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By SEABURY QUINN



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“The titan hand swept upward, carrying Elak and Solonala.”

Thunder in the Dawn

By

Henry Kuttner

Illustration by Virgil Finlay.

First published *Weird Tales*, May and June 1938.

A story to stir the pulses—a tale of warlock and wizard and valiant men of might in the far-off olden time—a gripping tale of Elak of Atlantis

1. Magic of the Druid

The tavern was ill-lighted and cloudy with smoke. Raucous oaths and no less rough laughter made the place a bedlam. From the open door a cold wind blew strongly, salt-scented from the sea that lapped restlessly against the wharves of Poseidonia. A small, fat man sitting alone in a booth was muttering to himself as he drank deeply of the wine the innkeeper had placed before him, and Lycon's quick, furtive glances searched the room, missing no detail.

For Lycon was a little frightened, and this prevented him from getting drunk as quickly as usual. His tall friend and fellow adventurer, Elak, was hours overdue from a clandestine visit to a lady of noble blood, the wife of a duke of Atlantis. This alone might not have troubled Lycon, but he was remembering certain curious events of the past fortnight—an inexplicable feeling of being trailed, and an encounter with masked soldiers in the forest beyond Poseidonia. Elak's dexterity with his rapier had saved them both, and, later, he had attributed the attack to the soldiers of Granicor, the Atlantean duke. Lycon was not so sure. Their opponents had not been the swarthy, sinewy seamen of Poseidonia—they had been yellow-haired, fair-skinned giants such as were native to the northern shores of Atlantis. And for many moons Atlantis had been looking northward with apprehensive eyes.

The island continent is, roughly, heart-shaped, split down the middle by a waterway which runs from a huge bay or inland sea at the north down to a lake nearly at the southern extremity, thirty miles from the seacoast city of Poseidonia. For as long as men could remember the northern shores had been harried by red-bearded giants whose long black galleys had swept down from the frozen lands beyond the ocean. Dragon ships they were called, and those who manned them were Vikings—sea-pirates, plunderers who left ruin and desolation wherever they beached their craft. Lately rumors had spread of a great influx of these Northmen—and in taverns and by campfires men met and boasted and sharpened their blades.

There were two men in the brawling clamor of the inn who had attracted Lycon's intent gaze—one, a gross, ugly figure clad in a shapeless brown robe, the traditional garb of the Druid priests. Beneath an immense bald head was a hairless, toad-like face glistening with sweat. These Druids, it was said, wielded immense power secretly, and Lycon habitually distrusted priests of any order.

Beside the Druid, Lycon watched a bearded giant whose skin showed traces of being darkened artificially, and whose hair was probably dyed, as it showed blue in the lamps' glow. Casually the small adventurer touched the hilt of his sword. Somewhat reassured by the feel of its smooth metal, he banged his cup on the table and yelled for more wine.

"What watery swill is this?" he asked the innkeeper, a wizened oldster in a liquor-stained tunic. "It's fit for babes and women. Bring me something a man can drink, or—or——"

On the verge of uttering a grandiloquent threat Lycon subsided, muttering softly. "Gods!" he observed to himself as the innkeeper moved away, "what's got into me? These past weeks have made me a coward. I'll be jumping at shadows soon. Where in the Nine Hells is Elak?"

He paused to throw a gold piece on the table and to lift a replenished cup to his lips. That was but the first of many cups, and presently Lycon's apprehension and worry had crystallized into belligerency. The bearded giant was watching him, he saw.

Lycon drained his cup, set it down with a crash—and sprang to his feet, overturning the table. Dark faces were turned to him; wary eyes gleamed in the lamplight.

For all his fatness Lycon was agile. He leaped over the table and headed for the giant, who had not moved, save to set down his liquor.

Lycon was, by this time, very drunk indeed. He paused to drag his sword from its scabbard, but unfortunately it stuck, marring the impressiveness of the gesture. Nevertheless Lycon persisted, and pulled out the weapon at last. He flourished it beneath the other's nose.

“Am I a dog?” he demanded, glaring malevolently at the giant, who shrugged.

“You should know,” he said gruffly. “Go away before I slice off your ears with that toy.”

Lycon gasped inarticulately. Speech returned with a rush.

“Misbegotten spawn of a worm!” he snarled. “Unsheathe your sword! I'll have your heart out for this——”

The blackbeard cast a swift glance around. He did not look frightened, but, oddly, annoyed, as though Lycon had interrupted some important project of his own. Yet he stood erect, and his blade came out flashing. The innkeeper hurried up, clucking his annoyance. In one of his hands was a bungstarter, and watching his chance he brought this down toward Lycon's head.

From the corner of his eye the little man saw the movement. He ducked, whirled, felt his shoulder go numb beneath the blow. The giant's sword swept out at his unprotected throat.

Something hit Lycon, sent him sprawling back, while razor-sharp steel raked his chest. He fought frantically to regain his footing. He came upright with his back to the wall, sword in hand—and stood staring.

Elak had at last arrived. It was his blow that had hurled Lycon from the path of the giant's steel, and now the lean, wolf-faced adventurer's rapier was engaging the blackbeard's weapon in a dazzling flash and shimmer of clanging metal, while Elak's laughter brought fear to his opponent's eyes. The innkeeper crouched near by, the bungstarter gripped in his hand, and swiftly Lycon caught up a heavy flagon and crashed it down on the man's head. He fell, blood spurting, and Lycon turned again to watch the battle.

The blackbeard was being forced back by the rapidity of Elak's onslaught. Few could stand successfully against the electric speed with which the adventurer wielded his rapier; already the giant was bleeding from a long cut along the forehead. He cried, “Wait! Wait, Elak——”

And his sword came down, leaving his throat unprotected.

But Elak also lowered his rapier. His wolfish face cracked in an ironic grin.

“Had enough?” he taunted. “By Ishtar, but you've little courage for your size.”

The giant fumbled with the fastenings of his tunic. Abruptly he brought out something thin and dark and writhing coiled about his arm. He flung it at Elak.

The rapier screamed through the air, but missed its mark. Elak sprang aside just in time; the dark thing shot past him and arched up to avoid the swinging cut of Lycon's sword. For a brief moment it hung in empty air, while the silence of stupefaction stilled the tavern's clamor.

It was a serpent—but a winged serpent! A snake, with two webbed, membranous wings sprouting from its body. Beady eyes glittered in the triangular head as the monster hung aloft. Then down it came, swift as an arrow's flight.

Chairs and tables crashed over, and the thunder of frantic feet sounded. Lycon's thrust almost spitted Elak. The winged snake, unhurt, flashed away, but its fangs had grazed Elak's

shoulder. The brown leather of his tunic darkened swiftly, while a stench of foul corruption was strong in his nostrils.

“Bel!” he ground out. “I can’t——”

Suddenly a bulky figure loomed before him—the Druid, huge arms lifted, shielding the adventurer with his own body. Elak made to thrust him aside. Then, staring, he paused.

From the upthrust hands of the Druid a pale flame was rising, twin fires that burned fiercely, dwarfing the yellow glow of the lamps. Incredibly the flames swelled and grew and abruptly took flight. The winged serpent twisted in midair, its wings whirring. But inexorably the flames raced down upon it.

They spread out lambent fingers, interlacing, till around the monster revolved a sphere of silently glowing fire. The serpent was hidden from view by a globe of flame.

And it swiftly diminished, shrank to a tiny glowing point—and vanished. Where flame and serpent had been was nothing. A gray dust filtered slowly to the rough planks of the floor. . . .

2. *Northmen in Cyrena*

“So may all traitors die!” the Druid said harshly.

He was staring at an outsprawled giant figure that lay broken across a splintered table, a man whose black-bearded, swarthy face was upturned to the lamplight. On his brow a circle of reddened skin was burned and blistered, and blood bubbled in his throat.

Before either Lycon or Elak could move, the Druid had bent above the dying man, gripping his hair with rough fingers.

“Who sent you?” he snarled, his toad-like face aglisten with sweat. “Tell me, you dog—or I’ll——”

“Mercy!” the wretch gasped, blood gushing from his mouth.

“I’ll give you such mercy as will send your soul screaming down the Nine Hells! Who sent you? Tell these men!”

The man croaked, “Elf! He——”

Callously the Druid turned away. A frown creased Elak’s brow as he saw the fear-glazed eyes roll up in death. “Elf?” he repeated. “I know that name.”

“You should,” the Druid growled. “Perhaps you know mine, then—Dalan. Come on, we’ve no time to talk. The guards will be here in a moment.”

Lycon hesitated, shrank back. But Elak gripped his arm and urged him in the wake of the Druid.

“We can trust him,” he whispered. “I’ve heard tales of this Dalan. And I think——” There was a wry smile on Elak’s lean face. “I think we’ll be safer with him than anywhere else.”

A wan moon hung low over Atlantis. Keeping in the shadows, the three cautiously made their way along the waterfront. Once they shrank back into a doorway while a troop of guards clattered past. And at last they came to a low hut into which Dalan ushered them, barring the door carefully before he turned to take a lantern from a peg on the wall.

Even then he paused to lift a trap-door in the floor before setting the lantern on the rough table in the center of the bare, gloomy room. “In case of surprize,” he explained; “though I think we’re safe enough here.”

“In Bel’s name, what’s this all about?” Lycon demanded. The drink was wearing off, and he was trembling a little with reaction. Gratefully he sank down in a chair the Druid indicated. “Did you kill that bearded swine? Winged snakes—magic fires—haven’t you anything to drink in this cavern?”

“You’ll need a clear head for what I’m going to tell you,” Dalan said. “There’s magic in it, yes, or at least a science you can’t understand. I slew that traitorous dog with a power we Druids have had for ages—a power over fire. And thus I slew Elf’s messenger.”

“The snake? Who is this—Elf?”

Dalan sent a somber glance toward Elak, whose face was grim and cold. He asked, “This man—does he know nothing? Have you told him of Cyrena?”

Elak shook his head. “Tell him, Dalan.”

“Cyrena? The northermost kingdom of Atlantis?” Lycon asked. “I know Orander rules it, but that’s all.”

“A dozen years ago Norian ruled Cyrena,” the Druid said. “He had two stepsons, Orander and Zeulas. Zeulas killed him.”

Elak moved uneasily.

“Zeulas killed him,” Dalan repeated, “in fair fight, and both men had provocation. Because of this, Zeulas, though he was the elder, did not assume the crown. He left Cyrena to wander, a homeless vagabond, through Atlantis.”

Lycon turned to stare at Elak. “By Ishtar! You don’t mean——”

“He is Zeulas,” the Druid said. “His brother, Orander, rules over Cyrena. Or——did rule.”

“The Vikings?” Elak asked.

“Yes. They’ve invaded the land, with the aid of Elf the warlock. Elf has always hated your brother, who would never give him the freedom he wanted for his black sorcery and human sacrifice. So Elf made a pact with the Northmen to destroy Orander, in exchange for power and for the victims he needs for his necromancy.”

“Did he——” Elak did not finish, but a cold fire blazed in his eyes.

“He couldn’t kill Orander; my magic was too strong for that. But he has taken him captive and left the armies of Cyrena without a head. So the chiefs argue and battle among themselves, and the Vikings slay them at leisure.”

Lycon was nearly sober now. A smoking oath came from his throat. “Your kingdom, Elak? This is your kingdom? And the Northmen and this stinking wizard rule it? Dalan”——he stood erect, teetering a little——“we head north tomorrow——tonight! I’ll slit this Elf’s throat like a pig’s.”

Elak pulled him down. “Wait a moment. Dalan——you want me to return to Cyrena? To lead the armies against the Vikings?”

The Druid nodded. “That’s why I’m here. Elf caught me unawares, and he has your brother captive. But if you’ll come north, you’ll give Cyrena the leader it needs. My magic will aid you.”

“To free Orander?”

“Yes. And to destroy Elf, to drive out the Northmen!” The toad face grew hideous with rage. “They desecrate the Druid altars, crucify our priests! They worship Loki and Thor and Odin, devils of the blackest abyss——and they worship Elf’s evil gods, as well. By Mider!” Dalan’s hand moved in a strange quick gesture as he named the Druids’ greatest deity. “You’ll come——you must come, Zeulas——Elak——whatever you name yourself now!”

Elak stood up. “Yes, I’ll come. I’d sworn never to enter Cyrena again, but this is a different thing.”

“And I’ll go with you,” Lycon put in. “You’ll need a strong sword in the forests. It’s a far distance to Cyrena.”

“Good!” Dalan’s great hands swept down, gripped Lycon’s shoulders. “You have courage——and you’ll need it. But we’ll not go through the forests. Look.”

He bent to scrawl, with a bit of charcoal, a rough map on the table’s top. “Here we are at Poseidonia. We go inland thirty miles to the Central Lake, where I’ve a ship waiting. Then north, down the river through the heart of Atlantis, into the Inland Sea that touches Cyrena. We’ll go with the current, and my oarsmen are strong.”

“And we start——” Lycon’s face was eager.

“Tomorrow, at dawn. You’ll stay here with me tonight.”

Elak hesitated. “Dalan, we may not return. And I promised——well, there’s a girl I’ll have to see tonight.”

“Velia?” Lycon asked. “Duke Granicor’s wife? I should think you’d had enough of her by now. And, by the way, what kept you tonight?”

“Her kisses,” Elak said frankly. “I told her I’d see her before leaving Poseidonia.”

Dalan grunted, “The guards——”

“I can evade them.”

“What about the man I killed in the tavern tonight—and Elf’s messenger? I tell you, Zeulas—or Elak—Elf fears you. He knows I came to Poseidonia to bring you north to fight him, and he knows, too, that if you’re dead, the Vikings will sweep unopposed over Cyrena. He has servants besides the Northmen—renegades, traitors!”

