

RLAKERS
ONE DAY *in*
ATLANTIS



THE FIRST EIGHT
CHAPTERS OF
ATLANTIS
TWILIGHT OF MANKIND

Copyright © 2015-2016 The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including the use of information storage and retrieval systems, without express written permission from the copyright owner.

Certain stock imagery © iStockphoto.

Cover design, internal design, and maps © 2016 The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC.

The Orbital Defense Corps™ and the ODC Roundel circle/star design are trademarks and service marks of The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC.

Four Powers™, the power, prince, and pawn pieces, and all associated logos are trademarks of The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, institutions, establishments, places, events, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and/or are used fictitiously. Events or situations described in this book with reference to real locations, institutions, establishments, and/or actual living persons are historical, merely coincidental, and/or fictionalized with the intent to provide the reader with a sense of reality and authenticity.

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid, without knowledge of the author or publisher. The author and publisher claim no rights in, and expressly disclaim any liability potentially arising from, the accessing and/or use of any referenced websites. Neither the author nor the publisher guarantees, approves, or endorses the information, products, and/or services available on such websites, nor does any reference to any website indicate any association with, or endorsement by, the author or publisher.

First Printing, October 2016

ISBN-13: 978-1534796799

ISBN-10: 1534796797

THE AUTHOR HAS RATED THIS NARRATIVE

RL-18+

INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 18

For descriptive scenes of violence against both animals and humans, frightening portrayals of malevolent supernatural beings, depictions of societal debauchery and human sacrifice, and references to depraved sexual practices and denigration of women.

No part of this story is appropriate for children.

For Sarah,
who was with me
every step of this adventure



THE PANTHOLON

THE FOUR

S'MAEL	<i>the Stag</i>	god of the forests and all verdant life
R'ZUUS	<i>the Ram</i>	god of the skies and the mountain reaches
M'LAAK	<i>the Bull</i>	god of fulfillment
E'RIIS	<i>the Goat</i>	god of war

THE SIX

H'PHAEST'M	<i>the Chimera</i>	creator god
A'BAAD'N	<i>the Locust</i>	destroyer god
H'KETH'A	<i>the Mandrake</i>	god of procreation
X'NUUB'S	<i>the Hound</i>	god of the dead
B'KSEID'N	<i>the Crocodile</i>	god of the inland sea
R'HAAB'A	<i>the Kraken</i>	god of the greater sea

THE THIRTEEN

G'DEER'L	god of the morning
M'LATH'Z	god of the evening
B'STEM'S	god of the hunt and wild animals
D'NYYS'S	god of crop and vine
S'TARO'T	god of beauty
E'PHEN'X	god of music and poetry
G'BAAL'M	god of storms
D'GAAN'U	god of fertility
Y'NCUUB'S	god of seduction
I'THIN'I	god of knowledge
V'LAAB'C	god of riddles
M'THEM'T	god of order
L'TEET'M	god of chaos

THE CALENDAR

SEASON OF COLOR

First Moon	<i>30 days</i>
Bitter Moon	<i>29 days</i>
Dream Moon	<i>30 days</i>

SEASON OF TWILIGHT

Kestrel Moon	<i>29 days</i>
Wet Moon	<i>30 days</i>
Bull Moon	<i>29 days</i>

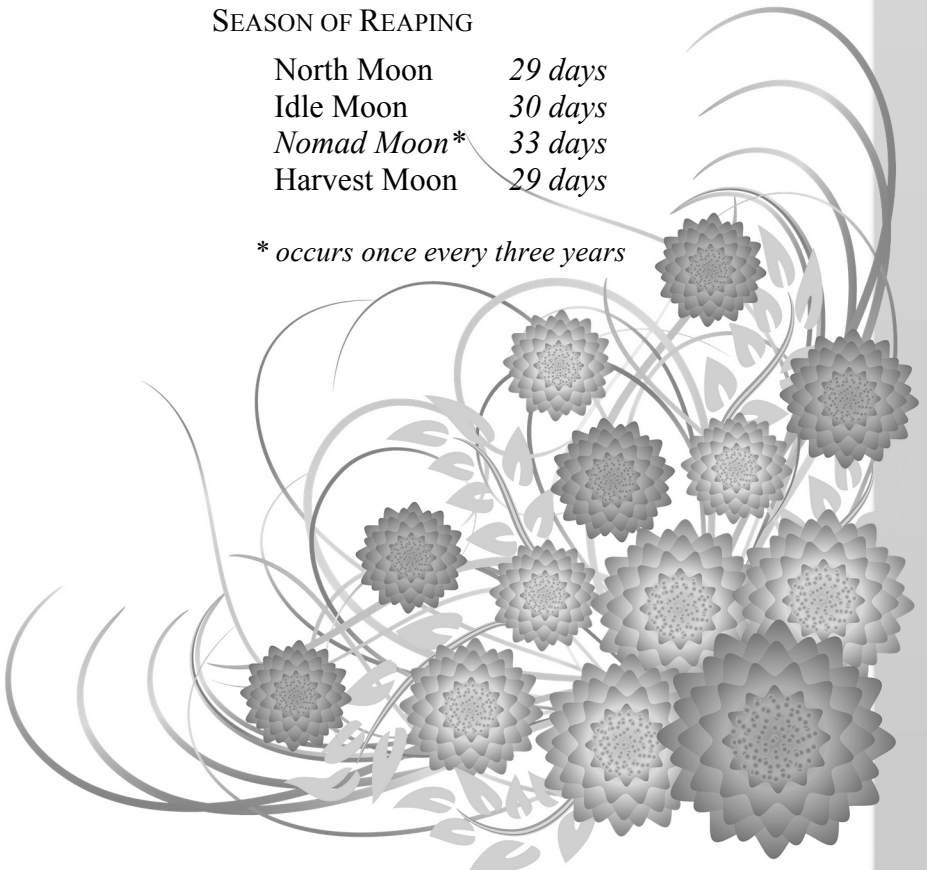
SEASON OF SOWING

Spring Moon	<i>30 days</i>
Bright Moon	<i>29 days</i>
Blade Moon	<i>30 days</i>

SEASON OF REAPING

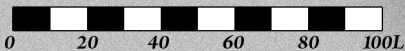
North Moon	<i>29 days</i>
Idle Moon	<i>30 days</i>
<i>Nomad Moon*</i>	<i>33 days</i>
Harvest Moon	<i>29 days</i>

** occurs once every three years*

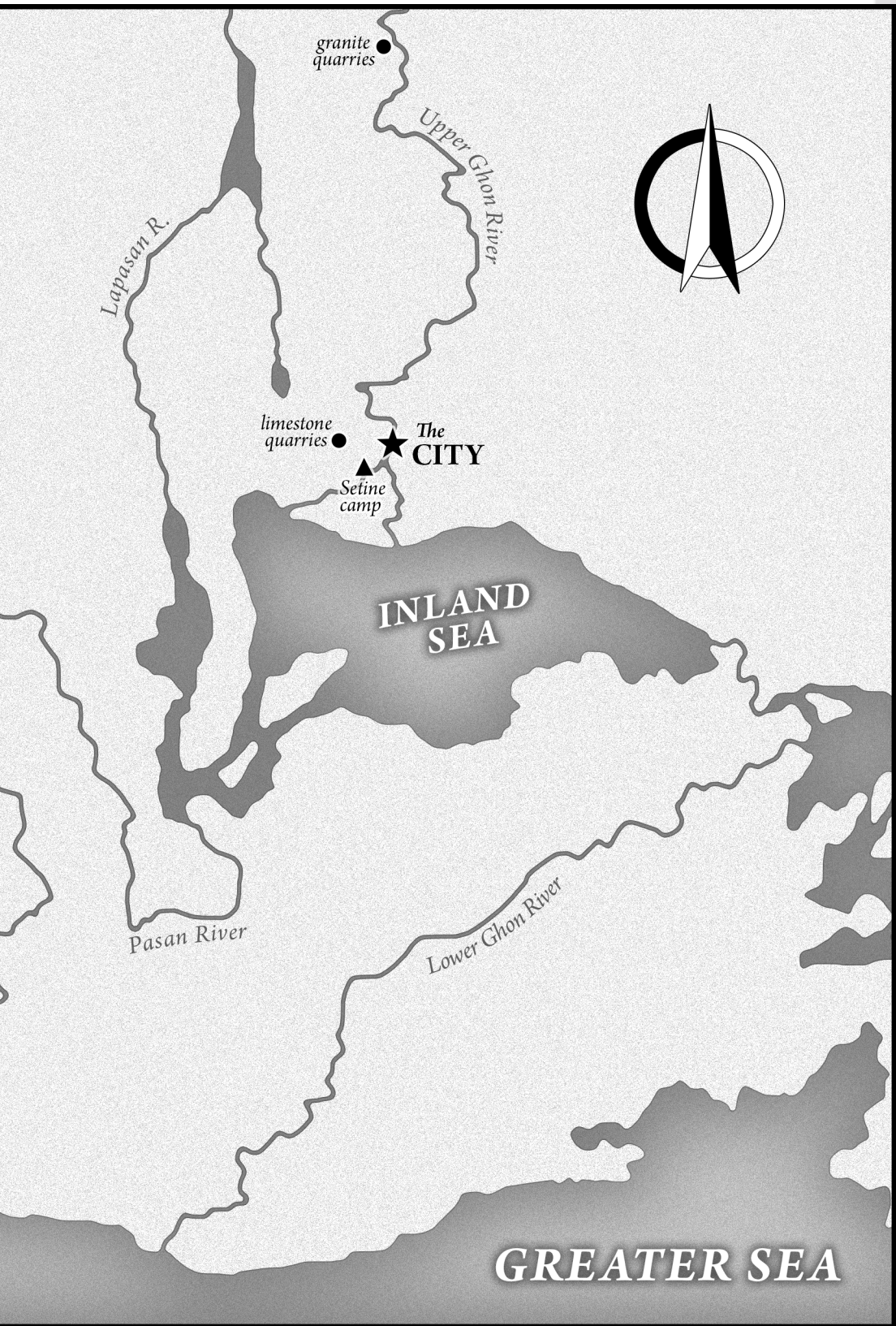


The
**KNOWN
WORLD**

Scale 1:10,000,000
One Inch Equals Approx. 50 Leagues



GREATER SEA



granite quarries

Upper Ghon River

Lapasas R.

limestone quarries

Setine camp

The CITY

INLAND SEA

Pasan River

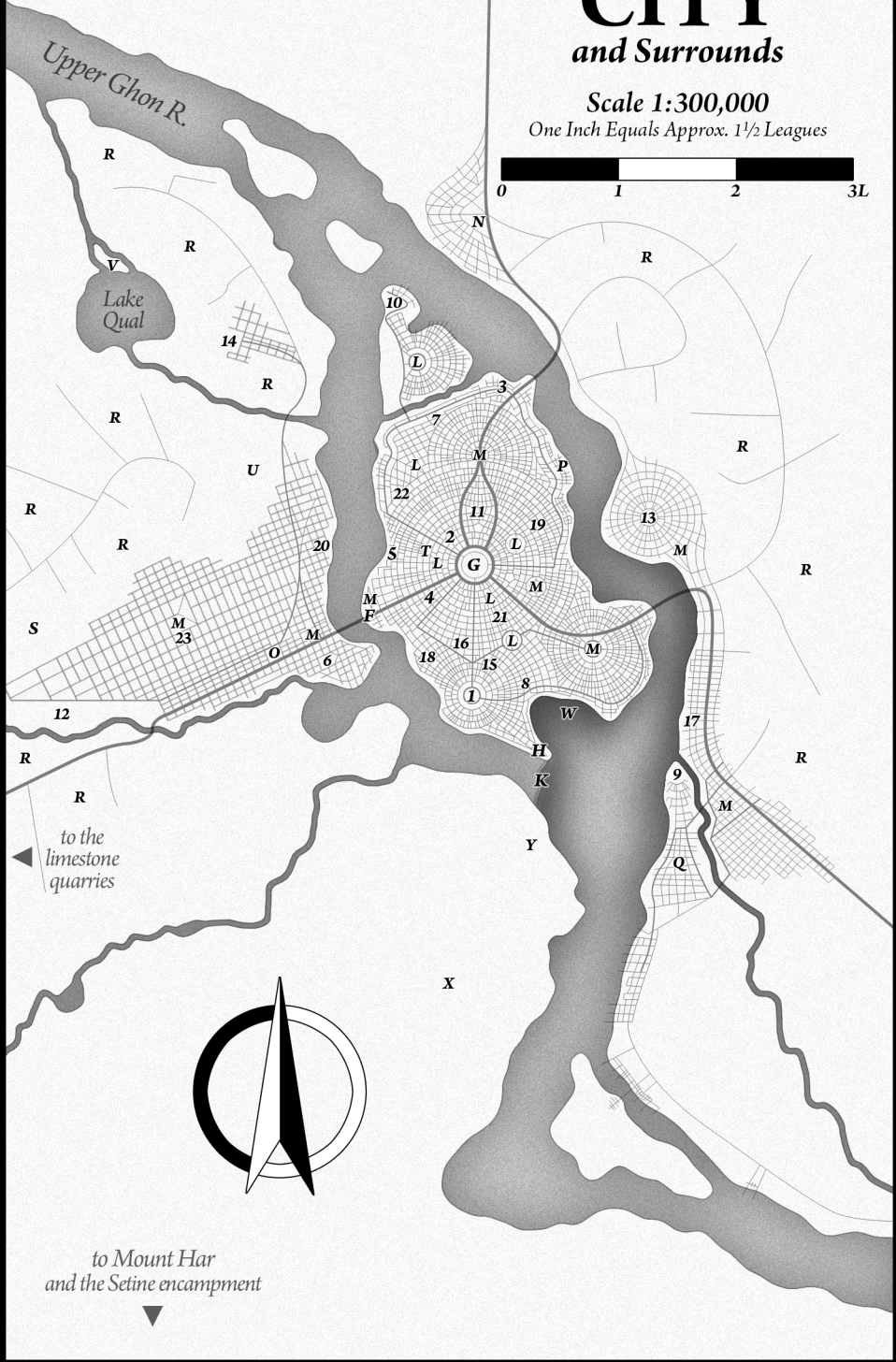
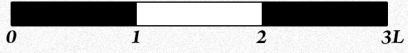
Lower Ghon River

