

ATLANTIS  
NEVER LOST

The story of Santorini

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GEORGE KOUKOULAS

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The story of Santorini

NOVEL  
2012



For you



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## Volcano Island

The passenger ferry ploughed a straight line across the surface, splitting in two the waters in the basin formed by massive, reddish-black rocks. This huge concavity surrounded by towering cliffs is the crater of one of the most ancient active volcanoes on this planet. Hazy drowsiness still lingering after a short but restful nap magnified the other-worldliness of the wild scenery around him. A sight unmatched by any other anywhere on the face of the earth. With every passing second as the vessel neared the imposing walls of the caldera, the rocks seemed to pose more and more of a threat, demanding and captivating every ounce of his attention.

Bright white houses teetering on the cliff edges, carefully constructed between sea and sky where they defied gravity and the sheer drop, completed the picture, like the last of the winter snow on mountain peaks just before it melts away in the warm embrace of the spring sunshine. As the ferry approached the harbour, the outline of villages on the island gradually came more clearly into view on the port side. First was the village of Ia, renowned for its views of the setting sun. Then scattered dwellings like tiny snowflakes reached along

the cliff-tops to the next village, Imerovigli. With the frenetic pace of development taking place on Santorini, this village is now almost part of Fira, the main town on the island. Only the experienced, discerning eye is able to see where one ends and the other begins. Towards the right, in a semi-circular arc skirting the brow of the caldera, the landscape is equally bewitching. Clusters of white houses perching on the rim of the volcano. The last patch of snow visible on the facing side of the island was the village of Akrotiri. It took Alexandros a while to recover from the impressive sights slowly revealing themselves before him, faithfully keeping time with the progress of the ferry. He could not help but muse a while on the events that had led to his now being before this magnificent sight.

It had all begun two days earlier with a telephone call from his much-loved but, as with so many relationships when shared interests fade away, now almost forgotten, archaeology tutor, professor Nicodemos. Events had then unfolded unexpectedly fast, compared with the normal pace of the routine that had long since taken over his life.

He was as yet uncertain whether his decision to do a second degree in archaeology after graduating from Athens University School of Science had really been prompted by an inner thirst for knowledge in that field or whether it had been a delayed reaction to his earlier choices. As a child he had always wanted to be among stars and planets – anything to do with space intrigued him amazingly. As he grew up he decided to study at the School of Science with a view to embarking on a career in astronomy. During the course of his studies, however, dreams were swept away by crude reality. Relentless intervention and pressure in the guise of advice from family

and friends alike in favour of a safe, secure career in a conventional, established field had swayed Alexandros away from his initial decision and derailed his dreams. He had ended up teaching crash courses in physics at cram schools, helping school leavers prepare for university entrance exams. His previously well-to-do family had been going through a bad patch and was in financial difficulties. The small family business his father ran had failed to keep up with the changing needs of the market and rapid advances in information technology. The healthy, lucrative electronic repair and sales firm of the 80s was a thing of the past. The firm was now caught in a perpetual struggle to make ends meet, having long since lost the unequal battle against modern, multi-national companies.

It was seven in the morning when his mobile phone rang. He was not at all accustomed to such early morning calls. The fact that ten seemingly random numbers flashed across the tiny screen instead of some familiar name locked in the memory of the device sparked his imagination. An early morning fluster that evolved into justifiable curiosity as to the identity of the unknown person at the other end of the line, and his reasons for calling. He had no trouble recognising the ever eager, vibrant voice of his favourite tutor. Nicodemos skipped through the initial exchanges customary for a telephone conversation between two people who have not spoken for over a year with amazing alacrity and went straight to the point.

‘Alexandros, I need your help.’

The initial spontaneity in his voice gradually gave way to the more serious tone he adopted when dealing with crucial questions in one of his lessons; lessons that were always given to a packed lecture hall, even when other university build-

ings stood emptied by strikes, elections, celebrations and the host of other things that so often leave them abandoned and devoid of life.

The professor at the other end of the line went on, 'I can't explain on the telephone,' he said, 'but you're the only person I can trust. It's imperative that you come to Santorini right away. Right away, do you hear?'

His phrases, now short, betrayed his agitation.

'The discovery I'm on the track of... the reason why I'm here...It's enormous.' A short pause followed these last words, hiding the huge effort he had to make to seem collected. 'I'll be expecting you tomorrow. The day after at the latest. You can stay with me at my place in Ia. This can't wait. Call me as soon as you know exactly what time you'll be here.'

The familiar buzz on the line marked the abrupt end of the conversation; a one-way conversation which had left Alexandros no room to object.

The ship entered the submerged caldera of Santorini. The houses perched on the edge of the island's cliffs now clearly visible. To their right, the black knot of two small islands in the middle of the caldera glided past. Young islands made up entirely of volcanic lava that first started to rise two thousand years ago, having since changed shape and form many times, in deference to the whims of the volcano. The last time the volcano decided to make another such change was three hundred years ago, when new pieces of earth rose in successive waves from the depths of the sea amidst eruptions and upheavals of the earth. Gradually the pieces grew together and now form the island known by its descriptive name of 'Nea Kammeni', or Newly Burnt.

This was not his first visit to Santorini, the island in the Cyclades that floats into the mind of every young romantic as the island of love, the ultimate destination for all fledgling couples. Being no exception, not even he had been able to escape the myth, the convention of the time. A flood of memories of the trip made to those small black islands with Aphrodite on the second day of their holiday six years earlier came rushing back. Emblazoned across the travel agent's leaflet in huge red lettering were the words:

*Volcano Tour*

It had taken Alexandros quite a few days to realise that every day on this island was a volcano trek and he had embarked on that little Odyssey without having sought any advice, was totally unprepared for what lay ahead. The only thoughts occupying his mind were of love-making with his partner. The invisible workings of his lustful mind were totally given over to an internal timepiece constantly counting down to the next time their bodies would entwine in erotic embrace. He had only just discovered how overpoweringly tyrannical desire can be when aroused by a woman's body.

The trek was a total disaster. Tiny, burning hot, black grit tortured him as it crept between the soles of his feet and sandals with every step he gingerly took on this slightly rugged ground. He now realised why every tourist in the group, and by diabolical coincidence his own partner too, were all wearing trainers and socks in the heat of midsummer! As became clear to him on more than one occasion in those days, most of his grey matter was pre-occupied with the pursuit of erotic encounters – there was little left for any activity of

the rational mind. The torment continued as they climbed the steep path and the immediate dilemma overrode even his unbridled, imaginary sexo-chronometer. Should he submit to the humiliation of admitting what torture he suffered with every step, or should he carry on walking like any other Anas-tenari fire-walker<sup>1</sup>, albeit not in the name of God, but in that of love? His agonising grimaces and ungainly steps put an end to the awful dilemma. His fellow trekkers could not help but notice. The guide, a sun-weathered, almost toasted local man came over to him, knelt down and opened his backpack, pulling out a pair of socks in a rather rare shade of brown; a pair of socks that had most certainly been white when first worn. He still remembered every word the guide had said.

‘Put these on. It’ll help a bit. This sort of thing’s happened before, but I can’t be expected to carry a supply of spare shoes in all shapes and sizes, now can I?’

The words had come with a smile, tinged with a touch of sarcasm, and the situation grew worse when the smile evolved into a long look, with innuendo, at Aphrodite, his girl, standing beside him. Oh, the shame of it! All he could wish for was a cloak; a cloak of invisibility that would make him disappear instantly. His only comfort lay in the dark blackness of the scenery, now in absolute keeping with his mood.

