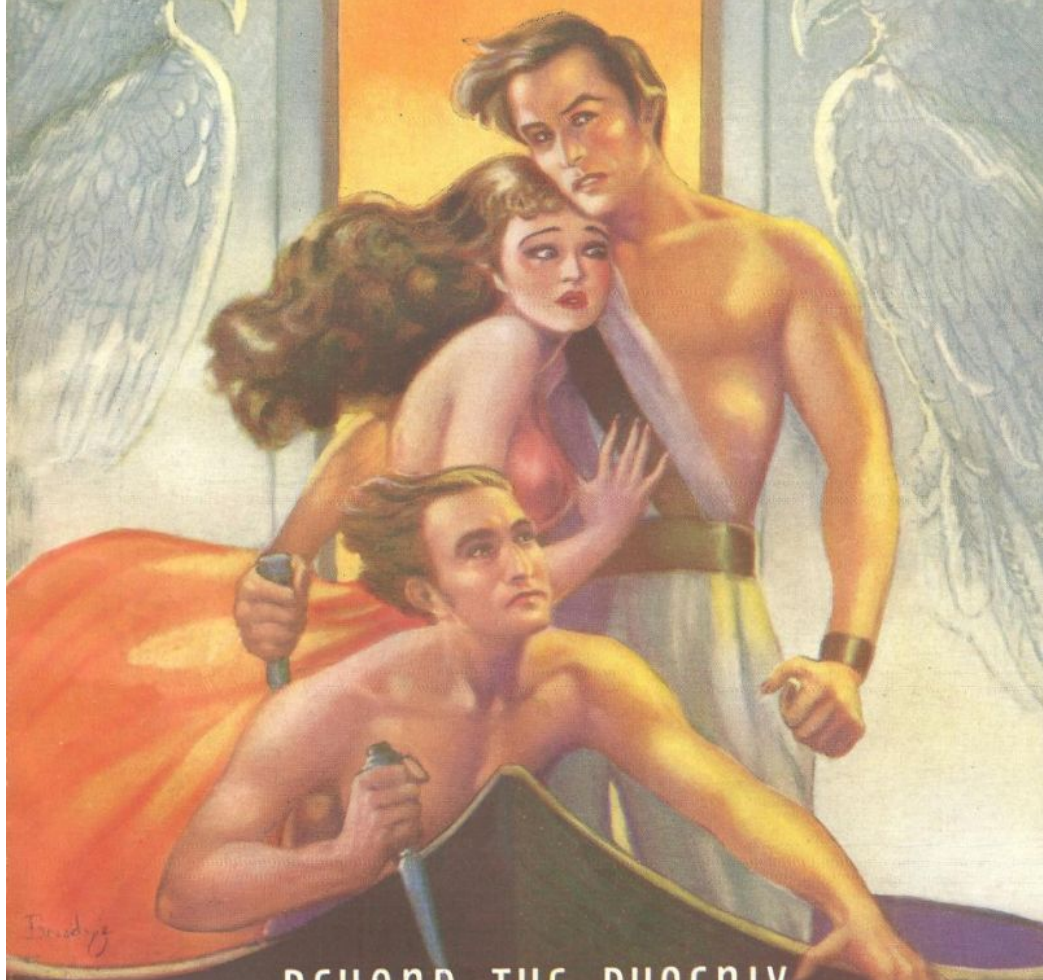


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BEYOND THE PHOENIX

a tale of sorcery and thrilling action

By HENRY KUTTNER

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

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Beyond the Phoenix

By HENRY KUTTNER

A tale of Elak of Atlantis, and an evil priest who was more than human and who worshipped a foul god—a tale of perilous sorcery and thrilling action

I. A King Dies

And the torchlight touched the pale hair
Where silver clouded gold,
And the frame of his face was made of cords,
And a young lord turned among the lords
And said: "The King is old."

—G. K. Chesterton.

"I won't kill you quickly," said Lycon, a fierce grin of satisfaction on his round face. "No. I've suffered your insults too long. I must bring an offering each day to the altar of your stinking god, eh? An ear for that!"

He brought down his sword in a vicious sweep.

"Good! Now your nose, Xandar—you've sniffed out too many victims with it already. Thus——" Again steel flashed.

"And an eye, Xandar—see? I remove it with the point. Very carefully. For a copper coin I'd make you eat it."

"Drunken little fool," Elak said, coming over to the table. "Leave that roasted pig alone. It won't be fit to eat after you've finished carving it."

Lycon looked down at the succulent brown carcass on the great wooden platter. "I've not hurt it," he said sullenly.

"You'll be having us swinging by our necks if you keep yelling threats against Xandar. I don't like him any more than you do. But—under the king—he rules Sarhaddon."

This, unhappily, was true. Since the two adventurers had come to Sarhaddon, a little-known city in western Atlantis, they had risen high in the service of King Phrygior, eventually attaining posts in his personal bodyguard. But they had more than once incurred the dislike of the high priest, Xandar, perhaps because they were outlanders who had come from the seaport city of Poseidonia. At any rate, Xandar disliked the two, and took pains to make this clear. It was within his power to levy tribute from any citizen, and therefore Lycon's purse was usually empty. He stole as much as was safe from Elak, but the latter had lately become suspicious.

"I don't like this," Elak said now, his dark wolf-face set in harsh lines. "We're supposed to be with the king now. Always, when he's asleep, his men guard him. Yet the captain sends us down here to the kitchen to wait for—eh? A message, he said."

