

THE  
ALABASTER  
THRONE  
*Book 1 of The Fall of Atlantis*  
**by Wilson Harp**

Cover art by Daniela Owegoor

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For my Denisa  
I love you to the moon and back

# ONE

Tal kept his lips sealed tight as he watched his brother adjust the breastplate. He sat with his arms wrapped around his knees in the folds of the curtain which flapped in the soft breeze. The blue linen decorated with silver thread would blow in front of him, but he still watched in rapt attention to the servants who worked without words to prepare their lord for his day of glory. Tal had been told to keep his breathing quiet as the fitting took place, and had kept his mouth closed so not to be sent away. He felt the excitement and thrill he was sure gripped his older brother.

Galius admired himself in the polished oval of copper one of the slaves held before him. The silver leopard head snarled in sharp relief against the finely crafted polished bronze breastplate which gave the young man a look of power and regality beyond his years.

To be chosen as commander was a great honor, and that Galius was only fifteen years old spoke of the trust their father, King Fa'amuil, held in his second son.

“My Lord.”

General Praset came into the room. His four guardsmen stopped just outside the room to assure no one would approach the powerful officer without his knowledge. Tal had heard the General laugh at warnings of



assassinations, but he acted as though he believed each moment he was under threat. His security was as formidable as the High King's.

Galius peered at himself in the polished copper for a few seconds more before he dismissed his servants with a wave of his hand. Tal readied himself to be sent away, too, but his silence had rewarded him. Galius had forgotten his little brother watched from the dark corner of the room.

“General, I trust the field is prepared as I have ordered.”

“The troops will be in position, my lord. I will ride directly behind you.”

“And who will be facing us tomorrow?”

“General Noma has sent a commander from Avatui. I know little about him.”

“No matter. You have trained me well, and I have a keen mind. The battle will go as we have planned and I will return with a victory to present to my father.”

“His majesty will be pleased by your success today, my Lord.”

“As he should be. I will earn him great honor and my victory will announce to the people that Mestor has a new commander who's to be feared.”

The slightest twitch at the corner of Praset's mouth indicated his approval. “So it shall, my Lord. Your chariot will be welcomed



into the gates with the highest honor. I'm sure his majesty will step down from his throne and place the crown on your head himself.”

“The first of many crowns,” Galius said. He strapped the silver traced bronze helmet onto his head and walked out of the room with a haughty smile. The general peered after him and pursed his lips as if in thought.

Tal considered his situation. He was afraid if he were caught hiding in the corner, he would be punished. But he didn't think the general knew of his presence, so he stayed still and waited for a moment when he could slip out unobserved.

General Praset looked to the door and bowed deeply.

“Your majesty,” he said.

Tal felt shock his father might catch him and shrank back behind the curtain. He almost sighed out loud when his mother entered the room a second later, but was able to control his breathing.

The queen stepped inside and looked around. Her eyes seemed to take in every object in the room, but she never looked in the dark corner where Tal had hidden himself. She extended her hand to the general and he took it and kissed it. Then he kissed up her arm and took her in a lover's embrace and kissed her on the lips.

“Careful General,” Queen Jala said as she pulled herself from his embrace. “I don't wish



the servants to speak of us meeting in my own son's chambers."

"Of course, my Queen. Galius has gone to the stables. He is fully suited for battle and his chariot will soon take him to the field of Comril."

"Then you must go soon and calm him before his day."

"Did you wish to see him?"

"No. I said my farewells this morning when I had breakfast with him. I waited until he left before I came to you."

"It will go as you have instructed," Praset said.

"Did you speak any falsehood to him?" Queen Jala asked. She stepped over to the window just feet from Tal.

"No, your majesty. I would never offend the gods by being false to royalty. I told him his chariot would enter the city in glory and he would be honored by his father placing a silver coronet on his head."

"And then he will be lowered into the water," the queen muttered as she turned to look out of the one window where she could see the ocean. She smiled as she took in the view.

The general stepped behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. "Your plan is in place. Everything is arranged."



“When I sit on the Sapphire Throne, you will be my personal guardsman. I will keep you with me for your loyalty.”

Praset kissed her neck. “Among other things.”

She laughed and turned to him. “Yes, among other things.” She kissed him on the lips and then slipped from his grasp again. “Go now and mount your chariot. Give my son a great entrance onto the field of battle. This moment will be his pinnacle; he needs to ascend great heights in front of his men. Let their hearts soar as their new commander arrives in the highest honors.”

“Banners and pennants will wave from every spear. It will be a glorious entrance.”

“Tomorrow evening I will mourn for him in true grief, but for now I must be the proud mother and prepare with the other women. We must finish the hero’s welcome which all expect.”

She lifted her hand to Praset who kissed it in farewell. He walked out of the room and Tal heard the footsteps of his guardsmen follow him down the main stairs from the apartment.

Queen Jala turned back to the window and sighed. She uttered a short prayer to Rosta, goddess of storms, and looked around the room.

“You had an arrogant way, my Galius. I could have used that if you weren’t so stubborn.”



Tal watched as his mother left the room and turned toward the main stairs. He picked a blue striped tile and had decided to wait until the shadow from the door reached it before he left the room in order not to be seen. He thought about what he had seen and heard as he watched the shadow on the floor. That his mother had taken General Praset as a lover was no surprise. His father had many women in his service and his mother had taken many men to her bed as well.

What confused Tal was the talk of Galius being killed. His mother mentioned mourning and Galius being lowered into the water. But how could that be? Praset was a great general and Noma was a doddering fool who had to gum his food and women? That was what King Fa'amuil had said just the night before when he gave Galius command of the army.

The shadow reached the tile and Tal crept from behind the curtain. He spared a moment to look around and make sure there was nobody who lingered outside of his brother's apartments before he walked out the door into the bright noon sun.

He darted from the doorway to a large terrace of flowers and looked around. No one seemed to notice. He turned to descend the stairs which climbed down the wall side of the royal apartments.