A double hoot on the ferry boat horn interrupted his short mental excursion into the past; Aphrodite now also a part of the past he had mused on. They were almost at the point where the captain would order a series of intricate ma-

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to a custom linked to the Greek Orthodox church in which believers walk barefoot on red hot coals as a demonstration of their faith.

noeuvres so the ferry could dock in this most difficult, awkwardly constructed harbour in the Aegean Sea. Every visitor arriving at this harbour is greeted by massive black cliffs rising around and above him like a gaping mouth, seemingly with intent to swallow him whole. The only way out is along a treacherous, steeply winding track hewn out of the capricious, reddish black walls of volcanic rock. Ia, where the professor lived, was, a remote, typically Cycladic village at the other end of the island, and the choice of transport to it was limited. There was public transport by bus, which would take him first to Fira, the main town of the island, where he would have to board another bus to take him to Ia, his destination. His only other option was to queue endlessly with all the remaining, travel-weary passengers until a taxi came along. In the event, he decided to brave the island's public transport.

Trying to avoid the sweat-soaked, hairy armpit of an oversized, northern European female tourist just a few centimetres from his face, he also had to brace himself against the excessive weight of the overlarge local woman strap hanging next to him every time the bus rounded a hairpin bend on the steeply climbing road. The middle-aged lady made every possible effort to steady herself using the worn out strap, but with limited success. The torture lasted about half an hour, the time it took the bus to make all the intermediary stops and complete its journey to Fira.

On the second leg of his journey, the one to Ia, he was luckier. His window seat on the left of the bus allowed him the luxury of rekindling his memories of the rare geological formations on this island. The alternation of rock forms along this route is particularly impressive. Exceptionally interesting even to the untrained eye gazing out of the window,

it is even more so to anyone versed in the science of geology. This route had been his introduction to Santorini on an excursion with the University of Athens School of Geology. It seemed it was just yesterday that he had been listening to Aphrodite, then in her final year, giving him detailed comments on the different layers of ash and lava deposited all over the island after the last huge eruption of the volcano. Each subtle difference in shade or hue represented a different mineral and a different time of coming into being, together they formed a complete and accurate historical map showing the geological fingerprints of the area going back millions of years. Alexandros was amazed that he could still remember some of this information, even vaguely, after so many years. He may have gazed at her and hung on to the sound of her every word during the countless lessons she had given him in every corner of this island, but he had paid little heed to what she actually said. New fragments of memory now sprang back to life in his mind.

What had this amazingly beautiful, vivacious young woman ever seen in him, just another young student in the second year of his degree course? He had not been particularly good-looking and was only averagely tall with a not very well-cared for, rather flabby body, little money, and no career prospects yet established. To top it all, he wore a pair of thick glasses in a ghastly frame that was much too big for his face. The crude answer stared back at him from every mirror he looked into; and he had tried many, always hoping for some sort of improvement.

Aphrodite truly and totally lived up to her name. This fact overwhelmed him every moment of their first month of meeting. Goddess of beauty and one of the twelve Olympian

deities, she exuded femininity with her every move. She had an enticingly bright face and deep blue eyes that he could gaze into for hours on end. This puzzle of perfection was complete with a voluptuous, curvaceous body. Though not particularly tall, she was full of the promise of fertility. As far as mythology was concerned, she lacked nothing of her namesake. But she also lived up to her namesake in astronomy. Aphrodite, or Venus as the Latins call her, is the only planet in our solar system that bears a woman's name. It is no coincidence that this planet rotates in the opposite direction from all others, even defying the supreme monarch of planets, the Sun itself. That was her personality to the tee. Always setting herself against conventionality and 'proper' behaviour. Always in the fore of anything new and rebellious. The epitome of reaction against the establishment.

Wherever she was and whoever she was with, she shone. There was no chance of her ever not being noticed. Her combination of beauty and intense, complex personality meant she stood out in any surroundings. Just like her planet namesake. Even in prehistoric times people knew that Venus was the brightest object in the night sky. The ancient Greeks called the planet *Lucifer*, bearer of light, as it heralded the dawn, though it was mostly seen just after sunset as *Hesperus*, the evening star.

Scientists bickered with one another for decades over what lay beneath the layer of cloud covering this mysterious planet and what sort of surface would be discovered down there. Alexandros sought with equal zeal to discover what hidden aspects there were to this charming, mysterious young woman he was fortunate enough to be able to call his girlfriend. He did not, however, take into account the most re-

cent scientific discoveries. Modern expeditions have revealed a surface with a temperature of four hundred and eighty degrees Celsius and atmospheric pressure ninety times greater than that on Earth. A hot and hostile planet. The closest to Earth, but perhaps the hardest to approach and inhabit...

Not even his vast knowledge of astronomy could deter Alexandros from embarking on the enterprise. He knowingly chose to ignore those recent discoveries about the neighbouring planet. Like an inexperienced, ambitious, yet naive exploratory spacecraft, he tried to defy the laws of physics and land in the heart of Aphrodite the woman. The end of his mission relationship had been predetermined and mapped out by previous exploratory space missions. Following an intensely exciting, amazingly beautiful journey into her atmosphere, there had been a sudden, red hot entry, ending in a violent collision. The enterprise had been fruitless; totally devoid of any chance to collect scientific data regarding the make-up, geology and behaviour of the heavenly body. And not a hope of survival for the exploratory craft. Total destruction! Alexandros had never got over the break up.

The professor was just as he remembered him. Still sprightly, of average height with the familiar white beard and little round belly protruding endearingly. An ideal candidate for the role of Santa Claus. Closer acquaintance, however, would reveal sparkling eyes and bags of energy despite advancing age. As when they had first met at the university, he was constantly alert, giving the impression that the wheels in his brain were in perpetual motion, working on a new idea or discovery. With hardly any time for a serious word to pass between them, they had already left his bags in the professor's house and were sitting in a white, open-top Beetle, heading

for the other end of the island. The professor's favourite car, his first love, his everlasting love, as he would gleefully point out when given half a chance or responding to a compliment about the car. It was the one and only human weakness that Alexandros had ever noticed in his total dedication to archaeology. Had circumstances been different, he might have been quite annoyed at having to suffer the arduous journey all the way to Ia village, and then having to turn round and go back again, past where he had started. But the thrill of being reunited with the professor, coupled with restrained curiosity as to the reasons for the unexpected journey, overrode any negative feelings and weariness that had been building up on the way.

The treacherous, unpredictable road made it impossible to have any sort of serious conversation about the discovery that had brought him there. The danger he had felt on the bus journey, when he had not thought too long about putting his trust in the experienced hands of the professional driver, had been markedly less than what he felt now with the elderly professor in the driver's seat beside him pushing the beetle way beyond any capabilities the manufacturers had foreseen, and a sheer drop at every bend in the road. He dare not distract the driver's attention by starting a serious conversation. Instead, he mused over what reason might lie behind this reunion with Professor Nicodemos.

His experience of working on his thesis had taught him that the professor's interest in Greek civilisation centred on Minoan times, in the mistiness of the still scant knowledge available about this amazing, early Greek prehistoric civilisation. Unlike the Egyptian civilisation, which was at its peak at approximately the same time, the historical data on the

Minoan civilisation are meagre, almost negligible. Because they had papyrus and hieroglyphic writing, the Egyptians left a mass of information and historical data about their civilisation for later peoples to peruse. The geology of the land where generation upon generation of Pharaohs flourished and its geographical location played a huge role in the preservation of historical data and archaeological finds. But the key factor was the continuity of Egyptian civilisation from 3500 BC down to the Ptolemaic Dynasty and 30 BC. On the other hand, the main writings of the Minoans were in Linear A and Linear B script and there was no papyrus to write on. This and the sudden disappearance of their civilisation has made them one of the most mysterious chapters in human history, even to this day. Though the civilisation was at its height, and though there was no power to equal it in the whole Helladic region, it was suddenly destroyed and lost forever, leaving only amazing samples of its superior achievements. The veil of mystery surrounding this first magnificent civilisation ever to emerge in Europe was the professor's source of inspiration and object of study. Second only to Crete, Santorini is the greatest archaeological evidence there is for the study of this illustrious civilisation.

