

Terra Draco

The Fantasy

Chapter 8: Spinning

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Terra Draco (West)



Chapter Eight

Spinning

I
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Gesula, Lenyol

'I don't understand what you're saying, Tàvae!' Ànlisia, alarmed, was throwing supplies of preserved food in a satchel at her sister-in-law's bidding.

'I have made the most terrible discovery and I always felt they were watching me, since I left, and sometimes my books moved overnight—my heart whispered that they'd been in—but why should they? And so I never really feared, never knew—how—how perilous—' Her breath caught in her throat like the clogged cry of nightmares. 'Mitchas will escort me to Miggest at his own peril. There he is now, saddled and packed—' She began pillaging Ànlisia's herb cabinet.

'With no cart? Ride to Delus with no cart? Have you papers? Coin enough? You must leave me some word for your husband—?'

'No!' Tàvae growled viciously, halting the frantic packing of her herb-purse to crush Ànlisia's biceps in a vice grip. 'Not a word to Kengar! Not a *single word*, do I make myself clear?' The snarl in her voice was to be obeyed. 'Make some tale and stick to it.' She discarded Ànlisia. 'Give the parcel to Toran, or Kesia, when the time comes—a year after Kengar takes her, perhaps more—and keep it buried deep from now until. Do not open it yourself.' She snatched the satchel and threw the purse inside, moving toward the front door in the same moment. 'Swear to me you will make a tale for Kengar, though he may not return?'

'Yes, Tàvae.' Ànlisia recognised the dread of parting with danger aloft. 'Please don't go.'

Tàvae recalled Ànlisia's broken months and was almost stopped by pity; but some other drive compelled her, and she pushed through the front door. Ànlisia pursued with speed, suddenly sensing the nature of Tàvae's thoughts, and grabbed her sister-in-law's cloak and arm. 'Whatever your errand, you are right to fear, so say nothing of it to anyone en route. Even when you think yourselves alone.' She eyed Mitchas and whispered: 'Is there anything in your home you want no one to see?'

Tàvae murmured: 'I have destroyed or concealed what I thought I must.' Quieter again, she added: 'There is a vault. Find it, though wait, until next summer at least, if

I do not return.'

She pried free of Ànlisia and met Mitchas outside the gate, waiting with two fine mares. They mounted their rides and were gone almost instantly from the village.

Their haste invited concern from neighbours nearby. Ànlisia ignored the inquisitive expressions turned toward her, retreated into the house, and took up a cushion before the altar. She lit a candle and began intoning a fervent prayer.

II

Kengar returned at last. Seeking his wife, he came to Kesia's house. Kesia listened as Ànlisia explained feebly that Tàvae had departed the previous day with Mitchas, perhaps to Offenure—or Alendae, it was so rushed—on some unknown yet urgent business. Yes, they had used Mitchas' horses. No, they had not given a return date. Yes, Tàvae was fine. No, she hadn't appeared anxious. She had merely asked for some things to stock her herb-purse. Would he like some tea? Not to worry, Mitchas would surely return soon, and have better information.

Kesia knew her mother, and was surprised her uncle bought the false gaiety. Whatever had transpired in Tàvae's departure, it had been serious and distressing. Ànlisia's insistence that it had been otherwise was strange. Yet Kesia decided to aid her mother's flailing excuses, and entered the kitchen from her bedroom.

'Hello!'

Kengar eased his searching expression, and smiled at his niece. 'Kesia. Good morning. I was just asking your mother about Tàvae.'

Kesia planted a kiss on her uncle's cheek. 'She'll be back. Tea?'

'Thank you.'

Kesia went to the hearth. 'Are you here for long?'

'Actually, yes. I have been temporarily relieved of my duties.'

Kesia stopped fitting the kettle. 'You plan to stay?'

He smiled.

'Really?'

'I don't suppose you know anyone seeking a tutor in weaving?'

Kesia grinned.

