The Hunt for Atlantis

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Extract

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New York City: Ten Years Later

Dr Nina Wilde took a deep breath as she paused at the door, her reflection gazing pensively back at her in the darkened glass. She was dressed more formally than normal, a rarely worn dark blue trouser suit replacing her regular comfortable, casual sweatshirts and cargo pants, shoulder-length auburn hair drawn back more severely than her usual loose ponytail. This was a crucial meeting, and even though she knew everyone involved, she still wanted to make as professional an impression as possible. Satisfied that she looked the part and hadn't accidentally smudged lipstick across her cheeks, she

psyched herself up to enter the room, almost unconsciously reaching up to her neck to touch her pendant. Her good-luck charm.

She'd found the sharp-edged, curved fragment of metal, about two inches long and scoured by the abrasive sands of Morocco, twenty years before while on an expedition with her parents when she was eight. At the time, her head full of tales of Atlantis, she'd believed it to be made of orichalcum, the metal described by Plato as one of the defining features of the lost civilisation. Now, looked at with a more critical adult eye, she had come to accept that her father was right, that it was nothing more than discoloured bronze, a worthless scrap ignored or discarded by whoever had beaten them to the site. But it was definitely man-made – the worn markings on its curved outer edge proved that – and since it was her first genuine find, her parents had eventually, after much persuasion of the typical eight-year-old's highly repetitive kind, allowed her to keep it.

On returning to the United States, her father made it into a pendant for her. She had decided on the spur of the moment that it would bring her good luck. While that had remained unproven – her academic successes had been entirely down to her own intelligence and hard work, and certainly no lottery wins had been forthcoming – she knew one thing for sure: the one day she had not worn it, accidentally forgetting it in a mad morning rush when

staying at a friend's house during her university entrance exams, was the day her parents died.

Many things about her had changed since then. But one thing which had not was that she never let a day pass without wearing the pendant.

More consciously, she squeezed it again before letting her hand fall. She needed all the luck she could get today.

Steeling herself, she opened the door.

The three professors seated behind the imposing old oak desk looked up as she entered. Professor Hogarth was a portly, affable old man, whose secure tenure and antipathy towards bureaucracy meant he'd been known to approve a funding request simply on the basis of a mildly interesting presentation. Nina hoped hers would be rather more than that.

On the other hand, even the most enthralling presentation in history, concluded with the unveiling of a live dinosaur and the cure for cancer, would do nothing to gain the support of Professor Rothschild. But since the tight-lipped, misanthropic old woman couldn't stand Nina – or any other woman under thirty – she'd already dismissed her as a lost cause.

So that was one 'no' and one 'maybe'. But at least she could rely on the third professor.

Jonathan Philby was a family friend. He was also the man who had broken the news to her that her parents were dead.

Now everything rested on him, as he not only held the deciding vote but was also the head of the department. Win him over and she had her funding.

Fail, and . . .

She couldn't allow herself even to think that way.

'Dr Wilde,' said Philby. 'Good afternoon.'

'Good afternoon,' she replied, with a bright smile. At least Hogarth responded well to it, even if Rothschild could barely contain a scowl.

'Please, take a seat.' Nina sat on the isolated chair before the panel. 'Well,' Philby said, 'we've all had a chance to digest the outline of your proposal. It's quite . . . unusual, I must say. Not exactly an everyday suggestion for this department.'

'Oh, I thought it was most interesting,' said Hogarth. 'Very well thought out, and quite daring, too. It makes a pleasant change to see a little challenge to the usual orthodoxy.'

'I'm afraid I don't share your opinion, Roger,' cut in Rothschild in her clipped, glass-cutting voice. 'Ms Wilde' – not *Dr* Wilde, Nina realised. Miserable old bitch – 'I was under the impression that your doctorate was in archaeology. Not mythology. And Atlantis is a myth, nothing more.'

'As were Troy, Ubar and the Seven Pagodas of Mahabalipuram – until they were discovered,' Nina shot back. Since Rothschild had obviously already made up her mind, she was going to go down fighting.

Philby nodded. 'Then if you'd like to elaborate on your theory?'

'Of course.' Nina connected her travel-worn but trusty Apple laptop to the room's projector. The screen sprang to life with a map covering the Mediterranean Sea and part of the Atlantic to the west.

