

In the anticipated sequel to Age of Immortals, Dr. Carning and his team continue deciphering the story of mankind's lost history. Old friends and new foes emerge. The ancient story continues coming to light. Princes Dias and Heracles fight for survival after the cataclysm. In Keb, Horus tries brokering a wedding, all the while Lila schemes from Ur.

The Chronicles of Atlantis: Dark Tides

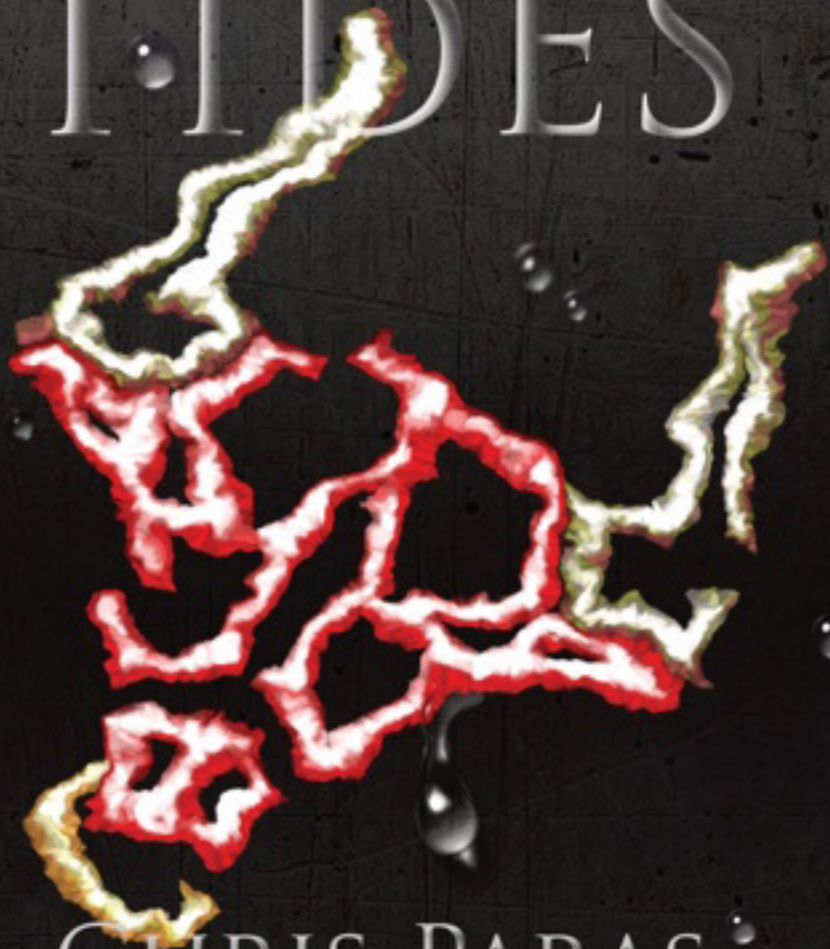
by Chris Paras

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THE CHRONICLES OF
ATLANTIS II

DARK
TIDES



CHRIS PARAS

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Prologue 1

Brooklyn, New York, present day

“I can’t believe this! I still can’t believe this!” The whiny tone coming from a middle-aged man wearing designer jeans and Italian loafers didn’t surprise Andrew. Normally, all of the attention on this street would be focused on the perfectly lined trees shadowing the finely cut brownstone faces of homes occupying this neighborhood. In this wealthy section of Brooklyn Heights, some of these brownstones were over a century old, but their rich red and brown color would fool the keenest of eyes to their true age.

Today, the attention was on the two police cars and half dozen officers roaming the block. The blue uniforms continuously moved in and out of the home belonging to Mr. Whiny Butt, the sharply dressed gentleman. Andrew took the last drag from his cigarette, with one leg out of the half-opened driver side door of his sedan. He threw the finished cigarette onto the freshly tarred street. The brown butt clashed sharply with clean black tar.

He rose and stood next to the black sedan with federal plates, then closed the car door and straightened out his suit jacket and tie. Despite how often he might dry-clean his tie and suit, that dingy odor of old cigarettes never left. Nor could a designer suit hide a growing belly.

“You must be Agent McDonald.” A clean-cut New York City police officer, in a freshly pressed blue uniform, nodded at him.

“Yes, Andrew McDonald, FBI,” replied the middle-aged federal agent. “Where are you from, son?”

The young officer straightened proudly. “I grew up in Brooklyn most of my life, Canarsie to be exact. My family moved down to Virginia after I finished high school. Yourself, sir?”

“Your accent did sound a bit New Yorker to me,” Andrew said. “As for me, I grew up in Wisconsin, not too far from Green Bay. So, whatever your opinions are about the Packers, keep ‘em to yourself! You out of the academy long, officer?” Andrew gazed at the younger man, feeling a bit envious. So young, so fit, so enthused—still—about the law.

“Six months, sir. I served in the navy for four years prior to my joining the department,” he replied proudly.

“Good for you. I served too, army ranger for five years. Went on to special ops for a bit. Then I decided to come back to civilization,” Andrew added jovially.

“Yes, sir.” The officer smiled faintly as he walked Andrew up to the front of the rich brownstone. “The detectives are right up ahead.”

“Thank you, officer, and good luck with your career.”

The young man tipped his police cap in thanks.

Andrew walked up the red steps. “Good morning, gentleman, Andrew McDonald, FBI,” he announced while holding up his federal ID.

“Mornin’, Agent McDonald.” A portly detective gazed at him from the door.

“Lieutenant Detective Pole and this is my partner, Detective Timeas. I received word of you coming down just a couple of hours ago. Not that I mind feds pissing in my pond, but would you mind telling me why you’d be interested in a simple heist?” Detective Pole took a big sip from his coffee cup, impatiently waiting for an answer.

Andrew appreciated the detective’s irritation. “I apologize, detective, for the short notice, but I am not... pissing in your pond... as you say. This robbery may be a part of a larger criminal enterprise I am afraid,” replied Andrew.

The broad smiles from the two New York City detectives irritated Andrew. “I say something funny,” he asked.

“Criminal fucking enterprise,” asked Detective Timeas. The West Indian accent quickly gave away his origins. “Come on, agent, this was a straight up smash and grab. The coins and artifacts stolen were worth about a hundred grand all in all. This isn’t too complicated.”

Smug little shit.

“Smash and grab, you think? Okay then, walk me through the scene,” gently ordered Andrew.

The two detectives just nodded, and Andrew walked behind them into the main entrance of the house. Two grey pigeons flew right over the federal agent, and all he could do was put his hands on his thinning hair to prevent any surprise contributions of bird droppings.

The foyer entrance was short, leading into a wide living room with a ceiling that had to be fifteen feet tall. The multi-layered chandelier above the three men glimmered in the partial sunlight entering from the door and large front window. “There’s more gold and silver on the chandelier than in a jewelry store... damn.” Pole gazed up at the lighting fixture, mouth open.

The trio continued up a rich, mahogany staircase. The carved images of flowers and vines gently indented Andrew’s hand as he held the fine banister. At the top of the stairs, another officer stood writing some quick scribbles for a report. He greeted the high-ranking trio with a quick “good morning.”

The wide hallway was impressive. It was hard for Andrew to imagine all of the space hidden in these old brownstones, some edging up to five thousand square feet.

The second door to the right led into a study. The walls were studded with enlarged playbills, encased in protective glass and wood. Large white and black letters, superimposed on colorful images of various plays struck Andrew. *A White Christmas* and *West Side Story* were some of the more familiar names.

“The owner of the house is a Broadway writer and producer. He’s been involved in some very large musicals and plays,” Timeas said.

“I can see that,” added Andrew.

The far-right corner of the large study caught Andrew’s gaze immediately. The wall panel was out. Andrew couldn’t help himself and walked eagerly

ahead of his hosts up to the site of the crime. This section of the wall opened up and came about a foot forward compared to the rest of the wall on that side of the room. “Amazing! A secret room!”

“Yep. A lot of these old brownstones have secret rooms or stairwells. The victim kept his collection of coins and artwork in here. I guess it didn’t do him much good,” Pole commented.

Andrew walked into the open space. Just empty shelves and placeholders remained, but no sign of violence or damage. He ran his hands down the pristine mahogany shelves of the room -- not a dent or a scratch. The walls were a freshly painted coffee brown, and as clean as they would have been when the room was first built. Andrew chuckled to himself. “How does he do it?”

“Sorry, Agent McDonald, did you say something,” sarcastically asked Timeas.

“Fellas, let’s stop here,” announced Andrew. The detectives looked at the FBI agent with a bit too much apathy for Andrew’s taste. “You said this was a straight up smash and grab?”

“Yes, that’s right,” confidently replied detective Timeas.

“Fantastic, then can you tell me where the ... um... smash part is,” Andrew asked.

The detectives went quiet.

“I’ll tell you why you can’t answer the question... because there is not a *smashed* part of this grab. No, this guy is too good, way too good,” Andrew replied

confidently. He knew this type of crime scene; he knew this crime.

“Wait, so you know who burgled this house,” Pole asked.

Andrew nodded, frankly impressed at the crime. “Yeah, I have an idea who -- Nachos Boy.”

“Nachos Boy? Who the hell is that,” asked Timeas.

Andrew started walking out of the room, and before leaving turned to his colleagues. “Detectives, I would call off the Crime Scene Unit and the Fingerprint Team. This guy and his crew didn’t leave anything. Trust me.”

“They always leave something, McDonald. Is this thief that brilliant? The perfect criminal,” asked Pole.

“In short... yeah, he is...” Andrew pulled another cigarette from the crumpled box, crushed inside his suit jacket pocket.

Fucking idiots.

Nachos Boy -- a challenge for sure. Andrew pulled in the smoke through lips bared into a near-smile.

Prologue 2

Shediet, Keb, c. 13,000 bce

“Pitcher! Pitcher at the far table please!” Ariadne spoke loudly to the young man behind the long wooden bar. Despite her volume, her voice retained a sweet, feminine tone.

The bar’s wood was old. Ariadne still had jolts of tiny pain where a splinter entered her left hand just the day before.

Damned cracks!

Repairs would just have to wait. Over half of the tables in the wine house were full. It was a good start this early evening for Ariadne. The gift of this wine house from Prince Heracles years ago provided well for the young woman.

“Here it is, Ariadne.” The young man from behind the bar, filled glasses, jugs, and small plates.

“Thank you!” A couple of beads of sweat began to form at the junction of her smooth scalp and hairline. She placed the pitcher of clear, golden wine on a small tray and quickly walked it over to a table where a pair of men waited.

“Thank you, sweetie,” replied one of the men, adding a wink.

“My pleasure, gentleman. Three pieces of silver.” Behind Ariadne, the wine house door creaked open, and she heard the fervent murmurings of more customers.

A small reprieve, please!

“Three silvers, please,” insisted the scarred young lady.

The man wiggled in his chair, attempting to look in his half-torn pockets. “Apologies, my lady. I do not seem to have any silver on me, my sweet. Maybe you can let this one go. I will pay you tomorrow.

“I am very sorry, sir, but then I must take my wine back. When you come tomorrow, I will be happy to provide you and your friend another pitcher of wine at that time.”

Ariadne began reaching over to place the pitcher of wine back on the small wooden tray. She had become accustomed to difficult clientele in this establishment. Years ago, her hands may have mildly shaken at this sort of encounter... not anymore.

The irritated customer grabbed her now steady hand. “I said, my sweet, I will pay tomorrow. Your insults in front of my friend here are not taken kindly!”

Before Ariadne could pull her hand from her aggressor, she noticed his friend’s eyes widen intensely. Then a familiar deep voice emerged from behind her.

“How is it every time I enter this place, there is always some disgusting snail of a man touching my friend in ways she does not like?”

Ariadne quickly stood straight up and turned around. She could not hold back her smile. The man released her arm, and she ran to hug her guest. “Lord Heracles! Oh, Your Highness, it is so good to see

you!” She kissed the big man on the cheek multiple times and supplied several hugs.

“It is good to see you too, my dear!” Heracles returned the affection quickly, before turning to the two men at the table. “First, this is our table, so please rise and move before my friends and I become quite upset.”

To Heracles’ right, Ariadne recognized Pharaoh Horus who stood quietly, his long, brown hair plaited down his back. To Heracles’ left stood Prince Perseus holding his arms across his chest, seeming to wait for the order to hit something.

Heracles continued, “Second, you will pay this young woman what is owed. Need I mention it again?”

At this point, Horus chimed in. “Do you know who I am, friend?”

