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The Gods of Atlantis

Written by David Gibbins

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The Gods of Atlantis

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In 1934, Heinrich Himmler – the second most powerful man in Nazi Germany – bought Wewelsburg Castle, a medieval stronghold perched high above the valley of the River Oder in Westphalia. Himmler associated the region with the mythic origins of the German nation, and saw the castle's triangular shape as a 'spear of destiny', pointing north. The castle had a sinister history: legend held that thousands of accused witches were tortured and executed there, and an inquisition room still survived in the basement. But nothing in its past could equal the plans that Himmler had for it.

He set about transforming Wewelsburg into the 'order-castle' of the SS, the ideological centre of the Nazi cult. Slave labourers were brought to a new concentration camp near the castle, and over a thousand of them were worked to death quarrying and transporting stone. A circular chamber was created, the 'SS Generals' Hall'. In the centre of the floor was a twelve-spoked sunwheel, leading out to twelve pillars and twelve window niches. Directly below lay another chamber, a domed vault based on the tombs of the Bronze Age Mycenaeans, and a semi-mythical ruler Himmler admired – Agamemnon, the Mycenaean conqueror of Troy. At the zenith of the dome was an ancient symbol that had been found on pottery at Troy and on golden decorations at

Mycenae, a symbol the Nazis appropriated for their own baleful ends – the ‘crooked cross’, the swastika.

What went on in those rooms may never be known. Wewelsburg became a focus for Nazi archaeological research, to fulfil Adolf Hitler’s desire to ‘return to the source of the blood, to root us again in the soil, to seek again for strength from sources which have been buried for 2,000 years’. Yet Hitler himself never visited the castle. It was to remain Himmler’s preserve, central to his obsession with prehistory and the occult. From there, the Ahnenerbe – the ‘Department of Cultural Heritage’ – sent expeditions to Tibet, to Peru, to Iceland, to places still unknown today, searching for Aryan origins and for the greatest prize of all, the lost civilization of Atlantis. Underlying everything lay Himmler’s racial theories, and Wewelsburg became a springboard for some of the greatest crimes against humanity ever conceived. It was there that he began to formulate the ‘Final Solution’, the mass murder of the Jews. And it was there in 1941 that he assembled his top SS generals for ideological strengthening before the invasion of Russia, the most destructive military campaign in history – one foretold to Himmler in a legend of a final battle between West and East, and fuelled by his doctrine of Aryan racial superiority over the Slavic peoples of Russia.

Yet even while these terrible events were unfolding, Himmler continued to be obsessed with the symbols and artefacts of the past. He envisaged Wewelsburg Castle within a huge semicircular complex, the ‘Centre of the New World’, its plan reminiscent of the circular prehistoric monuments that he associated with mythical Aryan forebears. He planned a huge archaeological collection at Wewelsburg, to make it part of SS indoctrination. The placing of the sunwheel and the swastika in the Generals’ Hall and the vault below show how he drew power from ancient symbols, and incorporated them into the very core of Nazi

ideology. And just as he saw those prehistoric monuments as evidence of a new order, of a new race arisen, so he saw his new world as one where the only gods were the gods of the Nazis, the gods they themselves had become.

Nobody knows how close Himmler may have come to realizing his dream, and what artefacts may have been brought there. Deep within the castle lay another chamber, Himmler's private vault, but when American soldiers captured Wewelsburg in 1945 they found it empty, its contents unknown and seemingly lost forever to history.

One artefact might have been at Wewelsburg, an artefact of extraordinary power that could have unlocked the greatest obsession of all: the dream of the lost civilization of Atlantis, and of Atlantis reborn . . .

Then, as dawn first glimmered, from the horizon rose a dark cloud, and Adad the storm god was raging within it. Then Nergal, god of plague and war, wrenched out the boats' mooring poles; Nunurta, god of the earth, made the dams overflow; and the Anunnaki, dread gods of the underworld, their torches brandished, shrivelled the land with their flames. Desolation from Adad spread over the sky, and all that had been bright was turned into darkness. Like a bull he charged the land; he shattered the land like a vessel of clay; for a day the raging winds flattened the land, and then came the flood. Like a tide of war it swept over the people. A brother could not distinguish his brother; from heaven the people were not to be seen . . . For six days and seven nights it raged, the wind, the storm, the flood; it flattened the land. On the seventh day the wind abated, the storm that had ravaged the land like a war; the sea was lulled, the gale was spent; the flood ended. I looked on the day, and all sound was stilled; all the people had turned to clay. All around me the waters were flat like the roof of a house. Then I opened a hatchway in the boat, and on my cheek streamed the sunlight. I bowed down and wept, my cheeks overflowing with tears. I gazed into the distance, to the furthest bounds of the ocean, and saw land arising. On the mountain of Nisir the boat ran aground; the mountain of Nisir held the boat fast, and would not release it . . . I brought an offering and made a sacrifice, and I poured a libation on the peak of the mountain . . . so it was that the gods took me and caused me to dwell in this place, at the ends of the earth . . .

