

CHAPTER I

Nohor, high priest of the Temple of Gold and Iron, wiped his sweaty face with a serviette made from the skin of a sacrificed child. The handkerchief was rough and unpleasant to the touch, but sent a message to those viewing his actions. His large, limpid green eyes subtly scanned the chamber and he smiled slightly as several nobles and lesser priests flinched at the sight of his cloth.

A short man with the shoulders of a wrestler and a barrel-like body, Nohor knew he was not a very prepossessing sight upon first viewing. He did not have the tall, intense bearing of Ortiz, Queen Yerra's equerry, or the quiet, aged, intelligent dignity of high priest Ruslem of the Temple of Light. The high gold and jeweled crown that encircled his round skull would look stately or strong on those, or many others present. In truth, and he heard this from his many informers, most believed he resembled a butcher or a swine merchant with more gold than nobility.

Despite that, Nohor was unconcerned, disinterested in the respect of others. If he could not inspire love, fear would serve well enough.

The massive octangle hall held a gold domed ceiling and sumptuous tapestries made from imported silks and other rare cloths. At the center of the room was the throne of the Queen: a large, black iron chair encrusted with precious gems, apparently designed for someone who stood twelve feet-tall or larger. This chamber was at the summit of the great Palace of Council, a meeting hall of the nobles and priests, home to the immortal Queen Yerra.

The beautiful Yerra had summonsed them for a special conference, though all realized Nohor's hand was behind this preemptory convocation.

Unsurprisingly, the men and women present stood in three knots, each based on their respective castes. Some intermingling occurred, though this always resulted with the return to one's familiar tribe after a brief exchange.

The nobles, those whose bloodlines dated back to the earliest days of great Atlantis, stood together in a loose formation near Queen Yerra's royal throne. These men and women wore bright robes cut in the fashion of ancient days. They spoke in slow drawls and their topics rarely included anything of substance. Music, wine, servants, food, and hunting were the acceptable areas of discussion when they gathered in one location. Despite that, these apparently disinterested pleasure-seekers were dangerous when roused, most having trained as warriors and politicians since birth.

To the right of the nobles were the warrior class, a caste that ranged from those born to the best bloodlines to those whose ancestors had been slaves to the great kings of ancient Atlantis. These men and women were professional killers and strategists, who earned their step to the summit of their caste. Their talk was tense, harsh and filled with a bitter black humor based in their life of violent encounters with rebels, savages, and pirates from distant shores.

The final group, the smallest of the three, was also the one with the greatest share of political power: the priests of Atlantis. They were an odd assortment, from aged, white-bearded scribes to young oracles who caused disquiet whenever they left their hallowed halls. Dressed in the robes of their orders, they spoke quietly when not debating liturgical issues.

The chamber fell silent as the massive bronze doors swung open and a host of golden-helmeted soldiers marched into view. These were tall men, with powerfully, sculpted physiques and soft white kilts across their loins. Each carried a tall spear in one hand and a jeweled short sword strapped to their waists. They moved in perfect formation, their step and crash of their spear butts upon the ground were a wonderful display to even the most jaded viewer.

These men were the Queen's honor guard—a slave troop known as the Tammuz, who were once the fiercest fighting unit in Atlantis. Now, thanks to the influence of the nobility and the military, they were merely a display unit that impressed the masses when the Queen appeared in public.

A tall, blubbery man, with long curling hair and an ochre complexion, scurried into view. His purple and yellow robe was made from expensive silks and a thick gold and silver chain encircled his vast,

flabby neck. Fluttering his flat, fin-shaped hands in fussy, delicate manner, he bowed his head theatrically and called out in a fluty voice a statement all knew would come from him once he held their attention.

“All kneel before the vision of perfection, the daughter of the Heavens, the immortal Queen Yerra!”

All, save the Tammuz, lowered themselves to their knees, their heads bowed, staring at the pink, marble floor. The room fell silent and, for several minutes, no sounds emerged from the doorway. Then a delicate footfall penetrated the hush, followed by a gentle exhalation.

“You may rise, my people,” Queen Yerra said a few seconds later.

Those present rose and gazed upon the vision of loveliness who sat enthroned upon the seat of power. She was a tall woman with hair that was thick and streaked with gold and gray. Her face was triangular with soft, silken, golden skin, high cheekbones, and almond-shaped brown eyes that enticed all who met her gaze. Beneath her filmy gown was a shapely figure that was the envy and desire of every temple dancer and noblewoman in Atlantis. Today, she wore her royal crown: a gold circlet in the image of a serpent with eyes of rubies and fangs of ivory carved in such detail the creature appeared alive.

This was Queen Yerra, the immortal enchantress, ruler of ancient Atlantis. She was ancient, beautiful, terrible, capricious and untouchable. It was said that “to gaze upon Yerra was like staring into the sun, beautiful yet blinding.”

Yerra crossed one shapely leg over another and leaned back in her throne with an amused expression. Those present tensed, observing that she sat alone this day—with her equerry, dancers, musicians and servants. This was a bad sign—a message that Queen Yerra was not simply indulging in one of her arbitrary gatherings where she toyed with former favorites.

