

Terra Draco

The Fantasy

Chapters 4, 5 & 6

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Terra Draco (West)



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 millennia, a new city. Màtac 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 Miggest! 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 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 Migest'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 cumbrous 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 possess 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 lead 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!' Ànlisia 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.' Tàvae 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!'

Tàvae 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 her—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.'

*

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.'