

The Dragons of Atlantis

by Alice A. Kemp

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Chapter I – Evil in the Heart of Paradise

Jason Peterson woke with a jolt. He was falling!

“We’re going to crash!” Caroline, his twin sister, cried out in the seat next to him as the plane banked steeply on its approach to the airport outside Ponta Delgada, the Azores. Her dad, Duane Peterson, leaned across from his aisle seat to look out the window. He patted her reassuringly on her arm.

“No, honey, everything’s fine. We’re just getting ready to land. There! Did you feel that ‘thump?’ That’s the landing gear going down.”

He looked at his 15-year-old son. “We’re finally here! Are you excited?” he asked.

Coming to the Azores for a spring vacation was Jason’s idea. Ever since he had done a report on these islands for his geography class, he had wanted to come and experience this fascinating place for himself.

“Yeah, Dad!” Jason couldn’t pull himself away from the tropical paradise framed in the plane’s window. After spending hours traveling east over seemingly endless water, they finally spied the islands, rising abruptly from the Atlantic Ocean.

Pointing at the mountain peaks that dominated the background, Jason told his twin sister, "There's the old volcanoes I told you about, remember? They're extinct now, so there's nothing to worry about. Just lots of neat caves and lava tubes to explore."

He loved being involved in outdoor adventures and privately thought he should have lived a couple of centuries ago when he could have been a real mountain man. But for now he contented himself with reading about volcanoes and explorers and doing some spelunking and other outdoor stuff himself, when his dad could get away to take him. Caroline wasn't as enthusiastic about being underground, but often went, anyway. She was more adventurous than other girls her age and hated to be left out of anything.

As the ground rushed up at them, they caught glimpses of lush, green, tropical forests and sandy beaches. The wheels made contact and they were down, taxiing down the runway. Jason could hardly wait for the "Fasten seatbelts" light to go off, he was so excited.

"Easy does it, son," Duane said. "We'll get out there soon enough. And we have all week to explore and play." His job kept him from taking vacations very often, but when he could, he tried to make up for it by taking his kids to new

and interesting places. His wife used to enjoy such trips as well, until a drunk driver took her from them three years ago. Caroline was beginning to look more and more like her mother, with shining brown hair and big brown eyes in an elfin face. All this topped a graceful, slender body. Jason also had a slender body with brown hair and eyes but with a more boyish face than his sister.

They finally made it out to the rental car he had reserved for the week, picking up brochures and maps of the islands on the way. Jason and Caroline couldn't stop swiveling their heads around to take in all the exotic sights of a tropical island as they drove along the beach road to the rental villa. Duane spotted the house number he was looking for and pulled into the driveway.

"Wow!" the teens said in practically the same breath. "Is this where we're staying?" asked Caroline.

"Yup. It looks just like the picture we saw on the Internet, doesn't it?" He parked next to the house. "All right, be sure to grab your luggage on the way in." He pulled out the keys that had been mailed to him and, following his own advice, picked up a suitcase in each hand and marched up to the front door, with his kids close at his heels.

As the three stepped into the house, they dropped what they were carrying and checked out the interior, picking out the bedrooms each wanted. Having brought in the rest of the luggage, the twins skipped out to the deck through the sliding glass doors on the far side of the living room.

“Wow, this is great!” Jason’s eyes almost bugged out of his head as he saw the beautiful turquoise waters of the ocean just below the house.

“It sure is!” agreed his sister while she started to run down the steps to the water.

“Hold it,” their father called from the open door. “Go unpack first, then we’ll go on into town and shop around a bit.”

After taking care of that chore, they all piled back into the car and drove to the nearest town of Ponta Delgada. This was the twin’s first trip to a tropical island and they couldn’t get enough of the riot of colors surrounding them.

Once in town, they got their shopping taken care of, then stopped at a local restaurant for supper, since it was getting late. After ordering their meals, Duane told his children, “Tomorrow we’ll head for that outdoor adventure place where I’ve reserved a place on the hiking tour of Pico da

Vara.” This was the highest mountain on the island and considered a Natural Reserve. Special authorization and a tour guide were required to explore the extinct volcano.

“Great!” Jason exclaimed, his eyes shining with happiness. “And then we’ll check out the hot springs, and caves, and horseback riding, and. . .”

“Whoa! One day at a time.” said Duane.

“Don’t forget me!” Caroline chimed in.

“Don’t worry, princess. We’ll get in the obligatory beach time and shopping and sightseeing. There’s enough here to satisfy all of us.”

Bright and early the next morning, Duane called the outfitter to make sure they were still on for the day. The clear and sunny skies beckoned them onward to Nordeste, the closest town to the mountain. Pedro, their guide, was waiting for them at his little outdoor supply shop.

“Hello, hello!” he greeted them happily. “You are Senor Peterson, no? And these are your beautiful children!”

“That’s right,” said Duane. “We all are really looking forward to this. Is everything set?”

“Si, si, I have the permission to go up the ‘Vara’. It will be very beautiful up there today. You are very lucky. Come, we go in my jeep.”

After the short drive to the trailhead, Pedro and Duane shouldered their backpacks, leaving the kids free to just enjoy the walk. The highest concentration of the plants native to the Azores was here in this mountain sanctuary. Each new plant they saw as they climbed higher seemed to be more exotic than the last.

Having hiked for about an hour, Jason and Caroline lagged behind the two adults. Suddenly Caroline stopped and Jason almost ran into her. "Look at that!" she exclaimed, pointing down a faint side trail. There, sitting calmly and looking back at them was an extraordinary looking cat. It looked more like a miniature lion than a cat, complete with a full ruff around its neck.

"Meow," it said loudly, then got up and started walking down the little path away from the teens, stopping to look back at them. "He looks just like a tiny lion. And look, he's wearing some kind of necklace." Caroline was extremely fond of cats and often brought strays home, until her father put his foot down when the count reached five.

"Huh. That's really strange. That looks kind of like a ruby around his neck." A large stone caught the sunlight and sent off brilliant red rays.

"And he acts like he wants us to follow him!"

It was true. The cat would walk off a few steps, then stop and look back at them, just like he wanted them to follow. Caroline took off down the path after him.

“Caroline, wait.” But she forged on ahead, blind to everything but the unusual little creature keeping just ahead of her. Jason had no choice but to follow. He figured they’d lose the cat any time now and just backtrack to their dad and the guide.

The cat was moving faster now and the teens were practically running to keep up with him, when he suddenly ducked through a small opening in the lush vegetation on the mountainside. Caroline got down on her hands and knees and followed.

“Doggone it, Caroline, wait!” Jason went through the hole after them.

When their eyes adjusted to their darker surroundings, they found they had been led into a cave. A loud “Meow” sounded from ahead where the cat had slowed down as though to keep from losing them.

“Now I know he wants us to follow him,” the girl said.

“You know, I think you’re right,” her brother agreed, momentarily forgetting about his dad and Pedro out on the main trail. “But we can’t go much farther. It’ll get too dark in

here, and we don't have a flashlight." Strangely enough, though, it didn't get darker as they got away from the entrance. There seemed to be some sort of faintly glowing fungus growing on the walls that gave off just enough light to help them see their way.

All of a sudden the cat disappeared right in front of them. There was a faint mist in the air at that point and the teens had walked through it before they could stop themselves. It had been somewhat cool in the cave up to that point, but on the other side of the mist they found themselves suddenly sweating. It had become quite hot quite fast, and they could feel a vibration in the ground that hadn't been there before. The light got brighter as well.

Caroline and Jason stopped to take stock of these changes. Jason looked back and saw the mist behind them. It seemed to draw back the way they'd come. He also noticed red glints in the walls of the cavern around them.

Up ahead, Caroline exclaimed, "There's the cat again. Oh no, he's just gone into a crack in the wall." Both teens peered into the crack which was just wide enough for the cat but much too narrow for them.

Then they heard voices ahead. Two large figures stalked around the corner and stopped at the sight of the teens. They weren't tall but were wide and heavily muscled,

and dressed in a strange-looking leather harness affair that covered very little of their hairy bodies. At the side of each hung a short sword on one hand and a knife on the other, as well as a long wooden club. Another fact the teens noticed was that they were covered with sweat and dirt. The two men yelled at Jason and Caroline.

Jason looked at his sister. "Do you understand them?" Caroline was the linguist in the family and could already speak two languages besides English fluently.

"No," she replied. "It doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard."

In the meantime, the strange men had come up to them and grabbed each by an arm. Jason's captor shook him hard and again said something they couldn't understand in an even louder and more menacing voice.

"We don't understand you!" Jason tried to explain. The hulking figure that had a death grip on his arm shook him even harder and put his face down right in Jason's. Another unpleasant fact Jason noted then was that the man had really foul breath and bad teeth, as though he'd never brushed them or used mouthwash.

This time the brute screamed at the boy, but it did no good. Finally, after talking to each other in their own language, the two adults practically dragged the frightened

teens down the passageway they had just come up. Caroline tried to say something to Jason, but the hulk pulling her along slapped her hard across the face. She got the message and spoke no more, although tears started flowing down her cheeks.

The teens were hurried down one passage after another until they finally came into a huge cavern, where the heat and floor vibration were even worse. The walls glowed brighter than they had in the tunnels, making it seem almost like daytime. But the most outstanding feature of the cavern squatted in the exact middle of it. There, with red-glowing eyes, a head like a giant crocodile but more domed, and a mouth full of very long and sharp teeth, just like crocodile teeth, perched a huge dragon on an up-thrusting rock. It was covered with iridescent blue-green scales and a ridged back that ended in a forked tail. Huge wings were folded along its side. It looked totally evil.

"Oh my God," Jason moaned as their captors dragged them directly toward the creature. Both teens tried to break away but the men were too strong and kept their grips. Two more large and brutish looking men joined their little group as they approached the dragon. Each of the teens was now held

rigidly by two strong men. The dragon lowered its frightening head to stare intently at each of them. Then it reached out its two front legs and placed a claw-studded foot on each one's head. They both screamed, fearing they were about to be ripped apart and eaten!

Chapter 2 – In the Walls of the Volcano

The dragon gripped each teen tightly and continued to stare at them. Jason felt a blinding pain explode in his head and everything around him started to waver in and out of focus. But he obstinately refused to pass out, since he felt responsible for protecting his sister, who was apparently undergoing the same treatment. Suddenly the dragon removed its feet and returned to whatever inner meditation it had been engaged in when they had arrived at the cavern.

The man who had kept a grip on Jason right from the start said to one of newcomers who had a hold of Caroline, “Pick her up and carry her.” The girl had succumbed to the harsh treatment and fainted. “We’ll take these little maggots to the sleeping cavern and let the other slaves deal with them. It’s time for the end of the shift anyway.”

Jason was astonished. He could now understand them. That dragon must have done something to their brains to enable them to understand the strange language. But he decided to keep quiet and wait until they were taken to someone who might not be so brutal and quick to take offense.

The man had mentioned taking them to “other slaves” so maybe he could get the information he needed from them. Of one thing he was pretty sure, though, they weren’t in the Azores anymore, at least not the Azores they had known.

After trekking through more tunnels, they arrived at another cavern, though not as large as the first one. The perimeter area along the walls was divided into large rooms, into one of which the teens were brought. The man holding Jason shoved him onto a pile of grasses shaped something like a mattress, while the one carrying Caroline lowered her onto another pile next to her brother. Just then other adults started streaming into the cavern, carrying various tools such as shovels and picks. They were covered in dirt and sweat even more so than the men who had captured the teens.

Jason’s captor beckoned to one of the older men who had just entered. “We found these two in the outer tunnels. They couldn’t speak Atlantean so we took them to Rormorant. Find out where they’re from and what they were doing there.”

The older man bowed his head and said, “It shall be done.”

“See that it is or you know what’ll happen.” It sounded like a threat to Jason, as he watched that one march away into another tunnel.

The older man, although dirty and sweaty, had a kindly face and eyes. His hair was completely white, but his short body was lean and well-muscled. He straightened up after Jason's captors had left.

He kneeled down beside the twins, his eyes taking in every detail of the two. "Can you understand me?" he asked, concern showing in his eyes.

Jason was quickly recovering from his ordeal, and, although he was terribly concerned for his sister, he felt it best to answer this man first. "Yes, I can," he replied. "But I'm worried about my sister. She fainted when that dragon thing put its foot on her head."

The man leaned over Caroline and took her pulse, then raised her eyelids. "I think she'll be all right. Rormorant's treatment is rough, but nobody's died yet from it. She should recover soon." He turned back to Jason. "My name's Gautier and I'm sort of the leader of the people you see here. Are you not from Atlantis?"

"Atlantis!?" Jason's head reeled for a second time that day. "Like in the lost continent of Atlantis?"

"I don't know anything about being lost, but this is the land of Atlantis."

"What happened to the Azores? And it feels like we're inside an active volcano. If Pico de Vara had become active,

we'd have known about it. Volcanoes don't just suddenly erupt without any warning."

It was Gautier's turn to look confused. "I know not these words you speak. A . . . zores. And Pico what?"

"Pico de Vara! This mountain we're on. It's been extinct for thousands of years."

"This mountain is called Quetzylmundo. It is held in check by the magic of Baaldorant, who has much power over objects as well as people." Gautier looked thoughtful for a moment before continuing. "I have seen many strange peoples who have been captured and brought to our land from afar by the dragons, but none like you. Your skin is very fair and your clothes unlike any I've ever seen." Here he paused to feel the material of Jason's shirt, then shook his head. "Did you come from outside the mountain?"

"Yes. Caroline and I were with Dad and a native guide following a trail up the mountain. She saw a funny looking cat and followed it into a cave. We went through a kind of misty looking place and suddenly it got hotter and those men ran up to us and started jabbering away in a language we couldn't understand. What's going on? We need to get back to Dad before he misses us."

By this time, an older, white-haired lady had joined them. Gautier introduced her to Jason. "This is my wife, Tralga. Among other things, she is a healer and especially helps the women and teens here."

For the first time, Jason saw that there *were* teenagers here. They looked every bit as tired and dirty as the adults. "What are all of you doing here? And when can Caroline and I get back to our dad? He'll be worried to death about us."

Gautier and Tralga exchanged looks. "There is no getting out. When you're sentenced to these mines, you never leave, even when you die. They just throw your body into a lava flow in one of the tunnels."

Even though Jason was more courageous than most teens his age, the thought of never seeing his dad and the outside world again brought him to the verge of tears. Seeing his distress, Tralga took him in her arms and tried to comfort him. Suddenly he pulled away from her and said, "You said you were sentenced here. But nobody sentenced us. We just wandered in from the outside. Wouldn't that make a difference?"

"The boy has a point," Tralga said. "Why don't you tell us more about where you came from and maybe we can figure something out together." So Jason told them about the 21st

Century world and its history as best he could. By the time he was finished, Caroline was beginning to stir. Tralga immediately went to her and gave her a drink from a jug she had been carrying.

Gautier smacked his forehead. "I've been a bad host. You must be practically dying of thirst!" Jason realized that it was true. He was extremely thirsty, but the impact of this strange place and people had driven it out of his mind until now. Gautier glanced out into the main part of the cavern. "It's time to eat anyway. Let's continue this discussion after we have some food and drink in our bellies."

There must have been about a hundred other people in the next room over, where Gautier and his wife took the teens to eat. Most of the others were dressed in rags, although some of the younger ones wore better clothing. A number of serving people were moving about, handing out wooden bowls filled with some sort of cooked vegetables. Jason wolfed his down, although Caroline, still somewhat woozy from her experience, just picked at hers. Both of them, though, drank greedily from wooden cups they were handed, apparently containing plain water.

The two adults and two teens returned to the sleeping room after eating, to continue their discussion. Gautier started off. "To answer your question of what's going on

here, the kingdom of Atlantis is centered on this volcano. Most of us here have been condemned to mine these tunnels for the precious dragon's eye stones which are very valuable to the nobles and ruling class. Most of us were sent here because we didn't agree with the ideas of King Orestes, or maybe I should say, Baaldorant, who controls the king. King Orestes was a pretty good ruler, and our land peaceful and prosperous, until the coming of the dragons."

Tralga continued the story, "Many years ago, the dragons just suddenly flew down upon Atlantis. Our people were frightened of them at first, but the dragons brought many gifts to give the people, which coaxed them out of hiding and reduced their suspicions. At first they were kindly and showed us many wonderful things to make our lives easier.

