

Terra Draco

The Fantasy

Chapters 0 – 6

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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 Miggestian, 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.'

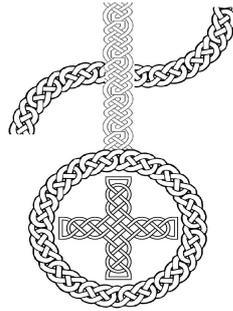
'Yes. Brennan pé Mitchas.'

'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 reins 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 even now with snow. 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. Miggest'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 Liónra 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 goseflesh, 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 curtsied, '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 Alagus?'

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 Mâtac: '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 N oe, 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 M atac caught her eye.

Bidding her aunt goodnight, Lady R egan 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?'

R egan regretted that she did not.

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

Chapter Four

Homecoming

I
December – 1022 YD
Gesula, Lenyol

Kesia reached to knock at Kengar's door, a little out of breath, and the sun barely above the trees; a note under her door had informed her of her uncle's return. Her knuckles almost touched the wood when shrill shouting came from the rear of the house.

'Don't you walk away from me!' Tàvae shouted. 'For months I have tried—'

'Get inside!' ordered Kengar.

Alarmed, Kesia skirted the house.

'Can you not hear me? Do you not—'

'I said get inside!'

'You came outside to begin with, now you order me in?'

Kesia rounded the corner, finding her aunt and uncle in the rear garden, Kengar pointing commandingly at the door.

'Hello?' Kesia said meekly, cutting the binds of their argument. Both dropped their arms when they saw her, and attempted to soften their expressions.

'I thought you would come early,' Kengar rocked slightly, considering before re-considering embracing his niece.

'Perhaps not so early,' Kesia said in a high voice. 'Perhaps I should have returned in the day, only I heard the shouting—'

Tàvae rubbed her face with her hands, flicking them afterward, and approached her niece. 'You caught us in a blow-out, is all, darling; just a lot of nonsense, really. Give us a kiss.' She threw an arm around Kesia and roughly drew her in, landing a big kiss on her cheek, rubbing her back forcefully, then releasing her. She grasped the end of her braid and tousled it. 'I missed you, pet.'

Kesia blinked. 'I have begun training with Lonan.' She looked to her uncle. 'Priest Caleb insisted.'

'Rightly so!' Kengar's bold tone did not appease his regret. 'Lonan is a man who will stand by his oath.'

'It is good work.'

'Carpentry is a good trade, alright.' Tàvae smiled. 'Let's have breakfast.'

Kesia moved toward the door with her aunt. 'Yes, the work is fine, but—uncle—can I return to my weaving apprenticeship?'

Tàvae stopped; husband and wife exchanged a glance.

'Let's have breakfast,' Kengar echoed, gesturing to the doors.

II

Kengar had returned to Gesula only for the summer months. He had made arrangements with her new tutor so that for the duration of his stay she could resume her training in weaving. Thus she was free to spend long days with her uncle among the Stones, retiring ravenous, head aching, and happy. Mellena would join them in sessions at his house from time to time, but her new trademaster could seldom spare her. It had been a dry spring and the flock needed moving often.

The subject of the fight Kesia had stumbled upon between her uncle and aunt remained unknown, but clearly it remained unresolved, for tension lingered in their home. Tàvae spent most of her days in the library, bent over her desk with Toran by her side. Beyond the occasional griping remark about her husband, she was consumed by research, and generally acrimonious of mood.

Toran came often to Kesia's in the evening to break bread and express his frustrations. Without instruction, Toran had done his best to continue his learning in Tàvae's library. His progress with Gaeilge, the ancient tongue, was impressive. Yet her constant irritation at his novice status left him shamed and angry. Their work translating some ancient texts felt urgent; she chastised him harshly for mistakes, and was annoyed by the questions he quickly ceased to ask. Kesia felt a similar pressure from her uncle, though he had been more patient. However, the strain of their efforts brought great progress for both students in those slipping weeks.

III

January drew to a close, and Kesia's fifteenth birthday passed. A troubled Toran arrived one evening with a confusing account of the day's events.

The main text Toran laboured over was one of history—a dense volume written in an academic form of Gaeilge, made more difficult to decipher by its calligraphic script. It was, however, very beautiful. Writ on vellum, covered with gold-plated metal, and with ornately decorated borders, it seemed as ancient as the time it recorded: the era before the accession of the Dragon Monarchs, and the first century of their reign. It was his task to transcribe it onto parchment, translating what he

could alongside. For weeks he copied the names of long-departed tribes, their territories, sacred places, and Chieftains; few dates accompanied these records, and their regions were unlisted. He constantly scoured the modern maps with faint hope of locating the areas mentioned—for the new tongue had given new names to these old places. His treasured bilingual dictionary was wearing from use. Yet his efforts were rewarded with insights into a forgotten time.

Toran told Kesia how the ancient tribes had sustained themselves as roaming farmers since before records began. Slowly many of the tribes began to settle, managing their crops better, establishing towns. Still the wilderness pressed upon them, taking lambs and calves in the night; and the untamed tribes raided often. Then the Stones—whatever that meant—gifted new technologies, and the settled tribes were better able to defend themselves. The towns expanded and the networks connecting them improved. The savage tribes retreated. The wild land was no longer king: triumphant were the wielders of fire, seed, and scythe. And so centuries passed.