“I see Velia tonight,” Elak said stubbornly. He turned toward the door.

“Wait.” Dalan’s huge hand spun him about. “There’s no need to take unnecessary risk. We’ll leave tonight—and, on the way, you can stop for a kiss or two with this wench. But you’re a fool to do it.”

“It isn’t the first time women have made a fool of Elak,” Lycon said, grinning. “But Dalan’s right. We’d better leave Poseidonia now. I’ll feel safer in the forest.”

Elak shrugged and waited while the Druid hastily erased the map from the table. That done, the three cautiously let themselves out into the moonlit alley. . . .

The palace of Duke Granicor shone whitely, towering on a hillock above Poseidonia. To the southeast the ocean swept out to a dim horizon. In the other direction was the forest, dark, menacing. In the shadow of a gate Lycon and Dalan waited while Elak dextrously mounted the wall. He moved quietly through the perfumed blossoms of the garden till he reached the trellis beneath Velia’s window.

He had climbed it often before, and it gave no trouble now. The girl came upon the balcony as he softly called her name. He was briefly silent, studying her golden beauty in the moonlight.

Her transparent robe concealed little; she seemed like an amber statue draped in gauze. Bronze hair fell disheveled about an oval, elfin face; amber eyes were upturned questioningly to Elak’s. Without a word he drew her close.

“I’m leaving Poseidonia,” he said after a time. “I may not see you again for a while.”

She clung to him. “Elak, I wish—I’ll go with you!”

“No. You——”

“I will! I can’t stand it here with Granicor. He’s a beast, Elak—a devil. You know how he bought me from my father—I’m little better than a slave to him. I—I’d have killed myself if I hadn’t met you.”

“Don’t be a little fool,” Elak said gruffly. “You’ll get used to him in time. Though, by Ishtar, his face is enough to frighten babies! Well——”

“You’re frank, at least, vagabond,” a new voice growled. “And you’ll be franker on the rack, with this harlot beside you!”

Elak released the girl and swung about quickly to face the man who came on to the balcony from the shadows. Duke Granicor was smiling, baring stained, discolored teeth through a gray-shot beard. In his silks and velvets he looked incongruously bedecked, a huge ape masquerading in borrowed finery. Bloodshot small eyes glared at Elak from little pits of gristle.

“You skulking dog!” Duke Granicor roared, lifting a dagger. “Your face’ll frighten soldiers when I’m through with you!”

From the garden below came the clash of armor, and the swift thud-thud of racing feet.

3. *Through the Black Forest*

Elak had no time to draw his rapier before Granicor was upon him. He twisted lithely beneath the dagger's blow, felt the blade tear and scrape along his ribs. Then he closed with his opponent, grimly silent.

Granicor's arm rose up, blade red and dripping, but before it could descend Velia had gripped it. Before the duke could wrench his weapon free the girl had bent swiftly, set her teeth in hairy flesh. Granicor roared an oath; but the dagger dropped, went clattering over the rail to the garden below.

Someone was climbing the trellis. Elak dropped swiftly beneath Granicor's encircling arms, and his own sinewy arms went about the duke's knees, gripping them tightly. With one swift movement he hurled himself up and back, sent his opponent crashing over the marble balustrade, hurtling down into the shadows. A yell of alarm and a scrambling in the foliage, ending in a smashing thud, told of a guard wrenched from his perch by Granicor's descending body.

Elak seized Velia's hand. "Come on," he snapped, and dragged her from the balcony within the room. A glance told him that there were no enemies here. Apparently the duke had been alone, save for his cohorts in the garden.

Now Velia took the lead. "I know the palace," she said swiftly. "There's a door Granicor may have overlooked. If there's no guard——"

They sped along dimly-lit halls, draped with tapestries and rugs of somber magnificence. Faintly there came to Elak's ears the sound of men's voices shouting. Into a narrow hall—down a steep winding staircase. . . .

Elak gripped a heavy iron door, flung it open. Someone rose up before him, startled and menacing; armor glinted in the moonlight. But the slim rapier sheathed itself in flesh, and blood spurted from a pierced throat as the guard sank down groaning. They hurdled his body and raced into the garden.

Blades shimmered frostily; shadows closed in on them. Elak saw Granicor, his face blood-smearred and horrible, one arm dangling uselessly, bellowing commands to his men. But surprize was in their favor, and they made the gate safely.

To their surprize it was open. Elak pushed the girl through and turned to find the pack yelling at his heels.

Huge hands gripped him; he was drawn through the gateway. Metal clanged. The gross figure of the Druid stood briefly between him and the soldiers. Then, without warning, a tongue of fire licked up from the ground. It spread and lifted, filling the gateway with its red blaze. Dalan turned.

"That will stop them," he grunted, "for a time, anyway. Hurry!"

Lycon came out of the shadows, and the four raced into the dimness, seeking shelter in a near-by grove of trees before Granicor remembered to use arrows. As they came panting among the shielding trunks a menacing roar came from the palace, and a rout of men, armor glittering, came pouring down the hill.

"More than one gate," Elak muttered. "Well, shall we fight—or run?"

"Run," Lycon advised. "I'll stay here and hold them, for a while, at least. You can——"

The Druid whispered, “Come. I know the forests. Follow me—and they’ll never find us. You too, Lycon.”

Velia’s hand was warm in Elak’s as they silently trailed Dalan. Like a shadow for all his gross bulk the Druid slipped from tree to tree, taking advantage of every bush and shrub, till at last the noise of pursuit died in the distance. Only then did he pause to wipe the sweat from his ugly face.

“No enemy can find a Druid in the forests,” he informed the others. “If necessary, our magic can send the trees marching against those who follow.”

Elak grunted skeptically. “Well, I’ve let us in for something now. Velia’s coming with us. I’m not going to leave her here to be skinned alive by Granicor.”

She pressed closer to him, and Elak’s arm went about her warm slimness.

“It’s no hardship,” Lycon said, glancing slyly at the girl. “And my sword is yours to command.”

Velia thanked him with a glance, and the little man expanded visibly. Elak’s expression was none too cordial.

“Let’s get started,” he said. “We’ve a long march to the Central Lake and your ship, Dalan.”

The Druid nodded and took the lead. They set out through the moonlit forest. . . .

Presently the moon sank, but Dalan guided them unerringly, even in the vague starlight, where they would have been separated had they not joined hands. Weird noises came out of the night; the shrill calling of birds and the rustle of underbrush. Once the ground shook beneath the tread of some giant beast that lumbered past unseen in the gloom. And once Elak spat with his rapier a spider as large as his hand, which squirted venom a dozen feet as it writhed and died.

As dawn came they reached the Central Lake, a chill blue expanse whose depths had never been plumbed. Zones of sapphire and aquamarine and deeper blue lay across its surface. Floating at anchor not far away was a long galley, sails furled, waiting.

Sand crunched beneath their sandaled feet as the four hurried to the water’s edge. Dalan made a speaking-tube of his hands and bellowed lustily till a small boat left the galley, heading shoreward.

“That’s done, at least,” Lycon said with satisfaction. “My poor feet!”

He sat down and rubbed them tenderly. His own sandals had gone to protect Velia’s feet, but the girl’s flimsy nightrobe had been ripped to shreds by thorns and branches. She kicked off the sandals, slipped out of her garment, and ran into the lake, laughing with pleasure as the cool water caressed her aching muscles.

Lycon eyed her enviously. “I’d join her, if I had time,” he observed. “Well, a few buckets of water will do the trick on deck. Here’s the boat.”

Two oarsmen rowed it; Dalan greeted them and quickly clambered aboard, his brown robe fluttering in the breeze. The others joined him; Lycon and Elak and Velia, who, after a few abortive attempts to adjust her robe, gave up the effort and made it into a brief kirtle.

“You may swim along the shore,” the Druid warned her, “but not out where the waters are deeper. This lake goes down to hell itself, I think, and there are devils below its surface.”

Lycon stared curiously around, apparently disappointed because no devils appeared. Then he fell to polishing his sword. . . .

In the galley's pit men lounged on benches. Brawny, half-naked oarsmen, not slaves, for they were not shackled to the benches. Dalan shouted an order as he climbed on board. Men scrambled to obey, settling in disciplined order, gripping their oars. A tall, broad-shouldered man with a golden collar mounted a platform. He gestured, cried a command.

The oars swept down, cleaving the blue waters of Central Lake. The galley sprang forward, plunging north.

North to Cyrena!

4. *Power of the Warlock*

So the strong oars dipped and plunged, and the galley ran northward to where two shores converged in the river that cleft the heart of Atlantis, rushing between granite precipices, lazily through sunlit meadows, thundering swiftly and more swiftly toward the Inland Sea and Cyrena. And these days seemed the happiest of all to Elak and Velia; while Lycon divided his time between drinking steadily and arguing with the overseer about navigation, a subject of which he knew nothing. Only over Dalan a shadow seemed to hang, and this grew darker as they swept north. When the sails were unfurled they hung loose and useless, though stormclouds gathered each night to the southward. At last Dalan called Elak to the cabin.

"Elf works magic," he said grimly. "Duke Granicor has not given up the pursuit. He sails after us, with Elf's wizardry helping him."

Elak whistled between his teeth. "That's not so good. How do you know?"

Dalan lifted a dark cloth from a pedestal; light glinted from a crystal sphere large as Elak's head. "Look," he said. "I've known this for days. . . ."

At first Elak saw only the transparent depths of the crystal, and very slowly, very gradually, they clouded and became translucent. Light images began to flash before his eyes, a vague succession of darting colors . . . and these crystallized into a scene, a tiny picture within the sphere: a galley, sails set and straining, racing between shores which Elak remembered passing only a day before. He looked up quickly.

"Wind? But our sails——"

"Calm follows our galley, but Elf's magic speeds Granicor's. We're nearly in the Inland Sea now, though, and—wait!"

Something was happening within the crystal. The sharply-defined image shook and wavered, like a reflection in water. It misted and faded and changed—and a face swam into view: the face of a youth, rounded as a child's. Blue eyes, clear with candor, met Elak's; soft flaxen hair fell about the man's shoulders. And, for all the innocence of that cool gaze, Elak subtly sensed an ageless, malefic evil that dwelt within the blue eyes, a black horror utterly incongruous with the beauty of the face.

"Mider!" the Druid snarled. "Elf—watches us! He——"

The red lips parted in a singularly sweet smile. Dalan thrust his face down close to the crystal.

"Elf!" he roared. "Hear me! Ho, you stinking spawn of devils—hear me! Not all your foul wizardry can keep me from Cyrena, or the man I bring with me. Tell Guthrum that! Let him pray to Odin and Thor—and I'll grind their faces in the dust as I'll grind yours." He cursed the warlock bitterly, foully, while Elak watched fascinated.

The smile did not leave Elf's face. The crystal dimmed, grew cloudy—and was transparent. The vision had gone before Dalan paused in his tirade.

Sweating, he mopped at his gross face. "Well, you've seen Elf now. For the first time, eh?" Elak nodded.

"What do you think of him?"

"I—scarcely know. He has my brother captive?"

"He holds Orander. And Guthrum, the Viking king, does as Elf wishes. You must fight Guthrum, Elak, as I Elf. And Granicor's galley comes swiftly."

“I don’t see why you fear him,” Elak said. “Your own powers——”

“Are limited. And Mider knows what magic aids Granicor. D’you see that storm?” He gestured toward a port-hole. Black clouds were drifting up from the south. “All the winds of hell are there—yet our sails hang without a breeze to lift them. Look.”

He turned to the north. “See that land, far distant? It’s Crenos Isle, a place best shunned. We go past Crenos to Cyrena—but I think Granicor will find us first.”

Dalan was right. The long galley of the duke swiftly drove before the storm, and just off the southern extremity of Crenos Isle the two ships met.

“One thing’s in our favor,” Dalan grunted, issuing weapons to the oarsmen. “Slaves man their oars. But ours are men, and warriors—men from Cyrena who’ll not ask for quarter. But we have no fighting crew, and Granicor has.”

“It’s my fault,” Elak said morosely. “If I hadn’t got the duke on our trail——”

“Forget it!” Lycon swaggered up, brandishing his sword and exuding a strong aroma of spirits. “We’ll run that dog up by the heels at his own masthead. Besides, Velia’s a girl worth fighting for, by Ishtar!”

Velia, looking like a slim youth in her soft tunic, laughed almost gayly. “Thanks, Lycon. At least I’ll not have to go back to Granicor. There are many ways to die here—to die easily.”

“None o’ that,” Elak told her; “though I suppose you’re right. You can’t enjoy life with your skin off. And that’s the duke’s favorite torture.”

The sky darkened. Wind buffeted them. The oarsmen bent to their oars, swords at their sides. Granicor’s ship lowered sail, but double banks of oars propelled it swiftly forward.

“They mean to ram,” Dalan muttered. “Well, two can play at that game. Ready, now——”

He roared an order into the gale. Oars were lifted; the ship came around, and timbers cracked and groaned and shuddered at the shock as the galleys scraped almost prow to prow.

“Up oars!” Dalan bellowed. “Cast off grappling-irons!”

His intention had been to cripple Granicor’s galley by smashing one bank of oars, but he was too late. A dozen hooks snaked out, were drawn taut. The ships were locked together—and a wave of shouting, blood-hungry men came pouring over the gunwales.

“Get in the cabin,” Elak commanded Velia, but she did not heed; there was a slim blade in her hand, and she stood coolly at his side. Dalan and Lycon flanked the two. The oarsmen seized their weapons, met the invaders. Swords clashed blindly.