GREATER SEA

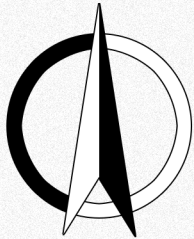
▲
to the
granite
quarries

The CITY and Surrounds

Scale 1:300,000
One Inch Equals Approx. 1½ Leagues



◀
to the
limestone
quarries

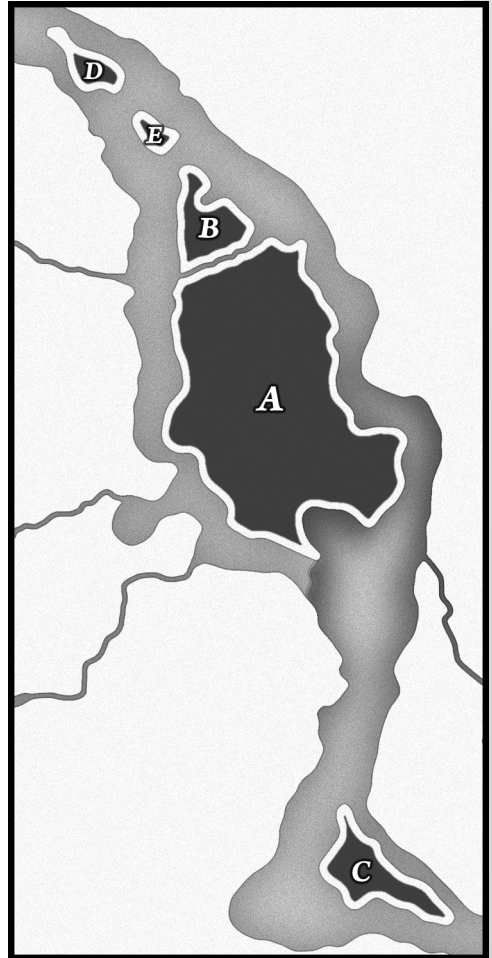


to Mount Har
and the Setine encampment
▼

LEGEND

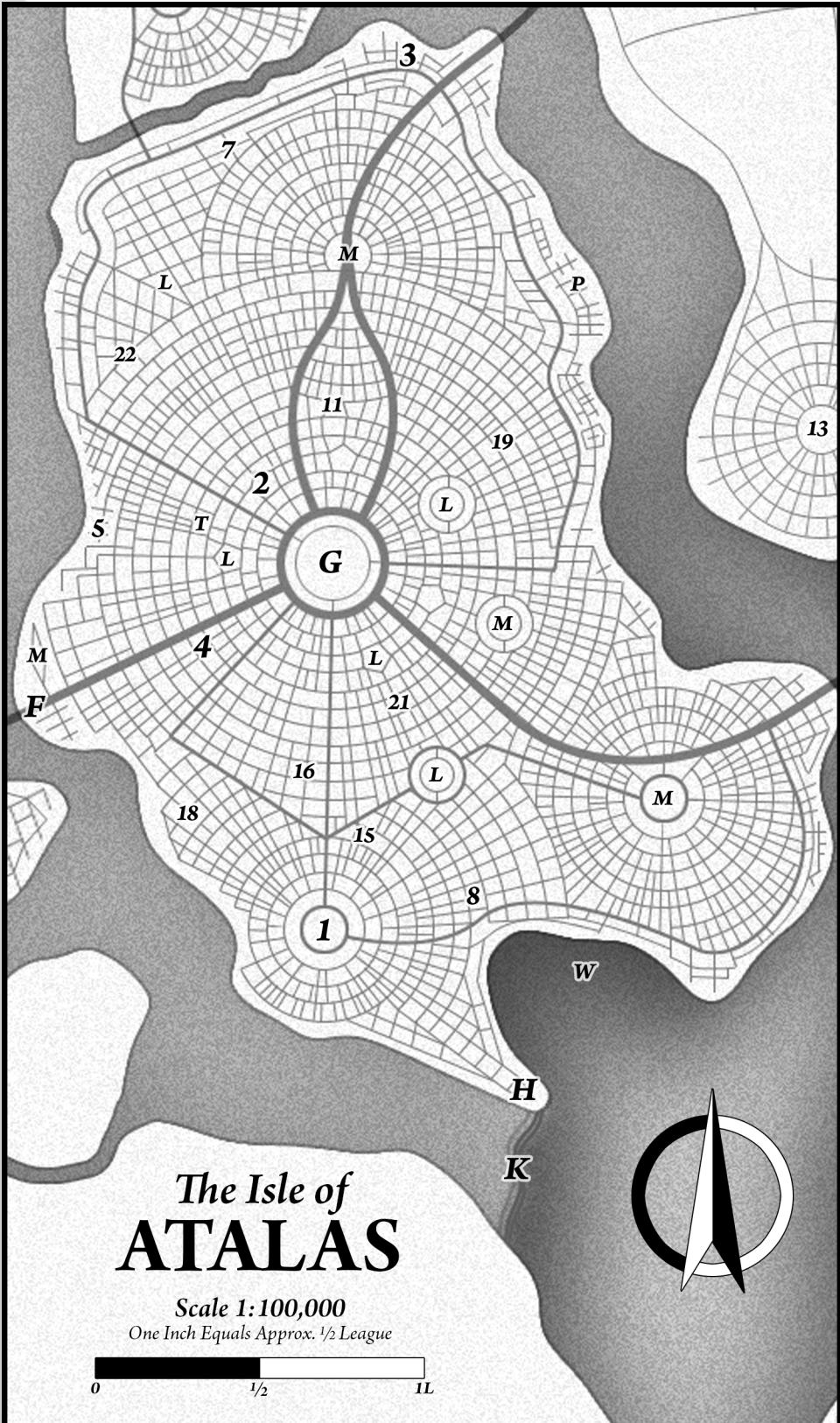
Landmarks

- A. Isle of Atalas
- B. Islet of Mored
- C. Islet of Jael
- D. Islet of Shael
- E. Islet of Lemek
- F. Falcon of Atalas
- G. Oldtown (Hannoch)
- H. Promontory
- K. The Falls
- L. Arenas
- M. Bazaars
- N. Stonemasons Guild
- O. Sawyers Guild
- P. Warehouse District
- Q. Fisher District
- R. Outlying Farms
- S. Stables of R'ZUUS
- T. D'Akaio's Estate
- U. "Newtown" settlement
- V. Leviathan's Lair
- W. Ghonjin Cliffs
- X. Lovers' Bluff
- Y. Rendezvous Clearing



Temples, Palaces, and Compounds

- | | | |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1. S'MAEL | 9. B'KSEID'N | 17. G'BAAL'M |
| 2. R'ZUUS | 10. R'HAAB'A | 18. D'GAAN'U |
| 3. M'LAAK | 11. G'DEER'L | 19. Y'NCUUB'S |
| 4. E'RIIS | 12. M'LATH'Z | 20. I'THIN'I |
| 5. H'PHAEST'M | 13. B'STEM'S | 21. V'LAAB'C |
| 6. A'BAAD'N | 14. D'NYYS'S | 22. M'THEM'T |
| 7. H'KETH'A | 15. S'TARO'T | 23. L'TEET'M |
| 8. X'NUUB'S | 16. E'PHEN'X | |

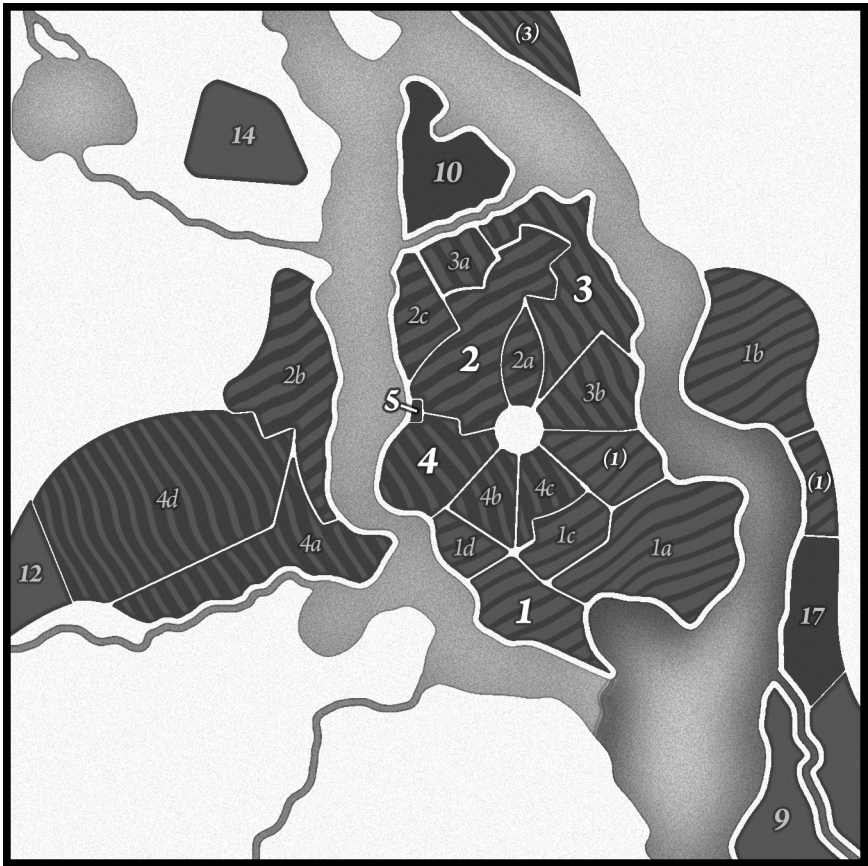


The Isle of **ATALAS**

Scale 1:100,000

One Inch Equals Approx. 1/2 League



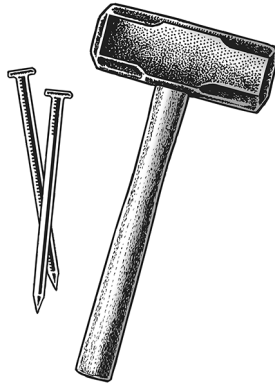


POLITICAL ALLIANCES

1. S'MAEL	2. R'ZUUS	<i>unaligned</i>
1a. X'NUUB'S	2a. G'DEER'L	5. H'PHAEST'M
1b. B'STEM'S	2b. I'THIN'I	9. B'KSEID'N
1c. S'TARO'T	2c. M'THEM'T	10. R'HAAB'A
1d. D'GAAN'U		12. M'LATH'Z
 		14. D'NYYS'S
3. M'LAAK	4. E'RIIS	17. G'BAAL'M
3a. H'KETH'A	4a. A'BAAD'N	
3b. Y'NCUUB'S	4b. E'PHEN'X	
	4c. V'LAAB'C	
	4d. L'TEET'M	

ATLANTIS

PROLOGUE



The sun had been hinting at its impending arrival for perhaps an hour when it finally appeared over the mountains to the west. The fiery orb was magnificent in its splendor, instantly dispelling what predawn gloom remained in the small valley where the Setines made their encampment.

Yefet gazed over the collection of ramshackle buildings and the flocks at pasture, now easily visible from his vantage at the opening to the mountain pass. But even in full light of day, there remained no sign that his wayward brother was even moving yet.

He made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. An hour of daylight already lost; how much longer would Chem delay them?

“I’m tempted to kill him and start over,” Father grumbled. “Your mother is not yet past her childbearing years. He would be easily replaced.”

Yefet hid his grudging smile, turning to check the straps on one of the pack animals. Despite the older man’s words, Yefet harbored no doubts about his father’s love. “We could just leave him.”

Father sighed. “I wish. But no, I promised he could come. It’s time he saw the City for himself.” For a moment, it looked like Father might say more, but he subsided.

At length, there came a distant shout. Chem appeared an instant later from out of a copse of trees, legs churning, a lamb draped across his shoulders. He shouted again, and this time Yefet could barely make out his words: "I'm coming!" The young man swerved towards the flock long enough to unburden himself of the lamb, handing it off to Grandfather, who had been on night watch; then he put on a new burst of speed and angled for the mountain pass.

"I thought I sent him after that lamb last night," Father muttered as he turned away, pulling the first animal in the pack train after him.

"At least he got to it eventually," Yefet pointed out.

"If he'd been paying any attention on watch yesterday, the creature wouldn't have wandered off in the first place."

The young man caught up with them a few minutes later, and the three fell into the rhythm of their journey along the narrow path. Yefet's irritation soon evaporated as he took in the sights and sounds of a beautiful mountain morning. The air was always pleasantly humid, but at this altitude, at this time of the day, the dew was cool and crisp against his bare skin.

Chem passed the time by wondering aloud at the glory of the City. "I've heard it said that the buildings scrape the sky," he declared, a touch of awe in his voice. At times like this, he sounded younger than his fourteen summers.

"I've seen some as high as four or five stories," Yefet admitted. "Some of the monuments and temples are even taller." This was his nineteenth summer, and he had accompanied Father to the City perhaps a dozen times by now.

"And have you been to the games?" Chem asked excitedly.

"No, but I've heard about them," Yefet responded soberly.

"I hope we have time to see one."

Yefet barked a laugh. He was tempted to tell Chem they *would* have had time if he'd not delayed them, but the truth was that Father would never allow it. He did not approve of bloodsport. He did not approve of much in the City, truth be told.

They emerged from the pass an hour later, and the world opened up around them. It was a clear day, allowing them to see for leagues. And for the first time since catching up to them, Chem fell silent. His eyes widened, and he stared in wonder at the glory of the City, stretching into the distance before them.



The City steadily disappeared from view again as they descended the mountain, until they were once more surrounded only by nature. They picked their way through an open forest area, Father guiding them unerringly to a stream, which they forded. Not long after, and not long before midday, they met up with the highway running southwest out of the City.

The pack train made good time along the packed earth, at which Chem stared with amazement. Yefet knew his younger brother had never seen such a straight path, such a broad path, such a *flat* path, devoid of significant erosion or muddy patches. But there were soon other sights to draw his attention.

They passed through outlying farms, and then a few small hamlets, and traffic along the highway steadily picked up. There were more than a few wheeled conveyances, and Chem studied these with great interest. Wagons were simply not feasible amidst the steep climes where the Setines made their home, so they represented one more amazing sight on the long list of innovations he would encounter for the first time today.

It was an hour after midday when the family finally reached the City proper, marked by the appearance of squat one-story buildings constructed entirely of stone. Wagons

forgotten, Chem stared at the square corners and perfectly planed white and gray surfaces of the buildings. Where he came from, everything was constructed in such a way that it could be taken down and rebuilt elsewhere with a minimum of effort. Even the structure Father had begun erecting—the project that had brought them to the City today for supplies—was to be framed and sided entirely of timber, massive though it would someday be.

Yefet watched his brother's face as wonder after wonder was revealed to him. He remembered his own first introduction to the City, just a few summers earlier. He remembered being similarly amazed, though he questioned whether he was ever as awestruck as Chem appeared now. And even now, his brother had yet to see the most amazing of what the City had to offer.

