

Terra Draco

The Fantasy

Chapter 9: Allies

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Terra Draco (West)



Chapter Nine

Allies

I

May – 1004 YD

Offenure, Lenyol

A young Princess Régan pulled open her door and poked a head into the hallway. Clear!

She slipped through the crack, careful not to open it past the creaking point, and leapt forward on the balls of her feet, silent as a cat.

Lanterns lit the way and she soon reached her parents' chamber. A small servant door was concealed nearby, which she entered, feeling along the dark passage and coming through a tapestry into the chamber itself.

The Custodin and Consort slept soundly in their bed. Régan held her breath, searching—where would he put it?—searching—did Mother just move? There!

The golden circlet, Mâtac's crown, rested on a shelf by the bed. She crouched to the floor and crawled toward it, keeping well below the bed line. Her father turned in his sleep, away from her; Régan's heart pounded; she seized the moment to take the crown, crawling to the safety of the tapestry, and hastening down the hall.

She approached the mammoth doors of the Great Hall, circlet in hand. Quickly checking behind her, and taking a breath of strength, she grasped one of the large brass handles and pushed with all her seven-year-old might.

The door gave way, its hinges cracking loudly in protest. She froze, releasing the door; the noise had ricocheted along the hall. Perhaps she should return to bed. Right now, in case he woke up.

But the Golden Throne shone in the moonlight, resplendent upon its dais. She squeezed through the gap in the door, unable to resist its allure, gliding along the great carpets. She came to the platform and pulled herself up. The golden frame of the throne was cold. Its cushion was hard, and cold also. Checking behind her again, she butted a knee on the edge, and bounced onto the seat.

The Great Hall seemed all the more impressive from the throne, its windows facing it directly. Anyone standing before the throne would be dwarfed slightly, elevated by several feet as it was. She examined the crown, tingling with excitement. It was as smooth as air, though far too large for her; and yet she placed it on her head. Beaming.

She imagined people coming to seek her advice in their troubles, including the proud nobles and their ilk; the downtrodden arriving to beg of her generosity; all kinds coming with special requests; and countless others bringing myriad pieces of their lives, hopes, and grievances to lay before the Throne. They all begin by telling her she was wise, and fair, and beautiful...

'You scheming little reprobate!'

Without warning, a hand locked onto her wrist and tore her from the throne, crown tumbling to the platform. She saw her father, face darkened with rage, and flailed against his grip while he wrenched her into the air; she barely knew what was happening before his hand bore down on her hip, thighs, back, and lower abdomen, while she twisted in space, trying to break free. Each blow stung like a plume of pinpricks. Her elbow and underarm burnt terribly. She tried to whimper, protest, or beg, but was too stretched and pained to conjure proper sounds.

Having taken the edge from his anger, he dropped her to the ground, where she curled into a weeping ball.

'Pick it up.'

She couldn't think, doused in stinging and heat.

Màtac commanded: 'Pick it up, and return it to me.'

The circlet—she looked to see it a few feet away. She crawled over, collecting it with her good arm, and lifted herself to her knees.

'Your crown, Your Majesty. I simply wished to—' she clamped her teeth along her inner cheeks and lip to restrain the burgeoning sob. 'I simply wished to borrow it.'

Màtac took it from her. 'You desire it for yourself.'

'No, Father. Your Majesty.'

'I know your mother sings your praises, but there is darkness in you. A conniving selfishness, and avarice. I will cling to life to keep it from you.'

Régan began to cry in earnest.

'Stop your keening and get back to your chamber. Now!'

II

December – 1026 YD

Delamore, Lenyol

Régan entered the Great Hall of Delamore Castle, greeted by Duke Giodah and his retinue.

She was seated at the head of the table, and a meal was produced by servants. She reported a pleasant journey from Offenure, which she had visited briefly, and remarked on the cooler climate of the south.

When the meal was done, the Duke rose his glass. 'We would like to present Your

Highness with a gift from our city.'