“My subjects,” Yerra said, her soft, musical voice carrying to every ear with ease, “a great calamity comes to Atlantis.”

She raised her hand slowly above her head and pointed towards the ceiling. With a harsh grinding sound, the domed roof slid aside, revealing the highest peaks of Bol-Gho. The sliding roof was, according to legend, designed and built by the ancient founder of the Atlantean way of life, King Argall himself. It was a wonderful piece of engineering, though rarely used since the machinery was delicate and not easily replaced.

Bol-Gho loomed above them, with the rising peaks and crags clearly visible in the silvery starlight. Yerra’s delicate hand fell and pointed to the left side of the mighty mountain. The collective stare of men and women present fell upon a curved crag known as the Bowl of Heaven.

“Do you see it?” Nohor asked, his voice almost breathy, “do you see it?”

“See what?” Iztemph asked, pushing forward and stepping to Nohor’s side.

Though elderly, this noble-born military leader held a natural presence and energy that one would normally expect from a younger man. Looming above the high priest, he overshadowed Nohor with relative ease.

“Place your eyes to the right of the Bowl of Heaven, good Iztemph,” Queen Yerra said, dropping her hand to her side and smiling enigmatically. “Tell me what you see.”

Iztemph tilted his head to the left and right, his eyes slowly blinking as he studied the indicated area. Eventually, he frowned and lowered his neck.

“A red star, your majesty,” he said with obvious reluctance.

Queen Yerra nodded and smiled, pointing again at the mountain.

“Yes, good General, a red star. Do any of you know what a red star in the Bowl of Heaven means?” she asked.

Ruslem, the white-haired, gray-bearded master of the Temple of Light, stepped forward. His lined face appeared tense and furious as he pushed into view.

“I do, great Queen, and beg you to remember the past. King Argall ended those terrible, evil rites in the first year of his reign!” he said.

Nohor stamped his foot in anger and whirled on Ruslem, thrusting his face upwards towards his aged rival.

“Past heresies are no excuse, Ruslem!” he said. “The ceremony must occur!”

Voices rose, demanding explanations from the two priests, when Yerra rose from her throne. Everyone fell silent, bowing their heads as the Queen strode between the two competing priests.

“Read the prophecy, Nohor,” she said, her lips curling into the feline smile.

Nohor removed a leather scroll case from his sleeve and retrieved an aged gold-colored page from the interior. He slowly unrolled the document, cleared his throat and waited several seconds.

“When the red star sits in the Bowl of Heaven and the Earth shakes and the enemies of Atlantis assault her shores, the last days of Atlantis shall come unless the people fulfill the Sacrifice of Apophis on that day...”

A buzz of whispered talk drifted through the chamber, the same question upon the lips of the men and women in attendance.

“What is the Sacrifice of Apophis?” Iztemph asked, voicing the question aloud.

“The Scourges of Nohor,” Ruslem said, naming the sacrificial priests who served the bloody temple, “remove the first-born child of every family born in the last eleven moons. Those children are then sacrificed to the God of Gold and Iron, the mighty serpent of darkness, Apophis. King Argall ended the ceremony, calling such proceedings an abomination!”

“The land quakes, good Ruslem,” Queen Yerra said as she settled back into her throne, “and enemies of Atlantis attack our shores with increasing regularity. Admiral Lohan, did you not battle pirates ten days ago?”

Lohan, a tall woman with flaming red hair streaked with white, appeared at the front of the military caste. She wore her hair loosely about her shoulders in opposition to fashion’s convention, and had one eye hidden beneath a patch made from a foreign gold coin. A popular figure among the populace of Atlantis, she was known for her utter honesty and complete disinterest in land-born politics.

“Yes, my Queen. However, that is a common occurrence. Trading vessels were upon the waves, heading east with gold and metals.”

“And the ground shook just yesterday, did it not?” Nohor asked, “The ground shakes and the enemies of our land attack. The red star will sit in the Bowl of Heaven in short months. The Sacrifice of Apophis must occur, or Atlantis shall fall!”

“Does anyone dispute the truth?” Queen Yerra asked, her eyes falling upon Ruslem. “Can you deny the evidence of your own eyes and ears? Are you willing to risk the lives of every citizen in Atlantis over a point of doctrine?”

Ruslem, who was considered the most learned priest among the Council of Priests, knew he could not argue. Queen Yerra’s question was a trap. Should he object further, Nohor would declare that the Temple of Light’s high priest risked the death of every Atlantean.

Ruslem frowned and bowed his head, unable to win this battle. Had he time or foreknowledge of Yerra and Nohor’s plans, he might have prepared a learned defense.

“I dispute the truth!” a voice called from the rear of the chamber. “I say Queen Yerra and High Priest Nohor violate the Law of Heaven!”

Nohor stamped his foot and turned about, looking for the speaker.

“Who dares? Who dares speak such sacrilege?” he asked.

A hooded figure stepped from the crowd, moving with a liquid grace that appeared almost inhuman. The white robe hid their features as they stopped and bowed slightly to the ruler of Atlantis.

“I do,” the speaker said, pushing back the hood.

A collective gasp filled the chamber and Queen Yerra sat back in her throne in shock.

“No, it cannot be...” she said in a whisper. “Soroe!”