

RLAKERS

INFERNO

AN EXCERPT FROM
ATLANTIS
TWILIGHT OF MANKIND



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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.



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>

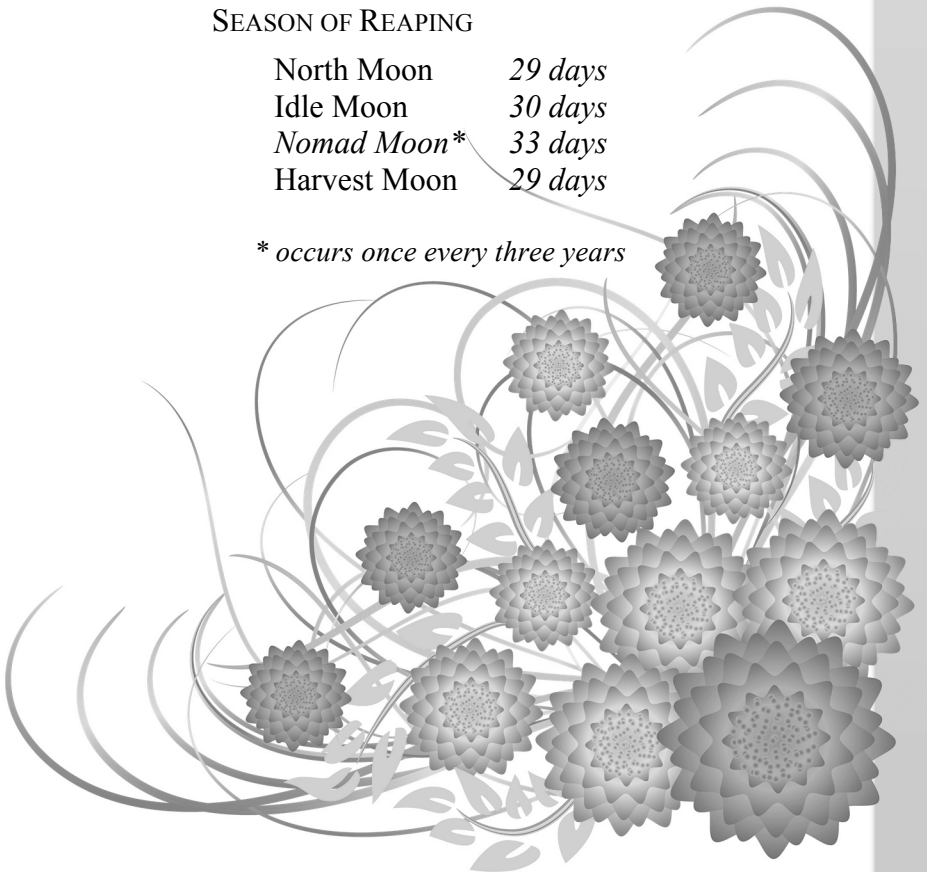
SEASON OF SOWING

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*



CHAPTER ELEVEN



twenty-first day of the
HARVEST MOON, 1653

“Here you go,” Adana said with a smile, handing down a small bundle. The emaciated woman accepted the package without meeting Adana’s eyes, mumbled something, then made way for the next person in line.

“You’d think they’d be more grateful,” Nehala muttered beside her, as she passed a bundle to someone on the other side of the wagon.

Adana shrugged fractionally, keeping her smile firmly in place. She had long since stopped remarking on the lack of gratitude; she’d have thought Nehala would be accustomed to it by now too.

A man came to the front of the line, eyeing Adana with suspicion. He was twitchy, kept glancing about him, as if he feared this was a trap of some sort. As soon as the bundle of food entered his hands, he pushed roughly out of the crowd surrounding her wagon and dashed away.

A trio of children came next, a boy of perhaps ten summers gripping the hands of two little ones, a boy and a girl, their faces dirty. And yet all three of them beamed up at her. Adana’s heart broke anew. If she’d been down on the ground, on their level, it would have taken all her self control not to

sweep those children into a hug, to shower love upon them. As it was, she simply handed down two of the smaller, easier to carry bundles, which the older boy tucked under his arms before taking hold of those little hands once more.

“Thank you,” he said earnestly. “Thank you.”