Régan stood as Giodah did, looking to the door. A young warrior entered with a leash, followed quickly by an adolescent Wolfhound.

Its coat was bronze, and its temperament lively. It immediately noticed the Princess and pulled at its lead, eager to explore the newcomer's fragrance. The wide smile Régan bore was high praise for the Duke; forgetting herself, she knelt to the floor and beckoned to the warrior, receiving the hound with relish.

'His name is Gratham.'

'Gratham,' Régan echoed, at which the creature sat and produced a paw. She shook it, laughing: 'It is my great pleasure to meet you.' She rose, allowing him to edge closer and press against her dress.

'He is the produce of our best war-hounds. Cailean, daughter of Commander Cairbre, has trained him herself.' The warrior bowed under the Princess' gaze. 'I requested a creature suited to palace life, but she was firm: only Gratham was fit for the future Custodia. He is not a lap-dog.'

The warrior's voice was deep for her age. 'He will go to war with you and lead the others, should Iulitha invade.'

Silence froze the air of merriment.

'Thank you, Cailean.' The Duke indicated to the doors. 'I will visit the kennels anon.'

Cailean departed, aware she had misspoken terribly.

Resting her eyes and hand on Gratham's wiry head, taking her seat, Régan ordered the room: 'Leave us.'

Her will was done.

'This is the matter you wished to discuss, I presume.'

'Yes, Your Highness. I had intended to handle it with a good deal more tact.'

'You are free to forgo subtlety in our private conversations. Tell me.'

Giodah took a seat adjacent the Princess. 'Two weeks ago, a family of Iulithan farmers came to the castle with a dreadful story. They sought protection. All I could offer was a room and provisions in Delamore Prison, with the option of being returned to their homeland by my guards, until I had procured instruction from the Throne. They readily agreed.'

'And what did my father say?'

Giodah fell heavy with apprehension.

'You feared he would banish or execute them, and sought my advice instead.'

'Yes, Your Highness.'

It was not the Throne's place to protect foreigners, nor should a precedent be set. Yet mistreating those seeking asylum would only be to Albus' advantage. Mâtaç would not understand this. 'If they slipped past and found refuge with other farmers, we might let it pass. Appealing to the castle was their mistake. They must return;

though they may find a home beyond the town for their children.'

'Yes, Your Highness. My guards will work to escort them safely across the border.'

Régan nodded, feeling the soft texture of Gratham's ear. 'Tell me what tales they brought from Iulitha?'

Giodah sighed. 'It may be more easily told with wine.'

*

Custodin Albus of Iulitha was waging war against his own. Members of the peerage had risen against him twice over the decades, challenging his rule—for his older brother Euan had been the rightful heir when their mother passed. Euan had conceded to Albus, then drowned at sea, and soon a young Albus was coronated in Athere. Those who cried foul and challenged him came to a bad end, and despite the coups receding into the distance, Albus continued to persecute those who plotted against him—real or imagined. Lands and towns surrounding supposedly treacherous nobles were also punished, and it was from one such town that the farmers had fled, travelling on foot over the Lenyol border. Albus himself rode with his warriors to carry out the punishment, as he sometimes did, and terror had descended on the peasants. It was said his sword thirsted for justice.

Régan, versed in history, recognised his type. Spoilt in youth, soured in adolescence at being second-born, then taking by force what he desired and defended it violently. Masquerading as keeper of justice, he partook of raids; and in this Régan saw a man who loved battle and conflict above all.

Régan would relate the account to her mother as a dark and exciting tale from the south, and let it pass thus to her father. She knew no Iulithan nobles, and had no means of procuring further information; she had Duke Giodah's word that he would send a messenger with any further news. And so the following afternoon she departed, carrying the story to the capital and dictating letters to Brennan so her allies in Court would understand her continual insistence of strengthening their warriors.

III

December – 1026 YD

Delus, Miggest

Delus Palace contained a wing for Beran members to reside. It was here that Vilsonius had resided for the past few weeks, sharing a corridor and Solar with the respectable High Commander Mahon. Within days of writhing under Galluel's hungry gaze, he found himself locking his chambers at night, checking the room for secret servant entrances—of which there were thankfully none.

