

The Oracle of Ephara

Jeremiah Isgur

From set *Born of the Gods*

Iris, the Oracle of Ephara, leaned forward in the wooden armchair and carefully probed the small side table until her fingertips touched the clay drinking vessel. She gingerly lifted the cup to her mouth, a thin stain of purple remaining on her lips as she tentatively placed the cup back on the table.

"I do not want to run and hide like a fawn," she said. "If we are to avoid war with those who have sided with the other gods, then I must be here to interrogate captives. You know my gift of foresight only comes from a touch. I cannot be of help if I am hiding far away."

"The enemies' agents have infiltrated the city," said Perisophia, the current head of the ruling council of philosophers known as the Twelve. The Twelve were arrayed in a circle in the center of the great hall of governance. Iris could hear their voices echo off of the massive marble pillars that stretched to the dome far above their heads.

"If you are captured or killed," Perisophia continued, "then you will be of no help to Meletis or Ephara. If we are to avoid open conflict among humankind, we must also prevent the renegade factions loyal to Purphoros from provoking it. We have conferred with the Temple and agreed that you will be moved to the garrison at Soli, where you will be safe until we call for you. The decision is final."

"How am I to get there?" Iris asked, resigned to the command. From one gilded cage to another. Although she lived in servitude to her god and her polis, at least she knew her way around Meletis. Learning the garrison at Soli would be challenging. She would be even more like a captive there.

"You will be escorted by a bodyguard, overland," Perisophia replied.

"Overland, by a single guard?" she scoffed. "Do you *hope* to get me killed?"

"The two of you are unlikely to be discovered on the way, and thus it is the safer option. If we send you with a patrol of soldiers, you will be a target. Besides," Perisophia continued, "your guard is no ordinary soldier. You will be quite safe."

Iris sat back in her chair, feeling the grain of the wood with her hands, her milky, useless eyes staring into nothingness, as always.

"Send him in," Perisophia commanded. The massive carved wooden doors at the front of the hall swept open. Iris heard the rubbing of wood on the huge bronze hinges and felt the subtle breeze as outside air pushed its way in. An armored man strode into the hall and approached Iris, the metal trim on his boots and skirt clinking with each step. He knelt before her. She felt his breath on her hand.