Toran had recently come to the segment covering the War of the Tribes. The war lasted almost twenty-three years, and immediately preceded the coming of the Dragon Monarchs. The record told how most of the major tribes had aligned themselves to one of the dragons and worshipped them with increasing fervour; differences in beliefs caused great offence. A summer of heavy rains birthed swarms of locusts and as crops were annihilated the Chieftains cast their gazes upon others' lands and livestock: for what right did the blasphemers have to nourishment in the face of famine? Tensions spilled over; war erupted. Thirteen of these tribes were greatly feared, led by powerful Weaver-Chieftains. The Weaver-Chieftains, the Makers of Storms, carved the fates of thousands and were lords even over nature, shifting rivers and mountains when need arose. Fear quickly flew before their attacks, and they took whole swathes of land with ease, absorbing smaller tribes in their wake. Finally these great tribes collided and it was said the smoke of their battles thickened the air for years.

Apprentice scribes commonly studied the War of the Tribes, and most people had some knowledge of it. The thirteen tribes were certainly remembered by history. But Toran—admittedly still a boy, at fourteen—had never heard of the Weaver-Chieftains. His curiosity was intensely piqued: what were their powers, names, ages? What became of them? He knew only seven tribes would survive the war.

He had asked Tàvae if she had heard of them; she had not, and assumed he had mistranslated. She took the text from him. Her eyes began to speed across the pages, only occasionally stopping to lift a scroll or text from the rubble of her desk and check for something. Toran knew better than to ask anything.

Tàvae seemed to remember his presence after half an hour. 'Where have you translated to?'

'Here,' he said, turning back to the end of the previous page. "'The mountains bowed, and the rivers submitted. The Weaver-Chieftains wielded their fearsome warriors and smoke blanketed on the lands.'"

She flipped the pages and read the chapter again—staring at the blank space beneath its final paragraph for quite some time. 'I have no idea who they were.'

'Is that not a little strange?'

'Yes. I think it is quite strange.'

Then her eyes flickered past him, to the forest beyond the house. 'Best not speak of this. Although you may mention it to Kesia.' She went quiet in thought. She then placed a hand on Toran's shoulder. 'You have learnt Gaeilge at great speed. Your work is excellent. But, son, you'd better let this subject alone now. Alright?'

And he had promised.

IV

December, 1022 YD

Lirna, Lenyol

Princess Régan arrived at Lirna Palace in the evening, four days after departing the capital. The journey had been hot and rough, and she was relieved to be received by the Duchess in the outer gardens. The Princess alighted the carriage; the Duchess, Lady Ione, took the Princess' arm guided her inside, along a series of beautiful staircases, and into to the Dining Hall. It was cool, set with a fine meal, and free from servants.

'Molan has been in Dara.' The Duchess was apologetic. 'I sent word when your messenger arrived yesterday; I had hoped he would be here to greet you. I expect he will return in the morning.'

Régan nodded. 'I will save my explanations for when you are together.'

Ione studied Régan's expression. 'You are welcome here as long as you wish.'

'I thank you,' Régan smiled. 'I am afraid there is discord in the royal household.' She laughed mildly, then sighed quietly and looked her friend in the eye. 'I will not deceive you; it is likely I will be here quite some time.'

*

Régan woke with the sun, and set out to walk through her thoughts in the gardens.

Lirna was a coastal town, and its palace took pride of place on the small cliffs above it. Régan found an iron seat which celebrated the views of the ocean and residents below. She settled against the cold metal, for the morning was hot already, and considered her situation yet again.

She knew her people would never accept a trade with Miggest. The Custodians of its throne were tyrannical militarists; no natural scourge would move Lenyolites to

compassion. Further, its drought would not stay neatly behind The Line. Already the rains had eluded the north of Lenyol; the business of preparing for a long dry spell would need to begin. For the entire journey she had pillaged her memory to find what could possibly entice her father to trade. She looked up at the palace, glistening in the morning sun. So fine compared to Offenure Castle.

And suddenly insight struck.

Nascóir.

Decades of overheard conversations came to her in a flash; Offenure Castle was ancient and crumbling, the city crowded and in need of expansion. She knew what drove her father to trade: he planned to be the Custodin who modernised the capital. A new millenia, a new city. Mâtac the Rejuvenator!

Nascóir was a mineral which set hard as stone when mixed with sand and water. Miggest was awash with it, while it could scarcely be found in Lenyol. The Custodin would need tons upon tons to achieve his vision.

She found herself relinquishing some of her ire, for it was actually an admirable dream. However two facts remained: first, Lenyolites hated Miggestians; and second, if drought descended from the north and the masses found the price of the Custodin's project was their suffering, even starvation, there would be an uprising. The Iulithan Custodin had shouldered one in recent times; perhaps Mâtac had forgotten how quickly an unhappy people can rebel.