The words of Uta-napishtim to Gilgamesh from Tablet XI of *He who saw the deep*, the Babylonian version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (late 2nd millennium BC Akkadian, but derived from a story first written down in Sumerian in the 3rd millennium BC and probably originating millennia earlier)

Prologue

The Voyage of Uta-napishtim

The man gripped the edge of the boat and squinted at the western horizon, trying to see past the blinding glare of the sun. Earlier he had sensed a flickering in the sky, a strange smell in the air, but he no longer knew whether it was real or a dream, after weeks of wallowing in this weed-choked sea. He tensed his hands and heaved himself up, then leaned over the side and stared into the depths. His knuckles were raw and bleeding from sunburn and salt, but he no longer felt the pain. Ever since they had been marooned in this windless sea he had taken to staring down, pulling his tattered leopardskin cape over his head to shade the water, letting it form a cover that had stiffened with the salt.

The sea was deep blue, and he could see far down, to where blue became black. He glimpsed flashes of silver, and sparkles

of light. He knew that something was down there, shadowing them, a shape that lurked on the edge of the underworld. If only he could fix it with his eyes, then he would be able to draw on the power of its spirit. He had spent hours looking, days. Even his brother Enlil no longer called him by the nickname they had used as boys, Noah, but now addressed him, half mockingly, by his shaman name, Uta-napishtim, 'he who sees the deep'. The others in his boat were too far gone to help him look, only four of them now, paralysed by thirst and hunger and fear. But he was their spirit traveller, their shaman. They might see the earthly form of the monster, but only he could touch its spirit.

He picked up his obsidian knife and ran his thumb along the blade, feeling it cut into his skin. He remembered going with Enlil and their father Ra Shamash deep into the volcano to find the sacred black stone, and watching the old man make the rippled flat of the blade by pressing off tiny flakes with a piece of antler. Noah had a cache of blades here now, in a basket under the thwarts, but this knife made by his father was the most sacred. That had been the day their father had taken them for the first time to the spirit cave and given them their shaman names, and taught them to inscribe their names into the rock using the ancient symbols, beside the paintings of bulls and leopards and vultures. But their father had gone to the spirit world years before, and now only Noah could give the others in his boat the strength to raise the paddles and seek out the shore he knew lay somewhere ahead. Three cycles of the moon ago, as the flood waters rose up the walls of their city, before he had completed the last bull sacrifice and they had taken to the boats, his dying mother Nisir had

closed her eyes and seen it in a vision: a thunderbird flying towards her, then twin peaks on the edge of the western sea, lofty like those of the sacred mountain of Atlantis that had been drowning all around them. And now he was sure he had seen it too, through a crack in the horizon the day before, framed by distant breakers like those that skirted the last land they had sighted weeks ago, the great cape that jutted out from the desert shore. If they could survive this malevolent spirit that would drag them down, if he could tame the beast and ride it into the spirit world, then they might reach that shore. *Atlantis might be reborn.*

A man's voice came over the water. 'Noah Uta-napishtim, my brother.' Noah put down the knife and shielded his eyes. He saw the raft of seaweed they had drawn in from the sea, tendrils of green and yellow filled with small crabs and fish to sustain them, until they had consumed them all. His eyes moistened in the glare, and he lifted a finger to them, wiping his eyelids and licking it, and then put his thumb on his lips, feeling the wetness of the blood that had been drawn by the knife. They had swallowed the last of the fresh water days ago. That morning his cousin Lamesh had drunk seawater and the malevolence had entered him, and they had lashed him down over the crossbeams at the front of the boat. Lamesh had consumed the lifeblood of the underworld, but before appeasing the spirits with the knife, Noah knew he must see the malevolence himself, must fix with his own eyes the monstrous shark that lurked below them.