Nicodemos was convinced that Thira, as Santorini is officially called, had much to reveal about Minoan civilisation. Virtually a permanent resident, obstinate and stubborn, some might even say obsessed, he had spent a huge part of his life on this barren isle. Perhaps even more than some of the native islanders, especially those whose business is in tourism. They leave the island as soon as the tourist season ends. Off they go on their own holidays, usually to the planet's warmer places, like Thailand, the Caribbean or other tropical desti-

nations where summer is just beginning. They come back in spring, tentatively at first, like returning swallows, and get their business enterprises ready for the next tourist season.

‘Are we there?’ Alexandros said when the white car finally slowed down on reaching the outskirts of Akrotiri village. His patience, as a rule in endless supply thanks to his calm nature, was beginning to fray at the edges.

The professor smiled and nodded to show he realised how tired his passenger must be after his long journey.

‘Here we are!’ he said a few seconds later, pulling up in front of a typical white island house with the customary vaulted roof and blue painted, square, wooden window frames punctuating its walls. As they approached the courtyard gate the professor drew closer to Alexandros and blocked his way with a rather authoritarian gesture.

‘Alexandros,’ he said, lowering the volume with every word he spoke, ‘I need you to be very cautious in how you respond to certain things in front of the owner of this house. As you very well know, when archaeological treasures are found in or on private property, things can become nastily complicated for the owner. There is a risk of the property being confiscated. At best, the value will drop significantly.’ Constantly casting furtive glances around lest the landlord should suddenly appear, he went on, ‘It all started when I overheard a conversation in the local coffee house last February. I had a hard job persuading the man, a local, to let me into his house, especially the cellars under the house. Let me look around and – well, you know.’ He paused, eyeing his student in a conspiratorial way. ‘And I used more than just words to persuade him,’ he added, rubbing his thumb against the tips of three fingers on his right hand to indicate that a far

from small sum of money had changed hands.

‘Don’t worry, professor. I’ll be careful.’ And then, unable to restrain himself further, ‘But I can’t stand this suspense any longer. At least give me a hint of what it’s all about.’ The mystery inherent in the professor’s words was the last straw that broke the back of his patience. His curiosity soared through the roof and questions tumbled out. ‘What’s in the cellar? What could possibly be so hugely important?’ He leant towards the professor, silently clamouring for more.

But the professor drew back and spoke more loudly.

‘Another Rosetta stone, my friend!’ His face shone in a way Alexandros had never seen in any of the hundreds of hours of lessons he had attended or in the endless evenings of deep, searching conversations they had had. ‘Another Rosetta stone!’ he said again, this time almost at the top of his voice, safe in the knowledge that the lanky, grey-haired, middle-aged man approaching to unlock the courtyard gate for them had no idea of the import of those words.

In 1799 a French officer serving in Napoleon’s army stumbled across an inscribed stele somewhere near a French fort to the north of the town of Rashid in Lower Egypt. A stone stele that held the secret to deciphering hieroglyphic writings and was the key to research into Egyptian civilisation. The inscriptions on the stele are in three bands. The upper and middle bands were in ancient Egyptian scripts which had never been deciphered. The lower band, however, was obviously in Greek script. But the most exciting thing about this discovery was that a note at the end of the Greek text stated that this was a decree issued by Ptolemy of Egypt written in three languages! Incredible... This lump of stone

solved the riddle that archaeologists, linguists and historians who knew the period had been trying desperately but in vain to solve for hundreds of years. Without this hundred-and-fourteen-centimetre tall lump of black rock weighing seven hundred and twenty kilos, it may, even today, still have been impossible to read Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Alexandros braced himself for what might come next. Could he possibly be on the verge of seeing such a mind-blowing discovery? One that archaeologists spend their whole lives dreaming about but rarely see? Could his beloved professor be so blinded by obsession and vain hope that he was, in fact, in pursuit of a fantasy? Could the long years spent searching and researching have pushed him to the brink of insanity? Just minutes from now his torrent of questions would be dissipated on the gargantuan breakwaters of reality.



### 3 HOURS BEFORE...

The ground heaved with an even stronger convulsion this time. The loud whinnying of the horses rearing up on their hind legs proclaimed the intense fear rising from their powerful instinct of self-preservation as ash fell like snow on their backs before scattering on the ground. The air reeked of death.

‘Sir, the horses are beyond control...’

The rasping voice of the profusely sweating soldier was punctuated by coughs and gasps. Strange black and white flecked smoke covered the whole area.

The tall, rugged officer in charge cast a discerning glance around. The pungent smell of sulphur penetrating his nostrils. He knew the headache and nausea that plagued him also plagued his men and the horses. Everything was happening so quickly there was no time for fear or alarm. He needed to know what forces he was up against. Was this the verdict on human insignificance or the last wave of submission to nature’s inexplicable whims? He quickly thought things through and decided it would be impossible to complete his mission. This load would never reach its destination. That soldier was right.

‘Unhitch the horses from the chariots and stack the tab-

lets in that cave over on the right.’ Desperate decisions had to be made on the go. ‘It’s hopeless. With all those stone tablets weighing us down we’ll never reach Akrotiri harbour in time,’ the officer in charge went on in his strong, steady voice.

He had done his best to salvage these most precious, most outstanding writings from the main library of the palace, just as the king had commanded. But the second part of his orders seemed an incomparably greater priority. A vision of the distraught princess waiting for him on the quayside overrode all thoughts of any further effort to save the tablets.

‘Once Mother Earth settles down again, we’ll come back and make sure they are safe.’

Words spoken to satisfy his own conscience only; the six men left in his command were paying no attention. They had already fallen eagerly to the task of stacking the stone tablets in the cave. The very same instinct of self-preservation that rose in the animals also reared up in the men. The last images of the destruction of their city a few hours earlier had wreaked havoc with their morale. The courage and self-confidence, of which they had always had plenty, had been completely drained.

‘Spread them out. Stack some in each of the three openings.’ The officer’s last attempt to increase the chances of some tablets surviving.

In the week gone by, nearly all the inhabitants of the island had fled to the harbours on the east coast, hoping to reach neighbouring islands that were thought safe. But the decision to evacuate had come too late. The main harbour installations in the middle section of the island had been totally destroyed, along with the greater part of the fleet. The volcano had given them no time to react. Even the very shape of the island had contributed to the scale of the disaster. The salt water inlet that penetrated

inland providing safe anchorage that had led to the empire's development had now turned into a deadly trap. The only way out to the open sea lay to the south west and was not wide enough to replenish the waters in the inlet and cool them down. The agitation of the sea, its foam tinged yellowish red, had been the first indication of impending catastrophe. Within minutes all harbour installations lay in ruins – and most of the ships at the bottom of the sea. With the water boiling and dead fish strewn all over the shore, their fate could not have been otherwise. The salty waters all along the inlet boiled, scalding hot, deadly like oil on a fire. The ships' wooden hulls burst and they sank in seconds amid the screams of their crews. Their deaths were slow, like torture. As sailors took the first few strokes in their attempt to reach the nearest dry land, the flesh fell clean away from their arms. Then they simply disappeared in the boiling water and steam. Only the lucky few, whose ships were moored right next to the quays managed to leap off and were saved.

Another explosion toppled two of his soldiers and the heavy stone tablet they were carrying fell on the ankle of one of them, crushing it badly. Though his scream was lost in the noise of the explosion, the severity of the soldier's injury was apparent in his grimaces and gaping mouth. His face distorted in pain.

'Hurry, hurry. Get that injured man on his mount and finish moving these tablets.'