Adana’s smile widened. Some were grateful. Not many, but some.

After eight moons, the people of Oldtown had come to expect her twice-weekly visits, so much so that she would be yelled at or cursed whenever she failed to show. The men gladly took her food, but they still favored her with distrustful expressions. The women were less hostile, but they remained fearful around her, even though she endeavored to dress plainly so as not to be intimidating.

Only the children seemed genuinely appreciative. And there were so many of them! Adana had lost count of the children she’d met, certainly lost track of their names. Not all of them were orphans, but it seemed the majority were, their parents killed by sickness or accident or fights in the ring. Or even fights *outside* the ring, for murder was sadly prevalent here. Others of these children had simply been abandoned, unwanted or perhaps one mouth too many for their parents to feed. Whatever their situation or the circumstances that had led to it, Adana loved them all. She loved their smiles, the way they lit up when they saw her coming, then ran alongside her wagon, giggling joyfully.

These children were no more insulated from suffering than the beaten-down adults of Oldtown. In fact, they were even more at risk, for they could not defend themselves, and they were often preyed upon—Adana had quickly learned that the majority of child sacrifices were supplied by such as these, for the devotees of the gods much preferred a sacrifice that cost them nothing. To this day, the knowledge of that reality made Adana so angry she couldn’t see through her tears if she allowed herself to think on it. So how was it that the children could find so much joy in their miserable lives? What

happened to them between the ages of five and twenty-five that changed their outlook so drastically?

The next man scowled at her as he accepted his handout. Rather than step aside so another person could receive food, he tore open his bundle right then and there, performing a quick inventory. He tossed the fresh vegetables aside, inspected the cured poultry with a critical eye. "I want more of this."

Adana's jaw tightened. "No."

The man's eyes flashed, and he sucked in a breath to speak—

She beat him to it. "You may take that package or you may leave it. But we will not be rearranging the bundles."

The man seemed to feel all the eyes on him then. Even Nehala had paused in her work, as had Adana's other two friends who were there helping. In embarrassment if not shame, the man crumpled his package violently and stalked away, deliberately squashing one of the fallen tomatoes as he departed. Two children dashed forward, scrambling to collect the other loose vegetables, then paused and looked to her for permission. She smiled and nodded.

The distribution resumed. It had grown into quite an affair since she began, and she was giving out more food than ever before. It was well that money was no object for her household. Under D'Akaio's guardianship, Adana had always known plenty, and their wealth had only grown as D'Akaio's fame soared. People had even begun leaving goodwill sacrifices at the entrance to their estate, beneath the arch on which the dragon's open-mouthed skull was now mounted. Personally, Adana found the trophy ghastly, but the gaping hole in the side of that skull served as an enduring reminder of what D'Akaio was capable of. Adana suspected that even if they dismissed the household staff, they could leave their estate vacant for days at a time without fear of burglary, for none could enter without knowing who it was they risked angering.

Out of the corner of her eye, Adana caught sight of a man sidling up to the rear of the wagon—the same man as before.

He surreptitiously slipped one of the smaller bundles into his tunic and stole away.

“Hey!” Adana cried. “Return that at once!”

For a wonder, the man actually stopped. Face burning, teeth grinding, he turned around and tossed the package back into the wagon, then left for good.

This kind of behavior had been common in the early days. No one had ever dared touch Adana herself; she wore D’Akaio’s knot prominently, and rumors still circulated of the men her brother had killed or maimed for trying to abduct her last year. But that protection did not extend to the food. At Adana’s very first distribution, the men of Oldtown had brazenly pushed children out of their way and taken as much food as they could carry.

At her second and third distributions, when the men began doing this again, Adana had lectured them. She’d explained that she would be returning regularly with more food, that they didn’t need to take so much. They’d laughed and stripped bare the small cart she’d been using at the time. So she’d waited an entire moon before returning again. After that, the crowd had begun to police itself; much of the food was perishable anyway, and it was better to receive smaller bundles more regularly.

There had still been occasional incidents, rogues cheating the system. The whole arrangement was rather tenuous, after all, for there was little Adana could do to enforce fairness, beyond threatening to withhold food in the future. She did her best to remember the faces of those who cheated, but her most effective tactic had been painting D’Akaio’s knot in bright colors on the sides of the wagon. That quite literally put the entire distribution operation under the Eidolon’s aegis, albeit without his knowledge. And no one wanted to cross D’Akaio.