Yet Régan could not publicly decry her father. She was too little known amongst the nobility. And her father had done well to protect their interests, retaining their deep affection.

As she sat in reflection, a Palomino horse dressed in royal colours approached the palace. Its rider noticed and recognised her, silhouetted as she was on the seat against the sky. The messenger dismounted and made her way quickly through the gardens. The Princess stood.

'Your Highness,' the messenger bowed. 'I have come with an urgent message.'

Princess Régan extended her hand for the envelope which was offered. It was fixed with her father's seal.

'Thank you. The servants will take care of you and your mount.'

Régan resumed her seat and broke the seal.

*Those who betray the Throne
in exposing delicate matters
will be tried for treason
and executed.*

She read the note several times, standing and pacing, embedding it in her memory. She then tore it into a hundred pieces and committed it to the sea.

Heat like ice solidified her veins. Her projected future fissured.

V

Along their journey north, Régan had dictated a dozen letters summoning her closest allies in the Court. Her assistant, Brennan, had been instructed to polish and dispatch them. Upon receiving her father's message she went directly to the servant's quarters and ordered a maid to retrieve Brennan.

He appeared within moments. 'Come,' she commanded, and lead him to her rooms.

As they entered, he warned the ladies-in-waiting of the Princess' volatility with a quick hand gesture. They dropped their smiles and promptly disappeared.

The Princess stood before a boxed window, chest heaving, waiting impatiently as Brennan ensured the rooms were deserted. He returned and awaited her furore.

'I have been compelled to silence.' The Princess glared through the window. 'Muzzled.'

'Your Majesty?'

She threw her eyes to the roof. 'Please. We are not in company.'

He closed his mouth.

"'Exposing delicate matters'..." She glared at Brennan. 'A message came: speak, and be executed.'

'Executed?'

Frozen anger ruptured. 'That tyrant. Of course the public will resist trading with Miggist! Even without the prospect of drought! And as successor am I not entitled to an opinion on such matters? Will I not inherit this disaster—if we are not overthrown?'

She was vibrating.

Brennan braced himself.

'What manner of barbaric—monstrous—' she clenched her fists— 'depraved and empty-hearted *dictator*—' her fists released like wings opening, shattering the ornaments of an adjoining shelf— 'would threaten to publicly murder his own and only child for counselling against so dangerous a treaty?'

'One with higher regard for himself above all else, it would seem.'

The pressure of her fury was relieved. 'Quite.'

'I assume you would like the letters destroyed.'

'Yes.'

'And the debris tidied.'

She examined the shards of glass and porcelain. 'By and by.'

'Perhaps a glass of wine.'

She took a seat in the window box. 'Two. Then sit, for I desperately need a thinking ear.'

VI

The Princess passed the morning expelling her grievances. In airing and examining them, she pacified herself; and when the fanfare announcing the Duke of Lirna's return burst through her window, she returned calmly to the Dining Hall. The Duchess swept her out onto the eastern balcony.

The Duke, Lord Molan, was accompanied by his men and another nobleman—the Duke of Dara. This Duke was Ione's brother, a golden-haired man of serious countenance and slightly worn attire. The Princess observed the men dismount, taking particular note of the contrast in his kindness to his horse and avoidance of the other men.

Ione had mentioned her brother often. Régan knew his attention was dedicated to his lands, which were dryer than most; a dedication which, incidentally, left him unmarried. Her mother had once mentioned this eligible Duke in the north, only to have her father dismiss him as awkward and odd. Were Régan not already in possession of a lover, this would certainly have made him a more appealing prospect.

The women waited as the men dressed for their meal. They arrived in good time, washed and freshly pressed.

'Your Highness,' Lord Molan bowed. 'I have kept you waiting.'

'I came with little notice; I have interrupted your plans.'

'Not at all.' He turned to his companion and held out a hand. 'Allow me to introduce my brother-in-law Lord Carrick, Duke of Dara.'

Carrick bowed to Régan, taking and kissing her offered hand. 'Your Highness,' he said.

'Lord Carrick. I have often seen your empty chair at Court.'

He laughed uncomfortably. 'Offenure is quite some distance from Dara, Your Highness. I seldom make the journey.'

She smiled. 'Yes.' Turning to her hosts, she indicated to the table. 'Please, let us begin.'

They bowed their heads, and took their places. They spoke briefly of the journey and its sights, but chiefly ate in silence for the men's ride had been long and they had need of nourishment.

Their plates were cleared and they sojourned to the large southern balcony. Overlooking the town and protected from the sun by the palace's shadow, it was a favoured space among guests.

The Princess remained standing as the others assumed their seats: an expectant

pause came over the group.

'I rode north and summoned you to discuss an urgent matter.' She clasped her hands together. 'However, a message came this morning and the Throne has forbidden me to speak of it.'

Molan and Carrick exchanged a glance.

'The Custodin cannot be disobeyed without consequence,' she reprimanded Molan. 'My position does not protect me from the charge of sedition.'

Molan silently cursed his display of frustration. Carrick placed his forearms on the table.

'The political differences between my father and I are not news to the Duke and Duchess,' said Régan, taking her place beside Carrick. 'I regret your fruitless journey.'