“Stay here, Lycon,” Elak said suddenly. “Guard Velia.” He sprang down into the pit among the mob of yelling swordsmen. A few arrows fell, but the galleys swayed and pitched so that accurate marksmanship was impossible. Still stronger came the storm wind, darker grew the clouds.

“’Ware, Elak!” Lycon’s voice.

The tall adventurer ducked a sweep of steel that came out of nowhere, saw a grinning swarthy face rise up behind him. The rapier danced into a dazzling shimmer and the man went down coughing blood. Then Elak caught sight of Granicor fighting his way toward him, gray beard blood-spattered, shouting furious oaths. He sprang to meet the duke.

The ships heeled, rocked sickeningly in the trough of the waves. From the corner of his eye Elak saw a flicker of red fire, realized that Dalan was battling too. The Druid’s magic turned the tide.

Cold steel men could battle, but not this searing flame that sprang out of empty air to leave blistered corpses in its wake. The struggle went back to the gunwales, back and back to

Granicor's galley, carrying Elak and the duke with it. Dimly Elak heard Dalan's exultant shout, the shrill cry of Velia. . . .

Without warning disaster struck. A blast of frigid, resistless air, a maelstrom of wind that smashed down on the two craft and ripped them asunder, sent them plunging through waters gone insane. Elak saw Dalan's galley being swept away, heard Granicor roaring in triumph as he plunged forward. He tensed for a leap, realizing as he sprang that he would fall short.

Salt water drove into his nostrils, choking him. He went down like a plummet, clinging grimly to his sword. Somehow he held his breath, fighting up toward a dim, hazily translucent green light. And somehow he kept afloat in a madness of racing seas, hanging to the fragment of an oar that drifted within his reach . . . but at last darkness took him, and he went down into the shadows.

Shadows that whispered, mocking him. Dim shadows, with cool blue eyes of Elf, moving swiftly in errands of mystery . . . vague visions of strangeness and of magic . . . and the faces of Velia and Lycon and the Druid, anxious and afraid. They were searching for him, he knew, and he tried to call a reassuring message. But the dreams faded and were gone. . . .

5. *The Dwellers on the Isle*

Elak awoke very slowly, conscious of a dull pain in his chest. A sullen gray sky lowered above him as he opened aching eyes. Near by waves crawled up whispering on a slate-dark beach. He tried to sit up, and discovered that his arms were bound tightly.

He turned to see tall rocks hemming him in, monolithic eidolons that rose up in all directions save seaward. His attention was drawn by a flicker of movement to a slab of rock that towered twenty feet above him; there was a very narrow crevice splitting it, and from it came a man.

Elak could not repress a start. Before him was a Pikht—a member of the almost legendary race that had held Atlantis so many eons ago that their very existence had almost been forgotten. White men from the east had warred upon the Pikhts, exterminating them ruthlessly, until, on Crenos Isle, there dwelt what was probably the last survival of the race.

The man was dark-skinned and very short—scarcely five feet in height—and hairless. Not even his pale eyes were fringed by lashes. He wore no more than a loin-cloth, and great muscles crawled beneath the smooth skin. His somber face had an indefinably bestial cast—and Elak thought suddenly of tales he had heard of the kinship of Pikhts to the beasts—that these men were the first beings who had possessed the true human form, and who had possessed powers lost to those of a higher stage of evolution.

The Pikht bent over Elak, a knife in his hand. His voice was thick, guttural, and Elak could scarcely understand the Atlantean tongue he spoke. “Get up, stranger. Slowly!”

Elak, with some effort, got to his feet, careful to make no hasty movement. His rapier, he saw with regret, was gone. Also his legs were bound together by a thong about a foot long.

The Pikht urged him toward the crevice in the rock. It narrowed until his broad shoulders scraped the sides, then widened as he led down. Elak debated the advantage of trying to take his captor unaware, but, bound and unarmed as he was, he knew only death would result. Presently he felt stairs beneath his feet, invisible in the shrouding darkness.

“Ware!” It was the Pikht’s harsh voice. “Not too fast!”

Obediently Elak slackened his pace. Before him a slit of light widened, and he looked down a corridor cut out of solid rock.

Perhaps two hundred feet long it was, lit by bronze lamps that stood in niches in the wall. Iron doors, with barred windows set in them, broke the monotony of gray rock on one side; the other side was blank, roughly chiseled stone. Elak paused.

The Pikht’s blade gouged skin from his captive’s back. Glancing around, Elak saw that behind the dark-skinned dwarf were two other men, replicas of his captor, hairless and smooth-skinned and dark. They carried long blades, longer than themselves.

Elak let himself be prodded along the passage. As he passed the barred doors he realized that they guarded captives, Atlanteans all, some clad in leather or armor, others in furry skins. In the silent faces that watched him Elak saw fear—fear so great that none spoke aloud. In whispers men cursed the Pikhts, and the dwarfs smiled mockingly, their eyes coldly alight with malicious amusement.

At a door near the end of the tunnel the Pikht halted. He gestured, and one of his companions lifted a great metal bar that locked the panel. The iron door was swung open, and Elak was thrust across the threshold.

Metal clanged; the bar was thrust into its socket. The cell, cut from solid rock, held nothing; but in the further wall was another door—an iron slab whose smooth surface was featureless and unbroken.

Elak heard the Pikhts go padding along the passage. And, very slowly, the iron slab began to swing outward.

A man crept into the cell. His emaciated body was clad in a tattered jerkin, and tangled, yellow hair hung about a bearded, pain-ravaged face. His eyes were vacuous, filmed with a blue glaze. Spittle drooled from the slack mouth. Behind him the door swung silently shut as Elak sprang forward. He had only a flashing glimpse of a gray corridor—no more.

The man huddled in a corner, shuddering and moaning. Elak looked down at him with pity.

“Who are you?” he asked. “Can you understand me?”

“Yes . . . yes, I can understand. The Shadow took Halfgar, my son. The Shadow on the pool . . .”

The bearded face was contorted with grief and horror. Elak cast a swift glance at the iron door, cryptically shut. What talk was this of—a Shadow?

The blue stare focussed on Elak. “Elf the warlock gave me to the Pikhts, and my son Halfgar went with me because he fought at my side against Elf’s men. They——”

Elak leaned forward tensely. “Elf? These dwarfs—Pikhts—know him?”

“Yes; they serve him. They give him magic in return for strong men whom they sacrifice to their god. For ages they’ve dwelt on Crenos Isle worshipping——” The man’s voice dropped to a thin reedy whisper, and madness crept into his eyes. “The Shadow took my son. The door opened, and I went out into the passage where the pool was. I saw water below me, and a Shadow lying upon it. The Shadow leaped up at me, and as I drew back it touched my brow . . . it was not hungry then. It had just fed on Halfgar . . . it took him from my side as I slept . . . there are doors which are not to be opened. . . .”

The whisper stopped. The man’s eyes widened. He sprang to his feet, clawing at his breast with ripping fingernails, tearing away skin and flesh in long ribbons. He screamed, a frightful, agonized shriek that resounded through the cell.

And he fell, a boneless huddle in the corner. His bearded face stared up blindly, and Elak saw that he was dead.

A soft rustling made him turn. Very slowly, very gently, the iron door was swinging outward. From the vagueness beyond the portal a misty gray light crept into the cell.

Elak heard the lapping of water . . .

Dalan’s black galley lay beached on Crenos Isle, battered and bruised by the storm. The same gale that had flung the ship ashore had sent Duke Granicor’s craft driving northward till it had been lost to view in the scud. Now the oarsmen were busy calking seams, mending the ruin the tempest had wrought.

But Dalan, in the cabin, crouched over his crystal globe, his ugly face set in harsh lines. Velia and Lycon stood beside him, curiously eyeing the sphere, watching the flashing images that swept through its depths.

“Elf’s magic is strong,” the Druid muttered. “He battles me at every step. But——”

“Is Elak alive?” Velia asked anxiously. “Why won’t you tell me?”

“Because I don’t know. Keep quiet, girl! Elf’s spells war with mine, and I see nothing—yet.”

He peered into the shimmering sphere. Lycon squeezed Velia's arm reassuringly. And, suddenly, Dalan expelled a long breath of relief.

"So! He lives—see?"

Within the crystal a picture grew, a tiny image of a beach flanked by towering gray rocks. On the slope a man lay bound and unconscious.

"Praise Ishtar!" Lycon said. "Is he far? I'll go after him——"

"Wait," the Druid commanded. "I know that beach. Elf's allies, the Pikhts, have an underground temple there. And—look!"

Velia gave a soft little cry. There was movement within the crystal; a man emerged from a cleft in one of the tall rocks and approached Elak's prostrate figure. As they watched they saw Elak prodded to his feet by the Pikht, urged into the darkness of the fissure. For a second the sphere was a ball of jet; then it brightened and showed a long corridor cut out of solid rock. Three dark-skinned dwarfs thrust Elak forward. . . .

"Mider!" Dalan said tonelessly. "He's in the temple! And that means he's to be sacrificed to——"

"Not if I know it!" Lycon snapped. "How far is this temple? The crew have swords, and know how to use them. Tell me how to go, Dalan—north or south?" He was at the door, grinning unpleasantly as he fingered the hilt of his blade. "I'll butcher those little devils for you!"

"Good! Go south, Lycon—and swiftly. You'll know the place?"

"I'll know it. How far have we to go?"

"Half an hour's march, if you travel fast." The Druid turned to his globe. "I'll stay here. You must fight the Pikhts—but I battle Elf. And——" His huge hands swept down, gripped the crystal. "Hurry, Lycon! Elak's in danger now—deadly danger!"

Lycon thrust the door open, sprang on deck. His shrill voice shattered the morning calm. And in response the crew leaped to obey, dropping oar and hammer, taking up sword and ax, dropping over the rail to the beach. A half-naked, villainous-looking band, they trotted south, urged on by Lycon's searing oaths and the flat of his blade.

And with them came Velia, keeping always at Lycon's side, eyes flashing with battle-hunger, lips parted in a smile that was not pleasant to see. They went so swiftly that they reached their destination before the time Dalan had allotted. Recognizing the black cleft in the stone, Lycon halted his men to take the lead.

He stepped into the darkness with a strange crawling of uneasiness, sword bared, blinking in an attempt to pierce the gloom. Something moved, and he cut at a menace he sensed rather than heard. Steel gashed his thigh, but he felt his blade rip through flesh and grind against bone. A squealing, scarcely human cry sounded. In a frenzy of loathing he struck and struck again, cutting his way forward against soft bodies that resisted briefly and then broke and retreated under his onslaught.

The oarsmen poured into the cleft, led by Velia, and in the darkness the Pikhts rallied and came at them, snarling rage. For a little while there was a black madness of battle, a chaos of yells and oaths and death cries. In the end Lycon won through, and the Pikhts scattered like rats before the sweep of thirsty blades.

Before Lycon now was a dim-lit corridor, one wall set with barred doors. He cut down a screaming dwarf that plunged at him, dagger bared, and left the rest to Velia and the crew. Swiftly he raced along the passage, casting hasty glances into each cell as he passed. Captives stretched out imploring hands, begging for release, but Elak was not among them.

Near the end of the corridor, one door was open. Lycon sprang over the threshold, saw a bare, empty cell with an iron slab ajar in the opposite wall. He went forward, sword dripping red on the stones as he lifted it.

Water was lapping softly near by. . . .

6. *The Night of Gods*

Elak stepped through the portal and found himself in a narrow passage. Gray light bathed him. In the distance he saw a sparkling surface that rippled in the cold glow.

And suddenly he heard Dalan's voice. It came softly from empty air, urgent, peremptory, calling his name.

"Elak! *Elak!*"

Searching the bare walls with incredulous eyes, Elak whispered, "Dalan? Where are you?"

The Druid's voice rang out sharply. "No time now, Elak—the Shadow comes as I speak. Leap into the pool—dive into it, now! At the end of the passage——"

Still Elak hesitated. "But where are you——"

"There's no time to talk now! Hurry——"

The stark urgency of Dalan's words spurred Elak to action, sent him racing along the corridor. He checked himself sharply on the brink of a square basin. Little menace in that, or in the blue-green water that filled it. But within the pool dwelt horror. A Shadow lay upon it.

The shadow of a man, cast by—nothing! An opaque outline that lay incredibly on the surface of the pool. And it darkened into blackness, while the gray luminescence of the corridor dimmed.

"Ware, Elak!"

Dalan's voice, loud in warning! Elak whirled, saw a dark-skinned dwarf almost upon him, pale eyes blazing, bestial face menacing. In the Pikht's hand was a dagger.

The two men smashed together on the pool's brink, went down, clutching and tearing, the oily body of the dwarf squirming like a snake in Elak's grasp. Steel grated on the stones. Elak's fingers closed relentlessly on his opponent's knife-wrist.

With a powerful lunge the Pikht brought his dagger down, its point touching Elak's chest. The two rolled over, snarling oaths, and—dropped into emptiness!

The pool took them—dragged them down into water icy as polar seas, blue as turquoise. Elak could see nothing but that illimitable blueness as he went down, choking for breath, battling against blinding panic. Was the pool bottomless?

The sapphire tint deepened to indigo, foamed in fantastic patterns before Elak's eyes. He realized abruptly that this was not water surrounding him—could not be, or he would have drowned minutes ago. There was a swift accelerating rush, and abruptly frightful cold, incredible agony, tore at the citadel of Elak's brain. He was conscious of a *change*.

Air rushed into his lungs—air stale and dead, as though it had never been breathed, yet curiously refreshing. Dim, flickering shadows were all about him. And the swarthy devil-mask of the Pikht's face swam into view from the vagueness.

