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Dragon Moon

A NOVELETTE OF LOST ATLANTIS

By HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "The Watcher at the Door," "Hydra," "Spawn of Dagon," etc.

Weird Tales

JANUARY, 1941

1. *Elak of Atlantis*

Of great limbs gone to chaos,
A great face turned to night—
Why bend above a shapeless shroud
Seeking in such archaic cloud
Sight of strong lords and light?

—Chesterton.

The wharf-side tavern was a bedlam. The great harbor of Poseidonia stretched darkly to the southeast, but the waterfront was a blaze of bright lanterns and torches. Ships had made port today, and this tavern, like the others, roared with mirth and rough nautical oaths. Cooking-smoke and odor of sesame filled the broad low room, mingled with the sharp tang of wine. The swarthy seamen of the south held high carnival tonight.

In a niche in the wall was an image of the patron god, Poseidon of the sunlit seas. It was noticeable that before swilling liquor, nearly every man spilled a drop or two on the floor in the direction of the carved god.

A fat little man sat in a corner and muttered under his breath. Lycon's small eyes examined the tavern with some distaste. His purse was, for a change, heavy with gold; so was that of Elak, his fellow adventurer. Yet Elak preferred to drink and wench in this brawling, smelly tavern, a predilection that filled Lycon with annoyance and bitterness. He spat, muttered under his breath, and turned to watch Elak.

The lean, wolf-faced adventurer was quarreling with a sea captain whose huge, great-muscled body dwarfed Elak's. Between the two a tavern wench was seated, her slanted eyes watching the men slyly, flattered by the attention given her.

The seaman, Drezzar, had made the mistake of underestimating Elak's potentialities. He had cast covetous eyes upon the wench and determined to have her, regardless of Elak's prior claim. Under other circumstances Elak might have left the slant-eyed girl to Drezzar, but the captain's words had been insulting. So Elak remained at the table, his gaze wary, and his rapier loosened in its scabbard.

He watched Drezzar, noting the sunburnt, massive face, the bushy dark beard, the crinkled scar that swept down from temple to jawbone, blinding the man in one gray eye. And Lycon, called for more wine. Steel would flash soon, he knew.

Yet the battle came without warning. A stool was overturned, there was a flare of harsh oaths, and Drezzar's sword came out, flaming in the lamplight. The wench screamed shrilly and fled, having little taste for bloodshed save from a distance.

Elak crouched catlike, his rapier motionless in his hand. A glint of angry laughter shone in the cold eyes.

Drezzar fainted; his sword swept out in a treacherously low cut that would have disemboweled Elak had it reached its mark. But the smaller man's body writhed aside in swift, flowing motion; the rapier shimmered. Its point gashed Drezzar's scalp.

They fought in silence. And this, more than anything else, gave Elak the measure of his opponent. Drezzar's face was quite emotionless. Only the scar stood out white and distinct. His blinded eye seemed not to handicap him in the slightest degree.

Lycon waited for a chance to sheathe his steel in Drezzar's back. Elak would disapprove, he knew, but Lycon was a realist.

Elak's sandal slipped in a puddle of spilled liquor, and he threw himself aside desperately, striving to regain his balance. He failed. Drezzar's lashing sword drove the rapier from his hand, and Elak went down, his head cracking sharply on an overturned stool.

The seamen poised himself, sighted down his blade, and lunged. Lycon was darting forward, but he knew he could not reach the killer in time.

Out of the dark—out of the unknown—came Karkora ... rotting the souls of the kings of Cyrena. For Karkora, the Pallid One, was a creature more loathsome than anything on earth. It was beyond good or evil, a Presence from the Outside—a shadow of which the "altar fires had whispered."

And then—from the open door came the inexplicable. Something like a streak of flaming light lashed through the air, and at first Lycon thought it was a thrown dagger. But it was not. It was—flame!

White flame, darting and unearthly! It gripped Drezzar's blade, coiled about it, ripped it from the seaman's hand. It blazed up in blinding fiery light, limning the room in starkly distinct detail. The sword fell uselessly to the floor, a blackened, twisted stump of melted metal.

Drezzar shouted an oath. He stared at the ruined weapon, and his bronzed face paled. Swiftly he whirled and fled through a side door.

The flame had vanished. In the door a man stood—a gross, ugly figure clad in the traditional brown robe of the Druids.

Lycon, skidding to a halt, lowered his sword and whispered, "Dalan!"

Elak got to his feet, rubbing his head ruefully. At sight of the Druid his face changed. Without a word he nodded to Lycon and moved toward the door.

The three went out into the night.

2. *Dragon Throne.*

Now we are come to our Kingdom,
And the Crown is ours to take—
With a naked sword at the Council board,
And under the throne the snake,
Now we are come to our Kingdom!

—Kipling.

"I bring you a throne," Dalan said, "but you must hold it with your blade."

They stood at the end of a jetty, looking out at the moonlit harbor waters. The clamor of Poseidonia seemed far away now.

Elak stared at the hills. Beyond them, leagues upon leagues to the north, lay a life he had put behind him. A life he had given up when he left Cyrena to gird on an adventurer's blade. In Elak's veins ran the blood of the kings of Cyrena, northernmost kingdom of Atlantis. And, but for a fatal quarrel with his stepfather, Norian, Elak would have been on the dragon throne even then. But Norian had died, and Elak's brother, Orander, took the crown.

Elak said, "Orander rules Cyrena. Do you ask me to join a rebellion against my brother?" An angry light showed in the adventurer's cold eyes.

"Orander is dead," the Druid said quietly. "Elak, I have a tale to tell you, a tale of sorcery and black evil that has cast its shadow over Cyrena. But first—" He fumbled in his shapeless brown robe and drew forth a tiny crystal sphere. He cupped it in his palm, breathed upon it. The clear surface clouded, misted—and the fog seemed to permeate the entire globe. The Druid held a ball of whirling gray cloud in his hand.

Within the sphere a picture grew, microscopic but vividly distinct. Elak peered closely. He saw a throne, and a man who sat upon it.

"South of Cyrena, beyond the mountains, lies Kiriath," Dalan said. "Sepher ruled it. And now Sepher still sits upon his throne, but he is no longer human."

In the globe the face of Sepher sprang out in startling clarity. Involuntarily Elak drew back, his lips thinning. At a casual glance Sepher seemed unchanged, a black-bearded, bronzed giant with the keen eyes of a hawk, but Elak knew that he looked upon a creature loathsome beyond anything on earth. It was not evil, as he knew it, but a thing beyond good and evil as it was beyond humanity or deity. A Presence from Outside had touched Sepher and taken Kiriath's king for its own. And Elak knew this was the most horrible being he had ever seen.

Dalan hid the crystal. He said coldly, "Out of the unknown has come a being named Karkora. What he is I know not. I have cast the runes, and they say little to me. The altar fires have whispered of a shadow that will come upon Cyrena, a shadow that may spread over all Atlantis. Karkora, the Pallid One, is not human, nor is he a demon. He is—alien, Elak."

"What of my brother?" the adventurer asked.

"You have seen Sepher," Dalan said. "He is possessed, a vessel of this entity called Karkora. Ere I left Orander, he, too, had—changed."

A muscle twitched in Elak's brown cheek. The Druid went on.

"Orander saw his doom. Day by day the power of Karkora over him increased, and the soul of your brother was driven further into the outer dark. He died—by his own hand."

Elak's face did not change expression. But for minutes he was silent, a deep sorrow in his gray eyes.

Lycon turned to look out across the sea.

The Druid went on, "Orander sent a message to you, Elak. You, in all Atlantis, are of the royal line of Cyrena. Yours,

therefore, is the crown. It will not be easy to hold. Karkora is not defeated. But my magic will aid you."

Elak said, "You offer me the dragon throne?"

Dalan nodded.

"The years have changed me, Dalan. I have gone through Atlantis a vagabond and worse. I put my birthright behind me and forgot it. And I'm not the same man who went from Cyrena years ago," Elak said softly, laughing a little bitterly, and looking over the jetty's edge at his face reflected in the dark swell of the water, "Only a king may sit on the dragon throne. For me—it would be a jest. And a sorry one."

"You fool!" the Druid whispered—and there was rage in the sibilant sound. "Blind, mad fool! Do you think the Druids would offer Cyrena to the wrong man? Blood of kings is in your veins, Elak. It is not yours to deny. You must obey."

"Must?" The word was spoken lightly, yet Lycon felt a tenseness go through him, tightening his muscles. "Must?" Elak asked.

"The decision is mine, Druid. By Mider! The throne of Cyrena means much to me. Therefore I shall not sit in it!"