Duchess Ione made a gesture to a servant inside, who appeared with a decanter and goblets of fine crystal. Once the wine was poured, the servant was quickly dismissed.

'I am sure it is a difficult situation, Your Highness.' Ione rose her glass. '*Sláinte*.'

'To your health,' the men echoed.

Régan rose her glass, and drank. 'Lord Carrick,' she said decisively, dismissing the previous topic, 'your sister has told me much about you. I am told it is rare to find you in the palace.'

'That is true. My lands keep me occupied, my Lady.' He paused; Ione frowned. 'Particularly of late.' The words seemed to fall forward, unbidden.

Régan recognised the subtle censure in Ione's eyes. 'I am pleased that you do not simply consider them an asset of your title. What recent changes have you had?'

'Ah,' he cleared his throat, 'my sister reminds me that fine company requires fine conversation; I have been far too immersed in talk of cattle and crops to think on other topics.' He reached to hold the stem of his glass. 'Perhaps you would suggest one?'

'As it happens, my present interest is the weather.'

Carrick took up his glass, nodding politely, though frowning a little afterward. What interest would a princess have in the weather? Was the heat was irksome to royalty? All that fur and velvet.

'The matter of crops and livestock also interests me. Will you give me an honest report of your harvest?'

The others watched, knowing the questions were more than idle talk.

Carrick frowned. 'We have brought in a smaller crop than last year, but no two are the same.'

Régan smiled falsely. 'I am not in need of optimistic forecasts. Ione's accounts paint a man who knows his lands, and talk of the Court suggest you are not one to gild the truth.' She waved off his awkward laugh. 'I came on a different matter, yet

here you are, and so I sit in the hope of procuring a sincere report—for my weather-readers in Alendae have confessed that Miggest's drought is crossing our northern borders, and is unlikely to relent for some time. What do you make of that?

He examined her face. 'I would say my experiences as a northern landlord confirm such a notion.'

'And?'

'And if the rains fail to come again next year, we will have to decide whether to retain stock or prioritise the grain store.'

Régan nodded. 'Which would you favour?'

'Stored grain does not have three stomachs.'

And here the Princess laughed, abandoning her inquisition. The others joined. 'This is true.' She remembered her hosts' presence. 'Now, to the games! Do you also shoot, Lord Carrick?' She removed a gold pin from her hair and passed it to the Duchess. 'For you, most esteemed tutor. Did you hear I was crowned Master Archer at the Castlefall Open?'

Chapter Five

Custodia Galluel

I
Winter – 1023 YD
Trialle, Miggest

The Custodian of the Throne of Miggest took up her sceptre and held it upright before her.

'In the name of Miggest, King of the Black Dragons, I initiate you into the covenant of his rule. You will guard his lands and safeguard his people. You will protect the faithful from torment and shield them from disaster.'

The man who knelt before her lowered his head. 'I will be as a shepherd to his sheep.'

'You will obey the dictates of the Throne, and uphold the teachings of the faith.'

'I will uphold and obey.'

'You will place the needs of your charges before your own, and relinquish your title if you are found unworthy of your privileges.'

'I will be duteous.'

Custodia Galluel lowered the staff to tap each shoulder with the iron Lehius symbol that comprised its handle. 'You are hereby appointed the title of Duke of Trialle.' She placed the sceptre on the crown of his head. 'And I bind you to your oath.' A bolt of energy passed from his chest to the head of the sceptre, temporarily illuminating the black diamonds embedded therein.

The choir began to sing a hymn and Lord Haine, now Duke of Trialle, arose.

Daylight fades
You face the night
Where Lord protects
Adherents' plight
To burdens borne
His strength He lends
The sworn.

The High Priest stepped forward with a cushion bearing an iron torc. Custodia

Galluel lifted and curled the cumbersome jewel around Haine's neck.

The Custodia turned to the nobles who occupied the Great Hall of Trialle Castle. 'These are difficult times. I understand many of you are eager for an audience; I will remain until each of your concerns is addressed. Let us begin by enjoying the feast our host has prepared.'

The night marched forward, and when opportunity came Galluel summoned Sevína to request the name of the unknown, rust-bearded noble in her company.

'That is the Duke of Edeen, Your Majesty; Lord Vilsonius, who converted to the faith last year. He is under my guidance.'

The Custodia smiled to herself.

'Perhaps you knew this.'

'Yes; truly, it was an introduction I sought.'

Sevína bowed, and went to collect him.

As Lord Vilsonius bowed to the Custodia, the room hushed slightly. Noticing this, Galluel waved a dismissive hand; the nobles forced themselves to resume their conversations.

She extended her hand, which he took, kissing the black opal of her ring.

'Lord Vilsonius. Your name has been spoken in Delus; I desired to meet this converted Duke, but custom demanded patience.'

Again he bowed.

'Walk with me.' They began to move about the hall. 'Sevína has surely informed you of our mistrust in foreigners, and your inability to enter the capital until the proper time.'

'She has, Your Majesty.' His Iulithan accent was unmistakable with its rolling or's and bent vowels.

