Excerpt From CHAMELEON
by Sarah Holding

Prologue

My Lord Atlas,

Our preparations are proceeding slowly. The Hall of Records will soon be completed and sealed under the great leonine statue, and, thanks to the Builders, the three pyramids are beginning to take shape on the great plateau, in alignment with Orion's Belt, just as you instructed. I believe there is now a good chance New Atlantis will be ready in time for your People to relocate here before the Earth Changes begin in earnest.

According to my divinations, we have already reached the tipping point for the Kingdom of Atlantis and are rapidly approaching the end sequence. With each day that passes, there will be ever more violent climatic, seismic, volcanic and meteoric activity, and you will soon exhaust all possible means of preventing or holding off the Kingdom's demise. There is no denying that our day of reckoning is approaching, just as the Emerald Tablets prophesised. There is very little time left to evacuate Atlantis, and I recommend you commence this process immediately.

Your Honour, I also urge you to fully activate our secret failsafe project and start field-testing the resilient strain of human, Homo Chameliensis. En.Ki's latest reports show this new prototype could be capable of surviving the aftermath and repopulating Atlantis, should your own People not make it. We both know this project is woefully behind schedule; Askew and his team have so far only managed to produce one live sample – a male, I believe. As you know, their first creation did not survive, but I understand there is a third in the early stages of production, a female.

I will return to Atlantis shortly, but I must first make sure that the Builders have all the resources they need to complete the power plant. Without the three gold capstones in place, Earth will be plunged into an eternity of darkness and falling debris. The Stasis Giants must now be awakened if we are to have any hope of activating the pyramids before calamity strikes.

As you requested, I am also assembling an intergalactic mission, briefed to be discreetly on hand but to intervene on Earth only if it should prove absolutely necessary.

Could I ask that you now allow me to make arrangements for the inauguration ceremony for the New Atlantis? I humbly suggest it should take place in front of the pyramids at the start of the new Sothic Cycle to mark the beginning of the Age of Leo. Any later than that, the floodwaters will rise, and it will be too late.

Ever in your service, Tehuti

© Sarah Holding 2020

The Sphinx Codex

Tablet 1: Etheria

The male 'child' was the oddest of the three. He had the palest blue eyes, very white skin and hair the colour of monatomic gold. Under the bright lights of En.Ki's main laboratory, his skin looked almost translucent and his blue eyes stared straight ahead, completely unseeing. As the two research scientists assigned to the project, I and my supervisor, Colonel Askew, tended him like all our other genetically-engineered creations – with a mixture of pride, care and curiosity. The child's hair grew into golden, wavy locks so Askew and I started calling him Leon, because, despite his virtual blindness, he looked – and at times behaved – like a young lion. Leon slept more than the other two, ate less often, growled more than he spoke, and grew more muscles. We knew early on he would become the strongest and tallest of the three, as well as the most determined, the most fierce. It was as if a seething, roiling anger had been bred into him, which compensated for his lack of vision; he seemed to hear and feel things more keenly because he was not seduced and sedated by the gift of sight.

Around the age of four, Leon's unusual mental and physical powers started to kick in. We would know, for instance, that a storm was brewing somewhere up in Earth's atmosphere, because Leon would start acting up. It was as if his emotional state was connected in some way to the weather; his behaviour anticipated it by a few hours – sometimes even a few days – so we always knew when external conditions in Atlantis were about to take a turn for the worse. Being so wrapped up in my work, I was never one to pay much attention to the weather but, as Leon's outbursts got more and more violent and frequent, I couldn't help noticing how many news stories there were about the weather in Atlantis becoming increasingly wild. Leon was my barometer and the only proof I needed; the speed with which his mood could escalate spoke volumes about the unusual volatility in atmospheric pressure. And it wasn't just storms, either – his mood mirrored more of Earth's unprecedented symptoms: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis all caused turmoil in Leon's fragile psyche, unleashing wave after wave of intense emotional paroxysms.

Regardless of the strange occurrences going on outside the lab, for me it was more fascinating to observe what was happening inside Leon's brain as he responded to our relentless schedule of experiments, sensing the imminent pain and tensing up before the electrodes even touched his forehead. At six years old, he could scale the lab's climbing wall like a baboon in less than a minute and eat a plate of fresh meat even faster. A zoologist by training, Askew harboured a plan to field-test Leon with a family of primates or even a pride of sabre-toothed cats, but I was against the idea. I was always more cautious, more sensitive to the needs of my experimental 'offspring', and made sure they were comfortable and well rested. I knew my care-giving was perceived by En.Ki as excessively paternal and that I was being closely monitored by the board of directors, who lived in fear of our royal patron shutting down the project, and wished to prevent me from becoming as emotionally attached to Leon as I was to my earlier test subject, Kam.

