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Atlantis

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Present-day map of the Mediterranean



A mighty empire once ruled the larger part of the world. Its rulers lived in a vast citadel, up against the sea, a great maze of corridors like nothing seen since. They were ingenious workers in gold and ivory and fearless bullfighters. But then, for defying Poseidon the Sea God, in one mighty deluge the citadel was swallowed beneath the waves, its people never to be seen again.'



Prologue

The old man shuffled to a halt and raised his head, as awestruck as he had been the first time he stood before the temple. Nothing like this had yet been built in his native Athens. High above him the monumental doorway seemed to carry all the weight of the heavens, its colossal pillars casting a moonlit shadow far beyond the temple precinct into the shimmering expanse of the desert. Ahead loomed rows of huge columns, soaring into the cavernous antechamber, their polished surfaces covered with hieroglyphic inscriptions and towering human forms scarcely visible in the spluttering torchlight. The only hint of what lay beyond was a whispering, chilling breeze which brought with it the musty odour of incense, as if someone had just opened the doors of

a long-sealed burial chamber. The old man shuddered in spite of himself, his philosophical demeanour momentarily giving way to an irrational fear of the unknown, a fear of the power of gods whom he could not placate and who had no interest in the well-being of his people.

'Come, Greek.' The words hissed out of the darkness as the attendant lit his torch from one of the doorway fires, its leaping flame revealing a lithe, wiry physique clad only in a loincloth. As he padded ahead, the bobbing flame was the only mark of his progress. As usual he stopped at the entrance to the inner sanctum and waited impatiently for the old man, whose stooped form followed behind through the antechamber. The attendant had nothing but contempt for this *hellenos*, this Greek, with his bald head and unkempt beard, with his endless questions, who kept him waiting in the temple every night far beyond the appointed hour. By writing on his scrolls, the Greek was performing an act properly reserved for the priests.

Now the attendant's contempt had turned to loathing. That very morning his brother Seth had returned from Naucratis, the busy port nearby where the brown flood-water of the Nile debouched into the Great Middle Sea. Seth had been downcast and forlorn. They had entrusted a batch of cloth from their father's workshop in the Fayum to a Greek merchant who now claimed it was lost in a shipwreck. They were already full of suspicion that the wily Greeks would exploit their ignorance of commerce. Now their foreboding had hardened to hatred. It had been their last hope of escaping a life of drudgery in the temple, condemned to an existence little better than the baboons and cats that lurked in the dark recesses behind the columns.

The attendant peered venomously at the old man as he approached. Lawmaker, they called him. 'I will show you,' the

attendant whispered to himself, 'what my gods think of your laws, you Greek.'

The scene within the inner sanctum could not have been in greater contrast to the forbidding grandeur of the antechamber. A thousand pinpricks of light, like fireflies in the night, sprang from pottery oil lamps around a chamber hewn from the living rock. From the ceiling hung elaborate bronze incense burners, the wispy trails of smoke forming a layer of haze across the room. The walls were set with recesses like the burial niches of a necropolis; only here they were filled not with shrouded corpses and cinerary urns but with tall, open-topped jars brimming over with papyrus scrolls. As the two men descended a flight of steps, the reek of incense grew stronger and the silence was broken by a murmur that became steadily more distinct. Ahead lay two eagle-headed pillars which served as jambs for great bronze doors that opened towards them.

Facing them through the entrance were orderly rows of men, some sitting cross-legged on reed mats and wearing only loincloths, all hunched over low desks. Some were copying from scrolls laid out beside them; others were transcribing dictations from black-robed priests, their low recitations forming the softly undulating chant they had heard as they approached. This was the scriptorium, the chamber of wisdom, a vast repository of written and memorized knowledge passed down from priest to priest since the dawn of history, since even before the pyramid builders.

The attendant withdrew into the shadows of the stairwell. He was forbidden from entering the chamber, and now began the long wait until the time came to escort the Greek away. But this evening, instead of whiling away the hours in sullen resentment, he took a grim satisfaction in the events planned for the night.

The old man pushed past in his eagerness to get on. This was his final night in the temple, his last chance to fathom the mystery that had obsessed him since his previous visit. Tomorrow was the beginning of the month-long Festival of Thoth, when all newcomers were barred from the temple. He knew that an outsider would never again be granted an audience with the high priest.

