

# The Genes of Isis

## Book One:

### Footprints of the Angels by Justin Newland

#### 66. The Autumn Festival of Mohengrin: The Gust of Gold

Magril heaved a deep sigh. Two days since the humiliation of the mists, and he was still seething. He'd returned to the city with an empty cart and a face like a wounded bear. 'Where was Jarda?' The people wanted to know. Disappeared into the *mists*? He'd never felt so angry and ashamed.

Then the tidings filtered through the conjuring of the mists. Where had Ashetar got the powers of an enchantress? Magril began to think she was in cahoots with the Helios. That made her dangerous, toxic. As usual, the search parties had found plenty of empty caves.

He kicked a stone in front of him and growled.

"You'll have to cheer up," Abance said to him. "You can't let the people see you like this. It's the Festival of Mohengrin and you're to lead the procession. Come on, it'll lift their morale."

"I know," he said.

In the Step Well portico, a large crowd gathered in a circle around two men dressed in traditional garb - one as a bull, the other, a lion. Each roar of the lion and each grunt of the bull were accompanied by hoops of laughter. The two danced around each other and in a mock wrestle, pushing and shoving with ever more serious intent. This was the re-enactment of the continuing passion play between the Earth and the Sun.

He really did not want to conduct another ceremony. He had an idea. "You must have seen Orkor conduct it many a time?"

Abance turned to him and with air of hesitation said, "Yes, I have. Why do you ask?"

"You do it," he said and thrust the hewn Mohengrin staff into Abance's hands.

"All right," Abance said with an insouciant air. "I will."

The dance concluded, Abance called for the procession to the Temple to begin. Behind him came a bustling line of carpenters, sculptors, weavers, masons, priests, musicians, dancers, children, mothers, fathers, and everyone else who cared about the city and its future. Each carried a horn of produce, green apples, oranges, red pears and black grapes, swaying and skipping up to the Temple. The musicians played the favourite songs of the sons of Samlios.

*'Samlios city, we live in her lee,*

*She is our ocean home.*

*We are made of air and sea,*

*And her mighty loam'*

People sang along, danced a jig with their neighbour and threw their skull caps in the air. The youngsters filched apples from the cart and threw them at each other until a stray one hit Galaxys in the back. For a moment, Old Thunder furiously shook his fists and stooped down to pick up the offending article, opened his lips revealing his toothless mouth and gripped the apple between his lips.

“He’s an Eater!” The children yelled in mockery until everyone collapsed in hoots of laughter.

Abance led the procession along the Avenue of Statues, through the Temple Gate and into the inner cloister. As Magril passed the Birthing Chambers, Seluce poked her nose out of the door and whispered to him that the birth of Rebecca’s birth would not be long.

“What a long face! Don’t be so upset about it,” she reprimanded him. “That’s about a good an omen as you can get: a child born on the festival of the Gust of Gold, the Autumnal twin of the Silver Zephyr.”

He murmured something back and wandered into the cloister. He had a sense of foreboding and it wouldn’t shift.

“Today the moon is round,” Abance was saying. “On the day of the Mohengrin Festival, that’s doubly propitious. How does the rhyme go?

*‘Mohengrin’s child is full of glee,  
That’s plain enough for all to see.  
Mohengrin’s child’s the apogee  
Let’s celebrate his legacy.’”*

Everyone gathered around the heart of the city: the revered Oak of Samlios. As he walked over its roots, it upset him to see the ground littered with blanched and tattered acorns, browned and blackened by the untimely frosts. This was not a good sign. Beforehand, Abance had assured him that there were a few fertile acorns still hanging on the tree, which was what mattered for the success of the Festival.

He wasn’t alone in seeing the parlous state of the tree because the musicians stuttered to a discordant stop, halting the dance and emptying a bucket full of worries into the proceedings. The rumours about the acorns - or lack of them - spread like wildfire.

“Are there any?” Geld asked, as she held baby Shamira.

“I can’t see any, they’re browned with disease,” Solon answered.

Abance called for silence. “Remember the great Oak is a symbol of our continuing contract with the Source. It looks the worse for wear except there are healthy acorns concealed amidst its thick and sturdy branches.”

“Are you sure?” He wanted to know, “Because I can’t see any.”

“There’s one here,” Abance pointed towards the upper branches.

“No there’s not. Look again.” This was turning into another farce!

“It was there when I looked this morning,” Abance was irritated himself.

“It’s not there,” he snarled. “So find another.”

The crowd grew restless as Abance shuffled around the other side of the Oak. People waved their skull caps and shouted.

“Is there one or not?” someone asked.

“It was around here,” Abance said frantically, “Yes, here it is. Look!” He pointed to an overhanging bough.

Everyone looked up.

“Yes, it’s there, on the end of that long branch.” He agreed. “Is that the very last one?”

“It is,” Abance replied. “Let’s give thanks. One is all that’s needed. We are fecund: that’s what it means. The covenant remains.”