They had left the highway earlier to avoid a snarl in traffic, more people and horses than Chem had ever seen, jammed so tightly the road became impassable. Now they were on a side street, a cobble-paved roadway lined with regularly-spaced trees, cutting back across the highway toward the bazaar. As they passed through the intersection, the pack animals' hooves click-clacking on the cobbles, Yefet directed Chem's attention toward City-center.

The young man stopped short. Several hundred yards up the thoroughfare, the roadway became a wide stone bridge over open water; at the other end of that expanse, an immense archway welcomed travelers to the isle on which the City had first been built. And clearly discernable, even from this distance, was the relief jutting from the upper half of that archway—the likeness of a massive falcon, wings spread wide, talons splayed for attack.

“Son!” Father called sharply. Chem blinked, saw he was in the path of an oncoming horse-drawn chariot, and dashed out of the intersection.

The City sounds had been growing steadily in volume, and Father finally called a halt as they entered the bazaar, a commercial area populated by vendors loudly hawking wares, their merchandise arranged artfully beneath colorful awnings. Father spent a few minutes taking their measure, then turned to Yefet. “I should find what we need here. There’s enough competition that I’ll not be gouged too severely.”

“What of Mother’s fabric?”

“That, I’ll need you to go fetch. You remember the place?”

Yefet nodded.

“Two bolts of spun cotton, dyed crimson.”

“I remember.”

Father handed him a gold stick, which Yefet surreptitiously pocketed. “Don’t dawdle,” Father instructed. “I want to be gone from this place long before the evening rites begin.”

The transfer of money had finally drawn Chem’s attention from the sights and sounds around him. “Where is Yefet going? Can I go too?”

Father paused, his gaze steady on Yefet.

“Is he going to the isle?” Chem persisted. “Father, I want to go with him! I want to see *everything* in the City!”

Still Father remained silent, and Yefet could see the uncertainty warring within him. Perhaps even a bit of fear.

Speaking quietly, Yefet said, “We are protected, are we not? You’ve said so before when we’ve come for supplies.”

Father sighed. “It’s not his physical safety I’m concerned about.” He turned finally to measure Chem with his eyes, and then his shoulders drooped. Chem let out a whoop, and Father placed hands on both his sons’ shoulders. “Hear me clearly: straight there, straight back. You understand?”

The boys indicated their agreement and turned away, Chem dashing off at a pace far faster than Yefet would prefer.

Half an hour later, they were passing beneath the wings of the Falcon of Atalas, setting foot on the great isle that stood at the center of the River Ghon.



If the buildings they had encountered on the outskirts were a few degrees more impressive than the humble dwellings of the Setines, the elegance of the isle's architecture was in a class all its own. Towering above the boys—four, five, and even six stories high—each of the structures here was a work of art, individually unique, and yet following a consistent style that allowed them to exist together in the same portrait, harmonizing to enhance the beauty and magnificence of the City. Many of the structures abutted, with only narrow alleys running between them; between other buildings, majestic banyan trees stretched to the sky, their immense trunks often as wide as the neighboring structures. Their interconnected boughs formed a canopy, casting shade over the patios that Yefet knew existed atop many of the buildings here.

So too had the crowd grown more dense and varied. Such nobility in the faces and comportment of the isle's citizens, such extravagance in their attire. And the women! Faces painted exquisitely, fingernails enameled in vibrant colors, delicate tattooed designs climbing up and around their exposed arms like filigree. Clothed in so much rich fabric, and yet so little of it covering their most private regions. His head turning to track a particularly exposed woman, Chem only narrowly avoided a collision with a second.

The horses were only slightly less majestic than their owners, appearing periodically in teams of two, four, or six, drawing chariots or carriages after themselves. And then there were the small squads of soldiers in matching, highly-polished armor, gripping matching, highly-polished swords or spears. They formed moving perimeters around whatever high-ranking

individuals stood or sat in those conveyances, and the way the soldiers moved in lockstep clearly struck Chem's fancy.

Great columns fronted many of the buildings, and hiding in their shadows, great doorways provided admittance to the homes beyond. It was easy to miss just how large those entrances were, until one compared their height to that of the soldiers who were often on guard here as well. Curious, Chem asked, "Why are the doors so tall? I could stand on your shoulders and still go through!"

In response, Yefet directed his brother's attention to a man who had just turned onto their street and was now striding in their general direction. Though handsome and muscular, there was nothing in his appearance to set him apart from the crowd, save for the fact that he stood more than head and shoulders above everyone around him. Even the tallest man in his vicinity came no higher than his powerful biceps.

Eyes falling on that man, Chem's motion was arrested yet again, prompting another near collision. Yefet hurriedly pulled him out of the flow of traffic, to stand beneath one of the smaller trees lining the street.

"Who is he?" Chem breathed.

Yefet shrugged. "One of the Eidolon."

Chem blinked at this. "There are... others like him?"

"Yes. How many, I do not know."

"I'd heard of the heroes of the games, that they were like giants, but I didn't take that literally." A smile of wonder crept onto Chem's face. "How are they so tall? Is it the food they eat?"

"It's just how they are. They're demigods," Yefet said uncomfortably. "You've truly not heard Father speak of them?"

Chem gave his brother a wry smile. "You know Father doesn't like speaking of the City or its people." He turned back to watch the Eidolon as he passed nearest them.

To Yefet, it seemed like the demigod was well aware of the crowd's eyes upon him, that he relished being the center of attention. Even as the boys watched, the huge man winked lasciviously at a passing woman, who began fanning herself furiously.

"They're... not fully human," Yefet said into the silence of their conversation. "Eidolon are the children of the local gods, but... with human mothers."

Chem's mouth dropped open slightly. "The gods can *do* that?"

"Apparently." Yefet wished suddenly he hadn't mentioned the parentage of the Eidolon. "But you know they're not really—"

"Hey, there's another!" his brother interrupted, not paying him any mind. "A *woman* Eidolon!" Without another word, he raced off in the direction of the statuesque woman.

"Chem! Wait!"

It took a few minutes for Yefet to reel his brother in, but soon enough they were back on track. They took a wrong turn somewhere along the way, but ultimately they found the draper's shop. All Yefet had to do was ask a passerby where the closest stadium stood; he remembered the shop as being across a wide boulevard from one of the pits where the City's bloodsport was conducted.

As they walked down that boulevard, Yefet realized his heart was beating faster. He had never liked the City's crowds, and the press of people along this street was the worst they'd yet encountered on the isle. It took him a moment to realize that many in the crowd were pushing toward the tall stadium structure. It wasn't long before Chem realized that too.

"That's where the games happen, isn't it?" he said excitedly.

Yefet didn't answer aloud; he simply grabbed a fistful of his brother's tunic and dragged him the rest of the way to the shop. Chem scowled but let himself be dragged, even though

he was old enough now that Yefet really couldn't force him to do anything.

Once out of the flow of traffic, Yefet turned him around and looked him in the eye as Chem smoothed out his shirt irritably. "Chem. Forget about the gladiators, the fighting, all of it. We're here for fabric, then we're leaving straightaway." He paused. "Believe me, you do *not* want to be here when the sun goes down."

Chem gave him a mocking smile. "But I thought we were *protected*?" He made to say something more, but he was cut off by the sound of an inhuman cry, a throaty roar that seemed to turn the air thick around them. Many of the passersby also fell silent, and then a nervous tittering swept the crowd. A second roar split the air, starting deep and guttural, ending in a barking cough that resonated up and down the cobbled street.

Chem's head swiveled back and forth. "What *is* that?"

Yefet's heart was beating even faster now. "Some sort of animal, I'd wager." He pulled his brother into the shop after him. "Probably for the games."

"They fight animals in the games?"

There was a man browsing fabrics just inside the door, and he turned with a smile as he heard the tail end of the boys' conversation. When it was clear Yefet wasn't going to answer Chem's question, the man asked, "You've never been to a game?"

Chem shook his head.

"Why, there's nothing like them..."

As his brother fell into conversation with the man, Yefet sought out the shopkeeper. As much as he wished to curtail his brother's sick fascination with bloodsport, interrupting their conversation would not accomplish that. Best to get what they came for and return to the outskirts as quickly as possible.

He soon found himself in the charge of the shopkeeper's assistant, who asked what Yefet needed.

"Two bolts of crimson, please."

The assistant raised an eyebrow. "Two bolts of...?"

"Crimson," Yefet repeated. "Oh, cotton. Sorry." Behind him, he could hear the other customer telling Chem of the cheetahs, leopards, and tigers that were common in the ring.

The assistant looked down his nose at Yefet a moment longer, no doubt taking in his drab, unstylish attire, maybe even detecting the smell of sheep on him. With a sigh, he led Yefet to a wall of fabrics and began pointing out various options.

"Today, one of the Eidolon is fighting. D'Akaio himself..." The other customer's words drew Yefet's attention momentarily to Chem.

The draper's assistant cleared his throat pointedly.

Turning back, Yefet frowned at the wall of red cloth before him. "Crimson is crimson," he complained. "How many shades can there be?"

The young man gave him a withering look and gestured expansively to the wall. Apparently there were dozens of shades of crimson-dyed spun cotton.

Yefet stared. Did it matter which he picked? Should he buy two different ones, or would his mother need all of her fabric to match exactly? He wished he knew, but he wasn't even sure what the fabric was needed for.

He finally made a selection, almost at random, then produced the money stick his father had given him. He and the assistant set about dickering over price, the assistant using his thumbnail to mark a place in the soft reddish-gold bar, then Yefet marking a different place, a far more conservative amount of money. Eventually they settled on an amount somewhere in the middle, and the assistant withdrew a small tool from his pocket; crimping off nearly three-quarters of the

stick, he returned the stub to Yefet and began wrapping the bolts of cloth.

When it was all said and done, Yefet turned back to Chem... only to discover that Chem was gone.



Yefet dashed from the shop, stumbling to a halt as he reentered the mass of people moving along the wide boulevard. His eyes went immediately to the stadium across the way, and he was rewarded with a brief glimpse of his brother pushing excitedly through the crowd in that direction. Chem soon disappeared beyond the trees lining the other side of the street. Yefet crossed the street himself, passing beneath those same trees just in time to see Chem push through one of the arena's entrances.

He attempted to follow his brother, but he was stopped by a man collecting money in exchange for admission. "I just need to go in and get my brother," Yefet tried to explain. "I'll not be staying to watch."

The man looked at him thoughtfully. "Your brother... Short lad, dressed like you?" He sniffed. "*Smells* like you?"

Yefet wasn't sure how to respond to this. "Yes? Maybe?"

"In that case, you owe double." The man shrugged. "Otherwise, I'll be breaking his legs when he comes back out." Of course, Chem hadn't stopped to pay when he pushed inside. Father hadn't given him any money.

With a sinking feeling, Yefet produced the stub of his money stick, bringing a light to the bruiser's eye. "How much?"

The man turned abruptly serious. "For the both of you? I'm not sure you've got enough."

"But this is pure!" Yefet insisted, waving the money.

Before he knew it, the stick was out of his hand and disappearing into one of the man's bulging pockets. "Better hurry inside before I change my mind, lad."

Yefet just stared for a moment, then he was being jostled forward by the next customer in line. Feeling sick, he gave up on the money and began climbing the ramp to the stadium's interior.

He reached a wide mezzanine and stopped, impressed despite himself. He'd never been to an arena. This was one of many scattered throughout the City, he knew, and it was not especially large—but there was still something inspiring about it. The structure appeared to be perfectly circular, with three tiers of benchlike seats. The first tier ran from the pit to this mezzanine, the second from the mezzanine on. A balcony formed the third tier, partially overshadowing the seating below it.

Amidst the press of people trying to find a good seat, Yefet realized it would be impossible to locate his brother from within the crowd. Glancing about, he found the stairs to the balcony level and mounted them. Up here, the onlookers were much more sparse; apparently the seating below had yet to fill up. Yefet moved to an open stretch of low railing at the front and leaned over to search the faces below.

His eye was instantly drawn to small pockets in the crowd—both on the mezzanine and amidst the lower tier seats—where normal men and women gave Eidolon their space. The demigods seemed to encourage this sort of aloofness, though Yefet saw that some of them had companions or even entourages. More than a few of the male Eidolon draped possessive arms across the shoulders of a young woman or even two. But of Chem, Yefet caught nary a glimpse.

Another thunderous roar shattered the air around him, pressing down on his eardrums and raising the hair on his arms, and Yefet found himself looking into the fighting pit for the

first time since entering. The pit was deep, dropping down to perhaps double a man's height—a normal man's height—from the first row of seats. The pit's floor was simple, a reddish-brown, sandy dirt. And at the center of the fighting pit, the source of the terrifying cries—

Yefet stared. The creature was tied at the exact center of the pit, except not with rope, but rather thick-linked chain. These chains stretched across the pit, two of them, meeting in the middle and passing through loops in the creature's collar. The animal shook its maned head back and forth in frustration, managing to slide several paces along one of the chains before the other chain pulled it up short. Throwing back its head, it roared once more, baring long fangs as it glared balefully at the spectators filling the arena.

"It's..." he breathed.

"A lion," Chem said from beside him.

Yefet jerked in surprise. There he was, his brother, having appeared right next to him. "Chem! What is *wrong* with you?" He stifled any further recriminations. "Come, let's be going." He laid a hand on his brother's shoulder, but Chem shook it off.

"Head back if you wish. I want to see this."

"Chem..."

"Yefet..." his brother responded in the same tone, mockingly.

"Father said—"

"Have you ever seen a lion that big?" Chem interrupted. They'd both encountered lions before, after all. It was unavoidable for a shepherd, whose docile charges attracted all manner of predators. But one *this* size...

Yefet raised a hand to his forehead in frustration. "Yes. I mean—no." He glanced back at the lion in the pit. "That thing's a monster."

"They're saying he's going to fight it single-handedly."

Yefet bit down on the obvious question that wanted to squeeze out—namely, *who* would be fighting the lion single-handedly. Chem was quite accomplished at sidetracking heated discussions this way. Instead, Yefet said, “Do you have any idea how much trouble we’ll be in if we don’t leave *right now?*?”

Predictably, Chem ignored him.

Yefet was preparing to say something more when a hush fell over the crowd. His eye was drawn to movement as another demigod stepped down into the first tier seats from the mezzanine, the crowd there parting around him. Yefet couldn’t help but stare, as did everyone else, for this man was remarkable even in comparison to the other Eidolon. The man was handsome and well built, every muscle standing out on his bare chest, his bronze skin glistening in the afternoon light.

