

Terra Draco

The Fantasy

Chapters 0 – 3

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Terra Draco (West)



Prologue

The Celts knew an ancient land which lay on a higher Plane, far across the seas. Through a vast network of stone circles, they colonised this place, trading what goods the others sought or lacked. And stories came that strange creatures dwelt in the mountains, creatures long gone from the lower Plane. Shy creatures, well beyond human reach.

There were seven forces of nature known to these colonies: darkness, light, water, growth, wind, consciousness, and fire. These were forces they had known in the old world, and accepted; what lived in the mountains they knew not, and feared. But the monsters were curious, bringing no harm, and gradually made themselves known.

Dragons have ever lived in the memory of man. And so it was with awe that these Celts learnt they had made a home among the seven remaining races, one for each of the natural forces. They revered the dragons, and as the centuries passed, tribes began forming attachments to one or the other. Customs of worship grew. Secret paths were forged in the rocks of the mountains.

For millennia trade continued to flourish between the upper and lower Planes, but change would come to Europe. As the Romans expanded their realm, conquering the Celts, many fled through the stones and found refuge in the land of dragons. The Romans would thus christen it Terra Draco, but would never learn how to reach it. Many of the stone circles were destroyed by those willing to stay and resist the Roman army. Trade diminished; devotion to the dragons deepened. What little relationship remained between the two became strained, and the portals fell into disuse. Records were burnt. Memories of another land slipped away.

As in the lower Plane, rivalry of beliefs and worship practices grew between different groups. Religious hysteria overtook Terra Draco, and the land was ravaged by a bloody conflict mirroring the crusades of their lost brethren. War began to consume the land: but just as despair appeared victorious, the Dragon Monarchs

emerged from the Otherworld. The Monarchs decreed that the land would be divided so each race of dragon would have its own people and place. Decades of conflict ended. A new calendar was created.

And thus the seven regions were founded. The first region is that of Miggest, the Black Dragon of darkness and the wolf. The land of the Gold Dragon, in which this tale is predominantly set, is the place of Lenyol, the dragon of light whose animal is the lynx. The third territory of Iulitha is home to the Sapphire Dragon of water, the falcon-dragon. The fourth is the region of the Green Dragon Enophy, the viper, whose natural force is growth. The fifth, Feliñat, is the dragon of consciousness, the Amethyst Dragon of the leopard. Tlansiagh is the sixth region, the White Dragon of the wind and eagle. Finally, the seventh, Brioe: the Red Dragon of fire and the bear.

The Dragon Monarchs sought human emissaries, that their will would be known in the lowlands; and so the lineage of Interpreters began. Over several generations, the Holy Scriptures were delivered to the realms by the Interpreters. In return, the Interpreters were given some power over the common dragons, and would reign over the people if needed. In their absence rule was lent to the Custodian of the Throne.

Since foundation, Miggest—the northernmost region in the west—stood as the strongest and most threatening of the territories. Despite its distance, it often intimidated and invaded others, causing the Sunset War in the mid-800's. The conflict ended with the Interpreters summoning the dragons—the only time dragons had been drawn directly into human affairs. Such destruction was wrought that all fight died in the human spirit. Great borders were built with the rubble of broken cities, and Miggest was cursed by all others. Migration and trade ceased almost entirely. Unforgiven, no aid came to relieve their present plight: for drought besets the region. Winter brought no rain, and crops were failing. Livestock were being harvested ahead of breeding season. And in such times our tale begins, with two very different people.

Chapter One

Rising Ashes

I
Winter – 1021 YD
Gesula, Lenyol

Long as she had known, Otàmil had forced Kesia to wear shoes with no soles. Weavers need always be connected with the earth, he'd said, and there was no point starting with proper boots only to lose them later. In winter his edict was burdensome, for though no snow fell in the lowlands there was fierce frost in the mornings from June on. It was the skin between her toes which smarted most, and no amount of exposure would ever harden those little sections of flesh. Her brother had caught her wearing socks one such morning. Her father learnt of this, of course, and for the whole of July made her wear shorts to ensure the soles of her feet were uncovered.

She had always known her father to be a stern, even joyless man. Unlike his brother Kengar, he was sombre and serious. In an argument Kesia had once demanded to know why he wouldn't take enjoyment of life as his brother did. The insult hit its mark.

She regretted it now. Her uncle's face showed little happiness in the dying light of the funeral pyre; and now like her father he would grow mirthless with some untold weight.

Kengar exchanged a glance with his wife Tàvae, who stood firmly clutching Ànlisia's arm. Ànlisia was waxen with grief and fury—the latter of which curled palpably toward Kengar. Kesia perceived this blame and resented her mother for it. Whatever father's secret business had been—business which had somehow killed Eamon two years previous—she knew he had led the charge, that her uncle only obeyed.

She therefore approached Kengar and touched his shoulder.

When he met her eye his face broke into sorrow. 'Forgive me, Kesia. I could not protect him.'

'He was responsible for himself,' she secured her grip on his arm. 'But I'm sorry it was you who found him.'

These were strange words to form in a thirteen-year-old mouth. Was she ambivalent, or wise? He mourned abandoning her again, stalling the beginning of her apprenticeship for the second time. Losing her learning would perhaps bring as much grief as Otàmil's death. He would have to tell her in the morning.

II

Winter – 1012 YD

Gesula, Lenyol

The village of Gesula was speckled with lantern lights guiding the way through the fog.

In the central street stood a large and popular house.

'Bed time, everyone!'

The house vibrated with excited feet; the children charged into the bedroom with shrieks of delight. All five crawled into one bed, snuggling up to Ànlisia. They elbowed each other to be closest to the story.

'Prayers first. Come on, all together.'

'No, story!'

'A big one!'

'Story, story, story!'

'Prayers. Quick! You know what will happen if you don't...' Each set of enlarged eyes turned to the curtained shutters. 'If you don't say your prayers, the Seathedai will come and get you during the night.'

'Get me dead?' asked a very small, very wide-eyed Kesia.

Ànlisia confirmed with a look. 'You start, Eamon.'

Eamon sat up straight, delighted to be given the honour usually reserved for his father. 'We thank You, Great Mother, for the gift of today. We thank You for the sunrise and the sunset and for the food You provided us. For the house we live in and for our family and for the safety of our village, we thank You.'