"But then Baaldorant was born about twenty years ago," Gautier said. "The dragons reproduce very slowly, but they live longer. Although all the dragons have magical powers, Baaldorant was the first one with the ability to control the minds of any humans around him. A few others with that ability have been hatched since, but their numbers are mercifully low. Other dragons, those who were restless and not so peaceful, influenced Baaldorant into thinking that the

dragons should rule Atlantis, and humans should be their slaves and worship them. Baaldorant soon controlled the mind of King Orestes and the other nobles. And if that wasn't bad enough, the 'Baals,' as they called themselves, have recently started demanding human sacrifices."

"The Baals usually fly far from Atlantis and capture people from other lands to be their sacrifices or slaves," Tralga continued. "But they also use Atlanteans who disagree with their ideas, if they can catch them. Some humans have learned how to keep their private thoughts from being heard by those dragons with mind-reading ability."

Jason, who had listened intently to all of this, broke in. "But if Caroline and I are in the same geographical area of the Azores, we must have somehow traveled back in time! In our world, most people think that Atlantis is a myth, a story made up by some ancient Greek."

Breaking her silence, Caroline added, "If we did go into the past and not the future."

"Or maybe even an alternate universe," mused Jason who liked to read science fiction. "But I guess the past is the most likely explanation."

"What about that odd-looking cat we followed in here?" Caroline asked.

Tralga answered, "Our people here in the tunnels have seen a cat that answers your description from time to time, but only when there has been some mishap or accident and someone needs help. This cat always shows up to guide the guards to the site of the accident, and then vanishes down a crack in the wall."

Suddenly Tralga sat up straighter with an odd look on her face. "I just remembered something my mother told me when I was a child. She said there was an old legend, handed down from mother to daughter, about a time when Atlantis would face a terrible menace from 'beyond.' However, a boy and girl from 'far ahead' would defeat the menace, although not without cost." Tralga looked excitedly at her husband. "Gautier, Jason and Caroline must be the ones the legend speaks of! They are the key to ending this reign of terror!"

"Hmmm," he replied. "I wonder. Jason, let me look at the back of your neck."

Jason, although mystified, complied. He felt Gautier pressing down on the skin at the base his skull. "He doesn't have the implant!" the old man stated triumphantly.

"What's that?" Caroline inquired as Tralga performed the same examination on her.

Gautier answered her. "Whenever a human is sentenced either to the mines here or to slavery in the outer world, a specially-trained human under the control of the Baals surgically implants a magical sphere under the skin at the base of the skull. The Baals can keep track of us that way: they can sense the sphere somehow, so they always know where we are. That way they don't need many guards down here. They instantly know when one of us is not where he or she belongs. They then swoop down on that person and use him for the next round of human sacrifices. Of course many of the dragons can sense human minds anyway, but these spheres make us stand out."

"But we don't have those spheres in us," Jason said. "So we can go anywhere we want. We can go back to where we came from."

Just then two of the brutish guards came in with their clubs in their hands and headed for the small group. Gautier quickly whispered to the kids, "Pretend to be confused and woozy. Maybe we can trick the guards into thinking we don't know where you came from yet."

Jason and Caroline did as he requested as the guards bore down on them. "Well, Gautier, what have you found out about these maggots?" one of the guards demanded while

slapping his club against his thigh.. He looked like he was ready, willing and able to use it.

Gautier thought fast. "Not much yet, honorable Fagmin. They've been so confused and scared it's been hard to make sense of them. But I think they're outlanders who were brought in to work the mines. They just got separated from the rest of the incoming group and got lost in the tunnels. We'll help them learn their place and their duties. They won't give you any trouble."

"They'd better not," growled Fagmin. He raised his club and started toward Jason. "I'll just give them a sample of what they can expect if they do give me any trouble."

Tralga spoke up. "Your honor, they haven't yet recovered from Rormorant's treatment. Any more rough treatment right now may cause permanent physical damage. Then they won't be any good as slaves or sacrifices, and you know how the Baals feel about waste."

Although he wasn't too bright, since intelligence was not a trait needed for guards, he did know what happened to guards who wielded their clubs too freely, losing too many slaves. "All right. But I'm going to be watching them, and you." He added menacingly, "At the first sign of trouble from any of you, I'm gonna work you over good." That said, he and his companion stalked away, making their rounds of

the rest of the slaves' cavern. Gautier and Tralga heard yelps and cries coming from other sections as the bullies took out their viciousness on others.

Tralga picked up the conversation where they had left off. "Do you think you could find your way back?"

Jason looked at Caroline. "I don't think so," he finally admitted. "There were too many twists and turns, although I think I would recognize the exact spot where we came in once we got that far."

"Getting that far is the problem," Gautier gravely remarked. "The guards patrol the tunnels and know just where everyone is supposed to be at all times. And many of these tunnels end in dead ends and even lava flows where you don't want to go."

Caroline touched her brother on the shoulder. "What about that legend? I think we should help these people if we can."

"But we have to get back! Dad will be worried sick about us," Jason stated. "Besides, we don't belong here."

Looking her brother in the eyes, Caroline asked, "Remember what mama always told us? That the main reason we were put on this earth is to help each other. And she was right."

“Yeah, I remember. She *was* right. I think Dad would agree with that.”

Gautier broke in. “I hate to make your decision any more difficult than it already is, but the newest batch of slaves brought down here had disturbing news. The dragons can breed only very slowly, so there are not many of them. This means they can’t control many humans at one time, although the Baals have been wanting to extend their influence beyond Atlantis. But apparently they’ve found a way to increase the number of eggs the females lay and even to breed for certain traits, like mind control.”

“So that means they’re going to end up conquering the world!” Jason cried out.

Chapter III – Atlantis

Jason's shoulders slumped. Then he straightened up again. "But there are no dragons in our world. That means they didn't succeed."

"And that means we stopped them," added Caroline confidently.

"I don't know if we are the ones to stop them, but if someone doesn't, then we can't go back anyway, because our world won't exist anymore." A determined look came over Jason as he turned to Gautier. "What do we have to do?"

After asking two of the newcomers, whom they knew and trusted, to join their group, Gautier, Tralga and the twins talked about the layout of Atlantis and the resistance movement until they were too tired to continue.

The next morning, dressed in Atlantean clothes and armed with the knowledge they needed about the great city of Atlantis and where to find friends of Gautier who could help them, the twins hid in the slaves' quarters under a pile of grass bedding. They waited quietly until they were sure the guards who escorted the slaves to their work sites were gone.

Gautier had told Jason and Caroline about the symbols etched into the walls at all the intersections that acted as sign posts. They crept silently down the tunnels toward the entrance. Once they heard voices ahead and managed to squeeze into a narrow fissure in a wall in the nick of time before being spotted by another group of guards coming down that tunnel.

Finally they saw the entrance ahead, which was unguarded as Gautier had predicted. The dragons made the best guards, so human guards were unneeded outside. Carefully Jason and Caroline approached the entrance and looked out upon the great city of Atlantis, which covered the land as far as they could see.

"It's huge!" gasped Caroline. "How will we every find our way?"

"We'll just have to go one step at a time. At least Gautier's friends don't live far from the end of this road," replied Jason as he pointed toward a dirt track that wound down one side of the massive mountain. "Come on."

Fortunately there were enough boulders and dense vegetation on both sides to give them some cover as they worked their way down the mountainside. It was early

enough in the morning that they shouldn't have to worry about any new slave groups coming up the mountain to the mines. But they needed to keep a lookout on the skies. Twice the twins had to duck into the trees next to the road when they saw dragons flying near.

After what seemed like hours to the two, they reached the outskirts of the city where the houses were. Now they did as the old man had instructed: they walked down the road as though they belonged there, trying not to gawk at the exotic sights around them. No one but guards should be coming down the road between the mine entrance and the edge of town, but Atlantean citizens as well as slaves moved freely up and down the streets and paths that crisscrossed the city.

Jason and Caroline had to be very careful not to miss any of the turns they had been told to take. Getting lost here could be disastrous to their plans. Suddenly Caroline grabbed Jason's arm. "That looks like the house Gautier said to look for."

"Yeah, it sure does," agreed her brother. They had approached a one-story whitewashed building with a red tile roof and a low, ornamental wall of red bricks surrounding the house and grounds. A small creek with a wooden bridge spanning it flowed in front of the house. It looked very

peaceful and inviting to the twins. They walked across the bridge and up to the front door. There was a rope hanging beside the door that Jason pulled. They could hear a bell ringing inside. A barefoot servant opened the door and looked down at them with a frown, since their borrowed clothing was none too clean.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“We’re here to see Donneltus. Tell him that our master, Tralgathus, sent us.” Tralgathus was a code name used to alert members of the human resistance movement to each others’ presence. But here the twins had to take a grave risk. Although Donneltus had been the leader of that movement, Gautier hadn’t been in touch for a while and couldn’t be certain that Donneltus was still in the resistance, or was still alive for that matter. What he had heard was that some resistance members had been discovered and literally brainwashed by Baaldorant. If Donneltus was one of those, he would turn Jason and Caroline over to the Baals where they would, probably, suffer a horrible fate.

The servant, after one more disapproving look at their clothes, told them to come in and had them wait just inside the front door, as though he were afraid they might

contaminate the living area. Understandably, the twins were extremely nervous. They examined their surroundings while they waited, noting that the room they found themselves in was humble, but clean, without much ornamentation except for some colorful murals on the walls. These murals showed scenes of everyday life in Atlantis, which provided some valuable information to the two, since they had not had a chance to learn any of the basics about Atlantean civilization.

At last a short, middle-aged man approached them, looking them over even more carefully than the servant had done, but in a less judgmental way. He had a rugged, weather-beaten face with dark but friendly eyes that seemed to miss nothing. Jason, recognizing him from Gautier's description, immediately felt a positive connection and thought he could trust him. He certainly didn't look like a mind-controlled puppet, but Gautier had told them to be careful, and not rely too much on outward appearance.

"I am Donneltus. My servant said you come from Tralgathus?" His voice gave nothing away, no hint of emotion other than simple curiosity.

Jason glanced around to make sure no one else was nearby to overhear them. "Gautier told us to look you up. We just walked down from the mine. We're not from Atlantis."

Caroline added, "We're not even from this time! We were out walking with our dad and suddenly ended up here. We think we went through some kind of time portal."

Donneltus looked skeptical. "No one escapes from the mines," he said. "I don't know what kind of game you two are up to, but I think you'd better leave." He started to turn away.

"Wait!" Jason cried in desperation. "Have you ever seen anything like this?" he asked, holding out his wristwatch. Since he had been wearing long sleeves when caught by the guards, the watch he wore had not been visible. The guards, who thought he and his sister had come with the last batch of slaves, had assumed they'd already been stripped of anything of value, since that was the standard procedure for newly-created slaves. Thus they didn't bother to search the twins. Jason had kept the watch tucked out of sight underneath his Atlantean clothes, which consisted of a simple toga which left his arms and legs bare. Caroline wore a similar outfit.

Donneltus turned back and peered closely at the watch Jason held out, without touching it. "Is it some magic device?" he asked.

"Not really. It's a 'watch'." He had to use the English word since there was no word for it in Atlantean. "It tells the time of day."

"Sundials tell the time of day and that does not look like a sundial," Donneltus replied.

"No, it's not a sundial. It has little wheels and springs inside that make these hands go around at the same speed, as long as you keep it wound up. See, right now the hands show that it's ten o'clock in the morning." Jason had had to guess at the time that morning, basing it on the sun's position, when he set the watch. The day they had stepped into when they passed through the time portal seemed to be further along than the day they had left behind in the Azores.

"And you can hear it ticking," Caroline added.

"Yeah, I think that's little cogs on the wheels that make that sound as the wheels turn." Jason remembered prying the back off his watch once to see what the insides looked like.

"It's not magic and it can't hurt you." Jason had correctly interpreted Donneltus's reluctance to handle the watch.

"Look, it goes on your arm like this and you just wear it there all day." He suited action to words and slipped the band over his hand to his wrist. "Then you just look at it whenever you want to know what time it is. Even at night"

Donneltus stood back and seemed to be thinking for a minute. "Turn around and let me see the back of your neck."

“Oh, yeah. We almost forgot about that,” Caroline mentioned. “We don’t have those little implants, because. . .well, in the future we just don’t have things like that.”

Probing the back of the necks of both Jason and Caroline in turn, he finally said, “Let’s go into my study and talk there.” He led the way through the house to an inside room with no windows. There were various chairs scattered about and a large table strewn with numerous rolls of what looked like paper. They reminded Jason of Egyptian scrolls. Donneltus told the twins to make themselves comfortable while he called for his servant and ordered refreshments.

“Now, start at the beginning,” Donneltus ordered.

“First, though, I’d like to see the back of your neck,” Jason said.

For the first time, Donneltus smiled. “Fair enough.” He then turned to allow Jason to examine his neck. Probing in the same spot he’d seen, and felt, the others do, Jason satisfied himself that there was nothing artificial beneath the skin.

The boy then told Donneltus how he and Caroline had arrived in the mountain tunnel and described the twenty-first century, with his sister’s help. She finally repeated the legend that Tralga had told them about, and how Gautier and his

wife felt that the twins could be the ones predicted by that legend. While they talked, the servant brought in a pitcher with some steaming beverage in it, cups, and a platter of little cakes.

The cakes were sweet and delicious, and the teens made short work of them. The liquid, though, tasted unusual, but not bad. "What is this?" asked Jason, holding up the cup.

"I guess you really don't come from Atlantis if you don't know what that is," Donneltus observed. "It's called klaafa and is made from the root of the klaafinatt plant which seems to grow nowhere else but here on Atlantis. All Atlanteans drink it, from young teens on up."

The twins finished their story. Caroline added, "Gautier and Tralga said the dragons were demanding human sacrifices now and wanted to enslave the whole world. We want to stop them if we can."

Jason nodded in agreement with his sister. "He told us that you were with an underground resistance group. That's why he sent us to you. What can we do?"

Before the older man could answer, his servant ran into the room and announced in a frightened voice, "There's a pair of Guardians at the front door demanding to be admitted."

Chapter IV – Rats in a Trap

“Meet them outside and find out what they want, but don’t get in their way,” his master ordered. Donneltus pulled up a section of the carpet that covered much of the floor, exposing a trapdoor which he raised. “Quickly, hide down there. We can’t risk having you found, especially here. And take your cups with you.”

Caroline and Jason scrambled down the steep steps, trying not to drop the cups they still held. When the door was lowered, it became pitch black, like the deepest cave Jason had ever been in. Caroline started to speak, but Jason hushed her. “Just listen,” he whispered. First they felt and heard what must have been footsteps coming toward them and stopping overhead. They could vaguely make out muffled voices in the room above them, although they couldn’t make out what was being said. Jason thought his heart was beating so loudly it might give them away.

At last they heard the footsteps leaving. It grew very quiet upstairs, and that made them even more nervous. Jason started counting the seconds and minutes the way he’d been taught to tell how much time was passing. After about fifteen minutes, Caroline whispered, “I hear something!” Suddenly

the trap door opened over them and the face of Donneltus peered anxiously down at them.

"The coast is clear," he said. "For now anyway." He helped Caroline up into the room and then Jason.

"What happened?" Jason asked. "And what's a Guardian?"

"The Guardians are the human helpers of the Baals, their 'police force'. Most Atlanteans are against the Baals and their practices, but are too afraid to do anything about it. Unfortunately, some Atlanteans support the Baals and their evil ways. There's one in this neighborhood. He must have seen the two of you coming to my house and alerted the nearest Guardian station. They investigate anything new or different, like strangers."

"Oh, my gosh!" cried Caroline. "Are you in trouble because of us?"

"No more than usual," Donneltus replied with a twinkle in his eyes. "I told them a couple of kids came to the door looking for food and that I gave them some and sent them on their way. The Guardians looked around some, but didn't seem too suspicious. I didn't immediately let you out because I wanted to be sure they had truly left the area first."

"Good idea," Jason remarked. "But now what?"

“It’s too dangerous for you to stay here. When it gets dark, I’ll send you to another resistance member who lives in a poorer, but safer neighborhood. My man will take you. He’s trustworthy, and I’ll give him a note to give to Plotinus, my friend. You can stay there until our next meeting, which will be in two days. For now, I want you two to stay in this room. My servant will bring you whatever you need, and maintain a lookout.”