'Atlantis,' she began, 'is one of the most enduring legends in history, but those legends all originate from a very small number of sources – Plato's dialogues are the best known, of course, but there are references in other ancient cultures to a great power in the Mediterranean region, most notably the stories of the Sea People who attacked and invaded the coastal areas of what are now Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Spain. But most of what we know of Atlantis comes from Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*.'

'Both of which are undoubtedly fiction,' cut in Rothschild.

'Which brings me to the first part of my theory,' Nina said, having anticipated the criticism. 'Undoubtedly, there are elements of all of Plato's dialogues – not just *Timaeus* and *Critias* – which are *fictionalised*, to make it easier for him to present his points, in the same way that timelines are condensed and characters combined in modern-day biopics. But Plato wasn't writing his dialogues as fiction. His other works are accepted as historical documents, so why not the two that mention Atlantis?'

'So you're saying that everything Plato wrote about

Atlantis is completely true?' asked Philby.

'Not quite. I'm saying that he *thought* it was. But he was told about it by Critias, working from the writings of his grandfather Critias the Elder, who was told about Atlantis as a child by Solon, and *he* was told about it by Egyptian priests. So what you have is a game of Chinese whispers – well, Hellenic whispers, I suppose' – Hogarth chuckled at the joke – 'where there's inevitably going to be distortion of the original message, like making a copy of a copy of a copy. Now, one of the areas where inaccuracies are most likely to have been introduced over time is in terms of measurements. I mean, there's an oddity about *Critias*, which contains almost all of Plato's detailed descriptions of Atlantis, that is *so* obvious nobody ever seems to notice it.'

'And what would that be?' Hogarth asked.

'That all the measurements Plato gives of Atlantis are not only neatly rounded off, but are also in Greek units! For example, he says that the plain on which the Atlantean capital stood was three thousand stadia by two thousand. Firstly, that's one precisely proportioned plain, and secondly, it's amazingly convenient that it would match a Greek measurement so exactly – especially considering that it came from an Egyptian source!' Nina realised she was getting excited and tried to rein it back to a more professional level, but found it hard to temper her enthusiasm. 'Even if the Atlantean civilisation used something *called* a stadium, it's unlikely it would have been

the same size as the Egyptian one – or the larger Greek one.'

Rothschild pursed her lips sourly. 'This is all very interesting,' she said, in a tone suggesting she thought the exact opposite, 'but how does this enable you to find Atlantis? Since you don't know what the actual Atlantean measurements were, and nor does anyone else, I don't see how any of this helps.'

Nina took a long, quiet breath before answering. She knew that what she was about to say was the potential weak spot in her theory; if the three academics staring intently at her didn't accept her reasoning, then it was all over . . .

'It's actually key to my proposal,' she said, with as much confidence as she could muster. 'Simply put, if you accept Plato's measurements – with one stadium being a hundred and eighty-five metres, or just under six hundred and seven feet – then Atlantis was a very large island, at least three hundred and seventy miles long and two hundred and fifty wide. That's larger than England!' She indicated the map on the screen. 'There aren't many places for something that size to hide, even underwater.'

'What about Madeira?' asked Hogarth, pointing at the map. The Portuguese island was some four hundred miles off the African coast. 'Could that be a location for what was left of the island after it sank?'

'I considered that at one point. But the topography

doesn't support it. In fact, there's nowhere in the eastern Atlantic that the island Plato describes could be located.'

Rothschild snorted triumphantly. Nina gave her as scathing a look as she dared before returning to the map. 'But it's this fact which forms the basis of my theory. Plato said that Atlantis was located in the Atlantic, beyond the Pillars of Heracles – which we know today as the Straits of Gibraltar, at the entrance to the Mediterranean. He also said that, converted to modern measurements, Atlantis was almost four hundred miles long. Since there's no evidence that would reconcile both those statements, either Atlantis isn't where he said it was . . . or his measurements are wrong.'

Philby nodded silently. Nina still couldn't judge his mood – but suddenly got the feeling that he had already made his decision, one way or the other. 'So,' he said, 'where *is* Atlantis?'

It was not a question Nina had expected to be asked quite so soon, as she'd planned to reveal the answer with a suitable dramatic flourish at the end of her presentation. 'Uh, it's in the Gulf of Cadiz,' she said, a little flustered as she pointed at a spot in the ocean about a hundred miles west of the Straits of Gibraltar. 'I think.'

'You think?' sneered Rothschild. 'I hope you have more to back up that statement than mere guesswork.'