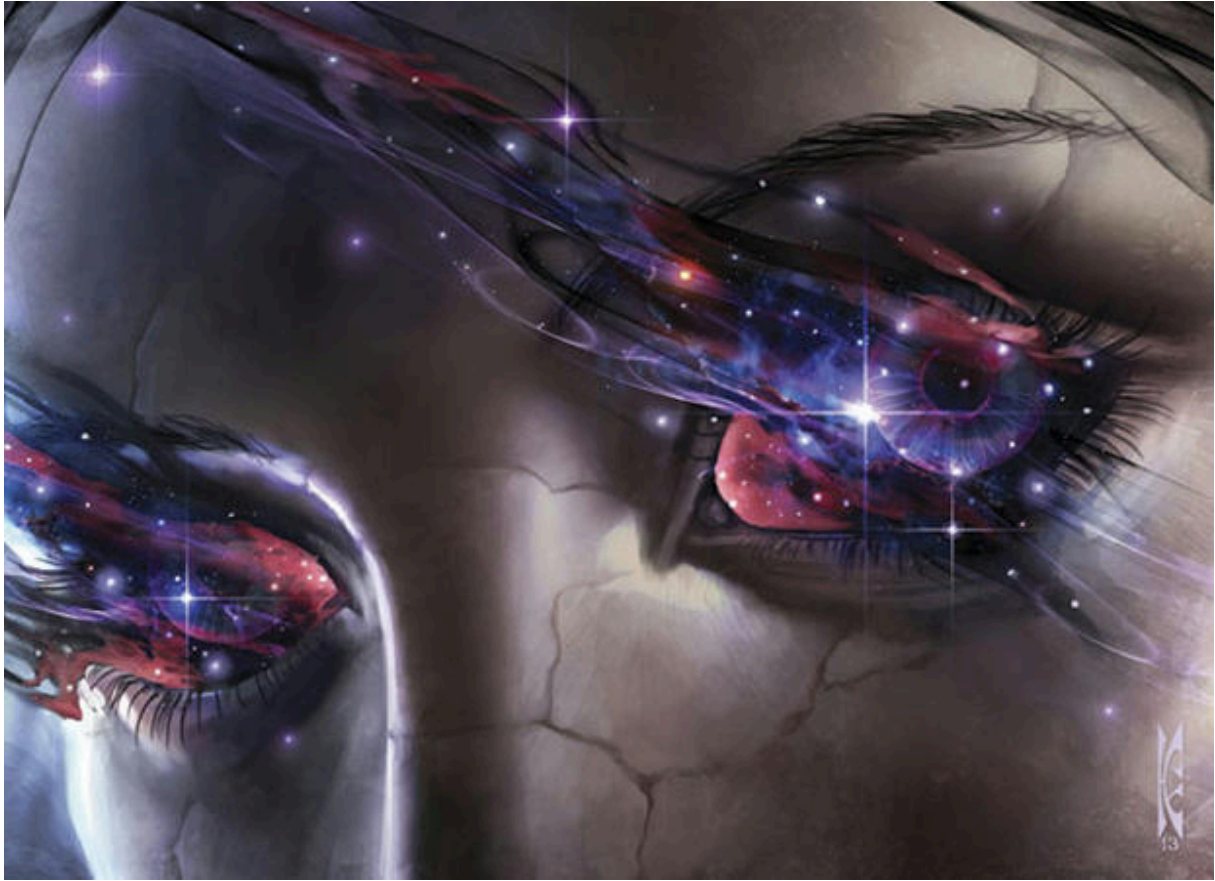


Akroan Skyguard | Art by Mark Winters

“Your ladyship,” he began, in the deep voice of the very tall. “I am Alexio, Skyknight of Meletis. My duty is to see you safely to the garrison at Soli.”

He took her hand in his. Iris ran her fingers and palm over it, then up his arm, feeling the hair and muscles. When she reached his shoulders she felt a scar from an old, deep cut. She followed the wound over the top of his shoulder until she felt something brush against the back of her fingers. She slowly reached out until she could feel for certain the nearly intangible, ethereal mass of what she knew were wings of light, a gift of the gods. She smoothed them gently. He remained perfectly still, waiting for her to finish examining him.

Her fingers left his wings and probed his face so that she could understand what he looked like—his aquiline nose, square jaw, full lips, protruding brow, short curly hair. Her hand lingered in the side of his face for a moment. That’s when the vision came.



Oracle's Insight | Art by Raymond Swanland

She did not see a particular event from the future. It was more like a feeling, like being in Alexio's dream and feeling the same emotions as he. He was in love with her. Not now, of course, for they had just met, but sometime in the future. And she felt him being taken from her, and his sadness, and then his nothingness.

The thought repulsed her. Not because he was repulsive, but because she knew how it would end. He was an exalted soldier of the polis and she was a blind oracle of Ephara. Never in a thousand years could they be together. If his love for her would kill him, then she must prevent it.

She withdrew her hand suddenly and drew a sharp breath.

"Is everything all right, My Lady?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "We will leave at dawn. The journey takes at least three days, and we must hurry." Above all else, she wanted to get to the garrison as soon as possible, before her prophecy had time to manifest.

By the time the faintest light cracked the horizon, Iris was mounted on a government horse, her travel cloak wrapped tightly against the chill and her essential belongings packed securely in the saddlebags. Alexio held the reins. Perisophia stood in the courtyard, and held her hand for a moment.

"May Ephara grant you a safe and swift journey, Iris of the Sight," she said, gravely. "We will send for you as soon as it is safe to return. Godspeed."