Pale eyes glared into Elak's; the dagger came down viciously and buried itself in the ground as he writhed aside. He clutched at the dwarf's wrist, missed, and flung himself bodily upon the Pikht, bearing the smaller man down by his weight. But he could not maintain a hold upon the muscular, oily body.

Snarling, the dwarf lunged forward, teeth bared. Elak smashed his forehead into the Pikht's face, felt blood spurt into his eyes, blinding him. He shook the scarlet drops away.

Abruptly he released the Pikht's wrist. His hands shot up and gripped the dwarf's throat—sinewy hands that had been trained on battle-ax and rapier. The knife bit into his body, ripped

flesh from his breast as he twisted desperately. But the Pikht had struck too late.

Elak's tapering brown fingers almost met in oily flesh. Tendons stood out like rigid wires; there came a brittle cracking sound. A bubbling scream of agony died in the dwarf's throat before it could emerge.

The pale eyes glazed. The stunted body went limp.

Elak stood up, bracing himself. He stared in sheer astonishment.

It was no earthly landscape which he saw. Obscure color-patterns, shifting and dancing strangely, weaved in the cool air all about him. He thought of the shadows of trees painted on white rock, flickering arabesques of dancing leaves fluttering in the wind. Yet the weird pattern was not only on the pale clay-colored plain on which he stood, but rather all about him in the air. He stood alone in a fantastic weave of somber shadows.

Colorless shadows, dancing. Or were they colorless? He did not know, nor was he ever to know, the color of the grotesque weavings that laced him in a web of magic, for while his mind told him that he saw colors, his eyes denied it.

Suddenly darkness swept down, engulfing him. And very faintly a thudding sounded, and swiftly grew louder. With a giant pounding of cyclopean feet something strode past Elak in the blackness, something that shook the plain with the thunder of its passing. There was no other sound save for the tremendous booming thuds of the titan feet.

They died in the distance; the darkness lifted. Again the flickering shadow patterns grew in the air. And again they darkened into blackness.

The sound of wings came to Elak. Something was flying far overhead, something that wailed endlessly and mournfully, keening the cry of one lost and wandering in eternal night. A sense of overpowering awe touched Elak, and horror beyond all imagination—the horror one feels in the presence of a thing, so alien that the flesh of mankind instinctively shrinks and shudders. Elak knew, somehow, that he had entered a land in which men had not been intended to exist.

"Elak . . ."

Faintly, from very far away, the thin whisper came—Dalan's voice. Elak whispered the Druid's name as the darkness changed into the vague shadow-patterns. The distant voice came again.

"You are in a perilous place, Elak, but you live. Lycon's swordsmen slay the Pikhts now, the crystal tells me . . . you are very far away, Elak, but I come swiftly. Mider aids me. . . ."

Blackness again, and a roaring as of great winds. Power unimaginable shuddered through Elak's body like a spear shattering on a shield. And it passed, and the darkness lightened to the crawling shadows.

"You are with the gods, Elak," came Dalan's far whisper. "You are no longer in Atlantis, or even on earth. You are in a far land. And with you are those the Shadow has engulfed—the gods! Not the gods of Atlantis, nor the Viking gods, but the gods that have died. Around you move those whose flesh is not our flesh, whose lives are alien to ours. I come, Elak. . . ."

Piercingly sweet, throbbing almost articulately, a harp-string murmured through the gloom. Dalan's voice faded into silence, and again the note sobbed out. Above it a soft-toned song lifted in the words Elak knew were in no earthly language.

Startled, apprehensive, the Druid called, "Elak! Elf's magic battles mine—he——"

Then silence, till a gentle voice spoke.

“Dalan,” it whispered. “Dalan, Elak . . . my enemies. Now you shall die, Elak, for the Druid cannot reach you. The power of my harp keeps him from your side.”

Very faintly Dalan called Elak’s name. Once again he called, and was silent. Shifting shadow’s moved through the dim air. Elak’s hand went involuntarily to his side. Remembering that he was weaponless, he stooped and pried the dagger from the Pikht’s cold fingers. But despair was mounting within him. How could he fight Elf, alone in this lost hell, without Dalan to aid him?

“Your doom comes,” Elf murmured, and the harp-string twanged eerily, laden with bitter sweetness. “You live, Elak, and there is no life in Ragnarok. Only the dead gods, and the dust of the souls of men.”

The dancing shadow-patterns slowed their fluttering and became motionless. The sound of Elf’s harp died; it was utterly silent.

And, far in the distance and gigantic, towering above the horizon, a Shadow began to form in the air. In form it was human, but from its darkening nucleus there breathed chill horror that made Elak grip his dagger with desperate fingers. Fear shook him—the fear that attacks the citadel of man’s soul when it faces the Unknown.

7. *Solonala—and Mider*

A sound behind him made Elak turn swiftly, his weapon ready. What he saw made him pause in wonder. Even in the shadowy gloom he sensed something fantastically unreal about the figure that came stealing out of the dusk with curiously rocking gait.

But there was friendliness in the gesture with which the half-seen being beckoned. It glanced beyond Elak to where the Shadow grew and darkened on the horizon, and then swiftly bent above the dead Pikht. Dark hands moved quickly—and suddenly the dwarf moved, raised himself stiffly to his feet and stood motionless as an automaton!

The Pikht had died—that Elak knew. Even now the bald, misshapen head lolled monstrosly on one sagging shoulder. Elak could scarcely see the dwarf's face, but he knew intuitively that the shallow eyes held no life. An icy shudder shook him.

The Pikht turned. Swaying, the squat figure raced forward, past Elak, toward the Shadow that loomed in black horror in the distance. A soft hand was thrust in Elak's, and he looked down to see a white girl-face peering anxiously up at him.

He felt himself being tugged along, and yielded, smiling a little wryly. After all, into what worse hell could he be guided? The patterns flickered all around them as they moved, and presently Elak heard a low voice say:

“We should be safe now.”

“You speak Atlantean?” he asked involuntarily, and quiet laughter mocked him.

“I speak my own tongue. All languages are one here. Just as the Shadow appears differently to everyone, and yet is the same to everyone after being—taken—so do all tongues seem alike here. The world from which I came is far from yours. How are you named?”

“Elak. The—Shadow?”

“It has faded. See?”

Elak glanced over his shoulder, but could make out nothing but the dancing patterns of alien color. The invisible girl went on, “I put life into the dead being and sent him to the Shadow, so that we could escape while the Shadow fed. We are safe for a little while, Elak.”

She paused as the air lighted; they stood before a cave that opened into the side of a rampart which towered up until it was lost in the dimness. A misshapen, flat-topped boulder guarded the entrance of the tunnel mouth, and behind this Elak's companion stepped swiftly.

“Come,” she urged. “We can hide here—for a time at least.”

But Elak had reached her side—had gripped her slim arms with fingers rendered cruel by his amazement. He stared at the girl in wonder, knowing that she sprang from no earthly race.

A satyr-girl! A faun-maiden, slender and white and virginal as cool marble, round-breasted, with red-golden hair that hung in velvet coils about the smooth shoulders. To her waist she was human. Below that all semblance of humanity ended, and sheer fantasy began.

Her legs were golden-furred and crooked like those of a beast—not ungainly goat-legs, but rather the limbs of some graceful deer, ending in tiny hoofs that glistened golden in the dim light. Her face was as unearthly as her nether limbs, for all its classic beauty. No earth-girl had ever possessed *golden eyes*—eyes like flaky pools of pure gold, without white or pupil, that stared at Elak as unwinkingly as those of a cat. Her face was curiously feline in contour as she smiled at Elak, looking up at him fearlessly.

“I am strange to you?” she asked. “But *you* are strange too. There are many worlds besides your own, Elak.”

“So it seems,” the Atlantean gasped. “By Bel! This must be some mad dream I’m having!”

The girl urged him further into the cave. A dim light irradiated its further recesses, which were draped with violet samite that hid the rough rock walls. Cushions carpeted and hid the ground.

“I am Solonala,” the faun-girl told Elak, relaxing gracefully in a little nest of soft pillows. “Has Elf’s magic sent you here, too?”

Elak did not answer; his eyes watched the eery golden-furred legs in fascinated wonder. Solonala glanced down, smiling, and clicked her hoofs gently together.

“We are made in different patterns, you and I.”

Elak nodded. “Yes. Though—Elf, you say? D’you know him?”

“I know him, and I fought him. The land where I once ruled is far from here, and far from your own earth. But Elf’s powers enable him to go from world to world, and when he came to mine I saw that he was evil, and tried to destroy him. He was the stronger.”

She shrugged slender shoulders. “So I came here, or rather Elf exiled me here. He couldn’t kill me, for I’m not human, as you are—decay cannot touch my flesh, as it will touch yours in time. But he imprisoned me in this land, where in time I’ll be taken by the Shadow. . . .”

“What is this Shadow?”

Golden eyes watched Elak, luminous in the glow. “You saw it as a man’s shadow—eh? A man such as yourself? But I saw it as Solonala’s shadow. Every being sees the Shadow as his own. For it is his own. It is the ultimate death. It is destruction. This land is its home, but it can come to other worlds when gateways have been opened.”

Gateways—such as the pool in the Pikhts’ underground den!

“And it is here that the gods come when they die, Elak.” Her voice was hushed. “You heard them pass, I think. Darkness always comes when the dead gods go by, for they wander this lost land alone in eternal night. . . .”

Faint, infinitely far away, there sounded a thin murmur—the hum of a plucked harp-string. Dim and drowsy, it stole into Elak’s mind until, scarcely aware he heard it, he realized that he was nodding sleepily. Solonala watched him alertly out of great golden eyes.

“I hear magic,” she said.

The harp-string throbbed on, blanketing Elak in drowsiness. As he went down into slumber he was conscious of Solonala leaning toward him, cat-face puzzled . . . and then darkness. . . .

He dreamed. He dreamed of the black galley’s cabin, and of Dalan, crouching over his crystal globe. Within the sphere a flame rose up like a blossoming flower. It grew and lifted till it towered above the Druid’s glistening bald head.

Its scarlet tip bent down, expanded into a lambent rose of fire. It swayed and trembled in midair. Dalan prayed.

“Mider, hear me. God of the Druids, Lord of Flame, let your hand draw back this man from the Shadow——”

The vision faded. The dim murmur of a harp-string put a period to it. Vaguely Elak saw Solonala’s face swimming in silver mistiness, her lips parted.

Again the harp sent its sorcerous whispering into Elak’s sleeping mind—Elf’s harp, fraught with deadly magic!

“Elak!”

Dalan’s voice!

The harp-string twanged angrily. Above its noise came a harsh cry.

“Elak! Mider aid me—Elak! Hear me!”

The tall adventurer sprang to full wakefulness, his hand racing to the dagger at his belt. A low murmuring sounded from without the cave. Elak got quietly to his feet and moved toward the portal.

There he paused, his eyes wide. On the flat rock before the cave mouth crouched Solonala, her white body gleaming in the shifting shadow-patterns, and all about her, genuflecting and abjecting themselves in ghastly worship, was a horde of tiny, hideous white things that moved so swiftly Elak could not clearly define their outlines. Indeed, he had no chance, for as he appeared Solonala lifted her head, saw him, and flung out a slim arm commandingly. The white beings streamed away and were lost in the distance.

Now Elak saw what had previously escaped him. Towering to the sky beyond Solonala, menacing and terrible, loomed—the Shadow!

The girl let her arm drop to her side. Without moving she watched Elak.

“Elf’s magic brought the Shadow here while you slept,” she said. “I could not waken you, though I tried. Those little ones—I made them. Living things, to appease the Shadow’s hunger while we flee. Perhaps we can escape.” She paused doubtfully.

From empty air roared the voice of Dalan.

“Courage, Elak! I come—and with aid!”

And the voice of Elf, disembodied, gentle—mocking.

“What can Mider do against the Shadow, Druid? Your god lives—and there is no life in Ragnarok.”

The immense Shadow on the horizon grew darker. The flickering patterns in the air seemed to weave faster, troubled.

Without warning Elak saw the Shadow fold down tremendously and swoop upon him. He felt Solonala’s soft body shuddering against his, and his arms went instinctively about her. The faun-girl cried out—and her voice was clipped off into utter silence. Blackness abysmal and unearthly smothered them.

They were one with the Shadow. They were *nothingness*—annihilation, complete and final emptiness. And yet Elak was dreadfully conscious of a feeling of power—cosmic power, terrible in its illimitable vastness. Aside from this, nothing existed for him. Solonala’s body no longer pressed against his. He felt the fortress of his soul, his mind, crumbling under the assault of the Shadow.

And, suddenly, hope came. How it first manifested itself Elak did not understand, but he realized that no longer was he being absorbed into the Shadow. Something was pulling him back—lifting him from the sucking void that was annihilation.

He heard the Druid’s voice, strained, triumphant. “Mider! Save him, Mider—god of oak and fire—”

Light flashed out all around—warm, rose-tinted, luminous flame. In its fierce glow was revealed the figure of Solonala, unearthly in her beauty—and also the incredible thing on which the two stood. It was a hand.

Eight-fingered, colossal, it was no earthly hand. The hand of Mider himself, reaching down into the hell of the Shadow at the Druid’s prayer. The titan hand swept upward, carrying Elak and Solonala. . . .

It checked itself. Blackness crept back, dimming the rosy flame-walls. A sea of shadow rose like a tide, and the hand began to sink down, slowly at first, and then with ever-increasing speed.

Dalan's cry came, despairing, inarticulate. And Elf's soft laughter.

