

A Kingdom Threatened Bonus Scene

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: immediately following final chapter

Indigo

Indigo watched Merletta swimming furtively through the streets. It was the first time in days that the other mermaid had left the Center. Indigo knew. She'd been watching.

Not that she'd reported on any of Merletta's movements lately. She was too confused, too conflicted to know how to proceed. But she watched, anyway. Force of habit, she supposed.

Indigo had been as astonished as everyone else by Merletta's dramatic return to the triple kingdoms. She hadn't known whether to believe Andre's furious assertions that Merletta was probably dead. But she hadn't really expected the other mermaid to return. Certainly not at the head of a barely contained mob. It fit with the rabble-rouser image of Merletta that had been painted for Indigo when she commenced the program.

And yet...uncertainty squirmed inside Indigo. Andre told such a different story. And she'd never thought him either gullible or deceitful. It was hard to know what to believe.

She stayed well back from Merletta as the older trainee navigated Skulssted's streets. It wasn't as difficult to follow Merletta as it would be someone else. The trainee was so visible now, she was frequently recognized. Indigo didn't have to follow her literal wake...just the whispers and speculation that trailed behind her.

Indigo's nerves were taut as Merletta turned northward—she didn't usually follow Merletta this far. Normally she'd just taken note of when the mermaid left her accommodation, and who she kept company with. She'd even reported on when Merletta was with Andre.

A further flash of discomfort shot through her. Her cousin's bitter reproaches rang in her ears. They were almost preferable to the icy silence he maintained in her presence now.

Indigo followed Merletta just long enough to see her enter Tilssted, then fell back. She would have liked to know whether Tilssted was Merletta's final destination, or whether she was going to try to leave the triple kingdoms for the first time since her eventful return. But Indigo was too wary to go through the volatile city. These days the armband of a Center trainee might mark her as an enemy rather than someone to be respected. It was terrible the pass things had come to. And wasn't that all Merletta's doing? So she'd been told, anyway.

She turned around, her thoughts dwelling miserably on her cousin. Andre's assertions regarding the Center's deception, and Merletta's attempts to expose it, sat uncomfortably. But even more distressing was how little Andre had really tried to convince Indigo of the truth of his point of view. Prior to Founders' Day, he'd gently but inexorably deflected any conversation of substance. Since Founders' Day, he'd treated her like she was on the other side. Like she couldn't be trusted.

Not only did it sting, but it rattled Indigo more than Andre seemed to realize. For all their cousins' banter, she'd always looked up to him. Doubly so once he became a trainee. She'd joined

with the hope and expectation of entering into his world more fully, and being allies in all they did. The reality had fallen far short of this image.

That, also, could be laid at Merletta's door, one way or another.

Andre's friendship with Merletta had surprised Indigo a little even before she got into the program. The Tilssted trainee was infamous, after all. Indigo had gotten the impression that she was uncouth and combative, with a grudge against all those born with better fortune than her. It had seemed unlike Andre to form a friendship with such a mermaid.

When Merletta had arrived at Andre's birthday celebration, without a family to give her credibility, Indigo had thought she was getting her answer. Merletta didn't look uncouth—in fact, she was very pretty, or she would be if her resting expression didn't make her look like she was readying for a fight at all times. It seemed Andre had been charmed in defiance of good sense, and formed a romantic attachment for the Tilssted-born mermaid. But Andre had roundly denied it, insisting that he and Merletta were good friends, but nothing more. Indigo had gone back to being puzzled by Andre's fondness for Merletta.

And then Indigo had succeeded in passing the program's entry tests, and once again she'd thought she understood. When a senior guard approached her, the day after her test, and informed her that he had her first challenge as a trainee, she'd been naively excited. It had certainly been a surprise to learn that she was to keep watch on another trainee—an older one, who outranked her, if it came to that. But when the guard had explained that Merletta had gained a place in the program through deception and cheating, and that her suspected aim was to sabotage the program in some way, Indigo had been very ready to do her part to protect their Center of Culture.

It had seemed that Andre's preference for Merletta's company had been explained. He was a loyal and intelligent merman—clearly he'd been approached similarly, and had befriended Merletta with the aim of getting close to her and finding out what harm she had planned. Most likely the same was true of Sage and Emil.

The biggest mystery at that point was why Andre didn't confide in her. The guard had warned Indigo not to speak openly of their conversation, and like an obedient young trainee, she'd done as she was told. But she'd given Andre plenty of opportunities to realize she was in on the assignment, and to join forces. Each time, he'd seemed genuinely oblivious, and Indigo had been a little hurt that he was acting a part, even with her.

It wasn't until Founders' Day that she'd understood that he truly counted Merletta a friend, and had no thought of watching her or reporting on her movements.

That day, and the tense days that followed, had shaken Indigo to her core. She'd never dreamed that she'd have to pit her loyalty to either the Center or the program against her loyalty to family. Andre had never shown a hint of wanting to cause trouble before. How could he have been so completely taken in?

Unless what he said was true. Was it possible she was the one who'd been taken in?

A shudder ran over Indigo as she swam, and it wasn't caused by the increasing depth of her route as she headed back toward the Center. She didn't know how to proceed. Everything was changing—that much was clear. And she didn't want to find herself on the wrong side of whatever fight was coming.

Not the weaker side...the *wrong* side.

Her uncertainty was momentarily swallowed in annoyance. Andre should know that. He should know her better than to believe she'd knowingly give her loyalty and assistance to some kind

of tyrannical regime that silenced its dissenters. If he truly thought she was wrong, he should be trying to convince her of that, not freezing her out.

But she wasn't about to go beg for her cousin's attention. She had enough pride to baulk at that idea. Her thoughts drifted to the other astonishing feature of the scene that had occurred a week before.

