

Prologue

Antiquity - 11,000 years ago

The chamber was lit from several small incandescent lights, their glow filtering across the walls in muted colors, casting most objects into shadow. Sunlight filtering in through narrow slits in the upper walls were caught by highly glossed mirrors and redirected toward the ceiling. The effect of the light in the cavernous room was designed to be theatrical, channeling one's attention to the raised dais.

The King sat firmly on his throne, slightly elevated above his court, adorned in a gold tunic and breast piece fastened with precious stones, each sparkling in different colors. A purple robe flowed from his shoulders, cascading to the polished floor in orderly piles. His noblemen surrounded him on either side, but fractionally lower than his station so they would have to look up to their leader. A bored expression was painted across his face as he stared impassively at the man standing in front of him.

“And Your Majesty, if we continue to utilize the power bestowed upon us, we will bring destruction to our land, to our people. Even now the results are self-evident, they can be seen....” Priest Maltaz was stopped by the upraised hand of the King.

“My court and I do not share your view of events Maltaz. We do not rely on religious signs or portents to predict future events. The land is shifting. The ground will crack and move, much like our people. It is normal, expected. Nothing stays the same.”

“King Argot, we do not have to consult oracles to know the land is moving, much like the sea during a storm. Our concern lies with the cause, which produces the effect. We are destroying our world. We must stop the use of the crystals. They can no longer

be used; they must be limited. If we continue....” Again Priest Maltaz was stopped by the upraised hand of the King.

“Maltaz, I will have no more of this discussion! Our people have found a power unique to us! It has allowed us to flourish, to conquer the known civilized world and to move beyond our borders! We are the most prosperous and influential people on Earth and we will not move backwards! If you bring this up again, I will have you killed as an example to all!” screamed King Argot, as he rose from his chair and slammed the hilt of his sword home in its scabbard to emphasize his point, the jeweled hilt catching the waning rays of sunlight.

King Argot spun on his heel, his official robes billowing around him, the sound of his shoes striking the floor as he strode out of the room. His noblemen quickly followed, casting sidelong glances at Priest Maltaz as they scurried past. None dared to stare at the holy man, their eyes furtively darting to and fro.

Left alone in the chamber, Priest Maltaz turned to his followers who had gathered behind him. Smiling, he waved for them to follow. Leaving the imperial court, Priest Maltaz and his followers walked slowly through the streets before entering some hidden corridors. Safety was found in hiding, away from the prying eyes of the King and his court. The sanctuary would provide security, a place to meet, to plan. After entering the inner most rooms of their holy temple and only after sentries had been posted and the doors sealed shut, did Priest Maltaz address the group.

“You have all heard the words of the King. We will not betray our leader, but we must preserve our race. Is it all set?” Priest Maltaz turned to a small bearded man on his left.

“Yes. The scrolls of our ancestors and the knowledge of our people have been loaded. Along with food for the journey. Both ships have been outfitted and are prepared to sail at the next tide. We await your instructions.” Horace sat back down after speaking. Horace was dressed like the others in a simple tunic, the only indication he held a higher position was the small crystal in a gold setting fastened to his right shoulder.

“Good. Unfortunately, we cannot take all of you. The King would stop us if he knew we were planning to leave. Especially if he knew what we were taking. The journey will be perilous; even more so for those of you who are left behind. I am sorry. I wish there was another way.” Priest Maltaz saw the accepted nods of the chosen and of those who were to remain. “Say your farewells. We leave in two hours.” Priest Maltaz left the room amongst murmurs.

The journey had been a long one, but now it was over. Slipping out of the harbor at night, they had been able to escape their homeland and sail northeast until landing on the isles. It had taken two months, the northeasterly being kind to the sails that had billowed in the wind. Both ships had carried precious cargo and food. The scrolls and over two hundred people, all intent on not repeating the mistakes of the past.

They had sailed half way around the island before finding a suitable place to beach the ships. Priest Maltaz and his group cast one last look at their vessels, their sails hanging limp, the waves smacking the wooden sides in a hypnotic rhythm.

“We must move inland. If our predictions are accurate, the tidal wave will sweep miles across the country. We must take everything we can and move as fast as we can.”

Horace stared at his leader and mentor. The wisest man he had ever met, Priest Maltaz was more than a holy man. He had been the leading scientific mind in their land. He understood the use of their technology better than anyone and he knew the limit. Those limits had been exceeded, been exploited. And now the price for the foolishness would come.

“Prepare everyone to move. I’m fearful we will not gain high ground in time.”

Without another word, Priest Maltaz started walking inland, accompanied by his followers.

