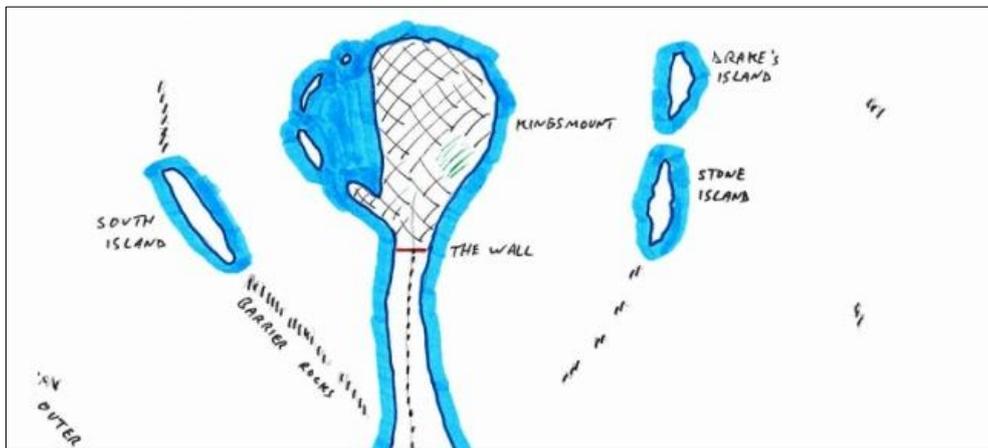


The Last Days of Atlantis

By David Meadows & Friends

Two: The Tunnel



Amber, an itinerant street entertainer and occasional thief, had been travelling on foot at the head of the refugee caravan when the bandits attacked. For several days her eyes had been on one of the covered wagons in the van, catching glimpses of a young woman of evident high birth and wealth who never left the wagon but despatched a maidservant to run her errands. Amber's curiosity was piqued.

When the alarm cries came from the back of the wagon, Amber was sitting at a cooking fire sharing a communal supper. At the first alarm, she slipped away from her place and retrieved her equipment from where she had stashed it under some straw on a farmer's cart. Deciding there was not enough time to don her armour, she settled for strapping on her weapon belt and throwing on her darkest cloak, blending into the shadows as she moved to see if she could assist the people being attacked at the rear.

Some instinct made her look back to the front of the column. Sure enough, she saw dark shapes slip into the lady's wagon, and seconds later there came a muffled scream, followed by the dark figures emerging with a struggling shape wrapped in a heavy sack.

Reasoning that the reward for saving a high-born lady would be greater than for helping the homeless refugees bringing up the rear of the column, she turned and followed stealthily after the kidnapers.

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By the rising crescent of the Moon, she tracked them to the eastern cliff edge, and was astonished to see them drop out of sight. Further investigation uncovered a steep cut in the cliff that gave access to a narrow ledge twenty feet below. Waiting a short time to ensure that the bandits had moved away, she silently scaled the steep descent and in moments stood on the ledge. The only obvious way forward was now a cave mouth which led into pitch darkness.

While she debated her next move, Amber heard whispered voices on the cliff edge above, followed by a painfully loud scrambling. A man landed heavily on the ledge, and, before Amber could do anything, he shouted loudly up to his companions.

From behind him, Amber clapped her hand over his mouth.

‘Quiet!’ she hissed. ‘They are close!’ The man struggled free and turned to confront her as two more men scrambled down the slope with even more noise than the first. Amber rolled her eyes, then, keeping her hands away from her weapons to make it obvious she wasn’t an enemy, she spoke very quietly but clearly:

‘There are four men, they have kidnapped a high-born lady from the caravan, and they have taken her into that cave, and I intend to follow them, strike with the element of surprise, and rescue the lady. You may accompany me, if you can be sufficiently stealthy.’

There was a whispered conversation, and the three men—Falderstaff, Anenomes, and Fourth, or course—agreed to join forces with this intense young woman.

Lighting lanterns and turning them down to the bare minimum necessary to see their footing, they entered the cave.

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The cave was high enough for a tall man and wide enough for two to walk abreast, rough-walled and with an uneven floor of crumbling stone. But as they penetrated further, the footing became surer, the walls smother, and they began to wonder if they were in a man-made tunnel rather than a cave.

They came to a side passage, with no clue to tell them which way to turn. Amber went a short distance down the passage and quickly came back to report that it narrowed into an impassable crack. The bandits must have continued down the main tunnel. But the investigation had cost them precious minutes, and they were acutely aware they were probably falling further behind the kidnappers, and were in a labyrinth that could see them easily lose their quarry. They picked up speed and hurried on.

At the next intersection, they halted again. This time, both left and right tunnels looked passable, and they debated splitting up. But, quick thinking, Fourth knelt and found footprints in the left-hand passage. The pale, chalky soil from the cliff edge and the ledge had clung to the boots of the bandits and left clear marks on the route they had taken.