“Tal,” Meleus said as he rounded the corner. “I’m glad I found you. Come on, let’s go. Tumat is waiting.”

“Why are you in such a hurry?” Tal asked. “He’s just a dried up plum. He talks to me like a servant.”

“He lets me listen and I can watch you practice. I think it’s interesting. I like him.”

Tal snorted. “You would. But you won’t be holding a spear in battle, leading the army to victory.”

“Maybe not, but I do want to learn about the untamed lands and the men and beasts which live there. I won’t lead men into battle on the isles, but maybe I’ll go to Sais one day.”

A trumpet sounded from the front gate and the boys turned to look.

“Come on,” said Tal. “Let’s climb the wall. We should be able to see from there.”

The boys ran down the stairs of the apartments and along a small garden path until they reached one of the many stairs which led to the top of the city wall. The wall on this side of the city fell away to the rocky shores a hundred feet below, so there were few guardsmen to move around. The horns blared again and the boys looked over to the gate.

“See!” Tal said. “It’s Galius’s chariot. The procession is leaving now!”

The two boys watched enthralled by the sight of the soldiers marching out. Galius, Praset, and other officers went first in their



chariots. The large warhorses were held to a slow cantor to allow the parade to be seen by as many people as possible. The trumpeters came next in their red tunics, the brass instruments blown when signaled by their leader. The ranks of spearmen which followed were in proper formation. Every spear head shined and gleamed with golden light, its bronze tip sharpened to needlepoint.

“One day you will ride out like that,” Meleus said.

Tal nodded as he watched. He saw Galius wave to the crowds which lined the road out of the city and to the crowds which filled the tops of the walls near the gate. He wanted to cheer for his brother, but he knew he would never be heard. And he felt strangely sad, like he would never see Galius again.

“What’s wrong?” Meleus asked.

“I... I don’t know.”

“Your father said this would be a great victory for him. Tomorrow night he will return ahead of the army and there will be a great feast.”

“There will be,” said Tal. But he couldn’t shake the image of Galius being lowered into the water with a silver circlet on his head.

“Come, let’s go and find Tumat,” Meleus said. He pulled on Tal’s tunic as he tried to get the young royal’s attention.



“I hoped that old toad would have been caught up in the excitement and not come to look for me today. He should take the day to rest his bones, as he complains they always ache.”

“He won’t lecture if you’re not there, and I love to hear the stories.”

Tal turned for his friend’s sake and walked toward the garden where he knew Tumat waited.

“Soon I will get to go to the yard and work with the spear,” the young prince said. “And before long, I will get to go see a real battle.”

“I suppose I will have to learn about the horses and chariots if I’m to drive for you,” said Meleus.

“What else?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to see the ships and travel.”

“To the savage lands?”

“Sure. There’s adventure and excitement over there. Wild beasts roam about and crazed barbarians with strange customs.”

“Atlantis is exciting enough for me,” said Tal. “Is that why you like the lectures so much? Because he drones on about the lands he has traveled?”

“It’s an exciting life. I wish I could be a scholar and travel. But I wouldn’t know where to start.”

Tal laughed. “When I have my own Palace, I can send you on trade missions. I’ll



get Father, or Olatic if he has taken the throne by then, to send you on the long voyages which will let you see the four corners of the world.”

“Would you really, Taldirun?”

“I would indeed.”

The young men broke into a run as they left the royal apartments and headed toward the garden. As they approached, they saw Queen Jala and several other women speaking with Tumat.

Tal slowed to a walk as he approached his mother and tutor.

“There’s my son,” she said. “Tumat tells me you are just on time.”

“Yes, mother. A little late, to be truthful. I went to see Galius ride out.”

Jala looked in the direction of the main gate. It was not the direction Tal had come from. “Did you need to get something from the palace?” she asked.

“No. I watched the procession from the top of the sea-side wall. It was a good view and I didn’t have to work through the crowds.”

“Oh?”

“It was Meleus’ idea,” Tal said. Meleus shrank back from the mention of his name. His eyes never left the ground as he stood before the regal queen, but he was aware of her volatile temper.



“That was a clever idea. It’s good to have servants who show intelligence. He serves you well.”

Jala motioned to the other women. “Come, we have the preparations to finish and then I wish to dine with Bator’cam tonight.”

“Goodbye, Mother,” Tal said as the women moved to follow the queen. She never turned back to acknowledge his words, but he was sure she had heard him.

One of the women spoke to a little girl as they left. It was Analise, the wife of General Praset, and she was bent over the strangest girl Tal had ever seen. The girl’s hair looked like it was the color of a raven’s feathers; black as the deepest night, but in some way it glimmered in the sun. Analise kissed the girl’s forehead and fell in with the other women. All of the women in service to the queen were pristine examples of beauty with golden hair which flowed down to their waists in sheets and piercing blue eyes that reflected the blessings of the gods.

But the little girl who had been left with Tumat had mysterious dark hair which curled and twisted around her face. Tal found it hard to believe she was Atlantean at all. He had never seen hair so dark, and yet she didn’t look like one of the savages from the far lands.

Tumat smiled and bowed at all of the women until they were beyond his sight. He turned to Tal and motioned him into the garden.



“You should be glad you arrived when you did, Taldirun. Your mother was asking where you were and I am finding it hard to make excuses for why you are late or altogether absent from my lessons.”

“If I’m absent, then you can rest,” Tal said.

“Yes, yes, rest. But your father would hear of me taking his silver and not teaching his son. And where would that place me? If lucky, on a ship back to Sais where I can teach some other ungrateful boy.”

The old man turned back to the entrance of the garden and gestured at the little girl. “Come on, it’s this way. We’ll sit by the pool in the shade as I teach.”

The young girl followed them at a distance.

“Who is she?” Tal asked.

“General Praset has convinced the King to allow his daughter some education. Apparently his wife’s mother was a Savarati woman and in their lands, both men and women were taught by tutors.”