Now he saw his brother's boat, shimmering in silhouette, a pair of carved wooden leopards facing each other on the pointed upswept prow. Theirs were the last two boats of the

flotilla that had set out from the drowning city, the ones that had carried on past the cataract that was flooding their sea and reached the safety of Troy, their outpost on the edge of the Middle Sea. For one full cycle of the moon they had paddled on, past rocky islands and great stretches of desert shore, until they had reached another narrowing of the sea and a towering rock the local people called the Pillar of Herakleos; then they had been on the western ocean. They had raised sails of deerskin, and the wind and current had taken them south along the desert shore. Before the great cape that had been their last sight of land they had alighted at Lixus, at the Garden of Hesperides, where the priestesses called the Ladies of the West had fed them with golden apples and honeyed almonds, where Noah's brother had fallen under their spell and been tempted to stay and found their new citadel.

But just as they had done at Troy, they inscribed a pillar with their names in the ancient symbols and sailed west, over a vast open ocean with no landfall in sight. When the days were overcast, Adad the navigator had stood in the bow of his brother's boat and held up the crystal sunstone; it too had come from the volcano, prised from the spirit cave generations before, and used many times by Adad and his forefathers to navigate the spirit lines of their own sea. Its light had dazzled Noah's eyes, as if it were drawing in the rays from the dawn, leading them on over the ocean. And at night Noah had traced the line of the Great Bear to the pole star, keeping it on the right, just as he had watched his father do when he had aligned the pyramid of Atlantis to the rising and setting of the sun: his father Ra Shamash, he who gave the light, sun shaman, whom they had laid to rest in the chamber inside the pyramid,

surrounded by the sacred obsidian blades and ironstones from the sky that had been brought across the ice by their ancestors. But Noah need hardly have bothered to chart the heavens. It was as if they were on a river on the ocean, being swept inexorably west, a river like those of his dreams in the cave that had become the flow of his own spirit journey.

The planks in their boats had held, their sewn seams caulked with boiled animal fat. The sweet foods of the Ladies of the West had sustained them, along with the flying fish that leapt into their boats. But then they had been beset by fearsome storms and mountainous waves. Six boats had become four. And finally they had entered this flat ocean, where there was no wind to fill the sails. They had paddled on until they were exhausted. Men desperate for food had scraped and licked the animal fat from the seams, and the boats had leaked and wallowed. They had made fire with flint and boiled their deerskin sails for broth; Enlil alone had insisted on keeping his sail. They had gnawed the boars' teeth they wore as necklaces, and scraped the marrow from the bulls' horns that adorned the prow of Noah's boat. That had kept them strong enough to fish, using nets made of twisted seaweed. But even that had proved too much. They had sickened, their gums swelling and bleeding and their teeth falling out, and they had become listless. Then they had begun to die.

Noah saw his brother clearly now, heaving on the cord that lashed the two boats together, compressing the floating weeds in between. Enlil stopped, panting and coughing a terrible dry cough, and then tottered upright with a club in one hand and a spear in the other. He was unrecognizable as the muscle-bound giant who had once guarded the holy of holies, the

chamber in Atlantis where they had kept their most sacred objects. Now he looked like one of the scarecrows they had made together in their father's fields, naked except for the tattered remnants of his lionskin cloak. Like Noah's, his skin was peeling off in blistered layers, his face a puffed mass of sores surrounded by matted hair and a beard. He stared across, trying to lick his lips, and then shook his spear. 'Noah Utanapishtim,' he croaked again.

'Enlil, my brother,' Noah replied, his voice cracking. 'If you call me that, I will call you by your shaman name, Gilgamesh, "he who would stand above men".'

Enlil slapped the club, then dropped it and stumbled, trying to stand upright, holding himself with the spear. His boat tilted, revealing the repairs they had made after the last storm: thick bulls' skins taut over the wooden frame, hemp rope sewn through the planks and lashed around the hull. Enlil had taken care of his boat. Noah saw the other matted and blistered bodies inside, men whose skin was grey beneath the sunburn, whose eyeballs had shrunk into their sockets, whether dead or alive he could not tell. Enlil went down on his knees against a thwart, still holding the spear. 'My brother,' he said hoarsely. 'Your animals are all gone.'