High Counsellor Dalan had been spooked by Clarissa's death, and quarrelled with Custodia Galluel over the threat anti-traders posed to the Court. She dismissed his

concerns as cowardice, stressing the importance of procuring goods from Lenyol in the wake of October's fires. Still he opposed her; her patience quickly waned. When December arrived, so too did his public resignation, and on the same day Galluel offered the role of High Counsellor to Vilsonius himself.

Naturally he accepted, and insisted at the first that Sevína be named High Priest Arnaud's successor. Arnaud, confined to bed, had barely spoken or eaten in weeks, and all knew his end was near. Sevína, who was present, was taken back; she had given the matter unrelenting thought and yet remained undecided, far preferring the safety of her obscurity. Vilsonius was certain her irresolution would dissolve under pressure, and so it did, for she conceded; and so in a single day he had won himself both a second title in the Beran and a firm ally therein.

Little in life comes without cost, however. When Sevína and Mahon left them alone in the Great Hall, she invited—that is, commanded—him to dinner on the roof that evening to discuss his new role. The afternoon passed with excess speed, and he climbed the steps with a meekness he hated in himself.

A velvet table had been set, and he quailed at the candles and black lilies. How little her low neckline served its intent; how keenly he thought of the lock on his door.

'My Lord Vilsonius,' Custodia Galluel greeted him, drained glass in hand. 'Thank you for joining me.'

'My Lady,' Vilsonius returned, kissing her hand.

'The most intense array of purple,' she awed at the sky, invitationally.

'Just beautiful,' he enthused, beckoning a servant with his forefinger before twitching his upturned hand to ensure his glass was filled.

'You drew out Sevína so proficiently today, Vilsonius. I have known her to be Arnaud's best successor for many years, but lacked the ability to convince her. How well you did to persuade her.'

'She is, as you say, the best successor. There is a proverb in Iulitha: "The louder the caw, the smaller the gall." Her reluctance is meritorious.'

Galluel smiled. 'And as for yourself?'

'*Eiridh tonn air uisge balbh...*' he answered without thinking.

The Custodia rested her head on her palm.

Vilsonius cleared his throat. "A wave will rise on quiet waters."

The Custodia had not heard the phrase, but concealed her nescience with a thoughtful nod. 'I had put more stock in Dalan, to be frank. I am thankful it came ahead of the real test—cowering into submission at the mere suggestion of rebellion. Imagine him when they beat at the city gates.'

'I also expected firmer resolve.'

'Yes. Resolve. A quality I find myself needing to model for others.'

Vilsonius shifted. 'Lord Mahon is not lacking in that regard. He is faithful indeed,

and has little shortage of praise for Your Majesty.'

Galluel reclined in her seat. 'He has been a true asset across the years. Come! Let us begin before darkness comes.' She clapped to the servants, who anchored the table with nourishment.

IV

Spring – 1024 YD

West of Waylin, Lenyol

The sheep rotated in their pens like woollen whirlpools. Their bleating was echoed by the bellowing of cattle from their yards.

Custodin Màtac surveyed the movement around him, of carriages riding in, shepherds and drovers guiding their stock, dozens of servants tending the tents, and a subdued rainbow of personages tarrying this way and that.

'My Lord,' the Countess of Riverton quietly murmured, touching Màtac's arm and nodding toward the north-east. The Custodin turned to follow her gaze, the Baron of Waylin oscillating with him.

Mounting the horizon was a caravan of carriages, Lenyolan in design—the quiet nature of the trade precluded the use of Miggastian carriages. Squads of Miggastian warriors bookended the procession.

When Countess Edalene gestured to Lady Régan, the Princess stepped beyond her tent. Régan's inclusion in the event had been orchestrated by High Priest Arnaud in a bid to ease tensions between father and daughter. On parting, he kindly yet firmly instructed Régan to do nothing but 'observe amicably'. The first she could do, and had done well.