“Have you ever taught a girl before?”

“No, and I wouldn’t now except your father wants her taught. I see no use in it, she doesn’t need to know more than enough numbers to be of aid to her husband if she marries a merchant. And if she marries anyone



but a merchant, my knowledge will be of no use to her whatsoever.”

They reached the central fountain and Meleus climbed up to sit on the edge of the water. He always sat on his perch and watched as Tumat taught Tal all the knowledge the old man thought his young charge could handle in a single session. Often Tumat presented drawings, or samples, of animals and plants either from Atlantis or from one of the far-off lands. Meleus never interfered or made a sound during the lessons, he just remained attentive to Tal and soaked in the knowledge the tutor revealed.

Tumat pulled himself up the first block of stone which made up the base of the fountain and sat with a grunt on the second step. Tal was about to join him, when he heard a whimper behind him. The little girl struggled to pull herself up on the structure, and Tal reached down to offer his sleeve for her to grab onto. She grabbed his hand instead and then went wide eyed as she realized she had touched a prince. Tal’s eyes went wide as well. No one but his family was to touch him unless he gave permission. That was a dictate from the gods. The royal family was divine, and to presume to make yourself equal to them by physical contact was an affront to the sea.

The girl tried to let go, but Tal held on. He later convinced himself she would have fallen and might have become hurt if he had let her



go, but the truth was he was frozen in place. Her eyes were dark, like the deepest shadow of the deepest night. He had never seen eyes like hers before. His eyes were blue, like all of his family and almost all Atlanteans. A few had eyes which were green, like the sea when it was angry. That was a sign they were to serve as priests in the temples of Hondre, or as serenes in the temple of Rosta.

But dark eyes. Eyes which locked onto his with a mix of fear and wonder. He couldn't have imagined anything like that. He pulled her rest of the way onto the stone and helped her steady herself.

"Thank you," she said. She looked down as he released her hand and hurried to sit below the legs of Tumat.

"What is your name?" Tal asked.

The girl buried her head under her arms and turned toward the stone. She wept and her body shook. Tal knew she must think herself in great trouble.

"Her name is Siande," Tumat said. "And as long as she cries quietly, she won't disturb our lesson."

"Her eyes. They're black," Tal said.

"A deep brown. It comes from her grandmother. Her mother has the same eyes. It's a curse on their family. If Praset wasn't a favorite of your father's, the queen would no doubt send Anilisa from her presence. But the



workings of court aren't a matter for us to discuss."

"Do all barbarians have dark eyes?"

"Most do. It's one of the ways we can see they are cursed. Dark hair and dark eyes, as the gods did not see fit to dress them as the sun and sea."

Tumat launched into his prepared lesson. Today he spoke of the herbs which were good to eat, where they were grown, and how they affected the body. He spoke of omens of birds and how you could use their behavior to let the gods guide you to make decisions. He told a story of war and how inept and foolish the barbarians were to stand against the will of Atlantis.

Tal sat and listened, but he took glances both up and down as Tumat prattled on. Meleus's eyes never left the old tutor as he absorbed each word. And young Siande sat as if under a spell, still as a mouse afraid of a cat. But every so often as Tal glanced at her, her eyes would meet his and for the first time in his life, he wondered about the world beyond Atlantis.



# TWO

*Tal walked through the forest. The trees were bright and grew tall, but an amber haze cut off the horizon in all directions. In fact, there was nothing but trees. Trees and short grass which carpeted the forest, but there was no underbrush, no bushes, no tangles. Just trees as far as he could see. The forest faded off into the haze with no sense of ending, but he felt comfortable.*

*This was odd because he was sure he was lost. He was sure he would never find his way out, and being lost in the wilderness was the one thing he dreaded above all else. He had heard stories of people who were lost in the wilderness and could never find their way home again. He didn't feel lost, though. He felt safe. He felt secure. He felt like he belonged here. He'd never seen this forest before and there were trees he didn't recognize. There were trees which couldn't exist, they were so beautiful and enormous.*

*There were evergreens, which he was familiar with from his few trips to the mountains, but they grew alongside larches and maples. Those trees only grew in the fields near the farms on the giant plain of Llabesc. But here they all grew together and were perfect and harmonious.*

*Some of the trees bore fruit or nuts, others just shaded the sky with their tall branches and boughs full of leaves. He wondered why he was here and how he*



*knew he shouldn't be. He didn't know this place and yet it felt like home. Was he in danger?*

*"You're perfectly safe."*

*Tal turned and saw the man who spoke. He was dressed in a simple garment and he sat on a fallen tree.*

*But the tree wasn't fallen, it was bent over. The man stood and the tree became upright. Tal blinked his eyes. The tree didn't move it simply changed.*

*"Let's walk a bit," the man said.*

*"Who are you?" Tal asked.*

*"It's a dream, Tal," the man said. "I'm talking to you in a dream. No matter what name I gave, you would understand no more or less because it's a dream."*

*"That's not true. Dreams are important and we can understand much when we dream. The priests tell us dreams can be dangerous, they can tell the future and the truth."*

*The man nodded and smiled. "That is true. Dreams can tell the truth, and they can show the future. Today, however, it's just the truth."*

*They walked in silence for a few minutes. Tal didn't see any landmarks the man walked toward, but he led them as if he knew every tree.*

*"What do you remember before you went to bed?" the man asked.*

*"I remember being down at the square where they were preparing the celebration. Mother had sent women to the kitchen to cook for the feast tomorrow."*

*"Will there be a feast tomorrow?"*

*"Of course. The food is being cooked now and Galius will return from battle."*



*“And when Galius comes through the gate, where will you be?”*

*“With mother and father. We’ll be seated at the table when his chariot arrives in the square. Father’s very excited about his triumphant entry.”*

*“And your brothers and sisters?”*

*“They’ll be there as well.”*

*“Then you’ll feast when he comes through the gate?”*

*“Of course,” Tal said. He frowned and came to a stop. “Why are you asking me these things when you already know them?”*