The officer's orders were given authoritatively as soon as he had made certain that the man's injury was not life-threatening. Time was not on their side and he knew it. Their only hope of survival was to follow his instincts.

The scene in the middle of the island signified a worsening eruption. Eerie flashes of fiery, yellowish light pulsed through the atmosphere. The canopy of black smoke covering

the city still spreading unstoppably. The air rising from below thick and burning hot. Tongues of flame shot higher and higher with every successive explosion, then merged with the clouds of smoke to the sound of mid-air crashes of rocks also catapulted into the sky.

The soldiers hastily moved the last of the stone tablets. Through the fog of falling ash that thickened with every explosion he saw the prophecy inscribed on the stones. His name, Andrionas, appeared at the bottom of the text, freshly added as a security precaution.

‘What irony!’ he thought, ‘This prophecy brought me here, and this prophecy sends me hence.’

## The discovery

Ilias, the owner of the house, was extremely friendly to both men.

‘No, no, you’re not going off anywhere until after I’ve shown you a bit of hospitality. I’ll lock the cellar door and you won’t be back here again,’ he said jokingly.

The professor sat down and put one of the traditional Santorini cakes into his mouth. Though the light-hearted manner of the local man was more than obvious, he was averse to risking any kind of misunderstanding. His eye darted around the white walls of the sitting room and the tattered, black and white photographs of the man’s extended family dotted here and there.

‘They’re called meletinias,’ Ilias explained, ‘they’re really a sort of Easter cake, but we have them all year round.’

‘Mm, not at all bad!’ said Alexandros reaching for yet another.

He had detected a touch of vanilla or Hios gum and wanted to confirm his suspicions. He had a desperate need to channel his energy into something inconsequential. The cakes in front of him gave him passing relief and an opportunity to rein in his impatience. The cakes came with a glass

of the familiar local sweet red wine known as Vinsanto. The landlord made it himself and stored it in the cellar they were about to investigate.

‘Vin Santo is French for Santorini wine,’ explained the professor, putting his glass to his lips and taking a sip or two.

As they descended the steps to the cellar, Ilias proudly told them all about the family tradition of wine-making; apparently they were among the best-known viticulturists and wine-makers on the island. The two rows of oak barrels arranged along the left and right walls of the cellar almost filled it. There was only a narrow gangway between them. The scent of mature must mingled with that of wood and filled the air. Directly opposite them, at the other end of the gangway, stood a rusty iron door. The professor’s back was so close as to almost touch Alexandros’ face. If he stopped without warning, they would collide. But Nicodemos did not stop.

‘Thank you very much, Ilias, I know where to go from here.’

The professor was anxious to shake off the persistent islander and share his discovery at long last with somebody who would appreciate it. He took a long metal key out of his pocket and moved towards the door.

‘Are you sure you don’t need any help in there?’ asked Ilias, disappointment registering on his face. His sparse hair, until then plastered to his scalp, now protruded defiantly. He hoped the presence of the young newcomer would secure him a larger share of information about the professor’s work.

‘None at all!’

The professor’s manner of delivery and tone of voice

left no doubt that he meant what he said and the superfluous member of the party turned round in retreat, muttering under his breath as he walked away.

‘This is a store room the landlord has recently started to dig out of the rock in his basement. The structure of the bedrock on this island means the local people can, and do, extend their basement storage space by digging into the light pumice stone.’ As he unlocked the flimsy, badly fitting door, the professor’s voice took on the tone he normally used when teaching.

Alexandros felt his heart about to burst. His heightened senses already in overdrive.

‘Behold!’ Exclaimed the professor, pressing a switch to his right. The light from a bare bulb slung up in the middle of the ceiling pushed the thick darkness away.

As his gaze flashed around the room, Alexandros immediately recognised the archaeological excavation tools on the right. Prominent among them were a small shovel and rake. Next to them lay a scraper, and brushes of different shapes and sizes. There was some electronic equipment to the left; a laptop computer and a digital camera. The wall facing him had been gouged out and a pile of dirt lay on the floor; an inscribed, rectangular tablet on top of it. Just about visible in the low light was the upper surface of another such tablet, still stuck in the hole in the wall and half buried in a thick layer of sand.

‘Can this be possible?’

The young archaeologist could hardly believe his eyes. His fingers reached up of their own accord and straightened his thick prescription spectacles. He stared, lost in amazement, almost totally incapable of comprehending the mag-

nitude of what he was seeing; not even the experience accumulated over years had prepared him for what he now looked at. He knelt with bated breath before the tilted tablet and examined it closely without touching.

‘It looks like Linear A. But... not only that... There’s something else... Ah! This can’t be possible!’ His words trembled as his mind tried to grasp what he saw.

‘But it is, my friend! Clay tablets. Text incised with a sharp instrument on soft clay, then dried in the sun.’ The voice of the teacher came in answer to the questions the student had not yet dared to ask, and picked up the thread of the examination. ‘Linear A in the upper portion of the tablet with a form of Egyptian hieroglyphs below.’

‘Have you deciphered any of it yet? Do we know anything about the text? Can it be read?’ The questions tumbled out in torrents.

‘You would have noticed had you not become so excited,’ Nicodemos said, unable to relinquish the role of unforgiving teacher. ‘The earliest finds tell us that Egyptian writing had already begun by 2600 B.C. This particular script is Middle Egyptian hieroglyphic script. The ordinary language of the Middle Kingdom from about 2000 to 1300 B.C. It was used on monuments, in inscriptions and for religious purposes, but also had a literary use.’

‘Does that mean we can translate it?’ Senseless questions still came fast and furiously. He should have known that this dialect had already been deciphered.

‘Oh, I’ve been very lucky there. One of the best minds in the field is here on the island. It’s my old friend Howard, head of archaeology and anthropology at the University of Bristol. We’re meeting him today to talk about his decipher-

ment of the first tablet.’

‘Here at the bottom, just after the hieroglyphic text, there’s something else... it’s another word... it’s in Linear A...’

Alexandros spoke these last words slowly and with difficulty. The dusty tablet lay within his reach. It felt as if the ancient object were exuding some strange energy that penetrated his body and mesmerised him. To the professor’s great consternation, he then did the unthinkable. He violated the first and most important rule that even an ignorant, novice of an archaeologist would have respected. As if in a trance, he placed his fingertips lightly on that last word inscribed at the bottom of the tablet.

All sense of time immediately ceased. His vision blurred. The room started to spin. The air became suffocatingly hot. He felt the earth under his feet fall away till his flesh could stand no more. Images seemed to come from another place, from a shadow world that bore no connection with reality. Bodies, objects and even the whole of nature hung in vast misty immobility that stood outside time and space. Confused images of a man with a rugged, determined face, mounted on a horse. Loud noise, explosions and smoke.

‘Alexandros!’

‘Alexandros!’

‘Alexandros. Come on boy. Wake up!’

Alexandros slowly came round. Through the misted lenses of his spectacles he could just about make out the familiar face of the professor, full of anxiety and close to his own. He had hold of him by the shoulders and was shaking

him.

‘What happened?’ He opened his still giddy eyes a little bit more.

‘Come on my boy. Not even I reacted like that when I first saw them!’ His anxiety gone, the professor now made light of the situation, glad to see colour returning to his student’s face as he regained consciousness. ‘You passed out. Must’ve been the heat in here and the excitement of it all; plus the long journey you’ve had. Come on now. Let’s get you outside in the fresh air. You’ll soon feel better.’ He looked at his watch. ‘We’ve got an important meeting to go to soon.’

The cool breeze, so abundantly available on the ride in the open topped beetle, was the best possible cure for his fainting fit. Once he was satisfied with the physical and mental state of his student, the professor could control himself no longer. Behind the façade of apparent tranquillity, he was seething. Alexandros had behaved unbelievably foolishly when he had seen the finds.

