

PARALLAX PRIME



PROLOGUE

5039 BCE: Phanagoria, The Taman Peninsula, The Cimmerian Bosphorus

HIGH ARCHON URIZEN THE EXALTED watched the armored guards bring up the prisoners. A slender, hairless man like all of his kind, he wore a flowing, purple-trimmed white robe. The only sign of his high rank within the Archon Directorate was the gold chain chaplet on his head and the signet ring on the first digit of his six-fingered left hand.

In the crowd of glowering, restless humans, Urizen stood out due to his height, pale blue complexion and a face consisting of two huge eyes set beneath a smooth, domed cranium. His ears were small, almost vestigial, nestled close to his head.

“So Jason and his Argonauts have finally captured him,” Urizen murmured. “After ten years of bloody war, we’re rid of Abraxas and the last of his Chimerii. Perhaps now the world will have some peace.”

“What will you do with the Chimerii, Exalted One?” asked Lam. He appeared to be almost identical to Urizen except for the saffron color of his robe and the lack of a chaplet upon his head.

Urizen shrugged his shoulders. “They will have to be euthanized, of course.”

“And Abraxas?”

“Abraxas must await judgment for his crimes from the Gods.”

“Have you considered public torture for the sake of closure, Exalted One?” suggested Los, an Archon official wearing the orange cloak of an administrator. “It could be stretched over many days before he is cast into darkness. That might soothe a bit of the Atlantean’s anger.”

Urizen glared at him. “No, you fool! Abraxas is one our own kind, despite his monstrous deeds. He can only be judged by the Gods of Nibiru and so he must wait until their return. Until then, he deserves a decent tomb. Not that it matters much, but—”

Urizen broke off and turned away. Lam exchanged a warning glance with Los, then looked back toward the approaching procession.

The Atlantean colony of Phanagoria was built upon a peninsula thrusting out into an expanse of clear blue water. On the glimmering surface floated merchant ships from halfway round the world. With its trade and its empire of island colonies and archipelagos, Atlantis bestrode the world as the mightiest of all thalassocracies—or it had before the destruction of its capitol city Poseidia over a decade before. Beyond the fortified sea walls at the end of the bay, the ocean swelled to the horizon, gray and green and blue beneath the noonday sky. Within the harbor, the sails of ships fluttered in a bright confusion of red, white and yellow.

The land ran upward from the bay at a gentle incline. Phanagoria spread over the hills, a tangle of streets between houses that ranged from the clay huts of the poor to the marble villas of the wealthy. Beyond the city walls on the landward side stretched the necropolis—the burial ground of the Atlantean sea kings, queens and princes.

A broad straight road lined with alabaster and gold sphinx statues extended straight from the harbor up to the palace which stood on the highest hill of the peninsula. At its end, wide marble stairs ascended toward the fragrant gardens of the imperial courtyard.

The Atlanteans swarmed about the street, straining to see the captives the soldiers led toward the fortress. The word that Abraxas The Deceiver, Abraxas The Destroyer, had finally been taken drove the people of the entire region to come to Phanagoria. There was laughter in the throng, jeers for the prisoners, shouts for public execution.

Most of the crowd were a slim dark-haired folk, men and women alike clad in belted tunics and sandals. As Atlanteans, they were proud of their might and culture and so their voices were the loudest in shouting insults at the prisoners. There were others who stood silent and glum-faced, not daring to voice their thoughts but making

them plain enough by expression and attitude.

The tall, black armored mercenaries from conquered Tyrhennia were long-galled by Atlantean rule. They had no other choice but to bow to it. Abraxas and his Chimerii had spent the last decade openly defying Atlantean authority. Their defiance earned the Tyrhennian's respect.

The soldiers marched their prisoners rapidly up the street. The notorious Argonauts of Jason were resplendent in blue shining corselets, greaves, and horsehair-crested helmets of the Aeolian navy. All of them were armed with short swords and round shields marked with the multi-tentacled Kraken sigil of Atlantis.

The captive Chimerii were mostly of the *Orcneas* breed, although a number of other creatures were represented such as the Cyclops and the Minotaur. They stumbled wearily along, battered and bloody, clad in a few rags, weighted down hand and foot by their chains. Only the figure in the lead walked erect, and he strode forward with the arrogance of a conqueror, not a defeated foe.