Finally finding high ground six miles inland, Priest Maltaz assembled his followers. They had worked around the clock, catching what sleep they could when they could. Earthen dams had been constructed around the make shift camp. All the supplies and the people had assembled inside the barrier, all hoping it would be enough. There was nothing to do but wait. The wait was short. The tremor from their home was felt beneath their feet on the second day and the sky darkened with ash even though they were over a thousand miles away. The sea churned and rushed inland in massive waves, inundating everything in its path. The dark waters swirled to the very banks of the dam they had constructed and threatened to spill over. There was nothing they could do but pray and hope. Earthquakes had triggered the tsunamis and they could be felt from time to time as the ground around the camp shivered.

During the next several months, only two small bands of survivors made it to them. It had been as Priest Maltaz had feared – their country, their home had been destroyed. There was nothing left. The land itself had slipped beneath the waves to hide

forever the reckless carelessness of their race. They were all that remained of a once proud race.

The decision had been made by a unanimous vote. The technology contained in the scrolls could not fall into the wrong hands and could never be used again. Priest Maltaz was to take a handful of devote followers and sail east to the mainland to find a final resting place for the documents. A kingdom to the east possessed similar knowledge, but they had abandoned the source of power out of fear. Hopefully, they would help hide the secret.

Horace and the others knew Priest Maltaz could not return for fear of the final location being discovered. With the small band of holy men rested the last hope, the last glimmer that their world would someday be remembered. It was all they had to cling to.

At sunrise Priest Maltaz and a small group of Elders sailed, bidding farewell to the remaining inhabitants of their country. They must go east, to the end of the world. Maybe there no one would look until the human race was ready. Maybe.

Horace stood on the shore and watched his mentor fade into the morning fog. He and the remaining few would construct a monument to the heroic actions of Priest Maltaz. They would write nothing down, but do it from the memory of the forbidden technology. It would be the last time they would use it. On a small scale the technology was safe.

Turning to those gathered on the beach, Horace smiled. This was home now. They would carve out an existence and remember the man who had saved them. Their country, Atlantis, was gone forever.

Starke, Florida – Modern Day

Carefully, the man moved the control stick forward, the powerful electric motor humming as it strained to carry him down the barely distinguishable road. The large rear tires of the wheelchair rolled easily over the small pieces of gravel, creating a soft crunching sound as the man sped away into the enveloping darkness. Occasionally, he would have to move from one dirt lane to the other to avoid a small stick or rut and he did this more by feel than sight, as lighting was limited in the country darkness. The trip would not be a long one, nor did he expect to encounter anyone.

In the distance, he could hear frogs calling to each other, a cacophony piercing the quiet; a staccato burst of noise only they understood or could comprehend. He heard an owl call to its mate and, after several seconds, it was answered, signaling the hunt had begun. They were the only intruders on his solitary quest; the only spectators to his silent ordeal. Other than the nocturnal animals, the trip was proving to be uneventful. Another half mile and he would be there, able to break free, to find release. The burden plaguing him for the last year had been immense, suffocating. Freedom loomed and he could feel his heart flutter.

Johnnie Atkyens let his wheelchair roll to a stop and he stared at the object clutched tightly in his hands. All the secrets he had uncovered about the truth lost for ages was documented inside the watertight box. All his knowledge reduced to scribbled words on parched pieces of paper. He knew men would kill for the truths he had revealed, he had ‘rediscovered.’ It was information that could not be shared; not allowed to be misused. Not by him or others. Johnnie rolled his head back and stared at the night sky, causing the breathing tube trailing from his nose to flutter briefly in a gentle breeze.

The tube was attached to an oxygen tank. A small metal shelf had been constructed behind the large tires and the sterile bottles of air had bought him a few more precious minutes of time. For his life now was measured in minutes, not years. Weakly, he sucked in another lungful of air.

Peering at the darkness closing around him, Johnnie watched a silent bolt of lightning arc gracefully across the Heavens before disappearing, leaving the eerie blackness to consume him. The phenomenon was called 'heat lightning' by the locals and he did not know if it was the correct name for the spectacle. It was lightning with no sound, no roar. Heat lightning was said to portend rain, but other than the occasional breeze, the night was still, humid. Aside from the frogs and owls, deathly quiet. A wry smile curved across his face and then disappeared, as the mere act threatened to drain his last reserves of energy.