She observed Màtac's irascibility and High Commander Boadicae's steely silence; the removal of flags and change into plain carriages at Alendae; their departure in the dead of night and addition of warriors to their party; the arrival of High Trademaster Faolan, an architect; the flocks and herds awaiting them in Waylin; the aggressive moving on of peasants and farmers who wondered why so large a convoy was travelling so far north.

Régan felt Brennan's absence more than she imagined—she had been ordered to leave him behind, and had no companions in the journey to Alendae. Countess Edalene was a very welcome sight in Alendae Palace. Edalene was the closest thing Régan had to a cousin, for both called the Duke of Alendae 'uncle'. The Countess was only a little older than the Princess and was similarly educated, titled, and wise to the reality of life beyond Offenure. Infinitely more diplomatic than her would-be cousin, Edalene said the correct things to His Royal Highness; truths which might cause discomfort for the Custodin she saved for Princess Régan. The Princess was

quickly informed of how close Miggest had come to disaster and how deeply opposed certain nobles were to Mâtac's negotiations.

*

For the past two years, Mâtac had corresponded with Lady Galluel through intermediaries and messengers. He had not met the Miggestian Custodia, and awaited her arrival with some tension.

The Miggestian warriors stopped a hundred yards from the site, as has per arrangement. Galluel's carriage was drawn up to the main tent. A man in colours stepped out, offering assistance to the door. A fine hand took it, and the sovereign of the northern region stepped out.

Lady Galluel took in the scene with large and intelligent eyes. Above her warm grey eyes, a crown was set in an arrangement of braids adorned with a single black rose; below, an ebony gown artfully embroidered with traditional knots complimented her frame. Her dark brows and wide lips gave her rounded face symmetry, and for all he had heard it was a surprise to the Custodin that she was uncommonly beautiful.

The decorated man, High Counsellor Dalan, helped Galluel to the ground and walked before her to Mâtac—distinguishable by his golden circlet and gilded breastplate.

Dalan bowed deeply. 'Your Majesty, may I present Custodia Galluel of Miggest.'

Lord Mâtac bowed also. 'Your Majesty.'

Lady Galluel courtesied, holding a hand to her chest. 'Custodin Mâtac.'

'If you will accompany me to the tent, we have refreshments and lounges to revive you from your journey.' He protruded his elbow invitationally, into which she graciously looped a ringed hand.

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Reclining slightly into the lounge, Galluel quietly assessed the Custodin. The veins of his cheeks shone from chronic drinking, and his belly ballooned. Permanent folds on his brow suggested a poor temperament. The length of their negotiations, she quickly surmised, were a symptom of detachment rather than hard bargaining. This did not commend him in her estimation; starvation had prowled her subject's periphery before rain had come.

'It is an honour to finally make your acquaintance,' Mâtac was saying.

'Yes,' Galluel replied, leaning forward. 'At last I have a face for your good name.'

Mâtac was flattered. 'This is my daughter and heir, Princess Régan.'

Galluel stood to receive Régan's curtsy.

'And is this your cousin?' Galluel inquired, indicating to Edalene. 'You look very much alike.'

'This is Countess Edalene of Riverton,' Régan answered, hardening at the insincerity she spied in Galluel's eyes. 'She is the daughter of my unblooded uncle's

brother.'

Galluel smiled very slightly. 'You are Duke N oe's niece?'

Edalene nodded in surprise.

'I am sorry to hear of your father's passing. I am sure your title is small consolation, as mine was to me.'

Edalene spoke quietly. 'Your Royal Highness is very kind.'

A small moment passed. 'I suggest the Custodia and I enjoy our meal with the High Counsellors, and work through the formal elements of our assembly. What say you, Your Majesty?'

'That would be fine indeed. Let us have the business side done with, and break bread.'

'Excellent. Thank you, Countess. Thank you, Princess.'

