



ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS ARNESON

# DREAMS OF A SUNKEN REALM

An Elak of Atlantis Tale

By **ADRIAN COLE**

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF ELAK

Henry Kuttner's Elak was first published in 1938 in *Weird Tales Magazine* in the story "Thunder in the Dawn." Subsequently three more Kuttner Elaks saw print in the magazine, before he moved on to other things, becoming a leading SF writer of his time. These four stories are due to be reprinted soon by Pulp Hero Press (US) and deal with Elak's youth as a young prince in one of Atlantis's kingdoms.

The first series of new Elak stories by Adrian Cole, *ELAK, KING OF ATLANTIS* (published by Pulp Hero Press), takes up the saga after he has won the throne of the whole Atlantean continent. In the meantime, Cole is writing further new stories, set between the two periods, of which *DREAMS OF A SUNKEN REALM* is one.

In this adventure, Elak is returning to his capital, Epharra, from his victorious unification campaign in the far south, to claim the overall throne, but his voyage is not to be as straightforward as planned.

## CHAPTER 1: CREATURES OF THE SEA STORM

"**W**E'RE veering well off course," said Dalan the Druid, standing beside the tall warrior at the ship's rail. "Something is pulling us north and east, well away from the coast. We should have been in sight of Cyrena's headlands by now."

"Is there a storm brewing?" said Elak, the young king, his keen eyes scanning the horizons. "The air seems calm enough." Clouds drifted over the gently heaving ocean, but there was nothing in them to suggest a break in the weather for the worse.

Dalan scowled, and although he rarely smiled, Elak sensed there was more to his unease than he let on. The Druid's supernatural senses had forewarned the crew of *Windrider* more than once on this return journey from the far southern shores of the Atlantean continent. Not so many days before Elak and his sailors had averted disaster rounding the notorious Cape of Blood, encountering demonic forces that had almost destroyed them all. He'd hoped their tribulations lay behind them on their run back to Cyrena's capital, Epharra. Now Elak was not so sure.

"I cannot bring us about," said Dalan. "The currents of the ocean and its strange tides are too much for my powers. And there is something else, down in those vast depths, something that disturbs me." Elak thought of the creatures and entities that he and his crew had fought on the long voyage back from the city of Zangarza. Monstrous demi-gods, spawn of other worlds, and servants of old deities from beyond the dimensions of earthly time and space. Perhaps whatever drove these horrors, if such an omniscient power existed, may yet unleash its frustration and fury on the young king. Did it see his ascendancy to the Atlantean crown as a danger to its existence?

"Darkness yet seeks to draw us in," said Dalan. "We must prepare to defend ourselves."

He had hardly finished speaking when the lookout shouted from overhead. A sudden gust of wind swept his words away, but Elak and Dalan understood the shout as a cry of alarm. Dalan leaned out over the rail and studied the racing rise and fall of the waves as they grew increasingly powerful, lifting and dropping the ship more erratically by the minute. Elak's concern about a storm was even more well founded, it seemed. Dalan pointed.

"There!" he cried above another swirling gust of wind.

Elak craned his neck and thought he discerned something in the waves, a number of darting shapes, rising and falling like dolphins at play. Though these were no dolphins. They had faces, blurred in the foam and spray, semi-human faces.

"Water demons!" Dalan gasped.

Another man had come to the prow to stand beside them. It was Lycon, the king's stocky protector, his face clouded with deep unease. He drew his blade, glaring over the ship's dipping side. "They're all around us," he said. "Circling like underwater vultures."

Elak turned to the Druid. "What are they? Who has sent them? Could they be minions of Xeraph-Hizer?" he added, referring to the monstrous creature of the ocean deeps which they had thwarted at the Cape of Blood.

"I have not seen their like before," said Dalan. "Though there have been many sightings and legends of similar creatures. Some call them the ghosts of long sunken cities, or sailors drowned by the wild elements of the northern currents." He raised his staff – its tip glowed brilliantly before projecting a tightly focused lance of light out into the turgid seas. The circling creatures veered from the intense white glow, which revealed their astonishing numbers. They had formed a closely linked living shoal, surrounding the ship, beyond the range of arrows or javelins.

Balazaar, captain of *Windrider*, joined the group. "Our look-out reports that we are completely surrounded by these horrors," he said. "We are at the center of a whirlpool, and it's increasing in size."

Lycon growled with anger. "I can feel the ship turning steadily into its embrace! The creatures are churning the seas with their dark powers."

"Aye," said Balazaar, mirroring the growing fear of the others. "The crew are fighting hard against them, but are making no headway. See! There is a low point in the center of the vortex and we are veering towards it."

"And the fleet?" said Elak. "I cannot see any of our other ships."