Dalan's toad face was gargoylish in the moonlight. He thrust his bald, glistening head forward, and his thick, stubby fingers twisted.

"Now am I tempted to work magic on you, Elak," he said harshly. "I am no—"

"I have given you my answer."

The Druid hesitated. His somber eyes dwelt on Elak. Then, without a word, he turned and went lumbering off into the night. His footsteps died.

Elak remained staring out at the harbor. His cheeks were gray, his mouth a tortured white line. And he whirled, abruptly, and looked at the hills of Poseidonia.

But he did not see them. His gaze went beyond them, far and far, probing through all Atlantis to the kingdom of the north—Cyrena, and the dragon throne.

3. The Gates of Dream

Churel and ghoul and Djinn and sprite
Shall bear us company tonight,
For we have reached the Oldest Land
Wherein the powers of Darkness range.

—Kipling.

Elak's sleep that night was broken by dreams—flashing, disordered visions of many things. He stared up at the white moonlit ceiling of the apartment. And—it was changed. The familiar room was gone. Light still existed, but it was oddly changed—grayish and unreal. Unearthly planes and angles slipped past Elak, and in his ears a low humming grew. This changed to a high-pitched, droning whine, and died away at last.

The mad planes reassembled themselves. In his dream Elak saw a mighty crag upthrust against cold stars—colossal against a background of jagged mountain peaks. Snow dappled them, but the darkness of the crag was unbroken. On its top was a tower, dwarfed by distance.

A flood seemed to lift Elak and bear him swiftly forward. In the base of the crag, he saw, were great iron gates. And these parted and swung aside, yawning for him as he moved through.

They shut silently behind him.

And now Elak became conscious of a Presence. It was stygian black; yet in the tenebrous darkness there was a vague inchoate stirring, a sense of motion that was unmistakable.

Without warning Elak saw—the Pallid One!

A white and shining figure flashed into view. How tall it was, how close or distant, the man could not tell. Nor could he see more than the bare outline. A crawling, leprous shimmer of cold light rippled over the being; it seemed little more than a white shadow. But a shadow—three-dimensional, alive!

The unearthly terror of Karkora, the Pallid One!

The being seemed to grow larger. Elak knew he was watched, coldly and dispassionately. His senses were no longer dependable. It did not seem as though he beheld Karkora with his eyes alone—he was no longer conscious of his body.

He remembered Dalan, and Dalan's god. And he cried silently upon Mider for aid.

The shuddering loathing that filled him did not pass, but the horror that tore at his mind was no longer as strong. Again he cried to Mider, forcing himself to concentrate on the Druid god.

Once more Elak called out to Mider. And, silently, eerily, a wall of flame rose about him, shutting off the vision of Karkora. The warm, flickering fires of Mider were a protective barrier—earthly, friendly.

They closed in—drew him back. They warmed the chill horror that froze his mind. They changed to sunlight—and the sunlight was slanting in through the window, beside which Elak lay on his low bed, awake and shuddering with reaction.

"By the Nine Hells!" he cursed, leaping up swiftly. "By all the gods of Atlantis! Where's my rapier?" He found it, and whirled it hissing through the air. "How can a man battle dreams?"

He turned to Lycon, slumbering noisily nearby, and kicked the small man into wakefulness.

"Hog-swill," said Lycon, rubbing his eyes. "Bring another cup, and swiftly, or I'll—eh? What's wrong?"

Elak was dressing hastily. "What's wrong? Something I didn't expect. How could I know from Dalan's words the sort of

thing that's come to life in Atlantis?" He spat in disgust. "That leprous foulness shall never take the dragon throne!"

He slammed his rapier into its scabbard. "I'll find Dalan. I'll go back with him. To Cyrena."

Elak was silent, but deep in his eyes was a black horror and loathing. He had seen the Pallid One. And he knew that never in words could he hope to express the burning foulness of alien Karkora.

But Dalan had vanished. It was impossible to find the Druid in teeming Poseidonia. And at last Elak gave up hope and determined to take matters into his own hands. A galley called *Kraken* was leaving that day, he learned, and would beat up the western coast. In fact, by the time Elak had hired a boatman to take him and Lycon to the vessel, the galley's oars were already dipping into the swells.

Elak's cockleshell gained its side, and he clambered over the gunwale, hoisting Lycon after him. He tossed a coin to the boatman and saw the man depart.

The sweating backs of slaves were moving rhythmically under the lash of the overseers. One of these came forward at a run, his bronzed face angry.

"Who are you?" he hailed. "What do you seek on the *Kraken*?"

"Take us to your captain," Elak said shortly. His hand touched the heavy purse at his belt, and coins jingled. The overseer was impressed.

"We're putting to sea," he said. "What do you want?"

"Passage to Cyrena," Lycon snapped. "Be—"

"Bring them here, Rasul," a gruff voice broke in. "They are friends. We'll give them passage to Cyrena—aye!"

And Drezzar, Elak's opponent in the tavern brawl, hastened along the poop toward them, teeth gleaming in his bushy beard.

"Ho!" he yelled at a nearby group of armed seamen. "Seize those two! Take them—alive!" "You dog," Drezzar said with cold rage. He stood before Elak and lifted his hand as though to strike the captive.

Elak said stoically, "I want passage to Cyrena. I'll pay well for it."

"So you will," Drezzar grinned, and ripped off Elak's purse. He opened it and ran golden coins through his thick fingers. "You'll work for it, too. But you'll not reach Cyrena."

"Two more oarsmen for you, Rasul. Two more slaves.

"See that they work!"

He turned and strode away. Unresisting, Elak was dragged to a vacant oar and chained there, Lycon shackled beside him. His hands fell in well-worn grooves on the polished wood.

Rasul's whip cracked. The overseer called, "Pull! Pull!"

The *Kraken* sped seaward. And, chained to his oar, straining at the unaccustomed toil, Elak's dark wolf-face bore a smile that was not pleasant to see.

4. *The Ship Sails North*

Orpheus has harped her,
Her prow has sheared the spray,
Fifty haughty heroes at her golden oarlocks sway,
White the wave before her flings,
Bright from shore she lifts and swings,
Wild he twangs the ringing strings—
Give way! Give way!

—Benet.

They drove down along the coast and skirted the southern tip of Atlantis. Then the galley crept northwest, up the long curve of the continent, and all the while the days were cloudless and fair, and the skies blue as the waters of the Ocean Sea.

Elak bided his time until the *Kraken* dropped anchor one afternoon at an uninhabited island, to replenish the water supply. Drezzar went, ashore with a dozen others, leaving only a few men in charge of the ship. This was apparently safe enough, with the slaves chained. Moreover, Drezzar had the only keys. But, at sunset, Elak nudged Lycon awake and told him to keep watch.

"What for?" Lycon's voice was surly. "Do you—" He broke off, staring, as Elak took a tiny twisted bit of metal from his sandal and inserted it delicately in the lock of his ankle-cuff, "Gods!" Lycon cursed. "You had that all the time—and you waited till now!"

"These locks are easy to pick," Elak said. "What? Of course I waited! We've only a few enemies aboard now, instead of more than a dozen. Keep watch, I tell you."

Lycon obeyed. Footsteps creaked upon the deck occasionally, and there were lanterns here and there on the ship, but their illumination was faint enough. The lapping of water against the hull drowned the soft scrape and click as Elak worked. Presently he sighed in satisfaction and opened the cuff.

Metal clicked and scraped. Elak was free. He turned to Lycon—and then hurrying footsteps sounded on the raised deck. Rasul, the overseer, ran up, dragging his long whip. He peered down—and dragged out his sword, cursing. With the other hand he swept the whip in a great singing blow, smashing down on Elak's unprotected shoulders.

Lycon acted. In one swift motion he flung himself forward, guarding Elak; the lash ripped skin and flesh from Lycon's side. And then Elak's sinewy hand closed on the tough hide; he pulled mightily—pulled it from Rasul's grasp.

"Ho!" the overseer shouted. "Ho! To me!" His voice roared out over the dark sea. His long sword was a pale flickering light in the glow of the lanterns.

Two more men, armed, came running up behind Rasul. They spread out and closed in on Elak. He grinned unpleasantly, as a wolf smiles. The whip was coiled in his hand.

It sprang out suddenly, like a striking snake. The fanged, vicious tip hissed shrilly. In the dimness the lash was difficult to see, impossible to dodge. Rasul roared in pain.

"Slay him!" the overseer shouted.