In his haste the Greek stumbled into the room, dropping his scroll and pens with a clatter which momentarily distracted the scribes from their work. He muttered in annoyance and glanced around apologetically before collecting together his bundle and shuffling between the men towards an annexe at the far end of the chamber. He ducked under a low doorway and sat down on a reed mat, his previous visits giving him the only intimation that there might be another seated in the darkness before him.

'Solon the Lawmaker, I am Amenhotep the high priest.'

The voice was barely audible, little more than a whisper, and sounded as old as the gods. Again it spoke.

'You come to my temple at Saïs, and I receive you. You seek knowledge, and I give what the gods will impart.'

The formal salutations over, the Greek quickly arranged his white robe over his knees and readied his scroll. From the darkness Amenhotep leaned forward, just enough for his face to be caught in a flickering shaft of light. Solon had seen it many times before, but it still sent a shudder through his soul. It seemed disembodied, a luminous orb suspended in the darkness, like some spectre leering from the edge of the underworld. It was the face of a young man suspended in time, as if mummified; the skin was taut and translucent, almost parchment-like, and the eyes were glazed over with the milky sheen of blindness.

Amenhotep had been old before Solon was born. It was said

that he had been visited by Homer, in the time of Solon's great-grandfather, and that it was he who told of the siege of Troy, of Agamemnon and Hector and Helen, and of the wanderings of Odysseus. Solon would have dearly loved to ask him about this and other matters, but in so doing he would be violating his agreement not to question the old priest.

Solon leaned forward attentively, determined not to miss anything in this final visit. At length Amenhotep spoke again, his voice no more than a ghostly exhalation.

'Lawmaker, tell me whereof I spoke yesterday.'

Solon quickly unravelled his scroll, scanning the densely written lines. After a moment he began to read, translating the Greek of his script into the Egyptian language they were now speaking.

'A mighty empire once ruled the larger part of the world.' He peered down in the gloom. 'Its rulers lived in a vast citadel, up against the sea, a great maze of corridors like nothing seen since. They were ingenious workers in gold and ivory and fearless bullfighters. But then, for defying Poseidon the Sea God, in one mighty deluge the citadel was swallowed beneath the waves, its people never to be seen again.' Solon stopped reading and looked up expectantly. 'That is where you finished.'

After what seemed an interminable silence, the old priest spoke again, his lips scarcely moving and his voice little more than a murmur.

'Tonight, Lawmaker, I will tell you many things. But first let me speak of this lost world, this city of hubris smitten by the gods, this city they called Atlantis.'

Many hours later the Greek put down his pen, his hand aching from continuous writing, and wound up his scroll.

Amenhotep had finished. Now was the night of the full moon, the beginning of the Festival of Thoth, and the priests must prepare the temple before the supplicants arrived at dawn.

'What I have told you, Lawmaker, was here, and nowhere else,' Amenhotep had whispered, his crooked finger slowly tapping his head. 'By ancient decree we who cannot leave this temple, we high priests, must keep this wisdom as our treasure. It is only by command of the *astrologos*, the temple seer, that you are able to be here, by some will of divine Osiris.' The old priest leaned forward, a hint of a smile on his lips. 'And Lawmaker, remember: I do not speak in riddles, like your Greek oracles, but there may be riddles in what I recite. I speak a truth passed down, not a truth of my own devising. You have come for the last time. Go now.' As the deathly face receded into the darkness Solon slowly rose, hesitating momentarily and looking back one last time before stooping out into the now empty scriptorium and making his way towards the torchlit entranceway.

Rosy-fingered dawn was colouring the eastern sky, the faint glow tinting the moonlight which still danced across the waters of the Nile. The old Greek was alone, the attendant having left him as usual outside the precinct. He had sighed with satisfaction as he passed the temple columns, their palm-leaf capitals so unlike the simple Greek forms, and glanced for the last time at the Sacred Lake with its eerie phalanx of obelisks and human-headed sphinxes and colossal statues of the pharaohs. He had been pleased to leave all that behind and was walking contentedly along the dusty road towards the mud-brick village where he was staying. In his hands he clutched the precious scroll, and over his shoulder hung a satchel weighed down by a heavy purse. Tomorrow, before

leaving, he would make his offering of gold to the goddess Neith, as he had promised Amenhotep when they first spoke.