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Kengar sat on the leaves beneath the oak in his yard, two shivering young women seated before him. The clouds were high, and the sun yet to rise. He leant forward and held his hands against the damp earth, indicating the others do the same.

'This is useful technique for cold mornings such as these,' he told his shaking pupils. 'I want you to draw fire from deep in the earth.'

Kesia and Mellena pressed their hands firmly against the soil; soon a flicker of red

energy rose from the ground—and seeped away within moments.

‘Ah,’ said Kengar, sparking their attention, ‘I gave poor instructions. Concentrate on drawing the energy to rest before you.’

They resumed their concentration; shortly, a small shape – like an echo of burning coals – glistened before them and did not disintegrate.

‘An excellent first attempt,’ commended Kengar. ‘Again.’

Kesia reached over and took Mellena’s hands. They pressed their sandwiched hands down and focused. Energy like a cluster of flames shimmered before them and radiated warmth. They smiled proudly at Kengar, shuffling closer to the heat.

Kengar’s eyebrows were raised. ‘Very clever, Kesia.’

She smirked bashfully.

‘Now your fingers are thawed, would you like to learn to repel small objects?’

Their attention had returned to the fire they had drawn.

Kengar tossed an acorn at Kesia's head.

‘Ow!’

‘I said would you like to learn to repel small objects?’

III

Kesia and Mellena worked with Kengar for days on end, impressing him with what they had learnt and practised over the years. It was not long, however, before their rediscovered zest for weaving was overshadowed by their commitments. Kesia had orders to complete for her Alendic clients; Mellena had the flock to tend; they had lives to lead.

Kengar approached Kesia about setting her carpentry aside for a time to finish her weaving apprenticeship.

‘I would love to. It's just, I'm completing three commissions at the moment, for noble patrons; and if more work comes, I cannot afford to disappoint. Fashion is fickle and I find myself favoured. The winter is ever quiet; you plan to stay, so let us work together then.’

Mellena was similarly apologetic. ‘The heat has been fierce this summer, and the flock needs care. Oran cannot alone tend them from dawn to dusk; we work together. I practice what you taught me in the field, and hunger for more—but the sheep won't last the summer without our careful watch. By autumn I will have time to spare?’

No word had come of Tavae. More days passed; Kengar prepared texts, considered lessons, neatened the house. Copied texts. Refined lessons. Dusted. Weeded.

On the fourth day, he walked down into the village.

‘Kesia, I understand your commitment to your trade. I am sorry it is not the trade you first sought; yet I am proud of your diligence. If you cannot give me your days,

perhaps you will lend me your evenings, and allow me to keep you company in your workshop? History and theory require only your ears.'

A pang sliced Kesia. 'Of course, uncle. You may have my evenings, and visit my workshop; though I work in silence when carving, so you must excuse me then.'

He agreed. 'Something smells nice. What are you cooking, Anlisia?'

'Chicken, carrots, corn. Thyme.'

'Ah, thyme. That's what it is.' He rocked on his heels by the door.

Anlisia and Kesia hid their smiles. 'Please, it is almost done; carve some bread, and eat with us.'

'If you're sure?' Kengar located the bread. 'Perhaps I can bring something tomorrow evening—' he collected the knife— 'I couldn't rouse the motivation to— when it's just myself, you know—' He ceased cutting, suddenly vacant.

Kesia reached an arm out and rubbed his back. 'It's alright. I'm sure it won't be for long.' She kissed his shoulder quickly, then patted it with mild force. 'Chop, chop.'

*

Kengar checked in on Mitchas' wife often, impatient for news. Daldria had heard nothing from her husband either, and joked of their running off together. Kengar did not find this amusing; Daldria quickly apologised, and like Kesia assured him they would return shortly. In his visits, he soon learnt that Mellena and Oran were involved. He expressed his disappointment that he had not seen her apprenticeship through as he had first sworn. Daldria shrugged; Mellena was only eighteen, with ample years for study ahead. However, she regretted that her daughter was not taking the chance to train with him now. 'She is young, and besotted. We rarely see them apart. He truly loves her; I hope she doesn't break his heart.'