'And for my blanket!'

'And for dessert!'

'Ànlisia made the dessert.' Mellena, a new neighbour Kesia's age, frowned at Toran.

'The other mother gave us the ingredients, though.'

'Yeah but Ànlisia made it.'

Ànlisia intervened: 'Alright, that will do.'

Kesia rose from the bed and quickly checked the shutters were bolted. 'Real Mum?'

Ànlisia smiled. 'Yes, real daughter?'

'Where do the Seathedai live?'

Ànlisia exhaled and curled into the fold of the children, eliciting in this simple move a ripple of anticipatory excitement.

'The Seathedai live in Iuratimo Forest, a day and a half ride from here.'

'Oh, I know the forest!' Toran cried, 'It's, look, it's—it's on the map, it's right there!'

'Yes, Toran. There on the map, the Seathedai live, where they have lived for a long, long time.'

Eamon cleared his throat. 'They live there because everyone in the cities were mean to them, don't they, Ma?'

Ànlisia nodded. 'They were slaves in Offenure, Delus, Athere—all the big cities.'

'Then there was a fire?'

'Stop, Eamon! Ma's telling the story.' Kesia returned to the bed and stabbed his arm with her finger, teeth grit in irritation. The other children cast him similar looks.

'There was a revolt,' Ànlisia agreed with her son, 'and a great many fires were lit one evening. The slaves fled their captors and took refuge in the great forest. They found safety with the Gold Dragons, and there they remained to build cities of their own, though we do not know where they are, and we are not welcome in them. They care for the dragons and love Lenyol most of all; and their love is jealous, for those who fall from faith are hunted by the Seathedai.'

'Is that what happened to Breena?'

Ànlisia gave her son a sharp look. 'It is time for sleep. Your parents return from the Alendae markets tomorrow and you must be rested, or they'll never entrust you to me again.'

The children folded into the blankets. As Eamon explained the rebellion to Lasair, Kesia and Mellena held hands. Their eyes were fixed on the rippling curtains.

III

Spring – 1021 YD

Gesula, Lenyol

Kesia knew not what to make of Otàmil's death. Even when at home—rare since Eamon died—he was generally absent. She meditated on the numbness in her heart,

seeking some nature of response, but could find only compassion for her mother. In her mother's skin lived a woman who, seldom speaking and scarcely eating, did nothing but tend the house and garden. Little of Ànlisia could be found in her face. Tàvae visited several times a week and attempted to break the spell, without avail. At least she kept Kesia company.

When Mellena's father offered for Kesia to join their annual trip to Offenure, and Kesia repeated the offer to her mother, Ànlisia shrugged.

And so Kesia retrieved Otàmil's leather case from the loft. She packed for a month.

On the morning of departure, Liaison embraced Kesia and handed her a purse of essential herbs and balms. 'I'm sorry, my darling,' she whispered.

Kesia felt her throat tighten. 'It's okay, Ma. Just rest.'

Offenure, Lenyol

The low sun threw its reflection across the sea onto the City of Offenure, whose granite and quartz walls glistened with small flecks of gold. Even from their ten-mile distance a great golden flag could be seen whipping against the castle peak. The wind blew intently from the north that day.

They completed their journey as the sun retreated into the ocean. Mitchas drew the cart to a crawl at the gatehouse, reaching for the identity papers in his satchel.

'Halt!' a guard cried; his comrades came quickly to attention when they saw the cart's passengers. Hands on hilts and mistrust pronounced, their path was immediately blocked: for Mellena and her family were Miggastian, and plainly so. Mellena's wild coils were almost black in the fading light; Daldria's greying hair rested in an uncommon and thick plait; but Mitchas' heavy frame and ebony beard would raise alarm a mile ahead. Indeed it had as they passed through Bunteale and Felcommon, and thus Kesia was unsurprised by the guards' reaction. Unsurprised, and yet unnerved.

'Have they harmed you, girl?' one asked her.

Kesia was startled, but discomfort wound her tongue. 'No, not at all—these are my neighbours, friends. We come from Gesula and they have papers, and they've lived there ten years. Mitchas is a horsemaster, and Daldria tends the goats—we've bought cheese—their son Brennan works in the castle—'

'Papers!'

Mitchas drew a leather document pouch from his satchel and passed it to the chief guard. The guard assessed the documents, which bore the Duke of Alendae's mark. He made a slight nod to a pair of subordinates, who stepped forward. 'Where do you lodge?'

In an unmistakably Miggestian accent, Mitchas replied: 'Castleknock.'

This caused the guard to study Mitchas carefully. A thought occurred to him. 'The girl said your son is Brennan.'

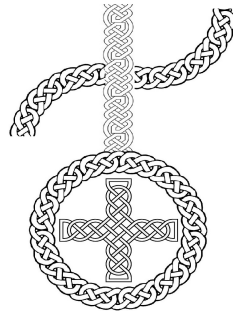
'Yes. Brennan pé Mitchas.'

'The Princess' assistant.'

'Yes.'

His face tightened. Kesia expected this revelation would draw respect and yet his contempt was ill concealed. 'These men will accompany you. I recommend against wandering the streets without them.'

The two guards mounted the cart—one at the front, one at the rear—and bid Mitchas drive forward. He clicked the reigns obligingly and forward they tread, over the drawbridge and through the colossal city doors. Engraved on each of the doors was the Alia, the symbol of Lenyol.



IV

The city was a wonder to Kesia. Along the route to their inn she absorbed the scope of city life, with all its noise and haste and sensory onslaught.

Castleknock was an impressive place. Three levels in height with gilded windows—each fitted with stained glass—its interior and furnishings had the opulence of nobility. It was a relief to Kesia that by the time of their arrival most guests were asleep, and that the innkeeper recognised Mitchas with warmth. His beautiful horses were taken to the castle stables, and they were shown to their rooms.

Before dawn the following morning, Kesia and Mellena woke to set their hair and determine which of their clothes best reflected their surrounds. None did, of course, for agrarian villages did not spin fine cloth. Embroidered tunics and clean hose would have to do. Kesia felt deeply embarrassed by her soleless shoes, and tied the understraps tight in hope her toes would not be noticed.

