



Rise of Villains: The Anuk Chronicles

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Chapter 1: Aftermath

The year is 2959 in the age of Virgo, winter. Describing this 2960 year cycle as tumultuous is understating the realities which have shaped the world. Right at its inception this period of purported prosperity and rebirth was ushered in with conflict and strife. A great house of the Anuk, House ENki, was stricken from existence. Swift retaliation came from Lumeria at the hands of Queen Persephone, which devastated the world and annihilated most of her kind – the Anuk.

When the storm clouds of war had dissipated, the remnants of man were left to their own designs, like it was before the visitors from the stars came; before the time of the Anuk. This quickly changed when a surviving lesser-house arrived in a land once ignored by the royal houses of ENlil and ENki. The tribes of man were tamed by the Anuk Atlas, and thus all nations under his domain came to be known as Atlantis.

The lust for conquest by Atlas and his descendants created an empire stretching from the continent in the west across the sea, past the domain of Egypt, and into the scorching deserts of Rekam. Only the unified kingdoms of man called Illyria posed any threat, unlike the weaker mixed heritage survivor cousins of Atlas to the east – the Aryans.

Now, almost three-thousand years since the Great-War of the Anuk, Atlantians, Illyrians, and Aryans coexist peacefully, for the most part. The occasional skirmish between forces of each civilization and the ‘Wild-men’ called nomads occur in patches throughout the habitable world. Only one known nomad stronghold exists in peace, with a royal decree of protection going back since the time of Persephone – Cappadocia. This land was bestowed upon the then Princess by her uncles for bravery and honor.

Two days ago forces of Atlantis moved on this peaceful border town on the orders of Prince Timon of House ENlil; his motives known only to the slain Commander Stavos and a select few who resisted the illegal affair. A sizeable force descended upon the soldiers in defence of the nomads. The surprise attack ultimately dealt a severe blow to the invaders.

Clouds pregnant with moisture rapidly move into the Gap-of-Cora, filling the evening sky with dread. Soon the torrential downpour will wash away rivers of blood mixed with oil staining the Tuscan-rose coloured valley. Once again this ancient land of Persephone hosts death; once again her nomad warriors are victorious.

But these are not the defenders of Cappadocia - those brave fighters were massacred by the forces of Atlantis. Their bodies still lay where they fell less than one day ago. Retribution came swiftly at the hands of the wild-men from Northern Illyria. Long braided hair, muscular builds with animal skins for clothes, these nomads stand out from the subdued remnants of the Atlantean Foreign Legion. Soldiers of the empire are now prisoners bound together, making their march to crude holding areas. Timidly they trudge through the mud, fearing the fate promised in the eyes of their captors.

They did not expect the attack to descend upon them like locusts on a bountiful field. Quiet reflection of their own slaughter in Cappadocia occupied their thoughts, along with the death of their beloved Commander Stavos; murdered by his trusted Captain and friend, Alexius of house Badur.

The drumming of raindrops begins, quickly becoming accentuated by lightning bursts followed by echoing thunder. Nomads armed with rifles drive a herd of soldiers to a corner of the camp, welcoming the weather while marvelling at the prisoners' discomfort.

Albanoi, one of the lead warriors, strides past the line-up. His sizeable six-foot-six-inch frame is menacing to the captives. He smiles at the *poor Atlanteans* as he enters the dead commander's tent.

Crackling from a warm fire in the centre of the ample space welcomes Albanoi. Assorted documents are thrown around a broken monitor on a desk. Shivering near the fire, a blanketed figure tries to get warm. Albanoi smiles as he makes his way to the flames.

He'd better not start praying, or I throw him out with the rest, Albanoi decides. In his thick Northern Illyrian accent, he inquires, "Your Holiness, are you sick?"

Calis has seen better days. Before he could escape Cappadocia, his exploding transport craft hurled him into the river Halyes. The perilous journey down the waterway in the cold winter night had left him with a fever. His mother always warned, 'put some meat on your skin and bones or you will get sick'; forty-seven years later this still rings true.

He looks at his smiling visitor, "I am praying to Almighty God to get me out of this wretched place." Albanoi smiles at the thought of throwing him outside. "Why are you so...happy?" Calis inquires.

"We have great victory. Plenty of prisoners for ransom, with big reward from King Barish."

"You do know you were late getting here. If I were Barish, you'd get nothing," Calis states bravely.

"This is gratitude Albanoi gets; maybe I should have left you in Halyes, you'd be in ocean by now."

"No you inbred twit, the Halyes doesn't go to the ocean..." Calis concludes that he is wasting his breath, "...never mind."

Albanoi becomes irritated, "You say something bad about my motër?"