With trembling in his voice and a downcast gaze, the now-nervous man replied, “Yes, Your Highness. You are Pharaoh Horus.”

Keb’s monarch went on. “Do you know how I feel about theft, friend? My parents were robbed of their throne and their lives by my snake of an uncle. So, one would say, I am rather sensitive at the thought of this young woman not being paid her just price.”

“Yes, yes, Your Highness. Of course, Your Grace.” The terrified men quickly threw three pieces of silver on the table, and just as quickly, rose and jogged out of the establishment.

“I cannot thank Your Highnesses enough,” commented a humbled Ariadne, with a bowed head.

She felt a gentle hand lift her chin. Horus spoke while lost in her eyes, even the scarred one. “No need for thanks, my dear, it is our duty. Besides, my brother Heracles continues to boast how this is one of the best wine houses in my capital city! I had to come and visit!” The pharaoh laughed.

“Of course, Your Highness. My lords, please sit. Please! I will bring the finest wine and heket we have!”

“Thank you, my dear Ariadne. It truly is good to see you,” Heracles spoke softly. “Last I saw you, fear and desperation defined you. You were a child, barely entering womanhood, and now look at you. Over a decade later and you have become a beautiful young lady and from what I see, a good establishment owner. I am happy for you, Ariadne!”

“I have Your Highness to thank. If it was not for your nobility and generosity, I do not know where I...”

Ariadne was quickly interrupted by the strong man’s kiss upon her forehead. “Enough of this talk. Where is our drink,” gently demanded Heracles.

She gave a quick bow as she ran to the bar to prepare the wine and heket. The three monarchs sat at the newly commandeered table, not far from the bar, allowing Ariadne to hear the princes' conversation inadvertently.

“So Sundiata agreed for the introduction of his daughter to Philo,” asked Heracles.

“Yes. He felt it might be a good match not only for his daughter but for all of Kush and the North,” Horus replied.

“Well, brother, you did a good service to both the owners of the Tree Throne and the House of Minos. If this introduction leads to a wedding, that means you would be next in line for a nuptial arrangement,” Perseus added jovially.

“Ha! That is to be seen, brother,” Horus said smugly. “Speaking of brothers, Heracles, how is Dias? I hear whispers in the wind and not pleasant ones I am afraid.”

Ariadne walked over the pitchers of wine and heket. She watched as her strong protector poured a mug full of wine without speaking a word. He took a long swig and continued to drink and drink. It seemed he would rather become dizzy with drink than answer the question.

“Whispers are just that brother, whispers,” Heracles finally admitted. “But, I cannot lie and say there is no truth to them. My brother has difficulties since the cataclysm. Some days he is better. Other days -- well, that is what the gods are for. Is it not?” Heracles continued to bury his face in the mug.

“Unfortunate, truly unfortunate,” replied a solemn Horus.

Ariadne’s silent stance did not prevent her from attracting the pharaoh’s gaze. That same gaze made it difficult for the scarred beauty to turn and walk away to her other customers. “Is all well, my lords? Is there

anything else I can provide?” She asked, her gaze still locked on the pharaoh.

“Thank you, my lady, we are good,” gently replied Perseus.

Horus leaned forward. “Tell me, my lady, is this wine house the main source for how you maintain your livelihood?”

“Your Highness, this establishment is my only means of maintaining a livelihood. I live in the quarters above.” She pointed to the old stairs in the far corner of the wine house.

“I see, well, that may be something we can remedy.” And the pharaoh kindly smiled.

Chapter 1

Egypt, Present day

The colored projection of a man and woman, dressed in ivory robes wavered on the far end of the tent wall. They stood still, occasionally blurring when the cubed projection machine intermittently lost its internal yellow hue. Disappearing for a split second, the images would quickly flicker back moments later. The time in between flickers allowed Steven to scribble more notes on his legal pad, which was already tattooed with black ink to the brim.

Rust, internal after 13,000 years.

Over the past month, as Egyptian authorities prevented the team from leaving, Steven and his archeological team had continued to catalog and translate countless works. Lying next to Steven's cot were rising stacks of papers, digital pictures of documents, and translations from this lost era -- items ranging from architectural plans to genealogy records, shop ledgers to religious ceremonies. Nearly falling off the corner of the cot bobbed a yellow legal pad, where just yesterday Steven and George scribbled notes on a burial ceremony they witnessed from one of the oval storage devices.

Sitting on his beat-up cot and staring at all of the accumulating work throughout his tent, Derrick came to Steven's mind again. A subtle burn began in Steven's chest. The jitters down his arms and legs started next. Steven rose quickly, grabbing a bottle of water and a half tab of Diazepam. His anxiety attacks

had been worsening. After years of archeological digs, traveling through war-zones, and facing desert sandstorms, he usually faced adversity with his intellect and calm demeanor. But this...

Something in his studies here was a threat. One of his students, Derrick Peming was murdered here on the dig site not even a month ago. Steven shook away the thought of Derrick's dead body—the skin mottled, the bulging eyes -- and rummaged through the papers on his desk for his cellphone.

“Hey, Danny. I’m texting you again from my dig in Egypt. Not sure if you received my text a couple of weeks ago. Hope you are doing well. I could be doing better...I could be doing a lot better. I may be in trouble Danny, serious trouble. Will try to ping you later.”

Steven dropped his cell phone on his cot after sending the text. He removed the crystal oval from the ancient machine, and instantly the projected images vanished from the far tent wall. The machine's golden yellow heart stopped beating, and its hum went silent. He fell back on his cot and removed his glasses to rub his eyes.

Steven turned his attention to a tower of black spiral notebooks, kept from toppling into chaos by the corner of his cot. The images and stories of the pre-ice age world he had translated and re-animated after eons of slumber were now housed in a column of black and white marbled covers. The vivid scenes of the unimaginable story still stained Steven's mind. Despite him trying to ignore them, he had endless

reminders of this burden. He was still able to smell the roasted lamb from the founding festival of Athens. His back burned as Phoebus' did while rising toward the sun at Ugarit. He could even taste Dias' tears at the death of his beloved cousin Theseus. The saturation of his senses and emotions still could not be explained, but he accepted them. They were part of the price he would have to pay for this endeavor.

The Diazepam began working its wonderful magic on Steven's heart rate when the tent flap jerked back, and Lee-Ann sauntered in, her hips moving sinuously. Despite the harsh desert environment, she was still—and always—beautiful. She tugged her jet-black hair to a coil atop her head, and her olive skin had deepened since joining the team in the desert. “Hey, how are you holding up,” she asked brightly.

“Better now that you walked in.” Steven sat up at the edge of the cot and kissed Lee-Ann hello.

“Very sweet,” she murmured, holding on to his face for a moment. “Have you eaten anything? All I see are cans of Mountain Dew and energy drinks everywhere!”

“Yes, don't worry. I had a burger a little earlier actually. So, any news?”

She glanced at the machine with a small frown and ran one elegant hand over Steven's papers. “Any luck tracking the story in those ovals?”

Steven shook his head. “I don't know, Lee. Every time I translate or uncover something, an avalanche of questions comes behind it. So, the short answer may

be a little. But I'm not sure how significant the progress is, I'm afraid. What about on your end?"

"The boys are scheduled to video call with Michelle back in New York. She sent me a quick email regarding some concerns about our server and database. I'll touch base with the guys after their conference call."

"Concerns about our data? That is everything we have been working for! Every bead of sweat, the pain, the sleepless nights, dehydration, and even Derrick's death were all for this! This needs to be your first priority." Steven slapped a hand on his cot, and some papers slid to the canvas-covered floor. Lee-Ann just stared at him, hands on her hips.

"Well, Michelle is a very bright computer scientist; I have faith in her keeping our files safe."

He stood and walked over to his desk where he popped open another can of Mountain Dew, taking a big gulp of the lukewarm soda. He had to be strong for his team. Losing a student was the last thing he'd ever thought he would need to deal with. A natural death would have been awful enough, but not murder. He would have gladly taken an entire auditorium of colleagues and peers jeering him, rather than ever having to call a parent about their son's death ever again.

"You know your eyes can't lie," commented Lee-Ann. She leaned against the table, her curves obvious even under her camo pants. Steven just looked up at her with a blind look of disillusionment. She held one

of his hands. "It's been almost a month, and you're still not fully back to us."

"I cried for two days, Lee."

"When you heard the news that Derrick died?"

"No, after I had to call his mother up and have a video conference with his parents. Derrick didn't sign up for that -- dying. His parents were so proud of him." Steven felt his tears well up again and rummaged his desk to find a flask of some old whiskey. He took a painful swig.

"That will not take the pain away."

Steven set down the flask. "I know. Every once in a while, it helps. I don't know. First, all of the strange happenings with our arrival here, then Derrick's death, the thought of losing our data and everything we worked for is simply catastrophic. What the hell did we start here?"

Lee-Ann eased over behind Steven and began rubbing his shoulders and gently running her fingers through his hair. That always calmed him down. "Anything worthwhile has a risk, Steven. Whatever we have to deal with, we'll deal with as a team."

Steven turned, whiskey still fresh on his breath clouding his thoughts just a bit, and kissed Lee-Ann.

Her voice was a husky whisper. "We're still here."

The kissing turned heavy as Lee-Ann unbuckled Steven's belt. Steven pulled Lee-Ann's camo pants straight to the floor. He picked her up and set her on the desk. Lee-Ann responded with a startled giggle, and she shoved away the papers, cans of soda, and the

notebooks as simple but powerful desire temporarily assuaged any pain.

Several tents away, Leo Michaels' pulse pounded in his ears. While opening his laptop, he felt as if his eardrums would pop any moment. *Ugh!* With his charm and cute looks, the fairer sex often flocked around him, but Michelle was not a typical member of the flock. Michelle Rivera at New York University was in charge of informatics and computer data for Dr. Carning's team. She was very smart and *very different*. She lived in a glass cave, hiding from most of the world. Leo was one of the few with the uncanny ability to force Michelle from her ice fortress. All he knew was how his breathing always went shallow when they spoke.

The computer screen started dialing when George walked in, with his scruffy and wavy hair falling into his eyes. "What's up, Leo?"

"Was sup, George? Calling into Michelle in New York to touch base. I want to make sure that everything we are sending her and the university, are safe on the server. Her email this morning made me very paranoid."

"Bullshit, you just want another excuse to video phone Michelle!" George grunted.

"Dude, come on! We have sent her so much material, if we lost that, it would be a nightmare," Leo quickly replied.

“Relax pretty boy; I’m just teasing you. Even though we all know, you are the only guy Michelle is sweet on.”

“You think she is sweet on me? Really? She’s always so tight-lipped.”

Leo did not appreciate George rolling his eyes, and none too subtly before he replied. “All right, enough of that nonsense. On a different note, I heard the detectives from the Egyptian police investigating Derrick’s murder had changed again.”

Leo turned with his eyes wide open. “Again? What is that, the third time this past month?” Leo did a quick turn, his leg kicking out. Compared to Leo with his half-Asian features and fit body, George seemed a bit slow and pudgy. Leo tried hard not to rub it in.

“I know. The boss is pissed that there is no headway.”

The videophone connected and the camera activated. “*Ola señorita! ¿Como estas?*” Leo asked, with a more than friendly tone toward the pretty Latin face on the computer screen.

George whispered to him, “Does your charming and loveable ass really need to show off?”

Michelle’s dark eyes and hair flowed over her face as if she were trying to cover herself from the world. “Hey guys,” she said brightly. “I’m good. How’s it going over there? You know, I’ve not heard from Dr. Carning in over a week. He used to touch base with me pretty regularly for status checks. Is he okay? I mean, with Derrick and all...” Michelle chewed on a

pen then put it down out of view. Leo heard the tap, tap, tap of it on her desk, like a metronome.

George was quick to jump in. “He’s holding his own I guess. We just wanted to check in and make sure things were cool on your end. Did you receive the last scans and images we sent from the latest translations? The boss has been working overtime on it.”

“Yes, yes, I have. They’re safe and secure, no worries. I was surprised at the volume of materials you guys have been sending. I thought the translations were finished when Dr. Carning completed the translation of the first book.”

Leo replied excitedly, “Finished? Girl, we are just getting started. The story of Atlantis seems to go much deeper, and he can’t stop. He’s translating books and images every day. Then he compares these translations to some of the mythologies and civilizations in antiquity. He just found that a burial ceremony used in pre-ancient Keb was the foundation for burial ceremonies used in ancient Egypt, Sumeria and much of the eastern Mediterranean! The historical roots originating from this pre-ancient world are out of this world! Dr. Carning is functioning like nothing short of a machine.”