Solemnly, the demigod’s eyes swept the crowd, and Yefet felt a thrill as that charismatic gaze seemed to meet his for a brief moment. Then, unexpectedly, the man broke into a smile, and the crowd began cheering crazily. Before long, the crowd noise coalesced into a chant, repeated over and over—“Daw-kay-oh! Daw-kay-oh!” The man’s smile grew even broader, and Yefet was struck with just how warm that smile was, not haughty like the expressions he’d seen the other Eidolon wearing this day.

Yefet realized what the crowd was chanting then: D’Akaio. A traditional-sounding Eidolon name, though not one he’d heard before today. But he did remember that other customer telling Chem of this demigod in the draper’s shop.

Without further ado, without speeches or announcements, D’Akaio leapt down into the pit.

The crowd erupted once more, their chant lost in the ruckus, as the lion threw itself forward. The chains pulled the creature up short, and it swung one massive forepaw after the other, straining to get at the man. The demigod stepped closer,

only stopping when the enraged cat's claws were whistling through the air a hairsbreadth from his smiling face.

Yefet could not tear his gaze away, and all thought of departure fled his mind. Was this man mad? He wore little more than a kilt and carried no weapons. Choosing to fight a lion single-handedly was one thing, but even a lion knew to respect a sharp weapon. This man appeared ready to take on the monster bare-handed—

He had no further time to wonder, for in that instant, the chains went slack. The lion stumbled forward as the resistance was suddenly removed, but the demigod reacted instantly, dodging and rolling out of the way.

The fight that ensued lasted far longer than Yefet would have expected, had he been given opportunity to form expectations. And it was not because either combatant wasted time circling cautiously, sniffing out weaknesses. No. Both parties, man and lion, threw themselves at one another with a vengeance.

Again and again, the cat led with its claws, each swipe a killing blow if it landed. Again and again, the demigod demonstrated amazing reflexes, consistently dodging around and between these attacks, drawing in close enough to deliver powerful jabs. At first, these were aimed at the lion's center of mass, but he soon gravitated toward striking the most sensitive areas of the lion's face—boxing its ears, throwing spear-handed blows at its eyes and snout. The lion snarled each time one of these blows landed, but they seemed to have no effect beyond enraging the creature further.

“The chains,” Yefet muttered. “He should use the chains.” Whoever had been manning the chains at the beginning of the fight had quickly pulled them the rest of the way through the collar, so that the lion was unencumbered, but the chains still lay there in the pit. Undoubtedly, they would make an unwieldy weapon, but anything was better than

fighting a lion with your bare hands. “Use the chains,” he repeated.

Chem spared him a glance. “That would be cheating.”

In the pit, the demigod leapt back from another attack on the lion, but this time he landed wrong, tripping and falling backward. A cry went up from the crowd, but even before the man tried to rise, he was gripping a fistful of dusty dirt and flinging it into the air. The lion charged right into the cloud, swiping at where it’d last seen the fighter lying.

When the dust settled, it revealed both combatants poised motionless, staring each other down. The demigod clutched at a foursome of deep slashes running across his upper arm and chest, trying to staunch the flow of blood. Facing him, the lion lowered itself tensely, its tail flicking back and forth wildly as it prepared to pounce.

D’Akaio broke eye contact first, stumbling backwards and nearly falling again, feigning weakness from blood loss. In that instant, the lion leapt—but in the next instant, the demigod was moving again as well, throwing himself forward as soon as the lion committed to the attack. The man set himself and delivered a double-punch to the lion’s windpipe, an attack made all the more powerful by the lion’s own weight as it crashed into him. As the lion stumbled, its snarl turning to a rasping cough, the demigod caught one paw in a firm grip. He shoved the lion’s foreleg back against his other arm in a scissor motion, the leg resisting only briefly before the joint gave with a terrible snap.

The lion’s cry of rage was now a strained screech of fear and pain. And the crowd went wild.

Beside Yefet, his brother was whooping along with everyone else, his face flushed with excitement and bloodlust. Feeling more unsettled than ever, Yefet turned back to see how the battle would end.

The great cat was no longer interested in fighting, only in fleeing. While D’Akaio postured for the crowd, arms raised,

his wounds forgotten, the lion backed as far from him as possible, limping. The demigod finally lowered his arms and returned his attention to finishing his opponent.

The lion took one look at the tall man striding towards him, then leapt—

But not at D'Akaio. Unexpectedly, the creature leapt for the rim of the pit, scrambling momentarily at the edge before clawing its way up.

The pitch of the crowd's cheering changed timbre in an instant, excitement turning to horror on that side of the arena as the lion gutted one, two, three spectators with swipes of its uninjured paw. It tensed for another leap higher into the grandstands, then gave out a choked-off bellow of agony as its head slammed to the ground. At the lion's other end, D'Akaio had leapt up from the pit to grab the creature's tail.

Hanging only by that tail, the man kicked off from the wall and jerked hard, pulling the lion back into the pit after him. He landed badly, trying to roll out of the way, but the lion fell directly onto him.

There was a mad scramble, the creature thrashing as it tried to regain its feet, sand flying. But then D'Akaio was on its back, one massive arm wrapped around the creature's throat, squeezing. The lion's thrashing intensified, its eyes beginning to bug out as it coughed, but the man's grip never wavered. Slowly, the lion's movement abated, until it stumbled and, with one final heaved breath, lay still.

The onlookers fell silent in awe, an awe which Yefet himself felt keenly. This man had just killed a lion with his bare hands—or at least incapacitated it. As the demigod slowly disentangled himself, Yefet could see the lion's chest still moving, its breathing rapid and shallow. D'Akaio rose to his full height, then thrust his arms back into the air; the crowd erupted into excited cheering once more.

Yefet's eyes flicked to the rim of the pit where the lion had made its bid for escape; the people it had mauled still lay

there, blood pooling about their unmoving bodies. But the crowd had pushed forward, onlookers even now standing in that blood, trampling the fallen as they cheered wildly for the man in the pit.

Suddenly ill, Yefet fell forward onto his knees, vomiting up the fruit he'd eaten for lunch. When the spasms had passed, he looked up to see that his brother was cheering as wildly as anyone else, a gleam in his eye. He acted as though he'd not noticed Yefet's episode, but he'd also put several paces between them, making it appear as if the two of them were here separately.

Clawing himself back up the balcony railing, Yefet wiped his face and swept his eyes slowly around the arena, taking in the bloodthirsty faces of the crowd. For the first time, he truly believed everything Father had told him about the City—

He froze. In the first row of seats almost directly across the pit from him, there sat a girl about his own age. As he thought back on it later, Yefet would remember how pretty she was; but in this moment, what he noticed was his own horror reflected on her face. She was pale as the grave, her eyes focused on the unmoving bodies even now being trampled by the other onlookers. And then she turned, her own eyes sweeping the crowd much as his had, searching for anyone else horrified by this display. Their eyes seemed to meet—

Crack.

Yefet's attention was jerked back to the pit, where the demigod was stepping away from the lion, arms upraised once more, his bulging muscles bathed in blood as the cheering reached a fever pitch. Behind him, the lion lay completely still now, its head looking... wrong, somehow. It took Yefet a moment to realize its lower jaw had been ripped clean off. He felt his gorge rise once more.

“Yefet! Yefet—Chem!”

Whirling, he saw Father coming off the stairs from below. Yefet shouted and waved, and soon the older man was

pushing through the crowd towards them. Yefet threw himself into his arms, burying his face in that powerful chest. Almost immediately, he realized how childish he was acting, and he pulled back abruptly. But Father gave no sign that he was embarrassed by the display; he kept one arm gripped firmly around Yefet's shoulders as his eyes sought out Chem and then moved beyond. Yefet watched melancholy sweep across the man's features as he took in the sight of the slaughtered animal, watched that distress solidify to horror and then anger as Father saw the lion's trampled victims.

"Chem," Father said finally. "Come, we're leaving."

Chem opened his mouth, took one look at Father's face, and swallowed his protest unspoken.

"You have the fabric?" Father asked. Yefet hefted the package he'd been gripping all this time, and Father nodded. "Good. This trip wasn't a complete waste, then."

Yefet realized suddenly what he meant. "Your supplies? The pack animals...?"

"I was forced to leave them behind when you failed to return."

"How did you find us?" Yefet asked.

A bit of dry humor poked momentarily through Father's anger, and his eyes cut towards Chem. "The arena across from the draper's seemed a good place to start looking."

"Sorry, Father," Chem said contritely. "But surely the animals will still be where you left them."

A sad smile spread across Father's face. "Son, you have much to learn about this City." The smile faded quickly. "Though I pray you never have occasion to learn it. Come, it is nearing sundown. Let us be gone from this place."

The family descended from the balcony, then turned to exit the stadium via the ramp Yefet had used earlier. Pausing, Yefet twisted around for one last glimpse—not of the lion, not of the trampled bodies, but of the girl. It was hard to see

through the milling bodies here on the mezzanine, but for one long instant, the crowd parted and he saw her. At least, he thought it was her. She was still seated where he'd last seen her, but her face was now buried in her hands. Then the gap closed, and she disappeared from view.

CHAPTER ONE



eleventh day of the
IDLE MOON, 1652

Adana remained seated as the excitement died down and spectators began filtering out of the stadium. Though still pale, she forced herself to smile at everyone who passed; a few smiled back uncertainly, but most just ignored her. Likely, they didn't know who she was, and that was perfectly fine with her.

As the crowd thinned, she caught sight once more of the mangled corpses partway around the lip of the pit from her. For a very long moment, she was unable to look away. The bodies lay where they'd fallen, in pools of blood now growing sticky in the late afternoon sun. She wondered how long they would stay that way. Eventually, she knew, the owners of the stadium would have someone clean up the mess, rather than lose the use of those seats at the next fight. But would no one step forward before then? Arrange for a burial, treat those poor souls with the dignity they deserved?

No, of course not. Not unless they had family that came looking.

Adana turned away, chiding herself. It wasn't her concern. Those people were nothing to her. No doubt her brother would say the same thing if she talked to him about it.

The sound of her brother's laughter reached her ears then, and it brought a more genuine smile to her lips. He was still down in the pit, skinning the lion with a knife someone had tossed him. Even as he worked, he conversed with well-wishers who stopped by on their way out of the stadium. It was one of the reasons he was so popular, his friendliness with the common people. Adana loved him for it.

She felt the seat beneath her bow, and she turned to see another of the Eidolon settling onto the bench next to her. "Good day, D'Sheel," she said politely.

The demigod smiled rakishly at her, offering a glimpse of his perfect teeth. "Why Adana, you look lovely today." Still standing on his other side, D'Sheel's two companions whispered furiously with one another, looking none too pleased at losing the Eidolon's attention, even momentarily.

"Thank you," Adana accepted his praise demurely. "Hello," she added brightly, acknowledging the two girls. One snorted and the other giggled, and the whispering intensified. The words "pale waiif" were distinctly audible.

D'Sheel rolled his eyes. Turning to regard the pair, he said, "You two run along. I'll meet you back at my place after the rites." His lip twitched into a hungry smile, and both girls blushed. He swatted one playfully across the backside as they scurried away giggling, then he returned his attention to Adana. "My apologies."

Adana felt herself color slightly. "No apology necessary," she said.

D'Sheel leaned back, resting his shoulders on the bench two rows back, arms stretched out to either side. "Your brother continues to impress," he said. "A lion this time. And bare-handed?"

Adana beamed with pride, though the fights themselves repulsed her. "He's amazing, isn't he?"

The other demigod snorted. “Indeed. I shall have to up the stakes at my own fights, or soon enough, no one will be chanting the name of D’Sheel anymore.”

The girl hesitated, unsure how to respond to this. “I’m sure that’s not D’Akaio’s intent.”

D’Sheel threw back his head and laughed.

“But you’re his closest friend! He wishes you only the best!”

The demigod only laughed harder at this, and Adana frowned. She didn’t particularly like D’Sheel, but what she said was true—D’Akaio and D’Sheel were as close as two men could be, and she knew her brother would never wish to hurt his friend. It distressed her that D’Sheel obviously felt differently.

The awkward moment was broken as D’Akaio appeared before them, leaping up from the pit below. He pulled himself up with far more grace than the lion had managed, though admittedly, he wasn’t attempting the climb with a broken arm. Not that he’d escaped the fight *completely* unharmed.

With a gasp, Adana scrambled to her feet, hopping up on the bench to bring herself eye level with the claw wounds on her brother’s chest and arm. The gouges were deep, much deeper than she’d realized, considering how little impairment he’d shown in the arena. Now that she could inspect him closely, however, she saw that D’Akaio’s antics had pulled some of the wounds wider.

“My kit,” she snapped at D’Sheel.

The other demigod’s jaw tightened at her tone, but he retrieved the bag from beneath her seat and held it open for her. She rifled through until she found what she needed: a phial of disinfectant, sterile cloths, a bone needle, and several lengths of preserved cattlegut.

“Adana fancies herself a healer,” D’Akaio said conversationally, shucking the lion skin from his shoulder to collapse unceremoniously at his feet. Adana spared it a glance,

saw that he'd left the creature's paws and head attached. "Can't say as I mind," he continued, "considering my near-constant need for medical attention."

"Healing appeals to me," Adana explained to D'Sheel distractedly as she disinfected the wounds. "And D'Akaio has the best healers at his disposal. I've had plenty of teachers." She paused, glancing around suddenly. "Speaking of which, where are they?"

"The healers?" D'Akaio smirked. "I forbid them entrance. Didn't like how it looked, having three of the best healers in the City worrying over me like mother hens."

D'Sheel sniggered. "I can't imagine why they'd be worried about you."

D'Akaio shared his smile. "True, dear old *Dad* wouldn't be too pleased if I suffered permanent damage from a fight as unimportant as this one."

D'Sheel cocked his head. "Oh? You have something flashier in mind?"

"Dad has plans," the newly minted lion-slayer said mysteriously. His lip twitched as Adana stuck him with the needle and began threading the gut through the opening of his biggest wound, carefully closing it.

"And what of this?" D'Sheel asked, nudging the lion skin with his foot.

D'Akaio's eyes lit up. "I've had words with the tanner. He'll preserve not just the skin, but the paws and skull too. He can trim it like a cape, with clasps to fasten it about my neck; when I wish, I can even pull the beast's skull up over my head like a hood, with its fangs hanging down here and here." He hooked his fingers, showing them on either side of his forehead.

The whole idea struck Adana as grotesque, but she couldn't help but smile anyway, to hear D'Akaio's boyish enthusiasm in describing the scheme.

“That sounds absurd,” the other demigod said flatly, though Adana thought she heard envy in his voice.