‘What on earth were you thinking when you touched the tablet? You, with so much practical experience on major digs! I just can’t get my mind round it.’

He knew that sooner or later Nicodemus would ask him that. And now the dreaded question had come. The worst of it was, though, that he could give no answer that might be anywhere near convincing. The truth would make him seem so unreliable in the eyes of the professor and might very well put an end to their collaboration before it even began. No. The truth was not an option.

‘I thought I recognised that word at the bottom of the tablet but I couldn’t see it very clearly. The last letter was covered in dust. I was so excited I just couldn’t resist the urge

to brush the dust away, it was so strong. So I used my fingers. I didn't think. It won't happen again.' His apology was hesitant and he went on in humble voice, 'Please forgive me and put it down to the immense surprise of this unbelievable discovery.'

It was the first time he had ever lied to the professor. Ordinarily he lied whenever the occasion demanded it. He thought that necessity made everybody lie; that lying was part of human nature and nobody could possibly be strong enough or blunt enough to tell the truth all the time and let their genuine feelings be known.

*'Your hair looks absolutely awful like that.'*

*'How did you get so fat?'*

*'That's a load of nonsense.'*

*'Your clothes are a mess today.'*

Dozens of thoughts like these pass spontaneously through the inner recesses of our minds every day, but we do not put them into words. We all lie when circumstances require it. Insignificant, benevolent lies that make our lives better. Lies that help us survive. Lies are part of the social norm, easing social interaction and helping us live side by side with our fellow human beings. Alexandros had noticed that this part of human behaviour was established at a very young age. The vast majority of innocent-looking little children are already skilled in the art of deceit and use it with amazing ease whenever the situation requires. His own young nephew would often resort to little white lies to escape punishment or win somebody's admiration. Instinct is closer to the surface in children and quite crude. He had seen and verified this in a number of children of all ages and both genders time and time again.

Yet he had never dared lie to the professor. So what really did happen to him down there? Not even he could say with any certainty. Had it been a vision? Had he been dreaming while awake? Had he been in the grips of some invincible power that had compelled him to touch the tablet? The plain truth was that there was no natural explanation for what had happened to him in that cellar; he could only speculate. These thoughts eased his mind and made his guilt more bearable as he tried to focus on the amazing things he had just seen.

The professor sensed the presence of negative thoughts in his student and friend, and tried to lighten the mood.

‘That word you noticed at the bottom of the tablet is the only one I have managed to decipher so far. Like you, I was fascinated by it.’ Holding the steering wheel with one hand, he put the other in his pocket, pulled out a slip of paper and handed it to Alexandros. Broken down into syllables, was written on it the word:

*a-di-ri-jo.*

‘It means Andrion or Andrionas. It’s probably a name. The root must derive from the ancient Greek *ανδρείος*, which, of course, means brave.’ He then went on to refresh his one-time student’s memory. ‘If you remember, Linear B script was deciphered by British Royal Air Force navigator Michael Ventris in the sixties. Ventris then worked with linguist John Chadwick and together they managed to decipher most of the symbols in Linear B and show that it was a Greek script. It’s a mostly syllabic script with regional variations. It was written from right to left and represented the five vowel sounds with five different symbols. Linear A script is thought to have been a forerunner of Linear B and even though there are many similarities, it has never been deciphered. So our find initially

confirms a link between Linear A script and Greek.’

As the professor finished speaking the car veered sharply off the road and emerged on a dirt track leading to their left and right. A sudden, strong, cold gust of wind took the passenger by surprise and whipped the piece of paper out of his hand.

‘Not to worry. I’ve got a record of everything in my notes at home,’ the professor reassured him, while he watched the tiny scrap describe a few small circles on the wind and slowly spiral down into the crater of the dormant volcano.



## 6 HOURS BEFORE...

‘Don’t you see? It’s too late. You have to leave as soon as possible.’ His voice sounded hoarse but more determined than ever. ‘All the traditions, customs and history of our people are here in these writings. I have instructed the palace librarians to gather the most important volumes and load them onto the three chariots waiting in the courtyard.’

He raised a hand and pointed towards the main gate.

‘Legislation, history, religion, records of the most significant events and the most priceless knowledge our civilisation possesses; it’s all in your hands now.’

Minos Atlas had aged ten years within the space of ten days. The pain and suffering of the whole world seemed to weigh on his shoulders. His once kindly, gentle face now bore the marks of desperation and despair. Dark rings circled his eyes and his brows were fixed in a frown that was fast becoming second nature. He saw everything he and generation upon generation of his forefathers had lovingly and painstakingly created crumble and fall in an instant. An illustrious civilisation, the likes of which humanity had never seen before, now teetered on the brink of annihilation.

Yet he stood in the fore, firm as a rock, though the rest had already forsaken the capital city of the empire. An amalgam of self-confidence and self-respect pervaded his every act and inspired those under him to follow suit. He had spent the last few days putting into effect the best plan he was able to work out for the evacuation of his people from the tortured island. With him now were only a few loyal officers and lords, and the elite palace guard. He spoke to Andrionas.

‘Among those writings are the tablets that your friend the Egyptian priest translated to take back home to Sais. If you manage to catch up with him, load the tablets onto the ship taking him back home. This knowledge has to be saved and passed on to others, no matter what the cost.’

Even in these final hours, the mind of this extraordinary king was full of noble ideals and overflowing with altruism and wisdom. His main concern was the cultural legacy that his city would leave behind. He linked arms with Andrionas and led him aside, behind a purple column which, though its capital was cracked, was still standing; unlike most of the columns in the palace. The features of his face softened and his voice became more gentle as he made this request to his loyal general.

‘Astarte is waiting for you on Akrotiri quayside. I have given her strict orders to board the ship that you are on and none other.’ The unfamiliar coarseness in his voice betrayed the depth of his emotion.

The general’s gaze took in the colourful mural behind his king. Murals such as this adorned the whole palace, the subject of each studiously in keeping with the significance and function of its particular surroundings. This one showed young girls in religious procession. They were dressed in fine

jackets that left the bosom bare, above long skirts with many-pointed hems, covered in intricate designs. Their dark hair was immaculately coiffured and held in place by strings of fine beads and pearls. A bright beam from an east-facing light shaft shone on the face of the girl in the middle. The spot it illuminated had, like so many other places in the palace walls, cracked in the recent earth tremors and split the girl's face in two. The voice of Minos Atlas snapped Andrionas out of his momentary reverie.

'There are times when the only consolation the gods allow us is the knowledge that our race will survive.' A runaway tear traced a jagged course down his tired face. 'Do not fail in this, your king's last command and request.'

'But what about you, your majesty? There's very little time... You must come with us.' All due respect but also desperation were in this last attempt to persuade his king. But when the king spoke again, it was not to answer his question.

'Andrionas, I know you are the only person capable of keeping my daughter from harm... May the gods be with you.'

He walked swiftly away from his loyal general. His long strides took him to the centre of the imposing council chamber, once buzzing with life and grandeur. Now, with arms outstretched as if embracing the whole of his kingdom, he spoke loudly.

'Leave now, all of you!' He knew there was scarcely time left. He paused for a moment as if listening for the echo of his words. Then he spoke again, even louder this time, 'This is your king's command... Obey me in this, my beloved people, as you have obeyed my every command until

this day. The blood of the race of Atlantis flows in your veins. Live up to your race. Find strength in its blood.’ These last words said, he let his arms drop to his sides.