The day passed slowly, with Donneltus coming in now and then to talk further with the twins. He also provided them with more information about Atlantean society and the dragons. There were three main groups of dragons. The dominant group consisted of the evil Baals who weren’t content with just ruling Atlantis. Another group, called the Lektras, was sympathetic to the humans and wanted to depose the Baals, but didn’t know how. The third and largest group of dragons was merely indifferent, and followed the orders of whoever was in charge. Much like human society, Jason reflected.

Gradually it grew darker as night came, and the servant went around the house lighting the oil lamps that were placed in strategic locations. Donneltus came into the study and told the twins it was time to go.

Following his servant, they left by the back, kitchen entrance, which was less visible from the road. They all walked as casually as possible down the dark streets so as not to attract unwelcome attention. Donneltus's servant lit a lamp to light their way after they had gone some distance from the house. Not many Atlanteans went out at night, but they had a story prepared in case they were stopped and questioned.

However, no one stopped them or even paid them any attention and they made their way through the twisting streets and into a neighborhood of smaller houses that were built closer together. More noise came from the open windows, as well as the odors of cooked food.

The servant stepped around the back of one house in the middle of a block, and knocked on the back door in an odd sequence. Presently the door opened slightly and a balding man looked out. He and the servant exchanged some words, then the man beckoned to Jason and Caroline to enter. He had Donneltus's note in his hand, and quickly closed and locked the door behind them.

He ushered them through a kitchen, where a woman was cooking on a hearth, into a simple but clean living area. After seating the twins and himself, he read the note in his hands, finally looking up at Jason and Caroline.

"I'm Plotinus. And you are. . ."

"I'm Jason and this is my sister, Caroline."

"We want to help defeat the Baals," Caroline added.

"Shhh. Keep your voices down." Plotinus's eyes darted nervously around the room. "We don't discuss such things in the open. Too dangerous. Never know who's listening. My neighbors are safe, but you never know." Then he walked behind them and examined the backs of their necks. By now, Jason and Caroline were getting used to this treatment.

Just then, the woman who had been cooking entered. "My wife, Jonna. This is Jason and Caroline," he said, indicating the teens. "Donneltus wants us to keep them safe until tomorrow night." He looked at her significantly. "He thinks they're important somehow."

Jonna had a warm, motherly look about her. Although her hair was gray and her skin wrinkled, she seemed to radiate calmness and self-confidence, a sharp contrast to her fussy husband. "We'll do all we can to make you comfortable. Are you from Atlantis? Your names and fair skins are strange."

"No," answered Jason. "We come from very far away and we don't know if we'll ever be able to get home."

"The people that are brought here by the Baals never return home," Plotinus stated flatly.

"But we'll do everything we can to help you and make you feel welcome here. For now, though, we're ready to eat supper, but I'm afraid I wasn't expecting company and I don't have much to share this evening."

"Thank you, ma'am," replied Caroline courteously. "We ate before leaving Donneltus's place. But I am kind of thirsty, if you have any water."

"Of course. Plotinus, why don't you get them settled in the spare room while I fetch them water." Turning to the twins, she said, "That was our children's room, but they're grown now with families of their own. You should be comfortable there."

"Is there any way we can bathe?" Caroline asked. "We haven't had a chance since we got here, and I really feel dirty."

"I'll bring you some bathing water along with your drinking water. We have public baths scattered throughout the city, but now is not a good time to go."

"We need to keep you hidden until tomorrow night, and then we'll all decide what's to be done," Plotinus added.

The twins took turns with their skimpy baths and finally settled down for the night. Although exhausted, they had trouble falling asleep. "I miss home already," Caroline

whispered. "Our 'vacation' has turned out to be more than we bargained for."

"It sure has," her brother agreed. "I think the next few days are going to be even scarier than the last two."

"Thanks a lot, Jason. I really needed to hear that. But scary or not, we're doing the right thing, aren't we?"

"I guess so. If anybody ever needed help, these Atlanteans sure do. Being slaves to a bunch of dragons is just plain wrong. Maybe tomorrow night at their meeting we'll find out what we need to know. At least I hope so. I'll feel better if we get some kind of plan together."

"This is the first time anyone ever thought I was important. I think I'd rather be unimportant."

Jason thought for a minute. "I don't know. I feel like we're really living now, even though it is scary and dangerous. Well, anyway, we need to get some sleep or we won't be much good to anyone."

The next day seemed to drag to the twins. They stayed close to the room they had been given in case anyone came snooping around. Three times they had to hide when neighbors stopped by to chat with their hosts. And once, toward evening, they caught a glimpse out a window of a squad of Guardians marching through the neighborhood.

"I told you to stay away from the windows!" Plotinus told them sharply after the squad had passed.

"I'm sorry! It's hard being cooped up in that little room and not knowing what's going on outside," Jason replied meekly. "I don't think anyone saw us."

"If anyone did, we might not know about it right away. You have to stay away from all windows and doors."

At one point during the day, Jason showed Jonna his watch, but she recoiled from it fearfully. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"That looks like an evil eye."

"No, it's only something to tell time." But she wouldn't come near them after that, so he kept it hidden away in the lining of his toga.

Finally darkness overtook the city and the twins heard strange voices coming from the back of the house. Shortly after that, Plotinus came and led them into the master bedroom. The first thing Jason noticed were the half dozen Atlanteans sitting around the room. The second thing he noticed was that the window had been carefully covered. Then he saw someone he knew.

"Donneltus!" he cried.

Donneltus put his finger to his lips and said, "Speak softly, child. This meeting is extremely dangerous for all of us. We need to be as quiet as possible and keep this meeting as short as possible."

"Sorry," Jason murmured. "We were afraid you might have gotten in trouble over us."

"I haven't noticed anyone watching my house, but then the Guardians are experts in being sneaky. But let's go ahead and start the meeting." He introduced the teens to the other members of the resistance group. One of them, called Zoltum, kept looking strangely at Jason and Caroline, with a somewhat glassy-eyed stare. Donneltus and Plotinus kept glancing at him with worried looks.

Donneltus proceeded to fill in the others on the information he had obtained from Jason and Caroline, with the teens occasionally filling in or correcting some point he made.

"How do we know they're telling the truth and that they weren't sent here by the Baals to catch us?" one of the others asked. "They're smart enough to hatch a scheme like that."

"Show them your 'watch'," Donneltus ordered Jason. So Jason pulled his watch out and held it up for everyone to see.

All the others in the room showed some signs of fear, some more than others. Even Donneltus was not unaffected, although he tried not to show it. "That is not an evil eye," he stated flatly, "although it sort of looks like the one in the legend. But the legend of The Fall doesn't say that the 'boy and girl from far ahead' will bring an evil eye, exactly. As you all know, I've studied the old legends, especially this one, and the oldest version of it does state that the 'evil in the land will be defeated by a magic eye carried by a boy and girl from far ahead.' I believe these two are truly the ones spoken of by the legend."

"But this watch is not magic," Jason said. "It just tells time."

"That may be true in the world you're from but we don't know what kind of effect it may have on the dragons, especially the Baals, since they definitely fit the description of 'evil'."

Before he could continue, they heard the sound of running feet outside the window and pounding on the front door. "Open up in the name of the Baals!" yelled a voice outside.

Inside, there was a mad scramble as everyone ran for the back door. Donneltus grabbed the twins, who looked

bewildered and frightened. If he had had any doubts about them, the looks on their faces convinced him of their innocence. He shoved them after the others. However, as soon as they left the house, strong arms grabbed both teens and something struck their heads. Unconsciousness claimed them both.

Chapter V – The Sacrificial Altar

Gradually Jason became aware of the sounds of groaning nearby. His head hurt terribly, but he opened his eyes and tried to focus. He was lying on his side on a hard, cold stone floor. When he tried to sit up, he discovered a heavy iron collar about his neck with a chain attached to the wall next to him. He looked about and saw Caroline lying on the floor nearby, also chained to the wall with a collar around her neck.

There wasn't much light, but he could make out that they were in a large room with a smooth stone floor, rough stone walls and no windows. There were more people around them, all chained to the walls in a similar fashion. Among them were the other members of the resistance group, including Donneltus, Plotinus, and Jonna, who were still unconscious. However, Jason did not see Zoltum. The groaning he had heard was being made by several of the others chained nearby. He tried to reach his sister, who was next to him, but the chain was too short, so he called out to her. Finally, she stirred and groggily sat up, but with difficulty because of the heavy collar and chain.

"What happened? Where are we?" she whispered fearfully.

"I think we've been captured by the Guardians."

"Unfortunately, you're quite correct." By now Donneltus had recovered and was sitting up. He had been feeling the back of his head and his hand came away covered with blood. "The Guardians are not known for gentleness," he added dryly. "How are you two doing?"

Jason felt the back of his own head. Although it was tender, there was no blood. Caroline also found no blood on her hand after a similar inspection.

"You're lucky," added Donneltus. "People have been known to die of infected wounds down here."

"Where is 'here'?" asked Caroline timidly.

"I would guess in the palace dungeons. That's where the Guardians usually take their prisoners, until they can sort them out. Under the Baals' supervision, of course. It's the Baals who decide what to do with us, whether we get sold into slavery, go to the mines, or. . ." Here he hesitated.

"Or what?" Jason asked, although he wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

The older man looked bleakly at the two. "Or to be sacrificed to the Baals." Then he quickly added, "Although they don't usually use many young people that way. Most of the younger ones, like you two, are sold into slavery."

"Oh, that makes me feel better," Jason replied sarcastically, trying to act brave for his sister's sake.

"It's not all that bad," continued Donneltus. "It depends on who buys you. Some slave owners treat their slaves kindly, so their lives aren't so bad. Some slaves actually live better than some citizens."

Caroline chimed in, "With the way our luck's been running, we'll probably end up back in the mines." Neither of the twins wanted to think about the alternative, much less voice it.

Gradually the other prisoners regained consciousness, except for Plotinus, who hadn't moved at all. Jonna kept calling to him, trying to arouse him, but with no luck. "Maybe he's better off," she finally muttered.

"Donneltus, I don't see Zoltum," Jason observed.

"I had a bad feeling about him. He did not look his normal self. I'm afraid Baaldorant got to him and used him to find the rest of us." He laughed humorlessly. "I should have acted on my feeling immediately. Too late now."

Jason had been inspecting the chain that bound him to the wall but could see no weaknesses in it, or in the ring it was attached to. He finally settled down to wait, just as the others were doing, after checking to be sure his watch was still in its

hiding place. It was almost uncannily quiet in the darkness, with the only light coming from a small window inset into a large wooden door on the opposite side of the room from the prisoners. Jason thought there should have been at least the sound of water dripping somewhere. Every adventure book he'd ever read had put the heroes and heroines in drippy dungeons. But he decided the sound of water would only have served to make him thirstier than he already was.

At last there was a sound to break the monotony: the squeal of rusty hinges as the door to their cell opened. A squad of Guardians entered, two going to each prisoner and releasing the chains from the walls. They brutally kicked and struck the prisoners to get them moving through the door and down a long narrow hallway that wasn't much better than the cell they had just come from. However, the corridor was lit with brightly shining yellow globes, which reminded the twins of electric lights, except they hadn't seen any evidence of electricity so far.

They were pulled and dragged up ramps and down more corridors, gradually going higher in the palace, if this was the palace. The higher they went, the cleaner and nicer the surroundings became.

Finally they were goaded through a last door and into bright sunlight. Jason and Caroline found themselves at the end of the line of prisoners, standing on a large outdoor platform high above the rest of the city. Their view was spoiled by two things: one, a large, flat-topped rock that looked like an altar stone, and two, a huge dragon with malevolent red eyes perched on the other side of the stone.

Jason's attention was distracted by the sudden weeping and wailing of the others in line. Donneltus was just ahead of the twins. Although he kept silent, his face was gray and hopeless looking. Caroline looked around in bewilderment, then looked at the older man.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"We're going to be sacrificed, aren't we?" Jason said.

Donneltus nodded his head.

The dragon raised its head and started making a loud thrumming sound. For the first time, Jason saw that the open square just below their platform was packed with people. At the sound of the thrumming, they all fell silent. Two of the guards grabbed the first prisoner in line. It was Jonna. She screamed and struggled, but the guards apparently were used

to this. They quickly stripped off her toga, picked her up and placed her on the altar stone, tightly tying her wrists and ankles to rings in the stone. Another human, dressed completely in white robes and wearing a massive gold medallion, stood over her and raised a knife with a black blade.

Time seemed to slow down for Jason. Weird, irrelevant ideas scampered through his mind, such as thinking that the blade looked like it was made of obsidian and was probably extremely sharp. Since this was a volcano they were on, obsidian made sense. The knife seemed to descend in slow motion toward the poor woman's chest. Jason wanted desperately to tear his eyes away from the horrific scene, but his whole body appeared to be paralyzed. The crowd below roared as the white-robed figure held something aloft for them to see. Jason assumed it was Jonna's heart, but he did not want to look. He wondered if the dragons of Atlantis had gone as far as the western hemisphere and if the Aztecs had got their custom from these people somehow.

The roar of the crowd seemed to bring Jason's time sense back to normal. Caroline screamed and buried her head in her brother's shoulder, her whole body shaking with fear

and grief. He put his arms around her, while their guards laughed. At that moment, Jason passed irrevocably from childhood to manhood.

One by one the other prisoners faced the same treatment on the bloody altar. It was down to Donneltus and the twins when a huge shadow passed over them. Everyone, including the guards and the red-eyed horror presiding over the proceedings, looked up. Another dragon spiraled down to the platform and landed next to the first one. This dragon was lighter in color than the others the twins had seen so far and its eyes were copper-colored. The two dragons seemed to commune silently with each other, then the dark one flew off, leaving the newcomer in its place.

The copper-eyed dragon seemed to stare directly at Jason and Caroline for long moments, then made the thrumming sound which seemed to be an order for the sacrifices to continue. The guards now seized Donneltus, who offered no resistance as they flung him onto the altar. Caroline had kept her position with her face hidden from the sight, and this time, Jason also closed his eyes. Somehow he felt responsible for the murder of these people, especially Donneltus, who had been so kind to them.

Then it was their turn.

Chapter VI – Reprieve

The guards started to drag Caroline toward the stone. Jason yelled at them and struggled. He had to stop them! But the guards holding him were too strong and too used to struggling prisoners. They just flashed their evil grins at him at Caroline, apparently enjoying their suffering. There seemed to be people like that in all ages and countries, unfortunately. Jason had never felt so helpless or hopeless in his entire life.

“Caroline, I’m sorry!” he cried out. At least she, and probably he as well, would soon be with their mother.

Intervention came from an entirely unexpected source, in the form of a loud and discordant squawk from the dragon overseeing the proceedings. The guards halted in their tracks as they looked up at the creature that had reared up to its full height of about fifteen feet. Its tail lashed back and forth as it stared down at the guards. Their faces held no expression and they moved jerkily, as though under outside control. This must be one of the mind-controlling dragons, Jason thought.

The zombie-like guards gripped the twins and pulled them back inside, back down more ramps, but not all the way

down to the dungeon. Although the guards now seemed disinterested in them, Jason could not break their grip, hard as he tried. The little party halted in front of a brightly painted metal door. One guard pounded on it until it opened from within. They found themselves in an ornate corridor with wide windows and vivid murals and tapestries on the walls, showing scenes of dragons and Atlanteans engaged in war-like activities and conquest. They met no one else along the way, which made Jason wonder if the palace was deserted.

Finally they reached a huge, double door, also made of metal, with some kind of seal etched into the surface in the very middle. Two guards, dressed in gold-edged kilts and carrying odd-looking staffs with a large, round, milky-looking stone set in the top of each, silently opened the doors as they approached. The twins were escorted into what looked for all the world like a throne room, with lavish decorations on all sides and a large, ornately-carved wooden chair set up on a dais at the far end of the room. Sitting in that chair was an elderly man wearing robes of some metallic looking substance and festooned with golden jewelry and precious stones. He also bore a golden crown on his white-haired head.

Another man, somewhat younger and less elaborately decked out, sat in a smaller chair below the throne. He rose as the twins were brought forward and halted in front of the throne.

"Are these the ones you wanted?" asked the man on the throne, who must have been King Orestes. He seemed jittery and his hands shook. Jason wondered if he had Parkinson's disease.

The other man stood up and walked around Jason and Caroline, examining them as though they were pieces of furniture. "I believe so, your highness," he responded. Addressing the boy and girl, still in the grip of their guards, he demanded, "What are your names?"

Jason saw no point in refusing, so he answered, "I'm Jason and this is my sister, Caroline."