Galluel held her goblet to him, which he took and refilled from a nearby serving table.

'The tale behind your defection and conversion is long, I assume.'

He met her eye, unwillingly smiling at its convivial light. 'It is quite a protracted narrative, Your Majesty.'

'I would like to formally invite you to attend the capital and share this, for what I have heard is most intriguing. I also thirst for an outsider's perspective of our plight.'

'I am your servant, Your Majesty.'

'You may also address me as "My Lady", Lord Vilsonius, erstwhile Duke of Edeen.'

II Delus, Miggest

Two fires burnt on opposing walls of Delus Palace's Great Hall, yet they barely took the edge from the deep chill of late winter. The Custodia stood before one of the fireplaces, her High Counsellor and High Commander by her side. Her face was grave indeed.

'How many were killed?'

'Five, Your Majesty. Four men and a boy.'

She felt her throat constrict. 'And the age of the boy?'

'He was seven.'

'Seven.' Her breath shortened. 'Do we know why a seven-year-old child was in the granary at night?'

'He had been sleeping with his father underneath.' The High Counsellor answered. 'Amongst the staddle stones.'

The High Commander emanated an unspoken response.

'Lord Mahon. Speak.'

High Commander Mahon shifted. 'Your Majesty, some months ago I suggested dispatching warriors to guard the granaries as this year's yield was small. Reports of disputes and skirmishes have come over the last few weeks; I fear this incident is the first of many.'

'Then you perceived the threat better than I; it is my own inaction which caused this.' She stared at the fire for some time. She knew the raiders had been driven by hunger, fear, or both. Perhaps the men themselves had children to feed and protect. Yet she could not tolerate the stores being pillaged; if the rains bypassed the lands yet again in spring, those sacks of grain were their only safeguard against starvation.

'The perpetrators must be caught, and executed.'

A heavy silence fell between them.

'High Commander, you will send guards to protect each of our granaries. You will also recruit and train three hundred new warriors.' She turned to the High Counsellor. 'Lord Dalan, you will find and wake the High Priest and have him send word to the temples. They are each to employ a local cook, and serve breakfast to the children in their area.' She collected her goblet, delicately engraved with minuscule dragons, from the mantle. 'I will not suffer to have a diminished or stilted stock for my future army. Any adult who takes of this food will be incarcerated. You will yourself write to the peerage and ensure the temples are adequately provided, by their own stores if necessary.'

'Yes, my Lady.' High Counsellor Dalan departed.

'What happened in Yardford will be the first and last of its kind,' she commanded Lord Mahon. 'You will ensure there is an equal number of female and male soldiers;

we must be firm, yet we must be kind. The stores are to be protected only—I will not be known as a butcher.'

'Yes, Your Majesty.' He turned toward the exit. 'If I may, my Lady...?'

She straightened her shoulders and drew an eyebrow.

'You posses a far greater wisdom than your father, my Lady. His response would have been very different.'

Her eyes lost their focus, drawn into a memory. Then she nodded, almost unconsciously. 'Quite.'

Chapter Six

Coming of Age

I
August – 1026 YD
Gesula Temple, Lenyol

Three years passed. The Spring Equinox arrived.

Kesia and Lasair stood in the elegant gold dresses of their coming-of-age ceremony. Beside them were Mellena, in a soft red dress, and Toran, in golden tunic and trousers. All were taller, fuller, and on the cusp of adulthood.

As they had many years previously, they awaited Priest Caleb with nerves while their families took their seats inside the temple. A warm breeze blew from the east.

The musicians began to play, and Caleb appeared. He led them inside and through the crowd to the altar which bore three golden goblets.

'Spring has returned. With its flowers and nurturing rain, we bring forth four youths to step beyond the protective cloaks of their parents and trademasters, and into the light of adulthood. They have completed their studies in carpentry, shepherding, herbalism, and scribing, and enrich our village for doing so. Toran has studied under my own guidance these last years, and though I shall miss his company, I know the libraries of our region keenly await his careful eye.' He turned to the altar. 'The time has come for you to devote yourselves to the Great Mother, and willingly submit yourselves to her protection and love. You will drink of the wine of her harvest, golden and sweet, and read 'In Giving' from Monairc III.'

Mellena stood by; the three native youths recited:

“The Golden Light will break the night
And protect those lost from harm
Binding life to life a tether forms
An anchor in the storm
Though shadows come, and roads are marred
Love will come when called
And in the fold of Her deepest care
We shall by end return.”

From the single candle in the altar's centre, three cords of light spiralled, twirling

toward the chests of Kesia, Lasair, and Toran. Each felt an intense heat, and resisted the urge to squeal. It felt as though their hearts were encased momentarily in fire—discomfiture bordering on pain—as their parents looked anxiously on: and then it passed, as the hairs on each of their heads rippled and lightened, shedding their soft brown hue in favour of a more pronounced gold. Thus had they bound themselves to the Queen of the Gold Dragons.

The musicians began to play again, a beautiful piece which warmed the proud hearts of the audience. At its conclusion, applause broke out, and Priest Caleb bowed in departure; since their time had come, drinking was permitted, and he excused himself from the inevitable mess which would ensue.