It was inevitable that D’Akaio would find out eventually, of course. She hadn’t launched her feeding program until the Kestrel Moon, when he’d finally canceled her constant Hyderra supervision, so she managed to operate quietly for a few moons

without his realizing. But after she bought the wagon under the Spring Moon, discretion became more difficult; when she wasn't using it, the thing sat there in the courtyard for all to see, and it became only more glaring after she painted his knot upon it. Then there was the recurring expense of the food, not to mention the cost of hiring a teamster to pull the wagon each time she distributed.

D'Akaio had finally pulled her aside, demanding to know what mad scheme she and their mother had begun, for Finzele was still heavily involved at that point. Adana had explained at length, had spoken passionately, for she feared D'Akaio would forbid her from continuing. For someone whose life purpose involved helping other people, D'Akaio still seemed consistently confused by Adana's desire to help others herself. Nevertheless, he had been surprisingly supportive of her feeding program; confused or not, he was clearly proud of her, and that brought a warm feeling to her chest.

"I really wish you would hire some guards," Nehala said at her side. She tugged absently at the cuffs of her long sleeves, which she'd taken to wearing at distributions to hide the intricacy of her arm tattoos. Elaborate tattoos were a sign of social standing, but flaunting one's affluence in the midst of the impoverished was foolish. Of all the girls who helped with the distributions, only Adana kept her arms bare; but then, she alone of her friends had never visited the filigree artists.

Nehala snorted. "It's not like you can't afford at least *some* protection," she continued. Few distributions went by that she didn't ask about hiring guards.

Adana shook her head. It was an old discussion, and not one she cared to rehash. If she started hiring guards, D'Akaio might take that as a sign that she feared for her safety, which could lead him to cancel the distributions after all.

But she and the other girls were safe enough under D'Akaio's aegis. Nehala and the others wore his knot also—he gifted the pendants to many of his favorite girls—though theirs were less fine than the one Adana wore.

"I'm just saying, a guard presence would prevent issues like that one," Nehala persisted, referring to the man who had tried to steal a second bundle.

"We managed just fine on our own."

"That time. We don't always," Nehala grumped. "All it would take is a guard to bloody the occasional troublemaker, and people would stop trying."

Adana sighed. How could she explain that she didn't *want* to bloody anyone, even troublemakers? That doing so went against everything she was trying to accomplish here?

"Just think about it," her friend said.

Nehala accompanied her frequently on her distributions. Bringing her into the loop had been a good thing; Adana was grateful to have her friend at her side, especially once Finzele began falling away. Adana's mother had been incredibly supportive in the early days, but she had gradually slipped back into her bottle. These days Finzele came seldom, but Adana's other friends had taken up the slack. None came as frequently as Nehala, and Adana was convinced that many of them helped only to earn D'Akaio's favor, but she didn't mind; she was just grateful for the assistance.

"And that's that," Nehala said as she handed down the last bundle.

There was a moment of surprised frustration as those people remaining in line realized the food had run out. Several cursed loudly and stalked away, but Adana recognized them as regulars. If they missed a few handouts, they would not suffer.

Adana hopped out of the wagon and helped one of the other girls down. "Thanks for coming out," she told them. "Want to come for dinner tonight?"

All three of them brightened, and Nehala asked the obvious question. "Will D'Akaio be there?"

Adana smiled, refusing to feel offended that it was D'Akaio's presence they were more concerned with. "He

should be. No adventures this week, as far as I know.” She shrugged. “He’s home right now, posing for a new sculpture.”

Nehala swallowed visibly at that news. Marble sculptures were quite vogue right now, and their subjects were always nude.

Adana thanked the teamster and he departed; he could be trusted to return the wagon to their courtyard, if only because no one was fool enough to fence a stolen wagon with D’Akaio’s knot emblazoned so blatantly on three sides.

She and her friends lingered as they often did, joining in a game with some of the children. The other girls laughed and smiled as they tried to keep up with the little ones, and Adana derived as much joy from that as she did from seeing the children at play. Whatever their current motivations for helping, her friends would come around. As they interacted more and more with these children, jumping and playing, how could they not fall in love with them as Adana had?