Perisophia let go of Iris's hand as Alexio led her horse away, through the city, out the stone gates and onto the road south. They avoided the highway, taking instead the smaller, more ancient path through

the forest. By the end of the day, they would be at the foot of the mountains they would have to cross in order to reach the garrison.



Forest | Art by Adam Paquette

The day warmed as it lightened and Alexio soon drew her into conversation as they travelled.

“Should anything happen, My Lady—”

“Please, you may call me Iris.”

“My lady Iris,” he continued, “should we be ambushed, or endangered, trust to your horse and I will protect you. Know that if I must fly, I will come back to you, on my life.”

“Of course,” she acknowledged graciously.

“What are your hopes for peace, My Lady... Iris?” he asked.

“I daresay I want it. But the gods have abandoned us, leaving us to our own base desires—and that rarely ends well.”

“It is an unfortunate thing,” he replied.

“Fortune has little to do with it. It is the gods who play our strings like a harp. Although they have not answered my call in many nights, I know they still hear. I’m just not sure they care.”

“Many believe that soldiers are born for battle,” Alexio said. “But it is not always the truth. I would give anything to avoid war. I would rather converse with you by the fire, goblet in hand, than die on a battlefield for gods’ own reasons.”

“Does not your training teach you that you are already dead?” she said coldly in an effort to keep her emotional distance. “That is how a soldier must wake up every morning—with the certainty that his life has already been sacrificed.”

“My lady,” he responded, formally. “I will scout the area around us to ensure we are not being followed. Continue on and I will meet you up the path.” She heard him open his cloak and stretch his wings, and suddenly, with a deep beating of the air, he was gone.

She rode in silence, thinking of the previous day’s vision. Yes, he had drawn her into conversation, was even charming in his way, but she knew she must keep him at arm’s length, lest her vision of his love for her manifest too soon. Perhaps she could avoid this fate. If the gods were going to be silent, then maybe fate was on hold as well. For Alexio to fall in love with her... she shook the thought from her mind. It simply must not be allowed to happen.

She spurred her horse into a trot, feeling relief in the freedom from the city, from the oppressive magnitude of the government and its imposing stone, its formal customs and grave responsibilities. She quickly offered a prayer for safety and encouraged her horse into a gallop that it was eager to oblige.

The warm wind of the afternoon whipped her cloak and peppered her face. She actually laughed for the first time in ages, holding the reins loosely in one hand and gripping the pommel of the saddle in the other. The landscape of her mind flew by. She could hear the trees pass on either side. Everything felt gloriously out of control. It was the first time she had been alone without an escort or handler in ages.

“Iris!” she heard Alexio shout from somewhere above. Before she even had the chance to rein in her horse, Alexio’s powerful arms swept her out of the saddle and carried her through the air before roughly depositing her onto the grass. She heard her horse neigh violently and cry out. She heard the ringing of Alexio’s sword as it left the scabbard and the shouts of two other men as they were cut down by his blade, one of them putting up a fight, sword to sword, before being silenced. Quiet returned to the world, except the labored breathing of her horse some distance away.

Iris felt around her trying to regain her orientation. Alexio beat down to the ground by her side.

“Are you injured, My Lady?”

“No, just surprised, and disoriented.”

“It was an ambush. Two highwaymen, or what we are meant to think were highwaymen. Judging by the markings on their weapons, I would guess they were worshipers of Purphoros.” He took Iris’s hand and helped her to her feet.

“Thank you, Sir,” she smiled.

“Unfortunately, they used a tripwire to fell your horse, who appears to have a broken leg. If I hadn’t shown up just in time, you might have had a broken head. What were you thinking racing away like that?” He scolded her, gently, but seriously.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I was just reveling in a moment of freedom.”

“Wait here,” he said, “while I put your horse down.”

She cursed herself, silently, for losing control of her emotions. It had cost her horse, and it had almost cost her life. If only she could always have a bodyguard like Alexio, keeping a sharp and trusted watch over her, instead of the usual sniveling bureaucrats. She imagined the freedom she could have, and then pushed the thought away. It could never happen. The air changed, and she realized she could no longer hear her horse’s labored breathing.