II

Gesula Temple, Lenyol

'Congratulations, Kesia!' Anlisia grasped her daughter's shoulders and kissed her forehead. 'You did so very well. If only—' she caught herself— 'Oh, but you look so very beautiful.'

'She does indeed.' Tavae emerged from the crowd.

Kesia blinked as her aunt and uncle appeared by her mother. Kengar had returned occasionally over the last few years to continue her training, but half a year had passed since she had seen him last. She forgot her disappointment and threw herself on him.

'I missed you. Thank you so much for being here today.' She swallowed the prickling sensation in her throat. 'Typical, not to inform us; to opt for the glory of surprise, you silly startlers!'

Tavae laughed, choked. 'We were not sure we would make it; we could not bear to disappoint again.'

'I feared you might resent our absence,' Kengar admitted, 'and procured you a bribe from Mitchas. Would you excuse yourself a while?'

Kesia waved to the others, and followed him from the temple, downhill to its rear.

There stood a magnificent palomino mare, fifteen hands high, gilded in the fading light of day.

'Her name is Shann.'

'Shann.' Kesia repeated, lifting a hand to run it over the mare's perfect muzzle. 'Such grace...'

'I understand you have been hiring from Mitchas to make your weekly trips to Alendae. You are a professional now, and that will not do. Shann will serve you well.'

'This is a very kind,' Kesia moved her eyes across the rich saddle and bridle, 'and

very costly gift, Kengar.'

'Do you like her?'

Kesia nodded. She worked her way slowly around the horse to discover only perfect teeth, perfect eyes, perfect hooves, a perfect tail, and a gentle demeanour. 'I love her.' She swayed her head to catch Shann's gaze. 'You will be of much use to me, and will make for amiable company on the long rides to and fro.' Kesia faced her uncle. 'Thank you, Kengar.'

'You are most welcome.'

He found her hand and grasped it. 'I will introduce Shann to your stables and see to her needs. I must depart again tonight,' he felt the sting this comment made in his niece's chest, lamenting and commending its concealment in her face, 'but your aunt will remain; my task is near completion and when I return in several months' time, be assured I will tutor you.'

'I bind you to that promise, so be safe, uncle.' Kesia ordered him.

A chorus of laughter shot from the temple gardens as the drinking commenced.

'Go, be with your friends.' Kengar pushed Kesia toward the festivities. She bid him a fond farewell, planted a kiss on her newly beloved horse, and went to celebrate.

*

As sleep became an activity increasing in popularity a dozen hours later, Kesia stumbled home and tripped over a rather intimately entwined couple.

'Sorry!' laughed Kesia, trying and failing to return to her feet. 'Didn't mean to disturb!' She turned and saw Oran laying with Mellena astride him. Kesia cackled loudly and madly, and raised her empty chalice.

'To adulthood!'

III

Gesula, Lenyol

Rain had swept over western Terra Draco during the past three years, providing relief to the drought. This spring was no different, and it was another wet morning when Kesia awoke dry-mouthed from her coming-of-age celebrations the previous evening.

Entering the kitchen, she found her balance thrown by the wine, and steadied herself against the wall.

Chuckles came at her from the table; there her aunt and mother sat with mugs of steaming tea and knowing smiles. Her mother pushed a mug toward Kesia, and an egg with toast. 'Have these.'

Kesia groaned and complied.

Once done, some colour restored to her cheeks, Tàvae announced that she had a

gift to give. Kesia suddenly remembered Shann.

'Come, it is by the stables.'

The three exited the house into the rain, soft and steady, and made their way to the humble stable at its rear where Shann patiently awaited her new mistress. There a waxed blanket concealed some large, lumpy object. 'A gift for entering adulthood,' Tàvae said.

Kesia pulled the blanket aside, spilling the water it had collected, to reveal a beautifully crafted cart of spruce, trimmed subtly with gold. Kesia gaped as she examined the cart, Lenyolite iconography carved on all sides. Kesia's carpentry apprenticeship had led her to building altars, and she spent countless hours each week carving similar images; her work was considered good, indeed excellent, and had earned her a reputation in the Alendae markets. The craftsmanship before her was beyond what she thought wood capable of yielding.

'The workmanship is—just—superb. Far above the skill of any I have encountered in my trade! Who fashioned this piece?' Kesia looked up at her aunt. Tàvae looked pleased with Kesia's reaction to her gift. 'I must meet them...' Kesia looked again, shaking her head at the detail. And then she remembered her manners—she stepped toward her aunt and embraced her tightly. 'Thank you so much. I hardly want to drive it.'

Tàvae laughed. 'It will not be worn by use.'

Kesia frowned questioningly and sought to find the joke in her aunt's eye, but she was all enigma. And so Kesia turned her attention to the beautiful mare; their eyes met, and Kesia was suddenly desperate to ride her.

'Here, Kesia; saddle her up.' Tàvae opened the stable door. Shann grunted happily and began to fidget in excitement. 'I will ready Tapa; come to mine, and we will ride to the Stones.'