The three ran in, and Elak gave way, his wrist turning as he swung the whip. A thrown dagger brought blood from the Atlantean's shoulder. And a man staggered back, screaming shrilly, clawing at his eyes that were blinded by the tearing rip of the lash.

"Slay me, then," Elak whispered, cold laughter in his eyes. "But the dog's fangs are sharp, Rasul."

He caught a glimpse of Lycon, bent above his bonds, busily manipulating the bit of metal that would unlock them. Voices called from the shore. Rasul shouted a response, and then ducked and gasped as the whip shrieked through the dark air.

"Ware my fangs, Rasul!" Elak smiled mirthlessly.

And now the two—Rasul and his companion—were in turn giving way. Step by step Elak forced them back, under the threat of the terrible lash. They could not guard against it, could not see it. Out of the gloom it would come striking, swift as a snake's thrust, leaping viciously at their eyes. The slaves were awake and straining in their chains, calling encouragement to Elak. The man who had been blinded made a misstep and fell among the rowers. They surged up over him; lean hands reached and clawed in the lantern-light. He screamed for a time, and then made no further sound.

Lycon's voice rose, shrill and peremptory, above the tumult.

"Row!" he yelled. "Row, slaves! Ere Drezzar returns—row for your freedom!" Alternately he cursed and threatened and cajoled them, and worked at his bonds with flying fingers.

Elak heard a whisper at his side, saw a slave thrusting a sword at him, hilt-first—the blade the blinded one had dropped. Gratefully he seized it, hurling the whip away. The feel of the cool, leather-bound hilt was grateful. Tide of strength surged up Elak's arm from the sharp steel.

It was not his rapier—but it would do.

"My fangs, Rasul," he said, laughing—and ran in. His two opponents spread out, but he had foreseen that move. He turned his back on Rasul, cut at the other, and almost in the same motion whirled and leaped past, dodging a thrust by a hair's-breadth. And now Rasul only faced him. The other man was down, tearing at a throat sliced through to the spine.

Lycon shouted, "Row, slaves! For your lives!"

The long oars clacked and moved in confusion; then habit stepped in, and rhythmically, slowly, the blades dug into the sea. Lycon yelled a chant, and the slaves kept time to it. Gradually the galley gained way.

On the deck swords flamed and clashed. But Elak was not fated to slay Rasul. The overseer stumbled, dropped to one knee—and hands reached for him out of the dark. Shouting, he was dragged down among the slaves. Voices rose to a yelping crescendo of hate. Rasul screamed—and was silent.

Lycon leaped up, free from his chains. He cursed the rowers; their momentary inattention to their duty had caused confusion. An oar, caught among others, splintered and broke. The butt bent like a bow, snapped back, and smashed a slave's face to bloody ruin. From oversight came cries and commands.

The face of Drezzar rose above the rail, hideous, contorted, the scar flaming red. He gripped his sword between his teeth. After him armed men came pouring.

Lycon, a captured blade bare in his hand, ran toward them, yelling objurgations at the slaves. The oars moved again, tore at the sea, sent the galley through the waves once more. A slave had long since cut the anchor-rope.

A dozen armed men, swords gleaming, were ringed about Lycon, who, his back against the mast, was valiantly battling and cursing in lurid oaths. A few steps away Drezzar came catlike, and murder was in his eyes. He saw Elak stir, and ran in, blade ready.

Elak did not stoop to recover his sword. He sprang forward, under the sweep of the steel, which Drezzar had not expected. The two men went down together, rolling on the blood-slippery deck.

Drezzar tried to reverse the sword in his hand and stab Elak in the back. But Elak's supple body writhed aside, and simultaneously his lean, sinewy fingers closed on Drezzar's, above the hilt of the blade.

Drezzar tried to turn the blow, but could not. Elak continued his enemy's thrust. And the sword went smoothly into Drezzar's belly, without pausing till it grated against the backbone.

"My fangs, Drezzar," Elak said very softly, and with no expression on his wolf-face—and then drove the sword further in till it pinned the captain, like a beetle, to the deck. Drezzar's mouth opened; a roaring exhalation of breath, fraught with

ghastly agony, seemed torn out of the man. His hands beat the deck; his body doubled up and arched like a bow.

He coughed blood, gnashed his teeth till they splintered and cracked—and so died.

Elak sprang up. He saw a heavy iron key hanging at Drezzar's belt. This he tore away and cast down among the slaves. A grateful clamor came in response.

Lycon called frantically for aid. Elak responded. But now the outcome of the battle was a foregone conclusion. One by one the freed slaves passed the iron key to their neighbors and came springing up to add their numbers to Elak's cause. And, presently, the last of the ship's masters lay dead on deck, and the oarsmen—no longer in chains, no longer slaves—sent the galley plunging through the dark sea to the north.

5. *Aynger of Amenalk*

For the man dwelt in a lost land
Of boulders and broken men....

—Chesterton.

They came to a forbidding, bleak coast that loomed high above the galley. The cold winds of Autumn filled the sails and let the weary oarsmen rest. The sea turned smoothly gray, surging in long, foamless swells under a blue-gray sky. The sun gave little heat. The crew turned gratefully to the ship's stock—oil and wine and woven stuff, finding warmth and comfort in it.

But Elak was chafed by inaction. He longed to reach Cyrena; endlessly he paced the decks, fingering his rapier and pondering on the mystery of the thing called Karkora. What was this Pallid One? Whence had it come? These problems were insoluble, and remained so till, one night, Elak dreamed.

He dreamed of Dalan. The Druid priest seemed to be standing in a forest glade; before him a fire flickered redly. And Dalan said:

"Leave your ship at the red delta. Seek Aynger of Amenalk. Tell him you seek the throne of Cyrena!"

There was no more. Elak awoke, listening to the creaking of the galley's timbers and the whisper of waves against the side. It was nearly dawn. He rose, went on deck, and searched the horizon under a shielding palm.

To the right, breaking the gray cliffs, was a gap. Beyond it—an island. And on the island a castle loomed, part of the rock, it seemed, growing from it.

The galley swept on. And now Elak saw that a river ran between the broken cliffs. At its mouth was a delta, made of reddish sand.

So, in the cold, lowering dawn, Elak and Lycon left the galley. Willing oarsmen rowed them to shore. The two climbed the northern cliff and stood staring around. Inland the plateau stretched unbroken by tree or bush, windswept and desolate. To the west lay the Ocean Sea, chill and forbidding.

"Perhaps this Aynger of your dream dwells in that castle," Lycon said, pointing and shivering. "One of the men told me this is Kiriath. To the north, beyond the mountains, lies Cyrena."

Elak said somberly, "I know. And Sepher rules over Kiriath—Sepher, whom Karkora has taken for his own. Well—come on."

They set out along the edge of the cliff. The wind blew coldly, and brought to them a thin, high piping that seemed to come out of nowhere. Sad, mournful, weird, it murmured half-heard in the air about the two.

And across the plateau a man came—a great gray man, roughly clad, with unkempt hair and iron-gray beard. He played upon a set of pipes, but put these away as he saw Elak and Lycon. He came closer and halted, with folded arms, waiting.

The man's face might have been chipped from the rough rocks of this land. It was harsh and strong and forbidding, and the cool gray eyes were like the sea.

"What do you seek here?" he asked. His voice was deep and not at all unpleasant.

Elak hesitated. "Aynger. Aynger of Amenalk. Do you know of him?"

"I am Aynger."

For a heart-beat there was silence. Then Elak said, "I seek the throne of Cyrena."

Laughter sprang into the gray eyes. Aynger of Amenalk reached out a huge hand and gripped Elak's arm, squeezing it painfully. He said, "Dalan sent you! Dalan!"

Elak nodded.

"But it is not me you seek. It is Mayana—the daughter of Poseidon. You must seek her there." He pointed to the distant castle on the island. "Her power alone can aid you. But first—come."

He led the way to the cliff's edge. A perilous, narrow path led down the jagged face; Aynger started along it with surefooted ease, and Elak and Lycon followed more gingerly. Far below, the breakers tore upon the rocks; sea-birds called shrilly.

The path ended at a cave-mouth. Aynger entered, beckoning to the others. The cavern widened into a high-arched chamber, obviously Aynger's home. He gestured to a heap of furs, and gave each of his guests a great horn of mead.

"So. Dalan sent you. I had wondered. Orander is dead. Once the Pallid One has set his seal on a man, there is escape in death alone."

"Karkora," Elak said musingly. "What is he? Do you know, Aynger?"