"There is Abraxas himself, in front of them," said Los.

Urizen nodded. "He looks a bit worse for wear after the battle."

Lam said, "Not too badly injured, apparently."

The three men moved forward for a better look. Imperceptibly, the yellow robed members of the Phanagorian court shrank from them. The three High Archons were feared even by the haughty Atlanteans because they carried the blood of the Gods of Nibiru.

The prisoners shuffled through the fortress gates, not reacting when the heavy metal portals clanged shut behind them. Up the stairs they went, emerging into the fragrance of green trees and bushes, blooming plants and leaping fountains of the royal garden. There they halted, and nobles of the court buzzed about them curiously, like flies around a dead animal.

Urizen stepped up to Abraxas. "Greeting," he said, and there was no anger or triumph in his voice.

"Greeting," replied Abraxas in the same even tone. Abraxas was as tall as Urizen, a gaunt, blue-skinned, hairless man wearing only chains and tatters. His naked torso and limbs bore lacerations, streaks of crusted blood and dark bruises. A frayed strip of blue cloth wrapped his head, knotted tightly at the bridge of his nose.

The amber-eyed face of Abraxas was lean, long-jawed, curve-nosed, hardened by bitterness, suffering and desperate, unending battle. A chained hydra could not have looked more fiercely upon his captors.

"It's taken a long time to catch up to you, Abraxas," said Urizen. "Once I almost had the pleasure of doing it myself. It was when you raided Messantia—remember? I happened to be there with the fleet, and gave chase in a war-galley. We never did catch you."

"One of your ships did." Abraxas' voice was strangely soft and measured. "It didn't come back, as you may recall."

"How did Jason and his forces finally capture you?" Lam asked.

Abraxas shrugged and the chains about his wrists rattled. "You already know as much as I care to talk about... we sailed into Ionius Bay and found a whole Argonaut fleet waiting for us. We were outnumbered three to one. Someone must finally have spied out our stronghold."

Los nodded. "Not all of the Chimerii are in service to you. Tritonis and his merfolk were on watch."

Abraxas forced a half-smile to his lips: "The fleet blocked off our retreat along the Spercheus River, so there was no option but to go overland to make our stand on Mount Othrys. The Argonauts were armed with the Anunnaki weapons you gave them, so we were outgunned as well as outnumbered. Still, we fought until we were all dead or captured. These hundred are all that is left of my core Chimerii. I was knocked unconscious during the battle and woke up to find myself a prisoner. Otherwise—"

His amber gaze raked the court of assembled Atlantean nobles with lashing contempt. "I could be peacefully feeding fish now, instead of those witless fish-eyes."

"I won't drag out this business for you, Abraxas," said Urizen curtly. "Your Chimerii will have to be put to death of course...you will be placed in stasis to await the final judgment when the Gods return."

"Thanks," said Abraxas dryly, "but I'll share the same fate as my people."

"The choice isn't yours." Urizen stared at him in puzzled pity. "The Chimerii are *not* your people...you are one of us, one of the First Folk...you held my position of High Archon in Poseidia. Why did you ever betray us? With your resolve and skill and intellect, you could have shaped Atlantis into a global empire which would have ruled for ten thousand years—or longer. Instead, you chose to raze her and all of her colonies."

"I only attacked Atlantean outposts with military garrisons."

"And you were exceedingly ruthless about it. Why did you turn on us?"

"As you said, I was once a High Archon," said Abraxas thoughtfully. "I saw sovereign nations destroyed and the citizens taken away as slaves to serve the empire of Atlantis. My own kind, the First Folk, did not interfere. They—we—believed the wars were the will of the Gods of Nibiru and they—we—dared to have the arrogance to speak for them. I did not question or oppose the policy. I took an oath to abide by the decisions of the Archon Directorate who spoke for the Gods."

Urizen still appeared puzzled. "Yes...that is why we were bred."

"When the Directorate conspired to murder my offspring, the Chimerii, I broke my oath. It was the only oath I

ever broke, and I feel no shame.”

Abraxas paused, stared directly Urizen’s eyes and intoned, “That is enough of an answer, I trust.”