Noah turned to look at his own boat. Enlil was right. They had left with breeding pairs of animals: goats, sheep, boar and aurochs, the giant cattle that had lived in the marshland near the shore where they had grown up, animals he and Enlil had corralled as boys and fattened for the blood sacrifice. But now the animals had all died, and they had devoured the flesh. The bull had been the last, killed as it lay on the thwarts bellowing with thirst and hunger. Noah had plunged the knife into its

chest and drawn out the heart as he had done with bulls many times before, on the altar of their ancestors outside the spirit cave. Its hooves were still tied to the cross-beams, and the skull lay in the scuppers of the boat beside him, stripped of every morsel of flesh, the bone plastered over and painted in red ochre with the horns facing the bow. They had fed on the bull in a great feast after they had passed through the storms, and had drunk its blood in huge gulps. But that had been half a cycle of the moon ago. Since then there had been nothing more to eat. Only a few of those who had feasted then were still alive now.

‘My brother,’ Enlil croaked again. ‘You seek strength in the spirit world of our ancestors.’ He shook his head, then rattled the spear. ‘This is my strength, the metal that made this spear strong, the spear that has given us food.’

Noah squinted at the copper spearhead glinting in the sun. He remembered that day in the volcano as boys when they had searched for the obsidian. Enlil had gone further than any among the shamans had dared to go before, into the deepest chamber where the red-hot molten rock seeped out of the underworld. He had seen a golden stream flow among the molten red, and had watched it blend with silvery rock and form a hard metal. He had sworn Noah to secrecy, had not even told their father; only Enlil knew where it was to be found. And then, years later, as a man, he had emerged one day from the volcano and stood in front of the people, brandishing weapons of metal that made his shaman name seem like a prophecy: Gilgamesh, he who would stand above men, *he who would be a god*. Now, on this voyage, the spear had brought down a great bird, its wingspan three times a man’s

reach, and had jabbed and killed a turtle. And then a whale had circled them, one bigger than they had ever seen before, blowing spray high into the sky. The fishy smell from the whale's blow had left them ravenous. The old man Naher in Haran's boat had slipped into the water with a spear tied to a pig's bladder, and had used all his strength to drive it into the whale's head. Haran had lashed his boat to the carcass, and Noah as shaman had been given the first strip of oily skin. But then the blood in the water had attracted the sharks, more numerous and fearsome than they had seen before. The sharks had gorged themselves in a frenzy, ripping the whale to pieces, and then the great monster had reared up from the depths, leaping out of the water with its teeth bared. It had crushed Haran's boat and consumed them all, Haran and the old man and the others, dragging them down into the underworld, to the blackness Noah had seen in the depths below. He narrowed his eyes at his brother. *That was what spears of metal had done for them.*

Enlil swayed, leaning on his spear. 'And we have no women.' Noah felt his chest tighten. *No women.* It had been a week since sweet-voiced Ishtar had died a terrible, rasping death in the bottom of the boat, taken by the malevolence that now stalked them. The sea had seethed and sparkled, and then a vast welter of bubbles had erupted on the surface, swallowing Ishtar's boat and leaving her floating unconscious, wrapped around with the thin, glistening tentacles of the blue jellyfish that infested these waters, filaments that tingled to the touch and sent agonizing jolts through the body. They had hauled her into Noah's boat still alive, and after she had died he covered her in red ochre and laid her on a raft of seaweed.

She had worn her boar's tusk necklace, and held her wooden staff with the vulture skull on top, its eyes made from the sacred blue rock the hunters had brought from the mountains far to the east. Ishtar was to have been their mother's successor, trained as a shaman, but then she had been swayed from the old ways by Enlil and his followers, those who had set up idols in the shape of men, gods they fashioned after themselves. Noah had stared at her body in the knowledge that he was now the last shaman of Atlantis, the last who knew the rapture of the spirit journeys and how to spill blood on the altar of sacrifice.

He had watched the birds swoop down, tearing off strips of flesh from Ishtar's body, just as the vultures had done in Atlantis where the dead had been exposed in the stone circle above the city. After two days he had severed her head, filled her eye sockets and covered the sinews of her face with plaster he kept in a pot in the bow, placing cowrie shells in the hollows where her eyes had been pecked out. Her skull was there now, embedded in plaster below the prow, half in and half out of the spirit world. Noah had told his brother that the birds were the spirits of their ancestors taking her amongst them. Enlil had replied that the birds were hungry. Enlil had lost touch with the spirit world, spending all of his days in Atlantis inside the citadel. Noah had still walked past the fields their fathers had learned to cultivate, and had lived in the forest where their grandfathers had hunted, at one with the animal spirits. He had only ever entered the citadel to mount the steps up the volcano and perform his duty as sacrificing shaman, a duty that Enlil and the others had come to scorn.