Another child rushed up then, one she knew, a boy just beginning to sprout whiskers. He was out of breath and couldn’t speak at first—but from his expression, Adana knew immediately that something was terribly wrong.

“What? What is it?” she demanded.

“Fire,” he finally managed to say. “Fire. At the Castle. Kids trapped.”

Adana paled. “Go! Take us there!”



The Castle was anything but. That was just what the orphans called the two-story clapboard structure where many of them banded together to sleep. Adana had been there many times, had sometimes performed her distributions just out front of it. But the street urchins knew Oldtown’s warren of rambling alleys far better than she did, and the boy led her there far faster than she could have managed on her own.

Nehala and the girls followed, though they had shooed the other children away, not wishing to lead them into a dangerous situation.

They were all gasping for air when the Castle finally came into view. Adana could immediately see the situation was dire. The entire eastern side of the building was burning, great sheets of flame climbing the walls themselves, and islands of fire had erupted from windows running along the southern wall too.

And children were screaming from inside.

"They're upstairs," the boy gasped. "Can't see, can't find the stairs. Smoke."

"How do you know?" Nehala asked.

He waved. "I was with them. I jumped, tried to get them to follow." He paused, looking ill. "One did, landed bad... broke his legs."

"We have to go in," Adana announced.

"Are you crazy?" one of her friends demanded.

"We won't be able to see," the other said, visibly fearful. "Then we'll be trapped too."

"We just have to stay low, beneath the smoke," Adana replied.

Nehala looked uncertain, but the other two were shaking their heads.

"How many?" Adana asked the boy.

"Five."

Adana nodded. "Alright, let's go." She dashed for the door farthest from the conflagration, stopped when she realized none were following her. "Come on!" she demanded.

Nehala followed more slowly, but her other two friends just backed away.

Adana didn't have time for this. Even as she stood there doing nothing, the fire spread to the next building over, and new screams joined those of the Castle children.

She had a flash of inspiration. “Go get my brother!” she told her friends. “Bring D’Akaio!”

The two girls looked instantly relieved to have a task that kept them out of danger. They sprinted off before Adana could change her mind.

She turned to Nehala, saw the terror in her eyes, but also the willingness. Her friend didn’t want to let those children burn any more than Adana did. Adana led her to a nearby waterwell, where they poured buckets of water over each other, then wrapped their soaked shawls around their mouths. Then, crouching low, hand in hand, they entered the burning building.

Nehala’s courage lasted as long as her ability to see in the smoky interior. It was so dark! Almost like night, despite the fact that it was early afternoon outside.

“I—I can’t.” The girl ripped her hand out of Adana’s. “I’m sorry.” She stumbled back toward the door.

“Wait! Nehala!” Adana cried, thinking furiously. “Just... stay there! Right near the door. Call to us, use your voice to guide us to the door!”

The other girl had already disappeared into the smoke, but her voice came after a moment. “Alright. I can do that.”

Adana dropped to her hands and knees without another look back. She moved to the wall and began questing for the entrance to the rickety staircase, trying to picture in her mind the interior of the building. Fortunately, she knew that the structure employed an open floorplan, each story little more than a single large room. Had it been Adana’s own home on fire, the maze of rooms and halls might have proved impossible to navigate in the smoke, even for one intimately familiar with it. Of course, there was little risk of Adana’s stone-cut mansion erupting in flames; that was a danger only for the denizens of Oldtown, with their ancient, ramshackle hovels of timber.

Her mind was wandering. Adana shook her head, resettled the shawl, bent lower beneath the roiling blackness.

The rough boards and jutting nail heads had already torn her skirt and skin to a bloody mess. She pushed on, uncaring. She put her left hand down on an exposed nail point and it pushed all the way through. Screaming, she sat up, then immediately began coughing as her head entered the thicker cloud of smoke. She dropped low again, blinking rapidly. *Good*, she thought, as the throbbing pain cleared her mind. Still, she slowed down, began moving her hands in a sweeping motion to feel her way before committing to each move forward.