The man circled them one more time before addressing the king. "Yes, your highness, these two are just what I've been looking for. They'll make a nice, matched pair of household slaves. Just the right age to break in. Especially the girl." Here he leered at her, but Jason noticed that the expression in his eyes just didn't quite match his oily words.

"Take them, take them, Borrellus. You've done me enough favors in the past. Now I'll do you one. No charge.

But if they get into any more trouble or fall into the wrong company, nothing will save them from the sacrificial altar again."

Borrellus turned and bowed to the king with his arms crossed over his chest. "I hear and obey, O king."

The king stood up and looked down at them again. "It seems there's something else I needed to say." He seemed lost in thought for a minute, then brightened up. "Now I remember. They need their implants."

"Your highness, they are but teens and have been hard used. Let them heal and rest a bit and then I'll make sure they return for the implants."

"You're too soft on slaves, Borrellus."

"Perhaps, highness, but I don't have the high turnover rate other slave owners have. It's economically more prudent to treat valuable property well. It lasts longer that way."

"Very well," King Orestes conceded. "But no later than tomorrow."

After bowing one last time to the king, Borrellus turned and beckoned to several plainly dressed men who had been silently waiting near the doors. They came over and removed the metal collars from Jason and Caroline and firmly but gently led them out of the room, with Donneltus leading the

way. Following different corridors, they soon emerged once again into the sunlight, but this time the door opened onto a side street, where two horse-drawn carriages stood waiting. The twins were helped into one carriage, while their new master stepped into the other. Once inside, Jason discovered that the doors could not be opened from their side, and there were no windows. The seats were simple wood planks attached to the front and back walls, something like a stagecoach.

They traveled at a fairly high rate of speed for a busy city. It wasn't long before they stopped and the door was opened by the same men who had led them out of the palace. Jason was struck by the beauty of the building he faced, even though they were obviously in the back. It almost looked like an ancient Greek temple, with a wide columned porch running around the perimeter of the building. Donneltus had preceded them to the door and was talking to a middle-aged lady who wore a simple toga of light yellow, which matched her blonde hair.

She came toward the twins with a welcoming smile. "I am Morelta, in charge of the household servants. You have nothing to fear here. Let's get you fed and cleaned up first, shall we?" Beckoning to the men who still surrounded the two, Morelta led the way into the house.

The interior was every bit as beautiful as the outside, with more murals and tapestries on the walls, this time depicting more colorful and peaceful scenes of jungles, animals, exotic birds, and people engaged in leisure activities. There were finely sculpted statues around every corner and in various niches in the walls, as well as well-made and attractive furniture tastefully arranged in intimate groupings.

Morelta led them into a smaller room that contained a large bathing pool. "Are you thirsty?" she asked.

"Yes!" Jason and Caroline replied together. The older woman shook her head sadly. "It's a wonder the prisoners in the palace live long enough to be sacrificed, the way they're treated." She poured from a large, clay jug into clay goblets. "It's only water, but it should quench your thirst until after your bath."

The twins gulped at their drinks. It had been a long time since they had had anything to eat or drink and they were parched.

"Slow down," Morelta ordered. "You'll make yourselves sick if you drink too fast." After they had drunk their fill, Morelta said, "Bath time. Now if you give me your word that you will obey me, I will have the guards wait outside. But if you give me any trouble at all, I'll have them come back in and help bathe you both. Is it a deal?"

“Yes, ma’am,” Jason responded. “But do you want us to bathe together?”

“Why, yes, of course. Is that not your custom where you come from?”

Both Caroline and Jason blushed. “No, ma’am,” responded Caroline. “We always bathe alone.”

“Hmph. Well here, teens bathe together until they’re adults. Is that going to be a problem for you?”

Jason and Caroline looked at each other. Caroline touched her brother’s arms. “‘When in Rome. . .’” she quoted. Seeing the confused look on the older woman’s face, Jason quickly added, “That means we’ll just have to adapt to your customs.”

“Wherever you two come from, you certainly seem more sensible than the other outlanders I’ve run into. Or even other Atlanteans, for that matter.” With that said, she dismissed the guards and clapped her hands. Three young women came in and proceeded to help the twins undress. Jason remembered his watch and pulled it out of its hiding place.

“What’s that?” Morelta asked. Without saying anything, Jason showed it to her. To her credit, Morelta merely flinched back, but did not show as much fright as

others had. Jason, thinking quickly, said, "It's a magic eye. But it only works for me and Caroline."

"Well, put it down on that table," she said, pointing to a small wooden table against one wall. "No one will bother it."

While the twins were being bathed by the other women, Morelta kept up a conversation, skillfully questioning them about their backgrounds. At last, clean and dressed in clean tunics, Jason and Caroline were judged fit to appear before Borrellus. Morelta led them through the house with their guards trailing behind. Apparently no one was willing to trust them too far.

They were ushered into a small sitting room that had only the one door as entrance and exit. Borrellus was inside, reclining on a sofa and reading a scroll. There were more scrolls piled on the table beside him. He looked up as they entered.

"Ah, you do clean up nicely," he remarked, indicating for them to sit in two chairs facing the sofa. "Help yourself," he added, pointing to trays of fresh fruits and cakes on the same table. The twins fell to with a vengeance. Borrellus continued his reading until they had eaten and drunk their fill.

"Now then," he said, as he put down his scroll. "Tell me about yourselves. And don't worry: I'm not a monster. As a matter of fact, Donneltus was a friend of mine. I'm sorry I couldn't save him but that would have been too dangerous. Saving you two was dangerous enough."

"You know about the resistance movement?" Jason inquired.

Borrellus laughed. For the first time, Jason noticed that the older man had a kindly face also, much like that of Donneltus. Apparently his behavior at the palace had been an act for the king's benefit. Suddenly the teenager felt compassion for those that led a difficult and dangerous double life.

"Yes, indeed. I have been deeply involved with that movement for many years, from inside the more privileged circles where I have more influence. Unfortunately the Baals have become too strong to move against with what we have. But the message Donneltus sent me stated that the tide may have turned, with the two of you showing up as you did."

Feeling better than they had in quite a while, Jason and Caroline told their story once more, ending with their capture by the Guardians. As Jason mentioned that part, he looked around involuntarily, as though fearing another squad would come bursting through the door.

"Don't worry. I have an excellent spy system, not only around this house but throughout the city as well. No one can come upon us without me knowing about it well in advance, not even the Baals. I have friends among the dragons as well. Not all of them want to rule us and be treated as gods." He took a sip from a silver goblet on the table before continuing. He sat up and said, "Show me this 'magic eye' of yours."

Jason did as he was bidden. He was momentarily tempted to claim special powers for it, but this man had been candid with him, so he simply pulled it out.

Borrellus held out his hand and Jason dropped the watch in it. The man brought it up close to his face to study it. "What is that sound it makes?"

"It's called 'ticking'," Caroline replied. "That's a wind-up watch. The battery powered ones don't make any sound." She had to use the English word for 'battery.'

Jason added hopefully, "If you have a small knife, I could pry the back off and show you how it works."

Without hesitating, Borrellus pulled a small knife with a beautifully carved ivory handle out of his toga and handed it and the watch to Jason who set about putting action to words. Once he had the back off, he kneeled next to Borrellus to show him its inner workings. The man appeared fascinated and seemed to understand Jason's explanation.

“Donneltus seemed to think this ‘watch’ of yours is important and that it corresponds to the ‘magic eye’ mentioned in the Legend of the Fall.”

“Yeah, he told us about that legend, but this watch isn’t magic. We don’t even believe in magic.”

The older man pushed aside the scrolls on the table until he found the one he was looking for. He explained as he unrolled it, “There was a great philosopher who lived about fifty years ago who had an interesting theory. He was profoundly interested in time as another dimension, besides the three dimensions of space.”

“Oh, yes, we have a similar theory in the twenty-first century.”

Borrellus looked sharply at the boy. “Are you joking with me?”

“No,” Caroline chimed in. “There really is such a theory. And there have been a lot of ideas about what might happen if people could travel in time. But no one’s ever done it, of course.”

“Until now,” her brother added meaningfully.

Borrellus continued, “That’s interesting. I’ve studied this philosopher’s theory as a curiosity, never thinking that it could ever be proved, one way or the other. He said that if an

object could move backward in time, it would gain tremendous 'temporal' energy and power. So far, though, I see no evidence of energy or power in your watch."

They were interrupted by a soft knock on the door. Morelta poked her head in and said, "'Azamanth is here."

Her master looked unconcerned. "Azamanth is the chief of the dragons that are friendly to us. Let me see what he wants. Morelta, stay here with them." While Borrellus was gone, Jason and Caroline took the opportunity to ask questions of Morelta, questions about everyday life in Atlantis, which she was happy to answer. She was somewhat reluctant, however, to answer their questions about the dragons and merely said that Borrellus would have to answer those.

A few minutes later, Borrellus returned and beckoned to the twins. "Come with me to meet Azamanth. Don't worry, everything's fine," he added upon seeing the anxious looks on their faces. He led them back through the house to the back courtyard.

One thing the twins had not noticed when they had first been hurried from the wagon into the house was that this courtyard was completely enclosed by a high stone wall, which gave complete privacy to those within. And sitting on its haunches in the middle of the courtyard was the biggest

dragon they had seen so far. His head must have been a good 20 feet above the ground and he was covered in iridescent white scales. They couldn't even begin to guess at his length.

When he lowered his head to look more closely at them, they could see that his eyes were copper-colored, with vertical pupils like a cat's eyes. Yet, despite his great size and the horns that jutted out from his head, he did not project a fearsome appearance. Jason felt an odd sensation in his head, something like an itch. He wondered if it was being caused by the dragon.

This thought was quickly confirmed when Borrellus turned to him and announced, "Azamanth says he cannot hear your thoughts or your sister's. You are the first humans he's encountered whose minds he cannot read."

"Is that good?" asked Caroline.

"Yes, it is. One of the major problems we've had in making plans to rid Atlantis of the Baals is that many of the dragons can 'hear' what humans are thinking. And those dragons are carefully placed in strategic locations which we need to get to in order to destroy them. This is the best piece of luck we could have hoped for."

"So you think we can get through to wherever we need to go without being detected?" asked Jason.

“Yes. Especially since you don’t have those implants. That’s another way they have of tracking our whereabouts.”

“But the king told you to bring us back tomorrow to get them.”

“Don’t worry,” Borrellus said with a smile. “I used the description of you provided by Donneltus to acquire two slaves from the underground trade, slaves who look much like you and your sister. They will be going to get the implants tomorrow. No one will be the wiser.”

The man stopped for a moment and looked at Azamanth, who stared back at him as though he were ‘talking’ to him. The dragon nodded its head once,

“I just told him about your ‘watch.’ He would like to see it.”

Jason slipped it out of its hiding place and held it up to the dragon. Suddenly the watch glowed, then gave off some sort of pulse. The results were spectacular.

It was as though a giant hand had flung Azamanth backward clear across the courtyard. He squawked in alarm and tried to open his wings to keep from falling onto his back, but too late. The dragon fell heavily back with his four legs waving wildly in the air and his wings flailing about and beating the ground.

“Wow!” Jason couldn’t think of anything else to say.

"You'd better put your watch back under cover," warned Borrellus. "It would seem that it does have magic power after all. But right now we'd better get Azamanth off his back. The dragons can't turn over without help."

With the help of Borrellus's other servants, they were able to push and pull the distressed creature until he was back on his feet. His eyes seemed to be whirling around and he appeared disoriented. Finally he calmed down and stared for a long time at Borrellus.

At last the man broke off and turned to Jason. "He says your watch is a very powerful talisman. Neither he nor any of the other dragons have ever encountered anything like it. He's very much afraid of it."

"Now we have a weapon against the Baals!" Jason replied fervently.

Borrellus's eyes shone. "So we do. Now maybe we can make some plans that really have a chance to work." He looked again at the dragon. "Right now Azamanth needs to get back to their lair. We'd better step back," he cautioned. "His downbeat can knock *us* off *our* feet."

They were almost knocked over anyway as the mighty dragon lifted back into the sky. They watched him until he was out of sight.

Caroline sighed. "He's so beautiful. And wouldn't it be great to ride on his back?"

Borrellus look startled. "Ride on his back? I've never thought of that. But he's certainly strong enough to carry humans." The man put his arms around Jason and Caroline as he led them back inside. "For the first time in a very long time, I feel hopeful." He smiled at the twins. "I believe now we have a real chance to overthrow the Baals. We might go back to the happy and prosperous society we used to be. Although it may be too late for King Orestes."

"I noticed his shaking hands," Jason mentioned. "What's wrong with him?"

"Too much mind control for too long. Baaldorant keeps tight control over him and has for many years. We now know that such mind control can slowly destroy a person's mind." Borrellus shook his head sadly. "He was a good ruler and a personal friend of mine before the Baals took over."

"Is there no way to overcome this mind control?" asked Jason.

"Some of us have the ability to shield our minds from total takeover, at least from most of the dragons that have the mind control ability. But not from Baaldorant. At least we've never heard of anyone who could withstand him." He looked

sharply at Jason. "But then we've never heard of anyone who could not be 'read' by dragons with the mind reading ability, either. Until you, that is."

Jason picked up the train of thought. "So maybe we can't be controlled either."

"That's a big 'maybe'." Borrellus answered. "Once you're under Baaldorant's control, you're caught like a fly in a spider's web. There's no escape. However, we can talk more after supper. Right now you should rest."

Once inside, he motioned for Morelta to show the twins to their room. It was next to the kitchen and quite modest compared to the rest of the house, with two small beds and not much else, not even a window.

"You're lucky to have your own room," Morelta advised them. "The other servants all share two rooms, the men in one and the women in the other. But the master has devised a story to explain your special treatment. We're to tell the others that the two of you are really the illegitimate children of a noble friend of his, here to further your education. That entitles you to a separate room. If the other servants, or anyone for that matter, ask who your parents are, you're to say that you are not permitted to speak of them. That's common practice here in Atlantis."

Seeing their dubious looks, she added, "Don't worry. You'll be fine here. Supper will be in about two hours. I suggest you rest until then. You look like you could use it. I'll send a servant for you at the appropriate time."

After she had left, Caroline looked at her brother and said, "She's right about one thing, at least. I do need to lie down for a while. After all that's happened in such a short time, I feel like I'm ready to crash."

"Yeah, me, too!" her brother agreed.

It seemed he had just closed his eyes, when he felt himself being violently shaken.

Chapter VII – Double Jeopardy

Jason came up out of a deep sleep with his arms flailing about and his heart beating wildly.

“Calm down,” a strange voice said. “I’m just here to take you to supper.”

When Jason’s eyes focused, he saw a young man dressed in a simple kilt standing back a ways from the bed.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I was having a bad dream and I guess I thought you were part of it.”

“That’s all right. It’s pretty common to have dreams like that these days.” He glanced around as though afraid he had said too much. “Anyway my name’s Arcum, and the master’s waiting for you. There’s water over there for you to clean up,” he added, pointing to a pitcher and bowl on a small table against the end wall.

By this time Caroline had awakened. She was lighter sleeper than her brother, although she seemed equally frightened at the sudden commotion. She beat Jason to the water, though, splashing it on her face to help wake her up. When they were finished, they followed Arcum to the dining room.

It turned out to be the best meal they had had since arriving in Atlantis. It was obvious that Borrellus lived well although they wondered what his source of income was. Jason decided to ask.

“What do you do, Borrellus? I mean how do you afford to live so well? Or am I being too nosy?”

“No, you’re not being too nosy. You’ve told me about yourselves; it’s only fair for me to do likewise. I can see how you’d be curious about such matters.” He sipped from his wine goblet. “I own a number of sailing ships that take Atlantean goods to other lands to trade for valuable and exotic things, like precious stones, gold and silver, and the mineral from which quicksilver is extracted. My ships travel great distances, thanks to the magic engines the dragons have taught us to make. We no longer have to depend on the winds to take us where we want to go, and we can go faster now, as well.” He helped himself to a pastry before continuing.

“I once did the king a favor by bringing back some exotic animals that he had never seen before, and giving them to him as a gift. It’s always handy to have the king on your side, although these days the real power is Baaldorant.”

Jason was struck by something the older man had said. “Quicksilver? Why is that so valuable?”

“The dragons have a need for it, although they have never said how. It’s a secret that only they know. I’ve often wondered about it myself, if it’s somehow a weakness that we can take advantage of.”

“Is there any way we could find out?” asked Caroline.