"This is as good a place as any," Lycon observed, draining a huge drinking-horn. "What foul mead! Twelve cups and I can still walk. It was not like this in Poseidonia."

Elak turned away in disgust. He went to a mullioned window and stared down at the lights of the city, spreading over Sarhaddon Valley. Gaunt granite cliffs rose all about them, and a silver tracery near by marked the course of Syra River. It flowed under the castle, to disappear, so the tales went, into the Gates of the Phoenix, a place in which Elak did not believe, but in which every other inhabitant of the city did. He knew, of course, the traditional death-ceremony of the kings. Their bodies were placed aboard a royal barge, and set adrift on Syra—and returned, as the tavern stories went—to the land of their fathers beyond the Phoenix Gates.

Elak grunted softly and touched the hilt of a slim rapier that hung at his side.

“I’m going back,” he said. “Wait if you want. I’ve a feeling——”

Without finishing, he hurried into the hall and up a winding stone stairway, followed by Lycon, who was gulping mead from a horn as he came. The staircase was a long one, for King Phrygior slept in a high tower that rose above the gray stone battlements of the castle. And the sound of furious battle came to Elak and made him whip out his rapier, snarling a bitter oath.

“Curse Lokar for a traitor!” he whispered, blade ready as he bounded up. Behind him the drinking-horn dropped from Lycon’s hand and went clashing and ringing down; but the noise it made could not be heard above the tumult in the king’s apartments. Elak gained the anteroom and stood for a moment staring.

At his side and below him the deep well of the tower dropped down, bounded by the winding staircase. Yet, somehow, it seemed to Elak that as he stared into the room a dozen feet away he was looking into the abyss of a pit even deeper—a bottomless well that stretched beyond infinity. A blackness lay beyond the threshold, almost tangible in its tenebrous intensity. It was as though a jet curtain had been stretched across the doorway, barring entry.

Yet from beyond came the sound of battle, and abruptly the king’s voice in a shout of agony.

Impulse rather than reason sent Elak forward, plunging across the threshold, breaking through the dark veil. For a brief instant the chill of polar lands clawed at his flesh, and he was blind. Then Elak was in the midst of a shambles, his sight restored, and as he saw from the corner of his eye the black curtain behind him had disappeared completely.

The room was a wreck. Priceless tapestries had been torn down and lay in sword-ripped tatters, smeared with blood. Not a piece of furniture was upright. Above the familiar smell of incense rose the acrid odor of sweat and blood, and at Elak’s feet a man lay with his throat torn open, rags of cartilage protruding from the ghastly wound. A dozen corpses were here—few men survived. One of these was Lokar, captain of the guard, who was just swinging his sword down in a stroke that would have decapitated Phrygior, who was clawing at an overturned table in a desperate endeavor to regain his feet.

Elak moved with lightning speed. His rapier, sword-arm and body formed one incredibly swift thrust of movement, and Lokar shouted and let go his sword, which clashed harshly on the stones as it fell. The giant soldier whirled, clutching an impaled wrist from which red spurted. He saw Elak, and bellowed wordless rage.

Ignoring his wounded arm, Lokar sprang for Elak. And Elak made a motion of giving ground, his rapier hanging loose. At the last moment the adventurer leaned forward, bracing one foot on the flagging, and whipped around the rapier-point with flashing, deadly speed. Lokar saw the danger too late. The slender blade ground into his eye, burst through the thin shell of bone, and sheathed itself in the man’s brain.

“Look out—’ware, Elak!” Lycon shouted from the doorway. Elak swung about, teeth bared. One living enemy faced him—an unarmed man. Yet, inexplicably, Elak felt an icy shudder crawl down his spine at sight of this man—Xandar the priest.

He was a hunchback—yet no dwarf. His body, though warped and twisted hideously, was gigantic, and great muscles surged beneath the swarthy skin. Above the flattened, hairless head rose the hump, its horror strangely enhanced by the rich gold cloth that draped it. One side of the creature’s face was a mangled, featureless slab of scar tissue, remnant of some long-past battle. The red lips, singularly shapely on the left side, widened into a shocking lipless hole on the other.

The monster roared, “Ho, you fool! Back! Swiftly!”

“I serve the king, not you, gargoyle,” Elak grunted, and lifted his weapon. At his feet Phrygiar stirred, his white beard all slobbered and bespattered with blood. And now Elak saw a dagger’s hilt embedded in the king’s bare breast, center of a widening crimson stain.

Again the priest bellowed, “Back! Back!”

And Elak, moving forward on cat-like feet, hesitated. An indefinable warning tingled within his brain. He paused, staring at Xandar.

Was it illusion? The monster’s warped body seemed to be growing larger, impossibly increasing in bulk till it seemed to tower within the room. Elak shook his head, cursing. What madness was this? He tried to peer at Xandar, and found himself blinking through a dark, hazy mist that slowly grew thicker. Wavering in the dimness stood the shapeless pillar that was Xandar, now shrinking, now swelling to Elak’s warped vision. Whence the fog had sprung he did not know, but the subtle evil of it tore at the fortress of his mind with warning fingers. There was danger here—deadly danger. Strong in his nostrils was a sickly-sweet smell, musky, somehow reminiscent of the odor of growing things—but not things that grew in any healthy manner. Rather the disgusting miasma of life that sprang from foul corruption, fungi and lichen bursting from spores and feeding on rotten carcasses. . . .