"We've been cut off from them," said Balazaar. "I fear whatever devils are at work here have singled us out. If this whirlpool deepens and grows even more powerful, we'll be sucked down into the ocean's depths."

"Use all the oars!" shouted Elak above the growing din. "Fight the pull! Dalan, can you conjure a wind to counter the waters?"

The Druid cursed and shook his head. "A greater force is at work here." Nevertheless, he raised his staff higher, calling out in a strange language that Elak and his companions had heard whenever Dalan invoked the extraordinary power of the staff, a magic from a remote, forgotten age. This time when light speared out at the tossing waves, the sea burst upwards in sprays of foam, as though shuddering against a line of reefs. Those uncanny, man-faced dolphins were tossed to and from among the flume like so many chunks of flotsam, but the turbulent swirl was not broken.

Balazaar had his oarsmen bent double with efforts to pull *Windrider* from the center of the whirlpool and by their superhuman efforts they reached its edge, where Elak saw the massed water beings swimming in a lightning blur along the crest of the swirling chaos. *Windrider* rose up, climbing a huge bank of water, and again Dalan flung bolts of light in an attempt to break through the encircling waters.

Yet it remained a hopeless task. The rowers struggled mightily but could not compete and the ship was drawn inexorably to the center. Round and round the craft circled, and as it did so, the whirlpool opened its maw, its sides closing in, the circular well like a long gut running far down towards the invisible oceanic floor. Elak could only watch in impotent fury as the ship plunged into oblivion.

## CHAPTER 2: INTO THE VORTEX

**T**HE roaring of the ocean grew almost deafening, and darkness welled up from below as the inner rim of the spinning water walls carried *Windrider* swirling downwards. The waters resembled a huge column stretching towards distant daylight, filled with countless aquatic faces, quasi-human but contorted into bestial snarls, lamprey-like mouths gaping or snapping.

Elak and his companions drew back from the rail, though the creatures showed no sign of darting inwards and attacking. It was enough that they massed in the whirlpool's thundering sea.

"We'll be drowned!" shouted Lycon above the din, gripping his sword helplessly, frustrated at not having a physical enemy to assail.

"Whatever has brought us here," said Dalan, "has not done so to kill us, not in this vortex. We are being taken below for a reason."

"To be sacrificed, no doubt," retorted Lycon.

Elak laughed bitterly. "One thing is for sure, my friend – we're not being invited to a drinking festival!"

Darkness closed in overhead and the roar of the waters eased. The ship and its crew appeared to be encased in a bubble of air that preserved them from a watery doom. Under the hull, far below, the shadows were slowly dispersed by glittering emerald light.

"Which of the Nine Hells are we entering?" Lycon growled.

"There is no doubt that sorcery is at play," said Dalan. "Terrible powers have been set loose." He used his staff's beacon-like light to probe the deeps, but as yet the ocean floor did not reveal itself. Giant shapes crossed below the ship as it twisted its way ever downwards, huge leviathans from a long lost age of the world, denizens of the primeval oceans that seemed to be castaways in time. As the gloom thickened, *Windrider's* swirling speed slowed, and its crew now massed around its rails, watching the deeps for any sign of the ocean bed. At last they reached it and the ship settled, surprisingly gently, as if set in the layer of ooze by a god-like hand.

Elak looked up to see the waters closing in, sealing them into this weird underwater domain. And then, as though an invisible glass dome had been drawn over them, the sea pulled away like a receding tide. Lights flashed and throbbed, and the leering faces that had massed in the seas dissipated like ghosts. Slowly an intense silence gripped the sodden landscape that had been revealed. It was like no other that Elak or his companions had ever seen.

The sea bed undulated, dipping and rising into the distance. It was covered in high banks of coral and other more unusual growths, mostly green-hued or aquamarine, fronds of weed trailing in the air as if they yet danced in water. Dalan's staff provided immediate light, although the landscape was imbued with bizarre illumination of its own, and by its eerie shades, shapes could be glimpsed, some small, some much larger, slithering or hopping away from the human intruders. The bed was primarily mud and ooze, though not deep, suggesting the ship had come to rest on an expanse of bedrock. Broken slabs led away from it like paths in a zig-zag pattern.

Elak's company gathered around him, all of the men warily scanning the distance. They were the young king's most trusted warriors, sworn to serve him to the death if it came to it and more than once on this chaotic voyage they had proved their worth. Elak was about to comment, when a distant sound caught everyone's attention. It was a horn of some kind, possibly a sea conch, its one, long note rolling out mournfully over the broken plain.

"Something approaches," said Dalan, his mind attuned to the slightest intrusion in the atmosphere here.

The company formed a defensive wedge, backing on to the hull of the ship, every man armed. Lycon growled like an angry bear, eager to unleash his frustrations on something. A battle would be more than welcome.