gritty diffs men call Nierdriks, with coarse-skinned, high-beaked, hooded-eyed faces like killer turtles, and compact muscular bodies equipped with only two arms and two legs and no tails. Their bronze blades glimmered molten in the smoky shafts of crimson fire from the red sun, and their hides sheened muddy emerald in the fire from the green sun. With shrill yells of hatred they leaped for me.

My comrades were yelling, hullabalooing to get on along the path and at the Nierdriks. The first two attackers were seen off with no great difficulty. The shifting light and shade beneath the trees and the ruddy slope of the path made the action precarious.

My foot turned on a knobby tree root snaking like a swollen vein across the path.

I pitched headlong. My sword switched up instinctively and parried the flurry of blows. The ground came up — hard. The decapitators were held off easily enough; but I was on the ground and smelling the age-old dust puffing up into my nostrils, feeling that damned tree root gouging into my back.

With a slash measurably faster and more intemperate than those that had gone before, I slashed the nearest fellow's ankles and then had to twist aside to avoid the thwunking great blow of his comrade's head cleaver. There was no real danger. In the next instant I would be up, on my feet, and that bloodthirsty head-and-body parter would go tumbling down the slope spraying blood.

There was no real danger — but, in the instant as I gathered myself, a shadow moved over me and two firm, muscular legs straddled me, and Tyfar was yelling and swinging his blade over my head.

“Hold, Jak! I'll cover you!”

He was remarkably lucky I hadn't chopped him. He stood over me, swinging and smiting, his shield well up, his axe a silver-stained blur in the dappled shadows.

This was a new and remarkable experience. The sensation intrigued me. Here was I sprawled on the ground in the middle of a fight, and this fine young prince Tyfar stood over me battling off our foemen!

Remarkable!

Also — highly amusing.

All the same, by Zair, comical though it was it could not be allowed to go on.

I wriggled away and degutted the Nierdrik who sought to sink his brand into Tyfar's unshielded side and then sprang up and clouted the next one over the head. His big turtle nose burst and sprayed purple fluids into the shadows.

“You are unharmed, Jak?”

“Aye. Aye, I’m unharmed — Prince.” And then, because he was young and vehement and very much your proper prince of honor, I said — and with warmth, “My thanks.”

More Nierdriks dropped from the trees upon us and for a space we had a merry set-to. In the confusing shadows, twinned in jade and crimson, we fought. Presently the headhunters drew off and gathered in a bunch a few paces below us on the path. Many bodies strewed the ground between, and they must have realized now that they had sought to slay and take the heads of a party unwilling to allow them that liberty.

Abruptly, one of the turtle-faces spun about, silently, and collapsed.

Barkindrar the Bullet said, “They are real, then.” He took out another leaden slingshot and began to fuss with his sling.

Tyfar said, “Yes. It was in my mind they were mere phantoms.”

“Not phantoms,” said Deb-Lu-Quienyin. “I would have known.”

He would, too, not a doubt of it. The kharrna, the powers, of a Wizard of Loh would certainly have told Quienyin if we faced hallucinatory projections. He had taken no part in the combat, as was right and proper, and with a typical little hitch to his turban, setting it straight, he was visibly becoming a proper Wizard of Loh, respected and dreaded.

An arrow winged like a sliver of wrath and skewered a Nierdrik through that turtle neck.

“And,” quoth Nath the Shaft, “I’ll have that one back when we go past.”

“You didn’t see where my bullet went, Nath?”

“I did not. If you must sling lead then you must expect to lose it. If you must be a slinger then you must—”

“I’ll knock the next three over before you clear your quiver, you great fambly!”

Well, that was normal. Nath the Shaft and Barkindrar the Bullet arguing over their respective skills, and wagering any and everything on the outcome of their shots, provided a never-failing source of joy and amusement to us through the horrors we had endured. The Nierdriks clustered in a rocky clearing among the trees, a dozen yards or so below us, and the radiance of the Suns of Scorpio fell about them. They provided capital targets.

Another leaden shot and another feathered shaft flew.

“Ha! Your man is only winged!”

“He’ll never fly again, for sure!”