“Sounds like he’s on a roll,” Michelle said.

“So, are you doing all right back there in NYC?”

“Sure, I guess...” The tap, tap, tap of her pen continued but the pace slowed.

Leo’s ears perked up. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I had some funny inconsistencies in the base code of our database and server. It’s what I emailed everyone about this morning. After I investigated further... Well, guys, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say someone was trying to hack into our server.”

Leo felt a chill when he heard those words. George looked at Leo with concern when he stepped back in front of the computer screen. “Starting when Michelle?”

“Now that I think about it... the first time I noticed it was right after Derrick died. I was able to stop all of the attempts thus far, but even I’m not watching our system every hour of every day.”

George straightened up, squaring his shoulders. Leo could see he was taking the role of being in charge seriously. His voice was solemn. “Michelle, I think you have to go to the university’s security department, particularly informatics. Beef up your security as much as you can, and please back everything up.”

“No worries. Everything you just said is already underway.”

“Good job.”

Leo nudged his way back in front of the computer camera. “So, I’m not sure how long until I am back in New York, but you know you owe me a cup of coffee, right, girl?” There it was! That smile Leo loved, it only showed itself on rare occasion, those rare times Michelle came out of her cave.

“Coffee, huh? I am sure some of your adoring fans can pick you up a cup.” The tap, tap, tap of the pen on her desk stopped and Michelle’s face flushed just a little.

“I don’t want coffee from a ‘fan,’ I want a cup with you!” Leo saw Michelle try to hide that teenage-like excitement from having the cutest boy in school asking her to the prom, but she didn’t do a good job.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m sure that is what you say to all of the girls, Mr. Charming. We’ll see when you’re back here. George will keep in contact in regards to our security status. Take care, guys!”

“Later, Michelle!”

“Goodbye.” Leo closed the laptop monitor and lay back on his cot.

George turned to look at him, “You need to take care of that, brother. You know what I mean.”

Leo just stared at the top of the tent. “I know. I’m just not sure how I want to.”

“What do you think about the possible hacking,” asked George.

Leo shrugged. “Sounds like a potential problem. We need to tell Dr. Carning, for sure. I hope it’s just kids fooling around, or some hacks from a third world country trying to scam some money...” Leo frowned and grabbed a pillow to his chest.

“But...” George asked with concern.

“But, my gut doesn’t like it. One thing I have learned about myself, George, is that my gut is never wrong. My brain may screw up some of my decisions, but my gut never leads me astray -- never.”

George sighed. “Damn, I was hoping you would make me feel better.”

“Sorry, dude. I know. The last thing we need is more trouble around here,” replied Leo.

“Agreed. I’ll catch you later.” George stepped out of the tent leaving Leo alone with his thoughts of Michelle and growing concerns in his heart.

Damn gut -- never wrong.

George stepped out of Leo’s tent into the overworking sauna that was the late Egyptian spring. The sun this early afternoon was particularly hot on George’s head, despite wearing his favorite New York baseball cap.

“Georgie!” The dainty voice carried far in the open desert ahead of the tents. Lee-Ann. Again.

“Did you boys touch base with Michelle? She expressed some concern about our server. Is everything alright?” Lee-Ann had her normally tightly braided hair looking a bit mussed. Her large brown eyes gazed at him. As usual, her chest trying to bust out of her tight fit, athletic T-shirt.

George gave a sad laugh. “Well, not really. We just finished a video call with her. Everything is holding well back home for the most part, but Michelle thinks there were some hacking attempts into our database.”

Lee-Ann took a step back. “Hacking? Michelle was not clear about that with me! Really, when?”

“Apparently, she noticed the inconsistencies after Derrick, um, died.”

“Wow. Any word on who?” Lee-Ann blinked in the blazing heat and gazed at him.

“No, nothing on any suspects.”

“Shit!” Lee-Ann yelled.

“Yeah, I know Lee, believe me I know. So, what are you off too?”

“Not much. Heading back over to Dr. C’s tent.” Lee-Ann waved a few file folders around her face, fanning herself. “He’s finishing up some downloads and scans. He wants to review everything before his final downloads and translations are dropped into the ever-eternal cloud. When I tell him about the hacking, he is going to lose his shit, like really lose it!”

“Let’s just stay calm, and trust Michelle. That is all we can do,” George replied, trying to stay collected.

George wanted to continue the conversation and prevent that awkward silence that often kills a discussion. “So, is the boss still pissed that the Egyptian authorities won’t let him travel back to New York?”

Lee-Ann nodded. “You better believe it. Director Hull is trying to negotiate with the authorities as we speak.”

“I see,” George had nothing else to say.

Damn.

Lee-Ann perked up and gave him a quick smile as she grabbed George’s arm. “Come on, walk with me

to Dr. C's tent. Georgie, remember that tailgating party for the game against Michigan?"

"Do I," exclaimed George, "That had to be one of the biggest Michigan State home tailgate parties ever! I distinctly remember *someone* getting so wasted they slept in the back of a stranger's truck for an hour before the game even started."

Lee-Ann broke into an uncontrollable laugh. "I have no idea who you are talking about. You should not be hanging out with riff-raff like that."

Dr. Carning's tent was some steps in front of them. George took half a step to Lee-Ann's side, slowly releasing her arm from his. Staring at her big brown eyes, he said, "No worries, Lee. I don't hang out with any riff-raff."

Lee-Ann smiled and placed the back of her hand on his right cheek. "One can't be too careful, you know. See you later. And let's hope Dr. C. doesn't have a stroke."

George watched as Lee-Ann slowly walked to Steven's tent, hips swaying just enough to keep George's attention away from the blazing sun and sand. He tried to keep from asking himself why his heart was racing the way it was.

Bay Ridge, Brooklyn

Daniel took a deep breath, the smell of fresh-baked Italian bread streaming through the café reminding him of pleasanter times. As a child, he toddled around his mother's kitchen while she baked

fresh chocolate chip and almond cookies, and of course, bread. Today, Daniel and his muscle waited in Crown Café. On the corner of 3rd Avenue in Bay Ridge, this was one of the best sandwich spots in all of New York City, and Daniel loved it.

“Hey, Joey, where’s my soppressata special,” Daniel yelled at the manager behind the counter.

“Coming, Danny. It’s coming,” Joey replied.

“You hungry, skipper?” Lattimore Evans glanced around the shop before sitting gingerly on one of the wood chairs. He overflowed the seat, his broad bulk still toned, his shaved head gleaming in the deli’s overhead lights. He wasn’t the brightest of Daniel’s crew, but he was loyal and needed at meetings like the one today, which might be unpleasant.

Daniel smiled inwardly at the thought. “I’m always hungry; you know that! Now, where is this fucking hump?”

“He said he’d be here, so he’ll be here. He’s too scared not to show,” Lattimore answered.

They both glanced up as the waiter, a new kid Daniel had never seen before, placed plates with sandwiches in front of the two men. The thin college kid then briskly set the bill next to Daniel’s plate. The duo at the table remained motionless for a moment.

Daniel lifted the small paper, reading the computer printed invoice. “23.89? Okay.” He reached into the inside pocket of his smooth, black leather jacket all the while giving the kid a blank stare. Daniel felt the thick wallet just brush against his fingertips. He suddenly stopped moving.

A rushed voice said, “Oh, whoa!” Joey came running from behind the counter. He snatched the bill from Daniel’s grip. “Hey kid, what are you doing? Danny boy and Lattie here are friends! These are our guests. You got that?”

The stunned kid looked up. “Yeah, sorry... I didn’t...”

“Yeah, yeah, all right. Go, get your dumb ass behind the counter.” Joey turned to Daniel, his gaze downcast. “Danny, I’m sorry. The kid is new; he didn’t know.”

“No worries, Joey, I understand. Here, give this to the kid for a tip.” Daniel slipped a twenty to the fearful manager. Joey nodded and disappeared with an audible sigh of relief.

Daniel picked up his hero and took a big bite. The spicy Italian ham, Swiss cheese, and sun-dried tomatoes oozed with the still-warm dressing, taking complete control of his taste buds. He chewed and swallowed, chewed and swallowed. “Damn, that is fucking good! I will tell ya, Lattie, if this hump... what the fuck is his name?”

“Ronald, skipper.”

“Well, if this Ronald doesn’t show up with the ten grand he owes us, you and I have a visit to make. You feel me?”

“Always.”

Lattimore took another bite and tapped Daniel on the shoulder with a quick nod. Daniel turned around looking outside; there was the little man crossing the street toward the café. The middle-aged antique dealer

had initially been very excited at the prospect of moving some rare coins Daniel was able to provide, but the payment plan was not exactly what he expected, and he'd resisted Daniel's business methods.

Daniel smiled, and both men rose from their small chairs. The two walked outside, and the short, bald man approached. Daniel noticed the sweat stains at his underarms and the shine on his forehead.

"Mr. Sotis! Daniel! I have your —"

"Shut up!" Daniel snapped. "We'll go to the back." Daniel led the way down the corner to the back entrance of the café, where deliveries went straight into the kitchen. The short man followed, with Lattimore looming behind him. They stepped inside the kitchen's small utility room.

Daniel turned to the dealer, letting his face glower deliberately. "Now, where is my fucking money?"

The bald man pulled out an envelope and handed it over to Daniel, but Lattimore grabbed it and began counting,

"Only six G's here, skip."

Daniel's eyes flared.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sotis. I will have the rest by next week; it was just hard to..."

Daniel pushed away an undercurrent of pressure -- that emotional wave, like water overflowing a sink -- that told him the bald man was lying. Daniel gave a quick smile, then pulled out a 9mm handgun and placed the nozzle of the gun in the short man's groin.

The middle-aged bald man yelled, sounding like a hyper-caffeinated Chihuahua.

“Look at me, Ronald. Just look at me and listen, okay? I got you ten authenticated Roman coins from the Augustan period. I told you that you could have them at one grand a pop, right?”

The short man just nodded and gulped.

“Well, I’m not a mathematician, but ten times a grand for each coin is ten fucking grand! But you only bring me six!”

“Like I was saying, Mr. Sotis, I had some, um, difficulty with the auctions, but everything is now ready. I promise.”

Daniel put his gun away, carefully tugging down his shirt. “You have seven days. You hear me? Seven days, not seven and a half, not even seven days and an hour. And if you don’t bring me the remaining four grand, I will blow those peanuts you call balls right off.”

“Yes. Yes, sir.”

Daniel grabbed the man’s hand. “And just in case you have any ideas of getting cute,” he gave a quick twist and dislocated the bald man’s pinkie. The man cried out. The pitch of his voice, rising even higher until Daniel covered the man’s mouth with one angry hand. Daniel leaned down, his hand sliding chummily on the bald man’s face. “It’s only a fucking pinkie now. But, trust me, if you don’t get my money, it will be much worse. Now get the fuck out of here!”

The bald man ran. The kitchen door slamming open and then closed.

Lattimore laughed. “You think he’ll find the money?”

“You kidding me? That one will sell a kidney rather than come back to see me without the money. Now, let’s get going. I want to finish my sandwich. Then we have to meet with the boss.”

Daniel and Evans slipped out of the cafe onto a pleasant street, with storefronts below and apartments above. Most were only two or three-story buildings that let the sunshine brighten the area. When he was a kid, Daniel used to pry open the parking meters and make off with the coins. Now, the modern meters were digital and took credit cards, no coins allowed. It pissed him off.

Walking into a small shop that had turned into a makeshift lounge, Daniel saw too many familiar faces. Wise guys from all over Brooklyn and Queens came down to play some cards and pay homage to ‘Sweet Tommy’ Caspo, the local boss. In the far corner sat the fat boss, with perfectly styled thick black hair, surrounded by an entourage of men. Light gray smoke rose from a burning Cuban cigar creating a small veil surrounding the boss’ face. The smoky veil did little to cover the boss’s confidence or authority. Daniel could not help but envy that authority.

Boss -- just boss!

The image did not deter Daniel’s attention from the men that sat in the street king’s court; no different from lords and dukes surrounding King Henry VIII five hundred years ago, endlessly looking for affection and favor from their sovereign. One of those men was

Tommy's nephew, Angelo Caspo. He was a man of average height and stocky build with a striking gaze; one eye was green, and one was a golden shade of hazel, giving him an odd, witchy look.

Daniel had to consciously push away a frown.

Fuck! That spoiled piece of shit!

Lattimore stayed behind, heading toward the bar as Daniel walked up to Tommy before anything else. Proper respect was to be shown.

"Boss, how you doing?" Daniel kissed the captain on both cheeks before handing him an envelope. "This week's work, your cut. Not too bad."