“It may be,” said Urizen slowly. “You realize, of course, the wars of conquest waged by Atlantis were meant to safeguard not only the Archon Directorate but the legacy of the Anunnaki? We of the First Folk certainly couldn’t negate our covenant, in view of the Directorate’s duty to the Gods and their pact with the Tuatha De’ Danaan. We are charged with maintaining lordship over the Earth until the Gods return.”

“I don’t hold anything against the Directorate personally, Urizen,” said Abraxas with a tired smile. “Still, I’d give my soul to the nether fires for another chance to pull all Atlantean colonies down beneath the waves. Even if you had offered me another choice, I would not have given up.”

Urizen matched his weary smile. “That’s the trouble...men like you don’t know how, do you?”

Squaring his shoulders, Urizen said curtly, “I am sorry it has to end this way. You are brave but your thinking became twisted, particularly after you appointed yourself the guardian of the abominations our Gods commanded to be expunged.” He gestured to the guards. “Take him away. You know where.”

“One moment, Exalted One,” said Lam. “I would like to escort the prisoner myself, so I may have a few final words with him...I will attend to his final disposition.”

For an instant, Urizen appeared worried, lines deepening his smooth high brow. At length he replied, “I suppose you are entitled. You and Abraxas were friends.”

Urizen waved a hand in dismissal and turned away, as if only too glad to have a noisome task assigned to another. As Abraxas and Lam trudged toward the far side of the courtyard they heard the cries of dismay and grief rising from multiple throats. Chains rattled and clanked. Lam cast a glance over a shoulder. The Chimerii were herded away at the points of spears and blast-lances. Those who were able raised their shackled hands over their heads and shook the chains. Muscles bunched in his cheeks, Abraxas said nothing, keeping his eyes fixed on the open archway ahead.

“Those you call your people bid you farewell,” Lam said. “Don’t you wish to respond in kind?”

“I have already said my goodbyes,” Abraxas answered quietly.

Lam nodded. “As did we, on the day you drowned Poseidia.”

“And yet—here we are, many years later.”

The two men reached the archway, bracketed on either side by armored guards. Beyond it spread out the necropolis. Bulging gold domes and elaborately sculpted mausoleums rose from the dry ground of the plateau. Although of different shapes, the tombs of the Atlantean royalty all reflected a fine architectural style. The lanes of the necropolis converged like the spokes of a wheel into an octagon-shaped central plaza. Statues of stone, iron and bronze towered from high pedestals. They were crafted in the likenesses of men, women and children.

A thin smile stretched Abraxas’ lips. “Rather ironic, isn’t it?”

Lam cocked his head at him. “How so?”

“Over the last ten years, I’ve managed to destroy most of the Atlantean colonies in this part of the world...I left Phanagoria unscathed because of my respect for the dead. Now, it will be my final resting place—or least until the Gods see fit to render judgment.”

Lam gestured haughtily at the pair of guards. “I will conduct the prisoner to his tomb. You may go.”

The armored men exchanged perplexed, pensive glances. A tall black-bearded man whose attitude bespoke authority said, “My esteemed lord, this is not a task for you alone—”

Lam cut through the man’s protests with a short, slashing motion of his right hand. “I decide my own tasks, Captain Tros. Do as I say.”

The soldier ducked his head and stepped back. “As you command.”

Abraxas walked beneath the arch. Lam followed him. The sun beat down from the blue sky, baking the ground beneath their feet. Unlike Lam, Abraxas wore no footgear, but he did not react to the heat. As they walked, they heard no sound other than the boom of the surf and the jingle of chains.

Lam made a casual show of glancing over his right shoulder, at the same time pretending to adjust his voluminous robe. The two guards were nowhere to be seen. “We appear to be alone.”

Abraxas gusted out a sigh. “It is about time. Now we may complete the business between us.”

Lam looked at him, a half-smile quirking his lips. “You are very sure of yourself, my old friend.”

Abraxas chuckled. “I am indeed...and that is why I find myself in this current predicament.”

“Scarcely a predicament,” replied Lam. “This is your fate.”

Abraxas nodded. “It is one I accept.”

“And the other Chimerii?” Lam asked, an accusatory edge to his voice. “Do they accept it with the same calm as you?”

Abraxas did not reply for a long moment. When he did, his voice was low and subdued. “Not all of them.”

The two men walked between a pair of mausoleums with silver-chased walls. “However,” Abraxas continued, “most of them willingly, if not eagerly, entered the Resurrection Crypts you prepared for them. The ones who refused...”