Mellena and Oran guided the flock to the jagged country north-east of Gesula for a week at a time. Eventually she promised him time on her days of rest, and to read what he gave her whilst away. And with this he would have to content himself, treading up the hill toward home. Twelve days had passed since his return. Twelve days; he would give her another two, then seek her out. He had been patient.

Sighing as he opened his door, he halted at the wreckage of his home. Raising a lattice of blue protection around him, he stepped forward silently: over turned chairs and smashed pottery, emptied boxes, strewn rugs. Hands raised, he nudged open the library door with his foot, his heart knowing what hope resisted.

It was desecrated.

IV

A blue fairy-wren skipped the length of a fallen tree, perching on the peak of its unearthed roots. He chirped and sung, twitching and spinning on his twig-like legs. Kesia whistled; he replied, then flitted off to impress others in the forest.

In his wake, the song of the forest rose. She listened quietly.

A flock of parrots passed over the canopy, twittering merrily, forcing her eyes open; the sun had reached the treetops, illuminating the white branches of the ghost-trees and basking the forest in the golden light of daybreak. Kesia shivered.

She focused to absorb the energy of those rays which pierced the foliage, drawing it near; and faint specks of light glided over, spiralling her and the boulder she sat upon. She watched them drift for a minute. Exhaling, she released them, and they returned to their original trajectories.

Morning proper came, evening out the light, and still Kesia sat. She was not expected in the workshop until eight—it was presently half-six, at most.

She played with something Kengar had said two evenings prior: that weavers could learn to draw upon each of the seven forces. Concentrating on the moisture of the forest floor, she reached out her right hand, extending her fingers gently, and lifted it; so with it a thousand droplets of water rose from the sodden leaves. Startled, she snapped her hand back to her breast; and the particles fell from the air.

Brushing her hands as though such manipulations left them dusty, she unfolded her legs and turned her mind to Kengar's comment several days earlier. His regret that she had been 'reduced' to taking up carpentry continued to irritate her. Who was he to judge? He was yet to see her work—it was better than good. It was exceptional. It had immediately caught the eye of the wealthier patrons of the Alendae markets. The Duchess of Alendae's own lady-in-waiting had made an order, and promised to show the Duchess upon completion. Did Kengar expect her to pass up the opportunity of meeting and serving the Lady? Of course she intended to return to weaving; but his own undependability had encouraged her to find an alternate path, and she had done, in good faith. And now he expected her to drop it the moment he returned—as though she had merely been idling in the background, and not deliberately crafting her life?

Too annoyed to appreciate the beauty of the forest now, she found her feet and stalked back to the village. Approaching home, she saw her uncle awaited her on her doorstep.

Geared to defend her new trade, her passion waned on noticing the despondence in her uncle's posture. He had turned his head toward his knees, and was clutching his shaggy hair. She instantly feared for her aunt and hastened to a jog.

'Kengar?'

He looked up. A sleepless night creased his face.

'Is she okay?'

He said nothing. She thought he might cry.

'What happened? Tell me,' she touched his shoulders. 'What has happened?'

'The library. Her library.' His voice broke. 'In ruins.' He held her hand, bringing it to his lips, and whispered: 'I don't know where she is, Kesia. I don't know where she is.'

*

Toran exited the library, shaking his head. 'It's a mess.'

Kesia laughed involuntarily. She had asked him to assess the damage—hoping for something more precise.

Toran grinned, feebly. He ran a hand through his hair and lost the smile. 'To my eye, little has been taken. Yet someone sought something.' He looked at Kengar, who turned away. 'Sorry—how can I help if you keep hidden what you know?'

Kesia was surprised at his anger. 'Toran, please.'

Kengar remained with his shoulder to them. 'If you can put it right, I will be grateful, and thank you with coin. I think there is a catalogue.'

'I know!' Toran failed to quell the heat in his voice. 'I have spent years in that room!'

