

DRAY PRESCOT: 37

WARLORD OF ANTARES

KENNETH BULMER

writing as

ALAN BURT AKERS

A Mushroom eBook

WARLORD OF ANTARES

ALAN BURT AKERS

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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Warlord of Antares

Dray Prescott has been described by someone who has seen him on this Earth as a man above middle height with brown hair and level brown eyes, brooding and dominating, with enormously broad shoulders and powerful physique. He moves like a savage hunting cat, silent and deadly. There is about him an abrasive honesty and an indomitable courage.

Reared in the harsh conditions of Nelson's Navy, he failed to find success on Earth. When the Savanti na Aphrasöe selected and then rejected him for their purposes, he was taken up by the Everoinye, the Star Lords. They have flung him through four hundred light-years of empty space to the planet Kregen, orbiting the binary Antares, many times. On Kregen, beautiful and terrible, exotic and mysterious, Prescott's innate talents flowered and he secured success beyond his wildest dreams.

Now the grouping of continents and islands called Paz are threatened by the Shanks, fish-headed reivers from over the curve of the world. Prescott's task now is to unite all of Paz in alliance against the aggressors. Not all the people of Paz are willing to forget their old enmities. And there is Csitra, the Witch of Loh, who lusts after

Prescot and would drag down all of Vallia to ruin for his sake. In the passionate, shrewd, charismatic figure of Delia of Delphond, and his family and blade comrades, Prescot possesses riches past the mundane dreams of empire.

Alan Burt Akers

Chapter one

Metal

I, Dray Prescot, the Lord of Strombor and Krozair of Zy, whirled head over heels helplessly through a tempestuous void into the black boiling belly of hell.

“What the hell’s going on?” I bellowed. It felt as though I yelled with a mouth full of feathers.

Around and around I went, up and down, and I sincerely believed I was being pulled apart, as those unpleasant Echenegs pull people apart with a variety of wild animals. I tried to curl up into a fetal ball.

This experience was entirely new. The Star Lords had sent their giant blue Scorpion down to snatch me up from Kregen. I expected to be taken through various chambers and possibly be transported in a marvelous chair that hissed, and so be able to speak to those distant, immortal and superhuman entities the Everoinye.

Instead I was being torn to pieces in a black whirling madhouse.

Just what, by the putrescent eyeballs and pustular nose of Makki Grodno, was going on?

I know I am a fallible clown. The years spent on Earth trying to make a career in Nelson's Navy had been blank for me. I'd had a few successes since being hauled up by the ears and dumped down into trouble on Kregen. Yes, I supposed I was some way on to the grand scheme of uniting the peoples of the lands of Paz.

This time, when I saw the Star Lords, I'd said to myself, this time I'll have a few very hard words for them.

So they dragged me up in the midst of a whirlwind, battered my ears with blasts of wind and horrendous noise, tumbled me upside down and inside out for all I knew.

My heels hit hard and jarred clear up the spine into my skull.

I staggered forward. The blackness like the ear cavity of a Lepecranch bat folded about me. I blinked.

Well, I still wore the brave old scarlet breechclout. I still had the Krozair longsword. Apart from those two items and the sailor knife scabbarded from its belt over my right hip, there was only me.

With a convulsive heave I stumbled up. I shook my fist at the impenetrable blackness.

"All right, you high and mighty Everoinye! Come on! Let's be having you!"

If anything, the wind screeched louder and more fiercely, and a cold cutting edge of ice crept into its teeth.

“Damn you, you indifferent—” I roared on, verbiage of almost meaningless bravado when set against the awful forces colliding about my insignificant form. The words were stoppered in my throat.

A single slashing streak of viridian green swiped all across that blackness and drove sparkles and spots of brilliance into my eyes.

That searing shaft of green lasted only a couple of heartbeats and was gone; I knew who — or what — it was.

That was the impetuous and icily contemptuous Star Lord the others called Ahrinye. I thought he would be no friend to me.