*“To make sure you know them. I know they’re true but I also know you don’t understand why they’re true.”*

*“Why are they true?” Tal asked as they started walking again.*

*“I like you, Tal, and I want you to understand whatever I tell you is the truth.”*

*Tal felt the man’s words were true more than he knew a fire was hot.*

*“I believe you,” Tal said.*

*“You heard something today. In Galius’ room, you heard something which makes you doubt what you know.”*

*“General Praset said Galius would return through the gates and be honored by father. That a crown would be set on his head.”*

*“And your mother said something in response to the general’s comment.”*



*“I didn’t hear her correctly. I was shrunk back behind the curtain, and I couldn’t hear what she said.”*

*“You did Tal. And you know it’s true. You knew it when she said it, and you know it now, but you can’t bring yourself to face the truth.”*

*“Mother said Galius would be lowered into the water.”*

*“And what does that mean?”*

*“Galius will be dead.”*

*“Why would he be dead? How can he be honored and dead at the same time? How can both be true?”*

*Tal dropped his eyes to the ground. “It means he’ll be killed in battle. He’ll be honored because he died in service to Mestor. He will be lowered into the water and we will feast at his funeral.”*

*“It’s true, Tal,” the man said. He knelt next to the boy and opened his arms. Tal fell into his hug and let this stranger hold him while he sobbed.*

*“I want you to know I didn’t hide the truth from you, I didn’t tell you it would be well. It won’t be well. You’ll mourn, and you’ll mourn more because you knew the truth before you could see it.”*

*“But how could mother know?” Tal asked. “If there’s an accident in the battle tomorrow and Galius is killed, how would mother know that?”*

*“That’s a truth for another day. The truths you must understand today is I tell you only the truth and you know in your heart what is true. Now you understand these things, you can’t ignore the truth. You have to face it, you must accept it, and you must live your life according to the truth. Do you understand?”*



*Tal pulled away from the man and stared at him. Telling the truth was an obligation, his father said. But as a Prince he was only obligated to his father and mother. And the High King of course.*

*“If the truth doesn’t give us what we want, and leads us into trouble or into loss, then why follow the truth? I’m not obligated to it.”*

*“It saddens me, Tal. You think where you want to go is better than where the truth will lead. It is true those who do not follow the truth often find themselves in places where they desire to be, but where you desire to be is not always the best place for you.”*

*“I don’t understand. The priests say where we desire to go, we should go. The royal families’ desires are the best desires for the people of Atlantis.”*

*“Not always. Sometimes it is. Sometimes the leadership of Kings lead the people to a greater understanding and a greater purpose in life. But desires often lead to destruction and the more someone desires something, the more dangerous it becomes. Do not look to your desires to lead you, but seek the truth which is buried in your heart. The truth will always lead you to a better place than your own desires.”*

*“Will we talk again?” asked Tal.*

*“Yes, we will,” the man said. “But now we’ve walked a long time. Your mind is rested and your body grows restless. It’s time to awaken and face this day. It’s a day you will remember for a long time, but never forget, the truth will always lead you to a better place.”*



Tal opened his eyes. The dim light of morning greeted him and he heard sounds of others as they performed their morning duties among the royal apartments. Tal went to the window in his room and looked out to the sea. He looked to the sea every morning. It was the ritual he was raised with. The sea was life, it was what gave Atlantis its blessing and power. The western sky was still dark and the shadow of night still hung over the waters, but dawn was about to break open and spill its brilliance onto the day. Meleus would soon be in to awaken him.

He tried to remember his dream, but the images faded from his mind as he grasped at them. He could see the forest and the man, and the odd way the trees kept going forever. He tried to see the sky, but he never looked up beyond the leaves of the trees that he could recall. The ground had seemed to him a well-tended garden without anything else to remember. The man was indistinct, a perfect looking man and acceptable in every way but nothing which would have caught his eye had he seen him in a field or in the city. He wasn't particularly old or young, but his eyes had authority and his beard was grown to the right length for his face. There was nothing about him that made Tal feel in any way different than comfortable.

Tal thought about the message the man taught him. It was odd, he couldn't recall much



of what he saw, he just had vague ideas of where he had been, but he remembered each word of their conversation. He knew the most important thing to remember was the man only spoke the truth and he wanted Tal to always seek and follow the truth wherever it led.

Tal chewed on his lip as he thought of Galius. At this hour he would be awake and preparing for battle. By noon the battle would be over and Galius would head back to Mestor. But Tal knew in his heart Galius would never smile his bold grin or say the fiery words which made all the people love him. Galius would be killed today in battle. And somehow, their mother knew it. She said Galius would be lowered into the water.

The door to his bedroom opened and the light from an oil lamp spilled into the room.

“Oh, you’re up,” Meleus said.

“Just now,” Tal said. “I don’t know why I woke early but I did.”

“You’re excited about today. Galius will return and be feasted!”

“That must be it. Let’s go to the square and see the preparations. I’m sure they’ve already got the tables set up.”

The two boys ran out of the room and down the stairs of the apartments. The temple of Barket was already bright with the fires which would be used for the sacrifices. When



Galius returned, he would present to the King captives from the field of battle as slaves. The king in turn would offer them back to the gods, and they would be sacrificed by the high priest to bring blessings upon Mestor.

The boys reached the large square before the palace as long fingers of color threaded through the clouds above the eastern mountains. The central courtyard would have merchants and traders set up with their wares out by now on any typical day, but for a celebration of this size, the king had ordered everyone out. Long tables were set up and food was already in place as the workers and the laborers decorated and arranged the area. They ate as they worked, for the feast would last all day, that night, and well into the next morning. Food and drink would be available to all who came and there would be no restrictions until the king himself arrived at midday.