Tommy quickly thumbed through the bills in the envelope, his face unable to hide how impressed he was. "This fucking guy!" He smacked Daniel with the packet of bills. "You bring me more than most of my made guys you know that. You Greek-Rican fuck! I love this kid!" Tommy gave Daniel another kiss on the cheek.

Daniel smiled. "I'm part Columbian boss, not Puerto Rican." Daniel noticed Angelo squirm in his seat.

"Who gives a shit? A spic is a spic. Let's not forget that Uncle Tommy," Angelo spat belligerently.

Tommy's mood quickly changed. "Angelo, I am not hearing your bullshit today. You hear me? How about you go out and earn like Nachos Boy here, then you can talk."

Angelo jumped from his seat in outrage, right into Daniel's face; Daniel didn't flinch, but he noticed Lattimore take two steps forward.

“It’s going take a lot more than a hop, skip, and jump, brother,” Daniel commented, his gaze clear on Angelo. His emotions ran surprisingly cool no matter how much Angelo irritated him.

Angelo’s odd gaze flickered about, taking in the crews around him, the bar staff, Uncle Tommy. He turned and stormed out of the lounge.

Daniel turned to Tommy. “Sorry, boss, I should have kept my mouth shut. Angelo is a made—

“No worries, Danny. Now go have a drink and make some money at the card game!”

“I will boss. After all, it’s my card game!”

The group around the two men started laughing as Daniel again kissed Tommy respectfully goodbye, and greeted the remaining street hierarchy next to him with due reverence.

Red playing cards, a myriad of colored chips, and green dollars—none less than fifty-dollar bills—were scattered haphazardly on the poker table where Daniel sat down. Seemingly without order or meaning, men had been hurt or worse over these random tokens. Two of the active players lifted their heads and gave a quick glance at the handsome new player. One older gentleman, with a thick white beard, coughed from a clearly sour cigarette.

Daniel was quick to speak. “What’s up, fellas! I see the pot is nice tonight. Good, I could use some new suits!”

“Fuck you, Nachos Boy,” yelled a fat bellied man opposite Daniel, with a small smile on his face.

“Don’t you wish Harry. Don’t you wish!”

The edge of the circular table cut into Daniel's rib for a moment, but the pain was quickly forgotten when Clara walked by. Daniel kissed her on the cheek. "What's up baby girl, how you doin'?" Clara smiled faintly, trying to use that pretty smile to hide some anger. Daniel saw right through it as he did with most people; a long-standing gift of his.

"Where have you been? Haven't seen or heard from you in weeks."

"Busy, girl, busy. You know how it is. Come on, what do I owe you?" Daniel placed an arm around her tight waist, allowing her curved hips to bump against him.

"We'll see, Nachos Boy." The waitress leaned against him unable to resist the dark olive skin, chiseled good looks, and clear eyes.

"I'll have the usual."

"I already know. Your single malt scotch with ice and splash of soda is right here, along with a bowl of cheese nachos," Clara responded with confidence.

"That's my girl. Look, after this game, let's make sure—" But Daniel's cell phone chirped.

He pulled the phone from the inside of his leather blazer. He began reading the text message and sat back in his chair, eerily quiet.

Lattimore, ever loyal, walked up behind Daniel. "What's up, skipper? That douchebag, Angelo?"

Daniel turned. "No. It's my boy Stevie, Steve Carning."

"Carning? Isn't he that history professor or something?"

“Yeah. He’s away on a dig in Egypt. My oldest friend, since we were three years old. We used to play manhunt in the backyards of the neighborhood. I can’t tell you how many times we got chased by screaming neighbors! He always studied and tried staying out of trouble. I remember making fun of him about that when we were in high school.” Daniel felt a warm smile emerge, unbidden. Warm memories bobbed quickly in his brain. “We’ve been close for almost thirty years. And now he says he’s in trouble.”

Rome, present day

The great Roman Coliseum loomed over a row of cafes, settled among the crumbling semi-circle of stone across the avenue. The Coliseum’s giant presence gave a certain solace to Count Miguel Brimm as he took a sip of his double iced espresso. Admiring the partly destroyed stone of the Coliseum made Brimm feel at home.

It’s mine.

Placing the cold glass on the table, the thin white layer on top of his iced coffee jumbled as the table moved oh so slightly. Seated by himself the count was surrounded by men in expensive dark suits and sunglasses who hovered some feet away, standing in dark corners around the middle-aged nobleman.

Leave nothing to chance.

The count watched a bulletproof Mercedes-Benz pull down a few feet from the café. The back-passenger door opened and Shane Daggert stepped

out, buttoning his sports jacket, his shoulders solid, confident. The scar above his right eye looped around, down to his cheekbone. It was old, thin, but the scar tissue had keloided and could not be hidden by expensive clothing.

The count took another sip of his iced espresso as Shane approached and bowed his head in reverence to the second in command of the *Order of the Serpent*. “Greetings *archon mineon*. May the weak perish and the simple serve.”

The count gazed at his subordinate, his dark eyes cold. “May the weak perish and the simple serve. Have a seat, Shane.” The count spoke in that sophisticated Anglo-European accent that would make most women melt. Brimm turned and looked back toward the Coliseum. “Do you see that? Two thousand years and the stone refuses to disappear. Marvelous, is it not? When Titus completed this building, finishing the vision his father Vespasian started, my ancestors were there. Part of my bloodline began here, you know.”

Shane nodded as he ordered a simple cappuccino from the waitress. Shane had heard this history lesson before, but being subordinate in the order required total obedience. Count Miguel knew this and enjoyed making Shane listen.

The count smiled with pride, his teeth pearly white, but sharp. “My bloodline is one of the oldest in the order. We were there when that fool Hiero of Syracuse started the first Punic war, with our help of course! We were there when Julius Caesar proclaimed

himself dictator for life. We also assisted his beloved friend Brutus to end his reign early. That led to a very efficient civil war, which was quite profitable for my family and the order. After the fall of the republic, we served as companions of the first citizen, who was also known as the imperator or emperor. We were granted lands and titles in what is now Portugal and parts of northern Spain.”

Shane sighed a bit and resettled in his seat, nodding. The count spoke proudly, his voice growing stronger and a touch louder.

“When the Western Roman Empire fell, rather than disappearing into history along with most of what was called Rome, the patriarchs of my family married into the Visigothic nobility that conquered the region. The order felt Rome was becoming too big, too opulent, and most importantly, too uniting; this needed to be rectified. As ancient Rome turned from gold to rust, my ancestors have been rising.”

Shane gladly accepted his caffeinated drink as it arrived and took a big swig, but his lack of attention was noticed. His broad shoulders tightened beneath his jacket as Brimm droned on.

“Am I boring you, Shane? I apologize if my story is not as entertaining as yours. So, why don’t you tell me a story then? Please, tell me a story about how a simple archaeology professor on the verge of complete embarrassment amongst his peers has turned his expected misfortune into becoming a perennial thorn in my side.”

Shane just lowered his head in front of his superior. “I did everything I was supposed to, my lord. I still do not know how he was able to translate the books and scrolls. It is impossible.”

The count slammed his hand on the table. Shane’s cappuccino glass fell over and shattered on the sidewalk. A pedestrian walking by, trying to avoid the splash of liquid and glass, veered into the street and was almost hit by a small, red car zipping on the road around the Coliseum.

“Obviously, not impossible,” the count spat. “And to make matters worse, you dispose of the student that was supposed to help us in the sloppiest manner possible. If you used half of your brain, you could have used his death against the professor or his team. Now I have to clean this mess up for our *Megan Archon*.”

Shane’s gaze stayed on the glass, and he sighed. “I brought you something,” Removing his hands from his sports jacket he produced two crystal ovals taken from the dig’s library.

The count simply smiled and smacked the crystals out of the geologist’s hands. “You think these trinkets you stole from the library mean anything? Imbecil! This is why you will never make the final circle, Shane, your ridiculous shortsightedness. What do I care for a pair of crystals?”

“But.”

“There are no buts. The story is already out. No, now our priority is containment. We are now monitoring all communiqués from the professor and

his team. You are to return to Egypt immediately. After taking care of some loose ends there, you will be traveling to New York City. Dr. Carning's team will be returning there shortly."

Shane looked over with raised eyebrows. "New York, my lord?"

"Yes, New York. You do not need to be privy to all information as of yet. Tell me, how is my daughter?"

Shane bit out the words, lips tight, his jaw clenched, clearly trying to control his temper in front of the man that could have him flayed alive. "She is well, my lord. She is quite bright and ambitious."

"Yes, that she is. These silly endeavors of hers are just distracting her from her destiny, but so be it." Silence ensued for a few minutes as the count slowly enjoyed the last sips of his iced espresso. "That will be all, Shane. We will discuss more detailed plans at a later time."

The count turned his gaze toward one of the well-dressed men a few steps behind him before returning to his newspaper. The man took a step forward and signaled to Shane it was time to go. Shane rose from his chair, gave a greeting of his right hand over the left side of his chest then walked backward for three steps before he turned to walk back to the Mercedes. The count could easily hear the grumbling under the geologist's breath.

Brimm looked across the road to the crumbling edifice of the Coliseum, its worn stone glowing peach and gold and bronze in the setting sun.

Chapter 2

Ceftiu, circa 13,000 bce

The day was turning late, and the setting sun was eagerly shooting the last rays of light it could onto the thick stone walls of the empty meeting room. Perseus stood staring at a large map hanging on the wall. His cousin Dias, *megan prinkipon*, grand prince of Atlantis, stood a few steps behind him. Dias' continual slurping of his goblet of dark wine filled Perseus' ears as he looked at the map.

Dias' slurred words soon replaced the slurping. "That is all that is left, little cousin—dots. Dots on a map, Ha! How can one not laugh? All that we were, all we represented are just now red marks on a piece of canvas." Dias walked up to the large map and smacked it with an open hand as he gave an asinine and drunken laugh.

Perseus gazed at the map sadly. Atlantis was gone now, swallowed by the waves of the sea. The *prinkipon Atlantidon*, princes of Atlantis, no longer ruled over a vast empire, but rather a diaspora of survivors.

On the map in front of him, Perseus the *prinkipon mineon*, minor prince of Atlantis, continued counting the red marks representing known colonies of Atlantean survivors. The marks dotted the coastline of the Mesogian Sea, spanning from Tyrhennia, sections of north Libya, Pelasgia, south of Athens, and of course the largest of the colonies on the island of Ceftiu, where the majority of survivors migrated to

and where Perseus and the rest of the royal family settled.

On the western side of the map, most of those territories were destroyed in the cataclysm. There was a red mark on the city of Tehnochitan, where many survivors had merged with the survivors of Lemuria. Two other marks were placed on the large continent south of the western continent, its bulk stretching both deep and long. But these colonies were heard from sporadically at best.

So much death, so much lost.

The younger prince lowered his head at his cousin's inebriated condition. "Come now cousin; we need to preserve our judgment and standards of — "

"Standards? What standards, cousin?" Dias interrupted with a snort. "Morality, justice, honesty, service? Following the spiritual guidance of grandmasters, such as my deceased friend Abraham? What do they all mean Perseus? Nothing. That is what! Do you want to know why?"

Perseus sucked in a quick breath as Dias approached him, his face red with clear rage and eyes glowing white. His cousin bent close, his breath filled with wine. "Because whether acts are chivalrous and honorable, or despicable and horrific, they all lead to the same place -- loss and death." Dias took another swig from his goblet and then threw it against the wall. He then turned his back to his cousin as his unbalanced gait led him to the door.

"Dias, let me help you reach your chambers," Perseus pleaded.

Dias turned to him with bloodshot eyes. “No need for guidance, cousin, for I am already lost,” and the grand prince exited the room.

Perseus slowly walked back to the map, holding his arms to his chest and lowering his head in solace. Atlantis was gone, he knew. He ran trembling fingers over the mountain range that spanned the upper half of the drowned continent, then down the great river that divided the land mass.

So much lost.

Perseus could not help but think it took this long, almost thirteen years for the diaspora to settle down and begin recovering. Even now the world was a dark place. The loss of most of the centers of light in the cataclysm, the two greatest in Atlantis and Lemuria, removed the world’s beacons of creativity. In this age, it was not about innovation and beauty; it was merely about survival in the darkness. Perseus lowered his head and ran his hands through his newly thinning hair. Thirteen years had passed since Atlantis had been the center of their world, that long since he had been a young man with energy to burn. Now, a glimmer of hope was on the same map. At least now there was a chance of rebirth.