D’Akaio smiled good-naturedly. “In any event, thanks for coming.” He took D’Sheel’s arm in a forearm grip, then checked the sky. “You should probably be on your way. You’ve some distance to walk, and the rites will soon commence.”

D’Sheel shrugged easily. “I may or may not attend this evening.”

Adana froze. “I... cannot imagine your father would be pleased at that,” she told the other demigod carefully.

“Well, *Dad* doesn’t always get what he wants,” D’Sheel said with a carefree laugh, borrowing from D’Akaio’s dangerously informal lexicon to refer to his own divine father. He lifted his eyebrows in silent challenge. “What of you, D’Akaio? Surely you skip the rites from time to time, yes?”

Adana’s brother hesitated only slightly. “Of course,” he assured his friend. “It’s important I attend most of the time. The people need to see me there.” He shrugged, mimicking his friend’s nonchalance. “But sometimes, a man needs an evening to himself.” This was news to Adana.

D’Sheel smiled mischievously. “I’m glad to hear it.” He rose. “Nevertheless, I *should* probably be on my way.” He winked at Adana. “My lady.”

She waited until he was out of earshot before turning on her brother. “Since when have you skipped the rites?”

He shrugged again, but did not answer.

“D’Akaio...” she said warningly. “Please, do not anger your father.” She felt very real fear at the thought. “You’ll attend tonight, please?”

“Being the son of R’ZUUS is not what defines me, you know.”

“D’Akaio, *please*.” She let him hear her fear.

His face softened, and he smiled affectionately. “For you, I would do anything.”

She smiled at that, then finished tying off the last of the stitches. Cutting off the trailing length of gut, she returned it to her kit. D’Akaio swept her up in a bear hug and spun her around. The motion caused her to drop her bag, and no doubt he was smearing her dress with disinfectant and blood, but she giggled like a child nonetheless.

He set her down lightly, then saw her dress and cursed. “Sorry, kiddo. Guess you’ll have to go home and change.”

She beamed up at him. “It’s no trouble.” Unlike D’Sheel’s home, the estate D’Akaio shared with Adana and their mother was in this sector of the City—right around the corner—and it was only a short walk from there to his father’s temple. “I’ll see you tonight?” she concluded.

Her brother smiled ruefully and nodded.

Adana grinned and turned to go, but D’Akaio spun her back around with a gentle hand, his expression going dark. “And where is the pendant I gave you?”

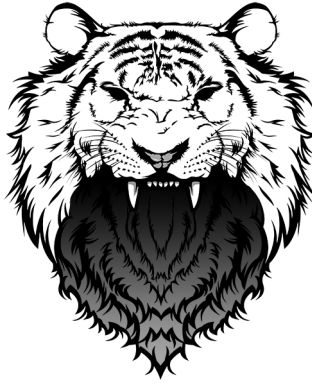
“Oh!” she said, mildly embarrassed. “It’s here...” She looked down, working her fingers around the necklace chain, pulling the pendant out from where it had fallen inside her dress. It was a beautiful piece, something like a multi-strand knot wrought from silver. It was an emblem D’Akaio had taken for himself, and she smiled reflexively at the sight of it, this reminder of her brother’s favor.

“Adana,” he chided her, “you mustn’t travel the streets without this showing. And hiding it beneath your collar is as good as leaving it at home.” He cradled the knot in his hand and lifted it for emphasis. “This is very important. Do you understand?”

It was Adana’s turn to shrug. “I *want* to wear it, show it to the world. But... no, I don’t really understand. Why is it so important to you?”

D'Akaio held her gaze for a very long moment, his face growing somber. "Because it just is," he said finally. "I want..." His face hardened. "I want everyone to know just how much I love you."

CHAPTER TWO



It wasn't love that brought D'Akaio to his father's temple every evening. Love didn't bring anyone to the temple of a god, night after night, no matter what they might say. Some came because they felt a deep need to worship, to give their devotion to someone or something greater than themselves. Some came out of superstition, out of fear for what might happen to them if they did not. Others came out of a desire for community, or to seek protection or boon or blessing. Whatever the reason, one thing was true of every citizen of the City: *everyone* chose a god to worship.

D'Akaio came for power. For as his father's power rose, so too did his.

The Temple of R'ZUUS was situated in the northwest quadrant of the City, a few blocks from the rambling mess of Oldtown at City-center. Unlike the temples of the other great gods, R'ZUUS's place of worship consisted of a pillared courtyard that stood open to the sky. And looming over that courtyard, like a great cat toying with a mouse, was the massive stone effigy of R'ZUUS Recumbent.

As he entered the marbled courtyard, D'Akaio gazed up at his father's great horned head, towering over him at ten times the height of a normal man. It was a hard face, and not only because it was wrought of stone. The avatar of R'ZUUS was the Ram—all of the Four were associated with horned

beasts—and this most famous of R'ZUUS's effigies perfectly captured his nobility and ruthlessness. The Ram faced due west, such that the evening rites commenced each day with the setting of the sun over his shoulders to the east, his head perfectly eclipsing the sun. Even now, the last bloody light of day formed a fiery nimbus around the Ram's head, the features of his face illuminated only by the sinister flickering of the braziers below.

Even after all his years of coming here, night after night, D'Akaio felt a chill go through him as he tried to meet the Ram's gaze.

The courtyard had already filled with revelers, but they made way as R'ZUUS's Favorite strode to the front. D'Akaio took up his prescribed place at the right of the steps leading to the dais, sparing a glance for his much older brother D'Urmaedo, whose position mirrored his. D'Urmaedo and D'Akaio—the First and the Favorite of R'ZUUS—with more than a score of lesser demigods lined up at even intervals behind them. Standing around and among them, hordes of commoners quite literally looked up to the Eidolon; everywhere D'Akaio turned, he saw a face full of adoration. Then one face in particular caught his attention, and D'Akaio broke into a smile.

Adana stood at the edge of the gathering, her back to one of the massive pillars, and even at this distance he could see her expression of relief. That bothered him somewhat, realizing that even though he had promised to attend tonight, his sister had still doubted him. In truth, he had never missed the rites, and he had no intention of doing so until such time as he'd built up an independent powerbase. But even when that day came, he knew he would have a hard time denying his sister anything she asked. She was the one true joy in his life, a pure light in a world that was all too often dark.

He frowned. Where had *that* thought come from? The world was what it was, and the day would soon come when he exercised a great deal of influence over it. D'Akaio had no

business feeling anything but excitement as he looked toward that future. He threw his sister a wink, then turned back toward the front.

He was just in time to see the priestesses file out onto the top step below the dais. There were six of them, and though they were mere commoners, they were ancient and greatly respected. As soon as they took their positions, they all began jabbering at once, and D'Akaio could pick out various expressions of praise as their voices overlapped. Following their example, the crowd of revelers began doing obeisance, ululating wildly; while some fell forward onto their hands or faces in worship, others rocked back and forth, arms raised high. There were dozens of cries of "Come, Lord R'ZUUS!" or "Enter me, R'ZUUS!" D'Akaio's own worship was more reserved, as befitted an Eidolon of his station, but he participated nonetheless.

And then his father arrived.

It began as a swirling mist, almost unnoticeable, except for the effect it had on the crowd. As the insubstantial black cloud twisted and twirled through a section of the gathering, the men and women there would react instantly—spines going rigid, voices going low as they moaned in agony or ecstasy. The longer the mist churned, the blacker it grew, the more substantial it became. And then the cloud condensed into a single twisting vortex and shot onto the stage, where it coalesced into the corporeal form of R'ZUUS, the god made flesh.

Given his nature, D'Akaio's father could show himself in any form he wished. For public gatherings of this sort, the god opted to intimidate and impress: a human frame of massive proportions, standing as tall above the Eidolon as the Eidolon did above lesser men, with a physique to put even D'Akaio's to shame. Of course, no human head rested on those shoulders, but that of the ram; and no dumb beast of the flock, either—animalistic or not, the Living Ram's face was as nuanced and expressive as any man's. As his form came into being, clothed

in a loose black robe, R'ZUUS's eyes shone with keen intelligence... and hunger.

Those devotees who had not yet prostrated themselves did so now. D'Akaio knew he was expected to do so as well—the prostration of both men and demigods before the gods symbolized the conviction that, while immortal blood ran through their veins, Eidolon were just as far removed from divinity as common men. And yet D'Akaio resisted. It was a small rebellion, but it did not go unnoticed. To his left and right, D'Akaio felt worshipers shy away from him slightly; on the dais, the Living Ram's forehead furrowed, and a molten fire began burning in those inhuman eyes. R'ZUUS started to raise one arm, and D'Akaio's knees gave out of their own accord. His face burned with shame as he flattened it on the cool marble of the courtyard's floor.

The reedy voices of the priestesses rose once more as they led the congregation in worship, reciting the Invitation of Indwelling. Though the words differed for each of the gods, D'Akaio knew that all of the Four employed something similar at the commencement of each evening's rites. His defiance exhausted, D'Akaio allowed the familiar words to wash over and through him as he repeated them aloud: *“Oh great R'ZUUS, god of the heavens, sovereign over the skies and the mountain reaches and of all beasts great and small who make their habitation therein...”*

The echoes of the Invitation had not yet faded when the first worshipers began stumbling forward in spontaneous expressions of devotion. D'Akaio lifted his head just enough to watch them push through the crowd: a scarred pit fighter going to his knees before the dais, tears streaming down his cheeks as he foreswore all profit in future fights, pledging to fight only for the glory of R'ZUUS; a stunning woman dressed in purest white, disrobing and prostrating herself once more at the god's feet, offering herself body and soul; a couple leading forward their young child, thrusting him into the arms of the priestesses as their enraptured faces locked onto R'ZUUS alone.

And others, many others. As the spontaneous offerings slowed, men and women began stepping forward with more premeditated gifts: choice livestock, exquisite delicacies, priceless works of art. The sacrifices became a steady flow, those human sacrifices among them adroitly bound and led away in the same manner as cattle. The majority of the gifts disappeared into the temple catacombs through doors at the left and right of the courtyard, pushed, prodded, or carried by an army of temple slaves.

When the time of offering was finished, only six sacrifices remained—six young boy children, each attended by one of the priestesses. The crones turned as one, seeking their lord's guidance, and R'ZUUS made a complicated gesture.

D'Akaio sighed. It was to be the Ritual of the Thousand Cuts, then.

He fought his boredom over the next hour. As the priestesses bound the children to the foremost pillars of the courtyard. As they placed the basins at the children's feet. As they painstakingly made the thousand small incisions on each child's body, every cut precisely placed, accompanied by a headache-inducing scream. As the basins slowly—*slowly*—filled with lifeblood. All the while, D'Akaio and everyone else remained on their knees, whispering praise for their god.

When the priestesses finally completed their work, they took not even a moment's rest. They returned their attention to the congregants and launched into prophecy, their warbling voices forming a cacophony of words that were only occasionally decipherable. In some ways, this part of the service was the most interminable, for there was no telling how long the crones might babble over one another, speaking in strange, otherworldly tongues; but at least the service was nearing its conclusion.

D'Akaio frowned at a sudden dissonance—or rather, not dissonance but *consonance*. A pattern was beginning to emerge from the discord of those six voices. The disparate

utterances were growing together in pitch, their phrasing and then their words beginning to align. Suddenly, all six were chanting in eerie, perfect unison—and with a start, D’Akaio realized he could understand them.

“—day nears swiftly, on fleet feet. Your women will wail in anguish, and your men will weep bitter tears, for your children will already be silenced. On that day, the great one’s anger will pour out in full measure. It will be a day of distress and anguish, ruin and desolation, darkness and gloom, battle cries and death.

“The lucky among you will lay already in pools of your own blood, slain by your brothers; you victors will slip into the depths, your lungs filled in. Your great city will not protect you on that day. Every wall that now stands will be ripped from its foundation; it will be swept away, brick by brick.

“And even then, not one man or woman who remains will beg mercy of the great one. No, not even on that day. Instead, you will cast yourselves at the feet of the usurpers, but they will be—”

The priestesses went abruptly silent. D’Akaio stared, dumbfounded, as the crones began clawing at their throats, mouths wide, eyes bugging. He shifted his gaze to his father, to find that R’ZUUS had taken a single step forward. The god’s arm was raised, his fist clenched in midair. The Living Ram’s immense eyes seemed to take in the entire congregation, and when he spoke, his voice filled the silence completely.

[[ENOUGH.]]

There was a resonant crunching sound, and all six of the priestesses went limp, though still suspended as if by hidden strings. When R’ZUUS unclenched his fist, they collapsed bonelessly.

Silence reigned once more, seemingly forever. Then R’ZUUS stepped forward with a complete lack of concern, producing a jeweled chalice from within the folds of his robe. He dipped the cup into the basin at the foot of one of the

sacrifices, then threw back his horned head and drank deeply. The child mewled pitifully as he watched his own lifeblood disappear down the throat of a god.

Sated, R'ZUUS flung the priceless cup disdainfully into the crowd, then turned and strode out of the courtyard through a doorway between his effigy's forelegs. There was another moment of awed silence, and then a group of worshipers fell to fighting viciously over the chalice. D'Akaio only stared after his father, a shiver running up his back.

CHAPTER THREE



Adana schooled herself to stillness. She denied her body the shudder that wanted to run through it, forcing her eyes to remain open and steady on the doorway where R'ZUUS had disappeared, lest she blink and release the tears that had welled up. She managed it, just. She'd had a great deal of practice.

When the crowd finally broke from its raptured state, she knew it was safe to lower her head—as if in worship—and surreptitiously dry her eyes on her tunic.

There was a scuffle off to the side, devotees fighting over the chalice from which R'ZUUS had drunk, but soon enough the lines began forming. Adana looked longingly toward the exit, fantasized about fleeing this place. But she couldn't do it. Defying her god, even in his absence, was too dangerous. Even if she were brave enough to do so, it was not in her nature to disobey. Not overtly, at least.

As she joined one of the lines, she felt the usual jumble of conflicting emotions. Guilt over what had been done to these children, while she stood idly by. Relief that *she* had not been forced forward as a sacrifice, either by those around her or by her own two legs, for she knew that happened on occasion— young girls betrayed by their own bodies, throwing themselves down before R'ZUUS or one of the other gods. Guilt and relief aside, she felt an abiding hatred for R'ZUUS that she could not soften, even as she quaked in terror that he would read that

hatred in her heart. And yet there was something in her, something else entirely, that nevertheless longed to worship.