She called out as she went, and she could barely make out the sound of cries over the roar of the fire. They indeed sounded as if they came from above. She found the stairs, climbed them on hands and knees. The cries were louder as she emerged onto the second floor, and she easily followed them to their source. Sure enough, five children, not one of whom had seen ten summers. They had retreated to one corner of the large room and were congregated under an open window, where the air was still breathable. They were probably situated right over Nehala's head.

"Hey there," she said, forcing a smile for the children's benefit. "I'm going to get you out of here. Sound good?" The words came out as a croak, probably not recognizable at all, but the little ones seemed to take courage anyway.

Under the window's uneven light, Adana tore strips from her skirt and shawl and wrapped them around the children's mouths. The material had long since dried in the hot air, but it was better than nothing. Then she showed them how to make a train, each of them grabbing the ankle of the person ahead of them, and they set off.

It felt like an eternity before they found the stairs again, then spilled out onto the ground floor. Adana forced herself to move slowly, lest she leave one or more children behind. Stumbling along, her eyes and throat aching, Adana lost her bearings. She'd been trying to follow the wall, but... the smoke... the confusion.

Please, she found herself praying—out of habit, as she'd been taught. It was stupid. No god cared about the welfare of mere children. *Please*, she prayed anyway.

"Adana!" a voice called faintly. "Adana! This way!"

She followed the sound of that voice, picking up speed as she went along. Abruptly, she broke from the smoke and Nehala was there. Eyes going wide, Adana's friend helped her through the doorway, turning to guide the children out too, one after the other, all four of them.

Adana groaned. They had lost one.

The fourth child in the line was inconsolable, incapable of thinking clearly, much less helping Adana determine if the missing child had let go before or after the stairs.

"Forget it!" Nehala yelled. "You're not going back in!"

"I have to!"

Nehala dragged her away from the building. "Please, Adana..."

"No, I can't—"

Her friend let out a wordless cry of frustration, then dragged her farther from the fire, toward the water well. "At least use your brain!" She dumped a bucket over her, and the cool water was such a shock to Adana's system that it actually *hurt*. Had Adana's mind been clearer and the situation less dire, she probably would have stared in wonder at the wisps of steam rising from her own body as Nehala doused her again and again.

Adana's first trip into the building had been a nightmare. Her second was hellish.

She quickly lost track of time. She cried herself hoarse but heard no answer. It felt as though she'd been crawling for hours through an oven, and though she sobbed, her eyes no longer produced tears. Her clothes and skin had dried, and her body no longer even sweated. She wandered almost aimlessly, her bearings lost once more, still on the ground floor since she'd been unable to find the stairs.

From the direction of the door, she could hear Nehala begging her to give up, to come back, that it was too late for the child. Adana knew she was being stupid, but she refused to turn back.

Her questing hands encountered something soft—a small body, unmoving. “Thank you,” she prayed thoughtlessly as she painstakingly crawled back toward Nehala’s voice, dragging the body all the way.

Adana and Nehala carried the little girl some distance from the building, to where the other four children huddled in fear. The fifth child wasn’t moving, wasn’t breathing. Adana began beating rhythmically on the little girl’s chest, the way she’d seen the healers do. Almost immediately, the tiny body spasmed, coughing and hacking and *breathing*. Adana swallowed her in a bear hug.

She looked about her for the first time. The inferno had continued to spread while she was inside, jumping from building to building. Not one building had been spared, not within sight anyway.

Oldtown was burning. And the screams had multiplied.

Adana began to cry. What could she possibly do in the face of *this*?

D’Akaio appeared from around a corner, searching frantically. Then he saw her, and relief spread across his features; he rushed forward and swept her—and the little girl she still clutched—in a bear hug of his own.

He released her, stepping back far enough to take stock of her, Nehala, and the children. He nodded firmly. “Let’s get you out of here.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



Adana allowed herself to be led away, even though D'Akaio could clearly hear the screams of more victims in the burning buildings around them. She and the other girl—Nehala, that was her name—took up vanguard and rearguard positions on the five children, who held hands in a line between them.

They had gone only a short distance before D'Akaio grew frustrated with their pace. His sister may not be crawling around inside a burning building anymore, but these narrow alleys were not much safer. A building collapsing into the street would kill her just as easily as fire or smoke.