"You must seek your answer from Mayana, on the isle. Only she knows. Mayana—of the seas. Let me tell you." The gray eyes grew bright with dream. A softness crept into the deep voice. "This land, on the western shore, is Amenalk. Not Kiriath. Once, long ago, Amenalk stretched far to the east. We were a great people then. But invaders came conquering, and now only this bit of land is left to us. Yet it is Amenalk. And I dwell here because in my veins runs the blood of kings."

Aynger flung back his gray, tousled head. "And for ages the castle on the isle had existed. None dwelt there. There were legends that even before the Amenalks held this land, an ancient sea-people made it their home. Sorcerers they were, warlocks and magicians. But they died and were forgotten. So, in time, my own people were scattered through Kiriath, and I dwelt here alone.

"Sepher ruled, well and wisely. One night he walked alone on the cliffs of Amenalk, and when he returned to his palace, he brought a bride with him. The bride was Mayana. Some say he found her in the island castle. Some say she rose from the waves. I think she is not human. She is one of the old sea-race—

"A shadow fell on the land. Out of the dark, out of the unknown, came Karkora. He took Sepher for his own. Mayana fled here, and dwells now in the castle, protected by her sorcery. And Karkora rules."

Aynger's gray beard jutted; his eyes were lambent pools. He said, "My people were a Druid race. We worshipped great Mider, as I do now. And I tell you that Karkora is a foulness and a horror—an evil that will spread through all the world if the Druids fail to destroy him. Mayana holds his secret. Mayana knows. You must go to her on her isle. For myself—" A mighty hand clenched. "I have king's blood, and my people live, though in bondage. I shall go through Kiriath and gather men. I think you will need armies, ere you sit on Cyrena's dragon throne. Well, I have an army for you, and for Mider."

Aynger reached behind him, brought out a huge war-hammer, bound with thongs. Laughter touched his grim face.

"We shall fight in the old way, woad-painted, without armor. And I think Helm-Breaker will taste blood again. If you get aid from Mayana—well. But with you or without you, man of Cyrena, Amenalk will go forth to battle!"

The great gray man towered against the cave-mouth, a grim, archaic figure, somehow strong with primeval menace. He stood aside, pointing.

"Your way lies there, to the isle. Mine lies inland. When we meet again, if we do, I shall have an army to give you."

Silently Elak moved past Aynger and went up the cliff path. Lycon trailed him. On the windy, treeless plateau he stood unmoving, while the gray giant passed him without a word and strode away, his war-hammer over one muscular

shoulder, beard and hair flying in the wind.

Aynger grew small in the distance. Elak nodded to Lycon.

"I think we have a strong ally there. We'll need him. But now—this Mayana. If she can solve the riddle of Karkora, I'll find her though I have to swim."

"You won't have to," Lycon said, wiping his mouth. "Gods, that mead was good! There's a bridge to the isle—see? A narrow one, but it will serve. Unless she's set a dragon to guard it."

6. *Mayana*

By the tall obelisks, all seaweed-girt,
Drift the pale dead of long and long ago,
Lovers and kings who may not more be hurt,
Wounded by lips or by the dagger's blow.

—*The Sunken Towers.*

From the cliff's edge a narrow bridge of rock jutted, a natural formation worn by wind and rain. It ended on a jagged ledge, at the back of which a black hole gaped. Elak said, "Lycon, wait here. I must take this road alone."

The little man disagreed profanely. But Elak was firm.

"It will be safer. So we won't both fall into the same trap. If I'm not back by sundown, come after me—you may be of aid then." Lycon could not help but realize the truth of this. He shrugged fat shoulders.

"Very well. I'll wait in Aynger's cave. His mead was potent; I'm anxious to sample more. Luck, Elak."

Nodding, the Atlantean started along the bridge. He found it safer not to look down, but the surging roar of the breakers sounded disquietingly from beneath. Sea-birds mewed and called. The wind tore at his swaying body.

But at last he was across, and felt the firm stability of the rocky ground under his sandals. Without a backward glance he entered the cave-mouth. Almost immediately outside sounds dimmed and quieted.

The road led down—a natural passage, seemingly, that turned and twisted in the rock. Sand was gritty underfoot, with bits of shell here and there. For a time it was dark, and then a greenish, vague luminous glow appeared, apparently emanated by the sand on which he trod.

It was utterly silent.

Still the tunnel led down, till Elak's feet felt moisture beneath him. He hesitated, staring around. The rocky walls were dewed and sweating. A dank, salty odor was strong in his nostrils. Loosening his rapier in its scabbard, he went on.

The green glow brightened. The passage turned; Elak rounded the corner, and stood motionless, staring. Before him a vast cavern opened.

It was huge and terrifyingly strange. Low-roofed, stalactites hung in myriad shapes and colors over the broad expanse of an underground lake. The green shining was everywhere. The weight of the island above seemed to press down suffocatingly, but the air, despite a salt sea-smell, was fresh enough.

At his feet a sandy half-moon of a beach reached down to the motionless surface of the water. Further out, he could see far down vague shadows that resembled sunken buildings—fallen peristyles and columns, and far away, in the center of the lake, was an island.

Ruined marble crowned it. Only in the center a small temple seemed unharmed; it rose from shattered ruins in cool, white perfection. All around it the dead and broken city lay, to the water's edge and beyond. A submerged, forgotten metropolis lay before Elak.

Silence, and the pale green expanse of the waveless lake.

Softly Elak called, "Mayana." There was no response.

Frowning, he considered the task before him. He felt an odd conviction that what he sought lay in the temple on the islet, but there was no way of reaching it save by swimming. And there was something ominous about the motionless green of the waters.

Shrugging, Elak waded out. Icy chill touched his legs, crept higher about his loins and waist. He struck out strongly. And at first there was no difficulty; he made good progress.

But the water was very cold. It was salt, and this buoyed him up somewhat; yet when he glanced at the islet it seemed no nearer. Grunting, Elak buried his face in the waters and kicked vigorously.

His eyes opened. He looked down. He saw, beneath him, the sunken city.

Strange it was, and weird beyond imagination, to be floating above the wavering outline of these marble ruins. Streets and buildings and fallen towers were below, scarcely veiled by the luminous waters, but possessing a vague, shadowy indistinctness that made them half-unreal. A green haze clothed the city. A city of shadows—

And the shadows moved and drifted in the tideless sea. Slowly, endlessly, they crept like a stain over the marble. They took shape before Elak's eyes.

Not sea-shapes—no. The shadows of men walked in the sunken metropolis. With queer, drifting motion the shadows went to and fro. They met and touched and parted again in strange similitude of life.

Stinging, clicking cold filled Elak's mouth and nostrils. He spluttered and struck out, realizing that he was far beneath the surface, that, unconsciously holding his breath, he had drifted into the depths. He fought his way up.

It was oddly difficult. Soft, clinging arms seemed to touch him; the water darkened. But his head broke the surface, and he drank deeply of the chill air. Only by swimming with all his strength could he keep from sinking. That inexplicable drag pulled him down.

He went under. His eyes were open, and he saw, far below, movement in the sunken city. The shadow-shapes were swirling up, rising, spinning like autumn leaves—rising to the surface. And shadows clustered about Elak, binding him with gossamer fetters. They clung feathery and tenacious as spider-webs.

The shadows drew him down into the shining depths.

He struck out frantically. His head broke water once more; he saw the islet, closer now.

"Mayana!" he called. "*Mayana!*"

Rustling movement shook the shadows. A ripple of mocking laughter seemed to go through them. They closed in again, dim, impalpable, unreal. Elak went under once more, too exhausted to fight, letting the shadows have their will with him. Only his mind cried out desperately to Mayana, striving to summon her to his aid.

The waters brightened. The green glow flamed emerald-bright. The shadows seemed to pause with odd hesitation, as though listening.

Then suddenly they closed in on Elak. They bore him through the waters; he was conscious of swift movement amid whirling green fire.

The shadows carried him to the islet, bore him up as on a wave, and left him upon the sands.

The green light faded to its former dimness. Choking, coughing, Elak clambered to his feet. He stared around.

The shadows had vanished. Only the motionless lake stretched into the distance. He stood amid the ruins of the islet.

Hastily he staggered away from the water's marge, clambering across broken plinths and fallen pillars, making his way to the central temple. It stood in a tiny plaza, unmarred by time, but stained and discolored in every stone.

The brazen door gaped open. Unsteadily Elak climbed the steps and paused at the threshold. He looked upon a bare room, lit with the familiar emerald glow, featureless save for a curtain, on the further wall, made of some metallic cloth and figured with the trident of the sea-god.

There was no sound but Elak's hastened breathing. Then, abruptly, a low splashing came from beyond the curtain. It parted.