He heard Lycon’s hoarse breathing behind him, and the sound brought back his courage. Xandar was a vague shadow—but at that shadow Elak lunged, rapier leveled. He felt himself smothered suddenly by a blacker darkness, and found his breath stopped by the horrible, miasmatic stench. Then there was the familiar feeling of flesh ripping under his steel, the grinding jar of metal clashing on bone, rippling up the rapier to his hand. From the priest burst a bellow of agony.

And the shout changed to words—a frantic cry in syllables Elak did not recognize, though their unearthly sound made him wonder. Grinning harshly, he once more sent steel arrowing through the shadow—vainly, this time.

And the darkness lifted, faded as though a veil had been withdrawn. Elak stood staring in the center of the room, gasping with amazement. He whirled.

“Lycon! Did he get past you?”

The little man shook his head, glancing at his heavy sword. “Ishtar, no! I’d have split him from pate to groin——”

“There must be a hidden passage in the wall,” Elak said, and dropped beside the king. Phrygiar’s bearded lips parted to swallow the wine Elak forced between them. Eyes cold as gray stone looked into the adventurer’s—and a blazing spark leaped into them.

“The priest! Kill him!”

“He’s gone,” Elak said. “The others——”

Phrygiar looked down, touched with weak fingers the dagger-hilt in his breast. He said hoarsely, “Leave it. To unsheathe it now would kill me in a moment. First I must——” He fumbled toward the wine-flask. “Esarra—my daughter—summon her.”

Elak made a quick gesture. “Get the princess, Lycon. I’ll guard the king.”

“No need—now. Xandar has—accomplished his design.” Elak held the flask to Phrygiar’s lips while the dying man drank deeply, and soon, strengthened, he began again.

“The priest has plotted against me for long, Elak. Some of his dogs were in my guard, and tonight they killed the ones who remained faithful. He has long desired the throne—and

Esarra. But he dared not defy the Phoenix—the god of Sarhaddon’s kings. Thus he sought aid—more wine, Elak. My blood drains fast. . . .

“So. Baal-Yagoth—you know not the name. Few remember, yet ages and ages ago when the gods dwelt on earth, Baal-Yagoth was the power of evil, the embodiment of dark lust. He sought to establish his dominion over the world, but in a great battle Assurah, the Phoenix, overthrew him, imprisoned him in the land of the gods . . . and now Assurah sleeps, and Xandar has called Baal-Yagoth out of the dark lands to rule Sarhaddon. Only a man crazed with venom and hatred would have dared, for the black god can have no power on earth till a human willingly opens up his soul and brain for Baal-Yagoth’s dwelling-place. Within Xandar dwells his god.”

Now Elak remembered what had happened when he had attacked the priest.

The king drank more wine. “My strength goes fast. Unless Esarra arrives speedily——” He stiffened in a spasm of agony. “Elak! I cannot wait! Your arm——”

Elak extended his hand, and Phrygiar seized it. From his own wrist he took a bracelet of black stone, on which were carved symbols Elak did not recognize. But on the largest lozenge was the outline of a phoenix, eagle-shaped, rubies and gold aping the mythical bird’s coloring. Swiftly the king snapped the bracelet on Elak’s sinewy arm. It felt curiously cold.

Phrygiar touched the phoenix with grotesque, archaic gestures. He murmured a phrase—and his grim face, already shadowed with death, lightened. “Only the Phoenix may unloose the sacred bracelet from your wrist now,” he said quietly. “You must go to Assurah—beyond the Gates of the Phoenix. Listen well, Elak, for my strength ebbs.

“At the foot of this tower a tapestry is on the wall, with a dragon battling a basilisk. Touch the basilisk’s eyes thrice. Once press the dragon’s eyes. A door will open, and you must go through it with your companion, taking Esarra so she will not fall into Xandar’s hands. A barge has long waited at the end of the passage you’ll find—waited for my corpse. I would have you—take me with you. Esarra will guide you. She is of the Phoenix blood——”

Quite suddenly the indomitable will that had kept Phrygiar alive failed. He gave a convulsive shudder, arching his back in agony, while froth bubbled on the white beard. Then he fell back and so died, scarcely an instant before Esarra and Lycon crossed the threshold.

The girl flew to her father’s side, while Elak arose, eyeing Lycon’s reddened sword. The small adventurer nodded briefly.

“More of Xandar’s dogs. I killed ’em. The girl helped, too—her dagger drew blood as often as my sword. What now?”

There was little time to explain. A few words told Esarra how matters stood, and she hastened down the stairway, while Elak followed, bearing the corpse of the king. After him Lycon descended warily.

The tower’s floor seemed deserted, though from not far away came the clash of ringing steel and the shouts of men. The great tapestry stretched across one wall. Elak saw that the eyes of the basilisk and the dragon were gems, and he pressed these as Phrygiar had commanded. With scarcely a sound one of the stone flags lifted, revealing a staircase leading down to blackness.

Lycon snatched a flambeau from its socket and led the way, while Elak, after a futile attempt to close the secret trapdoor, followed the girl. He eyed her curiously as her profile was from time to time outlined against the torchlight. A beauty, he thought. The regal cast of her face was softened by its warm humanity, and brown curls clung damply to her pale forehead.

The slender, delicate curves of her body were scarcely hidden by the silken night-dress, ripped in more than one place so that ivory flesh shone through.