The group of soldiers lined up facing him took two steps back, then turned and went to the main entrance of the council chamber at a light trot. When Andrionas took those two steps back, he was more hesitant. He stopped and looked at his king and lord one more time. His steely countenance betrayed such a strong will that Andrionas had to obey. He steeled his own heart to the powerful, previously unfelt emotions now flooding it. He wanted to collapse into a heap and allow himself to cry out loud. He had never known his father, yet felt that this was his father’s last farewell. It took circumstances of such magnitude as this to make him realise that all these years Minos Atlas had been a true father to him. He looked at him for the last time, while he, for his part, inclined his head and gave Andrionas a melancholy smile.

He turned and ran as fast as he could. He felt strangely numb; his feet like lead. With all the self-control he could muster, he channelled his energy into the well-trained, muscular legs that would carry him far away as fast as they could. There was no time to wallow in emotion. He had never done that. The painful command he had been given meant he had to abandon Atlas.

He sped like the wind down the flights of stairs from the second storey and caught up with his men. Minutes later they were at the south gate on the ground floor of the palace with the three, heavily-laden chariots. He stole backward glances up to the place where he had left his king. Dead centre on the hill where the palace was built, stood the Temple of Poseidon. The high roof of the temple, covered in gold

on the outside and worked with ivory, gold and silver on the inside, was cracked open. Imposing and still intact, the gold statue of the god on his chariot drawn by six winged horses protruded through the gap. Around this huge statue there had been one hundred nereids riding on dolphins. Since the earthquakes began, the number of nereids still riding was substantially reduced. Many of the gold statues of other gods in the temple had also suffered extensive damage. But this protector god of the city still stood untouched on his winged chariot, giving courage to his people. It was as if he wanted to join forces with Minos, who with equal magnanimity, refused to abandon the city.

‘Watch the horses. We need to keep the chariots going as fast as possible but mustn’t work the horses to death.’ Once again general Andronas had to stifle his own feelings for the sake of his mission. ‘We’ll stick to the main road till we reach the south gate. The fastest road to Akrotiri harbour is just the other side of that gate.’

The latest information he had was that three of the four twin bridges linking the inner island with the outer plain on the other side of the inlet were still standing. Unlike the fleet, which was now at the bottom of the inlet, the bridges were safe. The wooden beams and piles that supported them were on dry land, not in the inlet itself, so the boiling water bubbling up from the seabed left them unharmed. The westernmost bridge had come down in a strong tremor shortly after the earthquakes began. The entire family of the king’s cousin, who was also his advisor, plus two young novice priests from the metropolitan temple of Poseidon on the peak of the island were lost with the bridge. It was those same novice priests who had first noticed the sudden change of tempera-

ture in the springs in the chamber of sacrifice at the temple. Two springs bubbled up from the earth on the spot where the temple was built; one was a hot-water spring and the other cold. It was a commonly held belief that the springs indicated the presence of the god. For the last two weeks both springs had bubbled hot water. This had prompted the high priest to pronounce his prophecy.

‘These chariots won’t last much longer.’

Half an hour after they had set out, an anxious soldier confirmed what Andrionas had already guessed when he had seen how difficult it was to move them.

The axles between the spoked wooden wheels were becoming dangerously bowed. The weight of the tablets was definitely the maximum these chariots could carry, if not more. They were never really intended to carry freight. They had been designed to carry the combined weight of two soldiers riding to battle at high speed. The mass evacuation of the city had taken every other available means of transport. The chariots belonging to the palace guard had been the only remaining, but far from ideal, option.

‘Take the top five tablets off each chariot. And be quick about it,’ he ordered, ‘We need to lighten the load on these axles.’

They had just a few minutes more to go before they reached the main bridge and he could not risk the whole load. He had never failed in a mission yet. If he wanted to keep his unblemished record, he would have to sacrifice some of the valuable writings. Fifteen tablets soon lay at the side of the reddish-black paved road.

‘Let’s go. We’re running out of time. Go,’ he ordered his men.

The soldiers were still sweating profusely from shifting all the stone tablets so quickly and had hardly had time to get their breath back, but when they heard the general's new order they were in line again quick as a flash and ready to start again. A few minutes later they were crossing the first of the twin wooden bridges. This one linked the main part of the island with the strip of land in the middle of the band of sea that circled it. The waters steamed, smoked and boiled and were still covered with the reddish foam that fumed and stank so foully. They quickened their pace as they crossed the few metres of firm ground before they came to the second bridge in this twin crossing in the east of the island. The second arched bridge was very well planned. It was sited where the cliffs on the other side were easier to negotiate. Most of the coast on the ring of land round the inner, circular sea consisted of steep, insurmountable cliffs. Parties of experienced masons had worked on the rock faces at the other end of the bridge to reduce the incline and make the way up to the fertile plains on the outer island easier.

Andrionas, leading the way, had already crossed the bridge and reached the land on the other side. He turned his horse round to face the bridge and watch the rest of the column cross. The wheels of the second chariot had just made contact with firm ground when it happened. The first sign was the horses, which all started whinnying and tossing their heads frantically. The thunderstruck soldiers could do nothing. At the same time, a long, hollow groan rose from the depths of the earth. Andrionas had great difficulty controlling his horse, even though it was an exceptional mount and extremely well-trained. Then the ground started to heave and shake in frenzied rhythm, the likes of which it had not shown

them since it had started shaking a few days ago. It moved with an up down pumping motion and the groan grew in intensity, mingling with the clashing and cracking of rock breaking against rock. The bridge began to fall apart; starting from the far end. The third chariot, which was still on the bridge, rolled backwards as the bridge fell, taking with it the horses struggling in vain to gallop the other way. The weight of its load upended the chariot, flinging the injured horses into the air before the whole was swallowed and sank to the bottom of the sea. The last two soldiers on foot and the charioteers never had a chance. But the young foot soldier who was behind the second chariot instinctively leapt through the air and caught hold of one of the broken wooden beams projecting from the end of the ruined bridge. The ground was still shaking, relentlessly increasing in intensity. Andrionas leapt from his horse with feral agility and landed on his feet on the road. He moved towards the fallen bridge, stumbling left and right as if drunk. He lay face down at the edge and reached out to the soldier clinging to the broken beam. He summoned all his strength and grabbed the man, struggling to keep his balance against the continued lurching of the ground, he was forced to face Strongyle, the capital city, on the opposite shore. He saw it and froze.

Nothing could compare with the drama unfolding before his eyes. The colossal statue of Poseidon had snapped in two at the waist and the top half had begun a frenetic course, bouncing and rolling down the hill. Every time it bounced off buildings already in ruins, a new shower of gold and ivory shrapnel shot off in all directions. The crushed, almost unrecognisable, round object that had once been the crowning glory of the might of the kingdom made its last spectacular

somersault in the air and then plunged straight to the bottom of the inner sea. The palace on top of the hill lay in ruins, a cloud of brown dust filling the air. Every single structure and every single building in the once illustrious city, from the top of the hill to the shore of the inner sea, lay on the ground in a huge mass of rubble.

The screams of the young soldier he had grabbed brought him back to the urgency of the moment. The soldier's skin was soaked with perspiration and slippery against his own, yet he managed to keep his hold. Andrionas felt the muscles and tendons in his well-exercised arms contract in spasm with the effort. He used the combined strength of every muscle in his body to shift his weight and started heaving the soldier up. As the shaking of the earth subsided, two more pairs of hands came to help, then took over and completed the rescue. They dragged themselves away from the fallen bridge, scratched and exhausted, but still alive. Andrionas sank to the ground and put his hands on the earth. He could feel the heat of exhaustion in his strong arms. Totally stunned by what they had seen, he and his remaining soldiers stared in horror at the ruins of their city; the magnitude of the catastrophe beyond their comprehension.

Everyone had been concerned when the earthquakes had begun two weeks earlier. Even so, powerful lords on the island had strongly opposed any decision to evacuate. Early in the second week, amid signs that the ground was settling down again, teams of workmen had returned to the island to repair the damage. No one could have foreseen this turn of events. Not even Andrionas, Minos Atlas and the small group of his loyal officers who had together reached the decision to evacuate could have imagined the severity of this calamity.