Solonala knelt beside Elak. She put her arms around his neck; tender lips brushed his. Then, before he could move, she sprang away and flung herself into the void. For an intolerable, age-long second her white-and-gold-figure loomed against blackness—and was gone. A cry, gull-plaintive, drifted to Elak's ears as he started forward.

He was too late. The hand of the god swept up. Elak fell to his knees, struggling to drag himself to where Solonala had vanished . . . and then there was only darkness around him, and the howling and shrieking of great winds. . . .

The Story Thus Far

“The Northmen have invaded Cyrena. King Orander, your brother, is a captive of Elf the warlock, who has made a pact with the Viking chief, Guthrum. We need your help—the armies of Cyrena will follow you, but no other man.”

So Dalan, a Druid priest, told Zeulas, who had once been a prince of Cyrena, but who was now known as Elak, a wandering adventurer of Atlantis. Together with Lycon, Elak’s comrade, and Velia, the young bride of Duke Granicor, of Poseidonia, they set forth toward the Central Lake, where Dalan’s galley waited. Granicor, furious at the loss of his wife, pursued them in another ship, aided by the wizardry of Elf.

Near the shores of mysterious Crenos Isle the galleys met and battled, but were separated by a storm during which Elak was lost overboard. He was cast up on Crenos Isle and captured by the Pikhts, allies of Elf, a decadent, semi-human race who attempted to sacrifice Elak to their god, a Shadow which dwelt in the depths of a subterranean pool. Guided by Dalan’s voice, Elak cast himself into the pool and found himself in another world, where only the aid of Solonala, a witch-girl from an alien universe, enabled him to escape temporarily from the Shadow’s menace.

Meanwhile Dalan’s galley had been beached on Crenos Isle, and the Druid’s magic showed him the fate that menaced Elak. Lycon and Velia set out with the crew to invade the stronghold of the Pikhts, while Dalan sought the aid of Mider, ancient god of the Druids. Despite the power of the Shadow and the spells of Elf, Elak was saved by Mider, but only through Solonala’s self-sacrifice.

The story continues:

8. *They Come to Cyrena*

“Elak.” It was Lycon’s voice.

Elak opened his eyes. Gray light bathed him.

He was in the corridor of the pool, in the underground Pikht temple. Above him hovered the small fat figure of Lycon, round face alight with anxiety.

“Are you alive, Elak? Did those damned dwarfs——”

Elak drew a deep breath, got painfully to his feet, water cascading from his hair and garments. He looked down to where, beside him, the surface of the sunken basin lay blue and calm, untroubled by the Shadow that had once darkened it.

“I’ve just dragged you from there,” Lycon said, following his gaze. “You shot up from the water like a cork.”

“There was no other?” Elak asked. “You saw no one else, in the pool?”

Lycon was silent for a time, watching his friend’s eyes. Presently he shook his head.

“No,” he said softly. “There was no other.”

And then there was no more talk for a while, because Velia led in the blood-smeared oarsmen, who had just slain the last of the Pikhts; and Lycon was noisy about the number of dwarfs he had cut down, and was, he said, almost thirsty enough to drink water.

“But not quite,” he added. “Let’s get back to the galley. It wasn’t damaged much by the storm, Elak, and we can launch it in two days. . . .”

So again the black galley drove northward through the Inland Sea, skirting the western shores of Crenos Isle, on through the swirling waters until white cliffs loomed on the horizon. And there, when it was least expected, Duke Granicor’s ship came down on them as the galley was beached.

“Mider rot him!” the Druid growled, climbing ponderously over the rail, his brown, sea-stained garment flapping in the wind. “There’s no time to fight him now, Elak. We’ve got to get the chiefs together, lead them against the Northmen.”

“My brother,” Elak said. “Don’t forget him.”

“I know. But that must come later. You can’t help Orander till the Vikings are driven from Elf’s fortress, where they have their headquarters, and where your brother’s a prisoner.”

Lycon swaggered up, a flagon swinging against his side. “By the Nine Hells and a dozen more,” he observed, “are we afraid of Granicor? Go on ahead, Elak, and take Dalan with you. Give me two oarsmen and I’ll stay here and——”

“You’re drunk,” Elak said without rancor. “Go away.” He turned to stare at the long galley that was rapidly growing larger as it swept shoreward. Elak’s spirits had been dampened since his adventure with the Pikhts, and the image of Solonala could not be dimmed even by Velia’s caresses. Her self-sacrifice had shaken him more than he knew. And within him had crystallized a burning desire to cross blades with Elf, to slay the warlock minstrel—and swiftly!

So he agreed with Dalan. “We’ll head inland, eh?”

“To Sharn Forest. The chiefs will gather there, with their men. I’ve sent a messenger, and the word will go through Cyrena. When the armies have gathered at Sharn, we’ll move north on Elf’s fortress.”

“Good! I wish I had my rapier, though—this sword’s too heavy.” Elak made the tempered blade hiss through the air, and Dalan chuckled.

“You can spill blood with it, though. Come. Granicor is almost within bowshot.”

Dalan in the lead, the band set out to climb the white cliffs, reaching the summit as the Duke of Poseidonia beached his galley. Granicor wasted no time in threats; grimly silent, he led his crew in pursuit.

But the duke was soon left behind. This was familiar country to Dalan, and swiftly the party marched through a tangled forest wilderness, even Velia touched by eagerness that enabled her to keep pace easily. That night they camped in a little valley by a stream that chuckled pleasantly as it wound among furze and bracken.

Elak, sitting by the fire, idly plaited Velia’s bronze hair. “It’s good to be in Cyrena again,” he told her. “I never thought I’d walk this land again. Do you like it, Velia?”

She nodded, the firelight bronze on her face. “It’s rough and wild and—and honest, somehow. Strong men must live here, Elak.”

“The Northmen are stronger,” Dalan growled. “At least, until Cyrena has a leader.” He reached out a huge hand and retrieved Lycon, who was reeling dangerously close to the fire. “Bah, this drunken dog! But he’s a faithful one, at least.”

“Only the gods know my true worth,” Lycon said surprisingly, and collapsed in an inert heap, muttering faintly. Suddenly he sat up, his eyes bright. “Listen, Elak!”

As he spoke feet came trampling through the underbrush. Granicor’s voice bellowed a raucous command. Yelling men charged down the slope.

“Gods!” Elak snapped. “He’s trailed us, somehow. To arms!” His sharp cry cut icily through the night; swords gleamed redly; and the next moment Granicor and his crew were within the circle of firelight.

Dulled by the heat of the flames, not expecting attack, yet Dalan’s men met the charge bravely. The two forces came together, crashed and mingled, and then it was a whirling firelit madness of blood and steel. Granicor headed directly for Elak, and, nothing loath, the tall adventurer sprang to meet him, sword hissing. The blades shrieked together in midair, were sent flying by the power of the blows, and, weaponless, Elak and Granicor closed, the duke snarling oaths, the other watchful and silent. They went down, scattering embers from the fire’s edge.

Suddenly a shrill, warning cry came, above a low thunder of hoofs that boomed out from near by.

“Vikings! ’Ware—*Vikings!* The Northmen!”

And down into the valley rode red-bearded giants, roaring, spears driving, swords hewing, driving resistlessly over the campfire as they had swept down on Cyrena. Men screamed and died beneath trampling hoofs, and those who lived fled into the forest. In a moment the encampment was empty, save for the Northmen, the dead, and two men who lay locked in furious struggle on the ground.

Elak’s arm was locked about Granicor’s throat, but the duke’s bull-thewed legs were slowly crushing his ribs, forcing the breath from his body, when the Vikings prodded the two apart with ungentle blades.

“Thunder of Thor!” a harsh voice grunted. “What madmen are these? Guthrum, they——”

Guthrum! At that name Elak tore free, sprang to his feet, heedless of the steel points that pricked him. His stare found a red-bearded giant in chain-mail and brimless helmet, a man

whose face had once been strong and powerful and valorous—a man whose eyes were dead!

Blue eyes, dull and cold and bitterly ferocious, watched Elak. This was Guthrum, leader of the Northmen, whose pact with Elf had resulted in the imprisonment of Orander, King of Cyrena.

“Guthrum?” It was Granicor’s voice. “The Viking? My people aren’t at war with yours. I am from Poseidonia!” The duke stood squarely facing Guthrum, looking up defiantly at the somber figure on horseback.

Without replying the Northman lashed out with a mail-shod foot, sent it driving into Granicor’s face. Blood spurted as the duke reeled back. He caught himself, fumbled for a weapon that was not there—and hurled himself forward, up at Guthrum’s throat, snarling a blazing oath.

The Viking’s horse reared; Granicor went down under driving hoofs. Bitter laughter shook Guthrum, but the dull rage in his eyes was unchanged as he looked down on the prostrate Atlantean, turned to eye Elak. The tall adventurer felt a shudder course down his spine as he met that dreadful blue gaze. Something had been drained from the Viking chief, and there sit in his eyes that which was not human.

Granicor staggered upright, and Guthrum wheeled his mount to face the gory figure. In silence he listened while the duke choked out furious curses born of agonizing rage and shame. And then:

“Do you think I fear such as you? Do you think I fear anything on earth—after what a warlock has shown me?” The dull stare of the Viking was utterly horrible in its cold ferocity. “I, who have come sane from the vaults of Elf’s citadel—shall I fear your curses?”

He clapped spurs to his horse, went thundering into the darkness. From the gloom his voice came roaring back:

“Crucify those men!”

9. *The Chiefs in Sharan*

Spurred by the menace of Guthrum's words, Elak tore free momentarily from his captors, but as he turned to the forest they were upon him. He fought furiously, desperately—uselessly. He was born down, held powerless in the grip of red-bearded, mail-clad giants, as Granicor, his face a bloody ruin, was also held.

Working swiftly, the Vikings stripped Granicor of his armor, dragged him to where a great oak grew near by. He cursed them, striving to break away, his tiny eyes flaming with rage and fear. But thongs lifted the duke's ape-like body, binding him inexorably against the tree's bole. His arms were drawn up behind him, circling the trunk—and with iron spikes and improvised hammers the Northmen went about their crimson work.

Elak watched, white-faced, as iron tore through flesh and bone, listening to the frightful cries that burst through Granicor's mangled lips. The Vikings left him at last, letting him hang by his hands, shoulders wrenched almost out of their sockets. They turned to Elak.

He tensed for a hopeless struggle. And abruptly he sensed astonishment in the craggy faces about him. The Vikings had turned, staring, to where a gross brown figure stood just within the circle of firelight.

Dalan—his toad face hideous with fury, huge hands lifted. He made no sound, but so dreadful was the menace in his expression that the Northmen were held motionless for a moment. Then a cry went up; they surged forward, blades ready.

The Druid flung out his arms in a strange gesture—as though he hurled a curse at his enemies. From his thick lips a word came, unfamiliar, alien. There was power in the gesture, power in the word Dalan spoke. The air seemed to quiver, charged with electric force.

Thunder burst in Elak's ears. He was flung back, blinded by a sheet of white flame that washed the clearing in stark brilliance. For a second he lost consciousness.

Then the Druid was lifting him, muttering curses. Feebly Elak freed himself, stared around. The place looked as though lightning had struck it. The grass and trees were seared and blackened, and of the Northmen only charred corpses in half-melted armor remained.

"Ishtar!" Elak whispered, his voice unsteady. "What—what happened, Dalan? Is this more of your—magic?"

The Druid nodded. "A fire-magic I cannot work often. We have power over flame, Elak—and there's flame in the sky as well as on earth. With Mider's aid, I drew down the lightning. Those barbarians died by their own god's thunderbolt." Vicious laughter shook the huge bulk. "Lucky for you I wasn't cut down when the Vikings rode in. Look, their horses have stampeded—those that aren't blasted to death."

Elak touched his singed eyebrows. "I don't see how I escaped. Can you direct this wizard lightning of yours, Dalan?"

"Perhaps. Also the Northmen wore armor, and you have none. That may have accounted for it. See—the man they crucified, Granicor—he wears no armor, and he's still alive. Barely, I think."

Elak's gaze went to where the tortured body of the duke hung from the oak. He hesitated, then went forward purposefully.

"Lycon?" he asked over his shoulder. "Velia? Are they safe?"

The Druid nodded. “Yes, they’re waiting not far away. But the rest of the crew are dead or scattered. We’ll have to move quickly to reach Sharn Forest—I didn’t know the Vikings had come this far south, and four of us can’t very well fight an army. In Sharn we’ll meet the chiefs—what are you doing, you fool? Freeing that dog?”

“He’s an Atlantean, at least,” Elak said, wrenching at one of the iron spikes that transfixed Granicor’s hand. “And this is no way for any man to die.”

The duke had apparently lost consciousness. As the last spike came free, his body slumped down in a bloody huddle at the tree’s foot. Elak paused.

“He can’t live long. But I don’t like to leave him here to be tortured by the Northmen if they come. Yet——”

“We can’t take him with us! Gods, will you feed him pap and nurse him after he’s just tried to slit your throat?—while Elf rules Cyrena and holds your brother captive? I tell you we must get to Sharn—and quickly!”

“Very well,” Elak agreed, turning toward the forest. “He can’t live till morning—no man could, with those wounds. To Sharn, then—and after that we march on Elf’s fortress.”

“We march on Guthrum’s army,” Dalan grunted, “wherever it may be. But it won’t be far from the warlock’s citadel. Guthrum’s headquarters is there.”

His ungainly figure vanished in the shadows, Elak at his side. And at the foot of a great oak tree a frightful figure dragged itself half erect, an ape-like man, seared and bloodstained and wounded on hands and feet. Mangled lips writhed and opened.