Noah remembered the monster of the deep, lurking below, what it had done to Haran's boat, how it enslaved them with fear. Out here, the spirits of the beasts still ruled, not the gods that Enlil and the others thought they themselves had become, wielding their spears of metal.

Enlil banged the thwart again. 'There is no land ahead.'

Noah raised his arm to the west, pointing. 'But my brother, I saw it. Through a gap in the storm clouds before the great calm. Twin peaks on the horizon, exactly as our mother Nisir prophesied, the mountain she called Dû-Re. I saw distant breakers, and I felt a change in the rhythm of the waves. We will go there if we summon all our reserves and paddle west. We will find new animals, new pasture. We will find women.'

'Your visions are mere dreams. The flat sea is like the desert. The sun reflects off it and blinds you to reality, creating phantasms on the horizon. And for half a cycle of the moon, since the storms ended, we have seen nothing.'

But Noah knew what he had seen. And two nights before, there had been another sign. He had succumbed to hunger, and had devoured the strip of whale skin that had been given to him when they had cut into the carcass. Eating it had given him terrible sickness, as if the spirit of the whale were punishing him. But when he awoke, the sickness had passed and the torpor had lifted. His mouth had stopped bleeding, and the swelling of his gums had receded. It had been a sign of what he must do next. Now he squinted at Enlil. 'I must offer blood to the spirits.'

Enlil waved his arm dismissively. 'If you pour blood into the sea, the great shark will come for you. He is hungry, like those gulls.'

‘Then you can kill him with your spear of metal.’

Enlil snorted. ‘I would not waste it. This spear and others like it will make us gods amongst men. When they escaped the deluge, our cousins Adad and Nergal and Ninurta and Annunaki set forth south over land to the great rivers beyond the mountains, and Ishmael and Sethi and Minos sailed through the islands south from Troy, towards the far shore where the great river rises through the desert and waters the oases along its banks. They will found new citadels in those places. But I am the only one with the secret of the new metal, of the alloy that creates the strong copper.’

‘You swore that you would never reveal it. I warned you of its dangers. Men will use it to kill each other.’

‘As long as I alone have the knowledge of the metal, others will bow towards me. I will use that strength to keep peace among men.’

Noah looked at Enlil. He remembered how his brother had seemed a pillar of strength in his lionskin, its torn head and tattered mane now hanging over his shoulders. Herakleos, the Ladies of the West had called him, after the great rock that marked the edge of the Middle Sea, as they showered him with adulation that Noah feared would go to his head. For all Enlil’s bravado, Noah knew that his brother was afraid of what might lie before them, afraid because he had spurned the ways of the shamans who saw the ocean in their spirit journeys, for whom the unending horizon brought not terror as it seemed to bring Enlil and his followers, but instead the rapture Noah felt in the journeys of the mind he took in the spirit cave, journeys where he floated towards the world of their ancestors. ‘We are close,’ Noah said. ‘Look to your

own signs. The crystal lights the way forward. The palladion has become heavier, just as our mother prophesied. When the spirit bird flies out from Dû-Re towards us, when the palladion becomes as heavy as it felt in the spirit cave in the volcano, there we will find our new Atlantis.’

Enlil put down his spear and lifted a package from the floor of his boat, swaddled in a bearskin. He struggled to hold it, then raised one leg on the thwarts and rested the object on his knee. He pulled a lump of quartz out of a pouch on his belt and held it up, averting his eyes from the glare. ‘The crystal shines because it draws in the sun’s rays through the clouds, and when the sun is setting in the west the crystal shines on that side,’ he said, shoving it back in the pouch. He pointed at the swaddled package. ‘The palladion fell from the sky and was brought from the snows of the north by our ancestors. It becomes heavier now because we are approaching the edge of the world, where the earth meets the heavens. Soon it will become so heavy that it will sink my boat.’

Noah remembered what his mother had told him about the days of their ancestors when the glaciers had reached down almost to the shore of their sea. The palladion was the most sacred of the ironstones they had found on the surface of the ice. Noah remembered seeing Enlil disappear with it into the secret place in the volcano where he had learned to work metal, emerging with it days later in a shape that seemed to copy the circle of stone pillars with lintels that he and his followers had forced the old shamans to erect outside the spirit cave. Enlil had taken the most sacred artefact of their ancestors and made it his own. Now he unwrapped the skin, and Noah saw the crooked cross, its surface smooth and

polished. Enlil raised it into the air. ‘I will meld the ironstone with gold to lock the strength within. Then the others will know that I am destined to hold its power.’ He nodded towards Ishtar’s severed head in the front of Noah’s boat. ‘You have your own idols. And you believe your destination is just beyond the horizon. If you know the way, you no longer need the crystal or the palladion to guide you.’