The ground began to lurch again. Here and there in the flattened city on the other side of the inner sea, flames shot up from the bowels of the earth. Jets of white gas sprang from among the ruins, forced skyward by the pressure below. Every jet carried with it clouds of ash in varying densities that pulsated to match the intensity of each explosion before falling to earth. The pungent smell that had so irritated their nostrils all the way here suddenly became unbearable.

‘Up you get. There’s no time for weeping and wailing. We’ll mourn our dead comrades later.’ Something inside told him that this was merely the beginning. ‘Drag those horses and chariots back onto the road. We’re getting out of here with all the speed these animals can muster.’

The shocked, dazed soldiers obeyed their commanding officer unquestioningly. They had had no time to comprehend what it was that had struck so swiftly and severely; no time to wonder why life endlessly swings between order and chaos. The decimated column of soldiers and two remaining chariots looked more like a funeral procession than a military force on a mission. Heads bent, feet dragging in the dust and an eerie, guilty silence interrupted only by the sound of stronger and stronger explosions. They felt fortunate, and this filled them with regret. They might very well be the only survivors of their city.

## The theory

**H**e squinted against the blinding white façades of the traditional, Cycladic houses arranged in interlocking terraces down the side of the steep cliff. A unique sight, seen only on Santorini, along the rim of the partially submerged caldera of the volcano that still breathes and sighs.

Alexandros focussed his gaze on Howard, who had already started giving his comments.

‘I’m still working on the translation of the text of the first tablet in the set of digital photos you e-mailed me.’ The tall, thin, phlegmatic Englishman broke off to sip some tea from his bone china cup and then went on. ‘The way it’s written is quite strange. It’s certainly not a store-master’s account, as most of the Linear A tablets that have come to light so far seem to be.’

The attention of the young archaeologist wandered to the frayed, turned-up hems of the Englishman’s worn, corduroy trousers. As he had been sitting they had crept up to a point just below his knee. A colourful, dotted shirt with pointed collars, a fashion dating from the sixties, completed the picture. Truly erratic attire. Howard carried on talking.

‘It’s some sort of announcement or prophecy in three parts. The word “died” is in the first part. I think I’ll have translated the whole thing in a day or two.’

The sun had just set and the sky played with different shades of red where it met the sea, as if it could not quite decide which colour to choose. The three men were seated at a table perched on the edge of the cliff above the volcano, outside one of the many coffee houses in Fira, the island’s main town. The lecturer in archaeology from the University of Bristol raised his voice slightly.

‘However, I’ve made much better progress with the second tablet.’

The professor’s face lit up.

‘What do you mean?’

The Englishman sensed how anxious Nicodemus was and paused sadistically for a moment before continuing.

‘It’s a sort of official greeting from somebody called Minos Atlas to Pharaoh Ahmose I of Avaris in Egypt.’

There were a few moments of silence. Even professor Nicodemus, normally quick-witted and definitely accustomed to greatness through his work in archaeology, felt the need to remove his misted spectacles, and was momentarily speechless. As soon as he recovered his composure, he sat taller on his chair.

‘That means... The initial findings were, um, exactly what I suspected!’

Alexandros was trying to make sense of the disjointed phrases.

‘Initial findings? What about?’

Professor Nicodemus made himself more comfortable in his round, canvas chair, a glass of wine in his hand.

Obviously pleased, he embarked on an outline of his theory, speaking in English so both men would understand.

‘Pharaoh Ahmose I reigned at the beginning of the New Kingdom. To be more precise, he belongs to the eighteenth dynasty and, though studies are rather vague, they generally agree that he reigned from approximately 1650 to 1550 B.C. or thereabouts’

‘Which means?’ Alexandros also spoke in English out of respect for the eminent Englishman.

‘It means that our tablets date from around the time the great eruption of Santorini volcano is supposed to have taken place. But that’s not all.’ A hint of a smile appeared on his English friend’s face, showing that, unlike Alexandros, he was beginning to see where the Professor was leading. ‘First of all it confirms the theory that Minos was not the name of one specific person, but a title used for a king in the same way that pharaoh was used in Egypt. The crucial finding though, is that the name Minos Atlas links legendary Atlantis with Santorini, with the Minoan period and with the prehistoric eruption of the volcano!’

‘That’s certainly a most significant finding, but I don’t think it’s enough on its own to support the whole theory.’

Always the sceptic, Alexandros had never let himself be swayed by theories that had insufficient evidence to back them up. This attitude may have resulted from the combined effect of knowledge and analytical philosophy subjected to the influence of studies in physics and serious involvement in astronomy. It was one of his defining qualities and had made him stand out in archaeology classes. It was also the reason why Professor Nicodemos respected him.

‘But that’s not the only evidence we have!’ Nicodemos

was now unstoppable. ‘The tablet also mentions Avaris; the next city along from Sais. Cast your mind back to those lessons you had on Plato’s Republic.’

‘Right. Of course. The dialogues with Timaeus and Critias.’ The one-time student’s voice now had the satisfaction and confidence of one who has a better grasp of a conversation.

‘That’s right, my friend. In his Timaeus dialogue, Plato says that Solon, the Athenian law-giver, went to see some priests at a temple in the city of Sais, in Egypt. These priests told him about Atlantis. Apparently, it was an empire in the time of Solon’s ancestors. They said the reason why information about this civilisation was so scant was that such a long time had gone by since it had flourished and there had been huge geological upheavals, earthquakes, floods and fires.’

The waiter came with their order, causing a temporary halt in the conversation, and asked if they wanted anything else. They said they did not and Alexandros, true to form, seized the opportunity to look for holes in the theory. He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

‘But Solon quotes the priests as having said that the civilisation of Atlantis was at its height about 9000 years earlier.’

The professor took a few unhurried sips of his white wine before answering.

‘My dear boy, as I kept on trying to hammer into your head during those lessons I taught you, the history of ancient Greece is just like the ancient history of the rest of the world in that many of the real facts are hidden in myths and legends. Oral history, handed down from generation to generation in the absence of any form of writing, eventually turns

into a sort of legend or myth. Nine thousand years before Solon lived, humanity was still stuck in the Neolithic age. All finds from digs excavating that period point to primitive human existence, the only indication of civilisation being a few flint tools. People were just starting to farm the land, build primitive structures and live in settlements. There is no way such a technically advanced civilisation as the one we are talking about could have thrived at that time and left not a single trace for us to find.'

Alexandros nodded slowly, the beginnings of agreement with the professor's theory starting to show.

'Yes, I agree with that, professor, but does accepting that lead anywhere, apart from another dead end?'

The professor's response was immediate and emphatic. His voice strong and clear, with brief interruptions for sips of his wine.

'There is no such thing as a dead end in the continuum of history. The ancient Egyptians used a totally different calendar from the ancient Greeks. It is a known fact that they had no concept of historical age, indicating the beginning and end of a period. They referred to events as having taken place in a certain year of each pharaoh's reign. That is the main reason why it is so hard to date the dynasties with any degree of accuracy. It is very likely that somewhere along the line in the oral transmission of the legend of Atlantis a mistake was made in the date, altering it by a factor equal to an extra zero in our way of counting. If we were now to remove the extra zero, we would then arrive at a date of nine hundred years before Plato wrote his account. Bearing in mind that Solon went on his journey to Egypt in 600 B.C. or thereabouts...'

'That gives us a date of about 1500 B.C. Close to the

time of the eruption!' Alexandros now almost leapt from his chair.