Bitch! 'If you'll let me explain my reasoning, Professor Rothschild,' said Nina, forcing herself to stay polite, 'I'll

show you how I reached that conclusion. The central premise of my theory is that Plato was right, and that Atlantis did actually exist. What he got wrong were the measurements.'

'Rather than the location?' asked Hogarth. 'You're ruling out any of the modern theories that maintain Atlantis was actually Santorini, off Crete, and the supposed Atlantean civilisation was really Minoan?'

'Definitely. For one thing, the ancient Greeks knew about the Minoans already. Also, the time scales don't match. The volcanic eruption that destroyed Santorini was about nine hundred years before Solon's time, but the fall of Atlantis was nine *thousand* years before.'

'The "power of ten" error by Solon has been widely accepted as a way to connect the Minoans with the Atlantis *myth*,' Rothschild pointed out.

'The Egyptian symbols for one hundred and one thousand are totally different,' Nina told her. 'You'd have to be blind or a complete idiot to confuse them.' Rothschild scowled, but said nothing. 'Besides, Plato explicitly states in *Timaeus* that Atlantis was in the Atlantic, not the Mediterranean. Plato was a pretty smart guy; I'm guessing he could tell east from west. I believe that in the process of the story being passed from the Atlanteans themselves to the ancient Egyptians, then from the Egyptian priests of almost nine thousand years later to Solon, then from Solon to Plato over several generations

of Critias's family . . . the measurements got messed up.'

Philby raised an eyebrow. 'Messed up?'

'Okay, maybe that's not the most scientific way I could have put it, but it gets the point across. Even though the names were the same – feet, stadia and so on – the different civilisations used different units of measurement. Each time the story went from one place to another, and the numbers were rounded off, and even exaggerated to show just how incredible this lost civilisation really was, the error grew. My assumption here is that whatever unit the Atlanteans used that was translated as a stadium, it was considerably smaller than the Hellenic unit.'

'That's quite an assumption,' said Rothschild. Nina could tell that she was dying to add the old saw: *when you assume, it makes an ass of u and me*.

'I have logical reasoning to back it up,' she said. '*Critias* gives various measurements of Atlantis, but the most important ones relate to the citadel on the island at the centre of the Atlantean capital's system of circular canals.'

'The site of the temples of Poseidon and Cleito,' noted Philby thoughtfully, rubbing his moustache.

'Yes. Plato said the island was five stadia in diameter. If we use the Greek system, that's slightly over half a mile wide. Now, if an Atlantean stadium is smaller, it can't be too much smaller, because *Critias* says there's a lot to fit on to that island. Poseidon's temple was the biggest, a stadium long,

but there were other temples as well, palaces, bathhouses . . . That's almost as packed as Manhattan!'

'So how big – or rather, how small – did you deduce an Atlantean stadium to be?' Hogarth asked.

'The smallest I think it could be would be two thirds the size of the Greek unit,' explained Nina. 'About four hundred feet. That would make the citadel over a third of a mile across, which when you scale down Poseidon's temple as well just about leaves enough room to fit everything in.'

Hogarth made some calculations on a piece of notepaper. 'By that measurement, the island would be, let's see . . .'

Nina instantly did the mathematics in her head. 'It would be two hundred and forty miles long, and over a hundred and sixty wide.'

Hogarth scribbled away for a few seconds to reach the same result. 'Hmm. That wouldn't just be in the Gulf of Cadiz . . . it would *be* the Gulf of Cadiz.'

'But you have to take into account the probability of other errors,' said Nina. 'The three-thousand-by-two-thousand-stadia figure Plato gave for the island's central plain is clearly rounded up. It could have been exaggerated for effect as well, if not by Plato then certainly by the Egyptians, who were trying to impress Solon. I think you have to assume an error factor of at least fifteen per cent. Maybe even twenty.'

'Another assumption, Ms Wilde?' said Rothschild, a malevolent glint in her eyes.

'Even with a twenty per cent margin, the island would still be over a hundred and ninety miles long,' added Hogarth.

'There's still also the possibility of confusion if the figures were converted from a different numerical base . . .' Nina could feel the situation slipping away from her. 'I'm not saying that all my figures are correct. That's why I'm here – I have a theory that fits the available data, and I want . . . I would like,' she corrected, 'the opportunity to test that theory.'

'A sonar survey of the entire Gulf of Cadiz would be a rather expensive way of testing it,' Rothschild said smugly.