© Sarah Holding 2020

En.Ki were so concerned about how much I cared about Leon that they completely missed the fact that Askew was up to no good. They constantly scrutinised my actions and whereabouts but failed to notice that Askew was scheming to sell the genetic code for our prototypes, much to my disapproval. Askew maintained that he owned this fringe technology and took credit not only for the innovation of the blue eyes (which I'd painstakingly crafted onto chromosome 15 using strands of King Atlas's DNA) but also their shapeshifting or chameleonoid capabilities (a gene sequence I stitched into chromosome 2, adapted from a rare species of chameleon found on Sirius, which can change form or colour depending on its surroundings or its emotional state). But this is not about who's to blame or who takes credit. While the blue eyes were apparent from birth, both Askew and I knew the true shapeshifting abilities would most likely emerge around the time of puberty, triggered by freewheeling emotions and the onslaught of new hormones in the bodies of our creations. So, when the time came, we both took a particular interest in Leon's ability to change state.

Leon's shapeshifting powers were not, however, quite what we had been expecting. Rather than changing his physical form, he could manipulate his whereabouts in time, which I suspected was a defensive move to prevent anything intruding into his physical space. Around the age of thirteen, he began to 'step out', as Askew called it. This could happen in one of two ways: Leon either located himself slightly in the past, delaying or putting a slight drag effect on the current timeline so that he had more control over it, or – and this happened more often – propelled himself a minute or so forwards in time, so that he could effectively bypass the present moment altogether until the situation resolved into something he felt he could handle. This subtle flexing of time fascinated me, and I started to invent games to play with Leon, coaxing him to increase gradually the length of time he could project himself forwards or backwards without tiring. When I took a sample of Leon's blood after he'd shifted in time for more than a few minutes, I found that it was infused with an entirely new hormone that I named 'etheria'.

To keep track of Leon's episodes of 'stepping out' and also to counter the side effects of too much etheria (which, not unlike adrenaline, left him uncontrollably pumped up), I created a tracking device that I inserted into Leon's C1 vertebra. Although this meant I could download Leon's temporal whereabouts, I had no control over him stepping out. Not long after the device was introduced, I noticed a strange mutation in Leon's nervous system, which forced me to also install in his brain a Blocker, which I based on a piece of black-market tech my brother Jainko developed at Black Khanus' labs back on Sirius. The Blocker ensured that no entities or hive minds could infiltrate Leon's consciousness, not even Askew with his En.Ki level 9 security clearance. But it did nothing to stem Leon's production of etheria.

When the time came to field-test Leon, I worked tirelessly with the field placement team to find a suitable environment in Atlantis where Leon's unique talents would be sufficiently developed and challenged. After many long committee meetings, we eventually settled on a solution that I felt would be ideal for Leon: a secure underground installation built by the Atlantean military to store their vast reserves of orichalcum bullion and where they train new soldiers for deep-dive combat. The base was notoriously dimly lit compared to conditions on the surface but, given Leon's virtual blindness, he was hardly likely to be bothered by the lack of daylight.

© Sarah Holding 2020

I was concerned, however, that, being on a military base, he might be exposed to influences and circumstances that could trigger the kind of violent episodes we'd seen in his early childhood: he would inflict harm on himself or his surroundings when he was angry or frustrated, breaking things in the lab, or giving himself cuts and bruises. We managed the situation back then with low-level psychotic medication and he eventually grew out of it, but I had no way of knowing if the same approach would work now that he was approaching adulthood.

On the morning of Leon's sixteenth 'birthday', we hit a new problem. He must have heard us talking about his upcoming relocation to the underground base and decided to step out well before the lab assistant came to unlock Leon's enclosure. When Askew got wind of this, he accused me of letting Leon's etheria levels get out of control and went immediately to report the incident to our superiors. I then spent hours patiently trying every protocol we'd used on previous occasions: soothing music, enticing food items, new toys, stronger hallucinogens. But by now Leon could anticipate all our tricks and remained steadfastly in his timeless bubble until I reluctantly agreed to allow En.Ki's emergency sweeper team to take over. Leon had, of course, sensed this coming too, and managed to sidestep the strong electromagnetic fields they put through the lab. No one at En.Ki – not even Askew – had realised how knowing Leon had become in respect of his shapeshifting. He knew, for example, that if he dropped his guard for a moment, an arm or a leg could get stuck and become fused with the lab walls or fittings, because he'd been aware of it happening to countless other lab rats.

On this particular occasion Leon was lurking in an inter-dimensional plane roughly two minutes ahead of where I was. He must have learned how to sense minute changes in heat and air pressure or been picking up sound and electrical vibrations in the lab. The sweepers made one more pass, pulsing through the whole area with the kind of fine-grade microwaves that cooked most rodents, before packing up their gear to go. Canny as ever, Leon then waited until Askew and I were summoned to our weekly meeting with En.Ki's board of directors before he slid back into the normal timeframe and made his move…

© Sarah Holding 2020