What was wrong with her? It seemed that she alone was horrified by the rituals that took place here, night after night. Why was she such a deviant? Why could she not simply join with her people in worshiping the god who so graciously tolerated their existence in his domain? She had tried. Time and again, she had tried. And yet tonight, as with every night before, she had failed. When the Invitation of Indwelling had been recited, something had held her back from participating. It wasn't anything physical that stopped her. It was more like... all of the horror and disgust she'd ever felt, welling up a hundredfold to form a knot in her throat, past which words could not emerge.

She sighed, gritted her teeth in anguish. *Tomorrow*, she promised herself. *Tomorrow* she would say the words. As it was, she knew she was living on borrowed time. R'ZUUS was not a patient master. Certainly he knew her heart, and he would not suffer her disobedience for long; what's more, she knew she put her brother at risk by continuing to deny R'ZUUS his rightful place in her heart. *Tomorrow...*

The familiar promise died on her lips as she looked up, meeting the eyes of the child strapped to the leftmost pillar. Even now, the poor soul was straining to breathe, shuddering, his skin nearly as white as the pillar behind him. He no longer had the energy to scream, but he seemed to groan continuously, a breathy, grating sound that scraped at her very soul.

Adana tore her gaze away, looking for something to distract her from his pain. Something, *anything*. She caught sight of D'Akaio, smiling easily and chatting with one of his lesser brethren. Usually the sight of his smiling face was enough to buoy her spirits, to divert her attention from the suffering of the sacrifices... but not this day. Her eyes moved on, drawn next to the movement of a pair of temple slaves, carrying a sack between them—no, not a sack, a *body*. One of the high priestesses that had collapsed at the end of the service.

What had been the meaning of that, anyway? Hovering at the very edge of the gathering, Adana had been out of direct earshot, though snatches of that final prophecy had been passed back to her by others in the crowd. She shivered. No, the fate of those old crones was not something she wished to ponder either.

Against her will, Adana's eyes were drawn back to the child hanging on the nearest pillar... and just that quickly, her eyes began filling again. The suffering of this child, this... innocent... was not something she could ignore. But the gods demanded it! Not just R'ZUUS, all of them. Sacrifice was a fact of life in the City, an integral part of the only reality she had ever known. Who was she to question it? Her sovereign lords had instituted the practice. That made it right.

And yet... She felt an undeniable truth reveal itself to her as she gazed deep into the eyes of the suffering child. This... This was *not* right. It was *not* good, or honorable, or praiseworthy, no matter how many times she'd heard those words applied to the worship demanded of them by the gods. This... There was a word for *this*. Adana struggled, racking her brain, knowing the word was there on the tip of her tongue. This was...

Wrong.

Adana blinked. It was an obscure word, one not used much in polite society. But in that moment, she knew instinctually that what she saw before her was *wrong*.

Suddenly fearful, she glanced about, but no one was paying her any heed. These were dangerous thoughts for a follower of R'ZUUS. But... technically, she *wasn't* a follower of R'ZUUS... was she? She had never spoken the Invitation.

Adana was shoved from behind, and she found herself face to face with a priestess. Not one of those that had fallen earlier, obviously, but one of the others that had scurried out from the wings after R'ZUUS's departure. The woman nodded solemnly to Adana, proffering a goblet filled with the most

priceless vintage available in the City; but as always, Adana shook her head, unable to keep her eyes from flicking to the suffering child. The priestess's lips compressed in disapproval, but refusing the cup was not unheard of. Drinking blood could have adverse effects on the digestion, and those in poor health often waived their portion of the blood. By way of alternative, the priestess dipped her fingers into the cup and began painting glyphs on Adana's face.

The girl lifted her chin, again schooling herself to stillness, biting the inside of her lip to prevent it from trembling. She tried to ignore the hands on her face, her eyes going once more to the child. She was therefore watching when he stopped struggling; when the last fluttering movements of his chest ceased; when the light in his eyes... went out.

The priestess released Adana's face, and she stumbled forward, tripping. She stayed down on hands and knees, lifting her gaze one more time to that still form—and she felt something claw its way out of her deepest being. A prayer, like the ones she had learned as a young child, back when she'd been taught that the gods saw all, heard all, knew all. But it was not a prayer to R'ZUUS... She didn't know *who* she prayed to, only that it was the most honest prayer she had ever uttered:

“Stop this,” she whispered. “*Please...* Make this end.”

Despite her iron control, Adana felt the tears begin spilling down her cheeks, mingling with the blood to drip in red splatters across the beautiful marble tile.

CHAPTER FOUR



D'Akaio wiped his mouth on the back of one hand, then returned the goblet to the priestess. She bobbed respectfully, her eyes downcast, even as one of her sisters scurried up.

“Lord D'Akaio,” the newcomer announced with a curtsy, “your lord father, the great god R'ZUUS, sovereign king of the skies and the mountain reaches, demands you attend him.” The young priestess swallowed. “Immediately.” She sank even lower into her curtsy, head bowed almost to the ground.

R'ZUUS's Favorite smirked. Using commoners to deliver such messages always put them in an impossible position, even when the commoner was an ordained priestess. For while gods were well within their rights to demand the presence of one of their children, the Eidolon were just as well within their rights to end the life of any mortal who displeased them, no matter the reason, even if that mortal were sworn to the service of a god. More than one devoted servant had been summarily executed for delivering a message such as this; rather than be enraged at losing a member of their retinue, R'ZUUS and his kin were more often amused. It was just one more measure by which the common people were reminded of the true value of human life. In fact, the gods often couched their decrees in language designed to agitate their children.

But D'Akaio resisted the urge to throttle the messenger where she stood. It was a strategy Adana had put him onto years ago, though no doubt she was oblivious to how she had influenced him. Benevolence, used sparingly, could at times be more powerful than fear.

“Rise, child,” D'Akaio said gravely. When the priestess's surprised eyes rose to meet his, he added, “I will of course attend my father, at once.” He gave the girl just the flicker of a smile, but she heaved a sigh of relief, and he knew she would be his from that day forward. She might repeat her oaths to R'ZUUS day in and day out, but her heart would belong to D'Akaio.

It was not an easy thing, this business of winning hearts—it was not in his nature, not when he already had the power to demand whatever he wished of a commoner. But there was something satisfying about being not just feared, but loved as well... and D'Akaio was coming to learn that love was more infectious. As this young priestess scurried away, continuing to draw breath, he knew she would spread yet one more tale of his munificence, and his popularity would only grow.

D'Akaio hesitated as the girl passed from view, his attention arrested by the sight of his older brother staring fixedly at him. D'Urmaedo's gaze was almost as stern and disapproving as their father's, but R'ZUUS's First lacked the power to truly intimidate D'Akaio. Not just the First of R'ZUUS, but also the Firstborn of all the Eidolon, D'Urmaedo had nonetheless fallen from favor many years ago. He continued to draw breath mostly because it would embarrass R'ZUUS if his eldest met an untimely demise, and also because his continued existence kept D'Akaio himself from growing too powerful.

In any event, D'Akaio winked at his brother—drawing a scowl in return—then stalked off toward his father's chambers. It wouldn't do for him to tarry at this point, lest his *father* have

the young priestess executed for failing to deliver the summons.

Several minutes later, D'Akaio emerged from the warren of tunnels that formed the interior of R'ZUUS Recumbent, stepping into his father's private audience chamber. Members of the Hyderra Guard flanked each of the chamber's five entrances, and D'Akaio felt a surge of pride as he stepped between this pair. He himself had handpicked and personally trained each of the Hyderra, an undertaking he repeated every time one of them fell in combat, which was not often. The Hyderra were the best of the best, and they looked the part, standing easily at attention in their spotless cerulean tunics, a veritable armory strapped to their belts. Not that one such as R'ZUUS required physical protection; rather, the Hyderra existed to protect his honor when those outside this sector of the City dared to sully his name. Their military prowess and impeccable record only enhanced R'ZUUS in the eyes of those who did not yet worship him, and that prestige trickled down upon D'Akaio as well—in double measure, in fact, given that he was the one who trained the elite unit.

[[MY SON,]] a voice emanated from the throne that sat in shadow at the far end of the chamber.

D'Akaio strode forward and bowed low. There was a flicker of movement from within the gloom, and he knew his father had given him leave to rise. Doing so, he peered into the darkness and was able to discern his father's silhouette; the god had abandoned his ram's head guise in favor of a more familiar, fully-human form. "Father, how may I please you?"

[[WHAT DO YOU DESIRE, MY SON?]]

D'Akaio swallowed. The question was unexpected, and it verged into dangerous territory. "I... don't understand. I live to serve you, Father."

R'ZUUS chuckled, a basso rumble more felt than heard.
[[IS THAT SO?]]

“Yes, Father,” D’Akaio assured him, casting about for the right thing to say. Usually his father made demands. The god never sought council, and he certainly never expressed an interest in the *desires* of his lessers. Did that mean he questioned his son’s loyalty? “Of course, Father,” D’Akaio continued hurriedly, feeling his heart thumping, “I desire to see you crowned supreme among the Pantholon.”

There was a long silence, and then R’ZUUS chuckled again.

That had been a safe thing to say, surely? The Pantholon was the hierarchy of gods in the City; at its apex sat the Four, and beneath them the Six, and finally the Thirteen. Under the leadership of the Four, the Pantholon had maintained an uneasy balance of power ever since establishing itself here in the City... and yet D’Akaio knew that each of the Four lusted after absolute power.

[[AND WHAT OF YOU, MY SON? DO YOU NOT CRAVE POWER FOR YOURSELF?]]

Again, this was dangerous territory. On the one hand, R’ZUUS would not tolerate a rival springing from his own loins. On the other hand, no child of his would curry favor in his eyes unless the demigod desired that which R’ZUUS himself valued above all else. “Of course I crave power,” D’Akaio declared, choosing to speak boldly, though he hurriedly added, “my Lord Father.” He swallowed, continued. “But only with you as my overlord. My loyalty to you is complete.”

Another long pause, during which D’Akaio could see his father’s silhouette slowly nod. [[WELL SPOKEN.]] R’ZUUS shifted slightly on his throne, and D’Akaio felt some of the menace drain from the room. [[THERE IS ONLY SO MUCH POWER IN THE WORLD.]] His father rumbled. [[AND ALREADY, TOO MANY ARE FORCED TO SHARE IT. I ENVISION... A NEW ARRANGEMENT.]]

D’Akaio leaned forward eagerly.

[[YOU HEARD THE PROPHECY?]]

D'Akaio blinked, thinking back to the eerie events of only an hour before, when all six of his father's priestesses had prophesied in unison. "Yes, Father. What—"

A movement within the shadow, a dismissive gesture. [[ONE OF THE OTHERS. M'LAACK, PERHAPS, THOUGH IT LITTLE MATTERS WHICH. SUCH PROPHECIES HAVE BEEN GROWING COMMON, I HEAR. JUST YESTERDAY, ON A STREET CORNER HERE IN THE HEART OF MY DOMAIN...]] He trailed off, and it felt as though the menace returned to surround the words left unspoken.

"Yes, Father," D'Akaio responded quickly. "A baker's wife. She sought to draw the hearts of your followers to one of your rivals." He frowned. "Though I did not recognize the other god's name."

[[NO,]] R'ZUUS mused. [[THE OTHERS ARE CAGY. NONE OF US IS PREPARED TO MOVE OPENLY, NOT YET. THE BEST WE CAN HOPE TO DO IS DIMINISH ONE ANOTHER'S POWER, DRAW AWAY SUPPORT EVEN IF WE CANNOT CAPTURE IT FOR OURSELVES.]] Another movement, and D'Akaio felt his father's eyes on him again.

"We executed the woman on the spot, of course," he reassured the god, as if R'ZUUS didn't already know. "The Hyderra handled it."

Silence grew between them again, a long silence as D'Akaio's father regarded him from the shadows. Then:

[[I HAVE A SERIES OF TASKS I WISH YOU TO COMPLETE.]]

D'Akaio felt his chest puff up. "Like the lion? Of course, Father."

The god blew out his breath, almost derisively. [[THE LION WAS NOTHING. A TEST, AS MUCH FOR THE PEOPLE AS FOR YOU. YOU BOTH PASSED.]]

The Eidolon nodded slowly, thinking back to his encounter with D'Sheel earlier today. He had downplayed the lion fight more out of boastfulness than anything, but it seemed it really was but a minor part of his father's plans. He

swallowed, suddenly very aware of how close the lion had come to taking his life. “What... would you ask of me, Father?” How much more would R’ZUUS demand of him before this was through?

[[YOU NEED NOT KNOW EVERY DETAIL. JUST KNOW THIS: EVERY TASK YOU COMPLETE WILL INCREASE NOT ONLY MY PRESTIGE BUT YOURS AS WELL. AND WITH EACH VICTORY YOU WIN, YOU WILL SHAKE THE FAITH OF THOSE WHO FOLLOW ANOTHER. WE WILL BEGIN WITH THE LESSER GODS. IN THE END, NONE WILL REMAIN WHO CAN CHALLENGE ME.]]

D’Akaio smiled at this. He had no idea how he, a mere demigod, could undermine the power of the entire Pantholon—but he certainly *liked* the idea. And if there was one thing his father excelled at, it was scheming. Besides, if his father somehow granted D’Akaio the power to stand against M’LAAK or E’RIIS or S’MAEL, much less any of the Six or the Thirteen... well, how much more of a challenge could R’ZUUS himself possibly be?

The air seemed to thicken around him, until D’Akaio could barely breathe. His heart began to race.

[[YOU KNOW THE CONSEQUENCES OF BETRAYAL,]] R’ZUUS warned quietly.

“Of—Of course, Father,” D’Akaio gasped.

[[GOOD.]] The pressure eased, and D’Akaio could sense his father smiling. [[LET ME TELL YOU NOW OF THE REWARD FOR LOYALTY.]]

D’Akaio blinked.

[[THE PANTHOLON IS BLOATED, IN NEED OF CULLING. YOU KNOW THIS. BUT EVEN ONCE I REIGN SUPREME, I HAVE NO DESIRE TO REIGN ALONE. I WOULD FIND THAT... TIRESOME.]]

D’Akaio felt his heart speed up once more.

[[DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I AM SAYING?]]

“I... I think so, Father.”

[[I WILL HAVE NEED OF ALLIES. SOME WILL BE THE LESSER GODS WHO EVEN NOW PAY ME TRIBUTE. BUT NOT ALL. MANY OF THEM ARE WEAK, OR ELSE THEY WOULD NOT ALREADY BEND THE KNEE TO ME. I SUSPECT THAT OTHERS OF THE FOUR MAY BOW TO ME BEFORE THE END, RATHER THAN LOSE POWER ENTIRELY.]] A rumble of laughter resonated through the floor and traveled up D'Akaio's legs. [[I AM PLANNING ON IT, IN FACT.]] R'ZUUS paused once more. [[BUT THERE WILL BE ROOM ENOUGH FOR YOU AS WELL, MY SON... IF YOU SURVIVE THE TASKS I SET BEFORE YOU.]]