She heard Alexio's footsteps approach and he gently took her hand.

"It is done, Lady Iris. Now we must continue on foot."

He led her by the hand as they walked side-by-side down the forest path, his great, strong hand tenderly engulfing hers.

"We must keep our senses sharp. I know that your hearing is very keen. You must help me sense danger. Now that we are on foot, we are much more vulnerable."

"I am sorry," she said again. "I have been a fool."

"It is not true, Iris," he replied, squeezing her hand so gently she wasn't sure it was even intentional. "You were only enjoying a fleeting moment of freedom that most people take for granted their entire lives. Not only do I not blame you, I respect you all the more for it. Your life is not so different from mine, always in service to Meletis, never to ourselves."

She withdrew her hand from his. "I can follow you by sound. You do not need to lead me like a child."

"As you wish."

She detected a hint of disappointment in his voice.

"I will try to find you another mount tomorrow. I know of a herd that roams the mountainside. Since the sun grows wan, we will make camp soon and continue in the dawn. If you will allow me to carry you, I can fly us for a while. My wings are strong enough."

"That will not be necessary," she replied. "I am blind, not helpless."

They walked in silence until Iris's legs grew tired. Alexio led her away from the path to a forest clearing where they could sleep undetected. He made a small, hidden fire and a makeshift tent for her. They shared some food from the saddlebags and a sip of wine before Iris retired and Alexio flew to the treetops to stand watch.

"They came through here only hours ago," the commander said, rolling his dead comrade over. "This is clearly the work of the Skyguard."

"Look, sir, a horse," said one of the rangers.

"Ah," replied the commander. "It must be hers. Excellent. If they are on foot we should be able to overtake them tomorrow."

Two of the other rangers conferred farther up the path before turning back toward their commander.

"Two tracks continue in this direction," one of them said. "One is the woman, the other the Skyguard. There doesn't appear to be anyone else with them."

"The Oracle of Ephara, alone with a single Skyguard? What could they have been thinking? Men, we will be home with our captive and the head of a Skyguard before the moon is full."

By the time full daylight filtered down through the trees, they had reached the foothills of the mountains. They had already travelled many miles, Iris, again, refusing to be carried aloft in the arms of Alexio. He led her off the path to the base of a large tree, where he bade her to sit and eat while he went to look for a mount. She was grateful for the rest. Spending most of her time in the luxuries of Ephara's Temple, she was not used to this much travelling.

Leaning against the moss-covered trunk of the tree in a beam of sunlight with food in her belly, she could not help but to drift off to the dream world for a moment.

She awoke to the sounds of a horse whinnying and the deep beating of large wings. She could also hear Alexio's smaller wings beating down to the ground nearby. She recognized the particular quality and cadence of the way he landed, but she did not recognize the other set of wings. The sunbeam was gone, and in its place a cold shadow lay across her body. She could smell moisture in the air.

"I have returned with a mount," he said triumphantly. She could hear the smile in his voice. "He is willing, and friendly to the Skyguard."



Loyal Pegasus | Art by John Severin Brassell

Iris rose from her seat and approached the sound of the pegasus's breathing, hand outstretched. The creature pushed its head against her hand and she stroked its neck, moving alongside it until she could feel the huge feathers of its wing. She smiled, anticipating what it would be like to fly.

"How wonderful, Sir. I am speechless."

"We shall make haste now," Alexio said. "Are you ready?"

Iris nodded and he picked her up by her waist and hoisted her onto the back of the great mount. This time, she didn't mind his strong hands on her body. With a flying mount, they were more like equals.

"Hold fast, but know that he will not let you fall." Alexio let out a guttural encouragement and the pegasus beat its wings and leaped from the ground. Iris gave an involuntary squeal at the sudden movement and wrapped her arms around its neck, holding on for dear life.

"This is amazing," she laughed. "I have never felt this sensation before."

"It is heartening to see you happy," Alexio replied.

"Describe for me what you see," she requested.