Beyond it was green light, so brilliant it was impossible to look upon. Silhouetted against the brightness for a moment loomed a figure—a figure of unearthly slimmess and height. Only for a second did Elak see it; then the curtain swung back into place and the visitant was gone.

Whispering through the temple came a voice, like the soft murmur of tiny, rippling waves. And it said:

"I am Mayana. Why do you seek me?"

7. *Karkora*

And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns ten diadems, and upon his heads names of blasphemy ... and the dragon gave him his power, and his throne, and great authority.

—Revelations 13:1.

Elak's wet hand crept to his rapier. There had been no menace in the whisper, but it was strangely—inhuman. And the silhouette he had seen was not that of any earthly woman.

Yet he answered quietly enough, no tremor in his voice:

"I seek the dragon throne of Cyrena. And I come to you for aid against Karkora."

There was silence. When the whisper came again, it had in it all the sadness of waves and wind.

"Must I aid you? Against Karkora?"

"You know what manner of being he is?" Elak questioned.

"Aye—I know that well." The metallic curtain shook. "Seat yourself. You are tired—how are you named?"

"Elak."

"Elak, then—listen. I will tell you of the coming of Karkora, and of Erykion the sorcerer. And of Sepher, whom I loved." There was a pause; then the low whisper resumed.

"Who I am, what I am, you need not know, but you should understand that I am not entirely human. My ancestors dwelt in this sunken city. And I—well, for ten years I took human shape and dwelt with Sepher as his wife. I loved him. And always I hoped to give him a son who would some day mount the throne. I hoped in vain, or so I thought.

"Now in the court dwelt Erykion, a wizard. His magic was not that of the sea, soft and kindly as the waves, but of a darker sort. Erykion delved in ruined temples and pored over forgotten manuscripts of strange lore. His vision went back even before the sea-folk sprang from the loins of Poseidon, and he opened the forbidden gates of Space and Time. He offered to give me a child, and I listened to him, to my sorrow.

"I shall not tell you of the months I spent in strange temples, before dreadful altars. I shall not tell you of Erykion's magic. I bore a son—dead."

The silver curtain shook; it was long before the unseen speaker resumed. "And this son was frightful. He was deformed in ways I cannot let myself remember. Sorcery had made him inhuman. Yet he was my son, my husband's son, and I loved him. When Erykion offered to give him life, I agreed to the price he demanded—even though the price was the child himself."

"I shall not harm him," Erykion told me. "Nay, I shall give him powers beyond those of any god or man. Some day he shall rule this world and others. Only give him to me, Mayana." And I hearkened.

"Now of Erykion's sorcery I know little. Something had entered into the body of my son while I bore him, and what this thing was I do not know. It was dead, and it awoke. Erykion awoke it. He took this blind, dumb, maimed man-child and bore it to his home in the depths of the mountains. With his magic he deprived it of any vestige of the five senses. Only life remained, and the unknown dweller within.

"I remembered something Erykion had once told me. 'We have in us a sixth sense, primeval and submerged, which can be very powerful once it is brought to light. I know how to do that. A blind man's hearing may become acute; his power goes to the senses remaining. If a child, at birth, be deprived of all five senses, his power will go to this sixth sense. My magic can insure that.' So Erykion made of my man-child a being blind and dumb and without consciousness, almost; for years he worked his spells and opened the gates of Time and Space, letting alien powers flood through. This sixth sense within the child grew stronger. And the dweller in his mind waxed great, unbound by the earthly fetters that bind humans. This is my son—my man-child—Karkora, the Pallid One!"

And silence. And again the whisper resumed.

"Yet it is not strange that I do not entirely hate and loathe Karkora. I know he is a burning horror and a thing that should not exist; yet I gave him birth. And so, when he entered the mind of Sepher, his father, I fled to this my castle. Here I dwell alone with my shadows. I strove to forget that once I knew the fields and skies and hearths of earth. Here, in my own place, I forgot.

"And you seek me to ask aid." There was anger in the soft murmur. "Aid to destroy that which came from my flesh!"

Elak said quietly, "Is Karkora's flesh—yours?"

"By Father Poseidon, no! I loved the human part of Karkora, and little of that is left now. The Pallid One is—is—he has a thousand frightful powers, through his one strange sense. It has opened for him gateways that should remain always locked. He walks in other worlds, beyond unlit seas, across the nighted voids beyond earth. And I know he seeks to spread his dominion over all. Kiriath fell to him, and I think Cyrena. In time he will take all Atlantis, and more than that."

Elak asked, "This Erykion, the wizard—what of him?"

"I do not know," Mayana said. "Perhaps he dwells in his citadel yet, with Karkora. Not for years have I seen the sorcerer."

"Cannot Karkora be slain?"

There was a long pause. Then the whisper said, "I know not. His body, resting in the citadel, is mortal, but that which dwells within it is not. If you could reach the body of Karkora—even so you could not slay him."

"Nothing can kill the Pallid One?" Elak asked.

"Do not ask me this!" Mayana's voice said with angry urgency. "One thing, one talisman exists—and this I shall not and cannot give you."

"I am minded to force your talisman from you," Elak said slowly, "if I can. Yet I do not wish to do this thing."

From beyond the curtain came a sound that startled the man—a low, hopeless sobbing that had in it all the bleak sadness of the mournful sea. Mayana said brokenly:

"It is cold in my kingdom, Elak—cold and lonely. And I have no soul, only my life, while it lasts. My span is long, but when it ends there will be only darkness, for I am of the sea-folk. Elak, I have dwelt for a time on earth, and I would dwell there again, in green fields with the bright cornflowers and daisies gay amid the grass—with the fresh winds of earth caressing me. The hearth-fires, the sound of human voices, and a man's love—my Father Poseidon knows how I long for these again."

"The talisman," Elak said.

"Aye, the talisman. You may not have it."

Elak said very quietly, "What manner of world will this be if Karkora should rule?"

There was a shuddering, indrawn breath. Mayana said, "You are right. You shall have the talisman, if you should need it. It may be that you can defeat Karkora without it. I only pray that it may be so. Here is my word, then; in your hour of need, and not until then, I shall send you the talisman. And now go. Karkora has an earthly vessel in Sepher. Slay Sepher. Give me your blade, Elak."

Silently Elak unsheathed his rapier and extended it hilt-first. The curtain parted. Through it slipped a hand.

A hand—inhuman, strange! Very slender and pale it was, milk-white, with the barest suggestion of scales on the smooth,

delicate texture of the skin. The fingers were slim and elongated, seemingly without joints, and filmy webs grew between them.

The hand took Elak's weapon, and withdrew behind the curtain. Then it reappeared, again holding the rapier. Its blade glowed with a pale greenish radiance.

"Your steel will slay Sepher now. And it will give him peace." Elak gripped the hilt; the unearthly hand made a quick archaic gesture above the weapon.

"So I send a message to Sepher, my husband. And—Elak—kill him swiftly. A thrust through the eye into the brain will not hurt too much."

Then, suddenly, the hand thrust out and touched Elak upon the brow. He was conscious of a swift dizziness, a wild exaltation that surged through him in hot waves. Mayana whispered:

"You shall drink of my strength, Elak. Without it, you cannot hope to face Karkora. Stay with me for a moon—drinking the sea-power and Poseidon's magic."

"A moon—"

"Time will not exist. You will sleep, and while you sleep strength will pour into you. And when you awake, you may go forth to battle—strong!"

The giddiness mounted; Elak felt his senses leaving him. He whispered, "Lycon—I must give him a message—"

"Speak to him, then, and he will hear. My sorcery will open his ears."

Dimly, as though from far away, Elak heard Lycon's startled voice.

"Who calls me? Is it you, Elak? Where—I see no one on this lonely cliff."

"Speak to him!" Mayana commanded. And Elak obeyed.

"I am safe, Lycon. Here I must stay for one moon, alone. You must not wait. I have a task for you."

There was the sound of a stifled oath. "What task?"

"Go north to Cyrena. Find Dalan, or, failing that, gather an army. Cyrena must be ready when Kiriath marches. Tell Dalan, if you find him, what I have done, and that I will be with him in one moon. Then let the Druid guide your steps. And—Ishtar guide you, Lycon."

Softly came the far voice: "And Mother Ishtar be your shield. I'll obey. Farewell."

Green darkness drifted across Elak's vision.

Dimly, through closing eyes, he vaguely saw the curtain before him swept aside, and a dark silhouette moving forward—a shape slim and tall beyond human stature, yet delicately feminine withal. Mayana made a summoning gesture—and the shadows flowed into the temple.