The ladies made to exit. M atac knew R egan had intended to confuse the Custodia; before the tent flap closed he shot her a look of fire, and in the open air R egan flinched at her own indiscretion. Edalene pinched her harshly; R egan swore under her breath; and yet in a quick glance between them it was clear neither trusted Lady Galluel.

V

January – 1027 YD

The Crossroads, Lenyol

The new year came, as it always did, with the beginning of January. The heat had barely abated since the October fires and the soil was beginning to cake.

It was over such cracked earth that Kesia alternated driving her cart with Mellena and Toran. They had departed Gesula as the light had come, and it was now midday. The Crossroads could be seen as they passed over the final highland crest, and they immediately noticed a plethora of colourful tents flanking the village.

'Wanderers!' Mellena and Kesia breathed.

They drew toward the settlement. The Wanderers' flags rippled in the breeze, bearing their symbol of the seven-spoked wheel.

A young trio of olive-skinned boys approached quickly, clapping their drums and tugging strings of beads. 'Bracelets! Anklets! Necklaces! You would like to buy for your women?'

Toran, guiding the cart, laughed. 'Let us find a place to stop.'

The cart was placed where a pair of aged Wanderer women directed them. 'We protect your beautiful things, and care for your mare. Please, come in; these boys will guide you.'

And so they went with the boys, each taken by the hand and shown loops of painted beads while walking into the heart of the Wanderers' portable village. To satisfy the boys, Toran purchased violet bracelets, and they were unleashed at the periphery of a small crowd. A play was beginning; they exchanged coins for tickets, and sat on cushions embroidered with the Wanderer symbol.

'This is a tale of water,' a woman announced to the crowd. 'From the region of Miggest.' There was some negative murmuring from the audience. 'We do not have your prejudice here!' she scorned. 'Many of us were born in that region, and I see here a woman who is the Black Dragon's stock!' She indicated to Mellena, who blushed as eyes turned toward her.

'Let us begin. Hold your seats, and raise your chins; though this is not a happy story, it is one I would like to share.'

The cast appeared on stage bearing blue reams of cloth, trees, corn stalks, dolls, and projections from a capable weaver.

It was the mid-900s. The rain had begun to fall; and it fell, and fell. The creeks rose; the rivers broke their banks; still it fell, and the land could take no more. Crops drowned, trees swept away, and villages were ruined. So few knew how to move in water that hundreds were taken by the flood. And as the rain slowed, disease and starvation continued to eat the population. The Line was hardened by the Custodin of Lenyol's warriors, Miggestian messengers turned sharply away, Lenyol's gates guarded. And the Candle ignited in all the temples, a rope in the beating current. The Miggestian Interpreter, Murran of Yardford, came to the capital with twelve Black Dragons. He set them to work with dragonfire, gently purging the city of damp, channelling fire and growth to heal those he could. More dragons were summoned from the mountains and sent to the four corners of the region—a hundred at least, people later said, when all reports came to be recorded by scribes of those events. The rot was stopped, and the hero remembered always. Never had so many dragons been seen across the land; never had the people's belief been so roused and amplified. And never would they forget how the Lenyolite turned their backs before the dragons came.

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The final scene ended well into the afternoon, when the hot sun had settled to scorch captivated foreheads. The woman announced that the dancing would begin at dusk, and visitors were welcome to stay with the troupe under the stars. A sweet drink called meá was offered for sale and after so glum a tale sold well. Roasted

potatoes and corn were peddled on trays, and the three deserted their hopes of making Alendae that night.

The sun set and music began. The Wanderers began to congregate and dance, teaching their guests odd swooping movements in their peculiar version of the Western tongue. They also spoke the Eastern language, but to each other their words were in Gaelge, and Toran succeeded in translating for his friends.

Trilingual and interracial, the Wanderers were a people who moved throughout the seven regions. Theirs was only one such clan—how many there were in total was uncertain, for sometimes smaller groups came together while larger groups eventually split. Believing all dragons sacred, their holy text contained only the four books common to all regions: Seamai, Seachd, Driscoll, and Alverdias. Yet they knew the Monairc books of each region, and shared these legends and fables across the lands through their plays.