These two, archer and slinger, prepared to cast again. They were Prince Tyfar’s retainers, the only two he had left to him from his father’s expedition. But, for all the fun and frolic, we had to get down off this artificial mountain before nightfall, and that was not too far off...

An abrupt shriek rent the air.

Two shrieks shattered past us as the Pachak twins bounded down the trail. Ordered, methodical, intensely loyal, Pachaks, but when they loose their yellow hair and turn berserk, then it is prudent for any man to guard himself. Screaming war cries, the twins hurtled down

the path. Their weapons glittered. Like maniacal savages of a primitive time before the dawn of civilization, they burst in among the astounded head-hunters.

Barkindrar and Nath held their shots, and only just in time.

“We are with you!” shouted Tyfar. He started in running down the trail after the two Pachaks, whose right arms were going in and out twinkling with fighting fervor. The Pachaks’ two left arms apiece held their shields slanted expertly, and their tail hands swept razor-sharp steel in lethal slashes. The Nierdriks fell back, gabbling, some already turning to run.

So I lumbered down and saw off a man or two and, lo!, the path was clear.

“Well done!” panted Tyfar. “By Krun! That was a sight!”

The two Pachak brothers, Logu Fre-Da and Modo Fre-Da, bent to clean their weapons with methodical care on the scraps of cloth twisted around the corpses. Often it took a considerable time for a Pachak to regain normalcy from that fierce fighting frenzy; but I, like many men, considered that this berserk image of the Pachaks was carefully fostered, designed to impress and intimidate. It formed a part of their life-style only when they chose. All the same, there was no doubt that, often and often, something in that skirling onslaught got into their blood.

The Wizard of Loh, Deb-Lu Quienyin, was looking pleased. So was I. We had arranged with the two Pachaks to look out for the old wizard, and although

they had not yet entered his employ and given their nikobi, which code of loyal service would have bound them, they were actively aware of their responsibility.

There were nine of us, nine adventurers seeking to escape from this artificial mound, this Moder which contained treasure and horror, and now I turned to look at my two rascals who came walking down toward us.

Nodgen, the tough Brokelsh, carried a bloodstained spear.

Hunch, the Tryfant, poked apprehensively at one of the Nierdriks, who flopped over, his arms limp.

“Are they all—?” began Hunch.

“You great fambly!” roared Nodgen, in his coarse Brokelsh way.

I did not smile. I was aware of the decline of the suns, and the lengthening jade- and ruby-tinged shadows beneath the trees.

“Let us get on.”

Yes, there were nine of us, and we wended down the side of the Moder and we kept a very sharp eye out for more unpleasantness.

We had chosen to descend by a path different from the one up which the expedition had toiled to the summit, and now as we went down, the sweet scent of twining plants filled our nostrils, and the tinkling sounds of hidden brooks made a mockery of the horror contained within the Moder. Hunch kept on casting glances back up the path. Well, that was fine. That meant we had our backs covered.

To look at us as we came to the base of the descent and surveyed the belt of thorny scrub ahead would no doubt have occasioned either amusement or disdain in any splendid court of Kregen. We had outfitted ourselves with fresh clothes; but now these were ripped and torn and stained. But our weapons were sharp. I noticed with interest that Quienyin continued to carry his shortsword strapped to his waist. Perhaps his powers had not fully returned? He had lost his powers as a famed and feared Wizard of Loh, and within the lowest depths of the Moder he had regained them. But — perhaps he had not satisfied himself? It seemed to me he was not prepared to put full trust in himself or his powers just yet. That made sense, given the harsh and terrible nature of much of Kregen.

The sense of power being exercised wantonly, the crushing feeling of oppression, and the expectation of impending doom we had lived with during our time in the Moder did not magically lift the moment we stepped off the mountain. Naïve to expect it would. The Wizard of the Moder might have been tamed; now we had to face the terrors of the Humped Land, the sere and unforgiving land clustered and clumped with the artificial mounds, each containing fortune and horror.

The land ahead of us and barring our escape would test us all.

“You two,” said Prince Tyfar with that habitual note of command tempered by the feelings of comradeship, “scout the entrance where we came in. It is just possible a few beasts have been left us.”