With permission from Mellena's parents, they stepped outside and were awed.

'No wonder it's called Castleknock,' Kesia breathed.

Before them stretched Offenure Plás, perhaps six acres of cobbled sandstone, and at its head, Offenure Castle. The castle rose above the city square like a great wave, gilded turrets ablaze in the breaking of day, its immense golden flag bearing the Alia like a battle cry.

The castle faced south, and the wind continued from the north. The flag fought against its chains toward them, and fear streaked through Kesia with the sense it was trying to attack. In the same moment, a huge black apparition passed over the castle—it flew at her and past her with great menace, clouding Mellena—and she ducked with a shriek, clutching her hair.

Mellena grabbed her friend in alarm—though Kesia alone had seen the phantom—as another scream echoed across the square. 'Lynx!' someone cried, and a dozen other shouts of surprise followed. Within a few breaths all those who heard the cry, including the girls, had crouched in prostration.

Eyes firmly locked to the sandstone, Kesia did not see the creature approach. She swallowed another scream when it came suddenly into her vision, head bowed, emitting a strange sound—she realised it was purring. Short and shallow breaths revealed her panic. The animal burst forward and nuzzled her shoulder.

Still petrified, she rocked forward onto her knees and looked the lynx in the face to find its amber eyes were round with amity. Kesia moved a hand to stay her beating heart, a gesture the creature misread—in an instant its large moccasin paws rested on her knees, and its wet nose was pressed into her left cheek. It was more than half her own size and despite its benevolence her quivering escalated, penetrating her veins. Her vision began to spin.

Believing her friend would faint, Mellena moved to catch her. The lynx's claws suddenly extended, piercing Kesia's legs, and it growled fiercely at Mellena, tufted ears flat against its head, teeth bared. Mellena turned white as it stepped very slowly toward her, tensing, preparing to pounce.

Kesia's fear folded to protect her friend. 'Shh!' She patted her lap, trying to draw it back. 'Hey—shh, shh, leave alone, you're alright...' She scurried to Mellena's side, holding a hand out to appease the lynx. 'Shh...come here.' She tried to touch the lynx's back but it retreated, hissing at Mellena before turning and fleeing back to the castle.

The girls stood, clasping hands, and found an audience in all the square's occupants. They immediately withdrew into Castleknock.

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After tending Kesia's punctured thighs and replacing her hose, the girls took a table in the inn's vine-draped courtyard. The standing clock was still shy of eight o' clock.

'Why did you scream?' Mellena asked Kesia when the breakfast maid had gone.

Kesia's feigned confusion did not deceive.

'Before the lynx, you saw something, and ducked.'

'O! I thought a pigeon flew at me.'

'You know I don't believe you.'

'Your parents!' she stood, and whispered, 'O my goodness Daldria, you look like a noblewoman. Is the dress suede?'

The conversation quickly moved to Brennan and his generosity, but for the duration of the morning whenever alone Mellena pressed Kesia to reveal what had frightened her. Kesia remained silent.

Yet her thoughts did not waver from the lynx and the swooping shadow. Dozens of explanations visited her mind, each dismissed. By the time they approached the castle gates to meet Brennan, late in the afternoon, she was ready to forget what she thought she had seen. Inside the castle wall, however, was a fresco which halted her step. Half-concealed by shadow, she gasped in silence as its subject yielded to her adjusting eyes: for the creature depicted was absolutely that which had flown between her and Mellena. Heart racing, she bolted to rejoin the others, ignoring Mellena's looks, trying vainly to banish from her mind the image of the Black Dragon.

V

Summer – 1017 YD Gesula Temple, Lenyol

The children took to their cushions and rested on their knees within the open space of the temple. Priest Caleb sat at the opening of the arch they formed, open hands placed in his lap, a pillar of wax before him.

'We begin with the intake of breath.'

The children inhaled, faces serious, taking the air of summer morning into their lungs.

'We thank the Great Mother for the coming of day.'

A note of music thread forth from each child, circling the gathering in a wordless song of thanks. A wisp of golden light made visible their sound.

'We thank the Great Mother for the heat of the flame.' The priest took up a pair of flint stones, and struck alight the candle.

Another note, slightly lower, was given to the Temple by the children. The air which formed the music was tinged again with gold.

'And in return we receive the love of Lenyol.'

From the flame spun several threads of energy, each finding its mark on a child's

forehead, opening the channel of devotion.

VI

Spring – 1021 YD

Offenure, Lenyol

Brennan gave a servant's tour of the castle, showing them through the labyrinth of kitchens, service passages, larders and keeps. His only reprieve from duty were the hours in the early evening, during which the Princess dined with her family. His position was a taxing one, he told them, rewarded by an untaxed wage. 'Perhaps the only benefit of being a foreigner!' He added quietly: 'Many dislike my presence in the Princess' retinue. Perhaps I was chosen for my origin; the Princess enjoys being contrary.' Kesia smiled, suspecting even at her age that his appearance had been a prevailing factor.

'There are rumours.' Daldria spoke in such hushed tones the girls could scarcely hear. 'The Duke and Duchess of Lirna are said to host her often.'

Brennan bristled. 'I can't speak to her movements, mother.' To the others: 'Come! I have a surprise.'

Though he could not show them the grander elements of the castle—Great Hall, Dining Hall, Temple, and so on—he had consent to show them the Northern Tower. With sunset approaching this, after sunrise, was the perfect time of day to share its spectacular views.

Mellena and Kesia skipped up the final steps and flew to the balustrade. They grasped each other's hand.

To the south and north-west lay the bays, sweeping inward as though drawn by a lazy hand, bearing calmly the darkening tide. North, open fields of folding and swaying barley grew scarcely interrupted as far as their eyes could see except by the Barlon River and the Claes, the largest stone henge in the west. Beyond that to the north-east the towering Barlon Ranges stood like guards, miles of jagged mountains hatted with snow even now in spring. The east was open fields also, but different crops grew there, and the sight was littered with occupied roads, ruins, storage silos, and smaller buildings of varying purpose.