'Toran!' Kesia intervened, taken aback. 'My aunt has been gone almost a fortnight. Kengar is very concerned.'

'He has every reason to be concerned.' Toran fired hostilely at Kengar, who had turned in time to receive it. 'Tàvae demanded that I never return here—I came only as a favour to Kesia. Keep your damn coins; go and find her!'

V

Mitchas cantered into town, gliding past the workshop. Kesia had heard the hooves and moved to the window; on seeing him ride uphill toward Kengar's, she dropped her chisel and raced along in his wake.

She found her uncle's door open, and overheard their exchange.

'What do you mean, gone?'

'We were travelling to Migggest, and set up camp south of Bescon—'

'By Archoak Forest?'

'What remains; it burnt in October. Tàvae asked to continue on, but the sun was falling and the horses spent. When I woke in the morning she was gone.'

'And the mare?'

'Still tethered with my own ride. Her bag was gone also.'

'Why in the name of Lenyol were you travelling to Migggest?'

Kesia stepped forward into the kitchen. Her uncle had sank to the table.

'Kesia,' he scolded, 'Come back later.'

Mitchas looked to her, his hair damp with sweat. A strong odour of horse and heat came from his clothes.

'I saw Mitchas—'

'Come back later, Kesia.'

Kengar stood and escorted her to the front door, closing it behind her. Chastised and upset, she began downhill; Kengar watched to ensure she had no intention of returning before resuming the conversation in the kitchen.

'She needed to get to Delus,' Mitchas explained. 'I was escorting her.'

'And you left no word for me? Did you think I might have been interested to know?'

Mitchas frowned. 'She is not your charge, Kengar. Nor yours to monitor.'

Kengar paled with anger.

'I searched for her in the forest and up in Bescon. I went to the border, which the guards told me none had crossed for weeks. Perhaps she decided to go on alone, crossing the border through the forest—after the fires, it would be simple to traverse.'

Kengar nodded. It was possible; she could travel through the ashes to within twenty miles of the capital. The surviving trees would provide cover.

'I searched all along the route home.'

Kengar nodded again. 'Thank you.'

Mitchas bowed his head and began to take his leave.

'What of your mare?' Kengar inquired.

'I gave her to a farmer in Bescon. Hard times lay ahead for the north.'

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Kesia and Toran walked through the fields, picking at the long grass.

Sadness had settled over Toran when she repeated Mitchas' words. He had suggested a walk to speak privately, yet had said nothing in the two miles they had wandered.

A nearby ash tree broke the sun's dominance of the pasture land, and they went to it for shade.

'Will you tell me your thoughts?' Kesia ventured.

Toran collected a twig. 'Your aunt and uncle... have been having troubles. Her research was something he opposed, I gather because it was dangerous in some way, though I do not know why. She was fearful, and sent me to Alendae to lay low for a time. You said she disappeared by Archoak Forest?'

'So said Mitchas.'

Toran tossed the twig, or the tiny pieces that remained, to the ground. 'Then they took her.'

'Who?'

'It... it's just a feeling. Never mind. Kengar will find her, if she is anywhere to be found.'

'How can you say such a thing?!

'Sorry—sorry. Listen: when I went to Alendae, I took some papers with me, and hid them in your rooms. They appear blank but bear the marks of transcriptions I made for Tàvae. I knew she wanted her work protected, but felt my involvement a risk. I will copy and translate them in time—we must keep them secret for now. I do not know the nature of your uncle's work, but he is well connected, and has the means to locate her.'

Kesia gave a weak smile. 'She'll be fine. Perhaps she went into hiding.'

Toran brightened. 'She may have.'

'Mellena and I have planned a trip to Alendae in the new year. You are welcome to join us?'

'Thank you. I think I will.' They were quiet for a time. 'So, what new tricks have you got to show me?'

Kesia grinned. She pressed her hands together, raising her fingertips to her lips. She listened for the wind; waiting; and hearing it, grasped it, hurling it as she spun, propelling it through the fields to make deep trenches in the grass.