Behind him Elak heard the pound of footsteps; he called a warning, and the three hastened their pace. The stairs gave way to a corridor, stone-walled and dank, and this in turn opened into a low-roofed, broad chamber. A narrow ledge ran around its base; below the ledge was water, blackly ominous. A barge floated in the huge pool.

Elak had but a glimpse of dark silks and velvets, a jewel-studded canopy that was a fitting covering for a king's corpse. He leaped aboard the barge, put down his burden, and whirled, rapier out. A hasty glance around showed that the cavern had but one other opening—metal gates, corroded and green with verdigris, that descended from the roof to below the water's surface. Then from the tunnel-mouth burst the pursuers—Xandar's men, swords red, baying like hounds as they ran.

"Lycon! To me!" Elak shouted, but the little man did not answer. The tall adventurer bounded back to the ledge, spitting the foremost attacker through the throat, and deftly wrenching the rapier free as the man fell to splash into the water. He caught sight of Lycon and Esarra working desperately at a great bar of metal—a lever—that hung from the roof. Then Elak forgot all else in a red blaze of battle.

Three men he slew, and was himself wounded in the shoulder, while a flung blade missed his jugular by an inch and sliced his cheek. There was a grinding roar of hidden machinery, and Elak heard a frantic shout from Lycon. He turned to see the barge plunging away on the breast of a descending torrent.

Ignoring the men who were now pressing in to the kill, Elak leaped. A spear screamed past his head as he jumped, and he saw it thud into the barge's side. Ironically, that weapon saved him. He fell short, and his clutching fingers found the haft of the spear. For a second it held, and then Lycon's hands were on his wrists, tugging him to safety.

Above the barge rose the gaunt gray stones of the castle. Already the swift current had carried the craft beyond the door, and the three were safe from pursuit. It was, however, impossible to land, for there were neither poles nor oars. They drifted into a steadily deepening gorge, with the roar of the Syra rising into a thundering madness in their ears.

2. *The Opening of the Gates*

No growth of moor or coppice,
No heather-flower or vine,
But bloomless buds of poppies,
Green grapes of Proserpine,
Pale beds of blowing rushes,
Where no leaf blooms or blushes
Save this whereout she crushes
For dead men deadly wine.
—Swinburne.

The river raced into the heart of the mountains that surrounded Sarhaddon, till the blue sky was a brilliant narrow path above, jaggedly outlined by the towering scarp. The three on the barge could do nothing; it was impossible to talk below a shout. Nevertheless Elak explained to his companions what had happened.

“Ishtar!” Lycon screamed above the torrent’s roar. “I never trusted that devil Xandar! Did you kill him, do you think?”

Elak shook his head. “Got his arm, I think. That’s all.” Reminded of his own arm, he began to dress it, while Esarra went to stand in the barge’s prow, peering ahead into the mists beneath a pale, shading hand. It was her cry that brought the others.

“The Gates! The Phoenix Gates!”

Slowly they came into view through the clouds of spray, swimming into half-vividness and then fading again into fog, but growing ever closer—gates that towered up from the torrent, up and up for a hundred feet, constructed of metal that had never been stained or corroded by the unceasing drive of the water. Silvery-white they were, shot with pale bluish gleams. On their center was a Phoenix, huge as three men’s height, red as the fiery heart of a ruby, yellow as the golden rivers that wash Cathay. Crest proudly raised, the stupendous effigy seemed to stare down upon Syra River—at the three on the barge. And the current drove the craft remorselessly toward the gates.

“Gods!” Elak said tonelessly, his voice lost in the thunder of the waters. “The river goes under the gates! We’ll be dragged down——”

Esarra gripped his arm. “The bracelet! Let the Phoenix see——”

Uncomprehendingly Elak let the girl lift his bare arm till the phoenix bracelet gleamed distinctly through the mists. Was it merely his fancy that a brief, flashing ray of light seemed to leap out between bracelet and the image on the gates? If so, what followed was certainly not imagination. The gates opened. Silently they parted, disclosing glowing depths beyond them, and the barge raced through unharmed. Briefly it surged and rocked with the current, and then steadied as the gates closed once more. It was oddly silent now. They were in a cavern, glowing with weird brilliance. Violet gleams played over the walls.

Without warning came the inexplicable. There was a flashing, swift movement, and abruptly the barge was surrounded by a transparent, circular wall that seemed to be rising from the waters all around. Elak looked about warily, ready to drag out his rapier at the first sign of danger.

The glass wall lifted. It drew together above the barge, forming a dome. What slight trace of sound had drifted through the Phoenix Gates from the bellowing river was lost completely. Deathly silence fell.

Elak said, "I don't like this. It's like a prison. Princess, what——"

Esarra shrugged slim shoulders. "Assurah knows! But the kings of Sarhaddon have traveled this road longer than men remember." Her gaze went to where Phrygior's body lay beneath the great jeweled canopy. There was a little sob in her voice as she went on, "The legends say that the first king of Sarhaddon came from the land of the Phoenix, and his offspring must return there after death. So——"

"'Ware!" Lycon yelled. "'Ware, Elak!"

Imperceptibly the water beneath the barge had drained away till the craft rested on a shell of crystal. Now Elak saw that they were within a huge transparent sphere—and a shudder of movement shook it as Lycon cried warning. One shudder—and the globe dropped. Instantly deep blackness blanketed them. There was no sense of motion; yet Elak felt strangely certain that the sphere was dropping—dropping—into unknown depths. A giddiness assailed him. He felt Esarra's soft body flung against him, and his arms tightened about her protectively. Then the weird feeling of movement, almost extra-sensory in its inexplicable certainty, grew stronger; from the Phoenix bracelet on his wrist alien magic flowed through him. The darkness lightened. He saw Lycon and Esarra peering around blindly, and knew that they were still blind.