His words trailed off, as if he could not bring himself to finish the sentence.

Lam did not press him but he did interject quietly, “The ones who refused will be hunted like wild beasts and exterminated.”

Abraxas lifted his right hand and touched the cloth tied between his eyes. “I would like to remove this—it’s become very uncomfortable.”

“Of course.”

Abraxas tugged at the strip of fabric, tossing it aside with a sigh of relief. A bulge of flesh at the bridge of his nose showed a red pressure imprint. “That fool, Jason of Aeolia, feared my Deep Vision. Hercules told him to bind up my eye so I could not ensorcell the Argonauts.”

The corner of Lam’s mouth lifted in a smile. “How little the humans understand us.”

Abraxas eyed him quizzically. “Perhaps as little as I understand you.”

“Explain, please.”

“You denounced me and my cause years ago, and now—”

“—And now I help you, if not your cause.”

“Why?” Abraxas demanded.

Lam shook his head, his dark eyes suddenly distant. “It took me far too long to realize my grievous error in judgment by withholding my support for you all of these years. I came to understand your point of view and I reluctantly agreed with it. I’ve taken steps to make your fate only a temporary one—but I have no idea just how temporary.”

Abraxas stared him suspiciously. “So that’s why you created the Resurrection Crypts for my Chimerii as well?”

“Among other reasons.”

The two men stopped at the base of an obelisk of black marble rising two meters from a clean-swept expanse of ground. Engraved on the side facing them was the image of a man with a rooster’s head and coiled serpents for legs. Sunk into the marble beneath the serpent legs was a perfectly round perforation, not much larger than an Atlantean gold talent.

“What is this?” Abraxas asked, eyeing the column with bemusement. “I see my personal symbol inscribed there...the Master Breeder.”

He cast a quizzical glance at Lam. “Is this my grave marker?”

“After a fashion.” Lam reached into the belled right sleeve of his robe with his left hand. He withdrew it, holding six flat disks the size of coins between thumb and forefinger. They looked to be composed of shiny white ceramic.

Lam spread the disks out on his palm for Abraxas to inspect. He touched them tentatively, turning them over. The disks depicted the same figure as that inscribed on the obelisk. The obverse sides showed the acquiline profile of a man with a hawkish nose, prominent jaw and shaven skull.

“Very nicely crafted,” Abraxas commented dryly. “A good likeness. What are they supposed to be?”

“I call them Abraxas Stones.”

A faint smile ghosted over the lips of Abraxas. “Should I be flattered?”

“Possibly,” replied Lam, matching his faint smile. “They were designed as keys.”

The eyes of Abraxas narrowed. “Keys?”

“Keys.”

Taking one of the disks, Lam pressed it, profile side out, into the perforation on the marble. With a thumb he turned it to the right, to the left and then back to the right. The ground around the base of the obelisk began to tremble and show cracks. They heard the distant clanking of machinery.

The column of marble slowly rose, pushed from beneath by the gleaming metal cylinder. Air hissed and with puffs of dust, the cylinder stopped rising. A vertical line appeared on the surface, then a pair of panels slid apart. Within stood an oblong pedestal, nearly seven feet long. Four small pyramids crafted from pale golden alloy were placed equidistantly around it. A smooth, crystalline ovoid made of translucent material rested on the points.

Lam tapped the disks resting on the flat of his hand. “The Abraxas Stones were created as the keys to open the Resurrection Crypts—once the crypts are sealed, the keys will only function when the Gods of Nibiru and Mother Tiamat exert no more influence over this world...or us.”

Abraxas snorted disdainfully. “And when will that be?”

Lam shrugged. “Twenty years or twenty thousand or any time period in between. Neither you nor the Chimerii will age while in the stasis canisters. On the day you are freed, you will awaken in the quarters I prepared for you below. And on that day you can make a decision on whether to continue your war or find a new path.”

He paused, reached under the folds of his robe and brought forth a small but heavy chest made of dark metal. It rested within a leather sling connected to a looped carrying strap. Embossed serpents with human skulls for heads writhed across the surface of the box. From the largest skull sprouted nine tentacles. There was no clasp or catch or lock.