‘Throw the palladion into the sea, my brother. It belongs with the shades of our ancestors, not in your new world. Placate their spirits, and we may yet fulfil our mother’s prophecy.’

‘I will tell your story far and wide, Noah Uta-napishtim, the story of one who had no animals because he had sacrificed them all, and no women.’ Enlil wrapped the palladion back in the bearskin and placed it out of sight, then stood up again with his spear. ‘I will tell how a star of heaven fell from the sky, but it was too heavy for you, and only I could lift it and use its power; and how I wandered through the wilderness in the skin of a lion and crossed the waters of death, how with my own strength I lifted the vault of the sky that covers the abyss. I will tell how the heavens roared and the earth roared too, how daylight failed and darkness fell, lightning flashed, the clouds lowered and rained down death. I will call the great fish Humbaba, “toothed monster”, but I will make him a bull-man of the mountains; when he roars, it will be like the fury of the storms we have sailed through, his breath will be like the fire of the volcano and his jaws will be death itself. I will tell how I, Enlil Gilgamesh, slew the beast and rid the world of the spirit demons that your kind had nurtured for so long.’ He stomped the spear. ‘And as for you, my brother, I

will tell how I led you to the ends of the earth, the last of the shamans, how I cast you away in darkness, to the place from which none who enter ever return, down the road from which there is no coming back. I will call your mountain not Dû-Re, but Nisir, after our mother, as it is for her memory that I have kept you alive and brought you this far, and because this mythical mountain is her creation.'

Noah realized with a sudden empty feeling that his brother had been intending to leave him all along. Enlil had saved him from Atlantis, from horror and death, and had brought him far from the reaches of his vengeful followers who would extinguish all of his kind. 'On our voyage from Atlantis,' Enlil continued, 'I let you carve the old symbol of Atlantis on my pillars, set up where we landed; but when I return, I will topple them, and they will be buried in the earth, and new statues will arise, gods fully formed in the shape of men.' He heaved up the skin containing the palladion and unwrapped it again. 'The old symbol will die, but the new one I have fashioned in the palladion will endure through the ages to signify the coming of the gods.'

Noah looked at Enlil. 'These are brave words, my brother, but perhaps in your story you will come back to seek me again, and I will tell you from my new spirit cave in the mountain the truth about what you have become, that believing you have become a god does not save you from the certainty of death and the spirit journey we all must take.'

Suddenly there was a white flash in the sky. Noah looked down at the water between the clumps of weed. *Something was different.* He could no longer see into the depths. It was as if the cusp of the underworld had risen up, as if they were now

floating on it. He glanced at the sky. A darkness had come, a strange pall, as if they had been cast into shadow. Perhaps Enlil was right; perhaps they had reached the end of the world. Then he looked to the western horizon and saw a towering bank of cloud, billowing and shadowy, streaked with black. The surface of the sea, dead calm for so long, began to shimmer. He felt something they had not felt for days, something coming from the west, ruffling the water. *It was wind.*

A flash lit the sky again, and a whiteness sped across from a central point like an expanding corona. Noah watched in astonishment as the palladion seemed to catch the light and burn at the edges, a flickering blue aura that pulsed around the ironstone. Enlil swayed back, then gripped the palladion with both hands as the phantasm disappeared. 'That must be my sign,' he shouted hoarsely. 'I will go.' He put the palladion out of sight in the scuppers and quickly cast off the rope that held the two boats together. He staggered over to the bipod mast lying on the thwarts and heaved it up on its rope. One of the other men crawled over to help him. The mast came upright, and the tattered deerskin sail billowed out. The wind had already strengthened and the boat wallowed away, leaving the mat of weed behind. The sail cracked, taut and full. Enlil shouted across at Noah. 'We will be blown back to Lixus, and to the pillar at the edge of the Middle Sea. I will topple the stone we left at Lixus to show your passing from the world of men. You have no sail, and you cannot follow. You will remain forever outcast here at the edge of existence, Noah Uta-napishtim. Farewell, my brother.'