Kesia took Mellena's hand and together they explored the crafts in candlelit stalls. In a jewellery stall an array of brass pendants were displayed: hundreds of knots, region symbols, element symbols, dragons, legendary faces and more. Both purchased a number of charms and exited, locating Toran nearby.

A young woman of perhaps sixteen stepped forward. 'Orla min Nessa *is ainm dom*,' she announced with an extended hand.

Toran shook it, as did the others. 'I am Toran,' he answered, 'and these are my friends Kesia—' who smiled— 'and Mellena.' Mellena curtsied. 'This is Orla.'

The girl's clothes, while different and more eccentric than the already peculiar fashion which was common among her people, seemed to be of a higher quality than her companions; there was also an air of good breeding in her movements.

'I am Orla,' she imitated his accent with flirtatious eyes. 'I heard you speak our language. Where are you from?'

'Gesula.'

'This tiny place?' She gave him a sceptical look. 'But where do you learn my language?'

'In Gesula.'

'Gesula is only for the very clever,' Mellena interjected jokingly. 'You need to pass a test before you live there.'

'*Really?*' Orla's eyes grew large. 'I never heard of such a thing! Perhaps this is not fair. You must have done very well: I think Lenyolites do not like Miggestians very much?'

'Only very clever ones.'

Toran palmed his forehead and apologised. '*Tá mé buartha*. My friend is a smart-arse.'

'I like smart-arse.' Orla winked at Mellena. 'I like your friend. Come with me, I show you some things, then we will find a fire and have a good time.'

*

They found Kesia's cart the following morning—closer to afternoon after dallying in their haze—and piled in. Toran had stalled and lingered, but Orla had not reappeared. It was time to leave. They thanked and paid the elderly ladies and began to depart.

'I think I will stay on when we pass by again,' Toran remarked. 'Reading and writing Gaeilge is one thing, but speaking it—it's quite another.'

Mellena glanced at Kesia. Kesia gripped the reigns and kept her eye on the road.

'*Dia dhuit ar maidin!*' A white mare awaited them at the main road, captained by Orla in riding gear. 'You are very, very slow to move.'

Toran and she met eyes.

And such was Orla min Nessa added to their party.

VI

January – 1027 YD

Gesula, Lenyol

Ànlisia woke in the dark of night to the familiar scrape of her front door grinding against stone. She drew a flame to light her candle and made toward the front of the house, certain Tàvae had returned.

Candlelight could be seen through cracks in the kitchen door. Ànlisia whispered, 'Tàvae? Are you alright?' as she opened it.

Her breath evaporated and fear flooded her mind. A hand smothered her mouth, its nails long and brown. Its ghastly eyes—amethyst, short-lidded, and stern—speared into the heart of her deepest terror.

'The scribe Tàvae has entrusted a parcel to you. Retrieve it.'

So struck with doom she could barely stand, Ànlisia nodded, attempting to steer her breathing from hyperventilation.

The Seathedai released its grip.

Ànlisia sank to the floor and crawled to the table, pushing the chairs and carpets aside to reveal a small trap door.

She struggled to find the finger-hold. Fumbling, she at last hooked a forefinger and lifted; a stone-lined pit lay beneath the wood, nursing Tàvae's parcel. She drew it up onto her lap, gasping, for the Seathedai knelt over her. It extended a hand and she handed the package over.

It stood, untying the string, leafing open the wrapping and dropping it to the floor with quiet precision. It stepped toward the darkened hearth and placed a palm on the bricks surrounding it—the grate flickered—the logs whistled—and the lot opened into flames. It began examining the pages. Ànlisia recognised Tàvae's hand; but as the Seathedai lifted the sheets she spied a slightly different script—one she immediately guessed to be Toran's. The Seathedai continued to assess the pages, and she prayed it was blind to this detail.

The fire highlighted the creature's sage-coloured and flecked skin. Its silken hair had the dark green of moss, and draped long over its narrow frame, the height of which was no greater than her own.