D'Akaio realized he was panting slightly. Elevation to godhood—*godhood*. It was his for the taking, and he wouldn't necessarily have to betray his father in the process. That was good, since—quite frankly—the prospect of doing so terrified him as much as it excited him.

[[A'KAIO'L,]] R'ZUUS said musingly, as if tasting the word. [[A'KAIO'L THE LION. DOES THAT STRIKE YOUR FANCY, MY SON?]]

D'Akaio was beaming. “Yes, Father.”

[[VERY GOOD. NOW, I HAVE SOMETHING I NEED YOU TO DO.]]

“My first task?” the demigod asked eagerly.

R'ZUUS snorted. [[NO, A MERE ERRAND, BUT ONE I CANNOT ENTRUST TO ANYONE ELSE.]]

D'Akaio's chest felt as if it might burst.

R'ZUUS rose and stepped into the light for the first time, and D'Akaio instinctively averted his eyes, shying away from his father's sudden proximity. He felt a scroll thrust into his hands. [[DELIVER THIS TO H'PHAEST'M.]]

That stoked the Eidolon's curiosity. What project did R'ZUUS require H'PHAEST'M's services for this time? His fingers traced the length of the scroll, his thumb brushing against the wax seal... He glanced up, caught a knowing smile on his father's face.

[[RETURN WITH HIS ANSWER. THEN WE WILL DISCUSS
YOUR FIRST TASK.]]

D'Akaio straightened. "At once, Father."

CHAPTER FIVE



Adana's tears had dried by the time the rites concluded. Notwithstanding her pressing need to be away from this place, she had hidden herself in the shadow of one of the backmost pillars, hunkering down to await D'Akaio. Her brother was adamant about walking her home each night, and she seldom had cause to fight him on that point. Besides, this night especially, she would welcome his company.

But thus far, D'Akaio had not reappeared. She knew he wouldn't have left without her, and that meant he had been summoned to attend his father. And however she might feel about R'ZUUS, that made her happy, because she knew how much D'Akaio craved his father's attention, and how seldom he received it.

Adana tried to pass the time with mental games, but she was struggling with boredom by the time the courtyard emptied of revelers. And then she caught sight of a threesome in conversation some distance off, near the exit: a priestess, and a man and woman—the couple she had seen bring forth their son for sacrifice earlier.

And they were smiling.

Adana stared. She wasn't sure what she should have expected. These people had sacrificed their own child willingly, in exchange for what—R'ZUUS's blessing on some

business venture? perhaps more clout within the community? No doubt they were discussing their boon this very moment. But even so, for them to stand there *smiling*, as if the sacrifice hadn't truly cost them anything...

Adana hugged herself.

The discussion was concluded, and the priestess laid hands of blessing upon the couple. As they parted ways, the priestess retreating back into the courtyard, Adana found herself following after the other two. What would possess a mother and father to give up their own child? What could be more precious than a son or daughter? She had to know, and so she followed... though she gave no thought to what she would say when she caught up with them.

Adana had never known her own father, and her mother Finzele was far from perfect—she'd remained in her cups almost since the day D'Akaio reached adulthood, when R'ZUUS deemed the woman superfluous and cast her off. It was only D'Akaio's largesse that kept her clothed and housed, a blessing which Adana felt keenly; she herself had entered the picture much later, the result of a union even Finzele did not recall, and yet D'Akaio had chosen to extend his beneficence to his half-sister as well. In many ways, D'Akaio had been more of a parent to Adana than Finzele herself... and yet, Adana *still* could not imagine her mother willingly sacrificing her to the gods, no matter the reason.

She had nearly caught up to the couple when they turned onto a boulevard. Adana reached the intersection and paused in the glow of a streetlamp, suddenly uncertain. What exactly was she planning to ask them, once she had their attention? How did one couch a question of that magnitude, especially now that the two appeared to be laughing and carrying on? Perhaps that was only a coping mechanism, and they were burying their pain deep inside.

Adana slowed her pace, merging with the light evening traffic and pacing the couple instead of pushing ahead as she'd been doing. She needed time to think.

The couple was very accommodating on that score. They maintained an easy pace all the way to their destination, which was not far from the Temple of R'ZUUS. She had begun to think they were headed for the same exclusive neighborhood where Adana herself lived, but it appeared they weren't quite *that* well off. The couple stepped off the street just one block east of Adana's house, breezing past a doorman and entering a railed private garden. Adana paused at the corner of the property, resting her hands on the fence and watching as the couple disappeared through the front door of a modest three-story pillared home.

So... they were relatively well to do. They employed a doorman, perhaps additional household staff, and they maintained a home in a genteel part of the city. They had not sacrificed their son out of desperation. She sighed loudly, no more enlightened than when she set out.

"Who're you?"

Adana jumped. She wouldn't have thought the doorman could hear her exhale from so far, but... She blinked. It wasn't the doorman, but rather a boy.

"Hello?" the boy said rudely. He stood just inside the garden area, loosely gripping the leash of a domesticated lizard. "Are you dumb?"

Adana flushed. "Forgive me. I was just stopping to rest."

The boy shrugged and turned away, leading the lizard. Adana's eyes flicked to the creature, and she shivered. She preferred pets with more fur and fewer needle-sharp teeth. "Wait," she called after him. "You... you live here?"

The boy eyed her suspiciously, one side of his face pale blue in the moonlight, the other side yellow from a nearby

streetlamp. He was younger than she, only just beginning to grow whiskers. “What business is it of yours?”

“Is...” she cast about for something to say. “Are you going to miss your brother?” She cringed even as she said the words. Was that really the best she could come up with?

The boy looked at her like she was crazy. “My *brother*?”

Adana’s heart broke anew. This poor boy... he probably didn’t even know yet. Should she tell him? No, of course not. But—

“I don’t *have* a brother.”

She stared at him. “But your parents, they...” she trailed off.

The boy smirked at her, raising his voice to call over his shoulder. “Hey, Dom! We’ve a madwoman at the fence, bothering me. Would you *please* do something about it?” The doorman’s head appeared through the gate, followed shortly by the rest of him, and he began striding purposefully in Adana’s direction.

She raised both hands in apology and stumbled away, her mind reeling. The boy didn’t have a younger brother? But if that was true, then who had that couple sacrificed earlier?

Adana stepped back onto the boulevard and promptly collided with someone. Disentangling herself, she looked up into the face of a shabbily-dressed man about her age. He and his two friends were smiling, as if she’d interrupted them in the midst of a funny story.

“Forgive me,” she said.

It took a long moment for the man’s eyes to focus in on her—Adana well recognized the signs of intoxication—but once he had, his smile broadened. He looked around then, overtly casual, before responding. “You’re out here alone?”

Adana shrugged. “I was on my way home.”

“You really shouldn’t walk the streets alone, not at this time of night.” He took her arm in a friendly way, but his grip was just a bit too tight.

Adana felt a spike of fear. “Thank you,” she managed to say politely. “I’ll remember that in the future.”

“Yes,” the man said, a glint entering his eye. “I think you will.”

CHAPTER SIX



H'PHAEST'M was something of an oddity among the gods. One of the Six, he nonetheless stood outside the normal power structure of the Pantholon. His unique talents were in demand by all of the others, and thus he had managed to carve out a niche for himself in City politics; he remained at the heart of things, without paying tribute to any one of the Four.

He was... unusual.

He alone among the gods was indifferent to the worship of mortals. He was architect, inventor, creator—*programmer*, as he preferred to style himself. He exercised power in the form of direct control over nature.

H'PHAEST'M's compound was situated on the west bank of the isle proper, hewn equally from the territory claimed by R'ZUUS and E'RIIS. The god maintained only minimal household staff, but upon entering his palace, D'Akaio was greeted by a majordomo who showed him to the laboratory complex deep below ground. The sounds of animals in captivity rose to meet his ears as they spiraled down a chiseled stone staircase, the noise growing louder the deeper they descended. Most of the roaring and screeching was probably natural, but to D'Akaio's ear, some of the cries seemed agonized—as if the creatures' very existence was an inescapable torture. The steward delivered D'Akaio to the

laboratory, then turned and disappeared up the staircase, having never said a single word.

D'Akaio found H'PHAEST'M leaned over a large stone table, the god's hands thrust into the abdomen of what appeared to be a young horse. The creature wasn't moving, and at first, D'Akaio assumed it was dead—that the god was performing some sort of autopsy, accessing the beast's internal organs through incisions in its belly. But no... as D'Akaio looked closer, he realized the foal was still breathing softly, its belly unmarked; H'PHAEST'M was simply reaching *through* the creature's skin, his hands blurring to black mist where they disappeared.

The sight of it was unsettling.

[[D'Akaio, Favorite of R'ZUUS,]] the god intoned, without looking up from his work. Unlike the other gods, when H'PHAEST'M spoke, it sounded natural—more like a man and less like a force of nature. His lips even aligned with the words he spoke, as if his mouth were actually forming the sounds.

Despite being himself the son of a god, D'Akaio was not exempt from that moment of dread every mortal felt when becoming the focus of a god's attention. The gods were intimidating by their very nature. And yet while most of the Pantholon encouraged this sort of reaction, H'PHAEST'M's lack of interest in worship made him almost approachable by comparison. Less fearful than he probably should have been, D'Akaio stepped closer to the operating table. Momentarily forgetting the purpose of his visit, his attention was arrested by the image of the sedated creature, its chest rising and falling, rising and falling, while H'PHAEST'M did... *something*... inside of it.

The god smiled slightly, no doubt sensing D'Akaio's curiosity, though he had yet to look up from his work. [[Embedded within every mortal creature is a... a code, for lack of a better word.]]

D'Akaio stared blankly.

[[Like a sequence of letters or numbers.]] H'PHAEST'M frowned slightly, eyes fixed on something only he could see. [[By changing some of those values, I can make changes in the physiology of the creature.]]

“Physiology... You mean you can change its body?”

The god nodded distractedly.

D'Akaio had heard something of this, after all. H'PHAEST'M's creations had brought him a great deal of notoriety; rather than react with jealousy, the other gods only encouraged his fame by commissioning him to create specific works of living art. But what, exactly, was H'PHAEST'M capable of? “You say you can change its body... In what way? Add extra legs? Remove its head?”

H'PHAEST'M looked annoyed. [[Adding something as complex as an appendage is difficult. It ties into so many systems: skeletal, muscular, nervous... Too many things go wrong when such changes are attempted. And vital body parts cannot simply be removed.]] He paused, his expression of annoyance deepening to a scowl as he worked. [[If I add something, it must be simple: dead growth, like hair, claw, or horn. Replacing is easier; coding the head of a bull onto the body of a man, for instance. Most of the nerve and control linkages already exist, though they don't always connect perfectly...]] He trailed off, newly distracted.

D'Akaio found himself sickly fascinated. “And right now? What change are you making?”

[[Adding a horn... dead growth, as I said. Center of the forehead.]] The god shifted position, without removing his hands. [[The basic structure comes from code I found in the rhinokeros sequence, but I've made several modifications. This is my third iteration.]] He smirked. [[I get a little closer each time...]]

The strange conversation died as H'PHAEST'M focused harder on his work, the muscles of his arms shifting subtly as he visibly 'tinkered' within the supine creature.

"Why a horned horse?" D'Akaio asked finally.

H'PHAEST'M's lip twitched. [[M'LAAK desires one for some purpose. Or rather, four of them—a matched set. And...]] the god smiled triumphantly, [[that should do it.]] He pulled his hands out of the foal's belly, leaving no mark that they had ever entered. [[I call the new species 'equukeros.']]

D'Akaio waited expectantly... but there was no change. "Nothing's happening."

H'PHAEST'M burst into laughter, sounding genuinely entertained. [[You won't see the horn on *this* beast. But the changes I've made will replicate to its children.]] His laughter abated. [[Though not to its children's children. I have yet to figure out the problem there; it seems that any change I make also sterilizes the resulting specimen.]]

"I don't understand. Why do your changes to the mother only carry to the next generation?"

[[Because it is not the mother I am changing. My modifications are to the eggs she carries within her.]]

D'Akaio stared, then it was his turn to laugh. "Horses don't lay eggs." Clearly, the god was having fun at his expense.

H'PHAEST'M's face hardened, and D'Akaio cursed himself. True, H'PHAEST'M was more approachable than any of the other gods, but he was still a god. [[You know nothing of which you speak, little one,]] the god said simply, all trace of informality gone from their interview. [[Now tell me: what does your father wish of me?]]

D'Akaio hurriedly produced the scroll, handing it over. H'PHAEST'M broke the seal and stepped to an unused table nearby, spreading the pages across its surface and weighing down the corners with various implements. He was soon completely absorbed by the drawings.

It was clear that D'Akaio himself had been forgotten... so he quietly stepped forward to see what the pages contained.

He had expected something along the lines of M'LAAK's 'equukeros,' but it was immediately clear this was a construction project of some kind. Straight lines formed geometric shapes on the expensive parchment, most empty spaces occupied by words scribbled in an unfamiliar script.

[[A temple,]] H'PHAEST'M breathed, almost in awe. [[But... the scale of it...]] He shook his head idly, and D'Akaio was unsure if the god spoke to him or to himself. [[A project of this magnitude... the perfection required... Simply moving and placing such immense blocks...]] He rounded on D'Akaio. [[I would need an entire corps of Eidolon. Mere humans would not do.]]

"I..." D'Akaio blinked. "I will tell him."

[[But *where*?]] H'PHAEST'M asked absently, not focused on D'Akaio at all. [[A structure so immense... Outside the City?]] He spun back to the table, began flipping impatiently through the plans. [[There must be a survey here somewhere...]] He stopped. [[Ah. Of course...]]

Whatever it was the god had gleaned from this page of the drawings, it was beyond D'Akaio's ability to comprehend. Nevertheless, it caused a smile to spread slowly across H'PHAEST'M's face. He turned and seemed mildly surprised to find the demigod still standing there. He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Uh... my father said I should bring him your answer."

The god's brows smoothed, his smile broadening. [[In that case, tell R'ZUUS I am quite interested. Quite interested indeed.]]

CHAPTER SEVEN



The young man leaned close, leering, and Adana pulled away in disgust, coming up short as he gripped her arm tighter. She looked around for someone who might come to her aid, but the street had grown relatively quiet. She called to the doorman of the house she stood before, the house of the man and woman she'd followed home from the rites.