He turned to walk out of the room and to his bedchambers. His only solace after long days of meetings and public service was to see his wife Andromeda and sons Perses and Mestor.

Pacing through the quiet hallways, candles sputtering in their holders in his wake, Perseus continued to his quarters. Here the walls weren’t

speckled with jewels and gold as their home in Atlantis had been. Here the walls were washed with simple milk paint, even chipped in places. The floors were basic planks and packed earth, nothing like the elaborate marble floors and polished hardwoods he used to tread upon.

Perseus turned into his bedchamber and then to his children's beds. He often savored being immersed in sentimentality, leaning down over them, feeling and hearing their peaceful breath in the middle of the night. He kissed their unlined foreheads, his sons sleeping deeply after a full day of classes and physical training. Perseus wanted them to be prepared for their time to serve the public.

He peeked into his bedchamber and saw his wife Andromeda deeply asleep as well. She spent her day passing out seeds and saplings to peasant survivors who worked desperately to feed themselves and their families since the cataclysm. His wife was working just as hard as he was. He leaned down and brushed a light brown strand of hair off her lovely face before gently kissing her high-boned and delicate cheek.

With a sigh, he walked out to the balcony and took a deep breath. His gaze went to the bright moon above; its silver rays shined bright on the island. Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, Perseus appreciated the peaceful night. It was a small reprieve from the challenges, the moon's brighter brother, the sun, had been presenting to the minor prince.

The next morning, Perseus kissed his family goodbye and headed toward the dining hall to break

his fast. He strode from his family's suite, mind on the day ahead. Guardsman bowed and clanked past him, servant girls wafted between them, and the morning light shone on the tiled floors.

From an alcove, he heard a quiet murmur of conversation. It was a familiar voice, a feminine voice he had not heard in years. He slowed his rushed walk, taking a few steps closer to the source of this enticing riddle. He saw a guardsman speaking with someone, a woman. The icon forced a small skip in his heartbeat and a twitch in his hands.

“Hello there, Perseus.”

The prince stood with closed lips and widened eyes, ignoring the guardsman bowing away from him and the lady.

“Medussa?” Was all he could release from his near paralyzed mouth. She seemed different. Very beautiful, and her skin looked smoother, like olive oil. Her lips were darker than he remembered too. She wore multiple earrings, three necklaces, and a nose ring. The physical attraction was still ever present, but something felt off, different. “Medussa. I have not seen you since... since the cataclysm. You survived? Have you been on Ceftiu all of this time?” Perseus continued to look around in astonishment. “And how did you enter the palace?”

“My lord...” the enticing beauty smirked as she continued, “...Forgive me, Your Highness now. Since the cataclysm, the gods have placed me in various corners of Gia. Some large and grand, others small and miserable.”

Perseus nodded sadly. “We have all experienced challenges.”

“Recently, I arrived here on Ceftiu, the new home of Atlantis. As for entering the palace, some friends in the royal guard here still remember me.”

“Well, my lady, it is good to see you. I am truly glad to see you have fared well.”

“Are you,” Medussa asked with just the slightest hint of venom in her voice. “Glad to see me?”

“I speak the truth, Medussa.”

“Very well. We shall see as to that, Your Highness.” And Medussa gave a quick short bow and strode languorously to the opposite stairwell. Her gown whispered against the cool floor, and her hips swayed with her stealthy stride.

Perseus stood in the hallway motionless, silent, trying to make sense of the encounter.

The sweet relief of kneading into his eyes with his knuckles was near euphoric. Bright red veins flared into his large hazel eyes, but he did not care. The constant indispositions of his older brother had recently led to increased responsibilities for the second prince of the former Atlantis, which meant significantly less sleep. Despite his closed eyes and quick yawn, the murmurings coming from the surrounding council members seated at the long table continued. He twiddled with the golden globe in his right ear, as the low tone jabbering continued in the room. He enjoyed the new piercing, his wife

Hippolyta's idea. The endless politicking about current events just irritated the strong man rather than appraise him.

Beside him, Nemeas lay on the floor. Old now, his mane tattered with age, and his arthritic hind legs slowed him to just to merely padding slowly around with Heracles. He had changed from slender to skinny in the last year. The lion seemed ready to die any day. He yawned, showing canine teeth yellowed and dull.

Hera entered late and sat next to her large brother-in-law. Despite the passing years, the *megan prinkipissa*, grand princess, still maintained a curvaceous figure and her fiery red hair continued to provide a stunning contrast to her green eyes. Heracles, however, understood how her mature beauty and elegant dress could not mask her pain. She looked about the council room and sighed. "So, I see your brother is not here again. Quite the shock."

Heracles had no answer for her, just a nod of shameful acknowledgment.

Hera gave him a sad smile. "I think it was Alcmene last night, the new maid of the court. She is a pretty one. Herac, I am becoming too accustomed to a cold, empty bed."

He glanced away to Thermes, the captain of the guard. "Thermes, will you take roll please?"

Thermes rose smoothly and nodded. He tapped the gavel and his booming voice filled the meeting room. "All present and accounted for, sire." He sat down at the end of the table and Heracles took charge.

“Who wishes to speak first today,” Heracles asked.

Perseus, as *prinkipon minion*, was first to rise. “My lords and representatives, we have much to be proud of. Since the great *kataklysmos*, cataclysm, the Atlantean diaspora has persevered. After more than a decade, the colonies of the diaspora are now starting to settle and stabilize. This does not mean our work is over.”

A few head nods and calls of “here, here,” rose through the room.

Perseus nodded. “The world, unfortunately, is still a very dark place. We are here to address the concerns that many of you presented. Our initial problem after the cataclysm was survival. Now as the diaspora has steadied, we have a different problem, remnants of the past. His Highness, Heracles will elaborate.” Perseus took a seat, and his older cousin stood.

“Thank you, Perseus,” Heracles nodded as he spoke. “My cousin is correct in his assessment. The stability of the colonial diaspora has solved one problem but started another. Our colonies may be stable, but they are weak and isolated, located in random parts of the Mesogian Sea, Europa, and the western continent. This has led to the rise of piracy, pillaging and raiding by local warlords and barbarians.”

A loud voice yelled out, “These barbarians are raiding our livestock and destroying our crops! Something must be done!”

Heracles raised a placating hand. “I agree, of course. If the diaspora is to survive in its current fragile state, these brigands need to be addressed. Recently, a campaign was started by my lord Orion, *megan kapitanae*, grand captain, of the Atlantean fleet to try to nullify these raiders. Many of you here have come and voiced your complaints. We want you to know that we are allocating all resources possible for this problem. Our biggest problem is not the will, but our abilities. In our current state, our ability to produce ships and train men is severely limited, as it is for all who have survived the cataclysm.”

Lady Korin rose to speak. Heracles knew her to be gentle and non-confrontational, but she had clearly aged before her time due to grief and keeping up her family’s reputation. She had no wish to continue the awful work of her older brother, lord Cadiz, and his son, her nephew, Lord Censo. With their deaths and the death of her husband, Lord Diaphon, Korin became lady of all the Arian ancestral lands in Iberia. Despite the long history of the blood feud between the houses of Aries and Atlas, Korin felt it her duty to come to the new court and represent the Iberian lands.

Korin had to raise her normally soft voice. “Highness, representing the Iberian colonies I wish to emphasize how we appreciate all of the effort that you, prince Perseus and the rest of the royal family have placed toward this issue. I can attest to this horrific problem. One of our colonies has a fishing hamlet based off of a large river branch leading into the port of Galla. That hamlet has been raided twice in

the past year. Men killed, women violated, and children stolen. There is one man responsible for both of these raids, and for many of the raids, we have all experienced -- Dionysis! I come with a pleading voice, what will be done about this animal, my lord?"

Animal, Heracles knew to be a correct description. Dionysis had raided, pillaged, raped and murdered his way across the Mesogian for years.

Heracles sat back, his chair creaking under his large frame, deliberately not looking Korin in the eyes as she spoke. She came in peace and with good intentions, but even after all of these years, the images of her nephew, Censo ravaging and brutalizing his wife just replayed over and over again in his mind. It was difficult to separate his feelings and forgive.

With a pointed sigh, Orion rose to speak, looking every bit the stern grand captain, the lifelong soldier. His gaze perhaps not as reverent, his demeanor more confrontational as befitted a warrior. "My lords, we are fully aware of the horrific and evil deeds of Dionysis, his nephew Adonis, and their crew of brigands. The most disappointing aspect of all of this is that he is one of us, a decorated Atlantean *kapitanae*, who went mad after the cataclysm. As the years have passed, he has amassed a large following of ships and men. His claims are of discontent with our leadership during the crisis. I do not condone his actions my lords, but I understand his frustrations." Orion slammed down in his chair.

Heracles spoke sharply, feeling his chest tighten with anger “My lord would you care to elaborate on your... *frustrations?*”

“Gladly. I have been asking for the commissioning of at least six to eight more ships for over a sun-year now, as well recruitment of at least one full battalion of men. Where are they?”

Heracles squeezed the edge of his seat to help control his rage and kept his voice measured. “Tell me, Orion, where will we find the wood needed to build these ships? And what of the large quantities of orichalcum and gold needed to build the engines? Oh, and yes, what of the battalion you requested, considering over half of all mankind on Gia perished in the cataclysm?”

“The limited resources you have, *my lord*, went into building this palace, ports, school buildings and toys for the royal family to waste their time with, rather than securing the defenses of the diaspora!”

Heracles jumped from his seat, eyes glowing. “What did you say about my family?!”

The smoky tension in the room stood to a halt as Dias walked into the council room. The members went silent.

Dias eased over and placed one placating hand on Heracles’ shoulder. “Come now brother, my lord, Orion. Have we come to this? Orion, we are slowly building your ships, you know this. Do not throw stones if there is no need.”

Heracles turned to see his brother’s bloodshot eyes, noting his breath still reeked of wine. The room

stayed silent, and Heracles noticed Hera's eyes fill with tears, probably suspecting where her husband was last night. Not with her, but with that bitch, Alcmena.

Heracles nodded. "I see you have not completely forgotten about us brother. I am glad." He sat back in his seat and Dias took the main chair. The council members spoke general pleasantries to Dias, and the murmur of conversation started once again.

Amidst the conversations between the various captains and nobles, Thermes stood and asked permission to speak. Dias and Heracles nodded.

"I have correspondence from Lord Lykos, uncle of the deceased Prince Theseus. He is arranging to travel to Athens. Once his affairs are handled in the city of Zeus, he will then travel here to Ceftiu. He wishes to help with the piracy issue."

"Lykos, you say? Coming south," asked a perplexed Dias.

"Yes, Highness, this letter was received just yesterday," quickly replied Thermes.

Heracles moved over, attempting to whisper in his brother's ear. "Lykos has not been in south Pelasgia since Aegeus took the throne of Athens. He barely replied to Theseus' global plea for assistance against Set and Gilgamesh before Cappodocia; few words on papyrus if I remember correctly, indicating his *'inability to join the effort'*. Now, he wishes to join the fight against Dionysis and pull his head from the sand?"

Dias quietly replied, “It would seem so, brother. Could it be he has gathered audacity at this point in his life when his head has turned completely grey and the lines in his forehead have grown long?”

Heracles held back his desire to smirk but found it difficult not to let out a deep breath as he placed his hand over his mouth. The clicking of his nails tapping on his front teeth did not hush the whispers rising in the room of the news.

The lord of the north was coming.

The next morning, Alcmene rolled on the large bed in Dias’s guest chamber. The mattress was filled with ostrich and duck feathers, and she enjoyed the smooth softness as she sunk deeper with each turn. Her golden blond hair flowed all over the pearly white sheets. Next to the bed, a vase of white flowers stood nearly as tall as Alcmene, wafting a rich floral scent over the bed.

The sun shone through the three windows of the room she shared with Dias the previous night. Now fully awake, her wide hazel eyes were drawn to one of the windows. A single, beautiful white dove landed on the grey brick base of the window. It purred a couple of times and gawked its tiny head to the left and right. As the simple white bird walked across the window base, Alcmene noticed something. The bird’s pure whitefeathered covering had multiple intermittent black spots, of various diameter and form, covering its back. Not dirt. More like, disease.

She frowned and could not help but feel sympathetic for the striking bird. The sympathy did not last long. Its short and spotted neck jerked up when the door to the bedchamber abruptly opened, making the bird turn and fly away in terror.

Alcmene turned—and to her horror—the grand princess, Hera, walk into the room. Two royal guards stood outside the door as Hera closed the door behind her. It was not just her elegant dress or perfectly made hair; it was her strength of conviction that created an impressive scene. Quietly, the *megan prinkipissa*, stood over the bed, looking down at Alcmene.