Alexio described the mountains ahead, the forest below, the river snaking down from the highlands toward the city far behind them. Iris imagined it all in her head.

"The sky is dark," Alexio added, flying beside her. "I hope to get across the mountains before it rains, but I am not so sure."

As if a jealous god was listening to him, thunder rumbled from a distance. Iris offered a prayer to the gods to keep the skies closed until they were across the mountains.

All too soon, the rain began to fall. Misty at first, it slowly turned into a gentle shower, wetting her face.

"Are you all right, Iris?" Alexio asked.

"Yes," she replied, "we should continue on."

They flew in silence, concentrating. The rain came down heavier, soaking Iris's cloak and pelting her face as they cut through it. She grew cold, her body weary from gripping her mount, afraid of falling.

"Perhaps we should stop and take shelter," she shouted over the rain.

"If you can, I recommend we push on. Your mount has the stamina."

"Yes, but I do not. Please, if we could find a place to rest, I would be grateful, and more able to continue tomorrow."

"Of course. I will see what I can find." They banked to the right as thunder cracked again, much closer than before. Iris shivered and clung to her mount's wet hair.

They spent some minutes twisting to and fro, occasionally doubling back in the pelting wind and rain.

"Down there," Alexio said after a while. He seemed to be talking to the pegasus.

She was relieved when they gently touched down on solid ground and Alexio led them into a cave on the side of the mountain. The cave was cold, but dry. Alexio quickly reconnoitered the cavern, reporting that it had only two chambers, bent around a rocky outcropping, with entrances on either side.

Iris dismounted and shook out her cloak, shivering. Alexio quickly unpacked the saddlebags, and set about building a fire while Iris divided food between them. The pegasus clopped to the other chamber, shook himself out and settled down with a whinny.

"We'll never find them in this mess," one of the rangers complained to the captain.

"Nonsense," the captain replied

He pulled his men aside, under the relative shelter of a spreading oak tree and dismounted. His men watched as he retrieved a golden goblet from his pack. The captain scooped water from a clear puddle into the goblet and crouched over it, covering his head with his cloak and sheltering the water until the surface settled and became glassy. Concentrating, he uttered the incantation, repeating it until the water inside the goblet turned silver, like the surface of a mirror. In the mirror, he could see the Oracle and Skyguard descend toward the mountain pass and slip into the entrance of a cave.



Astral Cornucopia | Art by Aleksi Briclot

A drop of water rolled off the captain's hood and splashed into the goblet, shattering the mirrored surface and wiping away the image. The captain dumped the goblet on the ground and stood up.

"I know where they are," he said to his patrol. "But we'll need to make haste if we want to get to them before dawn. We will ambush them in the cave. With luck, we can bribe one of the spiders of the upper forest to help us."

He swung up onto his horse and spurred it into a gallop.

After being warmed by food and fire, Iris found the wineskin she had buried at the bottom of her belongings and offered it to Alexio.

"Lady Iris," he said after a drink, "I am glad you talked me into stopping. Seeing you glow in the firelight, warm and dry, is a beautiful contrast to the weather outside. Let's enjoy one more night of freedom before we must resume your duties."

"Yes," she agreed. "Another hour in that storm would have been the death of me. I, as well, would rather spend a night in a cave on a mountainside with you, than hurry to my continuing servitude."

Alexio moved closer to Iris and handed her the wine skin. She drank eagerly and wrapped her blanket over her shoulders.

"Will we be safe here?" she asked, quietly. The fire crackled, heating her face.

"You will be safe with me. You will always be safe with me..." he trailed off.

She reached out and took hold of his hand, hoping for a vision. Hoping for a sign of what may come. But there was nothing. Nothing but her own thoughts, desires, and the grip of his warrior's hand squeezing her back.

She moved next to him, their bodies touching, side by side. Her hands trembled.

"Are you all right, Iris?" he asked, voice soft, almost a whisper.