Without a word of explanation, D'Akaio lifted one of the children onto his shoulders, then hoisted two of the others, one under each arm. That left the two smallest for Adana and Nehala, and they followed his lead, lifting them into their arms. They set off once more, their pace greatly improved.

A thunderous crash erupted behind them, and D'Akaio turned to see a building collapse into the street not far back. He shivered despite the heat, thinking that might well have fallen on them had they not started moving faster.

D'Akaio hated fire.

They reached the beltway without further incident, and the demigod lowered his children to the ground, instantly

putting them from his mind. He waited for Adana to set down the little girl she was holding, then fastened a hand on his sister's arm. "Come."

She was so shocked that she let him drag her several steps before digging her heels in. "D'Akaio!"

"Do not try my patience, sister." He let some of his famous anger show through. He *was* angry. Judging by the condition she was in, Adana had come very close to dying in that fire, all because he'd allowed her to go repeatedly into Oldtown on her damned crusade.

She flung off his hand. "We have to go back."

"*What?*"

"There are still people in those buildings. They're trapped, *dying*."

D'Akaio barely stopped himself from telling her how much that fact really bothered him.

"Please, D'Akaio." Her whole body began quivering with emotion, and tears appeared in her eyes.

He scowled, but he couldn't simply ignore her pleas. He'd never been able to. She had real power over him, of a kind entirely different from what the gods wielded.

He looked back towards Oldtown, noting absently that the other girl—Nehala—remained nearby, watching as this drama unfolded between D'Akaio and Adana. He stared woodenly at the flames, listened uncaringly to the screams. He tried, *tried* to dredge up even an ounce of the compassion Adana so clearly felt for those people, but... there was nothing. Truly, he wished them no ill. They simply meant naught to him. These were people he had never met; why should he care any more about their deaths in this moment than if tomorrow was the first he heard of their fate?

Adana stepped in front of him, and his eyes were drawn to her face, which was now streaming with tears. "*Please*,

D'Akaio. You could help them. You're a *hero*. Saving people is what you do."

Her words inspired him, if only a little. What inspired him more was her passion. He loved *her*, and *she* apparently loved these people; looking into her eyes, some little bit of her love transferred to him.

D'Akaio's scowl deepened. He *really* hated fire. It had been a year since he faced the dragon, since he'd suffered the burns over half of his body. His hair had only recently grown back the way he liked it. And Adana was asking him to risk a repeat of that, all for a bunch of worthless commoners.

"*You* stay here," he told the girl. "Do you understand me?"

She didn't smile—she was too upset for that—but she *did* wilt with relief. "Yes! I promise! Thank you, D'Akaio. I love you!"

"Love you too, kiddo," he said grudgingly.

He started with one of the buildings on the outskirts. Why not? There were screams emanating from within, so it was just as fine a candidate as any of the other burning structures. He ignored the door—undoubtedly the people inside would have used it if they could. Instead, he followed the sound of their screams to a corner of the building, then punched one massive fist through the wall and started ripping off the siding. Smoke immediately began billowing from his opening, followed by people once the hole was large enough. Four adults, three children. No more screams came from within, so he moved on, passing several more structures before he heard more cries for help.

He repeated the same trick here—rescuing three—and on the building after that—another five. The next several buildings were quiet, so he skipped them and moved on to the one beyond, where he rescued a young couple.

He noticed Adana pacing him along the beltway, checking the survivors over, sometimes dashing forward to

help carry children. She wasn't actually following him into the buildings, however, so he let her carry on in that manner.

A new medley of wails reached his ears, and D'Akaio found himself following them, though it meant moving deeper into Oldtown's inferno. He was beginning to realize that most of the outlying buildings had been vacated already anyway; their owners no doubt had more warning of what was coming than those who lived farther in.

As he searched for the source of the screams, he realized he was almost enjoying himself. This was different from battle, and yet some of that same thrill coursed through his veins. And he could easily keep score here too, much as he did in the ring. What was he up to now? Twelve rescued? Yes, he needed to keep track, to give the bards something to sing about.