The crystal sphere was dropping down a metallic shaft, the sides of which were merely a blurred gleaming as the speed increased. Briefly a flash of violent red burned Elak's eyeballs, and then came a blaze of pure, deadly white that sent him flat on his face, fists clenched against his agonized eyes. The sickening giddiness grew stronger—stronger yet—

And gratefully Elak let his mind sink into the black pit of unconsciousness that gaped for him. He slept. . . .

Now it seemed to Elak that he dreamed, or so he thought; for, though his eyes were closed, he clearly saw what occurred around him. There was at first only a thick shroud of fog, swirling slowly in drab grayness; and very slowly this mist faded and was gone. In its place was a cold, blue emptiness that seemed to stretch into infinite distances.

But it was not the sky, despite the gleaming points of light that swam into view like stars. That Elak knew. For the glowing specks grew brighter and larger, and he saw that they resembled flowers, many-petaled—yet no flowers of earth. With a cold and dreadful certainty he knew that they were alive.

They watched him, hanging motionless in the blue vastness, until the grip of nightmare clutched Elak. Nothing existed but these malefic flowers, it seemed, and they seemed to press toward him with avid hunger; they strained against the blueness that held them back. It was impossible to judge their size. They might have been small as a man's hand, and very close; or unimaginably huge and far away. They waited. . . .

Now the dream changed. A woman came into Elak's range of vision, slim and dark and vital as a black flame. Red as her lips was the gown she wore, and her eyes and long tresses were midnight black. With slow footsteps she came to stand beside Elak, and in her hand, he saw, she bore a strangely-filigreed chalice. Thin steam ascended from it.

She bent over Elak. The gray mists swirled back, blinding, confusing. Out of the fog loomed the woman's face, arrogantly handsome; her pale hand, and the goblet it bore. She

lifted it to Elak's mouth. A cloying fragrance crept into his nostrils, and involuntary repugnance shuddered through him. The liquor's aroma was subtly sweet. A drop of the fluid touched his lips, and a hot pang raced through every atom of his body.

"*Tyrala!*"

On the word the woman drew back, hell-flames flaring in her eyes. She whirled to face a figure who came slowly through the mists.

It was a man, small but delicately proportioned, clad in tight-fitting silver garments, and, seeing him, Elak was reminded of the Northmen's god Baldur. The fineness of his beardless face was at variance with a certain assured strength in the dark, lazily amused eyes.

He said again, "*Tyrala*, your haste is ill-advised. I had not known of this man's arrival."

The woman stood rigid, clutching the chalice with white fingers. She hesitated, asked, "Since when have you stooped to interesting yourself in my slaves, *Ithron*?"

The man's smile was malicious. "But is he one of yours? The men of *Nyrvana* are pale and yellow-haired, even as myself. This one is dark and lean as a wolf. Moreover, he wears a certain sign. . . ."

Tyrala glanced at the bracelet on Elak's wrist. For a moment fear shone in her eyes, but she said nothing.

The man, *Ithron*, chuckled. "And I think there were others from above, too. Have you forgotten the pact? We two rule over *Nyrvana*—we two, not you alone. Shall we not judge these intruders—*together*?"

"Aye," *Tyrala* said presently, though her face was somber and menacing. "As you will. . . ."

Now the fog closed down again, and darkened into blackness. For a space Elak was unconscious, and he awoke slowly, with an unfamiliar, nauseating taste on his tongue. He sat up, spitting and cursing. From near by came the sound of *Lycon*'s snores.

The two were lying on low tapestried couches set side by side in the center of a great windowless room. Hangings of red samite hid the walls. From the ceiling was suspended a silvern lamp that cast a vague yellowish radiance. Otherwise the chamber was empty.

Elak got heavily to his feet and kicked *Lycon* off his couch. "Wake up!" he commanded. "We might have had our throats slit as you slept, drunken little dog."

"More mead," murmured the drunken little dog, still apparently engrossed in vinous dreams. "Alas, the cup is empty. . . ."

Elak hauled his companion upright by the scruff of the neck. "I said 'wake up,'" he grunted. "We're in some wizard's den or other, and your sword may be needed. I see you've still got it." He glanced down with satisfaction at the slim rapier at his own belt.

Lycon opened mildly disapproving eyes. "Our throats are safe, for a while anyhow. They had plenty of time to kill you, if they'd wanted to, last night."

"What d'you mean?"

"That I woke up to find myself alone in here. I hammered on the door and swore in seven languages, but vainly. So, as there was nothing better to do, I went to sleep again."

"Where's the princess?" Elak asked suddenly. *Lycon* shrugged.

"How should I know? Wait till somebody opens the door, Elak. Then we can use our blades. Until then——" He left the sentence unfinished. A low throbbing musical note sounded, and simultaneously a slit widened in the farther wall.

A man stood in the gap, yellow-haired, slightly built, wearing a loose robe of scarlet. He was unarmed. He lifted his arm in a beckoning gesture.

