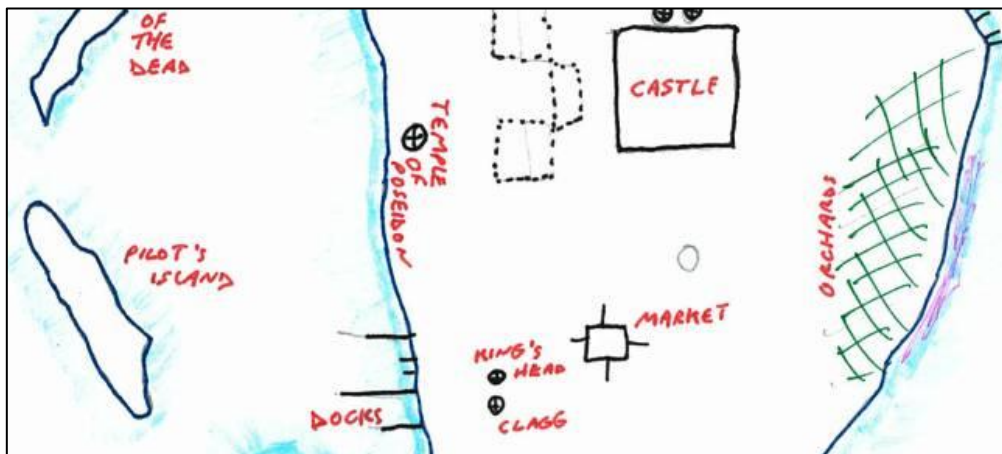


# The Last Days of Atlantis

By David Meadows & Friends

## Three: The City



The wall stretched for a quarter of a mile across the full width of the peninsula, and was the height of five men. From a distance, it looked impressive and impregnable. From a closer vantage point, its deficiencies became apparent, as Gotye and Fourth were discussing when the refugee caravan wound its way through the single central gateway.

First, the gates themselves were an obvious weak point in the otherwise featureless expanse of stone blocks. No wooden structure would stand against an attacker armed with battering rams or fire. Second, the height of the wall was insufficient to repel determined men with ladders. Finally, the sheer length of the wall would work against it, for surely no single city could muster an army great enough to defend the entire length?

There were men guarding the gates and standing lookout on the walls, all dressed in leather armour and carrying the short stabbing sword common among Atlantean foot soldiers. Their surcoats were of yellow-and-blue and bore the device of a curiously shaped five-pointed crown. They could see the same device on the pennants which flew from the towers of the castle that loomed over the city.

Beyond the wall lay the city of Kingsmount. Some said it was the oldest city on Atlantis. Certainly it felt old, its architecture a jumble of styles, its streets twisting and unplanned. There were none of the colonnaded avenues, spacious arcades, and graceful arches of Poseidonopolis, nor the natural, rock-hewn galleries of Herculaneum. The buildings were of dark grey quarried stone, and huddled together as if to

resist the incursion of the outside world. As soon as the travellers entered through the open gates, a palpable sense of ancient dignity seemed to settle over them, one quite at odds with the chaos of activity that surrounded them.

For weeks, Kingsmount had been receiving refugees from all of Atlantis as city after city fell and the survivors fled north to this forgotten haven. The city was bursting at the seams with people, far more than it was ever intended to hold. And those people were preparing for a siege. Within the walls, the refugee caravan jostled for space with wagons bringing in provisions from the outlying farms, and everywhere there were armed men, many of them looking as if they had never held a weapon in their lives, being drilled by weary and despairing veterans in the livery of Kingsmount.

The most frenzied activity took place at the wall itself, as from the inside it was clear that it was far from finished, and massive stone blocks were still being manhandled up wooden scaffolding and wrestled into place. They paused to see one such block being blessed by a priest of Gaia before sweating workers threw ropes around it and began hoisting it aloft.

The priest saw them and greeted them in a friendly manner, though he was obviously tired from his exertions.

'I bless every stone, to strengthen it, and ward it against harmful magic,' he explained. He bowed respectfully to Anenomes, the priest of Poseidon travelling with the refugees. 'Greetings. I am Quartz, servant of Gaia the guardian of the earth.'

'I am Anenomes, servant of Poseidon the guardian of the sea,' the priest responded formally.

'I expect you wish to present yourself at your temple. It lies on the west slopes. Takes the road here through to the marketplace, and anyone there will direct you. My brother, Quart, is priest there.'

'Thank you. May I ask if you also know of suitable lodging for me and my companions?'

Quartz shook his head doubtfully. 'Every corner of the city is full. You will be lucky if you can find a doorway to sleep in. Unless you want to join the militia manning the walls. They will find you a bed in the barracks.'