“Quidang, Prince!” said Barkindrar and Nath, and they took themselves off, moving very circumspectly among the foliage.

The members of the main expedition, from whom we had been parted in the depths of the Moder, would have been long since gone. They would be spurring back to civilization bearing the loot. I looked at Tyfar and he saw my quizzical glance.

“I know, Jak, I know. But we must try.”

“Yes.”

“Let me bustle around and make a fire while those two are gone,” said Hunch, the Tryfant. “I am famished—”

“Very well. Do I need to caution you over the fire?”

“No, no, Jak — I mean, notor — no need.” And Hunch shivered and looked across at the trees where there were more shadows than the last of the suns shine.

He had taken a sack stuffed with goodies from the abode of the wizard, after we had humbled that proud and cruel man — if the thing had been a man at all — and when the fire was going well within the little dell beneath a bank we had picked, Hunch shook out his sack.

We all stood back. The stench offended.

“By Tryflor!” yelled Hunch. “The damned Moder lord—”

“The rast has tricked us!”

“The food — putrid!”

“Well,” I said over the hubbub. “Maybe it is just as well. That cramp of a Moder lord might have magicked

the vittles in our insides. I do not care to contemplate that, by Krun!”

“You have the right of it, Jak,” observed Tyfar. “But we are hungry.”

“The Humped Land will not be so sere that we cannot find aught to eat.”

Tyfar made a face. He was a prince — admittedly, a prince of Hamal, which great empire was locked in deadly combat with my own land of Vallia — and the idea of chasing rodents and other lowly creatures for food did not appeal to him. Then he smiled.

“When you come to the fluttrell’s vane, Jak, one must do what one must. I shall not care for it, no, by Krun. But I will eat a green lizard when my guts rumble!”

“Nodgen,” I said, “do you go and see what fruits there are on those bushes.”

“Aye, Jak — notor — that will be something.”

These two, Hunch the Tryfant and Nodgen the Brokelsh, had been slave with me, and my trick of freeing them and giving them manumission before witnesses still had not quite overcome the old freedom of speech. It mattered nothing to me. But I fancied our deception had to pass muster, at least in the eyes of Tyfar. He was a man with high ideals, studious and yet quick with his axe; but he had been brought up in a culture in which slavery was a mere part of life. I wondered if he would ever be brought to understand what we were trying to do in Vallia, and if he shared the blind hatred of that island empire of his fellows. He

thought I came from Djanduin. Well, I do, in a very real sense — but if he discovered I was a Vallian...

I brushed these tiresome thoughts away. We had to survive to cross the Humped Land. I had not forgotten the fearsome swarth riders, who infested the land between the Moders; but I forbore to mention them at that moment, for fear of what would happen to the water pot Hunch was carrying across to the fire.

We set watches and the suns sank and Barkindrar and Nath returned. They reported the compound was empty of life, not a riding animal to be seen. But they did bring a few crusts of bread and a packet of palines wrapped in leaves somewhat shriveled.

“Whoever dropped this and cursed for his loss did us a good turn, by Belzid’s belly,” quoth Barkindrar.

By this I understood that he and Nodgen, Brokelsh both, were compatible.

“You did not believe the Wizard of the Moder had let us get away with his food, then?” said Quienyin. He was clearly interested in Barkindrar’s reasoning.

The slinger looked down, despite all his bluff toughness, discomfited by this direct interest in him by the Wizard of Loh.

“It was in my mind, San. We got away easy, like.”

“We put the damned Moder Lord down,” said Tyfar. “I still wonder if we did the right thing not to kill him. I see it was right and a kind of a small Jikai; but, all the same... He has played a scurvy trick on us.”

“It was right not to slay him, Prince.” I spoke briskly. “Now, if you agree, we will eat up this princely meal,

stand our watches, and when the Twins rise we will set off.”

They all gaped.

“But — Jak—”

“I do not think you will enjoy travel in the heat of the suns. And if we are to find ourselves mounts, we must look to the future. Or do you wish to remain a heap of moldering bones here?”

There was no answer on Kregen under Antares to that.