It looked sharply at Ànlisia.

'Tàvae stole these words.' He crouched and placed the transcriptions in the fire. 'Your kind considers the world its own.'

The papers caught and brightened the room. The Seathedai plucked falling shreds and fed them back to the fire. 'You cannot read our language. You do not know what she sought. Yet you knew danger pursued her,' he oscillated and slid forward on his haunches to grasp her chin with his claw-like nails, 'and were right to fear.'

Quivering words came faintly: 'What have you done with her?'

'I trust you know the fate of non-believers.'

Blood receded; eyes lost focus; muscles slumped. The Seathedai broke her fall by catching the collar of her gown. He flipped the curled carpets to their right place with a burst of wind ushered from beneath the front door, and lowered her to the floor.

He returned to the fire as Ànlisia swam in the haze of shock. Again he pinched fallen shreds skirting the grate and returned them to the flames, adding a log. Soon the text was devoured in full; soon Ànlisia overcame her collapse.

The Seathedai collected the string and coverings from the floor, and gave these also to the hearth.

It walked then to the door. 'You will not speak of this night. We are listening.'

It let itself out. Anlisia waited... she scrambled to the door, bolting it and all the shutters. She then crawled into the food store, locked herself in, and there she remained until morning.

When the sun had firmly risen, she flew from the house in search of a strong house-hound.

VII

January, 1027 YD

Lirna, Lenyol

Brennan was folded by his window, fixed on the Charge of Darkness. A subterranean restlessness had been rising in him since receiving it; this was his fifth reading. Régan's recognisable footfalls—quick, rhythmic, determined—echoed along the corridor. He slipped the text beneath his cushion.

The Princess came into his room without knocking, closing the door behind her. He tensed at her expression.

'Lady Ione has informed me that some in the court have commented on our familiarity, and the proximities of our chambers. Lenyol help whoever distributed that information.'

His breathing halted.

'You will return to Offenure,' she sighed, 'and work in the castle for a time.'

He stood, bowing his head. 'Of course.'

Régan frowned. 'What is this?' She crossed the room to his seat, brushing him aside to collect the ill-concealed book. She split it open, read of its pages, and focused grimly on his face.

There was a prolonged moment of silence.

'I have a friend in Ona.' Perhaps avoid mentioning Sevína's gender. 'It was a gift.'

Régan continued to stare.

'Perhaps you understand the spirit has yearnings of its own. It is for my own heart, for inward nourishment.'

'For your own heart,' she echoed, folding the scripture. 'I did not know you had connections in Miggest.'

'Only the one, from my very early years.'

She passed the text back to him. 'It would be best not to keep this. Spend the evening with Fiona. She will take your place when you depart in the morning. Try to communicate to her what "work" means, if you can.'

'Yes, Your Highness.'

She allowed the formality to stand, and took her leave.

*

'Forgive my summoning,' Brennan opened when Sevína appeared on the rooftop. He halted. 'What has become of you?'

Sevína bore the shorn head of adherents, and was clad in draping black robes. 'I have returned to the faith. The Custodia has asked something of me. I would have refused, but the wind is so dry. The rains will not come this year.'

Brennan burned with the eruption of sudden and profound craving. 'Take me with you. To Miggest, tonight.'

Sevína stared, his hands now clasping her own.

'I am being sent to Offenure. The noble rumour mill has finally turned its listless blades to the Princess' bedchamber. I am being temporarily removed from her service. Ill will come of it; I beg you, take me with you. I want nothing other than to study scripture. Perhaps one day make for Mount Réimeach itself.'

Sevína concealed her shock at the change in him. His face was raw with zeal. 'I cannot. High Priest Arnaud will cross the Bridge in a matter of days, and I am marked to take his place. I will come for you when I can. Please, Brennan—do not fear. I will collect you as soon as I may.'

'If I summon you, do not forsake me.'

'No, my beloved friend, I shall not. I need your love in these changing times.'

He embraced her. 'I will be in Offenure by the week's end. Find me there.'