Alcmene felt the princesses' gaze dissecting every aspect of her appearance until Hera finally spoke. "So, you are the newest bauble on my husband's necklace of temporary charms."

Alcmene swallowed and perked up, stretching her neck like the recent dove she witnessed on the window base. Her tongue refused to work.

Hera smiled as she continued. "What? Do you really believe he loves you? That he will leave me, and his children and run away with you to some far corner of Gia? He is the *megan prinkipon* of Atlantis! You are simply a distraction. A toy a child plays with one moment and then forgets once a flashy new toy catches their interest." Hera plucked one of the white flowers from the bedside vase. Her fingers tore at the petals, letting them rain down on the floor.

"Do what you will with my husband, but do not ever stay this close to my chambers or the chambers of my children again. Hear me well, girl. If you do not

heed my warning, I will have that pretty face of yours cooked on hot stones with lemon and pepper seasoning. There is only ONE grand princess of Atlantis. It would serve you well to remember that!” Hera stalked out of the room showing just her back to her competition, but Alcmene saw the other woman’s shoulders shaking as the door slammed closed between them.

Alcmene gazed at the torn flowers, then out the window again.

The ledge was empty; the bird was still gone.

Shediet, Keb

Golden sunlight bathed the throne room in warmth. Horus, the Hawk Prince and pharaoh of Keb sat on his sun throne. The prince was nearing thirty years of age. His jaw was still sharp and his long brown hair, braided with beads and ribbons, hung nearly to his waist. About his wrists were thick gold bracelets. A hawk sat perched just behind the throne. The rustle of its feathers soothed Horus.

Horus sat on his throne, happy this day. He impatiently waited for his courier to come with news of the arrival of certain guests. His old friend Sundiata, King of Kush and his friend’s daughter, Jenga were shortly expected. Horus lightly rubbed his chin with one hand and ran a finger around the rim of his wine goblet in anticipation.

Finally, the courier stood at the main entrance to the grand hall. “My lord, Pharaoh, may I present His

Majesty, King Sundiata and his daughter, Her Highness, Princess Jenga.”

Sundiata entered the room first, his grand stature sending energy through the large room. Older now, with a more sanded beard and refined wrinkles under his eyes, the dark-skinned King of Kush still demanded attention with his strong presence.

Horus all but jumped from his throne to approach his old friend. He hugged him and kissed him on the cheek in fraternal love. “Brother! It is truly a pleasure to see you again!”

Sundiata gave a small bow. “Likewise, my northern brother. You look well, praise the gods. May I present to you, my daughter, the lady Jenga.” Sundiata held his daughter’s hand as she gently walked over to the pharaoh and gave an appropriate royal greeting.

Horus kissed her hand and then her cheeks in welcome, enchanted with light brown eyes that contrasted her dark brown skin and perfectly coiffed thick, dark hair. At twenty-one years of age, she was a full figured young woman with powerful legs hidden under a skinned leopard skirt. A thin gold crown established her royal stature.

“My Lord Horus, it is truly a pleasure to finally meet you.” Her voice was cultured and feminine, yet strong and determined. “My father has spoken very highly of you and your noble character.”

“Likewise, my lady. Your beauty and power have been severely understated, princess. Come, I would like you to meet someone.”

The trio walked over to a distant corner of the grand hall to a small table occupied by a single man. The man appeared to be on the verge of his third decade of life, sitting tentatively and lacking too much confidence to Horus' liking. The pharaoh held out a graceful hand. "May I present Prince Philo, younger son of the former King Minos of Ceftiu. Philo has become a grand ally in recent years. Since the cataclysm, he has taken a personal interest in the recovery of his island, as well as the surrounding regions. Philo has assisted in coordinating the routes of resources and supplies from Keb to the eastern Mesogian. His compassion and dedication to his people and humanity simply mirror his honest soul."

"My lord, Pharaoh speaks too highly of me. My lady." Philo bowed and kissed the princesses' hand.

"My lord, Philo, it is a pleasure to meet you." The princess colored just a bit, to Horus' pleasure. It seemed the younger people liked each other.

"The pleasure is truly mine, my lady," Philo replied. "When Lord Horus approached me to broker a marriage, I could not imagine it would involve such a stunning woman. The nobility of your bloodline continues through you. You are a testament to Kush."

Horus was glad to see Philo's words elicited a warm reaction in the princess.

A good start.

"Those are very kind words, my lord. Thank you. You are a pleasant surprise as well," replied the princess.

Sundiata placed his hand on his daughter's back to guide her, and the group made their way to a table prepared with lush fruits, cheeses, and wine.

"Come, my heart, let us sit and become more familiar with the prince." Sundiata turned to Philo. "My lord, your older brother, Asterion was unable to be present for this introduction, I understand. It is a true shame."

Horus ground his teeth to prevent the group from seeing his dissatisfaction with the patriarch of the house of Minos. Asterion had made it clear to anyone who would listen that he was angry with Philo for accepting this marriage arrangement without consulting him. The brothers were still estranged.

"That is true, Majesty. Asterion sends his apologies, along with his respect and admiration." Sundiata gave a gracious but reserved nod and stepped away with Horus giving the two young adults some privacy for their nascent conversations.

Horus and Sundiata walked over to a balcony just off the main room. The regal duo stood tall, a short and warm breeze moved Horus' partly braided brown mane and tickled Sundiata's beard. Low-rise, uniform homes littered the scene. Small parks with single or double fountains were intermittently placed, in a seemingly random order. Horus proudly pointed out to the three new markets built, saturated with merchants and buyers. The rectangular and symmetric streets made an impression on the older king. "I see the re-

structuring of the city is starting to take form, my young brother.”

“With plenty of effort and labor, Shediet is slowly transforming from a mere city into a grand and organized *cosmopolis*. I have one goal, Lord Sundiata, to make Keb a land that will be remembered for generations to come,” replied the pharaoh.

“Of this brother, I have no doubt. The name Horus will be said from tongues all over Gia for millennia to come!”

Softly travelling on the same gentle breeze, a sweet but stoic voice emerged, “Would you care for some wine or a bite to eat, my lords?”

Horus turned and gazed down at a pretty woman with a pale eye and burn on the right side of her face.

“Thank you, yes,” Sundiata answered.

“Allow me to introduce Ariadne,” Horus said. “She is a friend of Heracles, and as such, I have taken her into my household and made her head hostess of the court. She is an able woman.”

Ariadne gave a small bow, her gaze downcast. Horus watched her move about the balcony, her skirts swaying about her brown legs, her long hair wafting in the same ever present breeze.

Sundiata cleared his throat. “I wish to thank you, brother, for preparing this introduction and possible nuptial arrangement for my daughter. If this relationship is a success, it will further improve ties between Kush and the centers of the North. This is a continued hope of mine. I believe making the world smaller through fraternity is the key to allow further

recovery on Gia. The collaboration between Kush and the north would be a thousand suns greater than the sum of the various parts,” closed the senior and more eloquent Sundiata.

“I could not agree with you more, my lord.” Horus nodded and took a swig of his *hecket*, beer. Horus continued to gently smile at Ariadne as she poured wine for his guests, but his attention quickly returned to the King of Kush. “Dias’ Gian council was the beginning of such a collaboration. Until, of course, the cataclysm destroyed that dream and changed the landscape of Gia herself.”

Sundiata nodded. “The cataclysm was great, but this does not mean the dream must die my friend.” The king smiled and lifted his goblet in a casual toast toward his daughter and her would-be suitor. Horus noticed the wise gaze of the great warrior king, “Seeing her, at this stage in her life... Her mother should have been here for this time. Unfortunately, the gods had different plans.” Sundiata took a long drink of his *hecket*.

Hesitance was clear in Horus’ voice. “Majesty, my lord, my friend, forgive me but you have rarely ever mentioned your deceased wife. Can you tell me...”

Sundiata looked up to the younger pharaoh, a sad smile on his stern face. Melancholy invaded his demeanor. “Ramina was a beautiful and charming woman. When she gave my Jenga, I only loved her more, removing any thirst for my lying with any available mistresses at court. It was not too long after Jenga’s birth that she remained with our second

child.” Sundiata looked straight ahead, his throat clenched. “However, there were... complications. My queen went into labor as normal as expected, the pains of birth were increasing in frequency and the canal of life opened, as it should. But, then she began complaining of pain in her head and neck. Soon thereafter, the vessels in her eyes thickened like decades-old grapevines. It was not long until the vines broke, and her pure white eyes turned red.”

Horus put a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder as he continued. “Her breath was the first to go, then her heartbeat. The baby came moments later, limp, grey,” his voice broke. “My son never took a breath in this world. The gods decided he should go straight to the halls of our ancestors.” Sundiata put the goblet to his mouth and drank deeply as his tears mixed with the semisweet liquid.

“I am truly sorry, brother. I never knew the depths of your loss.”

“There is no blame. I rarely discuss the pain. I must admit, despite the dagger in my heart that comes from mentioning Ramina’s name, I am glad I shared it here today with you. It is a type of divine closure, pain mixing with the pleasure of her daughter’s potential wedding. Suffering and joy, it would seem, are not that opposite after all.”

Horus smiled, wishing to give his friend support and solace. “We are here now, my friend, and we must celebrate the life of your wife and son through the joys of those who survive them, you and your daughter.”

Sundiata spoke with a stronger voice. “You speak the truth, my friend. You are wise past your years.” And both men gave gentle laughs that did not last long.

A courier quickly ran up to the pharaoh. “Forgive me, my lords.” He turned to Horus, slowly catching his breath. “We just received an urgent message from the eastern shore towns of the Green Sea. There have been multiple raids by the pirate, Dionysis and his rogue crew. Many are slain, my lord. The Mesogian runs red with our people’s blood!”

Chapter 3

Horus' lips tightened, and he felt his face flush red. He shouted his orders quickly. "Prepare my horses and order two hundred archers and two hundred horse riders to be ready by nightfall. We leave for the Green Sea shore immediately!"

Philo and Jenga ran over to the older men, faces alarmed.

"What is happening, father?" Jenga asked with worry in her voice.

Sundiata put down his *heket*. "There is trouble on the Green Sea shore." Turning to distressed pharaoh, he continued, "I and my personal guard will join you as well my friend. We ride together."

Jenga quickly approached her father's side. "I will join you father."

"No, my heart. You will stay here and continue to converse and spend time with Prince Philo. I do not want to ruin your time with such matters."

Horus overheard Jenga respond in a hard whisper to her father. "Father, if I am to rule one day, I will need to address such matters."

Sundiata took a breath, smiled and moved a strand of his daughter's hair from her face to behind her ear. "This is true my heart. But, not yet... Not yet." He kissed Jenga's forehead and moved towards Horus.

Horus nodded with a friendly affirmation and walked away quickly, collecting his most trusted companions and noblemen. Before he left, he locked

eyes with Ariadne briefly. Goodbye did not need to be said.

Be safe.

Green Sea Shore, North Keb

Torn clothing floated in the foaming waves crashing on the beaches of the Green Sea. Its waters were normally clear, ranging in shades from green to aqua to blue. Today, the water was warm and bloody.

The howls and screams of children being carried away and women being violated saturated the smoke-filled air. Dionysis, the great *kapitanae* of the pirate group stood in front of a fresh fire in the sand.

“Thirty heads of sheep, my lord,” an underling reported. “We also collected almost half a ship’s worth of gold, silver, and expensive trinkets. It was a good take today.”

Dionysis took a big gulp of wine from a goblet made of bear’s bones, studded with emeralds and garnets. As the wine dribbled out of the corner of his mouth, he smiled at a group of young men and women chained in front of him. Most were crying and afraid; some tried to pull on the restraints around their wrists and ankles. Dionysis sauntered up to the distressed line, their eyes wary and frightened, youngsters who grew out of their childhood too quickly this day.

Young and fresh.

He stopped in front of two young women, one blond with a large bust and another with black hair and stable but curvy hips. He gave a gentle smack on

the round rump of the nicely hipped girl. “These two.” Then he turned and gazed at a young man with golden blond hair and crystal blue eyes. Rather on the thin side, but muscular, his appearance also raised some desire in the captain. “That one too. Let us make it interesting, no?” Dionysis let loose a deep laugh and continued drinking.

Two bearded men in haphazardly fashioned clothing unchained the three chosen individuals. As they were escorted to the captain’s tent, the blond girl fell to her knees in front of the pirate captain. A large yellow stone in his right ear reflected brightly onto a spot on the girl’s forehead. Dionysis bent over and put out his hand to help the girl rise. The young beauty stopped crying as she fell into the pirate’s gaze.