“Elf’s—fortress,” a harsh voice whispered, cracked with agony. “*And Guthrum!*” A gout of blood spewed from the man’s throat, and a paroxysm of coughing shook him. He clung to the oak, dragged himself upright, grinning with abysmal pain.

“So I won’t live till morning?” he mumbled. “I’ll live—till I find Guthrum!”

Duke Granicor staggered a few steps and collapsed, but he lay inert for only a moment. Then, very slowly, wheezing and groaning between clenched teeth, he began to drag himself into the forest. . . .

Elak stood before the Druid altar in Sharn Forest, a great gray stone, its top hollowed out into a shallow basin that was stained darkly by countless ages of sacrifice. It was dawn. A day and a night had passed since the encounter with Granicor and the Northmen, and for a few hours Elak had slept in the shadow of the Druid stone, while the chiefs gathered, drawn to Sharn by swift messengers. Lycon and Velia had slept beside him, and Dalan had watched, greeting each newcomer as he arrived. Now nearly all the chiefs were here, a grim half-circle in the cold light of dawn, their strong faces betraying little of their thoughts. Yet somehow Elak sensed hostility in the eyes watching him, and their gaze was suspicious as well as appraising. Dalan realized something of this, for his ugly face was set in an appalling snarl.

A young chieftain pushed forward, bull-necked, ruddy-cheeked. He advanced till he stood only a few feet from Dalan, and halted with folded arms.

“Have I your leave to speak, Druid?” he asked mockingly.

Somber eyes watched him. “Ay, Halmer. Since Cyrena chooses a cub for spokesman—speak.”

Halmer’s laugh was scornful. “My words are those of all, I think. Well—listen, then. The Northmen are still on the coasts. They will not come south. If they do, we can drive them back.”

“What of Orander?” Dalan asked. “What of your king?”

The young chief hesitated. Then, gathering courage from the Druid's calm, he snapped, "We'll fight for our own holdings, if need be. But Elf's magic—who can fight that? I say, let the Northmen hold the coast, if they want it. They've not troubled my lands yet. If they do, I'll know how to drive them away."

"And one by one you will go down beneath Guthrum," Dalan said. "Halmer speaks for you all? You'll let your king rot in Elf's power, you'll let the Northmen hang like a cankerous sore on the coast—by Mider! but you need a king's strong hand to rule you! Without Orander you squabble among yourselves like a pack of snarling curs."

Some looked shamefaced at that, but none spoke.

Finally:

"Who is this Elak?" one asked. "You say he's Zeulas, the king's brother. Perhaps. But you ask us to bow down before a man who killed his stepfather—a man who may, then, kill his brother and rule Cyrena!"

Elak growled a curse. He pushed past the Druid.

"It wouldn't take much of a man to rule you, I think," he snapped harshly. "There were not so many fools and cowards here when I left Cyrena. I killed Norian, yes—but in fair fight, and most of you remember that my stepfather had no great love for either Orander or me. But as for my wanting to rule this land of women—bah! I've asked your aid. If you won't give it, I'll go to Elf's fortress alone and find my brother."

At his words there was a stir. One man, a tall, lean oldster in dented armor, came to cast his sword at Elak's feet.

"Well, I'll go with you, at least," he said. "And my followers are not few. I remember you in the old days, Zeulas—and I know you speak true words now."

With antique courtesy Elak gravely retrieved the fallen sword, touched his forehead with the hilt, and returned it to the oldster.

"Thanks, Hira. I remember you, too, and that you were always ready to fight for Cyrena. These other dogs——"

Hira's lean face twisted wryly. "No, Zeulas—or Elak. They are not dogs; they're brave men all—but fear of Elf's magic and hatred of each other have made them less noble."

Brawny Halmer laughed, "Go with Hira, stranger—and you too, Druid, since he's a madman too. I go back to my own holding now—and send me no more messengers." He turned on his heel, to be halted by the curt voice of Dalan.

"Wait."

He turned. "Well?"

"You fight among yourselves, you follow cubs like Halmer—and you fear Elf's magic. Now for ages on uncountable ages the Druids have dwelt in Cyrena, and they will not go down now before the gods of the North—not for the lack of a few strong sword-arms. So I tell you this: Druid magic may protect you against Elf's wizardries. And it may not. But, by Mider!"—the toad face was a venomous devil mask; Dalan spat the words at the chiefs—"By Mider! Elf won't protect *you* against the power of the Druids! And we have not lost our power!"

Some shrank back, and there were pale faces among those turned to Dalan. But Halmer laughed scornfully, shrugging broad shoulders.

"Old men and children may fear you," he mocked. "But I do not."

The Druid lifted a huge hand, pointed upward. His voice came sonorously, laden with menace.

“Then listen, Halmer. And—watch! Should it not be dawn now?”

At his words a little movement of apprehension shook the chiefs. None had noticed before, but over the brightening vault of the sky an iron-gray cope of cloud had been drawn. Heavily it lay above Sharn, growing darker as they watched. A shadow fell on the clearing. The trees loomed strangely ominous in the dimness.

Yet Halmer laughed again. “Do we fear clouds? Your magic is feeble—charlatan!”

Dalan said nothing; his black eyes, half hidden by sagging lids, watched Halmer. A cold wind blew through Sharn; whispers rustled the forest. Steadily it grew darker.

From the chiefs a low murmur of fear went up.

Elak felt Velia creep close to him, put his arm protectingly about her slim waist. For once Lycon was silent, looking up apprehensively. Before the altar Dalan’s misshapen figure towered, arms raised in menace.

Halmer’s voice was not quite steady, his face a little less ruddy, as he barked, “I’ll not stay here longer. I——”

“Go,” the Druid said. “If you dare.”

Halmer clapped hand to sword, turned, pushed through the group of chiefs. None followed as he moved to the edge of the clearing. Then, about to step into the dark shadows beneath the trees, he paused and drew back a step.

It seemed to Elak that, far in the gloom, something was watching—something infinitely horrible, avid for prey. And Halmer must have sensed something of this. He wavered, without taking step forward or back.

“Druid magic is feeble,” Dalan whispered. “What holds you, Halmer? There is nothing in the wood.”

Nothing—but a soft sighing, a nameless rustle in primeval, shadow-darkened forest. The dark dawn lowered over Sharn.

“Old men and children fear me,” the Druid mocked. “But *you* do not, Halmer. No.”

Snarling a furious curse, the young chief leaped forward into the gloom as though casting off unseen shackles. The murmuring deepened, grew to a low, sullen roar. Halmer was a dim shadow plunging forward between towering trunks.

Men saw him pause, casting a startled glance upward. His sword flashed out—and the roar of the forest grew deafening. From above something came hurtling down, a great branch, torn from its parent tree, sent plunging through foliage, upon a man who screamed once in frantic fear and died. Men saw Halmer borne down, broken, under the terrible impact. The roaring died to a faint murmur, lessened almost to nothing.

“Druid magic is feeble,” Dalan said softly. “Does Halmer think that now?” He swung to face the chiefs, bellowing. “Follow Halmer if you dare! Leave Sharn without swearing fealty to Elak—and you walk the forests under the Druid curse. By Mider! Go—and see how long you live!”

But none dared face the Druid’s wrath. One by one the Chiefs came forward and cast their blades before Elak.

So Elak took command of Cyrena’s armies—and from Sharn Forest the word went forth like flame: Gather! Sharpen steel! The land is risen against the Northmen—and the king’s brother leads Cyrena against Elf and Guthrum!

Gather! Gather to march against the Viking hordes!

10. In the Valley of Skulls

Lycon swilled wine from a goatskin, set it down, and wiped his mouth with the back of a pudgy hand. His sharp eyes drifted over serried ranks of armored man, flashing steel, horses snorting hungry for battle. It had taken twelve days to draw the last fighting-man from the mountains and far places of Cyrena; three days more of steady marching to reach the Valley of Skulls, named for a bandit who, long ago, had littered the slopes with the heads of his enemies. But the Northmen had drawn together swiftly, and had made their stand, too, in the Valley of Skulls. A river separated the two armies, safely beyond bowshot of each other!

“When do we attack?” Lycon asked Elak, who stood beside him on a little knoll.

“Soon,” the lean adventurer said. “The sun will rise in a few minutes. At sunrise we cross Monra River.” He tested the metal of his rapier. “It’s good to have a weapon like this again. I’ll give this blade its baptism today.”

“And I’ll give mine,” Velia broke in, coming lightly up the hill toward them. Her slim armor-clad body gleamed in the gray light of false dawn. Her bronze hair foamed out from a helmet that was too small to prison its bright masses. “This is different from Poseidonia, Elak. This was the life I was meant for—not a perfumed harem in Granicor’s palace.”

“Yes, it’s different from Poseidonia,” Lycon said glumly. “They have good liquor there. It’s next to impossible to get wine in this barbarian land, and the bitter ale your countrymen drink is too much for me, Elak. Gall and wormwood!” He spat and reached for the goatskin again.

Elak drew Velia close to him, kissed her swiftly. “We may meet death today,” he told the flushed girl. “I’d rather you’d stay in camp.”

Velia smiled and shook her head. “I’ve tasted war, and I like the draft. Listen!”

Far along the valley trumpets blew a call; they grew louder, closer, till the tocsin resounded from slope to slope. Across the river the armies of the Northmen waited. . . .

“They mean to use arrows as we cross,” Elak said. “But I think they’ll be disappointed. My plans are made.”

Trumpets shouted, drums groaned, banners lifted, streaming in the chill dawn wind, and the army of Cyrena moved forward. Brawny, fair-skinned, yellow-haired warriors, following their chiefs, riding their chargers into the foaming current of Monra River—and, watching, Elak smiled.

“Hira and Dalan have led men to the Vikings’ flanks,” he told Velia. “The Northmen think we’ll ford the river near the center of their front. But—look!”

The first rank of Elak’s army were in the river, dashing across in the face of a storm of arrows. On the opposite bank waited pikemen, and behind them, armored redbeards with swords and axes. The men of Cyrena seemed suddenly to surge forward in the wake of the advance guard, hurling themselves toward Monra River, down the valley’s slope. But in their rear ranks a concerted movement was taking place; whole troops and companies were racing to left and right, slanting toward the river, attempting to outflank the Northmen.

“What’s this?” Velia asked. “The Vikings can ride as fast as our men. Why——”

Across the river the enemy had seen Elak’s move, and their flanks moved outward—but not far. A great shout arose far to the left, and, a moment later, a thunderous roar came from

the right. Over the ridge, on both wings of the Viking army, rode warriors, streaming down the slopes, swords and lances gleaming in the sunlight.

“Hira—and Dalan!” Lycon said. “They outflanked the Northmen in the night. They’ll give us a chance to cross Monra.”

Now the strategy was evident; a thin line of warriors held the bank of the river, their bowmen keeping the enemy engaged. And the rear ranks of Cyrena galloped to left and right, racing into Monra River, plunging across it and up the steep shores in the face of a hail of arrows and steel. They could not have succeeded had it not been for Hira and Dalan, whose warriors spread ruin and confusion in the Viking flanks.

“We’ve crossed,” Elak barked, eyes agleam. “Now we’re on equal ground—it’s strength, not strategy, that counts now we’ve crossed Monra. Come on!” He turned to a great white charger that stood near by, stamping his impatience, his hoofs striking fire from the rocks underfoot. With one leap Elak was in the saddle.

Upright in the stirrups, shouting, rapier unsheathed, he thundered down the slope, and behind him rode Lycon and Velia—down to the water’s edge, into Monra River, foam splashing high as they charged across. A roar went up from the warriors—and the next moment, driven back by the impetus of Elak’s forces, slashing and thrusting at his heels, the Northmen gave way up the slope, desperately contending each inch of ground lost.

Then there was nothing but a red maelstrom of hewing and cutting, ax and sword and strongly-driven spear; screaming of horses that galloped by with riders clinging with one hand and warring with the other; horses plunging and dying in a welter of thunderous crimson ruin—giant men fighting and falling and slaying as they fell.

Raven banners toppled. Shouts of “*Odin! Thor with us!*” mingled with roars of “*Cyrena! Cyrena!*” Elak thrust and thrust again, guiding his steed with one hand as it stumbled and leaped over knots of prostrate, struggling men and still, bloody bodies. Above the ranks that surrounded him he saw the Druid’s head nodding and swaying far to the right, and a great sword hewed steadily about Dalan, cutting a wide swath of corpses. And ahead, in the front rank of the Viking army, rode Guthrum, red beard flaming, moving like a towering pestilence among men whose helms and heads were crushed by his bloody ax.

“*Thor! Thor with us!*”

“*Cyrena!*”

Sweat and blood smeared Elak’s face. He tried to find Lycon and Velia, knew it was impossible in the mêlée. A Viking rode at him yelling, spear leveled; the white warhorse leaped forward and aside at Elak’s urging. The spear-point grazed his cheek as he swayed aside, and his blade sank deep into the Northman’s hairy throat. He whipped it out, steel singing, thrust at a new foe.

The sun rose higher, and the reek of spilled gore mingled with the stench of sweat. At the top of the ridge the Vikings rallied, knowing that if they were driven past it they were lost. And like a massacre King Guthrum raged among his enemies, his ax rising and falling steadily, rhythmically, dreadful as the hammer of the Northmen’s god Thor. The army of Cyrena was checked—driven back a little down the slope.

“Forward!” Elak spurred his charger, sent it leaping against the mad horde that swept down Skull Valley. “*Cyrena! Ho, Cyrena!*” His rapier darted out like a snake striking, and its touch was as deadly. A Viking fell, screaming his deathcry.

And Elak's voice caught his army as it hesitated on the brink of retreat that led to destruction. One man, mad with valor, facing an army—and then Cyrena held, held and resisted and charged to meet the Northmen as they poured down.