“Not without Azamanth’s help, and so far he’s refused to divulge that information, although I have asked. I do know that the quicksilver is taken to their lair in the side of the volcano once it’s extracted from the ore, but no human has ever gone there and returned. Somehow we must get information about their lair.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, then added, “Today I got the impression that Azamanth’s just about ready to provide us with active help on account of the human sacrifices that are now taking place. I need to work on him. My wife might have obtained that information from him. For some reason, he seems soft on human females.” Noticing the startled looks on both teens’ faces, he explained, “I don’t mean physically. That would be impossible. He just seems to favor them more. You know, that reminds me that we’ve never seen nor heard of female dragons. They must exist, since the dragons have mentioned eggs.”

Now Borrellus looked at Caroline. “You may be just the one to tease the knowledge we need out of him.”

"I'll be glad to help. Just tell me what to do," she replied.

"Let me think on this further. Solutions to problems often come to me in my sleep. So let us sleep on it. It is getting late anyway. Can you find your way back to your room?"

"Yes, I'm sure we can," said Jason.

"Then I'll bid you a good night. I'll see you at breakfast."

The next morning the teens woke before the servant came by to get them for breakfast. Jason stretched luxuriously, feeling completely rested for the first time since coming here. It seemed hard to believe that it had only been four days since they had stepped through that time portal, if that's what it was. He looked over at his sister's bed and saw she was still sound asleep, so he picked up a sandal and threw it at her.

"Owwwww!" she cried out, sitting straight up and rubbing her arm where the missile had connected. She looked over at her brother who was grinning broadly and gave him a dirty look.

"I'll get you for that!" she promised, as she jumped out of bed and started for him. Just then there was a discreet knock on their door.

“Saved by the bell, or should I say the knock,” Jason taunted her, as he got up to answer the door. It was only Arcum, come to let them know that breakfast was ready, so they quickly dressed and found their way to the dining room. Shortly after they seated themselves, Borrellus arrived and they all helped themselves.

Caroline looked over at the older man. “Where is your wife, Borrellus? You mentioned her yesterday.”

A look of sadness crossed his face for a moment. “She died a few years ago in childbirth. And the child was born dead.”

“I’m so sorry!” replied the girl.

Borrellus shrugged. “That’s all right. I guess I’ve been too busy since then to even think about taking another wife. That plus the fact that I’ve gotten involved in the resistance movement. It’s an acceptable risk for me, but I don’t want to risk anyone else unnecessarily, knowing what happens to those who are caught.”

Jason shuddered, remembering their all-too-close brush with death only yesterday.

They finished their meal in silence, when Borrellus pushed his dishes away and looked at the twins. “I have to take the twins I purchased to the palace to get their implants.

Then I'll return them to the trader I bought them from. I can't have two sets of you running around here. I also have some business I need to see about at the port. In the meantime, a tutor is supposed to come this morning to further your education. His name is Savvus and he's also a resistance member, so you can speak freely in front of him. However, I don't recommend you speak of such matters too freely. I trust my servants, but these days it pays to be cautious."

Just then Arcum entered the room with an elderly man.

Borrellus rose to greet him. "Ah, Savvus, it's good to see you. You're in good health I trust?"

The two men clasped arms. "As good as can be expected at my age," the older man replied. Jason noticed that he walked with a limp, but otherwise seemed quite spry and good-natured.

"Are these my new students?" he inquired with a smile as he looked at Jason and Caroline.

"Indeed they are. The boy is Jason and his sister is called Caroline. I'll leave them, then, in your care while I tend to some business." Borrellus turned to the twins. "Now be sure you mind Master Savvus. He's the best teacher in Atlantis. You're lucky to be his pupils."

"Yes, sir," the two replied together. They did know how lucky they were.

The morning passed fairly quickly and quietly for the two. Savvus taught them about life in Atlantis and what little was known about the dragons. Although they had been around for many years now, the humans still did not know much about them, since the dragons were not inclined to pass on information about themselves. The twins did find out that the lights in the palace were not powered by electricity, but by a source they had never heard of. Their tutor said that there was a form of free energy in the universe for those who knew how to tap it, and the dragons did, but they only allowed this technology to be used by humans in the palace.

Savvus also explained that the dragons strongly discouraged humans from engaging in any experiments or trying to learn more of the universe. Those who tried always disappeared. The Baals ruled with an iron fist, or rather, an iron “claw,” and guarded scientific knowledge jealously.

Just as they were thinking about breaking for lunch, Borrellus returned. As he entered their “classroom,” he had an extremely grave look on his face.

“Is something wrong?” Savvus inquired.

“I heard extremely disturbing news in the marketplace,” he replied. “Rumor has it that the Baals are up to something that’s even worse than the sacrifices.”

“What could be worse than that?” Jason asked disbelievingly.

“I don’t know if I should even repeat it, it’s so unbelievable. But since I started, I suppose I should finish it.” He wiped sweat off his forehead that was not due entirely to the heat of the day. “The people are saying that the Baals are now eating people – alive!”

His listeners looked horrified.

Borrellus continued, “It’s whispered that they even torture their prisoners before eating them, as a cat tortures a mouse.”

Savvus raised a fist in the air and shook it at the ceiling. “Oh, ye gods. How can you let this happen?” Then he collapsed onto a nearby chair and held his head in his hands.

“This is only a rumor,” cautioned Borrellus. “We should not take it seriously just yet. I’ll try to find out from Azamanth if any of it’s true.”

“If Azamanth even knows,” replied Savvus. “The dragons keep secrets from each other, too.”

“But if word has leaked out to the human population of Atlantis, then surely he would know as well.” Borrellus waved his hand dismissively. “Until we know one way or the other, all we can do is carry on as usual. And my stomach is telling me that it’s lunchtime.” He looked sympathetically at

the other three. "I'm sorry if I've ruined your day, and probably your appetites as well, but I thought it best to prepare you for the worst."

"Just as well," mentioned Savvus. "But you were right about one thing: we must carry on, and our bodies and minds cannot operate efficiently without the proper fuel."

"Well said, my friend," Borrellus asserted. He clapped his hands to summon a servant to prepare lunch for all of them.

Jason sat closer to his sister than usual. She was extremely pale and just toyed with her food. Borrellus looked at her with concern and tried to redirect their thoughts by asking the twins more about the twenty-first century.

Jason was only too happy to comply and rambled on about all the inventions and discoveries he could think of. The two older men were fascinated by his revelations, but found it hard to believe some of the things he mentioned, such as astronauts going to the moon, and submarines diving to the depths of the oceans.

After lunch Borrellus suggested that the twins go with Morelta to the market to satisfy more of their curiosity about Atlantis. They agreed quickly, only too happy to get out and see the sights.

“Make sure you stay with Morelta at all times and do everything she says,” Borrellus cautioned. “I don’t want you getting into trouble. That would be very easy, given your lack of knowledge of Atlantis and our customs.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be careful,” replied Jason. He looked at his sister. “I think we’ve had enough trouble to last us a while.”

Their “owner” summoned his housekeeper and gave her instructions. The three of them got into a small one-horse cart that was waiting at the back. Morelta took the reins and drove them slowly through the streets to the central marketplace. As they got closer to their destination, the streets became more crowded with throngs of pedestrians and other horse-drawn carts and wagons of various types. Jason and Caroline marveled at the diversity of people they saw. Most wore traditional Atlantean clothing, simple togas edged in different colors and designs, but many others, who appeared to be from other lands, wore an astonishing assortment, from simple fur kilts to elaborately woven silks. It was obvious that Atlantean ships did travel far and wide and brought back people as well as goods.

Apparently parking was as much a problem in Atlantis as it was in the cities of the twenty-first century. Morelta had to drive down several side streets near the market before she found a good place to leave the cart. As they walked along the street, the twins couldn't stop gawking at the exotic sights around them. Even the simple apartment buildings they passed were clean, and in good repair, with colorful designs and paintings on their walls and doors. People sat on balconies overlooking the street, talking to their neighbors or passers-by. Some of them called out greetings to their small group, but Jason and Caroline did not know how to reply. Some of those people shook their fists at them when they did not respond.

Morelta finally took notice. "When people greet you on the streets, it is considered polite to say, 'May the gods bless your house'." She cast a quick glance behind her where angry looks seem to bore into their backs. "There are too many Baal supporters around who would like nothing better than to report on suspicious strangers in the streets," she added, casting another fearful glance behind her.

At last they reached the market proper. The twins could hardly believe the variety of goods that were displayed there. Atlantis truly seemed to be the center of the ancient world.

The older woman directed Jason and Caroline in helping her fill up the baskets they carried. They were so intent on their shopping, and sightseeing in the twins' case, that they did not see that they were being followed.

Morelta decided they had enough to last a few days and steered the twins back to where their horse and cart waited, just in time to see the tops of Guardian weapons moving toward them through the thick crowd. As if that weren't enough, a man a few feet away from them suddenly pointed right at them and yelled at the top of his voice, "There they are! There's the spies!"

It took the three of them a moment to realize he was pointing at them. They saw the Guardians veer in their direction and knew they were in trouble. Morelta froze in fear, but Jason grabbed her arm, gave her a strong shake and said in her ear, "I think we should get out of here, now!" Caroline grabbed her other arm and they slewed her around and pushed their way through the crowd in the opposite direction from the Guardians.

Jason, thinking fast, yelled himself and pointed ahead of them, imitating the Atlantean who was trying to direct the Guardians their way. Trying to act officiously, he, Caroline and the housekeeper pretended to be chasing someone else,

trying to put as many people as possible between themselves and the ones chasing them.

Caroline, who was just as quick-witted as her brother, took the basket she still held and dumped it on the ground by an unoccupied stand. "Quick, let's pretend we're picking up the fruit and then hide behind that stand."

"Good idea," her brother said, as he pulled the older woman down and shoved her none too gently behind the stand, closely followed by the girl. They squirmed into the farthest and darkest corner and waited.

Sure enough, the informer and the Guardians soon rushed by, not even slowing down as they passed the trio's hiding place. They waited until they could no longer hear any shouting.

"I don't think we should hang around here any longer, just in case the Guardians come back and search this area," advised Jason. He looked closely at Morelta. "Are you all right?"

"No," she replied, "We should not have run. We haven't done anything wrong."

"Maybe not, but one trip to the dungeons is more than enough for me."

"For us," added Caroline.

Jason continued, "They would have discovered we didn't have the implants, and then what?"

Morelta frowned. "I hadn't thought of that. Well, maybe we did the right thing after all."

Cautiously the boy poked his head out to check the progress of their erstwhile pursuers. They were nowhere in sight and the commotion seemed to have died down, at least in their immediate area.

"Now's as good a time as any to get going," he said. He led the way out from the stall and back in the direction they had come. "You take the lead, Morelta. You know this area and we don't."

Caroline bent down to pick up the dropped produce. "Let's pick these up first, so we don't look too suspicious," she advised.

"All right, but let's be quick about it," her brother replied.

As they set about retrieving the goods, Caroline became slightly separated from the other two. Suddenly two large and rough-looking men pushed through the crowd and grabbed her. One of them clamped a none-too-clean hand over her mouth and the two of them carried her between them, away from her brother and Morelta, who had not yet realized what had happened.

However, Caroline was no easy mark. Her dad had taught both siblings some basic self-defense techniques, and had encouraged Jason to take martial arts and medieval weapons training. She bit down on the thug's hand as hard as she could, causing him to yell and yank his hand away, as well as to loosen his grip on her. She seized the opportunity to yell for her brother, while at the same time punching and kicking whatever parts of their anatomies were in reach.

In the meantime, her brother, finally noticing her predicament, came charging toward them, grabbing a handy spear from the display table of a startled vendor. He brandished it ferociously at the two brigands. Finding themselves trying to hang on to a wildcat while being threatened by a boy who obviously knew how to handle the spear, they decided they had bitten off more than they could handle, and ran off into the crowd.

"I think we'd better get out of here before anything else happens," Jason told Caroline and Morelta who had joined them. "Forget about the rest of the stuff. Let's just get back to the house."

The housekeeper led the way to the edge of the market and down a different side street than the one they had used

earlier. "I think we'll be safer if we take a different route back to the cart," she explained. "I don't want to pass those same apartments again."

Jason had been watching their backs as they made their retreat. "I haven't seen anyone following us," he observed. "Of course that doesn't mean we shouldn't be careful. It looks like Atlantis has the same problems as any modern city has."

Morelta looked sadly at him. "It didn't used to be this way. Atlantis was a safe and beautiful place before the Baals took over. Now humans are turning against each other as well."

"Evil seems to inspire more evil. Humans seem to be plagued with an inner darkness that wells up at the slightest opportunity."

"But," his sister argued, "we don't have to give in to it. Light will overcome darkness, eventually. If we don't believe that, then we're lost for sure."

Just then their guide interrupted their philosophical discussion. "There's the horse and cart. Why don't the two of you hide in this doorway and let me drive around and pick you up. That way if there's a trap, it won't catch all of us. I hope!"

“Drive around the block first before you pick us up, to make sure you’re not being followed,” recommended Jason.

“Good idea,” she said, suiting action to words.

While they waited in the doorway, the twins tried to act as though they belonged there, although they felt considerable anxiety, especially Caroline after her narrow escape in the marketplace.

“Oh, my gosh!” exclaimed Jason in dismay.

“What is it?” Caroline asked, fearing the worst.

Her brother held up the spear he still grasped in one hand. “I didn’t pay for this!”

At that the two had to laugh. But Jason sobered quickly. “I hope this doesn’t mean the Guardians will be after me for theft.”

“They would have to know who we were to find us, and I don’t think that merchant you ‘borrowed’ that from knew us.”

They had been keeping an eye on the goings-on around them as they talked. A woman in an apartment across the street leaned out the window and yelled down at them.

“Hey! What are you kids doing there? You don’t live there.”

Caroline, thinking fast, yelled back, “We’re just trying to cool off from the hot sun. Besides, what do you care?” She

was beginning to feel more than a little ticked off at the nosiness of these Atlanteans and was determined to give as good as she got. "May the gods bless your house, anyway," but she added under her breath, "although you probably don't deserve it."

Jason had to smile at that. Then he grabbed her arm and pointed, "Look, there's Morelta now. Let's get out of here before any more trouble comes our way."

The housekeeper pulled over just long enough for the twins to board, then whipped the horse into a fast trot to put as much distance as possible between them and the nosy neighborhood.

Back at the house, the three of them related their adventures to Borrellus and Savvus. "I sincerely hope you weren't followed," Borrellus stated, looking grave.

"I didn't see anyone following us," Morelta replied.

"That doesn't necessarily mean you weren't," her master said. "The Baals and their servants are devilishly clever at staying hidden when they want to. Well, I suppose there's nothing to be done for it now." He looked more closely at Caroline. "Are you sure you're recovered from that attempted abduction?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. But what did those men want with me, anyway?"

"It could have been any one of a number of things," he replied evasively, not wanting to go into detail, but adding "Unfortunately the capture and enslavement of young women and girls is all too common these days. I should have warned you to be more careful."

Morelta, who had left to see to her household duties, hurried back in to announce the arrival of Azamanth.

Borrellus looked significantly at Savvus and the twins. "Now maybe we'll find out the truth."

All four of them walked briskly out back to greet the great creature. Azamanth appeared agitated, with his eyes whirling and his body shifting constantly from side to side. As the humans entered the courtyard, he lowered his huge head to look directly into Borrellus's eyes. The man stood stock still as the two communed silently. Gradually the blood drained from the man's face and he seemed to age right before their eyes. Finally he broke off and looked sorrowfully at the others.

"I'm afraid our worst fears have been realized," he commented. Before he could continue, however, the skies suddenly darkened from the presence of more dragon wings directly overhead.

"The Baals!" Savvus shrieked.

Chapter VIII – Discovered

With a powerful down stroke of his mighty wings, Azamanth leaped into the air to confront the newcomers. There were only two, but the confusion of beating wings made it seem as though the sky were alive with dragons. As soon as the white dragon was airborne, the two Baals, one brown and one black, attacked him. There followed a dizzying aerial combat in which it was difficult indeed to predict who would win. Although Azamanth was outnumbered, his opponents were smaller, and it soon became apparent that Azamanth was the better flier as well.

The four humans huddled on the ground in dismay as the battle raged above them. One of the Baals, the black one, raked the sides of the white dragon, raining blood down on whatever and whoever was beneath him, while his companion tried to grip Azamanth's neck in his teeth. However, the great dragon, in an astounding display of acrobatics, outmaneuvered that one and dove on him from above, his teeth closing savagely on the brown's neck and literally snapping it in two.