In that moment, she realized that her vision of his fate was incomplete. She had seen him fall in love with her, and be taken away, but she had not seen her part in the prophecy. Had the gods decreed this, or could her own actions change the future? What if they *could* be together, flying free over the world? Perhaps if she loved him back, she could change his fate—and he, hers.

She tilted her head toward him and parted her lips. No, she thought, this cannot be. But the aching inside her pushed its way out. Before she could control herself, she felt his lips touch hers. He wrapped her in his strong arms and laid her down on the blanket next to the fire.

No man had ever put his hands on her like that before. She let go of her earthly concerns and lived for a while in a cocoon of safety, pleasure, and release.

Eventually, she fell asleep in his arms, wrapped in a warm blanket by a gently crackling fire, a smile on her face and a warm glow in her belly. In the moment, right before the dream world took her, she felt happier and freer than she had ever been, or thought possible.

She awoke from a dream. A strange dream. Not the beautiful one she had hoped for. A large hand pressed down on her mouth. She let out a gasp and the hand pressed harder.

"Quiet," Alexio whispered. "Get up and get ready to go out the back of the cave."

Iris heard two things: the pegasus exhaling beside her, and the faint clink of metal, like a coin being dropped on a rock outside the cave entrance. She quietly shrugged the blanket off and felt around for her boots. The fire must have burned down to coals; she could barely feel its heat.

Alexio slowly drew his sword from its scabbard. She could hear him moving around the chamber. He dropped her cloak over her shoulders while she pushed her feet into her boots. Over the rain still falling outside, she heard the definite sounds of men whispering.

Iris pointed toward the cave entrance, indicating she heard them. Alexio lifted her onto the back of her mount.

"Let's go out the back entrance. I'll lead the way," he whispered.

Just then, an arrow whizzed past them and clattered into the back wall of the cave. Iris could tell by the direction of the sound that it had come from the cave entrance.

Alexio ran ahead, to the back entrance, the pegasus following behind. Iris heard at least two men enter the cave, swords and armor clattering. She offered a silent prayer to Ephara to deliver them both safely from this cavern.

"Gods," Alexio shouted suddenly. She could hear struggle in his voice. "A spider web has been strung across the back entrance."



Graverobber Spider | Art by Richard Wright

Iris's mount stopped short and grunted, cutting back and forth nervously. She could hear Alexio's sword swinging wildly as he struggled to cut the web away. Some horrible creature squealed and hissed before retreating.

"You must go, now!" Alexio shouted.

"I won't leave you," Iris replied, desperately, the horrible thought sinking in that she was completely helpless.

Another arrow twanged through the cavern, this time finding its mark. Iris shuddered as she heard the shaft sink into something soft. Alexio grunted and continued to struggle in the spider's web.

"Take my hand," she cried, reaching out into the dark, touching nothing.

"I have cleared the web. Your mount knows where to go." His voice quivered, he gasped.

"Please," she cried. The pegasus shifted forward nervously, barely able to hold back.

"Fly," he shouted, slapping the pegasus's rump with the flat of his sword.

The pegasus took a mighty leap across the cave entrance. Iris could feel the temperature and pressure change as they crossed the threshold of the cave. With a massive beat of wings they were airborne into the rainy sky.

"No!" she cried, "please, no."

"I love you," she heard him say, his voice fading away in the wind.

The ambushers were upon Alexio. She heard the receding clash of swords and felt the brittle fingers of death brush past her. She knew he would never make it out of that cave, his mighty body and heavenly wings doomed.

She buried her face in the pegasus's mane and cried, knowing in her heart that she was the one who killed him. What a fool she had been to think that she could change his fate. Where were the gods then? For the first time in her life, she had tasted love. For the first time in her life she had experienced enough freedom to even hope for love, and Alexio was dying for that love. If she returned to her old life, to grow old and die in servitude, his death would be for nothing.

She turned her mount, not toward the garrison at Soli or toward Meletis, but westward into the unknown. The Oracle of Ephara flew blindly through the rain toward freedom, unseeing and alone, as she had always truly been.