Mellena went to look upon the square with her parents as Kesia stared at the mountains. Her fingertips were white against the stone barrier. 'They say a colony of dragons live there.'

Brennan had approached. 'So the legends say.'

'The Book of Gold says they take residence in the high places.'

'Does it?'

Kesia looked at him. He certainly had an alluring presence. Such dark eyes.

'Perhaps I am too simple, taking more interest in crop harvests and trade.'

'But you—have faith?'

He smiled oddly. 'I doubt I would be welcomed in the Temple. And I could never be seen with the Charge of Darkness.'

Kesia was silent. Miggist's sacred text was forbidden throughout Lenyol.

He looked at her and rested against the barrier, his expression changing. They stood quietly watching the mountains blend with the clouds in the fading light, as the others chattered on the southern side. 'This is my favourite place. On moonless nights, when silence reigns, I stand where you are. In the corner.' His gaze was fixed on the peaks. 'There is a groove on the right where I rest my arms. No matter the cold; though rain makes it pointless.'

Kesia felt her skin tingle, and her breath cease.

'I came to escape the other servants, who distrusted me. At first I thought it was a pair of eagles.' He squinted. 'Yet how could I make out an eagle at such a distance?'

She reached over and grasped his arm. A flash like lightning crossed their vision—two graces of dragons, black and gold, in gnarled and clawing battle, fires burning and darkness prevailing. She recoiled. Brennan was equally pale; yet a look of recognition passed between them.

'You have seen them before also.'

Kesia's eyes darted to Mellena, fast returning.

'I lack your branch of faith, Kesia, but the dragons are seldom far from my mind.'

Their discussion closed, and they would not find themselves alone again.

Chapter Two

Beginning

I
January – 1022 YD
Gesula Temple, Lenyol

Months passed. Kesia stood nervously at the entrance of Gesula Temple clad in bronze ceremonial tunic and trousers. Beside her in identical garb were Lasair and Toran. A dragon of golden thread was embroidered both on their chests and the right leg of their trousers, the first coiled, the second stretched to the knee. Mellena was with them also but, unsure of etiquette, her mother had embroidered the same fabric with flowers instead.

Priest Caleb ascended the hill near the Temple carrying a basket of candles. He came upon the four youths and smiled. Inside, villagers and their parents smuggled excited waves.

'We will begin,' said the priest warmly, at a volume their audience would hear.

Two musicians began to play their pipes. The priest led them into the temple, through the corridor of witnesses, to the altar. Each took up a small stool and sat, eyes downcast self-consciously. An urn of rose-hip water rested behind each stool.

'Today we gather to mark the end of childhood for these four people. They now enter their time of greatest learning, both in trade and life; it is these years which determine their direction as adults, and we congregate to bid Lenyol guide them to their right paths.' Heads nodded. 'You know there is some exception today, as two of our number are late in this rite; circumstances have stalled Mellena and Kesia's journey.' Tradition dictated that childhood concluded at twelve, heralding vocational training. The girls would soon be fourteen.

Caleb spoke: 'Great Mother, we ask you shield these four from harm. Let your words guide them in these sensitive years, and let your light be ever a source of strength. May An Lónra be their family wherever their travels take them, and your temples open in times of need. May it be so.'

'May it be so,' chorused the villagers.

'Let them be born again.'

Four young priests and priestesses, summoned from Alendae, stood and collected

the urn. One by one the youths were doused with pink liquid, Priest Caleb leading the others in quiet incantation all the while.

'Though not of Lenyol's flock, we greet and accept Mellena as one of our own. She is hereby taken into the fold of An Lónra.' With golden paste he marked her forehead with the Alia. He did the same to the others.

'May the masters of trade step forward.'

Ànlisia and Tàvae arose, with a man long absent—for Kengar had returned to Gesula.

'Lasair.' She stood at the priest's request. 'You have chosen the trade of herbalist. Before Lenyol, do you swear this to be your present and future trade, and to complete your apprenticeship with diligence?'

'I swear to the trade of herbalist.' Lasair replied quietly, burning bright.

Priest Caleb turned to Ànlisia. 'You have chosen to accept Lasair as your apprentice. Before Lenyol, do you swear to lead and tutor her with dedication?'

'I swear to this apprentice.' Ànlisia placed a hand on Lasair's arm.

'Then you may take these beads as a symbol of your oath, and be seated.' He passed to them a bracelet of green beads, and they took their seat in the front row.

'Kesia and Mellena, please stand.' They did so. 'You have chosen the trade of energy weaving.'

'Art,' Kengar muttered, 'the *art* of energy weaving.'

'Before Lenyol,' Priest Caleb tacitly ignored Kengar, 'do you swear this to be your present and future trade, and to complete your apprenticeship with diligence?'

'I swear to the trade of weaver,' both affirmed.

He turned to Kengar. 'You have chosen to accept Kesia and Mellena as your apprentices. Before Lenyol, do you swear to lead and tutor them with dedication?'

'I swear to these apprentices.' Kengar's clasped fingers happily tapped his knuckles.

'Then you may take these beads as a symbol of your oath, and be seated.' Loops of brass beads were given, and the three were seated.

He then moved to Toran, who swore to the trade of scribe under Tàvae, and with white beads both took their place by the others.

'And so we bestow these new apprentices and their masters with our prayers, that their endeavours meet success.'

'May it be so!' the audience cried, breaking the solemnity. Handfuls of corn were thrown into the air as the new apprentices vacated the temple, and the musicians resumed their playing.

II Gesula Forest, Lenyol

Kesia stood close by Kengar at the edge of a large and perfect circle carved in the earth. In it stood a ring of large standing stones socked with moss, their diameter no less than thirty yards. Though Midsummer was past, the grass surrounding the Stones was thick and the earth moist.

'What kind of secret is this?' Kesia asked, stepping down the embankment with care. 'It must be almost the size of the Claes!'

'Not quite.'

Kesia shivered at the vibrating energy as she stepped between the Stones. She followed her uncle's lead and took to the ground in their centre with crossed legs.

It was early morning two days after Kengar's return. Kengar had woken his niece at an unreasonable hour and led her silently west, deep into the forest flanking Gesula.