He continued to follow the screams, grimacing and slapping at his hair to put out an ember that had blown there. It took him a little time, for sound traveled strangely amidst the cacophony of so many structures burning to the ground, but he eventually found the right building. The first floor was thoroughly engulfed, as was the second. The third floor remained remarkably untouched, however, and he guessed that was where the screams originated. Unfortunately, the buildings on either side had already collapsed, so he would have to do this the hard way.

D'Akaio drew two of the daggers he kept on his person at all times, then took a flying leap. He buried the daggers to their hilts in the wood siding, then hove himself up on upper body strength alone; once he had an overhand grip on the daggers, he tensed, then threw himself farther up the building, just catching one of the third-story window sills with his fingers. He fought for stability, then found the dagger handles with his feet and rested part of his weight upon them. Flames licked at his ankles, but he'd managed to position himself far enough away from the worst of it.

“Hey!” he bellowed. “You lot, inside! Get over here.” He waited. “Hurry up, you morons!”

The upper body of a man emerged from the window, face slack with shock.

“How many of you in there?” the Eidolon asked.

The man was already climbing out onto D’Akaio’s shoulders. “Help me! Help me!”

The demigod lost his balance thanks to the man clutching wildly at him, swinging this way and that. Cursing, D’Akaio struck the man, knocking him from his perch but catching at him to slow his descent; the man hit the street with a cry of pain, but he was healthy enough to crawl away.

There were others hanging from the window now, screaming for help. D’Akaio repositioned himself, back flat against the wall, and began guiding people out one at a time; he would hoist them over his head, then dangle them from their arms and lower them between his legs; most of them seemed capable of dropping from there without injury. Thirteen people he rescued in this manner, both adults and children. He asked the last of them if there was anyone remaining in the building, but he got no answer.

So that was... twenty-five?

D’Akaio was preparing to drop down himself when he heard another scream—a shrill scream, like that a baby might make—followed by silence. Gritting his teeth, he considered dropping anyway. This was a diminishing returns situation; he might enter this building and waste precious time trying to find the child, or he could move along and focus his efforts on a different building, one with another big group inside.

He paused. What would Adana do?

Sighing, he pulled himself up onto the sill and through the window. He located the child quickly enough—an infant, not even capable of moving on its own—and returned to the window.

Glancing out, he was shocked and angered to see Adana below, taking hold of two children and dragging them toward safety. With a yell, D'Akaio threw himself from the window; he had plenty of time to set himself before hitting the dirt street below, rolling once to bleed momentum. The baby, nestled safely in his arms, was screaming bloody murder when he came to his feet, and he promptly thrust the little monster into his sister's waiting arms. "Adana—"

"I know, I know!" She dashed away.

D'Akaio mastered his annoyance. He turned a slow circle, listening for the sound of more people in need. He heard a few off in the distance, but... surely he had done enough already. Adana couldn't expect more than this, could she?

On the other hand, twenty-six was such a paltry number. No bard would sing of that. But a hundred... that sounded like a fine number indeed. Was it possible there were still another seventy-five poor twits trapped in Oldtown? He snorted. Not just possible—it seemed likely. Fire had always plagued this most dilapidated sector of the City, since before the City had even grown up around it, back in the days when it was still known as Hannoeh. Even in his lifetime, D'Akaio had heard of hundreds being killed in these fires, and those had been relatively contained affairs, nothing like this all-encompassing conflagration.

With an almost sheepish grin—what would the other Eidolon think if they saw him risking his life so foolishly?—D'Akaio set out in search of more victims to rescue.

He worked the rest of that day and into the night, stopping only occasionally at a waterwell to drink deeply and douse himself. He sang quietly to himself as he worked, falling into a comfortable rhythm as he rescued people left and right. He sustained countless burns, of course, and it wasn't long before his hair was a total loss, but... that was alright. Because this, what he was doing here today, was *epic*.

In the end, the only reason he stopped was that he couldn't find anyone else to rescue. No doubt many had been killed because he wasn't fast enough, but there wasn't much he could do about that. He could, however, take pride in what he *had* accomplished. Through it all, he'd never lost count, and the number of people he saved was truly something the bards could sing about.

He was D'Akaio. Hero. Savior.

And he had rescued six hundred and seventy-six people from the inferno that consumed Oldtown.

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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.

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