“Slay!” A voice screamed—Dalan's, hoarse, trumpet-loud. “Slay the Vikings! For Cyrena!”

Men dazed and exhausted with battle felt new life pulse within them; blood-drunken, murder-hungry, they flooded against their enemies in a blasting charge that could have only one result. Fighting bitterly, insanely, hopelessly, the Northmen were overwhelmed, pushed up to the crest—beyond it, down the slope, while from the Valley of Skulls the armies of Cyrena came like a consuming flame. It was the day of doom for the Vikings—their Ragnarok, and the raven banners fell in the dust and were trampled by racing hoofs.

“Slay! Slay the Vikings!”

Upright in his stirrups Elak shouted, seeing in the defeat of the Northmen the ruin of Guthrum, the end of Elf—the freeing of his brother Orander. Cyrena had conquered—that he knew. Beside him Lycon reined up, his round face flushed and bleeding.

“Ho, Elak! They run like rabbits!” Even now Lycon could not refrain from his habitual exaggeration. For the red-bearded giants were not fleeing; they fought on, hopelessly, slaying as they died.

Resolution flared in Elak's eyes. “Lycon—stay here. Lead our men.” He whirled his horse. “Where are you going, Elak?”

“To Elf's fortress! Now! I'll take him by surprize——”

The rest was lost as Elak clapped spurs down, galloped up to the ridge—along it, skirting the edge of the battle. Lycon's shout was unheard in the roar.

But another had seen Elak's flight. A horse broke from the uproar, raced in pursuit. Astride it sat Dalan, brown robe streaming. Not even in this battle had he donned armor, and strangely no weapon had touched him. But few could venture alive within the deadly sweep of the Druid's sword. The runes carved on its blade ran red now, dripping along the horse's flank as it raced after Elak.

And behind them rose the death cry of the Vikings in Cyrena, while after Elak, after the Druid, rode vengeance. Guthrum on his huge black charger, grimly silent, leading a little band of Northmen—and there was cold murder in the Viking king's bitter eyes!

11. *How Granicor Died*

Elf's fortress rose, a great grim castle of stone, flanked by the sullen waters of the Inland Sea. It was empty now, or nearly so, for the Vikings had gone to meet Elak's army in the Valley of Skulls, and Elf kept few servitors. Men whispered that not all of these were human.

In the dimness of early morning a man had come down from the hills and entered the citadel, hoisting himself painfully from stone to jagged stone of the wall that guarded Elf's privacy. But the rivet-studded, iron barbican that blocked the inner gate he could not pass; and so he waited, skulking in the shadows, caressing the edge of a long sword he carried in one maimed hand. The face of Duke Granicor was like that of one of the gargoyles that grinned from the roofs of the fortress. Incredibly he had lived, had made his way north in search of Guthrum, and now, knowing nothing of the battle in the Valley of the Skulls, he sat on his haunches, a malignant fire glowing in his eyes. His clothing was in rags, and he more than ever resembled some monstrous shaggy ape lying in wait for its prey.

The sun was high when at last he heard the clatter of hoofs, and swiftly drew back into a shadowy niche. Elak and the Druid reined to a halt before the door of iron let into the outer wall, and the tall adventurer swung from his horse, his gaze examining the rough stones. The other's voice halted him.

"Wait, Elak. We won't have to climb. I'll open this door for you."

Dalan, without dismounting, reached into the folds of his robe, drew forth something which he hurled at the barrier. Immediately a sheet of blinding white flame sprang up, hiding the wall momentarily, setting the horses lunging and prancing in terror. Elak was nearly jerked from his feet as he fought to hold his steed.

Then the flames died. Where the door had been was a white-hot puddle of melted iron, and the stones of the portal were blackened and cracked by the intense heat. The Druid spurred forward his horse, and it hurdled the searing liquid iron easily. Elak followed, just in time to see fire burst out from the grill of the barbican.

"So far so good," Dalan grunted, watching the iron melt and drip to the stones of the courtyard. "But Elf doesn't depend on doors and walls alone."

Elak, looking up, did not answer. On the summit of the inner wall a gargoylish figure was carved seemingly of rugose dark stone, a creature that might have sprung from any of the Nine Hells. Stunted and huge and hideous it seemed to crouch above the courtyard, glaring down menacingly. Wide wings swept out from its gnarled shoulders. Somehow Elak sensed evil in the posture of the thing, the tiny eyes that seemed to watch him.

"Come! The barbican's down——"

The Druid's black warhorse stepped forward—and simultaneously Elak caught a flicker of movement from above, sensed rather than saw a great figure that hurtled down, wings sweeping, talons clutching murderously. He clapped spurs into the stallion, sent him driving against Dalan's steed. With the same movement he unsheathed his rapier, thrust up almost without aim.

A flapping of wings buffeted him. The weapon was torn from his grasp, and he crashed down on the stones, battling for his life with a monster that clawed and bellowed and ripped with vicious tusks—the thing he had thought carved from stone, the gargoyle, brought to evil

life by Elf's dark sorcery. Exhausted as he was, Elak was no match for the creature. The fangs drove toward his throat; a foul breath was strong in his nostrils.

Then the weight on Elak's body was gone; gasping for breath, he saw the monster gripped by the Druid, lifted above the bald, gleaming head. There was tremendous strength in Dalan's gross frame. He crashed the struggling monster down on the flags, leaped on it with crushing feet. His sword swung redly. . . .

"By Bell!" Elak murmured, retrieving his rapier. "Is that a devil? I've never seen beast or man like that before, Dalan."

"Nor has anyone else," the Druid informed him, staring down at the monster's still body. "It's an elemental, and devil's a good name for it. Elf set it to guard the gate. Well"—he swung his blade—"if I can cut through the warlock's neck as easily—good! Leave your horse, Elak. We must go on foot from here."

Hidden in a niche near by, Duke Granicor watched, wondering. But when Dalan and Elak passed the threshold, vanishing from sight in the depths of the fortress, Granicor sprang out and followed them.

And down from the hills rode a half-dozen horsemen, led by King Guthrum, spurring and yelling as they galloped. Only the Viking chief was silent, gripping his war-ax on which the blood had dried in dark red splashes. . . .

"To the vaults," Dalan said, hurrying swiftly along empty stone corridors. "I know the way. I've seen it often in my crystal. Hurry!" The Druid almost seemed to sense the danger that followed at their heels.

Elak's quick gaze searched the depths of side passages that led into enigmatic depths of the fortress. They raced on, through high-vaulted tunnels, down winding stairs dimly lit or in darkness, across great rooms that housed the magnificence of a king's palace.

They met no one. The vast citadel was deserted, or seemed so. And at last, when Elak guessed they had penetrated far underground, they came to a metal door, strangely figured with cabalistical signs, before which Dalan paused.

"This is the heart of Elf's castle," he said softly. "Here he holds your brother captive. Elak —" The Druid fumbled under his robe, drew out a long object wrapped in cloth. He unwound the casing, revealing a short dagger, apparently carved out of crystal.

"There is strong magic in this," Dalan said, handing the weapon, hilt first, to Elak. "And it will slay the warlock where no earthly steel can spill his blood. It is the Druid knife of sacrifice."

Nodding, Elak slipped it into his belt. Dalan turned to the metal door, pushed it open. A flame of amber light blinded the two momentarily. Then their vision cleared; they stepped across the threshold. . . .

They stood on a platform that thrust out from a wall of sheer rock that towered up and to both sides and down into a fathomless immensity of golden blaze that hurt the eyes with its fires. Ahead they saw nothing but clouds—amber clouds billowing and shifting continually, drifting like the sea all about them; flame-bright, yet cool as fog in its clinging mistiness. Elak shrank back involuntarily before the strangeness of the spectacle.

"Steady!" The Druid's huge hand gripped him. "Steady, now. We've a perilous road here—watch!"

Something swam into view from the mists to the left, a black object that seemed like a huge flat-topped globe as it slipped silently closer. Hanging unsupported in the amber fog it emerged, drifting forward until it hung not a foot from the edge of the platform on which the

two men stood. Now Elak saw that it was indeed a globe, like an orange with its top sliced off, hollowed out into a great cup.

“We ride that chariot!” Dalan whispered. “Follow me.”

He lumbered forward a few steps and sprang. The brown-robed, gross figure hurtled above the golden depths, plunged down safely within the hollow globe. It did not even sway beneath the impact.

“Elak!” The Druid had turned, was beckoning. “Hurry!”

The tall adventurer dared give himself no time to think; he leaped, his heart hammering. Almost he overshot the mark, but Dalan’s hands clutched him, lifting him to safety. White-faced, Elak stood erect on legs which were not quite steady.

The rim of the globe was waist-high. The diameter of the circular floor was about four feet, made of some unfamiliar jet-black substance he did not recognize.

The weird chariot swung in its orbit, skirting bare rock walls. The platform from which they had leaped was lost in the golden haze. They drifted through an endless sea of cool fire. . . .

As Granicor followed Dalan and Elak through the fortress he had soon come to realize that he, too, was being followed in his turn. Not guessing that the man he sought was among those who pursued him, he pressed on more swiftly—and the metal door that led to the platform above the abyss swung open under his hand as Elak leaped to the hollow globe. Guthrum stared in astonishment, not realizing until the black sphere had been lost in the mists that the noise of his pursuers was growing louder. Then he stepped across the threshold and flattened himself against the rock wall, sword lifted.

Thus Guthrum’s men did not at first see the duke. They came in a mob through the doorway, yelling like wolves. One nearly went over the platform’s edge as he twisted in midair, trying to halt his plunging rush. He reeled against a companion, clutching his shoulder—and neither one of them saw their slayer!

For Granicor lunged forward roaring. The sweep of his great sword toppled one Viking against the other, and they went over the brink in a flurry of arms and legs and a knife-edged shriek of despair. Before the other Northmen knew death was among them Granicor had struck again, shouting as he caught sight of Guthrum’s hated face. A helm was crushed like paper, and bone shattered under the rush of the duke’s steel; then blades licked out, and a cry went up from the Vikings. Three had died already—and there were more to die that day.

For Granicor moved like a pestilence, iron muscles in his great-thewed body toughened by his hatred of King Guthrum. His brand fell and swung and murdered in a crash of ringing steel there above the golden abysses, and though he was unarmored no thrust or cut seemed to have power to hurt him. Three he killed, and was wounded in breast and back and thigh. Blood gushed out through his tattered rags. Then even the hardy Vikings felt a shudder of horror go through them, for this madman, his body warped with torture, wounded almost to death—*laughed!* Granicor shouted with laughter, the insane glee that rose resistlessly within him as he cut his way toward Guthrum. Blood gushed from the half-healed wounds on hands and feet, mingling with the crimson welter that flooded the platform.

One man’s head leaped from his shoulders; and on the back sweep of the sword Granicor drove steel deep into a Viking’s side, slicing through chain-mail like cardboard. He dashed blood and sweat from his eyes with a shapeless paw—saw one giant figure before him, a huge

redbeard whose ax was driving down, screaming through cleft air. The duke leaped in, blade slashing.

The ax bit deep into Granicor's back. He shouted, stiffened. The sword dropped from his hands. In the bitter eyes of Guthrum a black laughter rose.

But the duke was not yet dead. He swayed, face contorted, clawing emptiness. He looked up and saw Guthrum, standing alone above corpses, the only Northman left alive.

Roaring, he sprang.

Steel fingers locked in Guthrum's hairy throat. Weaponless, Granicor made of his body a human projectile that drove the red-bearded giant back and down—back to the platform's edge—and beyond!

The two men plunged into the abyss, locked in a death-grip, Duke Granicor shouting mad triumph.

But from the Viking king came no sound as he fell through the golden mists to death.

12. Warlock and Druid

Swinging through empty space went the hollow globe with Elak and Dalan within it, on and on in a great curve till at last something loomed out of the dimness ahead. The Druid drew in his breath sharply.

“Leap after me, Elak—and swiftly.”

A pinnacle, a tower, a jagged eidolon of granite swam into view, lifting from amber fog-clouds. Dalan climbed laboriously on the sloping, waist-high rim, crouching there. The steep crag drifted closer. And the Druid sprang—scrabbled with hand and foot to cling to the dangerously angled rock. Elak followed, knowing a sickening instant of cold horror as he felt beneath him incredible depths of emptiness. Then they stood together on the slope—and Dalan pointed to a tunnel mouth just above them.

“There’s our road, Elak. Come.”

They stumbled cautiously toward the cryptic opening in the rocks. It led to a short tunnel, leading downward, very dimly lighted by the amber glow that filtered from the mouth. At the end of the passage was a door. It was unlocked; Dalan swung it open. Just beyond the threshold, on the rock floor, was a lamp, its bright flame illuminating every detail of the cave that lay before them.

It was empty save for a small square altar of dark stone, and the figure of a man who knelt before it, staring into the coldly yellow depths of a jewel he clasped in stiff hands.

“Orander!” Elak almost shouted.

There was no answer.

Orander of Cyrena, Elak’s brother, knelt as though carved from stone, his intent gaze riveted upon the jewel he gripped. He was younger than Elak, yet, somehow, he seemed older. Golden hair, unbound, grew in a leonine mane over the well-shaped head. There was strength in the king’s face—power, and something of nobility.

But the man was—*veiled!*

Over his features there lay, like the shadow of death, an impalpable darkness, intangible, yet conveying a definite air of *withdrawal*. It seemed to Elak that, strangely, his brother was very far away, though his body was only a few feet distant. And even as he called again he knew that Orander would not hear.

