

Terra Draco

The Fantasy

Chapter 7: Erstwhile, North

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Terra Draco (West)



Chapter Seven
Erstwhile, North

I

February – 1026 YD

Seaton, Miggest

Lord Vilsonius and the Duchess Clarissa before the altar. The priest had read the marriage rite, and Vilsonius had intoned his vowels, echoed by the woman who was now his wife.

Clarissa faced her new husband with large eyes and a broad smile. She was sweet, and he returned it honestly.

'So it is that you are bound in marriage, to the glory of Miggest.'

'Glory be to the King!' echoed the audience.

'May your union be prosperous and fruitful.'

Vilsonius' mind shot to his daily tea [compress, tincture, brew, whatever] of Barren Maiden. Curse

Sevína if it failed.

Clarissa gave him an expectant look; he remembered his cue. He collected her hand and raised it before the crowd; they cheered. He made to step with her toward the exit but she resisted.

'I have a gift I would like to give my husband,' Clarissa announced.

He turned to her.

The Duchess indicated to a priestess, who stepped forward with a cushion of black velvet bearing a torc identical to that which Galluel had placed on the Duke of Trialle some years previous.

'It is my pleasure to have gained not only a husband, but a partner in the peerage.' She held the cushion before him. 'Will you guard His lands and safeguard His people?'

'I will.'

'Will you protect the faithful from torment, and shield them from disaster?'

'I shall.'

'Will you obey the dictates of the Throne, and uphold the teachings of the faith?'

'I will.'

'Then on behalf of Her Majesty, I appoint you

the Duke of Seaton.' She placed the iron torc around his neck.

His cordial smile broke through his lips.

II

Delus, Miggest

1023 YD – September

Some months after the inauguration of the Duke of Trialle, Vilsonius accepted the Custodia's invitation to the region's capital.

He was admitted to the Great Hall and found it empty of attendants. Custodia Galluel sat on a platform above the vast space, leaning against the side of her throne, ankles crossed, bemusement folded in the corner of her mouth. The throne was ornate, and yet simpler than its Iulithan counterpart—here, the throne was low-backed, shallow and narrow enough for comfort, lined inside with a black bear pelt. The throne of his homeland was high, large, and cold.

To his intense irritation, self-consciousness beset him as he passed silently from the entrance to the

foot of the platform.

'Your Majesty,' he bowed. 'It is an honour to have been summoned.'

She laughed. 'I wonder if this is a carded script my guards give new entrants?'

'Forgive my triteness,' he apologised with a dawning smile. 'I truly am honoured to have been given the opportunity to formally introduce myself. Outsiders are poorly trusted in my own land, and turned away more often than not.'

'Perhaps I wished to politely turn you away?'

He met her eye and found it glistened with jest.

'You have stirred the waters of our closed ranks, Vilsonius of Iulitha. Former Duke of Edeen, weaver and son of Duke Baird, ringleader of the coup against Custodin Algas—you are certainly the most notable convert we have had to the Black Dragon's path in many years.'

Vilsonius had no reply.

'Sevína has given me the long version of your story. She has also noted how seldom you use your skills, and wonders at your undisclosed accomplishments.' Vilsonius bowed his head. 'She is kind to speak well of me.'

'On the contrary,' Galluel countered, 'her words suggest a lack of forthrightness on your part.'

'I see.'

'Weaving is an uncommon trade in Miggest, Lord Vilsonius, as you have undoubtedly gathered. My father was renowned for his mistrust of its practitioners. I will admit my own ignorance; however, I expect a true and honest answer when I ask: what is the degree of your skill in manipulating energy?'

'Your Majesty, I am a master of my trade.'

She assessed him.

'I am not given to pretence. I am conscious of the suspicion with which weavers are treated in Miggest. My former nobility makes for a far better reference; but as you have asked directly, I will answer directly. I have sought, and failed to find a weaver in Miggest with even half my experience or strength. I spoke of the honour in meeting you, for I have nurtured a hope since converting that I could lay my skills at your feet and offer them in service.' He placed a fist over his heart and bowed his head.

The Custodia stared a moment at the serious

foreigner before her. She rose and descended the steps, approaching while he kept his head low. She reached a hand and lifted his chin with a bent forefinger.

Pale blue and penetrating, she felt her pupils expand upon close contact with his gaze. 'I accept your offer. You will go north to Pends immediately, and demonstrate your mastery by galvanising that parched and broken district. Do this, and I will set things in motion to move you more directly to my service. I feel you will be useful indeed in the years ahead.'