He hoped so. He was as disappointed in the one lone acorn as the rest of the crowd, as normally the branches were bent over with the sheer weight of fruit.

Abruptly, a prolonged scream pierced the sullen quiet. It came from the Birthing Chamber and sounded like a scream of dread. But it couldn’t be. It had to be Rebecca - he guessed she was suffering the pangs of labour.

“Come on everyone,” he said, trying to encourage himself and the crowd, “We’ve something to cheer - a Mohengrin Child.”

“As long as it’s not an angel child,” someone in the crowd crowed.

He shook his head. Rebecca had conceived the child with Strode some two moons prior to the first appearance of the Helios, so how could it be a hybrid? That was ignorant talk. And how could Strode lend a hand to steal Jarda from him? He felt betrayed.

The Festival continued when the musicians struck up a jaunty melodic tune. Everyone sang along,

*‘When one and one make three,*

*It’s a time to glory be,*

*Welcome new born to our land,*

*You’re the bluest of the strand.”*

From the Birthing Chamber came more voices raised in alarm. A beautiful bird appeared to alight through the window opening of the chamber and glide effortlessly through the air above the cloister.

Irit was thrilled to see the bird - a wondrous phoenix risen from the ashes. This was an omen - no, it was more than that; it was the sign Tarsus for which had grown tired of waiting. Yes. What

joy! If only it were true. From the back of the crowd, she watched the magical bird fly high above the Temple gliding in broad circles.

With beating drum and shaking gourds of pebbles, the band played a rousing crescendo, heightened by a lilting melody of the flute. The bird seemed to pirouette above them then let out a strangulated croak, somewhere between a bird's squawk and a baby's cry. It descended above the oak in ever decreasing circles and swooped low over the heads of the crowd. It was caked in some thick, glutinous substance, like saliva. And - look, its wings protruded from - a human torso!

A hybrid!

Strode emerged from the Birthing Chamber, hands gripping his head like a coconut, eyes as big as conch shells. "Did - did you see it?" He stammered.

She couldn't bring herself to speak. No-one uttered a word. They watched with bated breath as the bird monster swooped down towards the oak and with its beak plucked the last acorn.

The last acorn! Gone!

The chimera perched on an upper branch to enjoy its first meal. Human hands held the acorn and put it to a curved beak. Two eagle-taloned claws perched on the branch while its wings flapped slowly and evenly.

Strode picked up a rotten acorn and threw it with venom at the winged thing, which squawked and flew off towards the Needles.

Strode slumped to the ground, crying, "That chimera - is our child!"

His stomach churning, Magril's felt his legs go beneath him and grabbed onto the trunk of the tree. The shock of the birth struck him to the quick. A golden breeze twisted a cluster of wilted leaves into a small vortex, which drifted away into nothing. That was how he felt, full of fury and nothing.

He recovered his wits and tried to put his distress beneath his feet. He was the Fortress: it fell to him to stare into the abyss.

"People, let us pour out our grief, lest it consume us all."

The crowd swayed and moved their heads from side to side, humming a requiem.

*"Never more shall we smile*

*As we face the terrible trial.*

*We will sing of days of yore,*

*For humanity is never more."*

This was a death knell, a turning moment, when things changed irrevocably. It was an excruciating time through which to live, a sad and bitter end to a long sojourn.

Gripping his fists into a knot, he said, "Let us turn to our friends and neighbours alike, because we - here - are the last of a kind, the last humans. From this day, the human race is extinct. We represent the past. Our women can only conceive a child shot with a renegade seed; part-human,

part-animal and part-angel. The only race to have continuance will be the hybrids who, in due course, will supplant us. They are the future. I was never a believer in the Surge Prophecies, yet in this dim and vapid light, we see clearly that:

*‘It comes from far away,  
This brand new day,  
So break with the past,  
As you will be the last’*”

“Yes, we are the last, that is the truth,” he said quietly. The wind died down, the great aquamarine ocean becalmed. “From this moment, every birth will fall under the scourge and aegis of the Helios. If the father is a man, the child conceived will be hybrid. As a race, we’re unable to make another of our kind. This is a tragic nadir. The Oak’s dearth of acorns is sad confirmation that the covenant between us and the Source is ruptured. We stand alone. Alas, we are the walking dying.”

He felt like he was grieving for a close relative - but there was no corpse. He had to find a way out of this dark abyss.

“Here is Solon and his family.” He beckoned to them to join him. “He and I had our differences - which dissolve before our dreadful plight. So today, we stand before you as brothers.”

With moist eyes, Solon shook his hand with warmth.

“Here,” he continued, “is his youngest daughter Shamira, the last born human in Atlantis.”

Geld held up the babe-in-arms for everyone to see. A muted pulse of well-being rippled through the crowd. Cradled in her mother’s arms, the child closed her eyes and fell asleep, evidently oblivious to the apocalypse unravelling around her.

As dusk fell and the great full moon lit the sky like a giant glow-lamp, Solon raised her to the twinkling night sky saying,

“Long live Shamira, the true last born, the last innocent.”