Moving swiftly on, Amber, in the lead, suddenly stopped and shielded her lantern. Ahead, unmistakably, was the flicker of another lantern. Extinguishing their own lanterns, the party silently drew weapons and crept forward.

And then Fourth stumbled over the lantern Falderstaff had put on the floor in order to free his hands for a fight. Its clatter echoed down the tunnel, much louder than they would have expected, and they heard a warning shout from ahead.

Abandoning stealth, they ran forward.

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The tunnel widened into a larger space, still cramped but wide enough for the four bandits to meet them with drawn swords. They had little option but to fight back, a short, viscous melee, the dim lantern light and confined quarters allowing for little finesse.

Beyond the four desperate bandits, they were aware of another figure; tall, hulking, shrouded in a dark cloak and hood, he bent over where a young woman lay senseless on the floor.

The group redoubled their efforts, attempting to battle their way past the bandits and drive this other man away from the defenceless woman.

Falderstaff succeeded in stunning his opponent with a well-placed thrust of his quarterstaff, and slipped past him, shouting a challenge. The cloaked figure straightened to its full height of at least seven feet, and faced Falderstaff, who involuntarily recoiled at the sight. The man looked barely human at all, his twisted face almost dog-like, his red eyes emanating pure evil. Before Falderstaff could recover his wits, the figure threw a dagger at him, barely missing him. In the second's grace this gained him, the figure turned and squeezed through a narrow passage at the rear of the cavern, his bulk barely fitting.

Gathering himself, Falderstaff bounded after him, to be stopped by Amber's grasp on his tunic.

'Let him go, you fool. You won't be able to use your weapon in that crack, he can wait and run you through while you are squeezing out!'

Falderstaff saw the sense of this, and reluctantly let the villain go. Instead, he picked up the dagger that had been aimed at him. He had never seen anything like it. Even in the dim lantern light, it was obvious that it was not forged of bronze or iron but somehow carved of a single piece of smoothly polished black stone. And its edge was like a razor. Falderstaff carefully thrust it through his belt, to examine more fully at a later time.

The bandits had been defeated. Three had fled, one lay dead. Falderstaff waited until none of his companions were looking, and lifted the dead bandit's purse.

Anenomes was administering to the young woman, who was slowly regaining her senses. In answer to his questions, she gave her name as Daimona, and assured them she was unharmed. Then a look of panic crossed her face and her hand flew to her breast.

'My amulet! The dog-faced man took it!'

Falderstaff was immediately interested in the value of the amulet, which the girl dismissed as a mere family heirloom of sentimental value. Nevertheless, she seemed unduly agitated about its loss.

Pursuing the thief, however, was out of the question; all agreed on that. Instead, they made their way back along the tunnels towards the fresh air.

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It was still dark outside, the height of the Moon suggesting that their entire adventure underground had taken no more than two hours. As they made their way back to the campfires of the caravan, they heard the thunder of a party of horsemen closing rapidly from the north. Taking them to be a rescue party, they attracted their attention by waving their lanterns, and were soon facing a score of mounted knights in the livery of Kingsmount. Their leader, a tall man with a noble bearing, shouted a challenge.

'I am Avant of Kingsmount, servant of the Regent, captain of the guard. State your names and business.'

To the surprise of her rescuers, it was the lady, Daimona, who stepped forward and answered. Though barely more than a girl, and a grimy and tattered one at that, she drew herself up and faced the mounted knight as an equal, speaking in a voice much more self-assured than the frightened one they had heard in the tunnels.

'Sir Avant, it is many years since we last parted, but perhaps you will still recognise me. I am Daimona, Princess of Kingsmount, travelling here as a refugee, kidnapped within sight of the city and rescued by these brave travellers, to whom I owe my life.'

There was a murmuring among the knights, but Avant held up his hand to restore discipline, then slipped from his horse, strode over to Daimona, and knelt before her.

'What is going on?' wondered Falderstaff out loud. Amber shushed him. All she could deduce from the proceedings was that her reward might be greater than she had dared hope. Certainly more than the paltry few coins she had seen Falderstaff pilfer from the dead bandit.

Avant spoke.

'Princess, welcome. I am glad to see you after all these years, and equally glad to find you unharmed. Your uncle, too, will be most happy to hear this news.'

'I wonder,' murmured Daimona, but only Amber's sharp ears caught that remark.

Avant turned to the four rescuers.

'You have the city's gratitude, and my personal gratitude. If you will present yourselves at the castle tomorrow, you shall be richly rewarded.'

There was little more said. Avant remounted, and helped Daimona up to sit before him on the horse. Then the entire party returned to the city at a gallop.

'What is a princess?' Falderstaff asked.

'The daughter of a king,' replied Fourth, who was a learned man.

After a pause:

'What is a king?' Falderstaff asked.

There was no answer.

Amber, Anenomes, Falderstaff and Fourth made their weary way back to the wagons to retrieve their belongings. There was the feeling that they were involved in weighty matters that were currently beyond their understanding. But tomorrow they would enter the city, and there they might learn more.

For now, there was little to do but sleep.

To be continued in Chapter Three: The City