The whole world shifted and swung and I fell to my knees. I didn’t know if I was on a world, any world, or drifted on a shard of rock between the stars, or was buried deep within some unguessable hell.

I knew the Star Lords to be fallible, as was I. I could not believe those superhuman entities of vast intellect and distant purposes to be fools. Again, as was I. Their powers were so great that the limited imagination of a mortal man might never encompass a fraction of a jot or tittle. As the universe swept up and down and around and around I tried with barbaric savagery to hold on to the central idea that the Star Lords needed me.

With my own puny willpower I had fought them in the old days when I imagined them indifferent and opposed to all my own wishes. In our more recent alliance I had glimpsed reasons why they had chosen me to do what I

had to do for them. I had not fought them recently. But, now...

When all this nonsense settled down and the world became right way up again, I'd have a few words to say, by Zair, a few words!

A looseness in the air about me and a lightness in my limbs heralded another change. The universe steadied. I could smell nothing. The darkness shifted about me and I felt harsh rock beneath my feet; but I could smell nothing and that is always very strange, very strange.

When the pale yellow streak appeared horizontally and glimmered with spectral fires, for a few treacherous moments I imagined this to be Zena Iztar. But this yellow was not her glorious golden yellow, refulgent, bringing a reassurance and a promise. Zena Iztar and I had not met for too long a time and I guessed she was about some supernatural task in realms and dimensions unknowable to mere mortal humanity.

Against the yellow streak, which widened steadily, sharp black peaks stood out like saw edges. I confess it took me a little time to realize I was watching the dawn.

That lemon yellow runneled between the mountain peaks. Shadows lay long and sharp-edged. Each of the scattering of boulders and pebbles all about me on that circular plain cast its own individual shadow. The peaks ringed the plain, and ringed me, too, as though I stood in prison.

Desolation is the only word to describe that place.

I didn't give a damn about the desolation. Only one thing mattered now — and the horror of it made me put

my fist onto the hilt of the Krozair longsword, gripping not in bravado but reaching out for reassurance and put a pulse throbbing evilly in my temples.

For if this was the dawn, as indeed it was, and that yellow glow was the sun, as it probably was, why, then I was no longer on Kregen.

The twin suns of Antares, Zim and Genodras, stream down their mingled opaline radiance upon the world of Kregen, red and green, ruby and emerald. Not yellow.

The only other world of which I had any experience was Earth, and Earth has a little yellow sun.

I did not break down in despair, as I had every right to do. I did not think I was on Earth, for the feel to my body recalled a fever dream of the African coast. In the next instant the blackness returned and the madness of whirling about upside down swooped upon me.

When, after what seemed if not an eternity then a damn long time, I was once more plunked down on my feet, I felt convinced that the Star Lords were in deep trouble. Those awesome beings had the power to hurl me about the world of Kregen willy-nilly. They could fling me four hundred light-years back to Earth, and reach out and bring me back — when they chose.

Now, it seemed, they were fumbling what ought to be the simple task of dragging me up into their presence.

I stood upon one of what looked like a worldwide series of metal boxes. Each box was of the size of a decent three-bedroom suburban house. That homely image did nothing to reassure me in the face of this alienness. I felt the oddness, the strangeness. Just metal

boxes for as far as I could see, and the alleyways between them slots of shadow, menacing and unfriendly.

Nothing moved in all that metal expanse.

The sky was just a silvery white distance, an even flow of light that illuminated the hard metal and thrust blackness into the slots between.

Because there seemed nothing else to do, I thought I'd take a look at what might exist in the alleyways, seeing that the tops of the boxes were uniformly flat, empty of anything, and dismally uninteresting.

At the corner of the box a metal ladder ran down the side. The rungs were spaced for a normal-sized person. In the context of the inhabitants of Earth, normal-sized can be understood. In those of Kregen it has to be understood to refer, as I use it, to apims, *Homo sapiens sapiens* like me and the rest of us terrestrials.