'But if I'm right, then I've made the greatest archaeological discovery since Troy!' protested Nina.

'And if you're wrong, the department has wasted potentially millions of dollars chasing after a myth, a *fairytale*.'

'I don't want to waste the department's resources any more than you do! I have complete documentation backing up my theory, all the historical references – I've spent two years of my life researching this. I wouldn't have brought it to you if I wasn't totally sure that I was *right*.'

'Why are you doing this, Nina?' asked Philby.

The personal tone of the question took her by surprise. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean,' Philby said, a look of sad sympathy on his face, 'are you pursuing this goal for yourself . . . or for your parents?'

Nina tried to speak, but her voice caught in her throat.

'I knew Henry and Laura very well,' Philby went on, 'and they could have had a spectacular career – if they hadn't been fixated on a legend. Now I've followed your career ever since you were an undergraduate, and some of your work has been quite remarkable. I personally believe that you have greater potential than even your father. But . . . you're in danger of going down exactly the same path that he and your mother did.'

'Jonathan!' Nina cried almost involuntarily in her mixture of shock, outrage – and pain.

'I'm sorry, but I can't let you throw away everything you've accomplished on this . . . this wild goose chase. Such a costly failure would cause enormous harm to your reputation, possibly irreparable.'

'I don't care about my reputation!' Nina objected.

'But we care about the reputation of this university,' said Rothschild, a faint smile on her thin lips.

'Maureen,' warned Philby, before looking back at Nina. 'Dr Wilde . . . *Nina*. Your parents *died* for this. If you follow them, the same thing could happen to you. And for what? Ask yourself, truthfully – is it worth dying for a legend?'

She felt as though someone had just kicked her in the

stomach, such was the horrible impact of Philby's words. Through clenched teeth she asked him, 'Does this mean my proposal has been rejected?'

The three professors exchanged glances and unspoken words before turning back to her. It took Philby a moment to look Nina directly in the eye. 'I'm afraid so.'

'I see.' She turned and disconnected her laptop from the projector, the screen going blank. Tight-lipped, she faced the panel. 'Well. In that case, thank you for your time.'

'Nina,' said Philby. 'Please, don't take this personally. You have the potential to enjoy a truly great career.'

'If?'

'If . . . you don't fall into the same trap as your parents. Professor Rothschild is right, you know. History and mythology are two different things. Don't waste your time, your *talent*, on the wrong one.'

Nina stared at him for a long moment before speaking. 'Thanks for the advice, Professor Philby,' she said bitterly, before turning away and exiting, closing the door with a bang.

It took ten minutes of hiding in a stall in the ladies' restroom before Nina felt ready to show her face to the world again. Her initial shock had been replaced by a stunned anger. How *dare* Philby bring her parents into it? He was supposed to be judging her proposal on its own merits, not on his personal feelings!

Since the deaths of her mother and father, Philby had been . . . not a surrogate parental figure, certainly – nobody could replace them – but a supportive presence, a mentor as she rose through academia.

And he'd rejected her. It felt like nothing less than a betrayal.

'Son of a *bitch*!' she spat, banging a fist against the cubicle wall.

'Dr Wilde?' said a familiar voice from the next stall. Professor Rothschild.

Shit!

'Uh – no, no speak good English!' Nina gabbled, frantically flinging the door open and hurrying out of the restroom, laptop under her arm. Anger replaced by embarrassment, she soon found herself at the building's main entrance. The familiar skyline of uptown Manhattan greeted her as she emerged.

Well, now what?

She had refused to consider even the possibility of failure, never mind such a crushing defeat, and was now at a complete loss as to what to do next.

Go home, that was probably the best bet. Eat too much comfort food, get drunk, then worry about the consequences tomorrow.

She walked down the steps to the sidewalk and looked for a cab. There were some waiting at the traffic lights on the next block; hopefully one would be for hire.

It was as she raised her purse to check she had enough money that she realised she was being watched.

She looked round. The person – a man – kept his eyes on her for just a moment too long before finding something fascinating to examine across the street. He was leaning against the wall of the university building, a broad figure with very short receding hair, wearing jeans and a well-worn black leather jacket. His flat nose looked to have been broken more than once. While he wasn't much taller than Nina herself, no more than five eight, his muscular build indicated considerable strength – and there was an indefinable hint of danger in his square face that suggested he would have little hesitation in using it.