Tal's father was a good king and served his people well, at least in Tal's mind he did. But he believed in the old ways, and the structures and rules which had been handed down through the generations. The laws written on the golden post on Mount Atlas were the basis of his rules, but he held to the traditions of his forefathers. He believed the people should obey him with complete and immediate action, and he in turn would love them and care for them to the best of his ability. He expected this



of the people, and he expected this even more of his family, but he was kind and gave generously to the people when they pleased him.

Mestor was wealthy because of its proximity to Del'rak and the control of access to many unique woods, spices, animals and crops. Though not as wealthy as Atlas, Gadeirus, or Mneseus, those kingdoms controlled much of what was known as the inner sea of the barbarians, Tal's family was still powerful and well respected; wealthy beyond any but a king could imagine.

Large bowls of an orange fruit sat on the nearest table. They had been cut open and their sweet fragrance drew the boys over. They each grabbed two pieces and wandered into the square. They dodged the servants which hurried to and fro, arms laden with decorations, food, or even animals. Carts pulled up to the edge of the square every few minutes and their cargo unloaded for the celebration.

When Olatic, Tal's oldest brother, had been placed in command of his first battle, the feast lasted for three days. Bulls were brought in from the finest herds to be sacrificed for the wonderful victory. Olatic was considered one of the greatest military minds that Mestor had ever seen, and Galius showed even more promise according to the generals.



King Fa'amuil was proud of his sons. He was still short of his elder years himself, and was considered a talented battlefield commander, so to have two sons who could lead armies as well was a great blessing from the gods.

Bator'cam, however, did not show such promise. The third son of Fa'amuil had a keen mind, and was shrewd with his words, but showed little skill with the spear or the chariot. He preferred the company of his tutors over the training ground of the soldiers and Tal believed he would be happier learning from the priests over leading men into battle. He often spent his time at the temple with their mother, and would repeat back the lessons he had learned with fervor. There were rumors he grew fearful at the sound of battle and his training with arms would come to an end soon and he would spend his time learning the rituals of the temple.

But Tal longed to be like his two oldest brothers. He wanted to go to the training yard where he could practice with a spear and learn to drive the chariot. He wanted to know the rules of battle and understand the strategies of war. Tumat was a fine teacher, but his lessons bored Tal each day. He wanted a life of excitement.

Galius had allowed Tal to come and watch his training at times. Often it was just hard work in the yard, with the officers drilling the



same moves over and over. Other times it was like being with a tutor. Tal learned that battle was strictly formalized, the rules structured to not offend the gods. The prime law of Atlantis was kings could never fight amongst themselves, and this extended to their families as well. So the commanders of each battle were carefully selected before the battle began. No member of a royal house could be in a battle against another member of a royal house without permission by the High King.

With King Fa'amuil's two sons as commanders, he held the advantage over most of the kings who had a single son or, as was the case of King Comris of Diaprepes, no sons that were capable of leading an army.

The first rays of the sun had fallen on the palace and worked their way down to the square when Queen Jala and her women descended the stairs from the royal apartments. The workers increased their pace as they saw the queen approach.

The queen used a firmer hand than her husband when it came to servants. She found insults and slights in the slightest error, and to displease the Queen meant a swift, severe punishment.

Tal devoured the rest of the fruit he held and rushed over to meet his mother as she entered the square.

“Good morning, Mother,” he said.



“Good morning, my son. I’m surprised to see you up this early. From what I hear, it isn’t unusual for you to lie in bed until mid-day.”

Tal winced at her chastisement. Sometimes he lolled in bed, but it wasn’t as bad as his mother implied.

“I was excited for today. Galius will return in victory and Father will place a crown on his head,” Tal said.

The queen lifted her face into the sun, closed her eyes, smiled and took a deep breath. “Yes. It will be a grand ceremony. But we have much to prepare for and must be diligent if we are to be ready.”

She motioned for one of the women near her and took a cup as it was offered. Tal knew it was the dark, aromatic caft which his mother enjoyed warm in the morning, but was very rare and expensive. His father and Olatic were the only ones he knew who drank it daily.

As the Queen moved into the square, Tal motioned Meleus to follow.

“Come. When the square fills up, we’ll return and do what we want, but if we stay here now, my mother will find work for us.”

The boys ran off to a side garden where they sat and watched the fishing boats leave the harbor to seek out their daily catch. There were three trade ships, but they remained anchored in the harbor as there was a high tide that morning. They would launch in a few hours as



the tide started to drop and winds shifted to their favor.

It was nearly noon before the boy's hunger drove them back to the square and the tables laden with food. Tal's mother had apparently not given him another thought and hadn't sent someone to fetch him from wherever he had hidden himself.

As they slipped through the crowds, Tal saw his younger brother and sister, An'toko and Hela, at a table near his mother. She was attended by several of the women of the court and were occupied with mirth and merriment. He waved at his siblings and slipped back into the crowds before they told his mother he was back. If she had seen him, she would've pulled him to the table and made him sit there until their father arrived, but Tal wanted to go experience the festivities without being watched and lectured about his duties.

The boys were at a cloth merchant when they heard the first blast of the horn from the gate of the city. The crowd stopped and turned to the sound. The merchant took the time to move his valuable cloth back into the baskets and joined everyone else as they listened for the sounds of distance horns. Tal shifted his feet and bit his lower lip as he waited. And then he heard it. The wind fought the thin sound of the distant horn, but the crowd cheered out loud when it reached them. Galius was on his



way back to the city and the celebration would begin in earnest within the hour.

“Let’s run to the gate,” Melius said. He took several steps before he realized Tal wasn’t with him.

“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you coming? Don’t you want to go?” he asked

“I think I should go back and wait with father,” said Tal. “I don’t want to disappoint him.”

“You want to go back and wait? If Galius sees us at the gate, he’ll let us ride with him in his chariot!”

Tal shook his head. “No, he wouldn’t. It’s his processional and then we would need to run through the crowds to be here for his welcome ceremony.”

Melius frowned as he followed Tal back to the square. A few workers hurried as they made last-minutes preparations, but the crowd was already in full revel. The horns blared from the gates every few minutes and each sounding drove the crowd into a frenzy of excitement.