“My dear, why do you weep? Is it fear? What is there to fear,” he asked as he continued escorting all three to his tent. “Nothing evil or foul will happen in this tent, you have my word. All you will experience is unimaginable pleasure and loss of constraints imposed by others. Sexual pleasure is merely another form of chaos my dear.”

The girl remained quiet, mesmerized by the smooth words from the eloquent brigand. His other soon to be lovers also fell victim to the same nectar in his voice. “And chaos, my loves, can be as beautiful as you wish it to be. There is no right and wrong, only things we do or do not wish to complete. Right now, I look forward to descending into chaos with all three of you.” He grinned and chased all three into his tent.

Dionysis was about to step into his tent, mentally preparing for the erotic excursions about to take place when he heard sand cracking under boots behind him.

“Uncle,” announced the young Adonis. The pirate king’s nephew and second-in-command approached. His astonishing good looks, defined by unblemished, smooth light brown skin, large blue eyes and a perfectly shaped jaw did little to hide his reservations.

Dionysis smiled as the blond braided locks of his handsome nephew swung left to right.

“Uncle, apologies for disturbing you.”

“You never disturb me, Adonis. You are all I have in this pathetic existence I call a life. What troubles you?”

“We have just received word that Horus is organizing a counter-offensive against us. He will be leaving Shediat before nightfall.”

He was touched by the concern in his nephew’s eyes. “You have the eyes of your mother; do you know that? I remember that same look in my sister’s eyes when I told her I was going off to serve and fight in the battle of Cappodocia with the brothers of thunder. A lot of good that service did me.” Dionysis looked down at a scorpion making its way across a hunk of wood left in the grained sand. Anger and rage emanated from a former *megan kapitanae* of Atlantis. With a small cry, Dionysis stomped down on the scorpion and heard the sickening crunch as its sizeable body smashed. He looked back up with some relief to Adonis. “Worry not, my nephew. It will still take Horus days to organize his men and march this far up

to the coastline from Shediet. Send a scout team three milia southeast of our position. Once they see sight of the pharaoh, they are to ride back immediately and inform us. This will provide ample time to prepare our leave.”

Adonis kept silent but played his left foot in the sand, making circles to avoid an uncomfortable conversation.

Dionysis put both his hands behind his second-in-command’s neck with love. “You have been doing that since you were a child. Ease your heart, Adonis. Horus is a righteous fool, just as his father Osiris was. Osiris... ha! Only a righteous fool would allow his own brother to overthrow him and cut his body up into pieces! Values only constrict one’s abilities, nephew. Trust me, I learned this the hard way.”

“I do not have the same beliefs about Horus. He is a substantial opponent.”

“Ah, nephew, you are still so young. You have not learned yet that we are mere boils on the ass of this dreaded cosmos Adonis. There is no need to be constrained by asinine concepts of right and wrong. Just act, nephew. That is all. Just act and do! Do not worry about the pharaoh and whoever accompanies him. If I plan correctly, we will be long gone before he even arrives.”

“Plans? What are you thinking? Should we return to our lair?” asked the curious youth.

“No, I wish to have one more raid this season, before the tide comes in. I wish to raid the shores of Kypros, the bronze island.”

“The bronze island?!,” exclaimed Adonis.

“Yes, why not? That Salamis is nothing short of an idiot. He would hear a rooster’s morning call and mistake it for donkey’s cry. Hapless fool! Besides, bedding his cousin, the widowed Phaedra of Athens is more of a priority for the *esteemed* king rather than planning any significant defense,” snidely replied Dionysis. He raised his goblet and drained it of the wine. “Truth be told, given the idiot king’s disposition, I am surprised he is even interested in the feminine form. I always figured he was solely enticed by single stone towers, rather than soft mountains and caverns. Ha!” The wine continued dribbling down the pirate’s beard as he laughed.

“What of Demephon? He has been Salamis’ ward since Theseus’ death. Will he not rally the Kypriot defenses? And maybe even call on the brothers of thunder?” Adonis frowned with concern.

“Demephon is just a large child. One who has never left the womb! A more accurate depiction of the once powerful ‘brothers of thunder’ is, now more, the brothers of sorrow. The bull’s tears run deep into both of their souls. I doubt they will interfere. Enough talk! Now, I command you, to acquire some pretty Kebian girl to open her warm vault for your pretty face! They never say no to you. Go, boy,” Dionysis gave his nephew a gentle shove.

Placing his goblet at the entrance to his tent, Dionysis pulled back the drapes to find his three captives already naked on the bedclothes, silent and awaiting their captor.

Ur

The nine-year-old boy huffed desperately, his chest and side piercing at him. His breath came hard, his heart pounding like never before. Running from rock to shrub, shrub to tree, and hiding from the flying arrows took a toll on the young boy's already impaired lungs. His left shoulder and chest wall, horribly smaller than his right side, dampened his lungs and breathing. Gasping, he finally slipped behind a large stone to grab a moment's reprieve. He put a small hand to his left side and closed his eyes in pain.

Lila sat back in her long chair watching her son Samael with pride. He was fourteen years old, beginning to grow taller. He stood steadfast, with his bow in position. "You are doing well, my love. Stay focused, son."

Samael did not move a muscle or hair, but stood with arrow at the ready, in perfect stillness. "I wait, mother. This terrible wretch needs to be put out of his misery," he added with stern confidence.

"Tis' true, my son. Unfortunately for this boy, not all of lord Tartarus' transformations end well for the subjects. Only half of this poor boy's body took to the experiment. A god's transformation may not be in his destiny it appears." Lila sighed with feigned concern. "So be it, destiny escapes none of us it would seem."

Lila stood and watched as the deformed boy attempted a run from the large stone to the far gate of

the complex. His gait was uneven, his body bobbing as he struggled through the heavy sand.

Samael quickly released an arrow, landing it in the boy's ribs. The boy fell, wailing in pain. Samael calmly walked up to the boy. With the young boy crying and pleading, Samael quickly drew his bow and shot an arrow straight through the boy's head. "There it is. You are welcome, my friend."

Lila grinned with pride in her growing son.

Great things for him are coming.

Servants scurried to collect the body of the dead boy. Running in the open complex like ants on a fallen apple, they quickly began moving out of the way for a gargantuan shadow. Behind that shadow, heavy steps followed.

Lila stood and quickly walked toward Ba'al. The giant stood near two times the height of the tiny queen of Ur. His shadow completely engulfed the approaching monarch. "My lord Ba'al, and my love, welcome back." Lila kissed the titan passionately, and the two embraced as they walked toward Samael.

"My lord Ba'al, it is a pleasure to see you again," Samael said. "How went the recruitment?"

Lila heard her lover's deep voice respond, "Well my young prince. Two wagons of candidates were collected."

Soon thereafter, the two wagons rolled onto the open grounds of the complex. Behind the train of wagons, on a small white horse rode Lord Tartarus. An entourage of four Titans, with long black hair flowing in the breeze, surrounded the hooded god on

his horse. The giants walked in unison, with broad shoulders and thick thighs completely blocking the sun from Tartarus. Tartarus' face and entire body hid under a black cloak, clashing against the fine white pelt of the horse. As they approached the queen of Ur, she fell to a knee, followed by her son and then her lover.

“Holy Highness, welcome,” stated Lila.

The dark hood turned to one of his titan guards, who stepped up to grab the small god. He was lifted off his horse and placed safely on the ground. Once on the ground, Lila saw a thin, grey hand emerge from the cloak indicating she could rise. When the trio rose, the tingle in the queen's head began.

“The recruitment went well. This should prove to be one of the most successful batches.”

The queen spoke respectfully. “That is a pleasure to hear, Holy Highness.”

She walked over to the wagons and pulled back the covering tarp to reveal dozens of children's faces staring back at her. The dark paint under her eyes and covering her lips frightened the children, and they pulled away, some with cries of horror.

Lila's eyes narrowed as she looked at the children. Delicate and terrified eyes and faces, ranging from the sweet skin of two-year-olds, to fully formed fourteen-year-olds gazed back at the queen with innocence. Many were fruitlessly crying for their mothers. The children's cries were useless. Ba'al and his entourage of nephilim made sure the parents of these children were among the dead.

A red-haired toddler was particularly loud with her crying. The queen bent over and picked up the child, placing the tearing face against her neck and shoulder. Her dark painted lips slightly smudged from kissing the tearful cheeks of the child.

“Do not fear, child. The gods do not take, but rather they give an endless bounty. They will provide you with an existence you would have never imagined.” The queen turned to the rest of the children in the wagon. “This is true for all of you. From this day forth, you will be leaving your miserable existence and becoming something so magnificent that you will be the envy of the entire cosmos! Trust in the gods, children. For they are great!”

Lila placed the partially consoled child back in the wagon. She then quickly pulled the cover back over, and the children’s wailing began again as the wagon pulled off.

Tartarus turned to the queen and dropped his black hood with a small nod.

“Yes, Holy Highness, as you wish,” replied the queen and she gave a formal bow as the short, hooded god walked into the complex.

Ba’al gave a hand gesture ordering his Nephilim to continue walking with the god in the complex. The giants nodded and followed the orders of their commander.

“What did his holy highness request,” Samael asked. “I am still not fully able to comprehend his words in my mind.”

Lila just smiled and placed a hand on her son's face. "My son, the gods will soon ask for you. But, fret not, for you will be their shining beacon of perfection! For now, go and prepare for our evening meal."

"Yes, mother." The prince kissed his mother on the cheek and bowed to Lord Ba'al.

Finely cut sandstone shone bright yellow, reflecting the clean light from metallic floating spheres and intermittent torches in the large dining hall. Lila had her hands quietly folded in front of her face awaiting her meal, but she was not a woman accustomed to waiting and was rapidly becoming impatient. She focused on a carved image of her father, the deceased King Gilgamesh, on the opposite wall above the entrance. His head was abnormally long, with a tall forehead covered by a thick and long crown. His beard was perfectly braided and flat, extending out from every direction of his face. He stood on a chariot, led by four steeds toward the stars.

They will pay... they will all pay.

Taking a deep breath, she placed her folded hands on her own forehead, trying to remain calm. After gathering herself, she looked up to her left. Lord Tartarus had his face lost in a bowl full of green and brown gruel. His second in command, Cerberus, was manipulating the otherworldly meal with his bony hands, making it bubble.

Four shirtless servants came scurrying into the room, quickly placing large plates of lamb, chestnuts, and long grained rice in front of their lords. “You realize if my son and I were delayed in our meals just moments further...” the queen hissed at them.

“Deepest apologies, Majesty. There were delays with the oven warming enough to adequately cook the lamb,” replied one of the servants. His hands shook like a leaf in the wind.

“I understand. If the oven is having difficulties warming again, I will make sure it is repaired and then tested with your children in it. Is that understood?” Lila speared a hunk of lamb and placed it in her mouth all the while keeping the servant’s gaze.

“Yes, Majesty,” the servant replied, lowering his head and walking backward and away.

“My heart, is your meal cooked to your liking?” Lila bent to Samael.

“Yes, it is quite good. Mother, may I ask something?”

“Of course, my son.” Lila noticed the second round of servants emerging from the cooking area with plates of fruits and sweet almonds.

“My grandfather, Lord Gilgamesh, is depicted in the image above the door as being led to the stars. Why?”

Plates smacked on the dining table. Lila heard Ba’al grabbing a handful of the sweet almonds and crunching them ruthlessly in his mouth.

“Your favorite, my love,” she commented, winking at her titan lover before she returned her attention to her son.

“My heart, my father Gilgamesh is depicted returning to the heavens as a champion of the gods. With loyal and unwavering service to our holy lords.” Lila waved a respectful hand toward Tartarus and Cerberus when she continued, “We are promised eternity. Gilgamesh died in the service of his holy highness Anubis. He is accepted into the cosmos’ grace. It is that simple.”

The final plate of delicacies was placed in front of the queen. The servant stood behind the queen’s right shoulder. His hands folded with discipline by his belt line. He stood at quiet attention.

Almond crumbs fell from Ba’al’s mouth, and he started sniffing in the air, like a hunting dog smelling for hidden prey. Paying no mind to it, the queen, used to the giant’s enhanced senses, gave him a quick smile and picked up a ripe green apple. Before her clean white teeth broke the perfect skin of the fruit, both Annunaki lords dropped their bowls of thick green gruel.

They turned toward the queen in unison. Dark swirls and black strands began floating around the globes of their eyes. Lila’s gaze immediately went to the hooded gods, and she quickly dropped the apple to jump from her seat and grab Samael’s arm, stopping him from swallowing a couple of large grapes. “My heart, refrain from the grapes. I am not sure they are of good vintage.”

