

Tree of Life

Part I



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Chapter 1

A Stolen Treasure

Against the blowing wind a young woman travelled through the night, nothing more than a thin shadow blending into the oppressive darkness. She was enveloped in a heavy cloak, clutching a small child to her like stolen treasure. With no moon or starlight to brighten the countryside, the only bastion in the encircling blackness was a small wayside inn. Dim light spilled out from its windows, and the smell of beer hung heavy in the air, along with the rich scents of roasting meats. As Daenara drew nearer she could hear raucous male laughter.

The brawling voices died as Daenara flung the door open. At several plain, unvarnished tables were scruffy travellers, and, standing behind the long unpolished counter, a stout man paused from cleaning an old mug. She could feel their displeasure at her intrusion, along with their lewd curiosity.

“Well, don’t just stand there letting in all the cold, woman!” One of the seated men said. “Shut the god-damned door!”

As she made her way toward the counter, she could feel their eyes follow her, not hostile, but intrusive. Her son, with his arms tight about her neck, did not once rouse his tired face but clung to his mother in a way that saddened rather than warmed the heart to see. A certain air of neglect and weariness, a sense of lost station, hung over her. She kept, therefore, a cautious reserve.

Only one other woman was present, a short, buxom person who was likely the innkeeper’s wife. She was busy over a hot

oven. The air was filled with greasy smells. The innkeeper, resting on one elbow, bent over the counter toward Daenara. He abruptly offered her a meal and a room. She accepted only the room and a bed, much too weary to eat.

The inn-keeper charged her seven gold pieces. Daenara frowned at this, but did not argue the point. She placed the money on the inn-keeper's thick, fleshy palm, taking a large iron key in return. Without glancing back, she headed toward the small, shadowy staircase that disappeared round the corner. The men called to her, asking her to let the boy sit and drink with them a while. She ignored their entreaties and disappeared up the stairs as quickly and soundlessly as she could. Not till she had reached her room and fastened the door did she relax and set Deacon down. The room was sparse and uninviting with a small bed, a small table, and a wash basin, but it was warm.

She stripped off both their heavy cloaks and retrieved a chunk of herbed bread, neatly wrapped in cloth, from her bag. Meanwhile the little one surveyed his surroundings, clinging all the while to his mother's dress. He looked dazed and wide-eyed, turning back to his mother, desiring to be held again. He raised his arms to her, but she instead placed a piece of bread in his hand, urging him to eat.

His face sombre and serious, he ate without enthusiasm. Daenara partook of nothing herself. Her gaze settled on the small child who seemed like a little stranger to her, he was so quiet. She thought of the man they had fled, and she suddenly felt exhausted and ready to cry. She gently brushed the crumbs from Deacon's mouth. "Had enough?" she asked, in a voice tight with subdued emotion. Deacon nodded, handing back the half-chewed bread.

They soon crawled into bed. Snug against his mother, Deacon fell asleep immediately. She, however, lay in wretched wakefulness, her mind full of anguished thoughts. The bed was hard, the drab bedclothes coarse and heavy with dust. Her whole body ached, and she wished to roll over to get comfortable, but she dared not move, not wanting to wake Deacon, who even in his sleep clung fiercely to her. Nerve-worn, she could

feel herself flinch inwardly with each burst of muffled laughter that came from downstairs.

Lying rigidly on her back, she felt an ache in her breast. Silently she wept out all the sorrow that had pressed against her heart these past months, her only comfort the small, fragile weight that lay bundled warm in her arms. Soon her son's steady breathing lulled her into sleep.

When she woke it was morning. Deacon's arm was slung loosely over her neck, his head turned away from her toward the wall. At moments like this she felt her heart would burst for love of him. He was so sound asleep that he didn't stir when she gathered him up. She was anxious to get to the Imperial city. There they would be safe.

Downstairs was empty, save for the few stragglers who had passed out at their tables in drunken stupors. With Deacon cradled fast in her arms, Daenara passed silently and unnoticed. Again they ventured out onto the road.

The day was almost spent by the time they reached the outskirts of the Imperial city. Scattered over the gentle, green slopes were stands of trees filled with game. No villages were along the way, but they passed an increasing number of small homesteads and farms.

Soon the sun began to die behind mountains thickly covered in fir trees. Fortunately the paved road provided easy footing. By nightfall they had reached the Angora river; the river extended in the same direction as the road, all the way up to the city gates. Daenara was weary, but her step was strong with the knowledge she had almost reached the city. She could see two brilliant flames burning at the front gates like welcoming beacons. She could also see the homestead and stables further up by the water's edge. The dim friendly glow gave her a sense of returning home.

A husky male voice suddenly cut through the dark and made her stop, her heart caught in her throat. "Evening, citizen," said the hulking city guard, stepping out from the shadow of a tree. "The gates to the city are closed at night. Don't despair. There is an inn not far back. It'll suit you and your little one just fine."

"I know the gates are closed. I was hoping you could make an exception and have them opened for me?" Daenara said. She was desperate to see her brother, and informed the guard of his high position in the Imperial legion. "Thaemon is his name. You perhaps know him?" she asked eagerly. The guard's stern face softened.

"I know him," he said in a gruff, but friendly voice. "Go on. Mention my name to the men at the gates, and they'll let you in."

Daenara used his name and instructions, and was supremely relieved when the men admitted her. Even at night people wandered the handsome streets of the Imperial. Soft light issued from flames in open caskets and lit the streets all through the night. Every so often she saw a guard patrolling.