“I’m glad I didn’t have to send someone to look for you,” Queen Jala said as Tal approached his seat. “You’re the last one to arrive, even Mira has pulled herself away from her suitors to join the family at the table.”

“I know, Mother,” Tal said.

Queen Jala had turned to other conversation by the time her son had spoken.



Meleus sat a full glass of watered wine in front of Tal. “We could’ve stayed a few more minutes,” he whispered. “We would’ve gotten back in plenty of time.”

“I know. I just... my stomach hurts,” Tal said. “Maybe I ate too much this morning.”

Meleus sat behind him and waited. If Tal needed anything, he just had to motion with his hand. When the feast and celebration was over, Meleus would go and eat with the other servants in the kitchen area. Tal would slip him food through the meal, of course, but Meleus would remain quiet and attentive until Tal went to his rooms that night.

Tal’s mind turned to his dream and his stomach twisted again. Everyone celebrated, and yet he knew what would happen. He hoped it was just a dream, his fear had caused him to see things as he slept. And yet, he knew in his heart the dream was true. He wondered how the others celebrating with him would react? Mestor fielded a better army than Azaes. Its troops were better trained and more well-fed. It’s horses stronger, spears longer, and chariots faster. This battle was not a vital affair, for both kingdoms knew Galius would be taking the field today and King Feltro of Azaes would have fielded a green commander himself.

The horn sounded again and the cheers went up. But there was a strangeness to the



sound which came from the far gates. Tal cringed as he thought the news of Galius would spread through the city before the celebrants in the square would discover it. The whole of Mestor would mourn before Galius' death was known to his own family.

A trumpet sounded from behind him, and Tal looked back at the Temple of Backet. The priests had stoked the sacrificial fires high and were preparing the altar. Their trumpets announced the entry of the chariots into the gates of the city, for they had a lookout in the high spire who would watch for the moment.

Tal looked back at the Palace and the great doorway opened. The king stepped onto the top of the wide stairs and threw his arms open. He called for the people and they responded with a cheer for their king.

Tal heard a voice call and looked toward his right, along the far side of the table. There Siande stood by her mother, her face euphoric as she watched the king descend. Tal was shocked to see her here, but if she were old enough to be tutored, she would be old enough to attend the ceremonies.

His eyes went back to his father and then darted for a second back to the temple. This would be the first time she watched the sacrifices. His jaw clenched as he thought of the first time he saw them. He felt sick and wanted to stop it, but he knew those men had to be sacrificed to please the gods. He



wondered if she would feel the same, or would she stare in wonder and joy like so many others did.

The king reached the bottom of the stairs and a large roar went up from the crowd. He smiled at his children and kissed Queen Jala on the cheek.

“My son has returned,” he said. “Let us feast in his honor!”

The king sat among the cheers and the feast began in earnest. Tal, though, listened to the wails of sorrow which could just be heard as the servants brought the platters of roasted meats from the cooking pits.



# THREE

Tal tensed as the cheers which rang through the city turned to the mournful howls of despair. Those in the square quieted as they sensed the change and there appeared at the edge of the square a soldier. He pushed his way past the last few people who stood between him and the wide opening and threw himself before the royal table.

His helmet and spear had been lost along his frantic run. Tal thought he probably hurled them away as they impeded his frantic and desperate mission. The soldier, out of breath and with a look of panic, shook as he lay before the king.

The wail and sounds of despair grew loud and the guests at the feast whispered dark thoughts as they watched the king motion the servers back to their ovens.

“What is this?” the king asked the soldier. “Why have you rushed in here and left in your wake the sound of a city in sorrow?”

“Your majesty,” the soldier said. His voice cracked from strain and he gasped for breath. “I was at the gate and saw. I was sent to run with the news.”

“What have you seen?”

The soldier stood and then ran out of the way of the sounds behind him. A racket of



horses and wheels broke through the wails and cries which now enveloped the city. Chariots burst into view, not hindered by people too slow to move aside. The horse hooves trampled flesh as easily as stone, and the heavy wheels jostled softly over every impediment.

There were three chariots, the last two full of men, but the first chariot had a single driver. It was Galius's royal chariot, and General Praset drove the horses into the square and turned them in front of the table.

Tal's eyes filled with tears as he saw what he knew he must. The body of Galius lay in the chariot, his hands across his chest, his helmet and spear by his side.

"No," cried the king. "This cannot be. Tell me this isn't so."

General Praset stepped around the body of the prince and hopped down. He bowed low to the king and spoke in a voice which filled the square.

"Your majesty, there was an accident in battle. I fear that an arrow found its way into the back of our beloved Prince Galius during our initial charge."

Tal saw his father fall hard into his seat. Several servants moved to help the king, to support him physically or to bring him drink, but were waved away.

"The charge," the king bellowed as he leapt to his feet. "The charge. Am I to



understand that my son was killed by one of his own men? That an arrow blessed by Hondre took my son's glorious life?"

Praset nodded. "Galius's plan was brilliant, perfect even. The enemy was destroyed in a single charge, driven from the field at the first clash of chariots. His strategy will give us great victories in the future, though its cost was great. His influence on the way we wage war will be seen in all future battles. He will remain as heroic in death as he was in life."

"Who did this to my son?"

Praset signaled to one of the chariots which sat at the edge of the square. It moved forward and three men, bound and bloodied, were taken from the back by soldiers.

Their hands were bound before them and chains linked their legs together. The soldiers pushed them to the middle of the square where all stared at them with contempt and hatred.

"These three men all had arrows in their quivers which matched the arrow that took the prince's life," the general said.

Tal noticed each man's beard was caked in blood, and the men looked as though they had been beaten for days. He realized their tongues had been cut out.

"Prepare them for the fires," King Fa'amuil said. "They are to be sacrificed as traitors."

