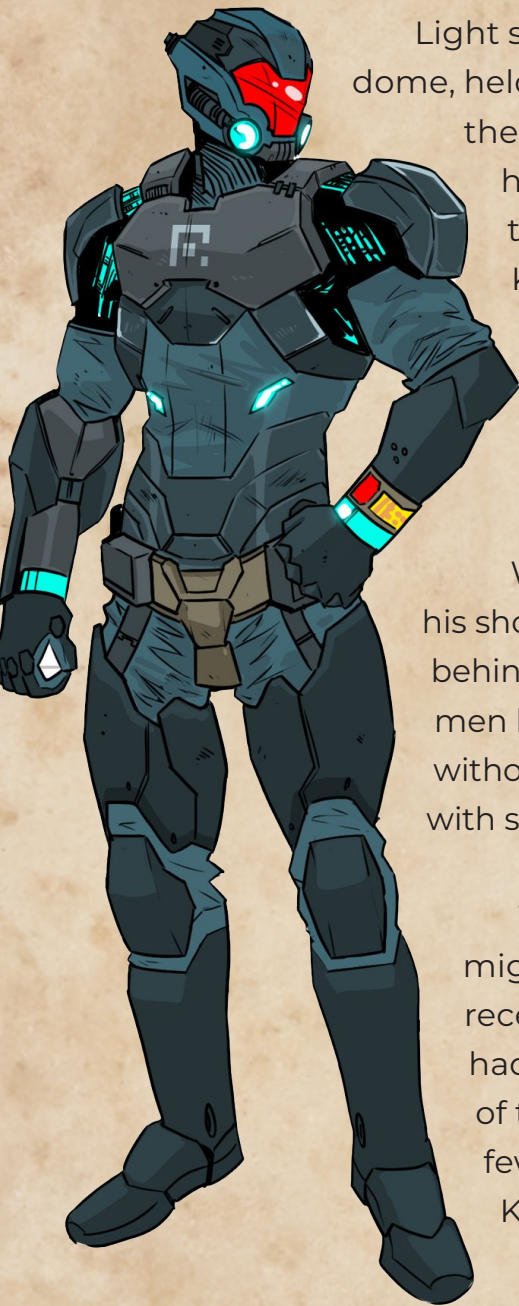


ATLANTICAN

Origin Story



Light streamed through fiber-optic windows atop a colossal dome, held aloft by four pillars rising twenty-five meters into the gloom, casting a celestial glow upon the ceremonial hall. Though the vast expanse was built to hold tens of thousands, only six living souls occupied the silence: the King, the Queen, their stalwart guardians, and Almar. As he crossed the threshold, he knew that reaching their Majesties' presence, especially at the measured pace of a ceremonial march, would take him well over a minute of long, echoing strides.

With his helmet tucked under his arm and a rifle slung over his shoulder, Almar marched with a pride that barely flickered behind a faint, triumphant smile. Only yesterday, he and his ten men had infiltrated the enemy's lair, seizing the entire sector without a single loss. No one believed he could lead a squad with such surgical precision, least of all Commander Logar.

The pride swelling within Almar's chest felt as though it might shatter the light armor encased around his body. In recent cycles, no operation against the insurgent factions had been so flawless. The peace of the realms, the security of the people, depended on these strikes and as they grew fewer, the citizens finally began to grasp the wisdom of the King's vision.

At the far end of the hall, the King sat upon a monolithic throne, draped in ceremonial finery, awaiting Almar's approach. Beside him, Queen Serfani sat upon a divan nearly half the size of the throne. Though her seat was more vibrant and intricately carved, the sheer disproportion of the two made one thing clear: exactly where the true power resided.

As Almar drew closer, he noticed the King shift uneasily. Queen Serfani's gaze suddenly darted past Almar's shoulder toward the back of the hall, her face snapping back toward the King in a mask of alarm. The ceremony demanded a rhythmic, unhurried pace, yet Almar felt the air thicken. When the guards behind the throne lunged forward, he knew a threat had emerged from the shadows behind him.

"My King!" one of the guards bellowed, leaping toward the throne with terror in his eyes.

Almar's hand flew to his ceremonial rifle, though he knew it carried no energy charge. It was pure and sharp instinct. He spun toward the looming threat.

Suddenly, the hall was consumed by a storm of lightning. As a void of absolute darkness began to swallow the world, the guards scrambled in panic to shield the King. Almar threw himself toward Serfani, desperate to pull her from the abyss.

Then, there was only the dark. Almar stood frozen, clutching his empty weapon. He felt nothing... No breath, no pulse, no sound. As he braced for death, the nightmare lifted as abruptly as it had descended.

They were in the same hall, or so it seemed. The helmet he had dropped before lunging for the Queen still lay on the floor. But something was wrong. Almar found himself leaning heavily on his left leg to stay upright; the ground had tilted thirty degrees to the right.

Then, reality tore apart. The grand hall groaned with a metallic shriek, the pillars trembled, and the alloyed glass of the dome shattered into a rain of diamonds. Within seconds, the sanctuary collapsed in a thunderous roar.

"A section of the palace, the royal armory, the ceremonial hall, and nearly all of the Gramiert Gardens..." a young officer's voice broke the silence, calling out to Almar, who was staring into the distance.

Almar struggled to process the horrific landscape. This was not his world. The corridors he knew by heart were now jagged ruins clinging to the side of a steep, alien cliff. And more devastating still: the King lay dead beneath the wreckage.

"How big is the known area?" Almar asked, his voice hollow.

"Beyond a four or five-square-kilometer radius, there is nothing familiar. Nothing at all."





Both men fell silent. The dust coating their armor made them look like ghosts from a forgotten war. The dried blood on their hands belonged to those they had tried to pull from the rubble... Was Atlantis dead? And the King among it?

Atlantians were a people of order and discipline, but without a crown, they were a tide without a shore. The Queen was wounded, the military barracks had been replaced by the jagged foothills of an unknown mountain, and Almar was now the highest-ranking officer among fewer than a hundred surviving soldiers.

They scrambled through the ruins for medical supplies. Fortunately, the food stores had been transported along with the gardens into this strange new realm. But their weapons were limited to the royal armory's stock, and energy was fading. Their technology was crippled; without the surviving solar towers in the gardens, they would have neither light for the night nor power for their rifles.

"Ensure everyone is gathered in a secure perimeter," Almar said, a sudden, commanding confidence rising in his voice. *"Then, form scout pairs for the four cardinal directions. They must move before darkness falls."*

"At your command," the officer replied, departing with haste.

Almar looked out over the ruins, searching for a sign of where they were. His wrist computer was silent; the stars above were strangers. The pleas of the wounded and the cries of the bereaved had stripped away the proud soldier who had walked the hall that morning.

They had all stepped out of a world of comfortable lies and into a shattered reality. They were no longer in Atlantis. They were no longer home. He tried to tell himself otherwise, but deep in his soul, he knew the truth: They were somewhere else entirely...