

CHAPTER I

Civil War was impending and there was nothing Argall could do to avert its horrors. His very presence was the cause of the turmoil and anything he did now could bring about the conflagration. Therefore, he followed his nature and listened, learning the identities of the players and the strategies they used in their forthcoming war.

“...looks like the statue! He is the returned Argall, just as she is the returned Soroe!” a noble named Illaz said.

Prince Illaz was a tall, handsome man with deep copper skin and the sculpted sinews of a warrior. The scion of an ancient Atlantean noble family, he was known as an agitator who sought a change in the structure of society.

“We,” Ruslem, the high priest of the Temple of Light said, “were fooled for generations by magic surrounding the false immortal queen, Yerra. How can we be certain this has not occurred again?”

The camps were divided into three distinct factions. The first were the military and ancient nobles. Their rage at discovering that their lovely queen, Yerra, was naught, but a series of witches trained by an evil power infuriated them. They would back anyone with a claim against the Crown with the hopes of increasing their power.

The second were the priestly caste, men and women who served the gods in the name of the state. They were also the main bureaucrats of the Atlantean government. This gave them a great deal of political power, despite having few men under arms.

The final faction was the merchant class. They possessed little actual power, but wielded massive influence over every aspect of the kingdom. They were prosperous men and women, many dressed in greater luxury than the nobles. Additionally, more than a few controlled dangerous mercenary forces that could tip the scale of power in each direction.

“He arrived,” Lophan, the one-eyed Admiral of the Atlantean navy said, “on a boat from the north. My ships intercepted the Erm-Gilt-Hermian vessel in the open sea. My sailors and I recognized the man’s resemblance to ancient Argall.”

Lophan was a tall woman with wildly flowing crimson hair that fell past her shoulders. Attractive in a dangerous way, she was considered the most honest noblewoman in Atlantis.

“How do you know you were not bespelled?” Ruslem asked. “Yerra’s master fooled us for generations!”

This was the truth, and few denied that fact. After the death of the original King Argall and Queen Soroe, the saviors of Atlantis, Queen Yerra had assumed power. A lovely, bewitching woman with uncanny magical abilities, she proclaimed herself immortal. After ruling for one hundred years, her subjects had created a monument in her honor, a statue as tall as the palace and equaling that of Soroe and Argall.

It was only thanks to Soroe’s modern-day descendent, a priestess of the Temple of Light, that the truth had become known. Yerra was not immortal, but merely one of a series of false queens placed on the throne by a distant unknown mystical force. Her statue held a spell that transformed the stone face and form of the queen into that of the current wearer of the Crown of Yerra.

In a rage, the inhabitants of the city had pulled down the mighty image of Queen Yerra, destroying part of the dwelling of her main supporters, the evil Temple of Gold and Iron. The mob had also driven out the members of that order, realizing that their worship of the demon snake Apophis could destroy their lands.

Argall, the chieftain of his barbaric northern people, had always known that his ancestors had come from Atlantis. An Argall, son of Argall, had always ruled their tribe in the frozen wastes, and were often declared the war chief of all tribes when battle commenced against outsiders. The idea that his ancient ancestor had ruled these lands was one of many surprises.

Soroe, the queen candidate who had overthrown Yerra, stood silently. She, too, had been listening without comment. A stunningly beautiful woman with shoulder-length golden hair, large blue eyes, and silken skin, she was the very image of the ancient queen. What those present also knew was that she had faced terrible dangers in the quest Yerra had recently sent her upon.

Yerra, in the hope of killing a possible claimant to the throne, had sent the young priestess in search of the fabled "Soul of Soroe." This item was a mystic gem possessing unknown powers and was said to have aided the first Queen of Atlantis in her quest towards bringing peace to the kingdom.

Soroe, with the aid of a young thief named Deena, had survived the many trials placed in her path before finding the lost treasure. Few questioned her rights and power upon returning... until Argall had arrived.

"The question of whether the chieftain of the Erm-Gilt-Herm is the heir of Argall can be settled with ease," she said, her voice carrying across the oversized, empty chamber.

"We will not accept the spells of the Temple of Light," Illaz said. "Your uncle is their high priest and greatest supporter."

This caused a roar of protest from the priests, their words flowing together in a terrible, incomprehensible babble. The military and nobles snarled back, and the civil war appeared poised to occur, when Soroe produced the Soul of Soroe.

It was a flawless clear gem that radiated and pulsed with white golden light. Laying atop a golden scepter, the jewel was the symbol of the queen's power in these lands.

The room fell silent again and the gem exuded a warm light that brought peace to all present. Soroe turned in a slow circle, showing again the legendary item that proved her claim.

"The Soul of Soroe reveals the truth in all who live," she said, her voice hushed. "If this man is a pawn of dreaded powers, all shall know."

Turning his direction, she gazed up to his face and asked, "Will you agree to answer the question while standing before the power of the Soul of Soroe?"

"I will," Argall said, and stepped forward.