They swept down upon Elak, bringing him darkness and cool, soothing quiet. He rested and slept, and the enchanted strength of the sea-woman poured into the citadel of his soul.

8. *The Dragon's Throne*

Dust of the stars was under our feet, glitter of stars above—
Wrecks of our wrath dropped reeling down as we fought and we
spurned and we strove.
Worlds upon worlds we tossed aside, and scattered them to and
fro,
The night that we stormed Valhalla, a million years ago!

—Kipling.

The moon waxed and waned, and at last Elak awoke, on the further shore, by the cavern mouth that led to the upper world. The underground mere lay silent at his feet, still bathed in the soft green glow. In the distance the islet was, and he could make out the white outline of the temple upon it. The temple where he had slept for a month. But there was no sign of life. No shadows stirred in the depths beneath him. Yet within himself he sensed a secret well of power that had not been there before.

Pondering, he retraced his steps through the winding passage, across the rock bridge to the high ramp of the plateau. The plain was deserted. The sun was westering, and a cold wind blew bleakly from the sea.

Elak shrugged. His gaze turned north, and his hand touched the rapier-hilt.

"First, a horse," he grunted. "And then—Sepher! A blade for the king's throat!"

So within two hours a mercenary soldier lay dead, his blood staining a leathern tunic, and Elak galloped north on a stolen steed. Hard and fast he rode, through Kiriath, and whispers were borne to his ears on the gusting winds. Sepher was no longer in his city, they said. At the head of a vast army he was sweeping north to the Gateway, the mountain pass that led to Cyrena. From the very borders of Kiriath warriors were coming in answer to the king's summons; mercenaries and adventurers flooded in to serve under Sepher. He paid well and promised rich plunder—the sack of Cyrena.

A trail of blood marked Elak's path. Two horses he rode to death. But at last the Gateway lay behind him; he had thundered through Sharn Forest and forded Monra River. Against the horizon towered a battlemented castle, and this was Elak's goal. Here Orander had ruled. Here was the dragon throne, the heart of Cyrena.

Elak rode across the drawbridge and into the courtyard. He cast his mount's reins to a gaping servitor, leaped from the horse, and raced across the yard. He knew each step of the way. In this castle he had been born.

And now the throne room, vast, high-ceilinged, warm with afternoon sunlight. Men were gathered there. Princes and lords of Cyrena. Barons, dukes, minor chieftains. By the throne—Dalan. And beside him, Lycon, round face set in unaccustomed harsh lines, for once sober and steady on his feet.

"By Mider!" Lycon roared. "Elak! *Elak!*"

The Atlantean pushed his way through the murmuring, undecided crowd. He came to stand beside the throne. His hand gripped Lycon's shoulder and squeezed painfully. The little man grinned.

"Ishtar be praised," Lycon murmured. "Now I can get drunk again."

Dalan said, "I watched you in the crystal, Elak. But I could not aid. The magic of the Pallid One battled my own. Yet I think you have other magic now—sea-sorcery." He turned to the mob. His lifted arms quieted them.

"This is your king," Dalan said.

Voices were raised, some in approbation, some in angry protest and objection. A tall, lean oldster shouted, "Aye—this is Zeulas, returned once more. This is Orander's brother."

"Be silent, Hira," another snapped. "This scarecrow Cyrena's king?"

Elak flushed and took a half-step forward. Dalan's voice halted him.

"You disbelieve, Gorlias?" he asked. "Well—d'you know of a worthier man? Will you sit on the dragon throne?"

Gorlias looked at the Druid with an oddly frightened air; he fell silent and turned away. The others broke into a renewed chorus of quarreling.

Hira silenced them. His lean face was triumphant. "There's one sure test. Let him take it."

He turned to Elak. "The lords of Cyrena have fought like a pack of snarling dogs since Orander's death. Each wanted the throne. Baron Kond yelled louder than the rest. Dalan offered him the dragon throne, in the name of Mider, if he could hold it."

From the others a low whisper went up—uneasy, fearful. Hira continued:

"Kond mounted the dais a month ago and sat on the throne. And he died! The fires of Mider slew him."

"Aye," Gorlias whispered. "Let this Elak sit upon the throne!"

A chorus of assent rose. Lycon looked worried.

He murmured, "It's true, Elak. I saw it. Red fire came out of nowhere and burned Kond to a cinder."

Dalan was silent, his ugly face impassive. Elak, watching the Druid, could not read a message in the shallow black eyes.

Gorlias said, "If you can sit on the throne, I'll follow you. If not—you'll be dead. Well?"

Elak did not speak. He turned and mounted the dais. For a moment he paused before the great throne of Cyrena, his gaze dwelling on the golden dragon that writhed across its back, the golden dragons on the arms. For ages the kings of Cyrena had ruled from this seat, ruled with honor and chivalry under the dragon. And now Elak remembered how, in Poseidonia, he had felt himself unworthy to mount the throne.

Would the fires of Mider slay him if he took his dead brother's place?

Silently Elak prayed to his god. "If I'm unworthy," he told Mider, with no thought of irreverence, but as one warrior to another, "then slay me, rather than let the throne be dishonored. Yours is the judgment."

He took his place on the dragon throne.

Silence fell like a pall on the great room. The faces of the crowd were intent and strained. Lycon's breath came fast. The Druid's hands, hidden under the brown robe, made a quick, furtive gesture; his lips moved without sound.

Red light flashed out above the throne. Through the room a cry rose and mounted, wordless, fearful. The fires of Mider flamed up in glaring brilliance and cloaked Elak!

They hid him in a twisting crimson pall. They swirled about him, blazing with hot radiance.

They swept into a strange, fantastic shape—a coiling silhouette that grew steadily more distinct.

A dragon of flame coiled itself about Elak!

And suddenly it was gone. Lycon was gasping oaths. The others were milling about in a confused mob. Dalan stood motionless, smiling slightly.

And on the dragon throne Elak sat unharmed! No breath of fire had scorched or blistered him; no heat had reddened his skin. His eyes were blazing; he sprang up and unsheathed his rapier. Silently he lifted it.

There was a clash of ringing blades. A forest of bright steel lifted. A great shout bellowed out.

The lords of Cyrena swore allegiance to their king!

Now, however, Elak found that his task had scarcely begun. The armies of Sepher were not yet in Cyrena; the king of Kiriath was waiting beyond the mountain barrier till he had gathered his full strength. But he would march soon, and Cyrena must by then be organized to resist him.

"Karkora didn't invade Kiriath," Elak said to Dalan one day as they rode through Sharn Forest. "He invaded the mind of the king instead. Why does he depend on armies to conquer Cyrena?"

Dalan's shapeless brown robe flapped against his horse's flanks. "Have you forgotten Orander? He tried there, and failed. Then there was no single ruler here. If he'd stolen the mind of Kond or Gorlias he'd still have had the other nobles against him. And conquer Cyrena he must, for it's the stronghold of Mider and the Druids. Karkora knows he must destroy us before he can rule this world and others, as he intends. So he uses Sepher and Kiriath's army. Already he's given orders to slaughter each Druid."

"What of Aynger?" Elak demanded.

"A message came from him today. He has gathered his Amenalks in the mountains beyond the Gateway. They wait for our word. Barbarians, Elak—but good allies. They fight like mad wolves."

Cyrena rose to arms. From steading and farm, castle and citadel, city and fortress, the iron men came streaming. The roads glittered with bright steel and rang to the clash of horses' hoofs. The dragon banners fluttered in the chill winds of winter.

Rise and arm! In the name of Mider and the Dragon, draw your blade! So the messengers called; so the word went forth. Rise against Kiriath and Sepher!

The defending swords of Cyrena flashed bright. They thirsted for blood.

And Sepher of Kiriath rode north against the Dragon.

9. *The Hammer of Aynger*

And a strange music went with him,
Loud and yet strangely far;
The wild pipes of the western land,
Too keen for the ear to understand,
Sang high and deathly on each hand
When the dead man went to war.

—Chesterton.

The first snows of winter lay white on the Gateway. All around towered the tall, frosted peaks of the mountain barrier, and a bitter wind gusted strongly through the pass. Within a month deep snow and avalanches would make the Gateway almost impassable.

The sky was cloudless, of chill pale blue. In the thin air everything stood out in startling clarity; voices carried far, as did the crunching of snow underfoot and the crackle of rocks deep-bitten by the iron cold.

The pass was seven miles long, and narrow in only a few spots. For the most part it was a broad valley bounded by the craggy cliffs. Canyons opened into it.