Elak's hand was on his rapier hilt as he moved forward. "Where are we?" he asked shortly. "Where's——"

"You will come with me," the other said. Elak paused at the expression in the man's blue eyes. They seemed, somehow, withdrawn, as though they looked upon invisible things. No hint of curiosity stirred in their depths. Vaguely, absently, the man looked at Elak, and he said again, "Come."

Lycon swaggered to the threshold. "Lead on," he commanded. "But you'd best play no tricks. My sword's sharp!"

The red-robed one turned, led the way along a corridor of white stone, windowless and doorless. Elak and Lycon followed, down the passage, up a winding staircase, lit with the cool pallor of hanging lamps, and down a sloping hall to a door of bronze. A gong clanged, peremptory, harsh. The portals opened.

Beyond the threshold was a great room, high-ceilinged, paved with strangely figured mosaic. Blue smoke drifted up from censers. At the farther end of the room was a dais, and upon it—two thrones.

A throne of gleaming metal, red as sunset-clouds, black-cushioned. And one of pale silver. In the silver seat was a man Elak recognized, small and blond, with lazily amused eyes. In the red throne sat a woman.

Tyrala! Elak did not need to see the goblet on a pedestal at her right hand to recognize her. The black eyes watched enigmatically; slim white figures and ivory shoulders gleamed against the blaze of crimson that was Tyrala's robe.

Above the thrones and between them, high on the wall, was a phoenix, delicately carved. Coils of incense slid past the jutting beak.

Elak's guide gestured him on. Slowly the two men walked toward the dais. As they paused before it Elak caught a flash of movement from the corner of his eye; he turned to see Esarra hurrying toward them, while another of the slim, yellow-haired men stood watchfully beside an open door.

"Elak!" The girl's face was white against the clustering chestnut curls; she clung to Elak, trembling a little. A silver gown had replaced the shredded night-dress, and there were silver slippers on the princess's small feet.

"Elak!" she said breathlessly. "I was afraid——"

Now Esarra saw the two upon the thrones. She swung to face them, shrinking against Elak's protective arm about her waist.

The red-clad woman, Tyrala, glanced aside at her companion. She spoke in an undertone. The man nodded. He leaned forward.

"Have no fear," he said. "You have suffered no injury as yet—is that not so?"

Now Elak remembered his vision. He said, "Perhaps we have you to thank for that—Ithron."

The woman caught her breath. Ithron's eyebrows lifted.

"Perhaps," was his only comment. "However, strangers come to Nyrvana seldom. The Kings of Sarhaddon—yes. They are of the Phoenix blood. But they come only after death, and not for many ages—aye, longer than you think!—have living men come from above."

"I don't understand you," Elak said. "Where are we? Last I remember was falling down a hole in some damned cavern—are we underground?"

"Aye," Ithron nodded. "You are in Nyrvana. Far and far is this land from the world above; Nyrvana is within a cave, but a cave so vast you could not span its breadth or height with your eyes."

Esarra whispered, "The land of the gods! Where Assurah dwells——" She looked up at the sculptured phoenix.

"And we rule under Assurah," Ithron said, "Tyrala and I. Before the phoenix slept, he gave us this charge: to rule Nyrvana and to guard—guard——" He hesitated, glanced at Tyrala. The woman's baleful gaze dwelt on Elak.

"They are here for judgment," she said. "Well? Let us judge!"

"Why are you here?" Ithron asked.

Esarra pulled free from Elak. Standing erect before the dais, regal head raised proudly, she told her story. And as she spoke, Tyrala's gaze grew darker and more ominous, while startled amazement crept into Ithron's eyes.

"So Xandar rules Sarhaddon," the girl finished. "And he has slain my father. The law of the Phoenix has been broken. Baal-Yagoth has been freed from his chains——"

"Now by Assurah!" Ithron whispered—and his pale eyes were wide now, and blazing as he glared at the enthroned woman beside him. "By Assurah and Iod! This is your work, Tyrala!"

Tyrala sprang up, her slim fingers flexing into claws. She spat words at the man.

"Aye—my work! And what of that? It has been long since Assurah ruled, and he has no power now. Shall I rule over this land of shadows for ever, with these pallid slaves of yours to serve me—to drink my wine——"

Elak saw a touch of horror in Ithron's face as he glanced at the chalice beside Tyrala's throne. The woman went on bitterly,

"And if I have called on Baal-Yagoth—what then, my lord Ithron? Who are you to halt me? Serve Assurah then, if you will—rule over Nyrvana! But I have made a pact with a priest of Sarhaddon, and for him I have freed Baal-Yagoth from his chains. Soon now I shall go to the outer world, where there are strong men—men with flame and life blazing within them, like this one here"—she flung out her hand toward Elak—"and they shall taste my wine!"

"Stop!" Ithron was facing the woman now, his face grim and hard. "You dare—under the very symbol of Assurah——"

"Aye—I dare! Nor can you thwart me, Ithron. Now I warn you—stay here. Rule Nyrvana. But if you think to meddle with my plans, you may taste my wine yourself!"

Laughing, Tyrala swept down from the dais, across the room and through open doors of bronze. Ithron turned, flung up his arms at the carved Phoenix on the wall. His voice was a rolling thunder.

"Assurah! Waken! Let your wrath pour down upon this harlot and utterly destroy her!"

The incense drifted up. . . .

"Lord of Nyrvana—waken! Baal-Yagoth is risen from his prison and hangs like a shadow over all the world. Smite him with your lightnings; rend him with your iron beak!