Calis realizes that tormenting the 'wild-man' is warming him up, "If you're going to speak the common tongue, it's 'mother.' Wait, isn't that your word for 'sister,' too?" Albanoi growls as he gets in Calis' face. A rustling in the tent fabric causes both men to pause to regard the incoming visitor.

Darius looks at them, finding humour in what could have happened. His tall stature is dwarfed by the warrior now walking past him. "Pay him no mind my friend, the fever still has him," he offers Albanoi.

The warrior begins his exit, "Soon we leave here. Heavy transports already close." Albanoi grumbles at Calis, "Get better priest." He calmly leaves the tent, sloshing away in a mess outside.

"I see you're making friends," Darius quips. "You're such an immature child when you're sick. I can't believe you're only five years my junior." He sits by the fire then grabs an end of Calis' blanket to wipe his balding head. A horrifying thought consumes him, "Are you naked under there?"

"What of it? It's because of you I'm plagued by this fever."

"Me?" Darius laughs.

"Yes, you. If you'd given me the artifact, I wouldn't have been anywhere near that bloody river."

"Don't be so dramatic...my part of the key to Lumeria is safe with Alexius, and..."

"Are you mad?" Calis asks rhetorically. "He's bound for Atlantis in chains; branded a murderer, surely with a death sentence to follow. I must get back..."

"Liviana is in the capital, she will take care of things."

This news calms Calis somewhat. "I'm leaving nonetheless," he insists. "How are your people?"

There is a look of sadness on Darius' face. His adopted people of Cappadocia looked to him for guidance and safety. He had done all he could before the attack; now only a few hundred remained, waiting for his return.

"We will go deep into the underground caves...like the unknown inhabitants did eons ago. Persephone left the maps to the farthest regions; possibly well past the Halyes."

"I pray for the day you can return to Atlantis, free from the past."

"Albanoi will get you across the Illyrian border...from there I suspect you can manage," Darius reassures him.

"Does he really think he can ransom his prisoners? He is signing his own death warrant if he thinks Timon will let him live."

"Albanoi may be a tribesman, but he is a smart one. He will take the prisoners to Northern Illyria, to the slavers guild. What is the one thing all the kingdoms of Illyria are good at?"

The flames dance on Calis' thin face, showing off his smile, "Commerce."

Darius stands slowly with his aching body screaming for rest, "Precisely."

Calis looks up at his friend with curiosity in his eyes, "What of Stavos?"

“The holy-men say there’s strangeness about the corpse, like that of an ancient evil. A plague meant to rob men of their souls.” Darius pulls his jacket tighter as an inner chill overtakes him. Calis stares into the flame.

The slow hum from overhead lighting pods breaks the silence. The tent’s interior brightens, competing with the brilliance from the fire. Calis stands, regarding Darius sternly. “I had seen that before when I was a young pupil of Samiri...you should remember those days,” he warns. He moves closer to Darius. “Listen carefully, this is the first sign we have that he is in play if what I suspect happened to Stavos is a reality.”

Darius protests “Surely Samiri is dead. I threw the body in the swamp myself. That was years ago.”

“No Darius...there is only one other capable of such magic; ‘Old-Mother,’ but she does not get involved.”

“I hope you are right.” Darius opens the tent’s flap. He stops at the threshold, “Keep my niece out of trouble will you?”

“Do you think that’s possible for mere mortals?” Calis asks, not really wanting an answer.

Darius cracks a smile, “Calis, stay out of sight. None of the soldiers have seen you. Don’t want gossip spreading that a High Priest of Atlantis is involved in all of this, do you?” He drops the flap then sloshes away.

Inside a small tent, three soldiers huddle together for warmth. They are drenched in blood mixed with mud, much of it from their own wounds. These are the surviving officers of the Legion, now captives who are forced to cohabitate the resting place of Commander Stavos’ corpse.

The tent’s flap opens letting in the brisk air; this causes the one Captain and two Lieutenants to cringe. They do so not at the blast of cold but at the expectation that a barbarian is coming to pass sentence. The junior officers begin to shake in anticipation. Only Captain Deidra remains calm. She shifts her weight off the other two, cringing with pain from her broken left arm. Death would be a welcomed friend now, bringing the promise of a warm embrace into an eternal slumber.

The nomad holding the flap allows Darius to enter with a light-stick. The three-foot device provides enough lighting for him to see the faces of the captives. Deidra recognizes him. “Darius,” she blurts out, barely mustering up the strength to speak. Her throat burns from dryness, lips chapped, eyes bloodshot. “How dare you come here,” she states.

Amused at the outburst, Darius asks, “Did I need your permission?” *By all that is holy, they are just children*, he notices, referring to the two junior officers who are in their early twenties; not so the thirty-two-year-old Deidra. He goes straight to Stavos’ body.