While this was going on, Jason, his heart in his throat, straightened up and, hefting his spear, took aim at the other

Baal. Putting all his strength into the cast, he sent it straight to its mark in the side of the remaining Baal. Despite its injury, it broke off the engagement and rapidly flew off toward the top of the mountain.

Once more Azamanth landed in Borrellus's courtyard, staining the ground red with his blood. Slowly his eyes ceased their whirling and he lowered his massive head toward the humans. Borrellus stood before him silently, "listening" to what the dragon had to say. Finally the man turned to Savvus and the twins.

"Azamanth says that the wound in his side is not as bad as it looks. The dragons are tough and heal rapidly. The greater wound is mental. He says that never before in his memory has dragon attacked dragon. They may not have approved of each others' behaviors, but they have never fought among themselves. He feels that the Baals have gone too far in more ways than one and must be stopped." He paused his narration for a minute and looked again at the dragon.

"Jason, he thanks you for your assistance but he feels we'll be temporarily safer in the country, and that we humans should go there. Savvus has a house in a private location." Borrellus looked inquiringly at the tutor.

“Yes, of course, we must go there at once,” Savvus replied. “But will we be safe traveling there? Won’t the Baals be looking out for us now?”

Borrellus communed again with Azamanth. “He feels the safest thing for the four of us to do is to ride on his back. He can out fly any of the other dragons and can get us there quickly. In the meantime, I’ll send my servants away to a trader I know where they should be safe. After Azamanth drops us off, he’ll return to the lair where he lives with the other Lektras who are friendly to humans and tell them what’s happened. Then he’ll get a message to us as to the outcome of their meeting.”

“So we have to lay low until we hear from him?” Jason asked. “What if we don’t hear? How long should we wait?”

“The boy has a good point,” said Savvus. “If something should happen to Azamanth, we won’t know about it. And how will we know if an approaching dragon is friendly to us or not?”

“The Baals are all dark colored, so if we see a light-colored dragon approaching, we can be confident that it’s one of the Lektras. I know that’s not much of a plan but it’s the best we can come up with on such short notice. We don’t

have time right now to go into more detail. Besides, much depends on what the other friendly dragons want to do, or can do.” He gestured to the dragon. “Go ahead and get on his back. I’ll join you as soon as I’ve given Morelta instructions.” He ran into his house, while Savvus and the twins managed to climb up on Azamanth’s leg and then onto his back, settling themselves between the ridges that stuck out all the way from his head to the tip of his tail.

After Borrellus had rejoined them and cautioned them to hold tight onto the ridges, Azamanth leaped once more into the sky, his powerful acceleration pushing his passengers against the ridges behind them. Had it not been each human’s deathlike grip and the support in their backs, they all would have fallen off. After gaining altitude, the great dragon circled cautiously to make sure they were not being pursued, then struck off toward Savvus’s country home.

From the height at which Azamanth flew, no one on the ground could tell he had passengers. He flew swiftly and soon left the city behind. Jason and Caroline were treated to a view of the surrounding countryside which was dotted here and there with homes and farms that became fewer and farther between as they continued their flight. Because of the

distance, Savvus did not spend much time at his country home and usually only lived there on weekends, staying in an apartment in the city during the week.

Suddenly Azamanth angled sharply down toward a large house nestled in amongst large trees and boulders at the base of a rocky cliff. Caroline was reminded of the landing approach of the plane that had brought them to the Azores in the first place and for a brief moment, she thought that perhaps Azamanth's strength had failed him. But the white dragon landed them safely, then immediately took off.

Fearfully, Savvus's servants crept out of the house to see what was going on. The elderly man reassured them, but stationed one servant outside to maintain a watch for any other dragons coming their way. The tutor ushered his guests inside and made them comfortable in his living room. He left briefly to instruct his other servants, then returned with a tray containing a jug of wine for Borrellus and himself and a milder beverage for the teens. His hands shook as he poured the wine.

Borrellus said, "Take it easy, old friend. The Baals haven't captured us yet."

Savvus took a large gulp of his wine before replying. "It's just a matter of time, though, isn't it?"

"I feel we're to blame for all this," Jason put in. "We seem to have brought you bad luck."

"No, lad," replied Borrellus gently. "This would have happened sooner or later anyway. The important thing now is to plan for the immediate future. Obviously, we need to hear from Azamanth before we can firm up any plans." Seeing the look on Savvus's face, Borrellus held up his hand. "Yes, I know: what if we don't hear from Azamanth in a reasonable amount of time?"

"I guess we first need to decide what's a 'reasonable amount of time'," added Jason, taking an active part in the discussion.

Caroline had been thinking while the others talked. "Azamanth said something about a meeting with the others. How long would that take?"

The two adults looked at each other. "That's a good starting place," replied Borrellus. "What do you think, Savvus?"

The elderly man put down his goblet. "The dragons do not make hasty decisions. At least in the dealings I've had with them over the years, they like to view a problem very thoroughly and from all angles first."

"But will the Baals let them?" Jason asked.

"And won't the Baals be looking for us?" added his sister.

Borrellus nodded his head. "Yes, they probably will be looking for us, but I don't believe the Baal that got away from Azamanth today saw Savvus. They'll most likely concentrate their search on my neighborhood and expand from there. The biggest danger will be from my servants, if they should be intercepted before they can reach safety. Some of them at least knew of your visit." He nodded at the tutor. "It would not take them long to find out about this house and come calling. So we should plan for the worst."

"I actually had that in mind last year when I bought this place," replied Savvus. "Matters with the dragons seemed to be taking a downward spiral even then, so I looked for a place that would provide a greater measure of security. The caves in the cliff back there," he gestured toward the back of the house, "lead into an extensive cavern system. Come with me and I'll show you."

So saying he led the way through his home and out a back door, which was separated from the cliff wall by only a few yards. He walked straight to the cliff and parted some bushes growing at the base. Then he disappeared. Jason and

Caroline felt a sense of déjà vu as they recalled how they got to Atlantis in the first place. But they and Borrellus followed and found themselves in a small cave barely big enough for them to stand up straight. Because of the screen of vegetation, very little light entered the mouth of the cave. They heard Savvus's voice coming from a few feet farther in.

"Let me see now. Ah, here it is." Suddenly there was light. The twins could see it streaming from a sphere similar to the ones that were in the palace. Savvus was holding it up in both hands.

"How on earth did you get one of those?" Borrellus asked in astonishment.

Savvus chuckled. "Let's just say I did a huge favor for one of the palace guards who repaid me by stealing this."

Jason walked over and touched the surface of the globe. It felt cool to the touch.

"Does it put out this light all the time?"

"So far it has. I've only had it for a few months. I keep it, along with a few emergency supplies, out here just in case."

Jason and the others finally noticed the boxes and packages piled in orderly stacks at the back of the cave.

"This stash of supplies also serves another purpose," continued the old man. He squeezed behind them with his light and disappeared again. "Come on back," his voice

echoed hollowly, as though from a deep well. Jason reached the back first and saw a narrow space behind the boxes. Following the tutor's path, he discovered a tunnel leading back from the cave. Soon all four were standing in the narrow passage. Savvus shined his light on the walls.

"Look at the marks on the walls," Savvus told them. "Either this tunnel is not natural or has been improved on. I've explored it for quite a distance. It passes through various sized caverns but goes quite straight. Straight toward the volcano."

"Who could have made this passage, and why?" inquired Caroline.

"I did some research at the library, and found out that my house was built on the ruins of a very old temple, although I don't know what god was worshipped there. I've also found some intriguing artifacts in this tunnel and the first cavern. Mostly small statues, pots, and stone tablets with writing on them that I have not yet been able to interpret."

Borrellus added, "I've heard this continent has been inhabited a very long time, and that our ancestors were very primitive and lived in small tribes."

"That is my conclusion also," affirmed the older man. "The evidence is right here, what I haven't brought in to study

more closely. I think that they may have worshipped Hephaestus and Hades.”

“Hades is the Greek name for the god of the underworld,” mentioned Jason.

“You don’t worship the same gods where you come from?” asked Savvus.

“No, we believe in just one god, who created everything.”

“Hm, sounds boring. But yes, Hades rules the underworld and Hephaestus is the god of fire.”

“Then it seems logical that this tunnel goes all the way to the heart of the volcano,” Jason suggested.

“It’s very possible,” Savvus answered. “I haven’t had the chance to explore that far yet. I’m not as young as I used to be,” he added ruefully.

Borrellus spoke up. “I think for now we should put together some traveling supplies that we can quickly and easily carry if we need to evacuate on short notice, supplies we can leave here in the tunnel.”

The others agreed and went back to the outer cave to sort out the supplies stored there.

“Do you have any backpacks?” Jason asked Savvus.

“You mean like the soldiers wear on their field trips?” Borrellus asked.

"I don't know what your soldiers use, but backpacks are just carry sacks with straps that your arms go through. It's easier to carry stuff that way."

"No," said Savvus. "I don't have anything like that, but maybe we can make some. I have lots of raw materials in the house." Having said that, he led the way back to the house and to a storeroom where he did, indeed, have quite a lot of odds and ends. Jason was reminded of a packrat, as he delved into the more promising heaps of materials, putting aside those items that would be needed for their rucksacks.

In the meantime, Savvus had summoned the servants, except for the one he had left on guard outside. After Jason, with Caroline's help, explained how to make a backpack with the things they had salvaged,

Savvus sent the servants off with orders to make enough for all of them, except for one kitchen servant who would help once he had prepared the evening meal.

Jason looked out a window at the sun, which was getting close to setting. "We never did decide how long to wait for Azamanth," he reminded the others.

"That's right," replied Borrellus. Gesturing toward Savvus, he continued, "You were telling us about their meetings and how long they took."

Savvus had settled into what was obviously his favorite chair with a sigh. He appeared calmer now, whether from the wine or from the actions they had initiated, Jason didn't know. Jason did know that he himself much preferred to be doing something than to just sit around and wait for events to happen. Waiting always made him nervous.

"Right. I believe you, Jason, asked if the Baals will let Azamanth and his kind hold their meeting," answered Savvus. "The dragons have never before shown even the slightest hint of dissension in their ranks. The fact that Azamanth and his brothers have been friendly toward humans did not really count as opposition to the Baals. Until now. With that attack on him today, all bets are off. I think we should give them another day to contact us. If we don't hear from them by sunset tomorrow, I'd say we're on our own."

"I'm not sure I would care to wait that long," said Borrellus. "If the Guardians were to come this way, the caves would not prove to be a good hiding place, at least not for long. The dragons would not fit in the cave, but the Guardians would."

While the adults talked, Jason was looking thoughtful. "Savvus, you said that it's possible the tunnel from the cave might go as far as the volcano. About how far do you think that would be if it stays straight?"

Now it was Savvus's turn to look thoughtful. "If it continued in a straight line, I would guess the distance would be around ten miles, more or less. I do know that the volcanic cone is completely honeycombed with caverns and tunnels all the way around it. Many of those had been made for the purpose of mining the dragon's eye stones that are so valuable."

"That was going to be my next question," Jason stated. "If the volcano has tunnels all around it, then maybe this one connects with them. It must go somewhere. Whoever made this tunnel went to a lot of trouble." He paused for a moment, then asked the adults, "Do the dragons have their lairs in those tunnels?"

Borrellus answered, "They do, but no one knows exactly where. Some aspects of dragon life have been kept secret from us humans."

"I wonder why?" asked Caroline, breaking her silence. "Could it be that if we knew more about their lives, we would know their weaknesses and be able to defeat them? After all, all living things have weaknesses."

"You're quite right, my dear," said Savvus. "But the dragons have carefully guarded all knowledge of their weaknesses from us."

“But surely this attack on Azamanth by the Baals will change things, won’t it?” asked Jason.

“Perhaps, perhaps not, at least maybe not as much as we’d like. The dragons are usually slow to change, slower than we are.” At this Savvus paused for a moment before continuing. “Although the Baals seem to have been making some rather rapid changes lately, and none for the good, not our good anyway.”

Borrellus broke in. “It’s rather pointless, don’t you think, to try to figure this out on what little we know? In any event, waiting another full day makes me very nervous. I would prefer to wait only until noon tomorrow, then if we haven’t heard anything, we should decide what to do next.”

Jason and Caroline looked at each other, then at the two men. “I agree with Borrellus. I’d rather not wait too long either.” Caroline added her agreement to her brother’s proposal.

“Perhaps you’re right,” admitted the tutor. “All right, I’ll make it unanimous and say we wait until noon.”

Caroline expressed a concern that had been on her mind. “But couldn’t they sneak up on us during the night. We’ve already had that experience when the Guardians captured us at Donneltus’s house.”

Borrellus waved his hand in dismissal. "The dragons either can't or won't fly at night. I don't think their night vision is very good."

"And I wouldn't worry too much about being caught by surprise by the Guardians again," Savvus added. "We have a good view in all directions and my servant can give us a warning long before they get here. Even if they come at night, they have to use lights to guide them, and we would see them coming."

The elderly man led the way to his dining room where his kitchen servant was putting the evening meal out. "For now, though, let's eat and then relax as best we can. I have a feeling it will be a long night."

Later a servant showed Jason and Caroline to their room. Once they were alone, Caroline voiced her fears to her brother.

"I'm really sorry I got you into this, Jason. If only I hadn't followed that cat! Now we're probably going to die, maybe in the belly of one of those horrible Baals."

Jason tried to calm her. "Now don't start. No matter what happens, I'm glad we came here."

"You are? Why?"

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He looked out a window at the strange constellations before answering. "I think it was preordained that we come here and help these people. And just think of it! We 'found' the lost continent of Atlantis! It really exists! And we're part of history now." His excitement was infectious.

"You're right. We have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a real difference. I'll bet Mom would be proud if she could see us now."

"She *can* see us. And we *will* make a difference. I promise you, whatever happens, we'll make it through. I don't believe we were brought back here just to die."

Then he pointed out the window. "Look, a shooting star! Dad used to tell us that seeing one was good luck."

As the two looked out the window, they saw more and more shooting stars streaking across the night sky.

"If you can believe Dad's stories, it looks like we're going to have a whole lot of good luck. And it's about time," said Caroline with a twinkle in her eye, as she prepared for sleep.

After a restless night, the two were awakened by one of Savvus's servants, who brought them to the tutor's study where he and Borrellus were already engaged in an informal breakfast.

"I thought it best to let you two sleep in a bit. This may be a difficult day for all of us," the elderly man said after greeting them. He gestured to a pile in one corner of the room. "Do those look like the backpacks you were wanting?"

The twins sat next to the pile and examined each of the packs. "Yes, these look good," answered Jason. "Your people did a good job of sewing them together," he added as he checked the strength of the seams.

"Then as soon as we're finished eating, we'll pack them up and leave them in the cave, just in case."

A few minutes later they suited action to words. Back in the cave all four sorted through the various supplies stashed there to make up enough packs for everyone. They had decided to include the servants in their plans, rather than just leave them to fend for themselves. Out here in the country they would have nowhere to go and would quickly fall prey to the Baals.

Jason was glad to have something to do. As he packed, he thought about what they might need if they should have to use the tunnel as an escape route.

"What about water?" he inquired of Savvus. "I didn't think about water bottles."

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“We probably don’t need to worry about that,” the man replied. “This is a wet cave system. I saw plenty of little springs as far in as I got. But I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to have some containers for water, just in case it gets drier closer to the volcanic core.” He beckoned to one of the servants who was helping them pack. “Go inside and get some bottles for carrying water. Fill them up and make sure they all have tight-fitting stoppers.”

They continued to labor in silence for several more minutes, when the servant returned at a run, spilling the bottles he carried onto the pile of goods that they hadn’t needed.

“There’s a dragon coming!” he cried out breathlessly. They all rushed out of the cave and through the house to the front where the servant on watch pointed in the direction of the city.

Jason, who probably had the sharpest eyes of anyone there, proclaimed, “I see him, over there. He’s one of the light-colored ones. But he’s flying funny, like there’s something wrong with him.”

“You’re right. I see him, too,” affirmed Borrellus. “He acts like he might be hurt.” As they all watched anxiously, the

dragon slowly closed the gap between them. He was obviously headed for Savvus's house, despite his erratic flight path.