The rungs of the ladder struck cold. I went down hand under hand and, oddly enough, I recalled the days when I'd had to descend from the rigging via the shrouds instead of as a youngster I'd been in the habit of sliding down the backstay.

The damned ground was all metal, too.

Extending about five feet up from the ground, the wall of the box was discolored. Instead of that steely-silvery sheen, the metal looked rusty, pitted and corroded, as though steel and alloy were breaking down.

The alleyway here was about twenty feet across and the box on the opposite side was also decayed.

Down here the perspective both loomed and towered.

The vanishing point was just that from the extended lines of the edges of the boxes, and I fancied they dwindled out of sight far more sharply than logic would suggest. I did not understand what I was looking at. That goes without saying; but I say it nevertheless in the light of much information that came my way later, information I am sure many of you listening to my narrative on these tapes have been born into.

The dizzying perspective extended to the right and to the left.

Either way, therefore — it didn't matter as far as I could see — would do. So I set off to the left and at the first intersection I took a single step out and immediately whipped back, flat against the metal wall, and the Krozair longsword snouted up.

The man out there wore a complete harness of armor and he carried a nasty-looking sword in his fist.

I waited.

Nothing happened.

Catching a breath and dropping low, I let an eyeball peer around the corner.

The man just stood there.

I watched him.

He stood, silent and motionless. His armor appeared to be fashioned from the same silvery-steely metal as that of the boxes. And from his ankles to his chest, the corroding rust of decay struck pitmarks that caught the light and turned the metal into a granular web.

After a time I straightened up and walked out.

“Llahal, dom,” I called in the formal Kregish greeting.

He made no reply. I studied him a trifle more closely, the longsword now hanging at my side. The blade was ready for action, I can tell you, ready for action in a jiffy!

His sword puzzled me, for it was cylindrical as to blade, without guard or quillons, and from its hilt a corrugated tube ran to the pack on the fellow's back.

His face was entirely covered, save for grillwork which I fancied was located in an odd place for either breaths or sights.

"Llahal!" I called again.

No reply.

I walked across to him.

Now many folk account me a fellow who walks softly. Some say I move stealthily, and others with less humor say I move sneakily. Either way, on a metal floor, I made no sound.

One of this armored man's legs fell away from his body. He keeled over. His leg crumbled to powder as it hit the ground, and his body tumbled down, to sprawl out in a tangle of metal arms and one metal leg.

I stopped moving.

All I could think was that the vibration through the metal ground had been the final straw in his destruction.

The metal rang with ironic sweetness as it struck the metal ground, a sound incongruous in these arid surroundings.

There was nothing I could do for the poor fellow, so with a word or two to Zair and Djan and Opaz to light

him on his way down to the Ice Floes of Sicce, I marched on.

The furtive scuffling sound from ahead came as a positive relief.

Flat against a metal side of a box, I stared down the alleyway.

A thing like a horse-sized caterpillar came into view. He clumped along on a multitude of little legs all going up and down in a rippling rhythm. His four eyes protruded on stalks. His feeding proboscis uncurled as he reached a corroded wall on the next box and I swore he put the end against the decayed metal and started to suck it in. I could have sworn, yes; but it did not seem rational. But, then, what the hell was rational around here just lately?

His body was colored in much the same steely-silvery sheen as the metal all around, and black hairs sprouted here and there. His eyes were red. He slurped the rotten metal in, and soon he'd cut himself a semicircle and was starting on the next sweep.

From locations just beneath and either side of his feeding tube a pair of grasping claws were folded limply. He did not use them to rip the metal away. By their size and ruggedness I fancied he'd have no trouble doing that if he came to a section of metal not quite decayed enough for him to suck up.

There is no pleasure in killing animals. There are really only two reasons or excuses for slaying animals, one that they are dangerous pests, and two you need to eat. I was sharp-set by this time; but this metal-eating

caterpillar struck me as being a not particularly tasty dish. So I turned around and went the other way.