After our exertions and despite our hunger and the conditions in which we found ourselves, we found sleep. The watches changed, and no one felt inclined for conversation. Our thoughts, I feel sure, dwelt on the confrontations of the morrow when we could expect to be visited by the swarth riders. They had shepherded the expedition to this particular Moder out of all the hundreds dotting the Humped Land. They were mysterious, enigmatic; but they were some kind of men and therefore amendable to the argument of steel.

But, for all that, they possessed the only riding animals that we could expect to lay hands on around this desolate place.

With the rising of the Twins, the two second moons of Kregen eternally orbiting each other, we rose also and gathered our weapons and set off marching across the Humped Land.

Under the moon glitter, the dark and ominous shapes of the Moders rose from the plain about us. They stretched for mile after mile, set in patterns, and at

random, some relatively small, others encompassing many miles of subterranean passages.

“D’you fancy going down another one to see what we can lay hands on, Hunch?” I overheard Nodgen speaking thus, and half-turned. Hunch spluttered a passionate protest.

“What! Has your ib decayed, Nodgen! Go down there again!”

“It was a thought,” said Nodgen, and he laughed in his coarse, bristly, Brokelsh way.

The Pachak twins marched in silence, and their eyes remained alert and they scanned every inch of the way.

The slinger and the archer marched one each side of their lord, Prince Tyfar. He strode on, head up, breathing deeply and easily. Yes, I had seen much of goodness in this young man during those periods of horror; now, with our way ahead at least for the moment clear, I hauled alongside him and we fell into a conversation about — of all things — the state of theater in Ruathytu, the capital of Hamal.

“A few houses play the old pieces,” he said. He sounded aggrieved. “But by far the majority play these new nonsenses, all decadence and thumping and sensation. It is the war, I suppose.”

“Yes. Fighting men—”

“But, surely, Jak, a fighting man needs the sustenance of the inner spirit? Needs to have himself revitalized?”

“You mean, when he isn’t trying to stop his head coming off?”

Tyfar breathed in. He eyed me meanly. “You mock me, Jak.”

“Not so. I agree with you. But you are a prince—”

“I am! But — what has that to do with it?”

“Just that you have had the advantages and privileges of an education that was not primarily aimed at earning a living.”

I probed deliberately here. I had opened a gambit — in Jikaida I would have been opening the files for the Deldars to link ready for the zeunting — and he was aware that I meant more than I said.

“You know no man may inherit his father’s estates and titles as easily as he climbs into bed, Jak. You know that, one day, when — and I pray to all the gods it is a long and distant day — my father dies I shall be called on to fight for what is mine. You know that. The law upholds. But a man must uphold himself as well as the law. I have been trained as a fighting man, and much I detested it at the time.”

I had heard how he had always been running off to the libraries as a young lad, and how he had taken up the axe as a kind of reproach to those who taught him.

The conversation at my nudging came around to his axe and he repeated what the slaves had said. He preferred the knowledge that came from books; but he had become an accomplished axeman as though to proclaim his independence from that emblem of many things, the sword. I thought I understood.

There was in this young prince an inner fire I found engaging. His diffident manner, so noticeable when in

the company of his father, had all fallen away under the tutelage of the horrors of the Moder. He gave his orders with a snap; yet one was fully alive to his own estimation of himself and what he was doing, as though he saw himself acting a part on a stage of his imagination.

Our conversation wended along most comfortably, and Quienyin joined us to debate again what we had discovered and our chances of the morrow. Our voices were low-toned. And we all kept a sharp lookout.

“We must seek to move from one point of vantage to another,” I said. “If we get our backs against good cover we can deal with the swarth folk. Once one of them is dismounted we will see what his mettle is on his own two feet.”

“Yes,” nodded Quienyin. “I fancied they did have only two legs apiece. Although, of course, you cannot be sure.”

“Quite.”

“I couldn’t make out what kind of diff they were,” said Tyfar. “There was something of the Chulik about them—”

“No tusks, though,” said Quienyin.

“No tusks. But something about the jut of the head.”

“We shall find out when the suns are up,” I said, and that tended to end the conversation for a space.