'We should do that,' said Gotye. 'War will come to the city soon, and we will all have to fight.'

'I will fight in my own way, when the time comes, and certainly not under the orders of these men,' said Amber, contemptuously indicating the drill sergeants nearby.

Clagg, the merchant of Kingsmount they had been travelling with, spoke up at that point. 'My brother-in-law owns an inn, and I owe you a debt for guarding me in the attack last night. Come with me to my shop and help me unload my goods, and I will introduce you to him. He will find you space.'

Gotye declined the offer, preferring to go his own way. Amber, Anenomes, Falderstaff and Fourth followed Clagg through the narrow and crowded streets.

Clagg tried to give them some sense of the city's geography. Kingsmount was built on a steep hill, and the main thoroughfares ran in spiralling circles around it. Steep alleys and narrow staircases between buildings connected the levels, and in many places a road on one level lay on the roofs of the buildings on the level below, or a low wall would conceal a lengthy drop to a lower street on its far side. At the top of the hill stood the castle keep, a massive fortified structure. North of it lay the library, the observatory, and the houses of the city's wealthier inhabitants. On the east were orchards, paddocks, and stabling for horses. The south quarter they had seen, and it was home to the streets of lesser merchants and tradesmen, surrounding the main market square which lay between the wall and the castle. The docks, surrounded by the poorest parts of the city, were on the west, and it was to this quarter that Clagg now drove his wagon.

Clagg's shop was a small building in the middle of a terrace of poor establishments that catered to the various needs of sailors in ports. A covered, sloping passage at the left of his shop cut through the terrace and gave access to the back of the buildings, and eventually to the docks. They helped Clagg unload the boxes from his cart and carry them into the shop. A young woman, barely more than a girl, opened the door for them. Clagg introduced her as Setara, his niece and, since her parents were dead, his

ward, who looked after his shop while he was away on business as well as cooking and cleaning when he was at home. She greeted her uncle, but only nodded shyly to the others when Clagg gave their names.

Inside, the shop was a cramped single room, filled with a bewildering variety of goods of uncertain function and dubious value. Clagg indicated that they should put the new boxes in the back room, which involved a tricky journey down steep stairs--the peculiar geography of the city meaning that the front door of the shop was on the top floor of the building, while the living quarters shared by Clagg and his niece were on a lower level.

Once the wagon was unloaded, Clagg pointed to north end of the terrace, where one building was obviously larger and taller than the rest.

'That is the King's Head. My brother-in-law, Boris, owns it. Tell him I sent you, and he will find you rooms.'

They thanked him, and headed up the street to the inn. At this early hour of the day, it was quiet inside. Boris was a portly, balding man, who looked very doubtful when they asked about lodging and gave a sharp intake of breath.

'I'm full up. Ruddy refugees everywhere. Some of my rooms have triple occupancy. Don't you know there's a war on?' Then he seemed to reconsider. 'But for friends of Clagg, I could put myself out. There's an attic space, it's not much and you'd have to clear the pigeons out, and you'll need to decide for yourselves how you divide it up. Seven copper pennies a night. Each. But I'll throw in some free bedding, can't say fairer than that can you?'

'Seven? It's daylight robbery!' spluttered Falderstaff, who took a dim view of theft--unless he was the one performing it.

'What can I say? There's a war on.'

'Seven will be acceptable,' said Amber. 'You can pay the man from that purse you ... acquired last night, Falderstaff.'

'How did you know about that?' asked Falderstaff guiltily.

Business concluded, they left their meagre baggage in their new lodgings and decided it was time to present themselves at the castle as had been requested. After all, as Falderstaff pointed out, there was no point in delaying a reward, was there?

They soon found that going anywhere in Kingsmount was a frustrating business. Although they could plainly see the castle, any road that appeared to go in the correct direction either turned in a different random direction or come to a dead end at a featureless stone wall. So it was almost noon before they eventually found the main gate of the castle, and they were beginning to wish they had breakfasted at the King's Head while they had had the chance.

At the gate, they gave their names to a disinterested guard who said he had never heard of them. After mentioning that their summons came from Sir Avant, however, his demeanour changed and he admitted them, telling them that Avant was in the Regent's audience chamber, and ordering a young page to convey them there. The twisting passages of the castle were as hard to navigate as the city itself, though Amber made sure to memorise the route in case she should ever need to follow it again.

The audience chamber was a large room with a high vaulted ceiling. Several people were in the chamber, most of them having the demeanour of supplicants here for an audience. Conducting the audience and dispensing judgements was the city's Regent, Ebenezer. Clagg had explained to them that, unlike every other city of Atlantis, Kingsmount was ruled not by an elected senate but by a council of merchants headed by a single man, Ebenezer, whose hereditary title was Regent. Clagg had implied that the Regent was not well liked by the people he ruled, and that they should keep their wits about them when they dealt with him.