Kesia looked up, beyond the Stones. In the predawn light the trees were silent and still, seeped in grey. The neutral aura of the forest began to disturb Kesia and she realised it was as mute as the Stones. She shifted her position and turned to Kengar.

'This is a place I came with your father when we were apprenticed to our own father. Some maps mark it, but it is difficult to find, and I would that it stayed as such.'

'What of—'

'Mellena...' he halted, awkward.

'She is your apprentice also.'

'She is Miggestian.'

Kesia knew her uncle to be a fair man, and let her need to defend her friend rest while an explanation came. It didn't.

'This is a place for you alone to come. Here you can practice your trade, and be enhanced by the power of the Stones.'

The peak of the forest canopy was lightening with the coming of day. Again she noticed the lack of sound.

Kengar followed her frown and knew her mind. 'The centre here is...outside of the forest. I will teach you a shield in time, allowing you to go unseen by any passing by.' He rubbed his hands. 'In my travels I have collected a number of volumes which may interest you. You have been robbed of your education, and Tàvae claims you thirst for knowledge. If I am called away again, you are to study these texts.'

Kesia nodded.

'I will divide your lessons with Mellena, teaching you separately and together according to my own judgement. However, the texts are for you to share.' He

straightened his back; Kesia mirrored him. 'Let us begin our first lesson, revising some of the things you already know.' He opened his hands and something white, like vapour, rose from them. 'All elements of nature are compiled of the same base which pulsates through existence. Energy permeates all things that were... are... and will be. This is the thing you must connect with, the thing you will learn to steer to your own design.'

She looked at him. 'I can connect to this, and have it manifest in wisps of colour. I practice from time to time.' She closed her eyes and summoned from the earth a small mass of golden energy. Faint, it took the vague form of a moth before gently disintegrating.

Kengar gave her a fond look. 'Otàmil taught you this?' She nodded. He drew a fold of parchment from his cloak. 'Perhaps he also taught you this?'

Kesia took the offered parchment and smiled when she recognised the words thereon. 'The Weaver's Creed.'

'Before I teach you to weave, you must swear to the Creed. Arise.'

She took to her feet with Kengar, who stepped backward. He turned his open hands toward the ground, and a haze of white was drawn up from the earth. 'Begin.'

Kesia read: "I speak today the Weaver's Creed and hope never to stray from its promise." She lowered the parchment and spoke the following from memory, as the mist swelled about her:

"It is my will to do no harm
I speak a thousand words less than I hear
Knowing time and reflection judge best.
My strength is sworn to justice
My heart is sworn to good
It is my duty to protect the meek
It is my purpose to serve the Revered Ones.
My transgressions invite misfortune sevenfold
As my virtuous deeds are met with everlasting life
I live free from corruption
And die free from regret
It is my will to do no harm."

Shroud in white, and gooseflesh, Kesia lowered the text.

'Learn its lessons well, and forget not the oath you swore today.'

She held the parchment against her chest. Kengar indicated that they sit again, as the mist faded, and so began their first day of training.

III
Spring – 1021 YD
Miggest

Rumours of a foreign man acquiring friends in the northern aristocracy found their way to Sevína. Only esteemed nobility, wealth, or skill could quell the natural hostility Miggestians felt toward outsiders; her mistrust was piqued, and she began to seek him out. When word arrived that the man would be hosted at Tenenum Temple over Imbolc, she departed the capital for Ona. She was received at Tenenum Temple, which stood in the forest east of the city, with warmth as she frequented it often to assist in the orphanage. Its black marble structure and elaborate engravings were also beyond compare in the region, and it was here she had trained as a priestess before becoming a weaver.

Wanting to study the foreigner before being introduced, she took the black attire of the adherents and tended the temple with the others.

He was immediately recognisable when he arrived. Bronze bearded, rust-haired. She took a broom and swept the marble floor as he conversed with the priest, minding their conversation. His speech was thickened with the Iulithan dialect, and his manner—she observed without notice—was imperial. Commanding.

When their conversation turned toward weavers in the region, Sevína began to exit—but halted at the mention of her name. Strange that he knew it; she turned slightly to watch him again.

'I have heard that her skill is recognised in Delus.'

The priest knew she was listening. 'Sevína trained here as a priestess before beginning as a weaver. She is highly respected in the temple, and the court. She has been assisting High Priest Arnaud in his old age.'

'I should like to meet her.'

Embarrassment crossed the priest's face as Sevína approached. The foreigner looked at her and smiled tersely before averting his eyes, expecting some administrative interruption. However, she simply stood, eyes focused in assessment. He looked again, a frown shadowing.

'I present to you the weaver Sevína,' the priest said.

The man saw instantly.

'Sevína, I present to you the Lord Vilsonius, Duke of Edeen.'

She extended her hand, and their palms met; her grip was less than amicable. The priest sensed the tension and made his excuses.

Once alone: 'I see you have been asking after me.'

He bowed slightly in admission. 'Your skill as a weaver is known around the

region.'

She locked the broom against her knee and held its handle before her, fingers tight.

'What interest do you have in weavers?'

'Not so much weavers generally; my acquaintances have sung your particular praise.'

She was not susceptible to flattery. 'How does a Iulithan noble find himself in Miggest cultivating influential friends?'

'Through a rather long series of circumstances.'

The broom began to vibrate. Flecks of maroon moved on the floor. 'I suppose you heard of our plight and saw some opportunity for yourself?'

He was watching the flickering energy, but threw his eyes on her again. 'I have no interest in *commerce*.' His disdain was patently genuine.

Slowly, she wrung the wooden handle and two cords formed from the energy at their feet, curling and tightening around Vilsonius' legs. 'These are difficult times. Perhaps you will make your interests plain?'

He watched the bindings move, apparently unconcerned. 'I have been seeking an adherent trained in weaving. Preferably a respected one.'

'Why?'

He waved a hand, and the binds recoiled from his skin, lashing back at Sevína and encircling her arms. The broom fell to the floor.

'I require a capable guide to show me the Black Dragon's path.'