The creature finally reached them. He landed heavily on the yard in front of the house, and they could all see the horrific wounds that covered his body, even his neck and head, where one eye appeared to have been gouged out. Suddenly he threw back his head and emitted an ear-splitting shriek that seemed to go on until the humans thought they would go mad, despite covering their ears. However, the injured dragon stopped quite suddenly, and gradually lowered his head until it rested on the ground.

Chapter IX – Into the Underworld

Caroline was the first to recover. “You poor thing!” she cried as she ran over to him.

“Caroline, wait!” yelled Borrellus, but she paid no attention. She stopped next to the wounded creature’s head and gently put her hands on it. Slowly his uninjured eye opened and looked at her with what appeared to be gratitude, although it was difficult to read draconic emotions. Savvus, Borrellus and Jason joined her. The dragon lifted his head a little as he stared intently at the older men. At one point, Savvus moaned and put his face in his hands. Finally Borrellus, looking graver than they had ever seen him, broke the silence to relate to the twins what the Lektra had told him.

“He says his name is Tramanth. First of all, he thanks you, Caroline, for your act of compassion. He says that dragons don’t have that trait, and he didn’t understand it until now. He also says he’s dying, but he would have been dead long before this had he arrived at Azamanth’s meeting on time. That screeching he did was his way of mourning his brothers. They’re all dead, including Azamanth. When they had gathered for their meeting, the Baals used their dark magic to explode their cavern, killing all inside. Only

Tramant escaped, but the Baals caught him. He said he killed two of them before he was able to break free and get away, but not before they hurt him beyond his ability to heal."

Savvus, in the meantime, had sat down on the front step of his house, his head still in his hands. "We're finished. Without the Lektras we don't stand a chance against the Baals."

Borrellus walked over and put a hand on the old man's shoulder. "Don't despair yet, my friend. Tramant has more to tell us." He turned back to the dragon and continued his mental conversation. At last, he turned around and addressed the others, while the dragon once more closed his eye and let his head droop to the ground, his blood flowing freely into the soil.

Savvus lifted his head to exclaim, "The quicksilver is the key!"

"So it would seem." Borrellus explained to the twins, "The quicksilver that is processed from the ore is kept in large tubes inside the dragons' nesting site within the mountain. That is what their magic has needed to keep the volcano quiet on the surface, yet still active underground. The dragons need that heat to reproduce. If we could get in there and destroy the tubes of quicksilver, the volcano would erupt and destroy their lair as well as their nursery."

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“But a volcanic eruption would destroy Atlantis as well, wouldn’t it?” asked Jason.

“Maybe not,” replied Savvus who looked more hopeful than he had a few minutes ago. “That part of the city immediately around the mountain would be most vulnerable, but the rest of Atlantis could survive.”

“Do we really have a choice?” replied Jason. “This sounds like the only way to destroy the Baals if we can catch them all in their lair.”

“We don’t even need to catch them all, or even most. All of their females and eggs are in the lair. If we destroy that, the rest of the Baals would eventually die out and we would be totally free of them.” Borrellus added in a decisive voice, “We have to try, regardless of the consequences.”

“I don’t see how we can get past the Baals, though,” stated Savvus worriedly.

Jason answered him with a triumphant flourish of his watch. “We have this! We all saw how it affected Azamanth. It will be our ticket into their lair.”

“I’d almost forgotten about that,” mentioned Borrellus. “The boy’s right. With that we should be able to reach deep inside the mountain. Once there we can see exactly what we need to do to destroy their evil magic.”

“It will probably destroy us, too,” added Caroline.

“Not if we’re fast enough. I got the impression from Tramanth’s mind that the volcano would need a little time to build up enough pressure to erupt. He. . .” indicating the dying dragon, “feels that this tunnel goes all the way to their lair, which is on this side of the mountain. We can get there through this route and escape the same way.”

A great sigh from Tramanth startled the humans who turned to see his sides heave one last time. Then the brave creature, having discharged his final duty to Azamanth and his brothers, died.

“Poor Tramanth. He risked everything to get to us with this information.” Caroline gulped to keep the tears back.

“That’s right,” replied Borrellus. “He might have escaped the Baals had he not come to warn us. Speaking of warning, the last thing he ‘told’ me was that he saw a squad of Guardians heading this way. The Baals still don’t know about our connection with Savvus, else the Baals would have been here by now. But they’re sending the Guardians out in all directions. It won’t be too many hours before they arrive.”

“Then we’d better get busy and get out of here,” said Jason.

Savvus had stood up while they talked. "I would only slow you down. Besides, I don't think I could make that journey at my age. Just going the short distance I did wore me out."

Borrellus looked gravely at his friend. "We can't just leave you behind. You know how they get information from their prisoners."

Savvus's face went pale from that reminder. "I'm not afraid to die."

"But how long do you think you could hold out under torture? Dying is one thing, but pain is something else altogether."

Jason put in a suggestion. "How about coming part way with us. Maybe you could hide down a side tunnel until you think the coast is clear. The Guardians may not discover this cave and tunnel, especially if we're careful not to leave any tracks." Then he added excitedly, "I know what! We could lay a false trail to one of the other caves to throw them off, maybe even dump some supplies inside."

"That's a great idea, Jason! What do you think, Savvus?"

"It's worth a try. And if the Guardians do discover our escape route, I'll just take a bottle of insurance with me."

“Right, then. Call your servants and let’s lay that false trial. We don’t have a lot of time.”

When Savvus and his servants had gone to take care of that chore, Borrellus and the twins made one last sweep through the house to make sure they hadn’t missed anything important.

“What did he mean by ‘insurance’?” Caroline asked.

Borrellus looked sad. “Poison,” he simply said.

“Oh, no!” she cried.

“It’s a better way to die than through torture. And I’ve heard the Guardians are experts at extracting information that way.”

Seeing nothing of further interest in the house, Borrellus and the twins went out back and did their best to erase any evidence of a trail to their cave. When they had finished, Borrellus picked up a long-handled axe leaning up against the back wall of the house.

“This could come in handy, in more ways than one,” he explained, as Savvus and his servants returned, carrying torches. All of them walked toward one of the other caves with Savvus leading the way, then they returned, being careful to walk only on rocks which would show no sign of

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their passing. After entering the cave, the elderly man and his servants meticulously replaced the branches screening the entrance. Finally satisfied that the cave entrance was as well hidden as he could make it, he led the way into the tunnel, also stacking up the unused materials behind them to hide that entrance as well. With the light globe in his hands, he marched on into the gloom.

As they set a brisk pace, Jason marveled at how smooth the tunnel floor was, not at all like other caves and caverns he and his sister had been in. He wondered why anyone would go to so much trouble to make this tunnel so easy for travel. He only hoped it did lead all the way to the tunnels surrounding the volcanic core.

They had traveled for perhaps a mile by Jason's reckoning when they came to an intersection. By now Savvus and one of his older servants were showing signs of tiring.

The elderly tutor stopped and pointed down the left-hand tunnel. "Down there is a large cavern with water and excellent hiding places. I'll just take Tantalus and Cornelius with me for company." He indicated the two oldest servants, leaving his last two and more physically fit servants with the twins and Borrellus. "Take Demetrius and Gladdius with you. They'll be handy in a fight, if it comes to that. Demetrius,

Gladdius, I want you to obey Borrellus as you would me. If all goes well, you'll be back home in no time."

The two servants nodded, but didn't look as though they fully believed him. Savvus passed his light globe to Demetrius and turned to clasp arms with his friend.

"Are you sure you want to wait there? We could rest a bit and then push on," Borrellus suggested, but Savvus just shook his head.

"No, my friend. We both know this is for the best. You need to move as swiftly as possible. We'll just hide in this cavern for a while. If we see no signs of the Guardians, we'll go on back and await word from you. Go now, and don't look back"

Borrellus suddenly engulfed the old man in a bear hug, then released him so quickly that Savvus almost fell. He took the globe from Demetrius and, gathering his reduced party, led the way forward.

The next several miles passed more swiftly. The tunnel had been gradually getting higher and wider, until the little party came to an obstruction. A wide crevasse blocked their path.

Peering across to the other side, Borrellus informed them, "It looks like it's about fifteen feet across. Definitely too

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wide to jump." Then he shone his light down. "And I don't see any bottom to it, either."

Jason, who had been exploring to one side, exclaimed, "Here it looks like a path along this wall. It appears to go all the way past the chasm. It's narrow but I think we can make it all right."

The older man joined him and examined the find. "I believe you're right. I'll go first, then Demetrius with the light. You and Caroline can follow right behind me with Gladdius bringing up the rear. We should have enough illumination for all of us to see our way." Having said that, he passed the globe to the other man and carefully made his way across the path, testing each step before putting his weight on it. The others followed slowly behind, walking sideways with their backs to the wall. About half-way across, Gladdius froze as pebbles that his feet had dislodged fell silently into the pit. It took a considerable amount of encouragement from Borrellus and Demetrius to persuade him to continue, but he finally made it to where the rest of the party waited, safely on firm ground again. Jason knelt down to look more closely at the edge of the pit.

"You know, this edge is too straight and smooth to be natural, just like the rest of the tunnel. And that path where we crossed seemed a little too level to be natural, too."

"Yes, I noticed that," replied Borrellus. "It's almost as though this pit is here for a purpose."

"What do you think it could be?" asked Caroline.

"I don't know and there's no real point in guessing. However, I see a little pool of water over there. That's as good a place as any to rest and replenish ourselves. We must not push so hard that we'll be too weak and tired to accomplish our objective once we do get there."

The twins did not really feel a need to rest, since they were both athletic and, of course, younger than the others, but complied without complaint. As they sat and munched on their rations, Caroline said, "Well, Jason, you wanted to do some spelunking while we were on vacation. Now we're doing it."

Jason laughed. "Yes, we are. It's not quite what I expected, though."

"No, it isn't," his sister agreed. "It's certainly not a fun trip, not with the fate of so many people depending on what we do next."

Caroline's words made Jason feel older than his fifteen years. "I just hope I have the intelligence to figure out what to do if, no when, we get there, and the nerve to do it."

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“You will, Jason,” stated Borrellus. “Your parents did a good job of raising you. If you two were my children, I would be very proud of you right now, no matter what happens next. The future must be a wonderful place if it’s populated by people as selfless as you.”

This time Caroline laughed humorlessly. “No, our world has its share of bad people and serious problems, but I really believe it’ll slowly improve, and that people will slowly become more compassionate and helpful toward each other.”

“Yeah, that’s what our parents taught us,” added Jason. “It doesn’t much look like it’s improving, not with the terrorism and violence and corruption. But we have to believe that there’s a better world ahead. And if Caroline and I manage to get back there, we’ll help to make it better.”

The man placed his hand on Jason’s shoulder. “Yes, you will,” he said softly. “And you will get back. Somehow I feel it deep down inside.”

They finished their snack silently. Borrellus picked up the globe again and once more led the way. The tunnel continued to run straight, with occasional side tunnels branching off that they paid no heed to, although a foul odor came from one that was somewhat larger than the others they had passed.

As they walked, Jason asked their leader, "If this tunnel does go all the way to the Baals' lair, won't they have some kind of guard over it?"

"That would seem reasonable, but I have no idea what form that would take. It could be a guardian dragon or some form of magic or something else entirely. I suppose we'll find out, so we must be extra careful and as quiet as possible from here on."

However, at one point, maybe six miles in, Gladdius, bringing up the rear suddenly said, "Stop, quiet, I think I hear something."

The rest of them stopped and held still, straining to listen for any sound. Nothing. Borrellus, however, said softly, "We can't be much further from the dragons' lair. I suggest we speed up a bit. Gladdius, since you seem to have sharp hearing, why don't you fall back just a little in case there is something behind us. The rest of us will proceed as quietly as possible. As a matter of fact, Jason, you have better hearing than I do. Why don't you take the lead? You may hear sounds from ahead of us. We don't want to walk suddenly into the midst of the Baals or a squad of Guardians."

Jason took the globe from the man and pulled ahead of their little party. "Not too far ahead, now," warned Borrellus.

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Caroline had been looking back the way they had come, shielding her eyes from the light. "Jason, cover up the globe for a minute. I think the walls may be glowing like they were where we first came in to the mining tunnels."

Her brother did as she asked. After their eyes adjusted, they realized they could see. There were fluorescent plants growing on the walls.

"That's excellent!" exclaimed Borrellus. "I was afraid the bright light from that globe would give us away as we came into the Baals' territory. Let's try moving without the globe light."

They moved on for a few more minutes when Gladdius again called out to them. "Stop! Listen!" Again they stopped. This time they all heard it. Someone or something was moving behind them.

Chapter X – The Sentinel

Jason spoke first. “It doesn’t sound like footsteps. It sounds more like slithering.”

His sister shuddered. “You mean like a giant snake?”

“Something like that. Whatever it is, it’s coming closer awfully fast.”

They strained their eyes to see what it was in the dim light. Demetrius, who was the closest to the approaching sound, suddenly cried out, “Look up toward the ceiling. What are those two lights?”

Borrellus warned them, “I’m going to uncover the globe, so we can see exactly what it is.” He pulled off the cloth covering the light. As the tunnel became more brightly illuminated, the travelers caught sight of their pursuer. A huge creature straight out of their worst nightmares confronted them. Its lumpy, glistening body completely filled the tunnel behind them. The two lights Demetrius had seen were its huge, glowing eyes. Below them was a wide mouth filled with pointed teeth that looked like swords. As the creature realized it had been spotted, those teeth started gnashing, while thick, ropy strands of drool splattered down onto the floor.

Caroline screamed.

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"I believe that's the answer to your question about a guard, Jason," Borrellus said in a shaky voice. "But look! It's backed up a ways. I don't think it likes this light."

"That makes sense. It lives down here where there's not much light. That globe probably hurts its eyes. Caroline and I have encountered other cave-dwelling creatures that couldn't tolerate bright light."

Caroline, shaking violently, had pressed up against her brother. "I don't think we should just stand here. That thing might get used to it."

"You're right," answered Borrellus. "Let's keep moving as fast as we can while we have some advantage. I don't think we should run, though. If that thing's a predator, and it certainly looks like one, our running may trigger its instinct to give chase." He passed the globe to Demetrius. "Here. I charge you with protecting our rear." Then he pulled the axe out of his pack. "Let me know if that creature starts to gain on us. We may have to make a stand. At least we're not entirely defenseless."

The travelers moved forward at their fastest pace yet, while the obscene creature dogged their steps, although it kept a respectable distance from the light. They also noticed

that the tunnel was narrowing somewhat, but not enough to stop their pursuer. About a half mile further, Borrellus suddenly slowed down, causing Caroline to bump into him.

“What’s the matter?” she asked anxiously.

“I see something ahead. It looks like red light reflecting off the walls. But the tunnel seems to come to an end!”

A moment later, Demetrius called out, “The monster is speeding up. We’re trapped!”

“No, wait!” cried Jason. “I think the tunnel makes a sharp bend up ahead. I also think now’s a good time to run.”

Jason’s observation proved correct. The tunnel did make a ninety degree turn and became considerably narrower at the same time, too narrow for the creature which had now almost reached Demetrius. The servant threw the globe at the animal’s head, which slowed it for a moment, long enough for the others to duck around the corner. However, as Demetrius attempted to follow them, the creature reached down and grabbed him in its sharp teeth. They heard him scream horribly. Caroline covered her face and sobbed, while Gladdius started to go back.

“We have to help him,” he exclaimed.

Borrellus grabbed the man’s arm. “We can’t help him now. We must continue with our mission. If we’re successful,

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these tunnels will be filled with lava and the creature will be destroyed."

"But we won't be able to come back this way ourselves, like we planned," added Jason.

"We'll find another way," Borrellus replied confidently. He looked up ahead. "That red light is not coming from the plants on the wall but from more of those globe lights, red ones, on the walls. And have you noticed? It's definitely much warmer in here. We must be on the outskirts of dragon country."

The adrenaline rush the monster had given them was beginning to wear off, and they could all feel fatigue start to take hold. They slogged along for about another half mile when they came to a corridor entering from the right.

This time Jason, who had an excellent sense of direction, as well as more caving experience than the others, spoke up. "You know it feels like this tunnel has been curving somewhat since we made that turn back there, like it's circling around the volcanic core. If so, that corridor there should lead more directly into the heart of the volcano. Do you think that's where the Baals' lair is located?"

"That makes sense," said Borrellus. "We know they like it hot, especially for the nursery. Let's go down there and find out."