Regent Ebenezer was a tall, thin man with a sharp nose and a piercing gaze. He wore a heavy ceremonial robe lined with fur and a heavy golden chain around his neck. He sat on an ornate, throne-like chair as he listened to a merchant air some petty grievance about taxation. He had the air of a man that it was unwise to trust and unwise to openly cross.

Sir Avant and the Princess Daimona were present, but stood apart from the crowd of supplicants, conversing quietly. Avant saw them enter and obviously recognised them, for he beckoned them forward and murmured a quick word in the Regent's ear.

Ebenezer looked them up and down with shrewd eyes. The eyes of the other guests in the room took a similar interest, trying to work out who these rough-looking travellers were, and they were conscious that they were wearing the same clothes that had been wearing for the last two hundred weary miles of travel.

The Regent finally spoke.

'I am told that I have you to thank for the saving of the Lady Daimona from bandits last night. The Lady is my ward, and so you have my eternal gratitude for delivering her safely to my care. And it is only right that you are rewarded. I have thought hard on this matter, to determine what reward is most fitting for such noble warriors. For I would not wish to insult you by the vulgar offering of silver or gold.'

Falderstaff appeared to be about to speak at this point, but Anenomes silenced him with an elbow to his ribs.

'And so I suggested to Sir Avant that he took the pick of the finest weapons in the castle armoury. This reward, we hope, will enable you to continue to serve this city which is now your home, in defending her against the storm that is to come.'

He motioned to Avant, who they realised had slipped from the room during the speech and returned with several wrapped items. The knight presented one to each of them in turn, explaining his choices as he did so.

'My Lord Priest, I saw that your scimitar was of bronze, a poor choice of metal for a weapon. I understand that the gods abhor iron, but perhaps they will find this silvered steel scimitar more to their liking. It is both stronger and keener of edge than bronze.'

'Fourth, you will forgive me if I point out that your sabre is of quite ordinary quality. This one was wrought by the finest smith in the city, its balance is without equal and no armour can stand against its edge.'

'Falderstaff Quagmire, I have little I can offer a man who fights with a wooden staff. But I noticed you also carry throwing knives. This matched pair of knives have an enchantment on them that will cause them to always fly true and strike their mark.'

'Lady Amber, this rapier is one of the fabled shadow swords created by the celestial priests of Uranus. When you draw it forth from its scabbard it will wrap you in a pattern of shadows that will confuse your enemies and protect you from their attacks.'

They realised that despite the brevity of their previous meeting, and by lantern light, Avant had taken the measure of each of them and their weapons and picked a gift which best suited each of them. They each thanked him and the Regent for their generosity. The Regent then made a flowery speech to ensure that assembled throng understood how benevolent and generous he was, then turned to other matters. They realised they had been dismissed, and left the audience chamber.

'I would have preferred silver and gold,' said Falderstaff morosely as soon as the doors had closed behind them.

'Though I am but a peaceful alchemist, when the enemy is at the gates we will be more grateful for these weapons than for money,' said Fourth philosophically.

As they made their way back to the castle gates, they heard a call from behind them. Turning, they saw Daimona running to catch them.

'I didn't have time to thank you properly last night, so I thought I should now. I am sorry I cannot reward you myself, I arrive here as a pauper, completely at my guardian's mercy.'

'Ebenezer is your guardian?' asked Amber, to clarify the situation.

'He is. It is a ... complicated story.'

'He calls you "Lady", not "Princess".'

'He will not acknowledge that I am a princess, for to do so would remove the need for him.'

'I don't understand.'

'Kingsmount was historically the seat of the kings of Atlantis. When the last king was exiled, the line of Regents ruled the city in his stead. I am now the last of the line of kings, and by right this is my castle and I should rule here. But he rejects my claim and will not step aside for me.'

This mystified all of them. The idea of hereditary kings was unheard of in Atlantis. But there was something inherently unlikeable about the Regent, whereas this young woman seemed friendly and honest.

'Is there no way you can prove your claim?' asked Fourth.

'My amulet. It is called the Amulet of Kings. It was a gift from my father, passed down through his line throughout their exile. Only the true king of Atlantis can wear it. It has five points, to represent the five-pointed crown of the kings. You can see it on the city livery.'

'This is the amulet which was taken from you by that creature last night,' said Amber.

Daimona nodded confirmation. Thanking them again, she turned and, reluctantly, it seemed to them, went back into the castle.

They didn't speak until they were outside the castle walls. Then Amber voiced what they were all thinking.

'I think we should find the dog-faced creature and retrieve her amulet.'