Praset motioned to his men and they led away the sacrifices from the square. They



would go to the temple by the low gate and be stripped and flogged before they were fed into the holy fire. Declared traitors, they would not be given the elixir of Rosta, which would dull their senses and grant them serenity in their last minutes.

Tears flowed down the cheeks of the king, and Tal was surprised to feel his own cheeks soaked as he wiped his eyes clear. All of the guests wept at the elegant praise the Praset bestowed up the fallen prince.

Olitac approached the king and placed his arm around his father. They spoke softly to each other. Tal forced his sight away from the private moment between his father and oldest brother. He didn't want to look at Galius again, so he looked down the royal table and saw his brothers and sisters in the same shock and mourning as everyone. Queen Jala had Bator'cam in her arms and whispered into his ear. Tracks of tears lined her cheeks, but her eyes were clear and darted from the King to Praset.

"My son, my son," the king cried.

Olati motioned for two servants, and they moved the heavy table from in front of the king. The King approached the chariot that displayed his son's body. Olati climbed into the chariot and went behind his fallen brother. He cradled Galius's head and lifted him up for the King to look directly at him.



King Fa'amuil brushed his son's cold face with his fingers and then sobbed again. A servant carried a large wooden box and set it by the king's feet, opened it, and stepped back.

Tal watched as his father reached into the box and retrieved a silver crown. It had a leopard's head on the brow and the band itself was crafted to be the waves of the ocean. It was truly the crown for a prince of Atlantis.

The king placed the coronet on Galius's head and kissed his son's cheek.

"Today my son has won a great victory, and Mestor has lost a great leader. We cheer and drink his triumph as we mourn and sorrow our loss."

All of the assembled people lifted their drinks to the air and cried "Hail Mestor" as one voice.

Tal drank his watered wine as he stared at the crown which sat on his brother's head. The crown he knew Galius would wear. The crown he knew his father would place upon him. His mother knew it as well, and so too Presat. And the man in the dream.

The king turned and looked at Queen Jala. She hurried to him and embraced him. She whispered words into his ear, and when he nodded, she signaled a priest standing near the steps to the temple. The priest was joined by several acolytes as he walked to the chariot.

The queen guided the king back to his seat as the priests carried the body of the fallen



prince up to the temple. Tal shook as he wept. He wished this were just a nightmare, but he knew it was true. He wiped the tears from his eyes again and looked around the square. Most cried, few talked, and no one ate. There would be no feast, today was a day of grief and anguish.

“Come, let us go,” Meleus said in his ear.

Tal turned to see the tear streaked face of his servant.

“Go? Where?”

“To the temple. See?”

Tal noted his brothers and sisters were already halfway up the steps to the temple. He was the only one still seated at the royal table.

“The others cannot ascend before you,” Meleus said. “They wait for you, Prince Taldirun.”

Tal nodded. It would have been blasphemy for those who were not of the royal family to proceed him up to the ceremony.

He stood and Meleus reached to steady him.

“I’m strong,” he said and headed toward the steps.

The fires of Basket soared high into the sky. Tal knew he was too far to feel their heat, but he could sense the anger of the gods in those infernos.

The ancient carved steps which led from the city to the temple were older than even the



palace itself. Mestor, the brother of Atlas, the son of Belkat himself, had carved these very steps out of the side of the mountain. The temple was an imitation of the temple which sat atop Mount Atlas just outside the holy city by the same name. The walls of the temple were covered in silver which shone like the moonlight and red copper details told the stories and legends that inspired all Atlanteans. The spires of the temple were polished gold, gleaming bright even in the darkest storms. The temple sat higher than any other structure and its spires could be seen from any place in the city.

Tal heard the crowds behind him on the steps. He knew they followed at a respectful distance, with the members of the court first, the nobles and merchants next, and then the common people of the city. The servants would clean up the square and adorn the palace and the royal apartments with the symbols of grieving.

Galius was laid on a golden table before the altar by the time Tal passed through the columns into the temple itself. A bier made of cypress and cedar was prepared and ready to receive the body of the fallen prince.

High Priest Faldrir emerged from the room behind the altar and approached the king. He intoned a blessing and then sprinkled the body of Galius with water from the holy cistern from beneath the temple.



Tal looked around as the ceremony continued. He had been to many funerals before, but none were as ritualized and profound as a funeral for a member of the royal family. He turned his head a little and saw the sacrifices as they awaited their fate. Their hands were now bound with linen strips and their bodies had been washed and scrubbed. They shook and rolled their eyes, but tried to remain brave and stand still. Their beards had been ripped out of their faces, and small clumps of hair still tufted out from the bloody, mangled jaws they kept shut tight.

“One of those men killed Galius”, Tal reminded himself. “They deserve to die for daring to touch a member of our family. How much more they deserve to burn in the fires and be dragged down to the domain of Ochtur for killing one of us.”

A horn blew from the back of the temple and Tal looked back at the ceremony. Four priests lifted Galius from the golden table and placed him on the bier. The High Priest then turned to the fire which raged behind him and opened the gate. The narrow walkway which led to the pit was covered in copper. The sacrifices would walk the several steps along the blistering walkway before stepping into the inferno which was the wrath of the gods.

Tal had once grabbed a piece of copper which one of the smiths had been working on



when he visited the soldier's practice yard. It had already cooled for a few seconds, but still burned his hand enough to make him cry out. There was no scar left, but he could still remember the pain. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to walk barefoot and naked along copper which glowed from the heat.

The High Priest finished his prayer to Barket and motioned for the prisoners. He cursed each one as they were pushed onto the blistering platform. The first two men raced forward and jumped off the end of the platform, but the third man walked in a measured pace to the end. Instead of jumping, he turned back to the assembled crowd. He wrenched his mouth open, and blood spewed out.

Tal convulsed as he realized the man's mouth had been sewn shut. The man yelled out what Tal was sure was a curse to the gods. He then stepped backwards off the platform and into the fiery pit.