Noah watched the boat recede. Low black clouds advanced

towards him, constricting the horizon, the spindrift shimmering in tendrils of white over the waves. The wind raised the stiffened mass of his hair, and tugged at his beard. This was not like the dry wind that had come off the desert weeks before. This wind was moist. *There would be rain.* He lurched over to a basket in the centre of the boat and drew a bleached animal skin over it, pressing it down to catch any rain that fell. As he did so, he saw the faded colours of a painting he had made on the skin: a mass of buildings, joined together with ladders on the rooftops, and behind them the triangular form of the pyramid his father had built; above that was the long-feathered figure of the bird spirit, and behind it the peaks of the volcano shaped like a bull's horns, the place where Enlil and the others had walled up the spirit cave of their ancestors. He remembered his vision of twin peaks on the horizon ahead. He felt his cracked lips with his tongue, then drew his thumb again over the obsidian blade, bringing the wetness of blood to his lips. He looked at the emaciated body of Lamesh tied down in the front of the boat. *Soon there would be more blood in the offering.*

A violent gust tilted the boat, whining and howling over the sea, flattening the wave crests and streaking the water with foam. Lightning forked on the horizon, and he heard the dull rumble of thunder. Enlil's boat was already far to the east, a speck on a foaming crest beneath racing clouds, and beyond that was the same wall of blackness. Noah twisted around. The blackness was on every side. His heart pounded. Shadowy streaks moved in the clouds at frightening speed, gyrating around him in one direction. Now he knew why there had been no ocean swell: he was in the eye of a great storm. The

waters that were surging round the horizon would soon reach him. It was a storm that had been set in motion when they had lured the malevolence from the deep, a storm that would encircle and engulf them like the ring of fire he had once lit around the altar of sacrifice, a fire that burned fiercely until all that was left of the bodies was the red-hot embers blown upwards by the exhalations of the underworld.

The boat lurched sideways, then pitched into the water with a mighty crash. A huge wave crest rose high above the trough, and the boat tilted and yawed. He saw another shape ahead, a great swell, sucking them along in its wake. Then the shape swung round, and he saw a giant fin cut the water. The shark rolled, its white belly upwards and its jaws gaping. In a flash, the huge rows of serrated teeth reared up at him, and he stared the monster in the eye. Then it was gone, sweeping the stern of the boat with its tail. *He had seen it. He had taken in the spirit power of the beast. Now it was time.* He turned quickly and reached into a jar beside Ishtar's skull, taking out handfuls of red ochre powder and smearing it all over his face and body. He picked up a polished stone mace and lurched towards Lamesh. They had tied him on his back, over a shallow stone basin, his feet and hands lashed to the rails, and drugged him with the resin of the poppy. Noah saw the fin of the beast circling, menacingly. He raised the mace, but his arm was too weak. He dropped it, then picked up the obsidian knife and put both hands on the grip, holding it tight, shaking.

He remembered the last time he had held the knife like this. It had been in the spirit cave, where they had exposed the bodies of the dead for the hooked talons of the spirit birds to rip the flesh and take it to the world beyond. It was there that

Noah had tied down the bulls and cut their hearts out, giving the meat to the people and letting the blood gush into the stone basins for the old shamans to gaze into the world beyond. But with their spears of copper, the new priests had forced the shamans to build a wall over the sacred cave, to block it off except for a small entrance to the mountain, and then to cut huge pillars in the quarry and struggle up with them, heaving them into a circle. They had chiselled their new symbols over the old. And then Enlil himself had ripped the plaster-covered skull of their ancestor Anu from the ground, gouging out the cowrie-shell eyes and placing it atop the first of the pillars; he had carved hands into the lintel of the pillar, while the others of the new priesthood, those with braided hair and beards, began to rub and chisel away the sacred paintings on the cave wall and hack off the ancient symbols of their ancestors, leaving only those that Enlil and Noah had incised on the wall that day their father had told them their shaman names.

And then the flood waters had begun to rise. Enlil and the new priesthood had assembled the people and blamed the shamans, ordering them to go to the cave to appease the spirits. But once inside, the shamans had been blocked in, Noah among them, sealed inside a flickering world of shadows and red embers from the fire that was always kept alive in the inner recess. The old shamans had tossed the sacred leaves on the fire and taken the milk of the poppy to ease them on their journey to the spirit world, but fear had tainted their visions. Those who had once floated in water in the dream voyages of the mind were now terrified of drowning. Their visions took them on a journey of horror, to darkness and fire coming

from within the mountain. An old man seized with terror had carved an image on a pillar, a swirling face that seemed to be caught in a scream. Noah himself had been half crazed, seeing men and women tearing at their hair and tossing their heads around and around. And then they had asked him to bring out the knife, to do what only he could do. *The basins had filled with blood once again.*