The Moders rose from the rubbly plain something like a dwabur apart. Walking those five miles gave us an itchy feeling up the spine, traipsing as we were across relatively open ground. The trouble was, that open ground was probably safer than the areas in the

immediate vicinity of the artificial mountains, the Moders, the tombs of the ancient dead and their treasurers and magics.

The rosy shadows of the next Moder enfolded us, and Hunch, for one, let go with a sigh of relief.

“Still!”

Modo’s piercing voice reached us, thrown so as to tell us the position and not to reach to the danger he had spotted ahead. We stopped stock-still. A few scrubby thorn bushes threw splotchy shadows from the Twins. In this dappled shade we stood and watched the file of Nierdriks pad past.

They looked like ghostly silhouettes, animated dark dolls against the radiance of the moons. Silently they padded past, one after the other. They were walking. I, for one, was content to let them go. Had they been riding, now, straddling any of the magnificent assortment of Kregan riding animals — why, then, I do not think my companions would have let them go...

When the last had gone, vanishing into the shadows of the Moder, we resumed our progress.

And we kept even more alert, staring about even more vigilantly.

Quienyin kept up with us, struggling along without a murmur.

“Prince,” I whispered quietly so that the Wizard of Loh would not overhear. “I think we must rest for a moment or two—”

“Rest, Jak? I thought the plan was to march as far as we might in the light of the moons and rest in the heat of the suns.”

He saw my gaze fixed on Quienyin, who had not turned to stare back at us but was doggedly ploughing on over the rubbly surface.

“Ah — yes, of course. It is thoughtless of me.”

Tyfar hurried ahead and checked the Pachaks in the vanguard.

We all rested, although of us all only Quienyin needed the break.

Again I pondered on Prince Tyfar. Many a haughty prince would simply have gone on, ignoring anyone else’s discomfort. That Quienyin was a Wizard of Loh was now known to my companions; but that had not caused Tyfar to call a brief halt.

We discussed the fate of our dead fellows of the expedition, and we expressed ourselves as confident that the survivors had escaped. We had seen them emerging into the sunshine before we had been trapped within the Moder, and Tyfar, it was clear, could not countenance any thoughts that his father and sister had not escaped to safety.

“And, Jak, do not forget. Lobur the Dagger was there and he is mighty tender of my sister Thefi.”

“As is Kov Thrangulf.”

“Oh, yes, Kov Thrangulf.”

That pretty little triangle had its explosion due, all in Zair’s good time.

When we set off again Quienyin unprotestingly marched stoutly with us. Dawn was not far off. The sweet smell of the air, only faintly tinged with dust, the host of fat stars, the glistening glide of the moons, all held that special pre-dawn hollowness, that waiting silence for the new day.

I began to spy the land with more stringency, seeking a strong place where we might rest. What I needed was precise and as we dipped down into a little groove or runnel in the ground, with thorn-ivy crowned ridges each side, I felt we had come as near as I could hope for. This was not perfect; it was as precise as we would find.

“Here, I think, Tyfar.”

He stared about. I watched his face, wondering if he would suffer a character change now that we were out in the fresh air.

The thorn-ivy, vicious stuff that flays the unwary, clustered thickly on the two ridgeways bordering the runnel. This was the real spiny ivy of Kregen. The Kregish for ivy is hagli. If we kept low we would be out of sight of a rider approaching at right angles. We chose a kink in the runnel so we could arrange one avenue only to watch. The clumped bushes shone a lustrous green and the thorns prickled like an army of miniature spearmen.

“You think so, Jak?” Tyfar looked uncertain.

The three principals stood together. The other six would not offer their opinions until asked, although the two Pachaks had every right to speak up.

Presently, Tyfar called, "Barkindrar, Nath. We camp here."

I nodded to myself.

That was the way it ought to be done. Confidence. The two Pachaks said nothing; silently they got on with cutting thorn-ivy and fashioning a form of boma around the open angle of the kink in the runnel. Old campaigners, these two Pachak hyr-paktuns, capital fellows to have along with you in a chancy business.

"I am quite fond of bright-leaved hagli around the door," said Quienyin. "But this stuff is murderous."

We hauled the thorn-ivy around, using sticks and weapons and not touching the stuff, and so fashioned the boma. I spied the land in the first flush of light. Jumping out, I walked a way off, turned to check the look of our hide.