"Assurah—god of Sarhaddon! *Waken!*"

3. *Duel of Gods*

The night is gone and the sword is drawn
And the scabbard is thrown away!

—John G. Neihardt.

Very slowly the wall behind the thrones began to move. It slid up, the Phœnix rising with it, and revealed a hazy depth beyond, dimly litten with silver radiance. Ithron turned.

“You three—follow.”

He moved forward confidently. Elak hesitated, felt Esarra tug at his arm. Warily he went toward the gap where the wall had been. Lycon trailed them. His sword brushed the pedestal beside Tyrala’s throne, set the goblet rocking. He glanced at it and shuddered.

“Ishtar! I would not taste *that* wine——”

They stood in glowing haze. The wall dropped behind them. Nothing existed now but silvery fog; somehow Elak had a weird feeling that they stood on the very brink of a gulf that fell away to abysmal depths.

At their feet lay an open coffin. In it was King Phrygiar, his dead face relaxed and peaceful. He wore a white robe, and an unsheathed sword rested on his breast.

Esarra dropped to her knees beside the sarcophagus. She whispered something Elak did not hear. Her brown curls fell forward, hiding the cameo face.

Ithron touched the coffin; it slid forward and was gone. The silver mists brightened. Far below came the rolling of deep thunder.

And behind them—the clash of arms! A woman’s voice, commanding, angry.

Ithron turned swiftly, gripped Elak’s arm. “Your bracelet! Hold it—thus——” He lifted Elak’s wrist. “Stay here! Tyrala is mad. But her madness gives her strength; I must keep her at bay till Assurah wakes——”

He was gone. A deep-throated roar came faintly to Elak’s ears. Dimly he heard Ithron’s voice.

But nothing existed but the mist, and two shadows beside him—Esarra and Lycon, waiting . . . and Elak stood with his arm raised, the Phœnix bracelet shining. . . .

Queer tingles darted through his wrist, ran down into his shoulder, racing into every nerve of his body. Flood of power poured into him, shaking the citadel of his mind with its alien strength. . . .

The fog alternately darkened and lightened; the muttering of thunder grew louder. And dimly he heard Tyrala’s voice raised in a cry of triumph from the throneroom beyond the wall.

“I have won, my lord Ithron! None can waken Assurah now. And you—you shall taste my wine!”

The thunder bellowed ominously. The fog brightened with a blaze of silver radiance, and before him Elak saw something rise up, a cyclopean shadow, almost formless, yet with a suggestion of sweeping wings and a beaked, upthrust head. . . .

He heard Esarra cry out, felt Lycon drop to his knees, breath rasping in his throat. From the Phœnix bracelet a tide of primal magic raced through him. The colossal shadow waited in the mist.

Elak felt words rising to his lips without will of his own. He heard himself crying,

“Assurah! Baal-Yagoth is risen! He has burst his chains——”

Elak was never to understand what happened in the next amazing moment. The power that the bracelet had given him was nothing to the inconceivable flood that crashed down on him from the risen god—flood of strange magic, blinding and deafening him, flaming through his brain like lightning. And dimly he heard a voice within his mind.

“I give you strength. Go forth and slay!”

Forthwith the tide lifted Elak and bore him weightless back; he had a vague impression of walls and rooms flickering past like segments of a dream, and yet he knew, somehow, that Esarra and Lycon kept pace with him, shoulder to shoulder. Something was in his mind, and Elak’s fingers closed about the hilt of a sword—a blade of flame, white and terrible. All about him the very air shook with unimagined power. . . .

Elak’s vision cleared; he stood in a room and remembered—the room of his dream, where he had first seen Tyrala. The walls were blue as infinity, and in that clear depth hung the glowing flower-things he had already seen. Avidly they waited, with a horrible air of expectation in their attitude, seemingly watching the horror before them.

A muffled drumming throbbed out; shrill insane flutings piped weirdly. There were monstrously misshapen beings that squatted on scaled haunches, demoniac toad-like creatures whose flaming eyes dwelt on the two figures that danced before an altar.

Tyrala—and Ithron! Both nude, Ithron’s pale body in strange contrast to the dark vividness of the witch-woman—and Ithron dancing, whirling like a weightless leaf in Tyrala’s grasp. An empty goblet lay on the stones. Ithron had tasted the dreadful wine!

The two figures moved in a swift, grotesque saraband, to the tune of the evil drumming and the pipes. The flower-things in the walls waited. And as Tyrala and Ithron danced, the strength seemed to be draining from the man—the life itself—pouring as though sucked by evil vampirism into the body of the witch.

Ithron grew shrunken, paper-white, skeletal. And Tyrala’s vivid body seemed to drink in life—whirling and swaying with increased energy. Sparks danced eerily in her streaming black hair. Her eyes were pools of lambent radiance.

“Strike!” a voice whispered in Elak’s mind.

He scarcely seemed to move, yet the flaming sword in his hand swung up. From its blade poured a cascade of lightnings, crackling, flashing, veiling the room with light. Through the blaze he heard Tyrala’s scream, knife-edged, keening with an agony beyond life. . . .

And other cries came, thin, utterly horrible. He knew that the glowing flower-things were dying. . . .

The curtain of light faded. And now nothing existed within the chamber but an altar, blackened and twisted; the walls were burned and blank, and there were mounds of dust on the floor.