IV

Winter – 1022 YD

Gesula, Lenyol

Until winter, Kengar taught both girls the essentials of their trade. Mellena had less aptitude than Kesia, and less obeisance, and Kengar tended to teach them separately. Kesia hastened to learn the history he taught her, while Mellena hungered for practical instruction, and he catered for both with the dedication he had promised. Once fortnightly he left the village, leaving them to be instructed by his wife. Tàvae enjoyed expanding on her husband's tendency for overviews and summaries, and her fireside lessons were a welcome reprieve from the cold.

By the first frost Kesia was capable of boosting the growth of young seedlings, and hastening the healing of small injuries; Mellena had learnt to rattle objects and create small sparks. Though minor feats, they were proud of their skills and deeply excited by her trade.

Kengar was not a man in control of his fate, however, and was compelled to depart

on the eve of Yule. He arranged for their tutelage to continue under Tàvae, intending to return by spring.

And yet when spring arrived, Kengar did not; and so when summer was nigh, and word had come to Tàvae that Kengar could not return, Priest Caleb bid the girls select new trades. Despite swearing to stay true to one craft, there was no alternate tutor, and they were already years behind others their age—they could not continue without an occupation. Mellena elected to begin as a shepherd; Kesia chose carpentry.

The year continued. Samhain was celebrated. Perhaps the weather hardened Mellena, or the workshop softened Kesia; perhaps their characters drew them to different paths. As it were, each began to see less of the other. It was enough to meet at the week's end with the other youths, lighting their corner of the village inn with conversation, occasionally exchanging ideas on Tàvae's lessons. Yet these too would come to a sudden end, forcing the girls to abandon their love of weaving until opportunity favoured them once more.

V

Spring – 1022 YD

Tenenum Temple, Miggest

The Duke of Edeen rewarded Sevína's guidance with ample coin. She had relinquished her initial offence at offer of payment when news came that the drought was taking its first victims in the north. The gold she gave to Tenenum Temple, as protection for the adherents and children. Winter had brought little rain and crops continued to fail.

Offerings came daily to the temples. Perhaps, as some whispered, penance was due for waning worship. The Black Dragon would accept their suffering as atonement, and deliver rain—in autumn—in winter—in spring?

Converts were a valued offering, and Vilsonius' desire to formally join the faith was well received. The High Priest regretted refusing Sevína's request to administer the ceremony, for while Custodia Galluel could ignore his movements in the provinces, she could not suffer his presence in the capital until he had formally joined the faith. Vilsonius remained in Ona, and prepared for the ceremony at Tenenum.

The appointed evening arrived. The Lehius, Miggest's symbol, was embroidered on the left of his shirt. He stood before the altar in the temple, flanked by Sevína and several adherents; an iron cauldron of burning embers simmered behind. The sun had descended some hours ago, and the air was cool. The small audience of Onan nobles stood by the cauldron.

As the priest, Dallon, entered the temple, its occupants straightened their shoulders.

'Welcome,' he acknowledged the nobles with a bow. He rose to face Vilsonius and began: 'Darkness has again fallen on the Black Dragon's land, and we are gathered to initiate another onto the path Miggest has lain for us. Vilsonius mac Baird of Iulitha, do you come freely, wilfully, without the intent of gain?'

'I come to the Black Dragon of my own volition, seeking a true path.' Vilsonius swore.

'Who has instructed you in our scripture, the Charge of Darkness?'

'The weaver and former priestess, Sevína of Ona.'

'Sevína iníon Eryn, do you testify to the purity of the pledge to be taken this evening?'

'I swear to have brought a true seeker to the path.'

'May your words be true.' Priest Dallon bowed his head. 'For Miggest binds you to them. You may make your pledge.'

Sevína turned to Vilsonius and bound his eyes with black cloth. The duke stepped toward the altar, hands held upright before him. Night pressed against the edge of the open temple.

'I surrender my journeying to the Father, that in the depth of His darkness I am found and shown the road of His ordainment. I dedicate my service to the wolf-dragon and offer worship to no other. I swear never to denounce or deny His might, for fear darkness take me. I hereby abandon my oaths to the Sapphire Dragon and begin anew as a bairn of the Black Dragon.'

A black thread struck out from the night, hitting Vilsonius in the heart. He staggered at the unexpected impact, and the audience was shot with fear. The redness in the duke's hair—though difficult to see in such poor light—was expelled: his beard turned black as coal; his hair the darkest brown. The cord dissipated, smoke in the wind, and a low rumble like distant thunder reverberated through the surrounding forest.

Dallon tore his eyes from the darkness and nodded to Sevína. Pale, she withdrew the blindfold and indicated to the cauldron behind them. Vilsonius approached it with her; she took hold of a metal rod resting in it.

'Open your shirt.'

He reluctantly obeyed. This aspect of the ritual had not been explained.

Dallon spoke: 'You have renounced Iulitha to take the Black Dragon's path, and the Lord will hold you to your oath. So, too, may those who see you bear this mark. Do you consent?'

Vilsonius quickly examined the branding rod, at the end of which was a glowing red Lehius. He summoned a faint film of blue energy across his breast. 'I do.'

Dallon stood behind Vilsonius and steadied him. Sevína held the rod true, waiting for Vilsonius' nod of readiness. He gave it, and she pressed the iron below the hollow of his neck.

The mild shield did little to diminish the pain. His roar of agony echoed through the night.

VI

October – 1022 YD

Gesula, Lenyol

The knocking on Tàvae's door went unanswered. After several minutes of waiting, Kesia let herself in to a cold house.

The fireplace stood black and empty, blankets strewn across the rug before it. Two candles were draped over their holders, let to die unsupervised. Kesia frowned and examined the rooms, of which there were few, before going to the library—the double-height, rounded room with shelves that spiralled the walls: her aunt's pride and joy—but that, too, was empty.

Outside, the stable was empty. At this Kesia returned home with confusion; she had arranged to spend the day with Tàvae, for since commencing her carpentry apprenticeship had little time in the evening for her aunt's lessons. Saturdays were dedicated to her tutelage.

'Ma?'

Ànlisia was by the hearth. 'Good morning! Where were you?' she asked, resting her book and looking at her daughter with compassion. 'Tàvae left a message for you this morning.'

Like most mornings since the sun began to rise early, Kesia had been at the Stones. 'Walking.'

'Kesia, Tàvae has had to join Kengar. It will likely be months before she returns.'