His screams echoed in the temple, and still longer in Tal's mind. His sisters and brothers, including Olatic, looked stunned at what they witnessed. The king and queen, however, remained expressionless as the High Priest closed the gate to the pit and intoned one final curse on the souls of those sacrificed.

Tal heard a whimper behind him and looked. The young girl Siande had her face buried in her mother's skirts. She held onto her



mother's leg and sobbed. Tal had wanted to do the same when he saw his first sacrifice. It was a weakness of his, one his mother despised, but he couldn't help but imagine what another person experienced.

A horn blew from outside the temple and the priests lifted the bier which held Galius. They left through the narrow door that led down to the sacred grotto. Only the royal family would follow for this ceremony. Tal nodded to Meleus as he took his place behind Bator'cam. While all others were buried in the harbor, members of the royal family were always buried in the sacred grotto. It was there Mestor was guided by Barket and given dominion over this portion of Atlantis.

The steps wound down the steep side of the cliff. Hidden from view by outcroppings of rock and the trees of the temple gardens, the family descended at a slow, careful pace. It was over a hundred steps from the door of the temple down to the narrow strip of rock which provided a place to stand at the edge of the water.

The priests were even slower than the family, and there were times the king had to wait as the priests maneuvered the bier along the tricky and precarious path, but in a short time, all the family were lined up to say their final farewells to Galius.



The sacrifice ceremony was long and intricate, but the actual burial itself was brief and simple. King Fa'amuil went forward and kissed Galius on the lips and cheeks, and Queen Jala did likewise. Olatic, Mira and Bator'cam went forward and kissed his cheeks and hands, and then it was Tal's turn. He took the steps needed to reach his brother, and placed a kiss on both cheeks and then the hands. The skin was cold and he knew his brother was gone. What was left was simply the meat, sinew and bone which would be taken away by Basket when the tide swept the grotto empty.

After his younger brother and sister had said farewell, the priests waded out into the grotto with the bier until the water reached their shoulders. They then lowered the bier into the water. Tal watched through his tears as Galius was lowered into the water, never to return.

When the priests were done, they left the water without a word and started up the long steps. King Fa'amuil followed and then the rest of the family in order.

Tal's legs ached by the time they reached the temple. Meleus was there with a cup of wine. This one was not watered, and Tal was sure neither were the cups for his younger siblings.

The royal family left the temple and went to the palace, where the king would soon hear



the report of the battle and learn more details of what happened to Galius.

“I’m hungry,” Tal told Meleus as they walked by the square. “See if you can find something to eat and take it to my room. I will meet you there in a bit. I will attend my father until he gives me leave.”

Meleus went off to find food and Tal continued into the throne room. King Fa'amuil sat on his throne and talked quietly with Praset. When the family was settled in place, the king dismissed most of the servants, including the general. He called the children to him, starting with the youngest. Olatic gave Tal a tight, pained smile. Galius and Olatic were as close as brothers could be. They were constant companions, always at each other’s side.

“Tal,” Vistral said.

Tal looked to where he was being motioned forward by his father’s chief servant.

He walked up to the throne and bowed.

“I attend thee, Father,” he said. It was the formal answer before the throne, and one even great tragedy could not remove from his mind.

“I see you, son,” his father replied. “Do you mourn your brother greatly?”

“I do, indeed. His passing pains me in my heart and I fear his cold visage will haunt me for eternity.”

“I am the same, my child. I see the sorrow on your face, but you’ve not expressed the



disbelief the way your younger brother and sister have. Have you grown so much these last years that I didn't recognize you were becoming a man?"

Tal hesitated. For his father to talk of him becoming a man was something which would indicate a chance to work in the yard with the soldiers. It was what he desired more than anything. But the man in the dream had told him he should follow the truth more than follow his own desires.

"No, father. I'm not in disbelief, but it's not because I have grown beyond it."

"Why then? When I was crying out in shock and despair, I happened to look upon your face. You accepted Galius' death even before I put the crown on his head. Did you understand so quickly?"

"No, father. My mind's not as quick and nimble as Bator's. Yesterday I would have cried out with you."

The king waved away several of the servants and leaned forward.

"Come closer and tell me what's happened."

Tal stepped toward the throne and lowered his voice.

"I had a dream."

"And you dreamed your brother died in battle?"

Tal shook his head. "No, I had a talk with a man. And the man asked me what would



happen today. I told him Galius would die. He told me I knew it in my heart because it was true. He said the truth was written in my heart, and I needed to simply follow the truth.”

“Your majesty,” High Priest Faldrir said.

The king leaned back as the holy man whispered in his ear. Tal realized the High Priest must have stood directly behind the throne. It was the only way that Tal wouldn’t have seen him as he approached.

King Fa'amuil and the high priest whispered back and forth several times before the king leaned forward again.

“Have you ever had a dream like this before, Taldirun?”

Tal shuddered as he heard his name. His father usually only said his name when he was in trouble. But his father looked concerned, not angry.

“No, father.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I would have remembered a dream like this.”

“What did the man look like?”

“He was old. But not really. He had a beard and hair to his shoulders. He was well built, but not overly tall or bulky.”

“Where were you in the dream?”

“A forest of some kind. Almost like an orchard. The trees were well tended, but there were trees of every kind.”



The king nodded. “If you have another dream like this, you must let me know immediately. This is my command.”

“I will, father.”

“It’s time your tutelage under Tumat comes to an end. Tomorrow, Olatic will bring you to the practice yard and put you under Kelrig’s instruction. He’ll teach you the basics of battle and we’ll see how well you adapt to the spear.”

“Thank you, father.”

“It’s time, Taldirun. You’ll be a man soon, and you need to learn battle. You may go now, and retire for the night. Remember we’ll be in mourning until the next new moon.”

Tal backed away from the throne and left the room. He forced himself to walk to the door, but once he was outside, he dashed down the steps toward his room. He hoped Meleus had brought plenty of food, for though he was sorry for the death of Galius and was in mourning, he felt like celebrating this news.