The grazing cattle were significantly less impressed than Toran.

VI

The flock ambled along the droveway, Mellena and Oran following steadily.

It was late afternoon. They were discussing Mellena's unfinished apprenticeship while making their way to the night yards. Oran encouraged her to take up again with Kengar. A pair of Molossus hounds walked before them, occasionally trotting forward to rouse a reaction from the sheep.

'But what of you?'

'I can take another apprentice,' he assured her. 'Weaving is a far more interesting trade—and yields far better coin.'

She made a noise of agreement. 'Steady, Cannu!' The more spirited of the hounds eased away from the stock, glancing sadly at Mellena. Her white coat gleamed in the low light. Mellena would miss her company; and the flock, their dense fragrance, and the scene stretched before her—the tide of hills, rippling out from the Border Mountains standing guard on the horizon.

Oran spoke carefully: 'Perhaps next summer we can consider building a house.'

Mellena broke from her reverie, inwardly startled.

'The shepherd's hut is hardly suited to family life, and returning to my parents' each winter wears thin.'

"Family life"? she echoed.

'Well,' he smiled, 'If we keep on, I suppose there might be more of us in time?'

The hope in his voice struck her with foreboding. She had told him several times of Anlisa's provision of Lover's Friend. She had no reply.

And her silence unsettled him.

'Let us lay such brevity aside,' he hastened. 'Kengar offers you an excellent trade, and a useful one, even in the humble management of sheep and land.'

'Yes,' she smiled.

Encouraged, he moved his shepherd's crook to his right hand and took hers with his left.

'You are right; Kengar has much to offer. When we find you a new apprentice, I will dedicate my time to weaving.'

He squeezed her hand proudly. She returned the pressure, then promptly released her grip.

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Two evenings later, Kesia felt bothered by Mellena's account of the exchange. 'I thought you were entirely taken by him?'

'Until the mention of multiplying, I was.'

This seemed unfair. The two had known each other since childhood, and had been an item for months; of course his affections would turn his mind to the future.

'What were your thoughts before now?'

'Simply to enjoy his company!' She slid the candle-holder toward her, frowning at its flame. 'To let it unfold as it would naturally, allowing time to decide our path.'

'And now?'

Mellena sighed. 'And now, prepare him to go without me, resuming my training with Kengar directly—by month's end. Perhaps time apart will calm him.'

'He isn't blinded by passion. He—he loves you.'

The flame of the candle doubled in size. 'It seems absurd to suggest children and marriage are the natural and immediate outcome of love.'

Kesia recoiled slightly. 'Perhaps not immediate, but certainly natural.'

Mellena turned her eyes to the roof. 'I know most seek marriage after coming of age, and it is fine—' the flame was now four inches high, consuming the wax with speed.

'—Stop it!' Kesia interrupted, fixed on the candle. 'You'll scorch the table!'

Mellena became aware of her actions, relinquishing her grip on the fire. 'Look: Lasair openly wants a husband, and perhaps you have hope of Toran; but I intend to travel, perhaps even to family in Ona. I should like to do so as a weaver.'

Kesia bristled at the remark about Toran. 'I intend to travel, as well you know. I thought we planned to journey together.'

'Our plans have been constantly interrupted, thanks to your uncle.'

Heat rose along Kesia's cheeks. 'You are not alone in your frustrations. I cannot answer for my uncle.'

'No—and nor will he. No explanations!'

'His work drew him away!' Kesia sat back in her chair. 'You are annoyed by Oran, not Kengar or myself. We have no need to argue. And don't burn my furniture.'

'Fine. Sorry.' Mellena slipped into thought, scratching at the unmarked table. 'We should travel again.' Mellena smirked. 'If you aren't cross.'

'Just go easy on Oran.' Kesia exhaled, glad the tension had ebbed. 'You can travel with me to Alendae next month, if you like. I have orders to deliver; we can pillage the markets with the proceeds. I heard you shepherds make pittance.'

Mellena lit up.