He was still lost in wonderment at what he had heard. A Golden Age, an age of splendour even the pharaohs could not have imagined. A race who mastered every art, in fire and stone and metal. Yet these were men, not giants, not like the Cyclops who built the ancient walls on the Acropolis. They had found the divine fruit and picked it. Their citadel shone like Mount Olympus. They had dared defy the gods, and the gods had struck them down.

Yet they had lived on.

In his reverie he failed to notice two dark forms who stole out from behind a wall as he was entering the village. The blow caught him completely unawares. As he slumped to the ground and darkness descended, he was briefly aware of hands pulling off his shoulder bag. One of the figures snatched the scroll from his grasp and tore it to shreds, throwing the fragments out of sight down a rubbish-strewn alley. The two figures disappeared as silently as they had come, leaving the Greek bloodied and unconscious in the dirt.

When he came to he would have no memory of that final night in the temple. In his remaining years he would rarely speak of his time in Saïs and never again put pen to paper. The wisdom of Amenhotep would never again leave the sanctity of the temple, and would seem lost for ever as the last priests died and the silt of the Nile enveloped the temple and its key to the deepest mysteries of the past.



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'I've never seen anything like it before!'

The words came from a drysuited diver who had just surfaced behind the stern of the research vessel, his voice breathless with excitement. After swimming over to the ladder, he removed his fins and mask and passed them up to the waiting barge chief. He hauled himself laboriously out of the water, his heavy cylinders causing him momentarily to lose balance, but a heave from above landed him safe and sound on the deck. His dripping shape was quickly surrounded by other members of the team who had been waiting on the dive platform.

Jack Howard made his way down from the bridge walkway and smiled at his friend. He still found it amazing that such a

bulky figure could be so agile underwater. As he negotiated the clutter of dive equipment on the aft deck he called out, his mocking tone a familiar part of their banter over the years.

'We thought you'd swum back to Athens for a gin and tonic beside your father's pool. What've you found, the lost treasure of the Queen of Sheba?'

Costas Kazantzakis shook his head impatiently as he struggled along the railing towards Jack. He was too agitated even to bother taking off his equipment. 'No,' he panted. 'I'm serious. Take a look at this.'

Jack silently prayed that the news was good. It had been a solo dive to investigate a silted-up shelf on top of the submerged volcano, and the two divers who had followed Costas would soon be surfacing from the decompression stop. There would be no more dives that season.

Costas unclipped a carabiner and passed over an underwater camcorder housing, pressing the replay button as he did so. The other members of the team converged behind the tall Englishman as he flipped open the miniature LCD screen and activated the video. Within moments Jack's sceptical grin had given way to a look of blank amazement.

The underwater scene was illuminated by powerful floodlights which gave colour to the gloom almost one hundred metres below. Two divers were kneeling on the seabed using an airlift, a large vacuum tube fed by a low-pressure air hose which sucked up the silt covering the site. One diver wrestled to keep the airlift in position while the other gently wafted sediment up towards the mouth of the tube, the action revealing artefacts just as an archaeologist on land would use a trowel.

As the camera zoomed in, the object of the divers' attention came dramatically into view. The dark shape visible upslope

was not rock but a concreted mass of metal slabs laid in interlocking rows like shingles.

'Oxhide ingots,' Jack said excitedly. 'Hundreds of them. And there's a cushioning layer of brushwood dunnage, just as Homer described in the ship of Odysseus.'

Each slab was about a metre long with protruding corners, their shape resembling the flayed and stretched hide of an ox. They were the characteristic copper ingots of the Bronze Age, dating back more than three and a half thousand years.

'It looks like the early type,' one of the students on the team ventured. 'Sixteenth century BC?'

'Unquestionably,' Jack said. 'And still in rows just as they were laden, suggesting the hull may be preserved underneath. We could have the oldest ship ever discovered.'

Jack's excitement mounted as the camera traversed down the slope. Between the ingots and the divers loomed three giant pottery jars, each as tall as a man and over a metre in girth. They were identical to jars that Jack had seen in the storerooms at Knossos on Crete. Inside, they could see stacks of stemmed cups painted with beautifully naturalistic octopuses and marine motifs, their swirling forms at one with the undulations of the seabed.