He remembered what an old woman had said as she lay back over the basin, her eyes milky-white with blindness, her hand holding his and pressing the knife against her heart. *You now have the bloodlust, Noah, she had whispered. You will never lose it, and you will doom all around you by your greed for it. In the times of our ancestors, when we were driven to seek the spirits on a river of human blood, he who spilled it was forced to kill himself to save the people from his bloodlust. You must kill yourself too, or be cast out for ever from the world of men. Your brother Enlil knows this too, as I taught him the old ways.* When she pulled the knife in, Noah had tasted the blood that spattered from her mouth, and he had felt the exultation course through him. She had been right. *He had wanted more.* They had come willingly, the men and the women and their children, the boy with the flute. The knife had plunged in over and over again, and the stone basins had filled with human blood, overflowing and smearing the skulls of the ancestors still embedded in the floor around them.

And then Enlil had broken through the wall and come for him, unable to leave his brother behind in that chamber of death. He had forced the others who remained alive to a dark recess in the cave and had rolled the boulder in front of them, even as they screamed for Noah to kill them too. Noah had

gripped a basin and stared into the blood-filled pool. In his desperation to break the spell, Enlil had taken out the palladion from a pouch and dropped it into the basin, drenching Noah with blood. Noah had seen only the reflection of the pillar with the skull on top, advancing towards him in repeated visions, swirling round and round. He had fallen backwards, wide-eyed and panting, just as the first water from the sea had surged into the chamber. Enlil had pulled the palladion out of the basin and put it in his pouch, then held Noah upright and hissed in his ear: *Atlantis is finished. We new priests will go to the four corners of the earth and found new cities. You, my brother, the last of the old, I will take beyond the Middle Sea to the place where earth and sky meld, to where you and your spirit ways will be beyond the world of men.* Enlil had dragged him outside to the boats, but for days afterwards as they paddled away, Noah could hear the screams of the shamans in his mind, and see the blood he had been unable to wash from the cracks on his hands and under his fingernails.

Now the storm clouds swirled around the boat. Noah tried to stay his hand as he held the knife. He was trembling not with fear, but with anticipation. He had crossed the boundary in that cave, and now there was only one river of blood he could ride.

Now the spirits would be appeased.

He plunged the knife into Lamesh, deep and hard, drawing it savagely round, feeling the warmth of the blood as it gushed out. He reached inside, grasped the still-beating heart and pulled it out. He took the knife and sliced into Lamesh's neck, sawing hard at the bone, and then held the matted hair with one hand while he severed the head from the body. He

dropped the knife and raised the head high, feeling the rivulets of blood pour down his arms and face. The storm was closing in now, twisting and swirling, the lightning flashing and the thunder cracking deafeningly. He dropped the head and scooped up blood from the wound, drinking it in great slurps, slaking his desperate thirst. He saw where the blood had poured into the small stone basin below the thwart, filling it to the brim. He stared into it, searching, seeing only the rippling concentric circles where the blood dripped off his face and fell on the surface of the pool. And then there was a flash in the sky and he saw it in the blood: twin peaks spouting fire, the fabled mountain Dû-Re, appearing over and over again as the blood rippled with the motion of the boat. He looked up, letting the rain pour over his face. *The spirit of the beast had answered him. The river of blood had flowed to the realm of the ancestors.*

Suddenly giant waves were upon him. The roar of the wind drowned out the thunder, and the sea heaved the boat upwards as if it were being forced up the ridge of a mountain, driving it far away from the circling fin of the shark. Noah clutched the thwarts, swaying, feeling the sweeping sheets of rain that blew in from the east. He suddenly realized what that meant. *The wind had turned. The boat was being blown west again.* They were on the crest of a towering wave, hanging still. There was another flash, and sunlight appeared through a hole in the darkness ahead. He blinked the rain and blood from his eyes, then followed the rays of the sun to where they lit up a narrow strip of sea to the west. A bird came into view, blown towards them on some eastward eddy of the storm wind, a bird with long trailing feathers like nothing he had seen before, coloured

like a dark rainbow. *A thunderbird, but a bird of the land, not of the sea.*

Then he saw it on the horizon. A raging line of surf, and beyond that, the twin peaks jutting against the blackness of the sky.

The prophecy had been fulfilled.

Atlantis would be reborn.