Judging by the increasingly desperate state of my stomach, I must have marched on for a good long time. In all that journey the boxes and the alleyways did not vary. I ran across a dozen or so more armored men in the alleyway and a couple more on roofs; not a one of them spoke and none moved. Their armor was in the process of decaying, so I judged the poor devils had been a long time dead.

Also I saw a couple of dozen of the metal-eating caterpillars. I gave them all a wide berth and went on.

What I hoped to achieve by this senseless wandering escaped me. I couldn't just stand in one spot and wait to die. Surely, if I persevered and went on long enough I must come across someone, or something other than these mindless ranks of boxes? I might, if I was not dead of hunger and thirst beforehand.

Just as I'd reached this conclusion in my miserable thoughts I heard a sharp hissing from ahead.

That hissing sounded familiar. It sounded remarkably like the hissing the magical chair of the Star Lords made as it whistled you along from chamber to chamber.

A dark object appeared from an intersection about a hundred yards ahead, flashed across from right to left, vanished.

The shape in the fleeting instant I'd glimpsed it could have been the shape of a Star Lord's chair.

I ran up to the cross alleyway and stared down; there was no sign of the chair and the habitual silence of this place clamped down again.

After that a number of chairs hissed past and always, infuriatingly, across alleyways too far off, so that there was no way I could hail. Always assuming, that was, that anybody sat in the chairs.

The metal boxes possessed doors, as I discovered, of many different sizes. There was no way I could gain ingress. The gap between door and jamb was hairfine thin, and there were no doorknobs, handles or any other system of opening. That there must be a system to open the doors was obvious, otherwise they wouldn't be there; I could not fathom it out.

Soon I was progressing through an area where the decay of the metal walls was far advanced and where large numbers of the caterpillars fed contentedly. I took considerable detours to avoid them.

At one corner I spotted a caterpillar who had been at full stretch, retract his body and go rhythmically off in search of fresh decay. Where he had chopped away left a jagged-edged gap.

Very cautiously I looked inside.

All was in darkness.

The silvery light spilling in from outside revealed what seemed to me to be more ranks of boxes, one after the other, receding into the dimness. There appeared no point in going in there to find a lot of small boxes when I had a lot of big boxes out here to play with.

Yes, I was growing more and more hungry and more and more annoyed.

What I imagined to be the final annoyance, although in that I was wrong, hissed past close at hand. A chair shot out of the alleyway opposite and pelted on and vanished past me. It went by close. And the damned thing was empty.

So, I lifted up my head and voice and I roared out: “Star Lords! What in blazes is going on! Are you all asleep, or are you all senile?”

Echoes rolled around eerily.

“Sink me!” I burst out. “I wish those doddering old fools would get both oars in the water.”

Nothing responded so there was nothing I could do but march on in hope.

I didn’t go near any of the dead men in their decaying armor. They hadn’t been struck down in a fight, so it was a good guess that they’d died of disease. I did not wish to have anything to do with that.

Only one of them was not wearing full harness. He was a numim, and his ferocious lionman’s face lay lax and crumpled in death. He carried a water bottle at his belt. I licked my lips. But that water could be the death of me. The numim’s chest was crushed in, a most unappetizing sight, and a curved sword lay on the metal near his right hand.

I went on.

Now I really was hungry, and no doubt about it.

Pretty soon I’d join the caterpillars and rip off a chunk of decaying metal and find out what their diet tasted

like. They looked big and chunky and well fed. Perhaps the corroded metal was really tasty. I pushed aside vivid mental pictures of pies and puddings, of steaks and gammons, of fruit and vegetables and endless cups of tea, and stalked on. And more and more my gaze was drawn to that rotten and tempting decaying metal.

“By the Black Chunkrah!” Head up, feeling a fool as though I was under observation, I marched over to the nearest wall and ripped off a handful of scrunchy metal.