There was no mistaking the pottery of the Minoans, the remarkable island civilization that flourished at the time of the Egyptian Middle and New Kingdoms but then disappeared suddenly, around 1400 BC. Knossos, the fabled labyrinth of the Minotaur, had been one of the most sensational discoveries of the last century. Following close on the heels of Heinrich Schliemann, excavator of Troy, the English archaeologist Arthur Evans had set out to prove that the legend of the Athenian prince Theseus and his lover Ariadne was as grounded in real events as the Trojan War. The sprawling palace just south of Heraklion was the key to a lost

civilization he dubbed Minoan after their legendary king. The maze of passageways and chambers gave extraordinary credence to the story of Theseus' battle with the Minotaur, and showed that the myths of the Greeks centuries later were closer to real history than anyone had dared think.

'Yes!' Jack punched the air with his free hand, his normal reserve giving way to the emotion of a truly momentous discovery. It was the culmination of years of single-minded passion, the fulfilment of a dream that had driven him since boyhood. It was a find that would rival Tutankhamun's tomb, a discovery that would secure his team front place in the annals of archaeology.

For Jack these images were enough. Yet there was more, much more, and he stood transfixed by the screen. The camera panned down to the divers on a low shelf below the clump of ingots.

'Probably the stern compartment.' Costas was pointing at the screen. 'Just beyond this ledge is a row of stone anchors and a wooden steering oar.'

Immediately in front was an area of shimmering yellow which looked like the reflection of the floodlights off the sediment in the water. As the camera zoomed in, there was a collective gasp of astonishment.

'That's not sand,' the student whispered. 'That's gold!'

Now they knew what they were looking at, the image was one of surpassing splendour. In the centre was a magnificent golden chalice fit for King Minos himself. It was decorated in relief with an elaborate bullfighting scene. Alongside lay a life-sized golden statue of a woman, her arms raised in supplication and her headdress wreathed in snakes. Her bare breasts had been sculpted from ivory, and a flickering arc of colour showed where her neck was embellished with jewels. Nestled in front was a bundle of golden-handled bronze

swords, their blades decorated with fighting scenes made from inlaid silver and blue enamel.

The most brilliant reflection came from the area just in front of the divers. Each waft of the hand seemed to reveal another gleaming object. Jack could make out gold bars, royal seals, jewellery and delicate diadem crowns of intertwined leaves, all jumbled together as if they had once been inside a treasure chest.

The view suddenly veered up towards the ascent line and the screen abruptly went blank. In the stunned silence that followed, Jack lowered the camera and looked at Costas.

'I think we're in business,' he said quietly.

Jack had staked his reputation on a far-flung proposal. In the decade since completing his doctorate he had become fixated on discovering a Minoan wreck, a find that would clinch his theory about the maritime supremacy of the Minoans in the Bronze Age. He had become convinced that the most likely spot was a group of reefs and islets some seventy nautical miles north-east of Knossos.

Yet for weeks they had searched in vain. A few days earlier their hopes had been raised and then dashed by the discovery of a Roman wreck, a dive Jack expected to be his last of the season. Today was to have been a chance to evaluate new equipment for their next project. Once again Jack's luck had held out.

'Mind giving me a hand?'

Costas had slumped exhausted beside the stern railing on *Seaquest*, his equipment still unbuckled and the water on his face now joined by rivulets of sweat. The late afternoon sun of the Aegean drenched his form in light. He looked up at the lean physique that towered over him. Jack was an unlikely scion of one of England's most ancient families, his easy grace

the only hint of a privileged lineage. His father had been an adventurer who had eschewed his background and used his wealth to take his family away with him to remote locations around the world. His unconventional upbringing had left Jack an outsider, a man most at ease in his own company and beholden to nobody. He was a born leader who commanded respect on the bridge and the foredeck.

'What would you do without me?' Jack asked with a grin as he lifted the tanks off Costas' back.

The son of a Greek shipping tycoon, Costas had spurned the playboy lifestyle which was his for the asking and opted for ten years at Stanford and MIT, emerging as an expert in submersible technology. Surrounded by a vast jumble of tools and parts that only he could navigate, Costas would routinely conjure up wondrous inventions like some latter-day Caractacus Pott. His passion for a challenge was matched by his gregarious nature, a vital asset in a profession where teamwork was essential.