She sat back in her seat and gave an angled look at the servant standing attention to her right. He was steadfast, but could not hide the drops of perspiration starting at his hairline. Taking a silk napkin and wiping down her mouth and hands, she called over the staunch servant. “Boy, can you step over here please?”

He bowed and took a step toward the queen. The second step followed, but then he whipped about, trying to sprint for the door. Before the boy made it halfway past the dining table, Ba'al jumped with the speed of a gazelle and grabbed him by the throat, raising him from the floor. With a short grunt, he threw the flailing servant halfway across the room. He slammed into the wall, crushing his right shoulder and arm. The boy wailed in pain.

Lila walked over to him, with Ba'al and Samael at her side. Ba'al again grabbed him by his throat, lifting him off the floor with grim ease. Lila removed a small case from her robe's sash. Upon opening it, Lila pulled two rings with long and extended golden claws. She began placing them on the second and third finger of her right hand. She tugged them on tightly and spoke calmly. “I will only ask once. Who sent you to poison my son and myself? Tell me, and you will pass quickly. Tell me not, and the screams of you and your loved ones will be heard for eons to come.”

The servant's defiant smile surprised Lila. “You think you frighten me, you hapless bitch? You have sold your body, your soul, and your people to these star demons and their Nephilim spawn. Sons and

daughters lost, parents murdered. You demand to know who wished you and your son dead? I am one of many, my dark queen.”

“Ha.” Lila spat on the floor, watching him claw ineffectually at Ba’al.

“I was there when your Nephilim spawn abducted my five-year-old sister and slaughtered my parents on their farm. Their blood still wets my hair. So, kill me. It is of little consequence because you have lost. The people of Ur will not stand for these atrocities anymore. We, the *grigorii*, are everywhere. And we will see you, your pathetic son by Set, and these demons from the stars fall.”

The servant’s words stopped short. Lila thrust her fingered claws into his mouth and through his skull. Ba’al released his grip allowing the final twitches of death to finish on the cold ground.

Samael quietly asked, “Who are the *grigorii*?”

Lila placed her hand on his cheek, blood and tissue still dripping from her ringed claws, “They are nothing of concern, my heart. You need not worry.”

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Tartarus and Cerberus placing their grey, hooded heads together yet she felt no tingle in her scalp or buzz of words in her mind.

The room quickly emptied. Lila stood motionless at the site of the dead rebel. The grey ground had been cleaned by servants, but remnants of crimson still appeared sporadically on the floor. With a deep breath

she crossed her arms and slowly walked towards the large carving of her father in the front of the room. Still silent, she looked up to him. Glaring outside the main door, the hooded gods, Tartarus and Cerberus, turned a far corner, leaving the room quickly, and to Lila's discontent, quietly. With another deep breath while placing a hand behind her neck for some reprieve, she felt Ba'al approach her from behind. His gargantuan hands began roaming around her waist as he bent and kissed the back of her neck. "These grigorii, you seem to know of them," he asked.

The dark queen extended her neck further into the giant's embrace while placing an arm behind and reaching for his thick mane. "You need not worry Ba'al. They are mere nutshells on our road. Easy to crack with a simple step."

"So, you are familiar. Who are they," Ba'al continued, with one hand rising up the inside of her dress devilishly caressing a breast as the other hand made its way in between her legs manipulating the gracious feminine sweet spot that is the fall of many men.

"Weaklings, my love. Peasant rebels. When my father made arrangements with the Annunaki, some of his nobles and leading men did not agree. They felt the gods tactics too harsh. They had no vision. The few that were bold enough to speak directly against my father, met quickly with the fates. Others snuck away from Ur under the veil of long winter nights. They snuck away and searched for their saviors, Dias and Heracles. They were given amnesty and a home.

Since then, they continually attempt to impede our progress. But, can Gia stop turning from day to night? Neither can the gods be stopped, nor us.”

Ba'al took a reprieve from the sweet and salty taste of his lover's neck, “Lila, their attempt reached the halls where we dine. I shall gather a cohort and search the cities and towns.”

Lila moaned in ecstasy, further feeling Ba'al's manhood rise against her backside. She further fed the luscious heat, continuing to rub and feel against him, “Enough talk Ba'al.”

It did not take long for Ba'al to take the queen over his shoulder and throw her against a wall at the far end of the room.

Lila said with a heavy breath of passion, “As long as we are together, nothing can stop us. Insects, mere insects they are! Pestering at best, but unable to stop grander motions around them.” She finished with a long passionate kiss.

“It has been too long,” he grunted as he tore most of her dress to the ground. Lila's face was gently pressed against the wall as she enjoyed Ba'al attacking her from behind.

Chapter 4

Kypros

The gentle Kypriot wind blew a few strands of hair into the beads of sweat that had accumulated on Demephon's forehead. His right arm was sore from holding his sword, and his powerful horse under saddle loudly gulped water without remorse, the bucket shaking under the thick neck of the steed. He dismounted and gave the horse a pat on the neck. "Good work today." Once he saw the horse was cooling down and taken care of, he turned to a nearby groom. "Some water for me please."

The man quickly ran to him with a silver pitcher and deep ladle. Demephon took the ladle and took two large refreshers before placing the pitcher next to him on the ledge overlooking his family's lands. The view was stunning, overlooking most of the middle of the bronze island. Blue mountains in the backdrop of this living portrait led into open farm fields full of green and yellow. Olive, lemon, and lime trees littered the scene, and cabbages grew lush in the rich soil. The river below ran next to the palace, leading into a small bay where fishing boats, merchants' ships, and fighting ships of the Kypriot navy covered the blue canvas of water.

Immersed in the scene, Demephon heard two claps from what sounded like gentle hands. "Bravo, son! You were flawless on the horse!"

Demephon looked up and smiled at his mother approaching him. She kissed his cheek. “Thank you, mother, I try.”

“Yes, you do, my love. You try almost daily. I do not believe many young men your age train as you do. They are usually dedicated to other pursuits.” Phaedra laughed as she ruffled Demephon’s hair. She was five and forty, a handsome older woman with a noble stature and classical Pelasgian curly hair.

Demephon gave her a gentle grin. “There is a fire, a fire I cannot explain. It comes from the depths of my heart. Even now, after a full morning of training and studying, I still wish to do more.” Demephon saw her face change.

Her voice tensed a bit. “I know what the fire is, son. It is your father. His blood runs deep and strong in you.”

“I am a mere fraction of my father. The mere mention of Theseus anywhere around the Mesogian and people fall to their knees. Not out of fear or necessity, but out of respect and love. Will I ever be able to touch so many people in such a manner? The same way the sun’s light touches and gives life to all? Perhaps you are right. Perhaps this is what drives me.” Demephon shook his head and took another cool drink of water.

A groomsman stepped over to the pair. “Apologies my lord and lady, His Highness, King Salamis requests your presence. There is word from Keb.”

Demephon stood from the ledge he was sitting on, the subtle tremble in the man's voice noticeable to the Athenian prince. "What news, my friend?"

"Not good news, my lord, not good at all."

In the throne room, King Salamis was on his second goblet of wine as Demephon and Queen Phaedra entered. The nervous king immediately jumped up when they entered, "Welcome, my cousins, welcome!"

Demephon's confusion showed on his tanned and handsome face. The servant's message had alarmed him. "Is there something concerning you, my king?" asked Demephon.

Salamis turned away from the mother and son to pace the far ends of the throne room twice. The room full of kypriot nobles and captains remained silent, some focusing on the lifeless statues that littered the center of the hall, rather than give Phaedra and Demephon more attention than already granted. Salamis' long purple and gold robes traced behind him until he finally stopped in front his cousin, the Athenian prince. "Well, since you ask." Salamis placed a scroll in Demephon's hand.

Demephon unrolled it and glanced down quickly at the signature: Horus.

Dearest brother Salamis, king and lord of Kypros, the bronze island,

I send this message with utmost urgency, out of concern for your wellbeing, and the wellbeing of your

people. In the case you are not aware of recent events...

The brigand Dionysus and his battalion of pirates viciously attacked my people. They raided multiple villages and hamlets on the Green Sea shore, entering from the Mesogian Sea. They have killed and kidnapped many, leaving behind nothing but remnants of what was once peace and tranquility.

As I am writing this to you, I have a prisoner in front of me. He was a member of a scout team Dionysus placed in lieu of my arrival. The team was captured and questioned. We have discovered that Dionysus and Adonis plan to attack the Kypriot coastline before the end of the low tide season. I do not have a precise location of their target, but I would estimate it to be somewhere on the southern shore of the island.

I, unfortunately, was unable to gather any more information. I felt the obligation to inform you of this potential danger so you can prepare and protect your people.

I hope this letter finds you well, and the information is useful. May the gods speed to your protection!

*Your friend and brother,
Horus of Keb*

Demephon slowly rolled up the scroll and just held it against his head.

Salamis looked at his distant cousin with a nervous twitch to his face. “Well, what is your counsel?”

After looking at his mother, Demephon turned to Salamis looking into the king's quivering eyes. "Counsel, Highness?"

"Yes, counsel! How shall we confront this threat? Tell me!"

Demephon sighed and spoke quietly, hiding his impatience. "Highness, I would imagine we would have to establish the shore defenses of the cities and larger towns on the south shore. I would also increase naval patrols of the more distant fishing sites and seas surrounding the bays and inlets."

"Excellent! Continue, continue..." The king babbled as he took another deep drink of wine.

"I would also send word to my cousins, the brothers of thunder on Ceftiu. The Atlantean stronghold may be able to assist us." There was silence in the room for a moment as Salamis shuffled back to his throne and sat heavily.

"Very well. See to all of this my lord Demephon. I am appointing you *megan strategon*, grand commander, for the defenses of the southern shores."

Demephon raised his eyebrows and stepped forward, surprised. "Highness, I am honored, but I do not have nearly the experience as some of the other captains and commanders in your service, some of whom are present here today. I would be happy to assist Your Highness's..."

"I will hear no more!" Salamis held up a trembling hand, age-spotted and bony despite the bulk of his belly. "My decision is final. My lady, Phaedra, do you

have an opinion on the matter?" The king gave a subtle wink to his distant but attractive older cousin.

Phaedra took a few steps forward toward the king and gave a gracious courtesy bow. "Highness, I have no doubt my son will serve with all his honor and ability to protect the southern shores."

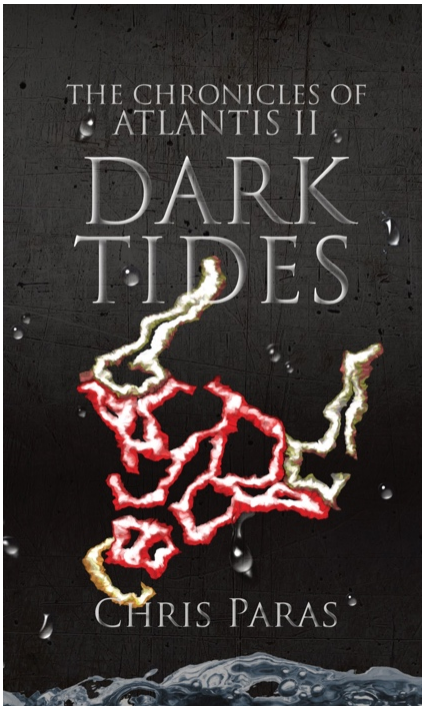
"Very well then, I deem this matter closed. Lord Demephon, you have access to all of our resources. Feel free to use whatever you deem necessary for our defenses. You may also send a message to Dias and Heracles in our name. Now, cousin Phaedra, I believe we have some private issues to *discuss*."

The queen kissed her son goodbye. "I will speak with you later, my son."

Demephon felt his face darken with anger as the queen walked toward the throne, watching her expression change. The thought of his mother with this squeaky excuse of a man...

Salamis put his arm out as Phaedra gently held it in the most ladylike fashion. The couple walked to the exit in the back of the throne room, with Salamis glancing back at him, and then away quickly.

The throne room went silent. Demephon was left alone, standing on the elegant tiles, motionless and fists clenched.



In the anticipated sequel to Age of Immortals, Dr. Carning and his team continue deciphering the story of mankind's lost history. Old friends and new foes emerge. The ancient story continues coming to light. Princes Dias and Heracles fight for survival after the cataclysm. In Keb, Horus tries brokering a wedding, all the while Lila schemes from Ur.

The Chronicles of Atlantis: Dark Tides

by Chris Paras

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