Living in New York, Nina was no stranger to threatening-looking characters, but there was something about this one that made her nervous. She looked up the street at the approaching traffic, but kept the man in the corner of her vision.

Sure enough, he was watching her again. Even though it was rush hour on a busy street, Nina couldn't help but feel a twinge of worry.

A cab! Thank God!

She waved an arm with considerably more vigour than necessary to flag it down. To her relief, it pulled over. As she got in and gave her destination, she looked out of the rear window. The man – she guessed he was in his mid-thirties, but the coarseness of his features made it hard to

tell exactly – stared back, his head turning to follow her as the cab set off . . . then was blocked from sight by a bus. She let out a relieved breath.

So, a stalker, humiliation and dismal failure. She slumped in the seat. 'What a crappy day.'

Once at home in her small but cosy apartment in the East Village, Nina decided to follow at least part of her instincts and make a start on the comfort food. There were a couple of bottles of wine in the fridge, but – after a moment of consideration – she opted to save them for later.

Armed with a huge bag of potato chips and a tub of Ben & Jerry's, she went into the living room, glancing at the answering machine as she passed. No messages. No surprise.

She let down her hair, then huddled up on the couch under a large knitted blanket. All she needed to complete the portrait of a sad, lonely loser was a CD of sappy, depressing songs. And maybe three or four cats.

Briefly amused at the thought, she curled her legs up against her chest and opened the bag of chips. Her hand brushed against her pendant.

'Some good luck you were,' she complained, holding it up. Even though the fragment of metal was heavily scuffed, it still shone with its odd reddish gleam when she held it up to the light. The markings on one side, groups of tiny apostrophe-like ticks counting up from one to eight

beneath short lines inscribed along its length, stood out clearly. Not for the first time she wondered what they represented, but the answer was as unforthcoming as ever.

Nina almost decided to take off the pendant, figuring that her luck couldn't get any worse today – but then changed her mind and let it fall back to her chest. No point tempting fate.

She had just crunched the first potato chip in her mouth when the phone rang. She wasn't expecting anyone to call – who could it be?

'Y'llo,' she mumbled as she answered, still chewing.

'Is that Dr Nina Wilde?' said a man's voice.

Great. A salesman.

'Yeah, what?' She stuffed a couple more chips into her mouth, ready to hang up.

'My name's Jason Starkman, and I work for the Frost Foundation.'

Nina stopped chewing.

The Frost Foundation? Philanthropic work around the world, developing medicines and vaccines, funding all kinds of scientific research . . .

Including archaeological expeditions.

She gulped down the half-chewed chips. 'Um, yes, hello!'

'I was sorry to hear that the university rejected your proposal today,' said Starkman. 'That was very short-sighted of them.'

Nina frowned. 'How did you know about that?'

'The Foundation has friends at the university. Dr Wilde, I'll get to the point. Your colleagues may not have been interested in your theory on the location of Atlantis, but we most certainly are. Kristian Frost, the director of the Foundation, has personally asked me to contact you and find out if you would be willing to discuss it with him this evening.'

Nina's heart jumped. *Kristian Frost?* She couldn't remember his exact ranking in the list of the world's richest men, but he was definitely in the top twenty. She forced herself to stay calm. 'I'd, ah, I'm sure I'd be willing to discuss it, yes. To what, um, end?'

'To the end of funding a full oceanographic survey expedition to see if your theory is correct, of course.'

'Oh, well, in that case . . . yes! Yes, definitely willing to discuss it!'

'Excellent. In that case I'll arrange a car to bring you to the Foundation's New York offices for a meeting and dinner. Will seven o'clock be all right?'

She glanced at the clock on her VCR. Just after five thirty. An hour and a half to get ready. It would be a rush, but . . . 'Yeah, yeah, I . . . that'll be fine, yeah!'

'In that case, I'll see you then. Oh, and if you can bring your notes, that'll be a great help. I'm sure Mr Frost will have lots of questions.'

'No problem, no problem at all,' she spluttered as

Starkman rang off. Putting the phone down, she sat still for a moment before kicking off the blanket and letting out a whoop of glee.

Kristian Frost! Not only one of the world's richest men, but . . . Well, normally she wasn't attracted to older guys, but from the pictures she'd seen of him, Kristian Frost could make her change her mind.

Nina lifted her pendant again, then kissed it. 'I guess you're good luck after all!'