The power caught Elak again, lifting him. He caught a momentary glimpse of a broad vista spread far beneath him, a land of sluggish rivers and dark forests stretching into the distance—and it was gone. Brief blackness, and then a flash of metallic walls sliding past, a shaft up which he sped with frightful rapidity, knowing Esarra and Lycon were beside him. . . .

A cavern now, and high gates. A river, under the warm radiance of the sun, tumbling through a craggy gorge. Then a valley—and Sarhaddon, the castles and walls of Sarhaddon, lay beneath him, and he was slanting down through empty air. . . .

Down he swept, through gates and walls and barriers, until he stood in the throneroom of Sarhaddon's kings. On the great carven chair, ornate with gems and precious metals, sat Xandar the priest, his twisted body hung with royal robes. A circlet of gold crowned the bald head. The scarred half of the priest's face was deftly disguised with paints that could not hide the frightful deformity.

A girl lay before the throne, strapped to an engine of torture. Her body was reddened with sword-cuts. She was screaming as cords slowly wrenched her limbs apart.

Around the room stood nobles and priests. On almost every face Elak saw thinly-hidden horror and disgust. One man turned away, and Xandar saw him.

"Ho, you Chemoch!" he roared. "Are you daintier than your king? Would you share this maiden's couch?"

White-faced, the man looked again at the tortured girl. Yet his hand closed convulsively on his sword-hilt.

And then—the voice whispered again in Elak's mind.

"Slay!"

Elak lifted his blade. A great cry went up within the throneroom; the crowd surged back against the tapestried walls. If they had not seen Elak before—he was surely visible now!

The monster on the throne thrust out clawing hands. He bellowed,

"Baal-Yagoth! Yagoth!"

A cloudy veil swept down over the priest, hiding him in shadow like a shroud. A foul, miasmatic stench was strong in Elak's nostrils. He swung the sword.

Lightnings blazed out crashing. They thundered down on the priest, enveloping him in flame. They licked at his armor of black fog, and drew back—impotent!

The air was choked with that charnel smell. The darkness crept out from the priest, fingering toward Elak. Again he lifted his sword.

Again the lightnings flared. And this time Elak moved forward, confidently, doggedly, slashing with blade of fire at the dark tendrils that crept in toward him. As he neared Xandar a cold revulsion shuddered through Elak's flesh. He sensed the nearness of an alien thing, a being so evil that it could exist only in the blackness of the pit.

Lightning and shadow clashed, and the castle rocked with thunderous conflict. The priest roared insane blasphemy.

The blackness coalesced into a tenebrous cloud. Out of it rose a head, malefic and terrible, with serpent eyes of ancient evil. A flattened head that swayed and arose on shimmering scaled coils—

The head of Baal-Yagoth!

It swung down at Elak. He countered desperately with his sword—felt himself driven back.

The shadow of cyclopean wings filled the throneroom with rushing winds. Something, unseen yet tangible, dropped toward that monstrous head. A blinding flare of consuming light crashed out, and for a brief moment Elak saw a gleam of blood-red feathers, eyes golden as the moon, and a striking silver beak.

And the shadow surrounding Xandar faded and was gone. The rearing serpent-head had vanished. Only the priest stood before the throne, stripped of his magic and his power, contorted lips wide in a despairing shriek. His face was a Gorgon mask, seared and blackened into a charred cindery horror.

Eyes of insane rage glared at Elak. The priest sprang forward, hands clawing for Elak's throat.

Once more, and for the last time, the alien voice whispered within Elak's brain.

“*Strike!*”

Sword of flame screamed through the air. Bone and brain and flesh split under that blow, and for a second Xandar stood swaying, cloven in half from skull to navel, blood spurting in a red tide. A moment the priest stood, and crashed down at Elak's feet dead in a widening crimson pool.

From the court a great cry went up—of triumph and thanksgiving. Elak felt the sword plucked from his hand; it was a flash of light in the air—and then was gone. He stood alone before the throne of Sarhaddon.

The magic had fled. Power of the Phoenix and evil spell of Baal-Yagoth alike were vanished. The nobles pressed forward, shouting.

Elak turned, saw Esarra cutting the last of the cords that bound Xandar's victim to her rack. A guardsman lifted the sobbing girl, bore her out. Esarra obeyed Elak's gesture.

He led her to the throne, seated her in it, and on her slender wrist clasped the Phoenix bracelet he took from his own arm. Elak swung to face the room. His rapier came out, was lifted.

And a hundred swords were unsheathed, shimmering together, at his shout,

“Esarra of Sarhaddon!”

“*Esarra!*” roared the nobles.

They dropped to their knees, heads bent, paying homage to the girl. But Elak felt a soft hand on his shoulder as he knelt, and looked up into Esarra's eyes. The girl whispered,

“Elak—you will stay in Sarhaddon?”

Slowly he nodded, and Esarra sank back on her throne, a little smile curving her red lips, as the nobles arose and came forward one by one, sword-hilts extended for her touch. Elak made his way through the group, looking for Lycon. He found him at last investigating the contents of a drinking-horn.

“We stay in Sarhaddon—for a while anyhow,” he told the little man.

“As you will,” Lycon said, smiling wisely. He glanced toward the throne. “No doubt you'll be content enough for a few moons. As for me”—he buried his round face in the horn and gulped noisily—“as for me,” he finished, wiping his mouth with a pudgy hand, “I hear good reports of the royal wine-cellars. And may the gods blast me if I don't get the keys to 'em before sunset!”

[The end of *Beyond the Phoenix* by Henry Kuttner]