It looked innocent enough.

Going back along the runnel I felt a burst of confidence.

We could hole up there all day and never be spotted unless some damned rider fell on top of us.

If that was what was in Tyfar's mind, it most certainly was not in mine.

Hunch was in no doubt.

"We can hole up here all day," he said to Nodgen. "We've water to last us and we can march on to the next stream tonight." He yawned. "I think I shall sleep all day."

“The dawn wind will blow our tracks away,” said Nodgen. “But you’ll stand your watch like the rest of us, you skulking Tryfant.”

“At least I don’t always need a shave—”

“Quiet, you two,” I said.

They froze.

“All of you — still!”

As the light brightened with the rising of the red sun, Zim, and the green sun, Genodras, and the shadows fled across the sere land, specks drifted high against the radiance. We squinted our eyes. Yes — Flutsmen. They were flutsmen up there, sky flyers sweeping across the land on the lookout for prey. True mercenaries of the skies, the flutsmen serve for pay in various armies; but they mostly enjoy reiving on their own account. And no man is safe from them.

We remained perfectly still.

High and menacing, the wings of their flyers lifting and falling in rhythm, the flutsmen circled twice, rising and falling, and then lined out and headed north.

“May the leather of their clerketers rot so they fall off and break their evil necks,” said Hunch. He shut his eyes tightly. “Have they gone?”

“They’ve gone, you fambly — you can stop shaking.”

“The trouble is,” said Hunch the Tryfant, opening his eyes and looking serious. “I couldn’t run away then, and you know how it upsets me not to have a clear run.”

There spoke your true Tryfant. But Hunch had proved a good comrade, despite his avowed intention of running off if the going got too tough.

We composed ourselves for the day. I positioned myself so that my head was just under the lowest prickly branch of a thorn-ivy bush, where I had to be careful. The view afforded lowered down — the dusty surface, ocher and dun, blowing a little with the dawn wind, and the prospects of the Moders, massive artificial mounds that gave the Humped Land its name of Moderdrin, spotting the landscape for as far as I could see. Slowly, the Suns of Scorpio crawled across the heavens. And we waited and sweated.

The first sign came, as so often, in a patch of lifting dust.

I narrowed my eyes against the glare. The dust plumed white streamers and grew closer. A body of men rode out there. Logu Fre-Da, who was on watch, called down gently, “Swarths.”

We remained still. The dust neared.

Dark shapes, fragmentary, appearing and disappearing, thickened beneath the dust. We waited.

“How many, Logu?”

An appreciable pause ensued before he replied.

“At least a dozen, notor — perhaps as many as twenty.”

“They will ride nearer.”

“Yes.”

Perhaps twenty — twenty of those hard dark riders who had hounded our caravan toward one particular Moder. Their swarths, agile, scaled risslacas with wedged-shaped heads, fanged, terrible, would carry them in a thumping rash if they spotted us. They would

have no mercy, seeing we were not an expedition but merely victims for their sport — or so it was easy to believe.

For very many of the mysterious races of Kregen that is just how it is, no matter that there are many splendid races on Kregen who regard that kind of bestial behavior with abhorrence. There was no mistake with this little lot. If they spotted us they'd seek to have sport with us before they slew us.

“Not a squeak out of you,” said Prince Tyfar. “Or you'll be down among the Ice Floes of Sicce before you've finished yammering.”

Not one of these men crouching with noses in the dust would make so much as a bleat. Now we could hear the soft shurr and stomp of the swarths. From their angle of approach they were making for the nearest Moder. They would pass within three hundred paces of our little thorn boma. They'd never see us. Not from where they would pass, avoiding the line of thorn-ivy. All we had to do was remain perfectly still and silent and we'd be safe.

Gently, making no fuss over it, I stood up.

I climbed out past the edge of the thorn-ivy.

“Jak!” screeched Tyfar. I heard the others cursing.

I walked a few paces forward, toward the swarth riders. I lifted my arms high. I shouted.

“Hai! Rasts! Over here! You zigging bunch of crampths — what are you waiting for?”

**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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