Kesia's stomach dropped. No.

Ànlisia stood. 'She knew how disappointed you would be. I'm sorry, pet.'

Her eyes pricked, yet she felt anger.

'You have leave to use the library, and she has left a list of books for you and Mellena to read.'

Kesia glared at the fire.

'She tells me Kengar will return in summer to continue your training, as fits with your new apprenticeship.'

'He will?' The flip in emotions caused her throat to jerk; she swallowed tears.

Ànlisia saw. 'Darling.' She squeezed her daughter's arms. 'Things will find their

balance in time. Are you enjoying working with Lonan?'

'Yes,' she sniffed. Her mother hadn't asked after her work at all since beginning. 'He is lovely. His work is beautiful.'

'Well! Kengar is often coming and going. It's good to be busy.'

Kesia nodded, forming a smile. She excused herself and went to tell Mellena the news—but she was off tending the sheep with trademaster Oran. She returned to the Stones instead.

Chapter Three

The Castle

I
December – 1022 YD
Offenure Castle, Lenyol

'Régan?' Royal Consort Bridget called for her daughter. 'Régan?'

Princess Régan flinched, waving her lady's maid to the doors. The servant went quickly to them, pressing her weight against the heavy oak, admitting herself to the hall. 'Your Royal Highness,' she curtseyed, 'the Princess is a little indisposed, though she is pleased to receive—' the Consort brushed past— 'you.' Crimson, the poor maid laboured with the handle to close the door.

'I am bathing, Mother,' the Princess stated, keeping her back turned. 'Perhaps you could leave me in peace?'

The golden bathroom was steaming—or had been, before the doors were opened. A great bath stood on golden claws in the centre of the room, reflected in a large mirror on the wall. The mirror was one of few in the palace, and worth several fortunes, not least for its gilded frame moulded into a continuous string of dragons. A small fire was lit in the fireplace, with the Princess' garments draped across the reclining couch before it.

'Leave us.'

The lady's maid bowed to the Consort as the Princess flicked her eyes to the ceiling. The maid exited behind a hanging tapestry.

Régan's bathing robe splayed across the surface of the water. She struck it and turned to Bridget. 'Mother. How can I be of assistance?'

'Do not take that tone with me.'

Régan sighed, and corrected her manner. 'How may I be of service?'

'Your father has requested your presence at the midday meal. It has been almost a week since your return; you are expected to dine with us.'

'I do. Every evening.'

'Fulfilling only the minimal requirements of duty could be perceived as an affront.'

Régan wondered if Bridget had created this sentence alone. 'I hope you can forgive my oversight. I have been preoccupied with work; I will gladly join you for meals.'

'Work?'

Régan brought her teeth together. 'Yes. I have several duties beyond the palace.'

'Well! I ask that you put aside whatever matters seem to take precedence over your own family, and present yourself to the Dining Hall within the hour.'

The Consort left, making to open and slam the door in drama, but its weight was far too great. She struggled to release herself.

Régan expelled a cough of deep amusement as her mother stormed down the hall.

II

'Régan!' Custodin Mâtac opened his arms to the closing doors and smiled. 'I am pleased you could join us.'

The Princess stood stiffly by the entry to the Dining Hall. She pushed her lips into a smile and walked slowly to the dining table, mahogany gown draping behind. 'Thank you for sending mother; I must be reminded to eat at times.'

Bridget ducked her head, receiving her daughter's gratitude with as much sincerity as was given, and took her seat. The Custodin and Princess did the same, and pleasantries were exchanged.

'We have received good news from the Duke and Duchess of Polare,' Mâtac commented as their meal was served. 'They are expecting their third child.'

'How wonderful.' Régan lifted her fork, gold-plated with the Alia engraved along its handle. 'Please offer them my congratulations.' She paused, and the air thickened. Polare was the southernmost city, less than a day's ride from the Iulithan border. Her mother shot her a glance, fearing what was to come, but Régan could not restrain herself: 'Do they send any word on Iulitha? On Custodin Algos?'

The Custodin inhaled angrily. 'Régan.'

'Reports come that he is killing his own people.'

'I cannot imagine that would be so,' he said civilly, trembling with restrained ire. 'If it were, it would certainly be a matter for the *Iulithan* Beran to address.'

Régan raised an eyebrow. 'I suppose it is possible that a Custodin could comprise his Beran of flatterers and bootlickers.'

Mâtac's jaw locked at the implication. 'The border between Lenyol and Iulitha is firmly closed, and so it will remain.' His finite tone closed the conversation for the duration of their first course.

An awkward five minutes passed.

As the second course was served, Régan attempted to break the silence by speaking to her mother. 'Duchess Bevan sends her regards.' The Duke and Duchess of Alendae, in the north, had hosted Régan over the spring.

The Consort smiled genuinely. 'I received her note from you, thank you. How is my sister?'

'She is well. Quite well, as always.' Régan turned to Màtac: 'She will be visiting after Midsummer, father.'

'Yes, your mother has told me. The Duke and Duchess are always welcome to escape the northern heat.'

The Duke and Duchess of Alendae made their annual visit in the first weeks of the new year. The timing was deliberate, for it was only in summer that the Princess called the old castle home—from her birthday on the first of December until Lughnasadh at the beginning of February—and by January tensions would be high in the royal household. Beyond occasionally passing through, Régan spent the remainder of the year at various palaces around the region, particularly Alendae in the north and Lirna in the east.

'It has been unusually warm this year. The spring rains were quite light.'

'Yes,' Màtac agreed. 'So I have been told. They are expecting a smaller harvest there this autumn.' What a relief to speak only of the weather!

'Why, Polare had enough rain to fear flooding this winter.' Bridget straightened with an idea. 'Their fortune may be a grace for the north; we could arrange a market in Bunteale after the harvest.' The village of Bunteale lay between the two cities.

Régan felt a rare wave of warmth toward the Consort. 'That is an excellent idea. I am sure father intended the same.'

'Quite,' said Màtac, touching his wife's hand and nodding. She beamed.

'The weather-readers in Alendae say the rains may elude the north for some time to come, as they have in Miggest. Let us hope the south continues to flourish.'