IV

Gesula Forest, Lenyol

The rear of Tàvae and Kengar's house was a dozen yards from the edge of Gesula Forest, and here Tàvae awaited her niece on a dapple gray mare. Both Tapa, the horse, and Tàvae were examining the forest as Kesia approached silently on Shann.

'Boo!' Kesia expelled, playfully; yet Tàvae shrieked, startling Tapa, who whinnied and threw her head, stepping backward while Tàvae attempted to soothe her.

'Sorry, sorry—it was just a joke—Tapa, it's me, girl, Kesia. Sorry—sorry.'

'Shh, Tapa, we're alright.' Tàvae held the reigns fast in one hand, and patted Tapa's mane with the other. She smiled at her niece. 'Were I not so easily scared! But Shann simply drifts, does she not? I heard nothing of your coming.'

There was something forced in the lightness of Tàvae's manner, although Kesia knew not to inquire after it. 'She just glides. She must be one of Mitchas' finest.' She rose her chin toward the trees. 'Shall we?'

And away they rode, sheltered from the continuing rain by the forest canopy.

'Ànlisia tells me you have purchased rooms in Alendae,' Tàvae related after a few minutes' silence.

'I have. By the river, two corner rooms on the ground level. The house belongs to a client; three others reside there also. I have had more work than expected and needed a space in the city.'

'Kengar tells me you have a budding reputation.'

Kesia blushed. 'Perhaps. My altars sell well, particularly.'

Tàvae nodded. They came upon the Stones; both women dismounted, trusting the mares to abide untethered, and entered the ring. Tàvae touched the Stones as she passed through; they sat on the grass in the centre. There they relaxed a while, absorbing the sights and smells of the forest in spring.

'Show me something,' Tàvae requested at length.

Kesia thought for a moment, then touched the ground. 'Out of sunlight flowers dress; bidden, unfold, with fine finesse.' The tight grass ruffled, and gave way to an array of tiny ivory flowers.

Tàvae laughed, clapping fingers to palm. 'Very sweet.' She held her hand over the display. 'What grows will glow, and wind winnow.' The petals lit up, broke off, and sailed beyond the standing stones like dandelion seeds. They watched the petals carry their light into the forest until they slipped beyond sight.

'Kengar will ask for your time when he returns.' Tàvae said suddenly, heavily, as though it had been at the fore of her thoughts all the while. 'You may need to set aside your chisel.'

'Yes.'

Tàvae's fading smile fell away. 'Your uncle and I have had some difficult years. In due time, I may sojourn to my father's house in Offenure. My work leads me to a path Kengar dislikes.'

Kesia felt a rush of cold.

'When you are ready, Kengar may ask you to journey with him. And of course you will go, and work with those who aided your father. But while Kengar has absolute faith in them, you must keep your eyes open, and not let reason be swept aside; and take Toran with you, if you can. Young eyes see clearly. Help each other.'

Kesia knew not what to say. She stared at the ground for a minute before looking over to the horses. They seemed unsettled—heads upright, ears oscillating. Tàvae noticed also.

'Remember that you are always safe in the Stones.' Tàvae reached forward and touched Kesia's arm to wrest her attention from the mares. 'The Stones are a haven.'

And if I do head south, please write. Your mother has the address.'

V

September – 1026 YD

Gesula, Lenyol

A constellation of bows were released, hissing with propulsion, crossing one another to land almost simultaneously on the target board with a riff of pummelling thuds.

'Ha!' Toran clenched his fist in victory; his arrow protruded from the target's centre, its navy fletching clear from their hundred-foot distance.

Kesia and Mellena grinned. Their arrows, brown and red, adjoined his by a few inches. Oran's bow was somewhere in the middle bands. He nudged Mellena, impressment apparent in his raised brows.

Bryan, the new apprentice carpenter, and Lasair were as happy as the others—their bows had actually struck the target.

'Not bad!' Kesia clapped Toran on the shoulder.

'Looks like the drinks are on Bryan and Lasee-eer...' Mellena sang.

'I am not of age!' Bryan squeaked.

'Off home then, my friend.' Oran ordered, good-naturedly. 'See you next time. Alright, sis, how is your coin situation?'

Lasair groaned. 'I hate playing with you.'

They made their way back to the village with their quivers and arches, waving off a dejected Bryan as the older five made for the inn.

'Oi! Weapons by the door!' The innkeep barked.

They complied. Kesia placed her bracers on the shelf; Toran noticed the workmanship. Unlike the others' several layers of wool, her arm guards were leather, engraved with chains of Alias. 'Nice,' he commented. 'I bet they set you back a bit.'

Kesia reddened. 'I like what I like.'

'The second round is on Kesia!' Toran announced, taking one of the bracers to inspect the work. The others turned to look, and seeing it, shook their heads.

Lasair went to the bar to collect the drinks while the others took up a table by the window.

Once settled, Oran put an arm over Mellena. Shrugged slightly; he removed it.

Drinks came and all relaxed into their seats. As the conversation escalated, a figure heading hastily downhill caught their collective eye. Tàvae appeared, scowling, heading directly to Kesia's house. She was muttering to herself.