III

Miggest

1026 YD – August

The restoration of Pends would become legend, and the man who inspired trees to mature in a season, revived withered herds and flocks, and taught broken soil to hold water won himself the heart of the region.

And so when Custodia Galluel summoned Duke

Vilsonius to the capital two years after dispatching him to appoint him High Weaver, glasses were raised in his honour throughout the land.

That his wife was precluded from the inauguration ceremony was perhaps a little strange, Sevína observed; Galluel returned that concerns over the Duchess' *condition* had been raised. A word with Vilsonius assured Sevína that Clarissa's symptoms were not only unrelenting, but fantastical. She could not refrain from laughing when he confessed his relief that she had remained in Seaton.

Sevína soon forgot the matter, distracted by High Priest Arnaud's deteriorating health and the suggestion that she was Arnaud's most suitable successor—if only she would return to the clergy. Galluel's words echoed throughout the inauguration ceremony, which she now watched with bemusement—Vilsonius' demonstration of 'skill', a show of light and movement, was mere play. She felt her fingers twitch with a desire to participate in the entertainment. The Custodia's expression of deep captivation restrained her, however; she decided to slip away from the Great

Hall, entirely unnoticed.

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‘Good evening, Brennan.’

The man pushed himself away from the turret, moving tired eyes from the moonlit landscape to the silvered woman behind.

‘My dear Sevína.’ He took in the woman’s embrace, kissing her forehead with a playful roughness. ‘Such fine weather for a rooftop meeting, is it not?’

‘Yes, my friend, fine.’ She patted his cheek affectionately and moved to lean against the edge, looking toward the sea. ‘You do not look well.’

‘Nor do I feel well.’

‘What ails you?’

‘The most ancient of ailments, I am afraid.’

‘How goes the source of this unwellness?’

‘Her health fares fine as always, but she is consumed by matters of the throne.’

‘Oh?’ Her hearing sharpened.

Brennan waved a hand. ‘Her paranoia knows no bounds. Earlier, she demanded to read my personal letters; I will be unable to write to you for some time.’

‘Perhaps she is jealous?’ offered Sevína.

‘Perhaps.’ He paused, remembering Régan’s expression. ‘She is fearsome when so enraged.’

They fell into silence, appreciating the view over Lirna and each other’s rare company.

‘How fares your sister?’ asked Sevína eventually, realising she had forgotten the girl’s name.

‘Good!’ cried Brennan, spirits raised at her mention. ‘It has been years since seeing her in the flesh, but I am in frequent correspondence with her—she is a shepherd now, and will be tutored again in weaving soon.’

‘I would so like to have met her.’ Sevína said with a smile. ‘She was born too late for me to have known her in Ona. Oh, and speaking of—I brought you the book,’ Sevína told him. ‘Though you might be wise—’

‘Please! Yes, it is a risk—but please, I have craved terribly...’

She pained for his hunger, and passed him the Charge of Darkness. ‘I had it rebound with a dull cover, but its contents will be immediately apparent. Keep it far from sight.’

He took it from her and read its opening passage

in the light of the moon, enraptured.

IV
Miggest
1026 YD – October

Summer came early that year. October caved under a wave of heat which dried the land and ignited anxiety in its stewards. Oceans of crops and grassland folded back toward the earth, until the landscape was yellow once more; and then began the fires, few and small at the outset, but spreading and rising as the heat remained day by marching day.

The past months had seen no protrusions in the Duchess' belly and tensions had risen as a result. It was not the first time he had been clung to, nor likely the last. Custodia Galluel had held his eye longer than necessary in recent Beran sessions, and his stomach shrunk at the thought. Vilsonius therefore took the fires as an opportunity to withdraw to Pends, which was choking in smoke from the flames consuming Archoak Forest.

It was there that news came his wife had taken ill.

Vilsonius returned immediately; anti-traders had issued threats over the past week, having discovered Galluel's intention of making Seaton the new base for trade with Lenyol. Galluel and Custodin Màtac had negotiated a number of small-scale exchanges in recent years, and executed them quietly. Now Galluel was making this work known, an offer of hope, but outrage had spread in [xenophobic] minds.

By the time Vilsonius returned, Clarissa had succumbed to the poison, and died. He arranged her funeral and burned at the idiocy of her death: slain for a policy she mildly opposed. In response, Galluel recruited three hundred warriors to her army and sent them to fortify peace. A reward was offered for information leading to capture of the assassins.

November came; the heat retreated. The warriors were tasked to assist in the clean-up.

Word came from the capital that Vilsonius was to put his house in order, and ride north when an overseer had been found. He had at last been summoned.