August's return. Indigo didn't know the guard like Andre did. But she'd known he was a friend of her uncle's, and she'd met him once or twice. She also knew where he and his wife were staying at present, because she'd heard her uncle saying that he wished they'd come to him.

Indigo hesitated for only a moment. The tension within her was too tight to let it just sit. She needed answers—she needed a course she could commit to, and follow with confidence.

She picked up speed, swimming with purpose now through Skulssted's quiet streets. It was better not to give herself time to wonder if the couple would receive her amicably.

When she knocked on the door of the dwelling in question, she thought the answering mermaid looked nervous.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Indigo," Indigo said politely. "I was wondering if I could speak with August and his wife."

"Are they expecting you?" she asked, her voice a little sharp.

Indigo shook her head. "My cousin is Andre," she said. "August is a friend of my uncle's, and I wondered if..."

"Let her come in." The deep voice issued calmly from out of her sight. "We're not trying to hide in here, you know."

Her gaze still suspicious, the mermaid opened the door all the way to reveal two middle-aged merpeople seated at a nearby table. Indigo recognized August from the times she'd met him, and even Eloise from the memorial marking the supposed deaths of August's patrol. Indigo had a good memory for faces. It was one of the things which had encouraged her to think she could succeed in the program.

"Good morning," she said respectfully, swimming up to the couple. "My name is Indigo. I'm ___"

"Andre's cousin," Eloise finished for her, motioning her into a seat. "He hasn't mentioned you."

Indigo could feel her pale skin flushing as she sank onto the stone bench, and she made a split decision to be frank. There was something about Eloise's face that she liked.

"We're not on the best of terms right now," she admitted. "I think he believes me disloyal for not sharing his view of recent events. But I..."

"You think he's lost his mind?" Eloise asked, a faint smile on her face.

Indigo considered the older mermaid for a moment. "I don't know what to think," she said quietly. "About any of it."

"That's understandable," August said calmly. "We never expected everyone to find it easy to believe that Center guards tried to murder me and my patrol." His face darkened. "Succeeded with poor Larson and Arlene, as well."

Indigo blinked, astonished by this bald statement. Her mind caught up slowly, trying to remember the details of the lost patrol. “Does that mean...are there others who...”

“Yes, there are two other survivors,” August said matter-of-factly. “But I won’t be telling you where they are, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Indigo shook her head. She couldn’t care less where the other guards were at this moment. “Did you say...did you say it was Center guards who...”

“I can’t prove it,” August acknowledged. “But I’m confident it was, yes. We’d seen too much, you see. We saw the land nearby, and the human. I think at that point the Center was still hoping to keep the proximity of land a secret. They were certainly hoping to keep everyone from finding out that humans are real.”

“How can you say all this?” Indigo demanded. “How can you make these accusations so calmly?”

“Would it be preferable if I yelled and screamed?” August asked mildly. “Would that make me more credible?”

“I don’t know,” Indigo said faintly.

“Or perhaps you think I’d do better to speak in riddles,” August went on. “But I have no desire to do that. I prefer the unaltered truth. Which is that the Center has not only hidden a great deal from the public, but actively deceived us on many things. The nearby land and the existence of humans are the least of it. The only conclusion I can draw from what I’ve seen and heard is that the Center has perpetrated a systematic and intentional regime of deception, including murder of those who threaten it.”

By the end of this speech, Indigo was staring at the middle-aged merman in open astonishment.

“But...you can’t say that. That’s treason.”

“Treason?” August raised an eyebrow. “Treason against whom? The Record Master? To commit treason, you’d have to be working against a regent. The Center of Culture doesn’t rule the triple kingdoms. Or at least, it’s not supposed to. Doesn’t the fact that you’re afraid to speak ill of the Center, as if it could punish you for disloyalty, tell you that something is wrong? That we’ve strayed a long way from what the system was designed to be?”

“I’m not afraid,” Indigo said quickly. But it wasn’t true. Her heart had indeed spiked in fear to hear August making such calm and untempered accusations against the Center. “If you really believed all that,” she challenged him, “wouldn’t you be declaring it in the market squares?”

“I’ll leave that to Merletta,” said August, with a touch of humor. “Just because I’m angry doesn’t mean I can’t be strategic.”

“So Merletta isn’t strategic?” Indigo asked.

“I didn’t say that,” August said. “Hers is just a very different strategy from mine—albeit one I’ve helped her develop.”

“But if everything you say is true, wouldn’t these supposed despots have killed you by now?” Indigo challenged. “I didn’t exactly have trouble finding you.”

August considered her thoughtfully. “It’s a fair question. I suspect it’s a matter of caution. Merletta exemplifies this issue. She’s become difficult for her opponents to dispose of. She’s dangerous to them, but killing her too obviously would be dangerous as well. Possibly even more so—you must have heard of the mob that was besieging the Center until just recently. She’s reached

the point where even if she died of a genuine accident, most of her admirers would blame the Center.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” Indigo demanded.

August shrugged. “Because you asked. I’m not shouting from the streets, but I’m not trying to hide, either. Just because it isn’t currently my mission to tell everyone the truth about everything doesn’t mean I’m going to lie to anyone interested in learning the truth.”

Indigo ran a hand over her face, overwhelmed and unable to find words.

“Not as easy to discount as a rough-around-the-edges teenager, is he?” Eloise asked quietly.

Indigo met her eye. “No, he’s not,” she acknowledged. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know what to think.”

“Well, just keep thinking, that’s the main thing,” Eloise said encouragingly. “Ask the questions, even if only in your head.”

Her words drifted in circles through Indigo’s mind as she swam away from the dwelling a short time later. It wasn’t a difficult exhortation to follow, to keep thinking.

She’d certainly been given plenty to think about.