Finding a strength he thought had abandoned him, Johnnie moved the control stick and the wheelchair shot along the narrow road. The box was held tightly in his arm, clutched protectively like a precious gift. This was his last adventure, his last heroic deed and he must not fail. The welfare of mankind, the very existence of life, depended upon his success. The contents must not fall into the wrong hands or the world as we know it would be lost. Forever. Nervously, Johnnie turned his head to peer into the stygian night to see if he had been followed. It was a futile gesture, but reassuring. Locating no one, he visibly relaxed and continued.

Coming to the end of the trail, Johnnie turned off the lane and moved the wheelchair to the shoulder of the road and onto some grass. The dew on the green blades shone like tiny jewels and he silently admired the beauty. Forcing his eyes away from

the landscape, he looked straight ahead. Lying in front of him was a large catfish pond, at least three acres in size. The middle of the pond was the deepest. Years earlier, Johnnie had rented a backhoe and dug the pond himself, sloping the bottom down to the center. Somewhere in front of him a catfish struck the surface and he could hear the splash of water.

Applying pressure to the joystick, Johnnie eased the wheelchair forward, hoping to control his approach to the edge of the water. The first twenty to thirty feet was done in safety and then gravity took over. Cresting a small mound of dirt, the wheelchair picked up speed and Johnnie was not quick enough to pull back and engage reverse. As the wheelchair gained momentum, Johnnie could see the pond rapidly approaching and he panicked. Slamming the control stick to the right, the powerful electric motor dug the front wheel into a sharp turn in the high grass. There was a moment of delicate balance as the odd-shaped-craft-turned-ATV moved onto its large right rear wheel and suspended there for several seconds. Like an animated movie, it toppled slowly over, throwing Johnnie forward to the pond's edge.

When he regained his wits, Johnnie found he was lying on his back with his left leg partially immersed in the pond water. Luckily, his breathing tube was still in place. Frantically, he reached around for the box and found it within arm's reach. Like a woman holding a small child, he grabbed it and pulled it to him, tears temporarily clouding his eyes, sobs racking his fragile chest. So close. He could have lost it all. Fighting down the emotion attempting to rob him of his senses, Johnnie forced himself to a sitting position and pulled the box onto his lap. Not much time. Already his breathing was labored from the exertion and he could feel the life drifting out of his sixty-two year

old body. Time was of the essence and the will to act took control. His body may be failing him, but his mind was as sharp as ever. A wicked grin touched his face and his eyes burned bright. He would have the last laugh.

Reaching inside his coat pocket, Johnnie removed a small rubber tube and placed it snugly around the box. Activating a small CO2 cartridge, he watched as the tube fully inflated within seconds. Next, he removed a small glass vile from his front breast pocket, unscrewed the cap and poured the contents on top of the rubber in several places, making sure most of the liquid was absorbed by the top portion of the material. With the task accomplished, Johnnie knew the hardest part was yet to come.

Half dragging, half crawling, Johnnie turned his body to face the water's edge. Finally reaching a spot where the box could float on the surface of the pond, he gave it a shove. He was rewarded with seeing the box drift away from him, buoyed by the tube. The breeze had returned and he could dimly see the box moving slowly to the center of the small man-made lake before it disappeared from sight.

Rolling over, Johnnie dragged himself partially out of the water, but was unable to go any further. His disease wracked body would not respond despite his frantic urging, his muscles unable to obey his mental commands. Giving up, he lay on his back and stared at the night sky, his breathing becoming more labored. He could not give up now. Victory was almost his. He must hear the sound he longed for, the music that would finally release him.

The mild wind current moved the box along to the midpoint of the pond, causing it to bob like an errant cork. Nearing the middle of the water filled basin, the slow acting acid finally ate through the outer layer of the rubber inner tube. A small hiss, gradual at

first and then louder, allowed the air to escape and water quickly rushed in. Losing its buoyancy, the box sank quietly beneath the opaque water, coming to rest on the muddy floor.

When Johnnie heard the sound of the escaping air from the tube, a smile covered his face and a sparkle lit up his eyes. All he could do was done. All he could hope for had been accomplished. It was left up to another now. The secrets of the ages had been entrusted to a man he had never met. A man he trusted could carry the burden. It would take strength, determination, and courage. Johnnie hoped he was up to it and more, for the demands would be strenuous, the perils many.

In the remaining hours of his life, Johnnie thought about all the wonderful people he had met and the marvelous places he had gone. There were a few regrets, but not many. Life was full of twists and surprises. A chuckle escaped his lips. It was the journey to the end he had enjoyed the most and he had saved the greatest surprise for last.

Morning found him on the bank of the catfish pond, his eyes closed and a smile etched into his face, as the sun started its daily ascent.

Johnnie Atkyens had finally found peace.