'Hold on,' Toran rose with the intent of pursuing. At the door, he added: 'No one touch my drink.'

*

Toran called to Tàvae, jogging to catch her up.

She turned with fury that abated instantly on recognition. 'Toran! I thought you were my tyrant of a husband.'

Toran looked to see if those nearby, who had stopped to look, could hear.

The villagers in their proximity continued their business after a cold stare from Tàvae. 'I thought he was away?'

'He is. He just came by shortly.'

'Oh.' Confused, he offered feebly: 'Drink?'

'No. Maybe. Sure.'

He started toward the inn; she took his arm firmly. 'My place.'

*

'I found him in here, sifting through my desk. He was seeking something in particular—' she reached under the desk and drew out an ancient volume from a concealed shelf behind its apron — 'This. It does not belong to me and I should not possess it; its keepers want it back.' She extended an arm and cleared the books and papers of her desk onto the floor, placing her glass and text on the newly cleared surface. 'Will you help me transcribe it tonight? I swore it was stored safely elsewhere; I must return it by morning.'

'Of course,' he submitted, collecting a chair from across the room. 'You are right-handed; I favour my left. We can each take a side.'

Tàvae ruffled his hair, surging with affection. 'That's my lad.'

VI

The sun set as Toran and Tàvae worked. They had made good progress transcribing the smuggled text, for though it appeared thick, its heavily decorated borders meant each page contained only a few hundred words.

And its words were fascinating. Entitled *Origins*, the book documented the discovery and evolution of energy weaving. Its first uses were in the domestic realm and were thought to have been stumbled upon by the women who ground grain. It began as a subtle art, accessible only to the sensitive and patient, and yielded little for many turns of the wheel. Weaving energy became a tool, still limited for use by a select few, to ease the backbreaking work agriculture demanded of its dependants. Yet though it served a purpose, the human spirit is creative in nature, and began to play with the possibilities weaving offered.

Before Toran could learn more, however, Tàvae became impatient with him. 'You can make sense of it later.' She was holding several already-deciphered pages upright in order to read subsequent sections. 'Simply reproduce it. Quickly.'

Disappointment visited Toran's face. His Gaeilge was good, but he could not transcribe and translate at the same time. To keep pace with Tàvae he would have to blindly duplicate.

And so he did, well into the night, through chapter after chapter of history he knew was hidden to most—including him.

*

Tàvae paused. '*Ilchruthach?*'

Toran rubbed his eyes. It was almost five in the morning; a faint light coloured the landscape outside. They were in the final chapter of the book. He assumed Tàvae need help to translate; he looked over at her page. 'I have not seen that word before, sorry.'

'Something about...!' she frowned, shaking her head at the apparent nonsense before her. 'Manipulation. Changing faces.'

Toran sighed. 'It is terribly late. As you said, we will make sense of it later. We are almost done.'

Tàvae translated: "'...but the wind came into her heart; the woman forgot herself, and remained a wren...'"

Toran shrugged, returning to his sentence.

Tàvae read on, muttering occasionally. Then she wrenched the book from the desk, one hand crushed against her cheek as the other held it open.

'Toran,' she commanded, in a distant, desperate voice, 'You must never speak of this book. Not what it looks like, not what it contains, nothing. Be cautious of even mentioning my name.' She turned around suddenly, sharply—frightening him—to stare at the forest beyond her rear doors. For half a moment, she thought she—but no—or could it—and she grew terribly pale, green, and fell heavily on her chair.

'I should not have brought you here. Foolish woman!' She struck herself in the forehead with her palm. 'I should have listened to him—Toran!' Her large eyes found his, and filled them with alarm. 'Go. Go to Alendae, today, and never come to my house again.'

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Kesia was deeply unnerved by Toran's report, although he did not disclose the work which spurred his departure. He simply related that their work had turned dangerous. And clearly he intended to heed Tàvae's warning—a horse awaited him at her gate.

'I'm sure she was scouring for Seathedai, Kesia.'

Her heart froze at his words.

'Promise you will not go to their house unless Kengar assures you it is safe?'

The pallor of her expression assured him; she walked him to the gate, having given him the key to her rooms in the city, and watched him depart. The sun had not yet pierced the horizon, and the forest beyond the town was dark; she shivered and

hastened indoors.

VII

Fatigue eventually claimed Tàvae, and she was curled in a deep sleep when Kengar returned. *Origins* lay beside her on the night table.

He lifted the book and opened it; he admired the artistry of the borders, glad that the written form of Gaeilge was a mystery to him. He had no desire to access its contents.

Tàvae woke at his presence, holding her eyes closed to collect her thoughts. It was safe; wrapped, hidden, all other evidence removed. Deliberate decoys set up.

Kengar knew she had woken by her change in breath. He announced: 'She desires to speak to you.'

Tàvae opened her eyes.

'She means you no harm.'

Tàvae sat up, looking at the text in his hands. 'I am sure she does. Perhaps she mistook which text I took—this is simply a history of weaving. Interesting, but hardly dangerous.' Quell your fear; wear the lie to your bones. Else she will smell it.

'She wants you to return it, and to speak to you. Please get ready.'