It felt like biscuits just holding together; crumbs fell away. I molded the handful in my palm. I looked at it. I sniffed it. No smell. Cautiously I tasted a tiny portion with the tip of my tongue. The hardness at once melted into paste. And the taste — deuced odd. Like vinegar, and yet not sharp and unpleasant, with a touch of gherkin in there, and spice, and a generous portion of piccalilli and tomatoes, and, under all this bizarre mixture, the feeling that, yes, by Krun, this was metal I was eating.

I ate some more. After a couple of handfuls it became more than palatable. I could guess that a fellow could get addicted to this stuff. This, therefore, would not do. I did not know of any metal-eating caterpillars on Kregen.

Munching the paste, well, teeth were unnecessary for, as the caterpillars did, I could simply slurp it down once it had been moistened, I trotted on. I confess I felt in a more reasonable frame of mind. That state of mind was still bloody in the extreme, mind, and I stored up the fruitiest epithets in my skull for use against the

Everoinye — when and if they ever put in an appearance.

Now I know about the Mysterious Universe and all that, and of the mystifying nature of humankind's choice, of destiny and all that, and of the inevitability of death; but I hadn't chosen to come here, I was not at this moment concerned with the mystery of the universe, and I most certainly did not intend to die here.

I was interested in the mystery of this place, for understanding that might hoick me out of it.

There appeared to me in all sober reality little chance that I *could* understand this crazy gaggle of metal boxes.

The miserable nagging doubt began to creep in that I had chosen the wrong way, that I should have gone right instead of left.

I can tell you, the bonhomie brought on by an unexpectedly good meal in a place not at once apparent for gastronomic delights, wore off sharpish, very sharpish, by Vox.

In this churlish frame of mind the fact that the metal was not corroded on the boxes I was passing took time to sink in. What made me realize this were the antics of a caterpillar I'd automatically switched alleyways to avoid.

He was lifting his head and aiming that feeding proboscis and shooting a jet of liquid in neat patterned swipes over the wall. The liquid glistened with the sheen of the rainbow before vanishing.

“So that’s it,” I said. “These hairy horrors squirt some gunk on the metal, that starts to rot away, then they trundle along and slurp it up.”

That made no difference to my taste for the stuff. I’ve eaten far worse than that on Kregen.

Farther on, with pristine boxes all about me, I ran across an object that — at last! — signaled a change.

A slender, near-gossamer tower rose up into that indeterminate silvery sky. The lacework of the weblike struts and girders, delicate and fairy-like, formed a contrast of overwhelming power.

Approaching that enchanted spire with great caution I stared up its height. I couldn’t see the top against that all-encompassing whiteness; but it was remote and far distant, for the latticework blended and formed a line no thicker than a hair before it was lost to my vision.

Now why I did what I did might have remained a mystery to me, had not a memory of Zena Iztar occurred to me. When, as Madam Ivanovna, she had visited me on Earth, she had said: “When the need to strike arises, you must strike with a gong-note of power.”

What the blazes she’d meant then I’d no idea.

But the memory recurred to me now, and as Zena Iztar might move in mysterious ways but always to a purpose, I whipped up the great Krozair longsword and struck the flat against the latticework of that fairy tower.

The structure gonged pure and mellow.

In the next instant I was upside down, buffeted by a mad whirlpool of blackness, hurtling head over heels

out of the blackness and into a refulgent blueness. I gasped as I landed with a thump.

Noise burst about my head, men shouting and arguing, women laughing and screaming, and in my nostrils stank the stench of a tavern, of rancid fat, of burned meat, of wetted sawdust, the smells of spilled wine and ale and the cheap scents of women.

**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:

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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:

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41. Scorpio Ablaze
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45. Gangs of Antares
46. Demons of Antares
47. Scourge of Antares
48. Challenge of Antares
49. Wrath of Antares
50. Shadows over Kregen

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52. Turmoil on Kregen