'Well, may the weather-readers' prophecies prove false. We do not want our own stores compromised, do we, my love?'

The Custodin's expression caused Bridget to shrink into her chair, pale in self-reproach.

Régan cast eyes of steel to Màtac. 'What are the stores for, father?' Yet she knew the answer, and rose from her seat, fingertips extended on the surface of the table.

He said nothing, fork quaking in his fist. Bridget covered her face with her hands.

'Tell me the rumours of you planning secret trade with Miggest are a lie.'

Màtac eyed with daughter dangerously. 'The business of politics is none of your concern.'

'Father. We have just celebrated my twenty-sixth birthday; one day I will bear the same responsibilities as you. If you wish me to rule well, I should now be under your tutelage—yet you exclude me from the Beran conclaves.'

Her words did not reach him.

'Right.' She scowled. 'How do you expect the people will react when they learn

their food is being sent to aid so hated a region?'

Màtac crashed his fist against the table, catching the edge of his plate so it flicked and shattered on the floor. 'I do not take advice on policy from you!'

'They will not quietly comply. Are you so entirely out of touch with the world beyond these crumbling walls?'

'What of your own conduct?' Bridget broke in. 'Hiring a Miggastian as your assistant?'

Régan sighed, irritated. 'Hiring one skilled foreigner is hardly comparable to opening the borders of a closed region. The former shows benevolence; the latter subservience, or at best idiotic gullibility.'

Màtac again thumped his fist against the wood. 'Enough!'

'Crashing and banging will not scare me into silence.' Her fingers were as claws on the wood. 'You are a fool if you believe the people will allow trade to be established with Miggast, and you are a fool if you think Custodia Galluel can be trusted. Did you know she was expanding her army? No. You did not, for your knowledge of the world comes only from those grovelling lap-dogs you call your Beran. Alsandul is the only one with sense, yet you do not welcome his advice. You are an arrogant, ignorant fool.'

She left Màtac to tear strips from her mother, exiting through a servant door. She found Brennan taking his meal with the other servants in the kitchen. 'Pack my chests. Everything. And send word to the stables. We will depart for Lirna by sunset.'

III

Summer, 1014 YD

Alendae Palace, Lenyol

The coming-of-age ceremony at the temple had concluded, and Princess Régan prepared for her official presentation to the court at Alendae Palace. The guests, including the Custodin and Royal Consort, awaited her arrival in the Great Hall. Word was sent from her chambers as she made her way through the palace halls.

The Duke and Duchess of Alendae rose at the ringing of bells, and their guests did the same. High Priest Alsandul, greatly honoured, crossed to the doors. 'The Princess Régan,' he announced.

The guards opened the doors, and the Princess entered. She smiled at Alsandul and rested her fingers in his offered hand. The afternoon sun broke through the windows; her golden gown glittered in its light, and the gold torc at her neck repelled a beam onto the wall. The High Priest led her to the main table, the

Princess' head lifted to the applause.

Lady Régan took her place at the table's centre, between her parents, who were in turn adjoined by her ducal aunt and uncle. Alsandul kissed her cheek, and took his place with the other Beran members at a separate table.

Excuses had been made that the old Great Hall in Offenure Castle was compromised by crumbling stone. The castle, around which the modern city had been built, was ancient and knew countless faults. And so the tale was believed, and Régan succeeded in having the celebrations in Alendae. She considered it home, having resided there with her aunt and uncle since the age of eleven, when the Custodin finally despaired of breaking in her temperament.

The feast was served, consumed, and cleared. As the sun began to touch the horizon, Régan's patience abandoned her. She lent past her mother who was giving some dreadfully uninteresting recount of her own eighteenth year, and nodded to her aunt. Lady Bevan signalled to the musicians, who took up their bows, and rose to announce the feast was concluded and that the evening's festivities could begin.

Régan patted the Consort's hand. 'Excuse me, mother; I must receive my guests.' Bridget's eyes glistened with pride—or regret at her own passing youth, perhaps—and waved her daughter off, taking her husband's hand across the vacant chair.

Duchess Bevan linked arms with her niece and began the exciting business of introducing the newly presented Princess to the region's senior nobles.

'Allow me to introduce the Duke and Duchess of Lirna, Lord Molan and Lady Ione.'

Régan turned her attention to the couple before her, a pair not half a dozen years her senior. She lit up, extending her hand, greeting and thanking them both for making the journey.

'Did you come across the Pavilion Marshes?' she inquired immediately.

Duke Molan laughed. 'We kept them to our north, keeping to the road above the Barlon Ranges and Intiae Forest. We did take a small detour to see the Aisling Stones, however.'

The Duchess clutched her hands. 'We saw them at sunrise. They were beautiful. The Stones are not as large as those of the Claes, but there are twice as many, and it is double in width also, is it not?'

'I have travelled that way once before; I believe you are correct.' Régan liked them both immediately. 'I do not recall my visit to Lirna, however. I must have been very young.'

'I am new to it myself,' admitted the Duchess. 'I was born in Dara, and we met in court. We have been married only two years. Lord Molan was inaugurated in autumn, when his father passed away.'

Régan looked at Molan in compassion. 'I am sorry to hear of your troubles.'

The Duke gave a slight bow. 'Thank you. You may know he was considered old when I was born; he lived beyond his eightieth year, still in fair health, and one cannot ask for more.'

Régan had not known this; nor did she have much knowledge of court gossip, considered inappropriate by her father until she came of age. And now her age had come.

Her uncle, Duke Née, came and stole her away to continue the introductions with his wife. The Custodin and Consort remained at their table, receiving news and praise while observing their daughter circulate the Great Hall. The evening wore on, and by its close the Princess had met all guests, absorbing the names and ranks she was given. As the candles at the head table sank into their holder, Custodin Mátac caught her eye.

Bidding her aunt goodnight, Lady Régan quickly sought the Duke and Duchess of Lirna. 'I am expected to retire presently. It was a pleasure making your acquaintance; will you be joining the games in the morning?'

'We will, Your Highness' answered Iona with a bow of her head.

'Lady Iona is a master of the bow. Do you play?'

Régan regretted that she did not.

Duchess Iona smiled, placing a hand very lightly on her arm. 'Then I shall teach you.'