Dawn had flamed and spread in the east. The sun hung above a snow-capped peak. South of a narrow portion of the Gateway part of Cyrena's army waited. Behind them were reinforcements. Upon the crags were archers and arbalesters, waiting to rain death upon the invaders. Steel-silver moved against a background of white snow and black grim rocks.

Elak was astride a war-horse upon a small hillock. Hira rode up, gaunt old face keenly alert, joy of battle in the faded eyes. He saluted swiftly.

"The bowmen are placed and ready," he said. "We've got rocks and boulders into position to crush Sepher's army, should it get too far."

Elak nodded. He wore chain-armor, gold encrusted, with a close-fitting helm of gleaming steel. His wolf face was taut with excitement, and he curbed the steed as it curvetted.

"Good, Hira. You are in command there. I trust your judgment."

As Hira departed Dalan and Lycon arrived, the latter flushed and unsteady in his saddle. He gripped a drinking-horn and swilled mead from it occasionally. His long sword slapped the horse's flank.

"The minstrels will make a song of this battle," he observed. "Even the gods will eye it with some interest."

"Don't blaspheme," Dalan said, and turned to Elak. "I've a message from Aynger. His savage Amenalks wait in that side canyon—" The Druid flung out a pointing hand—"and will come when we need them."

"Aye," Lycon broke in, "I saw them. Madmen and demons! They've painted themselves blue as the sky and are armed with scythes and flails and hammers, among other things. And they're playing tunes on their pipes and bragging, each louder than the other. Only Aynger sits silent, fondling his Helm-Breaker. He looks like an image chipped out of gray stone."

At the memory Lycon shivered and then gulped the rest of the mead. "Faith," he said sadly, "the horn's empty. Well, I must get more." And off he went, reeling in the saddle.

"Drunken little dog," Elak remarked. "But his hand will be steady enough on the sword."

Far away a trumpet shouted shrilly, resounding among the peaks. Now the foreguard of Sepher's army was visible as a glitter of steel on casques and lifted spearheads. Along the pass they came, steadily, inexorably, in close battle formation. The trumpet sang and skirled.

In response drums of Cyrena snarled answer. They rose to a throbbing, menacing roar. Cymbals clashed resoundingly.

The banners of the dragon flung out stiffly in the cold blast.

Kiriath rode without a standard. In silence, save for the clashing of metallic hoofs and the angry screaming of the trumpet, they came, a vast array that flooded into the valley. Pikeman, archers, knights, mercenaries—on they came, intent on conquest and plunder. Elak could not see Sepher, though his gaze searched for the king.

And slowly the invaders increased their speed, almost imperceptibly at first, and then more swiftly till through the Gateway Kiriath charged and thundered, lances lowered, swords flashing. The trumpet shouted urgent menace.

Dalan's gross body moved uneasily in his saddle. He unsheathed his long blade.

Elak looked around. Behind him the army waited. Everything was ready.

The king of Cyrena rose in his stirrups. He lifted his rapier and gestured with it. He shouted:

"Charge! Ho—the Dragon!"

With a roar Cyrena swept forward down the pass. Closer and closer the two vast forces came. The drums roared death. From the icy peaks the clamor resounded thunderously.

A cloud of arrows flew. Men fell, screaming. Then, with a crash that seemed to shake the mountainous walls of the Gateway, the armies met.

It was like a thunderclap. All sanity and coherence vanished in a maelstrom of red and silver-steel, a whirlpool, an avalanche of thrusting spears, speeding arrows, slashing blades. Elak was instantly surrounded by foes. His rapier flew swift as a striking snake; blood stained its length. His horse shrieked and fell hamstringed to the ground. Elak leaped free and saw Lycon charging to the rescue. The little man was wielding a sword almost as long as himself, but his pudgy fingers handled it with surprising ease. He lopped off one man's head, ruined another's face with a well-placed kick of his steel-shod foot, and then Elak had leaped astride a riderless steed.

Again he plunged into the fray. The brown bald head of Dalan was rising and falling some distance away; the Druid roared like a beast as his sword whirled and flew and bit deep. Blood soaked the brown robe. Dalan's horse seemed like a creature possessed; it screamed shrilly, blowing through red, inflamed nostrils, snapped viciously and reared and struck with knife-edged hoofs. Druid and charger raged like a burning pestilence amid the battle; sweat and blood mingled on Dalan's toad face.

Elak caught sight of Sepher. The ruler of Kiriath bronzed, bearded giant towered above his men, fighting in deadly silence. Smiling wolfishly, Elak drove toward the king.

From the distance came the thin high wailing of pipes. Out of the side canyon men came pouring—barbarous men, half naked, their lean bodies smeared blue with woad. The men of Aynger! At their head ran Aynger himself, his gray beard flying, brandishing the hammer Helm-Breaker. The gray giant leaped upon a rock, gesturing toward the forces of Kiriath.

"Slay the oppressors!" he bellowed. "Slay! Slay!"

The weird pipes of the Amenalks shrilled their answer. The blue-painted men swept forward—

From the ranks of Sepher an arrow flew. It sped toward Aynger. It pierced his bare throat and drove deep—deep!

The Amenalk leader bellowed; his huge body arced like a bow. Blood spouted from his mouth.

A battalion charged out from the ranks of Kiriath. They sped toward the Amenalks, lances lowered, pennons flying.

Aynger fell! Dead, he toppled from the rock into the lifted arms of his men. The pipes skirled. The Amenalks, bearing their leader, turned and fled back into the valley!

Cursing, Elak dodged a shrewd thrust, killed his assailant, and spurred toward Sepher. The hilt of his rapier was slippery with blood. His body, under the chain armor, was a mass of agonizing bruises; blood gushed from more than

one wound. His breath rasped in his throat. The stench of sweat and gore choked him; he drove over ground carpeted with the writhing bodies of men and horses.

Down the valley Dalan fought and bellowed his rage. The battle-thunder crashed on the towering crags and sent deafening echoes through the Gateway.

Still the trumpets of Kiriath called; still the drums and cymbals of Cyrena shouted their defiance.

And still Sepher slew, coldly, remorselessly, his bronzed face expressionless.

Kiriath gathered itself and charged. The forces of Cyrena were forced back, fighting desperately each step of the way. Back to the narrowing of the pass they were driven.

High above the archers loosed death on Kiriath.

With ever-increasing speed Sepher's army thrust forward. A gust of panic touched the ranks of Cyrena. A dragon banner was captured and slashed into flying shreds by keen blades.

Vainly Elak strove to rally his men. Vainly the Druid bellowed threats.

The retreat became a rout. Into the narrow defile the army fled, jammed into a struggling, fighting mob. An orderly retreat might have saved the day, for Kiriath could have been trapped in the narrow pass and crippled by boulders thrust down by the men stationed above. As it was, Cyrena was helpless, waiting to be slaughtered.

Kiriath charged.

Quite suddenly Elak heard a voice. In through the mountains. Above the call of trumpets came the thin wailing of pipes. Louder it grew, and louder.

From the side canyon the blue barbarians of Amenalk rushed in disorderly array. In their van a group ran together with lifted shields. Upon the shields was the body of Aynger!

Weirdly, eerily, the ear-piercing skirling of the pipes of Amenalk shrilled out. The woad-painted savages, mad with blood-frenzy, raced after the corpse of their ruler.

Dead Aynger led his men to war!

The Amenalks fell on the rear of the invaders. Flails and scythes and blades swung and glittered, and were lifted dripping red. A giant sprang upon the shield-platform, astride the body of Aynger. In his hand he brandished a war-hammer.

"Helm-Breaker!" he shouted. "He—Helm-Breaker!"

He leaped down; the great hammer rose and fell and slaughtered. Casques and helmets shattered under the smashing blows; the Amenalk wielded Helm-Breaker in a circle of scarlet death about him.

"Helm-Breaker! Ho—slay! Slay!"

Kiriath swayed in confusion under the onslaught. In that breathing-space Elak and Dalan rallied their army. Cursing, yelling, brandishing steel, they whipped order out of chaos. Elak snatched a dragon banner from the dust, lifted it high.

He turned his horse's head down the valley. One hand lifting the standard, one gripping his bared rapier, he drove his spurs deep.

"Ho, the Dragon!" he shouted. *"Cyrena! Cyrena!"*

Down upon Kiriath he thundered. Behind him rode Lycon and the Druid. And after them the remnants of an army poured. Hira led his archers from the cliffs. The arbalasters came bounding like mountain goats, snatching up swords and spears,

pouring afoot after their king.

"*Cyrena!*"

The drums and cymbals roared out again. Through the tumult pierced the thin, weird calling of the pipes.