This tunnel was even more finished-looking than the one they had come down from Savvus's house and was broadening out as they proceeded. The heat increased noticeably. Once again Borrellus stopped and held his hand up for silence. He crept forward toward a large archway ahead, where he got down on his hands and knees to examine whatever was beyond. Finally he motioned the others forward and signaled them to get down as well. When they reached him, they looked out upon an incredible sight: a gigantic cavern which was being crisscrossed by flying dragons. The floor of the cavern far below held neat piles of dragon eggs. A river of molten lava flowed down the center of the cavern floor.

The older man motioned them all to hide behind some rocks when he noticed a Baal flying in their direction. Once it had passed, he poked his head out to continue his inspection of the cavern. Pulling Jason up beside him, he pointed to the far side. "Look at the wall over there. Don't those look like large tubes?"

"Yes, they do. That must be where they keep the quicksilver. The tubes seem to be clustered around a shimmery-looking place on the wall. What could that be?"

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The older man looked more intently at the indicated spot. "From the pictures I got from Tramanth's mind before he died, I think that might be a shaft opening directly into the active part of the volcano. The lava below us seems to be coming out of the bottom of it. And I believe that shimmering comes from the magic they use to keep the volcano in check."

"So if we destroy those tubes of quicksilver, their magic will fail and the volcano will blow up?"

"I'm pretty confident that that's the way it works. Getting over there without being seen is going to be challenging to say the least." Borrellus grinned at Jason. "But then I always wanted to go out with a bang!"

Jason grinned back. Borrellus reminded him more and more of his dad. Caroline interrupted their momentary rapport. "What's so funny?" she demanded turning her tear-streaked face to them.

Her brother knelt back down and put his arm around her. "Nothing, really. Just 'gallows humor' I guess you could say."

"Well, have the two of you figured out what to do next?"

Jason crept out on his belly to get a better view of each side of the archway, keeping a wary eye on the circling dragons. "Careful, lad," Borrellus cautioned.

He ducked back behind the rocks after a minute. "I saw a break in the cavern wall just to our left. It looks like it might go all the way to the floor. And there's a ledge leading to it. I think there's enough rocks and stuff on the ledge to give us the cover we need to get to the crack without being seen. We may be able to climb down it. Caroline and I have had some experience in rock climbing"

Gladdius joined the discussion. "But how will we get across the floor to the other side? The Baals flying above will see and capture us. We don't stand a chance!"

"Yes, we do," Jason replied firmly. "I have a secret weapon." He showed the servant his watch. The servant fell back fearfully. "Don't worry. It only seems to work against the dragons. If we move fast and use this to fend off any attack, we should make it in one piece to those tubes. But they're kind of high above the cavern floor. I don't know if I can climb to them and keep the dragons off us at the same time."

Although Gladdius didn't seem too reassured by Jason's remarks, he seemed willing to accept the boy's claims. "I'm a good climber," he interjected. "Me and Demetrius. . ." he gulped when he mentioned his friend's name. That man's

death was still like an open wound to him. "Me and Demetrius used to climb the cliffs behind our master's house a lot, looking for eggs. If you can keep those dragons away, I bet I can get to those tubes. If they're glass, I can smash them with a rock."

Borrellus hefted his axe and added, "And I can do some serious damage with this as well."

"Then what?" asked Caroline. "Even if you do smash those tubes, where do we go from there?"

Jason and Borrellus looked at each other. "Good question," Jason said. "I don't know."

"I've been thinking," answered the older man seriously. "Jason, you said you and your sister came into this world near the dragon's eye mines. That tunnel behind Savvus's house ran in a straight line to the core. If I've calculated correctly, the mines should not be too far in that direction." He pointed off to their left. "Just now when I looked out across the cavern, I thought I saw some darker spots in the wall near the floor on that side that might be the entrances to more tunnels. They might connect with the mine tunnels."

"And what if they don't? We could end up wandering around until we die, or get captured." Caroline cried despondently.

Jason put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "We'll get through this somehow, sis. I know it. Whatever force brought us here will not abandon us now."

"You really believe that?" she asked.

"I really believe that," he replied firmly. "We'll have to trust in that, and in each other."

"Well said, lad. However, let's take this one step at a time. The first thing we need to do is get to that crack you saw without being observed. We don't want them to know we're here until we have absolutely no choice. Since you spotted that crack, Jason, why don't you lead the way? You said there were plenty of rocks to provide us with cover?"

"Yeah. If we space ourselves out and creep from rock to rock when the Baals aren't looking this way, we should make it to the crack. But let me go first. I need to see if it really does go all the way down. If it doesn't, there's no point in all of us risking ourselves."

"Good idea. I'll try to keep track of your progress. Give me a thumb's-up sign if it looks good, and the rest of us will make our way over to you. If not, I guess there's nothing else to do but for you to come back here and we'll try to figure out another way."

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Jason waited until there were no circling dragons near their hiding place, then he quickly crept out onto the ledge and over to a large boulder that provided some cover. He carefully peeped out from behind it and timed his next advance carefully. Safely reaching the break in the wall, he lowered himself down below the level of the ledge and checked to make sure no draconic eyes had seen him. Satisfied, he looked down the crack, seeing that it *was* a chimney. The boy climbed down part way and saw light coming in from the bottom. *Looking good*, he thought to himself. There were plenty of rocks and ledges jutting out from the sides to make climbing fairly easy. Swiftly, he climbed back up and gave Borrellus the signal.

The older man sent Gladdius next, then Caroline. He came last when he saw the others made it safely. Dashing over to the first boulder, Borrellus noticed an increase in the activity of the circling Baals. They seemed agitated and more vigilant than they had been. Several of them started in his direction. He realized that he and Gladdius may have given themselves away with their thoughts. There were quite a few Baals who could sense the presence of human minds. It stood to reason that there would always be at least one in this most important place of theirs.

Suddenly the largest dragon veered directly toward Borrellus's hiding place, confirming his worst fear. But out of the corner of his eye he saw something streak through the air and strike the creature in its eye. It dropped to the cavern floor, emitting loud cries which distracted the other Baals just long enough for the man to make a mad dash to the relative safety of the chimney, where the others were waiting.

"What happened?" he asked.

Gladdius grinned broadly. "I used to knock pigeons out of the sky with rocks to go in our dinner pot. I guess I haven't lost my knack," he answered proudly.

Borrellus squeezed his shoulder thankfully. "Good job! But I'm afraid we've lost the element of surprise. We need to rely more on speed now instead of stealth."

Taking the hint, Jason and Caroline took the lead in their climb down, showing the older men where to put their hands and feet, although Gladdius seemed to need little in the way of help. When they reached the bottom, they found a narrow entrance, little more than a crack, about two feet above the cavern floor. Jason poked his head out carefully and surveyed the area.

"All the dragons are on this side now, but they seem confused. I guess now is as good a time as any to try our

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'secret weapon'." Without waiting for an answer, he jumped out of the chimney and aimed his watch at the dragons just above him. The results were just as dramatic as they had been with Azamanth, but magnified about tenfold. It was as though a giant baseball bat had knocked them all out of the air. They lay scattered across the cavern floor, dazed and incapacitated, at least momentarily. One had even fallen into the river of lava and screamed piteously before it died.

"Come on, let's go!" yelled Jason. The other three jumped out, although Borrellus left some skin behind trying to squeeze his greater bulk through the narrow crack. They ran straight across the mammoth space, keeping well away from the lava in the middle. Several more dragons attempted to attack the little party, but Jason's watch took care of them. They had to get closer to the lava flow as they reached the other side. Jason thought he would suffocate from the intense heat, but forced himself on, making sure the others were right behind him.

They all stopped at the wall from which the lava flowed down like a waterfall. Eyeing the great tubes of quicksilver ranged above, Gladius took careful aim with a fist-sized rock he had picked up and launched it at the nearest tube. It merely bounced off, without doing any damage at all.

"Oh, no! Now what do we do?" asked Caroline.

Before anyone could answer her, the sound of metal striking rock spun them around. Out of a nearby tunnel opening came running a company of Guardians with weapons raised and pointed directly at them. With the Guardians in front, and the lava flow at their backs, they had nowhere to run. They were trapped!

Chapter XI – Back From the Grave

Jason's watch did not work on the Guardians. He felt hopelessness well up inside him. They had come so far and braved so many perils only to fail so close to their goal. Borrellus swung his axe around and stepped in front of his comrades. He, at least, would not go meekly into captivity. As he tensed his muscles to attack, a mighty bugling split the air and echoed throughout the cavern, almost deafening all the humans. It was Azamanth!

The powerful white dragon dived like an avenging angel onto the Guardians, grasping them in his sharp talons and flinging them through the air like so many rag dolls. It was only a matter of seconds before he had completely decimated their ranks. Other Baals had come into the cavern only to be deflected by Jason and his watch, although he was careful not to aim it in the white dragon's direction. As the last of their enemy was dispatched, the little band stood silently and gazed upon the carnage around them. Nothing moved in the huge space, except for them and Azamanth, who settled in for a landing beside them.

Borrellus strode over to stand before him, while they silently exchanged information. The man turned back to the others. "Azamanth discovered quite by accident that he had

an unsuspected talent when the meeting place in which he and the other Lektras were gathered suddenly caved in around them. I don't really understand what he's trying to tell me except that he found himself in open air outside the mountain with no idea of how he got there."

"Teleportation!" cried Jason excitedly. He had used the English word as there was no Atlantean equivalent. "It makes sense. The dragons have other extrasensory powers, why not that one as well."

"Such powers exist in your world?"

"A lot of people have claimed to have them, but so far there's no solid scientific evidence for their existence. I wish I knew where the dragons came from originally."

"Azamanth has tried to tell me but I don't understand the pictures he shows me. It's too bad you can't communicate with him. You might make more sense of it." Borrellus turned his head to look again at the dragon. "He says there are many more Baals and Guardians coming. He doesn't believe we could hold them all off for long. He also said that you, Jason and Caroline, should go on alone, since your minds cannot be sensed by the Baals. That tunnel will take you back to the one you want, and you'll even have a guide once you

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get down it a ways.” He pointed to a narrow entranceway just beyond the tunnel that the Guardians had come from.

“Gladdius and I will stay here and buy you some time.

Azamanth claims that the Guardians’ weapons should be able to destroy the quicksilver containers and reverse the spell.”

He walked over to the nearest unmoving Guardian and picked up the weapon while Gladdius followed suit.

Borrellus handed Jason another weapon. “Use this one if you run into any trouble. Just point it at your enemy and push this button.” He aimed his at one of the quicksilver containers and pushed a button inset into its handle. The container exploded, instantly vaporizing the element within.

“Now go, quickly. Gladdius and I will finish up here.”

“But how will you get away?” asked the boy.

“Azamanth will carry us to safety. Don’t worry about us, just get going!”

Caroline ran up and hugged him fiercely. “Thank you, Borrellus.”

Jason offered the older man his hand, but Borrellus grabbed him in a bear hug instead. “Go back to your world. And remember this: you helped make it safe from the Baals. Now go!”

Jason hefted the strange weapon and followed Caroline toward the crack in the wall that would take them home, he hoped. As he squeezed through, he cast one last look behind him. The two men were busy exploding the remaining quicksilver tubes, while Azamanth took wing in anticipation of more fighting ahead.

At first the crack that the twins followed was barely wide enough for them, even walking sideways. But it gradually opened up and they were able to move faster. As they ran, they felt the ground begin to tremble.

"The Baals' magic must be wearing off," shouted Caroline. As they pounded around a corner, they came suddenly upon an intersection. Standing in the middle was a Guardian, who turned as he heard them running behind him. He started to bring his weapon to bear on the twins, but Jason's young reflexes were quicker, and the man was vaporized. Caroline momentarily looked as though she were going to be sick, but quickly controlled herself.

"Now which way," she asked. There were light globes in the intersecting tunnel. They had had only the phosphorescent plants on the walls to guide them up to that point.

Jason looked helplessly down each branch of the new corridor.

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“Meow!”

“Look, Jason, it’s that cat that led us here in the first place!” The animal had stepped out from behind a small rock in the corridor straight ahead. Once more, it acted as if it wanted them to follow.

“That’s the guide Azamanth told us about,” exclaimed Jason. At that moment they were almost knocked off their feet by a stronger tremor. “I don’t think we have much time. Let’s go!”

They raced down the tunnel, just barely keeping the strange cat in sight. It moved straight on, ignoring the few side tunnels they passed. The twins noticed an increase in the heat. Jason risked a glance behind him, and was horrified to see molten lava in the distance. *We’re not going to make it*, he thought despairingly.

More earthquakes shook the earth, making it difficult for them to maintain a fast pace. Suddenly the cat put on an extra burst of speed and disappeared around a corner. As the two followed, they found themselves in the large cavern where they had been brought by the guards before Rormorant, the dragon that had telepathically instilled the Atlantean language into their minds. Another dragon was there now. It rose up on its hind legs and stretched out its wings when it saw the two teens run in.

Jason threw aside the Guardian weapon and pulled out his watch, aiming it at the creature. Once more it performed its magic against the evil beast. The cat now raced across the cave toward an opening in the far wall, stopping briefly to make loud and frenzied noises at the humans.

"I guess that means hurry up," remarked Caroline. They had almost reached the far side when a particularly violent quake sent stalactites crashing down around them. One fell across their path, forcing them to detour around. The light around them suddenly brightened. Looking back, Jason saw lava flowing into the cave. It was definitely gaining on them. He was hoping, though, that spreading out across the large cavern floor would slow it down.

The two finally reached a side tunnel where the cat was impatiently waiting for them, meowing constantly. Upon seeing them once more, it swiftly sped on, with the twins close behind.

"We must be getting close to that portal that brought us here," yelled Jason as they ran. He had to yell to make himself heard above the almost constant rumbling the volcano was making.

"I think I recognize this tunnel," replied his sister. "We're almost there."

However, the cat skidded to a halt just ahead of them. A large and dirty man blocked their path. It was Fagmin, the guard who had first captured them. A loud groan escaped Jason as he realized he'd left the power weapon back in Rormorant's cavern. Fagmin's ugly face split into an evil smile when he saw the twins. He lunged forward and grabbed Caroline by her hair.

"Now I'll do what I wanted to in the first place," he crowed.

Caroline, though, as she had already proven, was no dainty little flower. She lashed out with her foot where it would do the most damage. As the brutal guard doubled over in pain, the cat leaped onto his head and ferociously clawed and bit the man. Jason took advantage of Fagmin's distraction to pick up a good-sized rock and bring it down with deadly force on the brute's head. He went down and stayed down.

"Are you all right?" Jason asked his sister anxiously.

Instead of replying, she pointed down the tunnel.

"Look! There's the time portal!"

"Well, what are we waiting for?" her brother replied with a shaky grin.

"What if it doesn't take us back to our time?" she asked.

Jason hadn't thought of that. Not that it mattered now. Jason could feel waves of heat given off by the lava flow. It was almost upon them!

"No time to worry about that now," he said. He seized her hand and they jumped through the portal together, the cat right behind them.

They found themselves in a cooler cave with a rectangle of daylight beckoning them ahead. A tangle of vegetation grew up in front of the entrance but didn't even slow them down as they rocketed out of the cave and into a lush, tropical jungle. A loud rumble filled the air as dust and debris flew out of the cave behind them, before it collapsed in on itself, forever blocking the way back.

"Thank God," Caroline exclaimed fervently. "We're back! Look, I recognize that bush with all those flowers on it." Her face became sad, though, as she thought back to the ones left behind. "Jason, do you think Borrellus and the others survived?"

Her brother looked back at the pile of rubble that had cascaded out of the cave behind them. "I hope so," he said fervently.

Just then, they heard a voice calling nearby. "Jason! Caroline! Where are you!?"

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“It’s Dad!” Caroline cried out happily as she recognized the voice. The bushes nearby parted, and, sure enough, there stood their father, looking anxiously around.

“There you are. What have I told you about wandering off on your own? You scared the daylights out of me.” Then he frowned as he looked at them more carefully. “What happened to your clothes?”

The twins looked down at themselves. In all the commotion, they had totally forgotten about their Atlantean togas and sandals. They looked at each other and laughed until tears streamed down their cheeks.

“What’s so funny?” Mr. Peterson demanded to know.

The cat took advantage of that interlude to jump into Caroline’s arms.

“Oh, no, not another cat,” their father said. But Jason knew that, one way or another, that cat was going home with them.

Latching onto his dad’s arm, Jason said, “Come on, Dad. This is going to take a while to explain.”