The two men had first met at the NATO base at Izmir in Turkey when Jack had been seconded to the Naval Intelligence School and Costas was a civilian adviser to UNANTSUB, the United Nations anti-submarine warfare research establishment. A few years later Jack invited Costas to join him at the International Maritime University, the research institution which had been their home for more than ten years now. In that time Jack had seen his remit as director of field operations at IMU grow to four ships and more than two hundred personnel, and despite an equally burgeoning role in the engineering department, Costas always seemed to find a way to join Jack when things got exciting.

'Thanks, Jack.' Costas slowly stood up, too tired to say more. He only came as high as Jack's shoulders and had a barrel chest and forearms inherited from generations of

Greek sponge fishermen and sailors, with a personality to match. This project had been close to his heart as well, and he was suddenly drained by the excitement of discovery. It was he who had set the expedition in train, using his father's connections with the Greek government. Although they were now in international waters, the support of the Hellenic Navy had been invaluable, not least in keeping them supplied with the cylinders of purified gas which were vital for trimix diving.

'Oh, I almost forgot.' Costas' round, tanned face broke into a grin as he reached into his stabilizer jacket. 'Just in case you thought I'd faked the whole thing.'

He extracted a package swaddled in protective neoprene and handed it over, a triumphant gleam in his eye. Jack was unprepared for the weight and his hand momentarily dropped. He undid the wrapping and gasped in astonishment.

It was a solid metal disc about the diameter of his hand, its surface as lustrous as if it were brand new. There was no mistaking the deep hue of unalloyed gold, a gold refined to the purity of bullion.

Unlike many of his academic colleagues Jack never pretended to be unmoved by treasure, and for a moment he let the thrill of holding several kilogrammes of gold wash through him. As he held it up and angled it towards the sun, the disc gave off a dazzling flash of light, as if it were releasing a great burst of energy pent up over the millennia.

He was even more elated when he saw the sun glint off markings on the surface. He lowered the disc into Costas' shadow and traced his fingers over the indentations, all of them exquisitely executed on one convex side.

In the centre was a curious rectilinear device, like a large letter H, with a short line dropping from the crossbar and four lines extending like combs from either side. Around the

edge of the disc were three concentric bands, each one divided into twenty compartments. Each compartment contained a different symbol stamped into the metal. To Jack the outer circle looked like pictograms, symbols that conveyed the meaning of a word or phrase. At a glance he could make out a man's head, a walking man, a paddle, a boat and a sheaf of corn. The inner compartments were aligned with those along the edge, but instead contained linear signs. Each of these was different but they seemed more akin to letters of the alphabet than to pictograms.

Costas stood and watched Jack examine the disc, totally absorbed. His eyes were alight in a way Costas had seen before. Jack was touching the Age of Heroes, a time shrouded in myth and legend, yet a period which had been spectacularly revealed in great palaces and citadels, in sublime works of art and brilliantly honed weapons of war. He was communing with the ancients in a way that was only possible with a shipwreck, holding a priceless artefact that had not been tossed away but had been cherished to the moment of catastrophe. Yet it was an artefact shrouded in mystery, one he knew would draw him on without respite until all its secrets were out.

Jack turned the disc over several times and looked at the inscriptions again, his mind racing back to undergraduate courses on the history of writing. He had seen something like this before. He made a mental note to email the image to Professor James Dillen, his old mentor at Cambridge University and the world's leading authority on the ancient scripts of Greece.

Jack passed the disc back to Costas. For a moment the two men looked at each other, their eyes ablaze with excitement. Jack hurried over to join the team kitting up beside the stern ladder. The sight of all that gold had redoubled his fervour.

The greatest threat to archaeology lay in international waters, a free-for-all where no country held jurisdiction. Every attempt to impose a global sea law had ended in failure. The problems of policing such a huge area seemed insurmountable. Yet advances in technology meant that remote-operated submersibles, of the type used to discover the *Titanic*, were now little more expensive than a car. Deep-water exploration that was once the preserve of a few institutes was now open to all, and had led to the wholesale destruction of historic sites. Organized pillagers with state-of-the-art technology were stripping the seabed with no record being made for posterity and artefacts disappearing for ever into the hands of private collectors. And the IMU teams were not only up against legitimate operators. Looted antiquities had become major currency in the criminal underworld.

Jack glanced up at the timekeeper's platform and felt a familiar surge of adrenalin as he signalled his intention to dive. He began carefully to assemble his equipment, setting his dive computer and checking the pressure of his cylinders, his demeanour methodical and professional as if there were nothing special about this day.

In truth he could barely contain his excitement.