

The dragons made their way to desolate Nerys Island in the middle of the Crystal Sea. On the island stood a glittering temple of white sandstone, its primitive design reminding Isabel of Stonehenge. Women covered from head to toe in white linen, so that only their eyes could be seen, greeted the party. Men were not allowed to enter the temple so Isabel and Nancy followed the women inside. The stone floors were scrubbed and polished until they were smooth and shiny like marble. Torches dimly lit the inside of the temple and they could make out what looked like hieroglyphics etched into the walls. As the silent escorts led them deeper inside, Isabel could hear the echo of light melodic voices singing in the distance. They approached a pair of slick metal doors guarded by two women in silver plated armor clutching spears. One of their escorts bowed her head and made a gesture before the doors that opened in response. Light burst forth so bright the women had to shield their eyes until their sight could adjust before entering the room. The walls were pure white and smooth, coming to a rounded point at the top so as to resemble the inside of an egg. The floors were polished and white as well and sitting in the center was a young girl. She had smooth white hair that fell down her back and she was clad in a sheer white gown. She sat cross-legged, arms to her sides, with her eyes closed beneath a twinkling star that rested on her forehead and a smooth space in place of a mouth. As the women approached, the girl opened her eyes and Isabel gasped at their beauty for they shimmered silver.

Hail and welcome, Queen Valeska and Lady Isabel of Kendra. Came a soft female voice.

Isabel and Nancy looked around and exchanged glances when they realized their escort had left them in the room. Remembering Dowager Empress Ilythia's instructions, Isabel spoke.

"Thank you for granting us audience, Blessed One." she replied, genuflecting before the girl with Nancy following her movements. "We have come seeking guidance."

I have been troubled by the evil growing in our universe. You were wise to consult an Oracle. The voice spoke again. *Your enemies grow more powerful by the day, their armies of undead and the monsters they create fly against all natural laws.*

"Blessed One, can my father's amulet help us in any way?" Isabel asked.

The Heart of Kendra lies within the amulet. It is a link to Quendaris and will give you strength when you have none. It is that power the sorceress seeks. Travel to Mount Osera and use the amulet to rouse the Silver Fleet.

Isabel struggled to wrap her mind around what the Oracle had just said. She held the amulet in her palm and watched the light glint off the silver and rubies. The Heart of Kendra, what was it? Was that where her parents had gotten the amulet? Her mother had said it was a family heirloom.

The Oracle closed her eyes and there was a sudden toll of bells that shook the room. As the sound faded Isabel could hear faint whispers of the word "prophecy." The women gasped as the blank part of the Oracle's face arranged itself into a mouth, which opened.

"Daughter of the sun be warned. A Maelstrom in the distance looms. Legions fall, worlds in ruin, friend is foe and foe is friend. Cast out He Who Claims Divinity. What was broken thy must mend."

As the prophecy tumbled from the Oracle's lips, sights and sounds came unbidden to Isabel's mind. Screams of the tortured and dying, visions of carnage and death, the stink of sulfur and burning flesh, the copper taste of blood overwhelmed her senses until she could bear it no longer. Isabel gave in to her panic and fled from the room.

Once Isabel and Nancy entered the temple Alaric and Iskander stretched their legs in the sunshine.

"It appears the future king and queen of Shayn'delrune are not getting along." Alaric teased.

"No, we are not." Iskander chuckled bitterly. "It is just as well for we will not be wed."

"She has rejected you because of your sight?"

Iskander shook his head and smiled. "No, she had the good sense to reject me on my personality alone. She does not like being forced into anything against her will. She has had her every movement dictated to her from birth."

Alaric shrugged. "A wise man once said, with great power comes great responsibility. It is the way of things."

"Yes, but she does not believe it should be so and I am inclined to agree."

"Our responsibility is to our people, Iskander. If we do what we wish instead of what is right it is the people who suffer, you know that as well as I. You see what is happening in Izan."

"Do we really know this to be true, Alaric?" Iskander shook his head. "Tis naught, even if Valeska... Nancy has changed her mind, I will not tether her to a blind man for life. It would be a cruelty."

"And if your sight can be restored, what then?"

Iskander hesitated. His heart warmed as he thought of Nancy pulling him out of danger and caring for him in the tunnel. When she volunteered to ask the Oracle about his condition it was a surprise. Despite his best efforts, Iskander discovered he liked the woman. He enjoyed teasing her, especially when he found she gave as good as she got. When she had opened up to him in the escape tunnel he found he could sympathize with her, amazed that her own reluctance for marriage mirrored his own and for the same reasons. The only difference being he had intended to go through with it for the sake of his people. Growing up his parents had consistently pounded into his head how the fealty of a king to his people determined the people's fealty to their king. Nancy had never had that and as queen it was a lesson she would have to learn quickly.

The kingdom of Izan was an example of what not to do. The royal family was too busy fighting each other for power while the oppressive Church of Ore governed the people with an iron fist, turning brother against brother and neighbor against neighbor. The end result being a mass exodus that the Alliance would have to contend with once this current war was over.

"Lady Isabel, what is wrong? Where is Valeska?" Alaric asked suddenly.

Pale and trembling, Isabel appeared in the entrance of the temple and dropped to her knees. Alaric flew to her side at once. Iskander drew his sword instinctively, hefted it as if having second thoughts, but kept it to hand as he listened intently.

Isabel shook her head, gulping the sweet fresh air and wiping away her tears as her senses returned to normal.

“It’s alright, Highness,” she smiled with a final shudder, “she should be out in a minute.”

Alaric helped Isabel to her feet and held her gaze. Instinctively he knew she wasn’t telling them everything and he intended to grill her once she was no longer so shaken. The prince chuckled to himself. What was this intense need to protect this woman? When she had attempted to venture into the forest on her own he could have throttled her for being so reckless! He was escorting her to her chambers when the palace came under attack. Rather than run to safety as he’d commanded, the maddening woman brandished the leg of a fallen set of armor and insisted on fighting alongside him! Lady Isabel seemed almost fearless, a trait that made him want to both kiss her and shake her. How could he protect her if she insisted on protecting herself? Seeing her so upset as she left the temple disturbed him more than he ever thought possible. It was as if a fist had reached into his stomach and twisted it. Whatever Isabel had learned in the temple, he would have to find out and figure out a way to protect her from it whether she liked it or not.

Nancy appeared in the entrance and asked woodenly, “Is she alright?”

Alaric nodded and then, noting Nancy’s expression remarked, “It seems the Oracle had nothing but bad tidings for all of us.”

“I’m afraid so.” Nancy replied quietly.