“Get away from him!” Deidra snaps, “Savage!”

A ghastly sight it is. The battle fatigues Stavos wore when Alexius killed him is still on the body. The skin is pale but yet there is a faint glow of red about the complexion. Around the right eye, dark blue lines shoot down towards the open sternum, like spider webs crisscrossing each other. Upon closer examination, the fine lines exhibit minuscule gold dust particles which let out a short sparkle in the darkness. No one sees this.

Deidra’s objection does not stop Darius. He inspects the corpse’s eyes, touching the blue lines then tracing them to the fatal wound. He swings the light-stick back and forth over the body three times. With the light away from the injury he moves in for a closer look; he catches a glimpse of the golden sparkle.

Darius turns to face Deidra and her hateful stare, “Savage...what an ugly word,” he says in a condescending tone. “You come into our lands, slaughter unarmed people, and I am the savage? No little girl...you are.”

The words sink into Deidra’s soul. She knew the part she played in this campaign. Her loyalty to Atlantis was unswerving, this she held on to, that notion of honoring the code of the Foreign Legion. At some point, here in the darkness amidst all the death, that honor begins to weigh heavy.

Pointing to Stavos Deidra expresses her disgust, “You poisoned Alexius...you did this.”

“I opened his eyes.”

“And now he is going to die for it.”

The tent’s flap opens. Albanoi enters with two of his warriors, “We take them now.”

Two nomads slide past Darius to Stavos’ body. They pick up the corpse without ceremony. Deidra springs up after them. Albanoi swings his arm. The back of his hand lands on her face. She falls on the frightened juniors, desperate to hold back uncharacteristic tears.

Albanoi waves in another warrior, “Take them to transport!”

“Not that one,” Darius orders while pointing to the Captain. “Not yet.”

Albanoi leaves with the others. Deidra remains crumpled on the ground. Darius drops down to her, gently examines her face then dips into his pocket.

He offers her a small canteen, "Here, drink." She takes the container without suspicion. The liquid stings when it hits her throat, but this does not stop her from finishing the milky substance. "Kefir...fermented sheep's milk."

"What, you are my friend now?"

"This will be hard for you to hear. You're involved in a much bigger game...one which transcends Atlantis, nomads, the Legion. One I have avoided for as long as I could."

"You won't sway me with your misguided truths. I don't care about your game."

"You love him don't you?" Darius asks. The momentary pause allows Deidra to formulate a denial. "He forgot the world just save you," he adds.

"Yes," she blurts out. The shame of sending Alexius to the capital for judgment starts to consume her.

"Then know this, we are on the same side; you just don't know it yet."

There is an air of trust about Darius, one she could feel. "What happens now?" she inquires. Darius helps her up.

"Now you go to Northern Illyria. Forget what you know about artifacts and quests...I was never here. Know this...if you betray my trust, then Alexius is as good as dead."

The warning echoes in her head. She nods acknowledgment. "What about Stavos?"

"He will not be returning to Atlas," Darius explains.

They make their way out of the tent. Deidra looks back to where the commander's body once lay. The chilling thought of betraying her honor hovers over her soul.

~Atlas, Capital of Atlantis~

The military airport on the northern tip of the capital city is adjacent to the commercial piers. This makes it easier to patrol the airspace surrounding the busy port entrances. It is far removed from the main military headquarters, the 'Garrison,' located several miles away.

Why stop here? Alexius ponders. *One would think that we would have gone directly to the garrison.* He shrugs the question off. The chest wound he received from Stavos begins to ache.

The soldiers transporting him were once, maybe still are, friends. The pilot, a young man named Parish, spent the better part of three years with him at the Atlantean garrison in Southern Illyria. This friendship allowed him some semblance of dignity on his way to the gallows.

Alexius climbs out from the back of the small transport craft. He is too tall and broad for this model. The design is more conducive to the pilot's five-foot-seven slender build. The co-pilot joins Parish in front of Alexius; they look up sullenly at their six-foot-two-inch tall friend.

Parish hands Alexius a small leather satchel, then looks at his wrists, "I'm sorry my friend."

Without complaint, Alexius hangs his bag across his shoulders then offers his wrists, cringing from residual pain. "So this is it I suppose?"

"Stay with the transport, I'll take him to the checkpoint," Parish orders his co-pilot.

They walk off the short tarmac on to a narrow path. The dirt track takes the soldiers to a broken fence separating the airport from the piers. A quick descent to a street opens up to the noisy bustle of the trading section.

Seagulls sing overhead, occasionally diving into the dark waters. Solid retaining walls keep the water from the walkways, with only the rhythmic sloshing to remind pedestrians of where they are.