"*Helm-Breaker! Slay! Slay!*"

And then madness—a hell of shouting, scarlet battle through which Elak charged, Dalan and Lycon beside him, riding straight for the bushy beard that marked Sepher. On and on, over screaming horses and dying men, through a whirlpool of flashing, thirsty steel, thrusting, stabbing, hacking—

The face of Sepher rose up before Elak.

The bronzed face of Kiriath's king was impassive; in his cold eyes dwelt something inhuman. Involuntarily an icy shudder racked Elak. As he paused momentarily the brand of Sepher whirled up and fell shattering in a great blow.

Elak did not try to escape. He poised his rapier, flung himself forward in his stirrups, sent the sharp blade thrusting out.

The enchanted steel plunged into Sepher's throat. Simultaneously Elak felt his back go numb under the sword-cut; his armor tore raggedly. The blade dug deep into the body of the war-horse.

The light went out of Sepher's eyes. He remained for a heart-beat upright in his saddle. Then his face changed.

It darkened with swift corruption. It blackened and rotted before Elak's eyes. Death, so long held at bay, sprang like a crouching beast.

A foul and loathsome thing fell forward and rumbled from the saddle. It dropped to the bloody ground and lay motionless. Black ichor oozed out from the chinks of the armor; the face that stared up blindly at the sky was a frightful thing.

And without warning darkness and utter silence dropped down and shrouded Elak.

10. *The Black Vision*

And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where are also the beast and the false prophet; and they shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

—Revelations 20:10.

He felt again the dizzy vertigo that presaged the coming of Karkora. A high-pitched, droning whine rang shrilly in his ears; he felt a sense of swift movement. A picture came.

Once more he saw the giant crag that towered amid the mountains. The dark tower lifted from its summit. Elak was drawn forward; iron gates opened in the base of the pinnacle. They closed as he passed through.

The high whining had ceased. It was cimmerician dark. But in the gloom a Presence moved and stirred and was conscious of Elak.

The Pallid One sprang into view.

He felt a sense of whirling disorientation; his thoughts grew inchoate and confused. They were slipping away, spinning into the empty dark. In their place something crept and grew; a weird mental invasion took place. Power of Karkora surged through Elak's brain, forcing back the man's consciousness and soul, thrusting them out and back into the void. A dreamlike sense of unreality oppressed Elak.

Silently he called upon Dalan.

Dimly a golden flame flickered up, far away. Elak heard the Druid's voice whispering faintly, out of the abyss.

"Mider—aid him, Mider—"

Fires of Mider vanished. Elak felt again the sense of swift movement. He was lifted—

The darkness was gone. Gray light bathed him. He was, seemingly, in the tower on the summit of the crag—the citadel of Karkora. But the place was unearthly!

The planes and angles of the room in which Elak stood were warped and twisted insanely. Laws of matter and geometry seemed to have gone mad. Crawling curves swept obscenely in strange motion; there was no sense of perspective. The gray light was alive. It crept and shimmered. And the white shadow of Karkora blazed forth with chill and dreadful radiance.

Elak remembered the words of Mayana, the sea-witch, as she spoke of her monstrous son Karkora.

"He walks in other worlds, beyond unlit seas, across the nighted voids beyond earth."

Through the whirling chaos a face swam, inhuman, mad, and terrible. A man's face, indefinably bestialized and degraded, with a sparse white beard and glaring eyes. Again Elak recalled Mayana's mention of Erykion, the wizard who had created the Pallid One.

"Perhaps he dwells in his citadel yet, with Karkora. Not for years have I seen the sorcerer."

If this were Erykion, then he had fallen victim to his own creation. The warlock was insane. Froth dribbled on the straggling beard; the mind and soul had been drained from him.

He was swept back and vanished in the grinding maelstrom of the frightful lawless geometrical chaos. Elak's eyes ached as he stared, unable to stir a muscle. The shadow of the Pallid One gleamed whitely before him.

The planes and angles changed; pits and abysses opened before Elak. He looked through strange gateways. He saw other worlds, and with his flesh shrinking in cold horror he stared into the depths of the Nine Hells. Frightful life swayed into motion before his eyes. Things of inhuman shape rose up out of nighted depths. A charnel wind choked him.

The sense of mental assault grew stronger; Elak felt his mind slipping away under the dread impact of alien power.

Unmoving, deadly, Karkora watched—

"Mider," Elak prayed. "Mider—aid me!"

The mad planes swept about faster, in a frantic saraband of evil. The dark vision swept out, opening wider vistas before Elak. He saw unimaginable and blasphemous things, dwellers in the outer dark, horrors beyond earth-life—

The white shadow of Karkora grew larger. The crawling radiance shimmered leprously. Elak's senses grew dulled; his body turned to ice. Nothing existed but the now gigantic silhouette of Karkora; the Pallid One reached icy fingers into Elak's brain.

The assault mounted like a rushing tide. There was no aid anywhere. There was only evil, and madness, and black, loathsome horror.

Quite suddenly Elak heard a voice. In it was the murmur of rippling waters. He knew Mayana spoke to him by strange magic.

"In your hour of need I bring you the talisman against my son Karkora."

The voice died; the thunder of the seas roared in Elak's ears. A green veil blotted out the mad, shifting planes and angles. In the emerald mists shadows floated—the shadows of Mayana.

They swept down upon him. Something was thrust into his hand—something warm and wet and slippery.

He lifted it, staring. He gripped a heart, bloody, throbbing—alive!

The heart of Mayana! The heart beneath which Karkora had slumbered in the womb! The talisman against Karkora!

A shrill droning rose suddenly to a skirling shriek of madness, tearing at Elak's ears, knifing through his brain. The bleeding heart in Elak's hand drew him forward. He took a slow step, another.

About him the gray light pulsed and waned; the white shadow of Karkora grew gigantic. The mad planes danced swiftly.

And then Elak was looking down at a pit on the edge of which he stood. Only in the depths of the deep hollow was the instability of the surrounding matter lacking. And below was a shapeless and flesh-colored hulk that lay inert ten feet down.

It was man-sized and naked. But it was not human. The pulpy arms had grown to the sides; the legs had grown together. Not since birth had the thing moved by itself. It was blind, and had no mouth. Its head was a malformed grotesquerie of sheer horror.

Fat, deformed, utterly frightful, the body of Karkora rested in the pit.

The heart of Mayana seemed to tear itself from Elak's hand. Like a plummet it dropped, and fell upon the breast of the horror below.

A shuddering, wormlike motion shook Karkora. The monstrous body writhed and jerked.

From the bleeding heart blood crept out like a stain. It spread over the deformed horror. In a moment Karkora was no longer flesh-colored, but red as the molten sunset.

And, abruptly, there was nothing in the pit but a slowly widening pool of scarlet. The Pallid One had vanished.

Simultaneously the ground shook beneath Elak; he felt himself swept back. For a second he seemed to view the crag and tower from a distance, against the background of snow-tipped peaks.

The pinnacle swayed; the crag rocked. They crashed down in thunderous ruin.

Only a glimpse did Elak get; then the dark curtain blotted out his consciousness. He saw, dimly, a pale oval. It grew

more distinct. And it was the face of Lycon bending above Elak, holding a brimming cup to the latter's lips.

"Drink!" he urged. "Drink deep!"

Elak obeyed, and then thrust the liquor away. He stood up weakly.

He was in the pass of the Gateway. Around him the men of Cyrena rested, with here and there a blue-painted warrior of Amenalk. Corpses littered the ground. Vultures were already circling against the blue.

Dalan was a few paces away, his shallow black eyes regarding Elak intently. He said, "Only one thing could have saved you in Karkora's stronghold. One thing—"

Elak said grimly, "It was given me. Karkora is slain."

A cruel smile touched the Druid's lipless mouth. He whispered, "So may all enemies of Mider die."

Lycon broke in, "We've conquered, Elak. The army of Kiriath fled when you killed Sepher. And, gods, I'm thirsty!" He rescued the cup and drained it.

Elak did not answer. His wolf face was dark; in his eyes deep sorrow dwelt. He did not see the triumphant banners of the dragon tossing in the wind, nor did he envision the throne of Cyrena that waited. He was remembering a low, rippling voice that spoke with longing of the fields and hearth-fires of earth, a slim, inhuman hand that had reached through a curtain—a sea-witch who had died to save a world to which she had never belonged.

The shadow was lifted from Atlantis; over Cyrena the golden dragon ruled under great Mider. But in a sunken city of marble beauty the shadows of Mayana would mourn for Poseidon's daughter.

[The end of *Dragon Moon* by Henry Kuttner]