“Hey! Could I have a little help here? Please?”

The doorman met her eye, then pointedly looked away.

Adana stared at him, dumbfounded. The grip on her arm tightened some more, and then she was being pulled back around, another hand fastening onto her other arm. “You’d best release me immediately,” she demanded, “or else my brother—”

“Or else your brother will *what?*” the young man asked, leaning close. The smell of liquor was heavy on his breath.

“Or else he’ll rip your head off, like he did to that lion earlier today.”

There was a momentary hesitation, and then the man and his two companions burst into laughter. “D’Akaio?” one of the others guffawed. “*D’Akaio* is your brother?” It was clear they didn’t believe her.

Looking into their eyes, Adana felt a little more of her indignation morph into fear. The City had always been a safe

place for her, even at night. She'd heard of other young girls, even some acquaintances, being accosted as they traveled home from the rites, but she'd always assumed they did something to provoke the attacks; these were the sorts of girls who continually sought the attentions of men, dressing and acting in such a way as to draw the eye. That was not Adana, and yet... here she was.

"Please, let me go." She licked her lips, tasting sweat. "I promise not to tell him about any of this." She tried not to think about what these men had planned for her. Maybe they just wanted to scare her a little, but... maybe not. She felt a sudden strong conviction that she didn't want to find out.

The men's howling only intensified. "D'Akaio's sister," one of them said, shaking his head and laughing so hard he almost couldn't speak. "You've made friends with D'Akaio's own sister, Orvo."

"C'mon," the first man slurred, spinning her around and pushing her down the street ahead of him. "And don't worry. We'll treat you how you deserve."

They traveled a surprising distance in this manner, the first man—Orvo—keeping a painful grip on her upper arm as he pushed and pulled her along. Adana remained in denial for several blocks. They were moving openly down the cobbled streets of a respectable neighborhood, a route she traveled on a daily basis, not a stone's throw from her own home. If these men truly intended her harm, surely they wouldn't be dragging her along out here in plain view; they would have found a darkened alley somewhere.

It was only as they stepped out onto the beltway and began crossing toward City-center that Adana realized their destination: Oldtown.

Most of the City had been carefully planned and developed in the time since the gods revealed themselves to mankind, but Oldtown was a relic of an earlier age. Once known as Hannoeh, the town's foundations had originally been

laid down by Atalas, the firstborn of mankind—he who defied the heavens. The ramshackle collection of winding alleys and wooden structures that still stood bore none of the beauty of the City that had grown up around them. By extension, there was little civic pride to be found in the people who called these environs home. Only the most disenfranchised of society existed here, just a few short blocks from where Adana herself lived in relative luxury.

By the time Adana’s fear climbed past the threshold of her pride, it was too late for her screams to do any good. She screamed anyway, desperately begging for help, struggling against the man’s grip. The streets were poorly lit in Oldtown, if lit at all, but still she caught movement in the shadows—and yet no one came to her aid. She screamed herself hoarse, only falling silent when her voice began to give out.

And through it all, the three men acted as if they were out on a casual evening stroll. As if there were nothing different about this night than any other.

“What say you, Toviah?” Orvo asked, shifting his grip on her arm. “My place or yours?”

“Yours,” Toviah responded firmly. “I hosted last night.”

“You have the more extensive wine collection,” Orvo pointed out.

Toviah snorted. “Not after last night.” He sighed. “What about you, Lethos? Care to host tonight?”

There was no immediate answer, and Adana’s captors turned to look, jerking Adana around painfully after them. “Lethos?”

Lethos came flying out of the night, barely missing them before slamming into a nearby wall. The wooden siding of the tenement building splintered under the impact, partially caving in. Lethos himself collapsed to the ground and did not move.

Orvo released Adana’s arm and stumbled toward his friend. Adana herself could only stare in shock, trying to

process the sudden turn of events. She hadn't the time to think of running yet.

Then a huge shape loomed out of the darkness, descending upon the two men who were still standing. Immense hands closed around the men's throats, lifting the ruffians as if they were nothing but cloth dolls.

D'Akaio had arrived.

His expression was thunderous, his anger visible despite the poor light of Oldtown's back streets. Even after watching him emerge victorious from the ring on a dozen occasions, Adana had still never seen such an expression of rage on her brother's face.

And he was squeezing the life out of the two men.

Adana threw herself onto her brother, her savior, wrapping her arms around his waist as she began to sob.

"*Please...*" one of the men gasped, barely forcing the word past D'Akaio's grip. "*Please...*"

Adana spun. It was Orvo, his face beginning to swell, tears streaming down his cheeks as he clawed ineffectually at the vise around his throat. Adana felt her heart pounding, pumping fury through her blood vessels, everything in her crying out in hatred against this man who would have violated her. *Kill him*, she wanted to snarl, even as hot tears of shame poured down her own cheeks.

"*Please...*" the man repeated. "*Don't...*"

Adana looked into his eyes, saw his fear and horror... and something inside her shifted. "No," she whispered, blinking, staggering back as much from her own hatred as from the man before her. She came up short as she backed into D'Akaio. "Don't kill him." It felt like the words barely made it past her own hoarse throat.

She turned to her brother. His teeth were clenched, his face the mask of an avenging angel, his eyes on the men and not on her. She placed a hand on his chest.

“D’Akaio, no. Please. Don’t kill them.”

He blinked, looking down on her in bewilderment.

“What? Why not?”

“I... I don’t know. Just... please. Don’t.”

The demigod looked back and forth between the two men in his hands, as if suddenly unsure of himself. He must have relaxed his grip, though, because the men were suddenly gasping, filling their lungs with air. “I don’t understand,” D’Akaio said.

Adana wasn’t sure how to explain. “Just don’t. Not on my account.”

Fire flared in D’Akaio’s eyes. “This is not your fault, Adana. What they planned for you. You are not responsible.”

“I know,” she said softly.

D’Akaio gritted his teeth again. With a cry of fury, he raised both men overhead and then hurled them into the same wall where he’d cast their friend. Orvo hit the wall and then the ground; Toviah broke all the way through, disappearing from view.

Horried, Adana stumbled forward, going to her knees to check on the two prone figures who lay outside the building. Lethos was clearly dead, his neck twisted at an unnatural angle, but Orvo was still breathing. “He’ll live,” D’Akaio bit out.

Adana’s gaze shifted back to Lethos. He was so young... She’d never even heard him speak. Had he even intended her ill? Maybe he’d been too afraid to speak out against his friends. And now he was dead. Her eyes filled even more rapidly as she stroked the dead boy’s cheek.

D’Akaio stared at her. “What is *wrong* with you?” He shook his head, then grabbed her upper arm and hoisted her none too gently to her feet.

“Ow!” It was the same arm Orvo had gripped so tightly on their forced march.

D'Akaio released her immediately, dropping to both knees and bending before her so as to look her in the eye. He cradled her face gently in both of his big hands. "Oh, Adana. I'm so sorry." His breath caught, and for a moment she thought *he* might cry. "This is my fault. I should have been there to walk you home. Instead I was off doing something for *Dad*."

Adana shook her head, no longer able to speak; all the emotion she'd been holding back was crashing over her at once. She threw her arms around her brother's neck and clung to him tightly. D'Akaio clasped her tightly in turn and then stood, cradling her in both arms as he began striding away.

She sobbed into his shoulder all the way out of Oldtown. By the time they reached the beltway, with its familiar sights, she was feeling better. She patted his shoulder. "I'm alright now. You can let me down."

D'Akaio didn't respond, just kept on walking.

"Please, D'Akaio. People will see. I'm a full-grown woman—this looks silly." And there *were* people, out and about, just as there had been when she passed this way before. Not many, but a few. Would they have helped her then if she'd been sensible enough to scream? Yesterday, she would have said yes. Today... she wondered. She wondered about a lot of things, including how long she'd been lying to herself about the state of affairs in the City. "D'Akaio..."

He paused his hurried pace and let her down finally. He studied her for a long moment, no doubt questioning whether sixteen summers qualified her as a full-grown woman. He left the thought unspoken, however, leaning down instead to take her hand in a no-nonsense grip before setting off once more.

"How did you find me?" she asked, having to run to keep up with his long-legged pace. "How did you even know I was in trouble?"

His face fell, and he slowed enough that she could walk normally. "I was coming back from my errand when..." He

met her eye and immediately looked away, ashamed. "...when I realized I'd just left you there, at the temple. I checked at home first, but Mother said you'd never returned, so I ran from there to the temple. I couldn't find you anywhere in between."

Adana waited for the rest of it. "So..." she finally prompted.

D'Akaio steeled himself. "So I asked my father."

Adana's legs momentarily stopped working, and D'Akaio's continued movement almost pulled her off balance. The thought of R'ZUUS—god of the sky, who took such great pleasure in virgin sacrifices—focusing his divine attention on *her*... it sent such a chill up her back that she thought she would be ill.

"I had to go back anyway," D'Akaio explained hurriedly. "He'd given me an errand, and he expected an answer. He's a *god*, Adana, he could *tell* I was upset. But he told me right where you were—only took him a minute or so to find you."

This didn't make Adana feel any better. Nevertheless, she forced herself to start walking again—until D'Akaio raised a hand, stopping her. Tenderly, the Eidolon worked his fingers under the fine chain of the necklace she wore, pulling it forward until the silver knot—D'Akaio's knot—came into view.

"Of course," he said softly. "This wasn't visible, was it?"

She started to answer, then stopped, comprehension dawning. "I've been a fool," she said bitterly.

D'Akaio gazed down into her eyes, a sad smile on his face. "No, kiddo. You've been innocent. There's a world of difference."

"Well, no longer," she said, fussing with the pendant. She wouldn't soon be forgetting the importance of keeping it visible. She'd need to be more careful about what she wore, to prevent it from disappearing inside her hem. Maybe even put it on a longer chain.

“Don’t say that. Innocence... it’s a very precious thing.” He sighed. “And rare. Too rare.” He eyed her longer, long enough and seriously enough she felt at risk of bursting into tears again. Then, as if he sensed that, he forced a jovial smile. “If it helps, I could have it embroidered on the back of all your dresses...”

She snorted, blinking away most of the moisture. “Don’t you dare—”

“I’m not talking some little monogram, either. I’m thinking *big*, covering your entire back.”

Adana was giggling despite herself. “I shudder to think what that would look like. Considering your eye for color, it would probably clash terribly.”

“Whatever is most visible—”

“Not that anyone would be able to tell what it was you embroidered. You forget—I saw the way you stitched up that wound in your back last year. If that’s any indication of your talent at embroidery, ‘D’Akaio’s Famous Knot’ would probably come out looking like something Outsider coughed up.”

D’Akaio turned on her in mock outrage. “First of all, that scar was hard-won. I’d thank you not to compare it to your pussycat’s hairballs. Secondly, I couldn’t even see that wound. Talk about doing something with your hands tied behind your back—I’d like to see you do better!”

“You *would?*” Adana shot back with a smile. “Don’t you think that would be a little awkward, watching your little sister sewing up her own naked back?”

D’Akaio blushed furiously, a rare reaction indeed, his rebuttal faltering as he stammered. “That’s— I— It’s not what—” He huffed. “*Thirdly*, I wouldn’t do the embroidery *myself*. We have people for that.”

“Dear brother, you won’t be doing the embroidery at all. I like my dresses the way they are.”

“Oh? Even that green one? Because I think it could use—”

“The *green* one? You mean that *teal* gown I so love?”

“The one with the ruffles? In that case, yes, the *teal* one. It could do with some improvement...”

The siblings carried on in that manner all the way home, laughing and joking as if nothing earthshattering had happened that day. It was enough that Adana almost forgot about her abduction.

But she didn't forget—not about the abduction, nor about her realizations during the rites or even her horror at seeing those bodies left to decay in the arena. Maybe D'Akaio was right—maybe she hadn't been a fool, but she *had* been naïve. And it was high time for that to change. If—when—she saw something that seemed *wrong*, she needed to trust that instinct; and instead of waiting for someone else to do something about it, she needed to start stepping forward. She was only one girl, with no power of her own to exercise, but surely she could make some difference for good. She just had to be smart about it.

When they arrived home, Adana was forced to endure more smothering, this time at the hands of her mother. Finzele had been worried about her daughter's tardiness even before D'Akaio came home to ask after her; when he then went back out but failed to return, it sent Finzele into a proper fit. The woman was even mostly sober by the time she threw her arms around her daughter.

Eventually, Adana convinced her mother—not to mention the rest of the household staff—that she was fine, and the siblings retired for the night. Just before parting ways in the residential wing of their home, Adana paused and snapped her fingers imperiously at D'Akaio, the way she'd always done as a child. With a smile, her brother bent close enough that she could plant a sloppy wet kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you,” he said gravely.

She smiled. “No, thank *you*. Seriously. For everything. I love you, D’Akaio.”

“Love you too, kiddo.”

They turned, each toward their own suite of rooms, but Adana knew she would sleep little this night. Her mind was too full of ideas about how she would change the world.



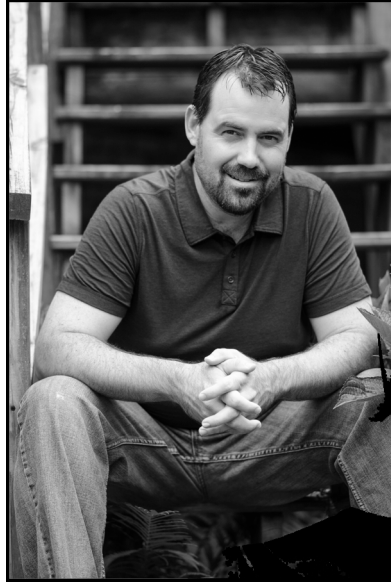
Purchase the full novel

ATLANTIS

TWILIGHT OF MANKIND

*in print or e-book editions
at Amazon.com*

<https://www.amazon.com/Atlantis/dp/B01MQ4D9I4/>



DEGEORGE PHOTOGRAPHY

R.L. Akers loves stories. He loves hearing them, loves telling them, loves embellishing them, and loves forging them from raw materials. He is convinced that every person who ever lived has an interesting story, and he's only met one person in his life who came close to proving otherwise.

Holder of an undergraduate degree in computer science and a master's degree in business administration, Akers has worked in software development as well as non-profit fundraising and publicity. His love for children has led him in the past to be a foster parent and a coordinator of the K-5 ministry at his church, and he currently invests time each week in the lives of local high schoolers. His interests include graphic design, orchestral movie soundtracks, and anything remotely creative.

Akers lives in West Virginia with his wife Sarah and the four children he loves most in this world. Visit him online at RLAkers.com.