Market stalls are spread out, with vendors shouting out bargains. The air is ripe with goods coming off the ocean vessels, including fresh fish. Today the area is packed as everyone is getting ready for the start of the New Year festivals.

The two men stop at a food vendor. The covered stand is small with a fat cook attending to pots with fish frying in hot oil. A chunky woman wearing black hair-net smiles at the incoming customers, "What can I get you boys?"

"Two sharks please," Parish answers. "Consider this your last meal," he proclaims to Alexius. "Andros surely will deprive you of one."

"Yes, our fortunate new Commander. I am sure he is outraged at my crime; him inheriting Stavos' post and all."

"When I picked you up in Morocco I had no idea of what had happened. Our orders were simply to bring you here in shackles, subdued with extreme prejudice."

The smoking sandwiches arrive at the counter. Parish pays the lady then slides Alexius' tray to him. He watches his friend struggle with the meal, working the condiments onto the golden-brown bread. "What happened?" Parish asks.

"The short version?" Alexius asks rhetorically. "Remember the raid on the temple in Illyria? The stolen chest contained my father's journal, which directed me to Cappadocia to retrieve an artifact. Turns out Stavos had orders from Prince Timon to purge the inhabitants then seize the same artifact. He was not himself. He disregarded all morality, had the population murdered, then turned on me for what I possessed – the artifact."

"You were defending yourself is what you're saying?"

Alexius shakes his head while devouring his meal. "There is so much more going on here, I don't have time to explain...I don't know who to trust."

"If only Deidra were here, she would know what to do," says Parish.

Alexius suddenly remembers the warning of the attack he received from Darius. "Have you heard from her?"

"No...nothing. Their transport returned to the camp, then I brought you here...no communications after that."

"You must contact her. A horde of Illyrian warriors is descending upon them."

"Sorry my friend, orders from Andros...absolutely no communications with the ninth."

"You must try," Alexius pleads. Parish nods. "Thank you."

"Alexius!" a voice yells from a nearby stall. His long-time family friend, Carrell, makes his way to the pair.

The weathered sailor embraces Alexius with a smile that turns to curiosity when he notices the restraints. He looks at Parish.

"Carrell, this is Parish," Alexius introduces. *This is the sailor who rescued Alexius' mother from the ocean before he was born*, Parish thinks to himself.

"Pleasure, I think," the old man blurts out. "What's all this?"

"I'm here for sentencing," Alexius explains.

"Messing with the commander's daughter again?" the old man jokes.

"Murder," Alexius says softly.

"Who's?"

"Stavos."

The shock shows on Carrell's face. He drops on an empty stool, "Seems like you got yourself into a situation."

Alexius looks at Parish, "Can you give us a moment?" he asks. Parish nods as he moves several paces with his sandwich.

"Listen, I have something urgent for you to do, will you help me?"

"I swore an oath to your lord-father to always protect you, ask it and it shall be done," Carrell declares. "If you mean to escape, my ship is ready to sail."

"No...no, my fate is my own. I need you to get something to my sister, in secret, no one must know."

Alexius drops to the ground, opening a pocket in his boot. He carefully slides out two items, one small cartouche-like pendent on a chain, together with a slightly bigger piece he attaches to the other's back. He passes it to Carrell.

The old man's eyes widen, "These cannot be out in the open!" he warns.

"Tell Cassandra to secure it in my secret place...she will know."

"I will leave immediately. Do you think you will make it out of this?" Carrell asks with worry in his voice.

"Darius told me to find Princess Liviana...I suspect you know who Darius is?"

"I will get word to her," the old man promises then embraces Alexius tightly. "May God watch over you," he says. A tear rolls down his face.

They release their embrace. Parish moves in closer, "We have to go, they are waiting."

Without any words, old friends express their farewells. Alexius nods to Parish then they leave the sailor.

Carrell suddenly experiences anxiousness in the air, a sense of urgency that is as palatable as the aroma of the fried fish behind the stall. He immediately slips the two artifacts in his pocket, ready to make haste to his ship.

He is distracted by a hooded figure standing thirty feet away, beyond the food area. *Caution is paramount from now on*, he warns himself. He concludes that it is a woman, maybe blonde, sharp features...medium height with caramel skin, wearing dark blue apparel. *Good to know who is following*.

He strains his eyes to get a better look at the figure, but only sees an empty space now. Carrell begins his journey back to his ship.

From behind a stack of barrels, Ayala the watcher observes Carrell's retreat. Her slender yet powerful right arm props up a two-hundred-pound butcher; his throat is slit with blood pouring out. She allows the body to slump on the white stone wall.

She inserts a syringe-looking device into the man's neck, extracting the hot blood from his vein. Satisfied with her collection, she slips the container into her pocket then casually walks away.