It was difficult for the eyes of Abraxas to widen, but his high-planned face went momentarily blank with shock. With trembling fingers, he traced the length of a serpent and then pushed down on the bas relief of the tentacled skull. The lid of the chest popped open. A rainbow-hued glow shimmered from within, bright even in the sunlight. The multicolored aura surrounded a pulsing, egg-shaped crystal of smoky purple at the bottom of the box.

“How did you get this?” he asked hoarsely. “I threw it overboard before we fled to Mount Othyrs.”

“Some of the merfolk are sympathetic to your cause. . .the selkies, for example. Unbeknownst to Tritonis, they retrieved this and brought it to me days ago—as I asked.”

Lam closed the box and pushed it into Abraxas’ hands. “The quantum vacuum crystal will be waiting for you on the day you revive from stasis. Then you must seek out and open the two other Resurrection Crypts if you wish to revive the Chimerii.”

“With the keys—the Abraxas Stones?”

Lam nodded, closing his fist around the ceramic disks. “The primary six will remain in my possession. I’ve made non-functional copies to serve as diversions in case the Directorate becomes suspicious of my actions. I will say they were created only as memorial tokens of a once great Archon and a dear friend.”

The high forehead of Abraxas acquired a furrow of doubt. “Where will I find the keystones upon my resurrection?”

Lam shook his head sadly. “That I cannot answer. If your desire to use them is strong enough, I have no doubt you *will* find them.”

Lam touched a spot between his eyes. “Alone among all of our kind, you have the Deep Vision. You will seek out the stones.”

Abraxas nodded. “You are right.”

He turned toward the canister, the metal chest under one arm. He hesitated and then clapped a hand on Lam’s shoulder. “You have been a good friend, Lam. I am sorry I ever doubted your loyalty. I hope we will find each other upon my awakening.”

Lam squeezed the other’s wrist. “My hope, as well.”

The two men stared into each other’s eyes for a long moment. With a sigh, Abraxas back-stepped into the chamber, toward the canister. He used his right hand to balance himself on the rim. He lowered himself, lying down on the cushioned interior, fingers laced around the chest.

His lips parted. “One more thing—”

Almost instantly, the humped, crystalline cover slid over him, cutting off his words. The interior filled with a cloudy, smoke-like substance. Lam moved closer and touched the crystal surface. The vapor within the ovoid immediately cleared. Within it he saw Abraxas, eyes and mouth slightly open. All the color seemed to have been leached from his body. His form held the appearance of dark blue ice, not only in color but composition. Even the dried blood on his limbs looked black, like splashes of ink.

Lam took his hand away from the cover and the smoky vapor within the canister immediately swirled around the figure of Abraxas again, obscuring him from view. He pulled the door panels shut, engaging an automatic sensor. Immediately the metal cylinder began sinking beneath the surface of Phanagoria.

Lam waited until the obelisk was flush with the ground before removing the Abraxas Stone from the perforation. He fingered the fanciful depiction of Abraxas inscribed into the black marble. His lips quirked in a rueful smile.

In his two hundred-plus years of life, Lam, like all of his brethren, revered and even worshiped the Anunnaki, the Gods of Nibiru. He and the other Archons awaited the return of their creators in order to gratefully surrender the stewardship of the Earth.

Only Abraxas suspected the Anunnaki were not the ultimate pinnacle of existence. Over three centuries older than Lam, Abraxas was one of the few members of the Archon Directorate who could cite first-hand, face-to-face contact with the so-called Gods of Nibiru.

Lam still remembered with painful clarity the day Abraxas told him the Anunnaki were not gods and in fact, on the cosmic scale, their intelligence might be only average. “Even we Archons seem like gods to the humans we oversee,” Abraxas pointed out. “And we know we are not deities.”

That one casual conversation so long ago had led to this moment, with Lam standing before the marble monument on Phanagoria. Inadvertently, Abraxas granted him a vision of a truth he might not have glimpsed for millennia, if ever. It was a vision he lived with for over ten years and it still disturbed him—but it also motivated him to obey his true nature, not one forced upon him from without. Nothing of value ever came from force.

Lam returned the Abraxas Stones to the hidden pocket beneath his robe. He turned away from the column of black marble, noting how the sun cast its long shadow before him across the necropolis. Bleakly, he realized the shadow of Abraxas would only lengthen in the centuries to come.