'Are we perhaps jumping to conclusions here? We must let this unexpected archaeological discovery lead us where it will, not subject it to preconceptions. The third man in the party tried to put the discussion of events on a more objective basis. With the phlegmatic, unperturbed manner of any English teacher, he went on working his way through his thoughts. 'There are quite a few more tablets. We have what looks like a lot of valuable material to decipher and translate. Let's not jeopardise this very hopeful project by trying to make it fit neatly into theories that have yet to be proven.'

Dr. Howard Donaldson's words took some of the intensity out of the discussion. For a while tension eased in the little group whose exchange of views had been fast and furious. Alexandros raised his head and admired the view spread out below this eagle's eyrie of a coffee house.

Therasia island faced him across the caldera. A smaller replica of Santorini itself, with the same perpendicular cliffs along its caldera side and a rolling plain on the other. This island is also semi-circular in shape, the natural continuation of the caldera. A wide opening to the sea stretches from the north of Therasia to the west of Santorini where Ia lies. The outlet to the open sea between the south of Therasia and the south-western tip of Santorini is much wider and clearly defined by the bright white houses of Akrotiri. Halfway across this gap sits the tiny isle of Aspronisi, seemingly locked in a perpetual effort to close the ring and restore the volcanic crater to its original shape. In the centre of the flooded basin a mass of lava forms two, very black islets. Cruise ships, several decks high, each bringing a few thousand visitors to the

island, lay at anchor in the caldera. From high up where the three men sat, they looked like small rowing boats.

Alexandros was churning over the latest information and trying to sort likely from unlikely in the professor's theory. He struggled to recall things learnt when he had been studying the works of Plato all those years ago. He remembered how impressed he had been with the young philosopher's description of Atlantis in the Critias dialogue. Plato wrote about a hill in the centre of the island that was surrounded by strips of land and waterways to the sea. He said the island's coast consisted of tall steep cliffs that gave the impression of massive walls rising from the sea. The strips of land in the central part of the island were, he said, linked by bridges. The capital, built on a plain, was also surrounded by beautiful, high hills.

Without realising it, Alexandros found himself comparing the image of Atlantis created in his imagination by the words Plato had written to the view spread out before him now. Not even his cold logic and sceptical nature could overlook the obvious. The two images were very much alike. The philosopher's description mentioned many features that matched the sight before him.

He took up a new thread in his reasoning. There were some things in the description that seemed to clash with any theory naming Santorini as the site of Atlantis. As more details flooded back to mind, Alexandros found himself subjecting the theory to another round of questions.

'But when Plato mentions the city in Timaeus, he says the site was beyond the Pillars of Hercules. He writes about a force that attacked it from the Atlantic ocean and calls it a continent larger than Libya and Asia combined.'

This unexpected turn in the conversation caught the professor off guard and he needed a few moments to collect his thoughts. Until interrupted by his student's question, his thoughts had been wandering thousands of years in the past. He made to take another sip of wine and reached for his glass, but the glass was empty.

'My dear and faithful student, I see you do not let your armour of scepticism slip for even a moment. You talk about the differences in Plato's description but choose to ignore the similarities. So be it... That is, after all, what made you stand out, right from the start. You always had both feet firmly on the ground!'

Now speaking to his young protégé with a broad smile of feigned admonition, the professor clarified his supposition. 'You seem to have forgotten that at the time in question there were no systems in place by which to make maps or measure the size of an island, let alone a continent. No ancient Greek, not even in Plato's time, would have been able to calculate and compare the relative sizes of Asia and Libya. And, of course, when the ancients said Libya, they actually meant the whole of Africa. So imagine how much more difficult it would have been for anyone to have calculated the size of an island or a continent a thousand years before Plato, when the legend began.

'Then bear in mind that in those times shipping and, of course, the ability to supply ships with enough food and water for long journeys would have made any such enterprise unfeasible, especially on high seas where weather conditions are totally unpredictable.'

Now it was the turn of the Englishman to make his contribution and cast more doubts on the theory.

‘So why did Plato allow so many inaccuracies to creep into his dialogues?’

The professor heard him without the slightest hint of unease visible in his face or the slightest alteration in his expression. He did not hesitate at all before answering. He had obviously asked himself these same questions and had the answers at hand.

‘Don’t forget the circumstances prevailing at the time this legend came into being. The original story Plato used was one that his student had told him. He used it to demonstrate the glory of the Greek people, especially in the city of Athens. The ultimate aim of the dialogue was to highlight the military victory Athens had achieved over the far superior empire of Atlantis. It is therefore more than probable that he exaggerated quite a lot so as to make the victors seem invincible, almost superhuman. So he turned the island into a whole continent and altered distances to match, giving the whole thing mythical proportions, and also distorting the historical record. Plato lived in Athens at the time of the Peloponnesian wars. His city had suffered humiliating defeat by Sparta and badly needed a boost to its morale.

‘It’s also possible that the Egyptians themselves distorted the historical facts over a long period of time. Let’s not forget that the Egyptian people had had nasty experiences with the sea and the number of Egyptians who made their living on the seas was minimal. For the most part, their ships plied the easy routes only, hugging coastlines and sailing up the river Nile. They even called the Aegean sea the *Great Green!* So their knowledge of the actual location of the islands they traded with, and their relative sizes, must have been scant, to say the least.

‘But Plato gives us something else as well, and in doing so he counters his own suggestion that the lost island of Atlantis was in the Atlantic ocean. What he actually says is that when Atlantis was destroyed and sank into the sea within the space of one day and night, an entire army of Athenians was also lost. It would not be possible for a cataclysmic natural disaster like that in the Atlantic ocean to cause such widespread havoc in the area of Athens and leave no trace of destruction in the parts of Europe that lie between the two.’

Alexandros struggled to cope with so much new information and assess it as well. His rational mind put up strong defences. The lines on his forehead deepened as he continued to dispute the theory.

‘But even Aristotle, great philosopher and one of Plato’s students, said the story of Atlantis was mere fiction.’

‘Perfectly correct!’ Professor Nicodemos responded with alacrity and unexpected enthusiasm. ‘But there were at that time also a host of other people who thought the story was true. Later philosophers like Proclus, Crantor and Poseidonius, and the geographer Strabo, all believed that the story of Atlantis was, at least in part, based on fact. As for Aristotle, remember that he disagreed with many of his teacher’s ideas and formed his own opinions. And that’s why Plato nicknamed him *Polo*, likening him to a new-born donkey that kicks its mother in the belly as soon as she brings it into the world.’

Nicodemos seemed to have an answer ready for everything. As soon as he finished speaking, Howard picked up the thread.

‘So from the tangle of inaccuracies surrounding this legend, we have to pick out the actual historical facts. It’ll

be rather like looking for a needle in a haystack. True, your theory, as you explained it to us, seems to be built on quite a lot of firm ground and there are plenty of rational explanations, but you know as well as I do that there's no end to the number of different interpretations that can be applied to any myth or legend. Without evidence to back it up, any theory is just an unsubstantiated possibility. Until these texts have undergone stringent semantic and linguistic analysis, anything we say is mere speculation.'

Alexandros had to agree with the meticulous English lecturer from the University of Bristol. Time and time again archaeological research begun with the greatest of expectations has been reduced to something humiliating and inconclusive. The theory was impressive and sounded convincing, but was riddled with holes; some of them gaping ones.

The professor was obviously not going to give up that readily. He did not go about his research with the obsessive fervour of a collector, but with the calm patience of a conservation technician rolling up his sleeves before reassembling the parts of an urn smashed to smithereens. He was convinced that they were delving into the apocryphal secrets of a people lost to history thousands of years ago. He was in no hurry. He was in competition with no one and relished the prospect of continued, painstaking research.

'That's why we are all here today, my friends,' he said, 'The tablets we have discovered might hold the key to the evidence we are looking for. They may change that proverbial needle in the haystack into an elephant... And believe me, when that happens, we'll find it, no question about it!'