“The king is lost to Cyrena,” Dalan said quietly. “There is strong sorcery in the yellow jewel.”

“I’ll waken him, then,” Elak grunted, moving forward. Suddenly he paused. Amazement flooded his lean face. For a second he seemed to strive futilely against empty air. His hands went out, seeming to slide across an invisible wall that blocked his way.

“Strong sorcery!” the Druid said. “No—don’t use your rapier. You’d shatter it. There’s only one way to reach Orander—and it’s a perilous one.”

At Elak’s impatient gesture Dalan turned to the lamp. Swiftly he extinguished it, and shut the door so that the yellow glow could not filter in. Intense blackness darkened the cave.

“There’s only one road by which we can reach the king, Elak—a road I’ve never traveled. Watch.”

Elak obeyed. He could see nothing. Flashing light-images played before his pupils, but gradually these faded and vanished. They were alone in darkness.

Then he saw a tiny pin-point of yellow light.

“Do you see it?” Dalan muttered. Elak grunted assent.

“Then follow it. Keep the light constantly before your eyes. Walk forward slowly until—until——”

The Druid’s voice faded oddly and was lost in silence. Without hesitation Elak stepped toward the tiny yellow light. He expected to crash into the invisible barrier that had blocked his path, but it did not materialize. After he had advanced a dozen paces he paused. Orander should now be almost at his side.

Urgently came Dalan’s hoarse voice. “Go on! Quickly!”

The yellow light had vanished. For a moment Elak searched for it vainly; then, dimly, he saw it, winking like a tiny star. He moved on again, and as he did the light grew brighter.

Yet it was only a pin-point, guiding him through utter blackness. As he went on he realized that he had traversed the length of the cave, and should crash against the rock wall. Yet he did not. And the rock beneath his feet had a different feel—softer, more elastic.

Suddenly there was a moment of frightful vertigo, a wrenching jar that tore at every atom of his body. He felt utterly disoriented—strangely lost, curiously conscious of movement he could not analyze.

The darkness fled away and was gone. Cool yellow light was all around him. At Elak’s side was the Druid—but no longer were they in the cave.

They stood on a glowing plain of amber, under a golden sky that was sunless and luminous. All around them was a featureless, coldly blazing expanse, stretching endlessly into infinity.

“Ishtar!” Elak’s voice was hushed. “Where are we, Dalan? This isn’t—earth.”

“No. We are in a far place now, and a dangerous one. We passed through a door into another world.”

“A door?”

“The yellow jewel,” Dalan said. “It is the bridge between our land and this world. More than that——”

The Druid broke off, staring. The distant glowing plains seemed to be undergoing an incredible transformation—lifting, rising like great waves, marching forward from the horizons toward the two men.

Elak caught a glimpse of Dalan’s face, startled and apprehensive, and then the two were jerked apart. A gap widened in the earth between them. Elak caught a flashing glimpse of abysmal depths where red-orange fire glowed. He seemed to be spinning through empty space, rocketing across the great plain with furious speed. Briefly the world seemed to close about him, as though he were being crushed between the vast plains which had somehow been folded in around him. He clutched his rapier-hilt in hopeless desperation.

And then he stood alone on the great shining plain. Nothing else was visible but the brazen amber sky; the Druid had vanished. It was utterly silent.

“Elak,” a soft voice called. The tall adventurer turned. He saw no one.

Then, from empty air, there sprang—a shadow! Two-dimensional, unreal, it grew darker, took on form and substance. As Elak gazed, a man grew into visibility and stood watching him, a slim, blueeyed youth with soft flaxen hair. He wore a doeskin tunic, his only weapon a dirk girded at his belt. In his hand he gripped a harp.

Elak remembered the face he had seen in Dalan's crystal globe on the galley—the face of Elf the warlock, the same on which he looked now. And again he sensed the ageless, incredible evil that lurked in the depths of the candid blue eyes, watching as a devil might peer through a mask.

"I am Elf," the warlock said. "But I think you know that." He did not move as Elak unsheathed his rapier, crouching menacingly, one foot forward.

"Yes, I know it," the tall adventurer answered warily. "Where's Dalan? Bring him here—or I'll let blood flow from your throat before you can move to cast a spell."

Elf smiled. "No, my business is with you. Elak—you have spoiled my plans. But I have no wish to kill you. Instead, I'd rather see you on the throne of Cyrena."

"Eh?" Elak did not lower his blade. "What are you trying now? Bring Dalan here, I say!"

"Dalan has lied to you. He said I had your brother captive——"

"And I saw him! Your lies won't help."

"He's here, yes," Elf admitted. "But not a captive. In Cyrena he was a king. But in this land of mine he is more. I have made him—a god!"

"What are you talking about?" Elak snapped. "You're playing for time. Bring——"

The warlock swept his hand over the harp's strings. Throbbing sweetness, with a poignant undertone of bitterness, rang out. Instantly they were in utter blackness.

And at that moment Elak thrust with his rapier, thrust at empty air. Cursing, he slashed blindly about. Suddenly the darkness lifted.

For an instant Elak saw his brother's face hovering gigantically above him, the weird veil of alienage still shrouding the strong features. In the king's eyes Elak saw withdrawal—a withdrawal so awe-inspiring that he felt momentarily cold, as though some breath of the unknown had touched him.

The voice of Elf came softly. "I have shown you Orander," the warlock murmured. "Now I shall show you more. You shall see the worlds over which the god who is Orander rules."

Again the dark veil fell.

Great vistas of flashing light, orange, scarlet, yellow, glittering with amazing beauty, down which fled cyclopean shadows. Slowly the vision faded and became distinct. Elak seemed to be hovering in empty air above a huge city, many-tiered and gardened, that rose on the summit of a mountain beneath him.

Fantastic splendor ruled the city. Shining domes and minarets rose high above the wide marble streets, and arches and bridges spanned the lakes and canals where water—glowing with yellow radiance—moved sluggishly between its banks. The inhabitants of the city were not human.

They were beasts—and yet more than beasts. Elak was reminded of giant colossi of stone, winged monsters, bearded and talc-winged, lion-bodied, sleekly beautiful. Smoothly powerful muscles rolled beneath the satin pelts. And wise, wise and ancient beyond all imagination, were the faces that Elak saw. The plumes of the vari-colored wings fluttered in the gentle breeze that swept over the mountain-top, honey-sweet, spiced with odors redolent of Eastern lands.

"It is Athorama," Elf's voice murmured from empty air. "Over all this splendor Orander rules."

Blackness fell again, and, lifting, disclosed a sea-girt city, where the yellow light was tinged with a dim green glow—a white city clothed in green and scarlet, blue and purple.

Vegetation wound up the towers, and serpentine trees writhed and twisted in the streets. Very slowly moved the men and women of this city—clad in flowing garments that trailed behind them eerily in the dimness. And there were vague shadows swimming to and fro. . . .

“It is Lur,” said Elf. “It is sunken Lur. And over this also is Orander a god.”

Darkness fell, and lifted to disclose the amber-glowing plain on which Elak stood. Beside him was the warlock, smiling gently. He lifted a hand as Elak’s blade flickered.

“Wait. You have seen these worlds which I made for Orander’s pleasure, in which all moves and is ordered as he desires. Now I shall show you the king again.”

The harp hummed eerily. In the ochre glow of the sky, clouds grew, shaping themselves in oddly patterned order. Slowly the vague outline of a face began to appear above them—the face of Orander, King of Cyrena. The eyes seemed to dwell on something infinitely far away. The titan face hung in the sky, fantastically huge and distant.

“Orander,” the warlock said. “Here is Elak.”

There was no change in the giant face, nor did the lips move; yet a voice said distinctly and coldly:

“I hear.”

Elak felt an icy shock go through him at the sound of that voice. It belonged to something which was no longer human. But because he knew that it was also Orander’s voice, he fought back his horror and called the king’s name.

“I hear,” the voice said again. “I know why you have come. It is useless. Go back.”

“You’re putting words into the mouth of a phantom,” Elak snarled, swinging round to face Elf.

“It is I, once Orander. Elf has made me a god, and he has built me worlds for my pleasure. Go back.”

“You see,” the warlock said, his gaze meeting Elak’s frankly. “Would you rob a god of his worlds? I put no enchantment on Orander. The king asked me to grant him this boon, and with my magic I did so—made worlds over which your brother rules. Would you drag him back to Cyrena—a place from which he fled?”

Elak did not answer. A frown darkened his face. Elf went on slowly.

“Dalan was jealous of my power; that was all. He tried to lead Cyrena against me, and in self-defense I sought the Northmen’s aid, for I could not call on Orander. Join me, Elak—you can sit on Cyrena’s throne, and my magic will serve you. Forget the Druid’s lies!”

Doubtfully Elak lowered his rapier. “I don’t want to rule,” he said. “I seek no crowns. I came here to win back Cyrena from invaders, and to free my brother. But——”

“But Orander does not wish to be freed——”

“*You lie!*”

Dalan’s voice! Elak’s head jerked up. He stared at the sky—to where, beside the titan face of Orander, hung another face, hog-fat, toad-ugly, glaring down at Elf.

“Mider!” roared the Druid. “By Mider—you seek to stuff Elak’s head with lies? Your spells won’t aid you now—you spew of serpents!”

The warlock looked up unmoving. And the voice of Dalan thundered on from the sky.

“My magic is stronger than yours—else I’d not be here now. Ay, you seek to enlist Elak’s aid, for you dare not fight him—not while he carries the Druid knife of sacrifice.”

Elf’s lips were twisted in a venomous snarl. But the Druid ignored him, bellowed:

“Elak! There’s foul enchantment on Orander. He’s glamored by the damned witchery of Elf’s poison, by the spell cast on him unawares—but he can be called back to Cyrena, and

he'll thank you for it. No man is made to be a god, and there'll be a fearful doom on Orander unless he's called back. Speak to him of Cyrena—of his people, Elak!"

For a second the adventurer hesitated, staring up at the cyclopean face of the king. Then, suddenly, he lifted his rapier with a shout. He had seen something change in the god-face, and the veil of horror had lifted from the alien eyes.

"Orander!" Elak cried. "Orander—come back to Cyrena! The sea cliffs are harried by Northmen, and dragon ships bring invaders with torch and sword. The chiefs have risen—but they need a king, else Cyrena will fall again.

"Orander, remember your kingdom—remember the fields of your land, green in the warm sunlight, silver under the moon. Remember the steadings and the cattle of your people—Sharn Forest, and the Druid altars.

"The mountains and plains of Cyrena, your warhorse and your sword, remember all these! Remember those who held the throne before you without failing—remember the blood and steel that make up your kingdom. Orander—come back to Cyrena!"

The titan face was no longer that of a god. It looked down on Elak, the face of Orander, Cyrena's king. His pulses surged with triumph as he heard the Druid shout:

"Shatter the jewel, Orander—shatter the demon jewel you hold!"

Simultaneously there came a thunder and a crashing as of riven worlds, and the ochre light vanished from the sky. The tumult roared all about Elak, the darkness broken by flashing, brief light-images. The ruins of sunken Lur sank down in thunder; the huge and splendid city of Athorama crashed in terrible destruction down the mountain, while the mitered beasts flew screaming, beating the air with frantic pinions. All around Elak was the death-cry of a ruined universe, and it swelled and rose to a dreadful crescendo of terror.

He saw Elf's face, twisted into a Gorgon mask of hate and fury, rushing toward him; something like the coil of a great serpent swept about his body. The rapier was gone, but he remembered the crystal dagger in his belt, clawed out the Druid blade. He drove it again and again into the cold, scaly thing that gripped him, unseen in the darkness that had fallen. Chill flesh seemed to shrink from beneath his attack.

Then he felt fangs closing on his throat, ripped out desperately with the dagger. There was a single frightful scream of deathly agony, and in a moment of blazing light Elak saw the body of Elf falling into a fathomless gulf that loomed below him. As he watched, the warlock's figure seemed to be wrenched asunder by some unseen power that waited in the abyss. And again darkness fell—and silence.

There was a low wheezing and scrambling near by, and light flickered up dimly. Elak saw the Druid bending over a lighted lamp, and realized with incredulity that he stood in the cave of the black altar. Swiftly he turned.

A man was rising to his feet—and on the stones around him lay splintered yellow shards. Orander—no longer tranced by Elf's magic, no longer under a spell. The king's eyes met Elak's.

The adventurer leaped forward, gripped his brother's arms. "Orander! Ishtar be praised!"

"Praise Mider, rather," Dalan said dryly. "And praise Orander for shattering the jewel and breaking the spell." An expression of malevolent triumph came over the ugly face. "But you've slain Elf, Elak, and for that you have my thanks. May his soul be tortured through eternity in the Nine Hells!"

From a turret of King Orander's castle Dalan watched three figures ride south weeks later. His heavy shoulders lifted in a shrug. Beside him Orander smiled a little sadly.

"He wouldn't stay, Dalan. And I'm sorry for that."

"He was wise," the Druid said. "A country should have but one hero, its king. Best let him go in peace, lest quarrels come if he had stayed."

"No. There would be no quarrels. But Zeulas—Elak, as he calls himself—is a wanderer. He will not change now, though I urged him. So he rides south again, with Lycon and Velia at his side."

The figures on horseback grew small on the plain—two who rode very close together, and one who followed at a little distance, reeling in his saddle and keeping his balance only by occasionally gripping the beast's mane. Elak and Velia talked, with soft laughter and high hearts, as they cantered onward—and behind them, Lycon, in his own fashion, was happy also.

"Wine," he murmured thickly to himself. "Goatskins of it. Good wine, too! The gods are very good. . . ."

THE END

[The end of *Thunder in the Dawn* by Henry Kuttner]