The city was divided into three districts: the markets, the residential, and the elven gardens. The latter was by reputation the most beautiful of all city gardens. Many years ago, when the Imperial was still young, elves had constructed the gardens as a gift for those humans who had fought bravely alongside them, though no elves actually lived there. Only the wealthiest could afford to reside in them, and only by invitation could one enter.

Daenara went directly to her brother's fine home. Mindful not to sound too alarming, she rapped on the door and waited expectantly, huddled with Deacon not so much to keep warm as to suppress her nervous shudders. Presently she heard quick, shuffling steps. The door opened, and Berrel, a short, well-rounded woman, stood in an inquiring manner.

The matronly servant looked out from under thinly plucked brows. She gazed at Daenara without recognition, before she exclaimed in a surprised and reproachful tone, "Daenara! Good heavens, child, did you walk all this way? Come in, come in. Let's get you out of the night air."

Somehow, among the small woman's flustered attentions, Daenara managed to catch sight of Thaemon. Upon the sight of his sister, his face at once became serious and questioning. Behind him, huddled in the doorway, Thaemon's wife shared her husband's anxious interest.

Daenara set the little one down, but no sooner had she done so than he turned back with raised arms in mute appeal. She gathered him back up, and he clung to her neck sullenly. Thaemon placed a considerate hand round his sister's shoulder. The other rested on the back of the boy's head.

"Where is Luseph?" he asked. "Has he been unkind to you?" Thaemon assailed her with questions. In his fierce perplexity all considerate thought for the travellers seemed lost. Finally his wife, Clara, placed her hand on his arm, and spoke kindly to Daenara.

"You must be tired. Come rest a moment." Her voice was soft and pleasant.

In the dwelling-room the two women sat opposite one another in comfortable chairs. Deacon sat, heavy and dozy, bundled in his mother's lap. Thaemon stood over by the fireplace. His face was solemn, and his eyes were fixed on his sister. He was a tall, proud man, respected by all who knew him for his integrity and inexhaustible kindness. Nobility, pride, and discipline all marked his features.

Clara also was well respected. She was a delicate woman with a proud bearing. With a steady, well-practiced hand she poured out the tea, placing the cup on a side table by Daenara. The room was richly furnished and exceedingly still and quiet. Clara and Thaemon had two children, a boy and a girl. Cedrik was Deacon's age, while Brielle was two years younger. Daenara knew they had already been put to bed.

With languid caresses she continued to brush Deacon's hair back from his face, hoping to lull him to sleep. Clara asked Deacon, "Is there something you would like, perhaps some warmed milk?"

By way of answer he turned inward, and buried his face as though the offer had offended him. He would not let her touch him.

The two women exchanged bleak smiles.

"He's tired," Daenara said.

"I've got water heating," Berrel said, coming to the doorway. "You can have yourself a nice hot bath in a moment." She stood with her hands on her ample hips. Daenara thanked her, then looked up and caught her brother's troubled gaze set on her.

"Have you been to see Mother yet?" he asked.

"No. I came directly here," she replied.

"Better to wait, I think, before mentioning this to her."

The mother they shared lived further out from the Imperial in a small homestead. Thaemon's father had died years before, while Daenara had never known hers; he had left when she was only a baby. Thaemon's father had raised her as his own.

Drawing a long, considering breath, her brother seemed about to resume interrogations; when Daenara said in an imploring voice, "Perhaps it is best we retire for the evening?"

"Yes, yes. You are tired," said Thaemon. "Get to bed. We shall talk more in the morning."

Warmed by hot baths and comfortable in fresh changes of clothes, the travellers settled into a soft bed. The room was spacious and pleasant in temperature. Two glass doors, covered with light drapes, led out to a balcony that overlooked the paved streets. Daenara had often stayed here with Luseph on their visits. Now the room seemed foreign and empty. Beneath the blankets she bundled Deacon warm to her breast.

Downstairs the next morning the house was alive and buzzing with excitement. Thaemon's two children were more than welcoming. In the kitchen Clara was preparing breakfast. It was a spacious, meticulously clean, and well organized kitchen; shelves lined the walls with large containers of spices and baskets filled with vegetables. The children had taken their place at the table, exerting all their energies on Deacon, who was entirely incommunicable. Brielle, like a little mother at two, commenced stroking his face and kissing his cheek in an officious, though well-intended manner, while Cedrik offered him a variety of good things to eat, as though he were a baby or some small animal.

While Deacon was engaged in timidly fending off the advances of his cousins, Thaemon took Daenara aside into his study. He frowned when he saw the strange burn mark round his sister's wrist; it was as though a red-hot bracelet had seared the flesh.

"How did you come by this?" he asked, taking her wrist to examine it.

"His hand," Daenara said, suppressing a shudder. "I could not tell you what shone in his eyes."

"Daenara," Thaemon said. "This is magic." She nodded gravely, understanding not the full extent and nature of this calamity, but enough to consider Luseph had put himself and his family in serious danger. Uttering a vicious oath, Thaemon let her hand drop, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Tell me everything," he said, slumping into his chair.

Daenara remained standing. She knew little, but told him what she could: that an odd man had come to the door of their home one morning, and that he brought a letter for Luseph. From the moment Luseph received it, he shut himself up in his room for days at a time, not so much as seeing the sun. He had become strange and secretive, and frightfully cold toward herself and Deacon. Then one evening when she ventured into his study he turned on her in sudden violence. She took Deacon from him the same night.

"It is an unnatural thing to steal a child away from his father," said Daenara. "I know not if it is a crime I have committed, but there is no other means. We must not stay with him; Deacon must never breathe the atmosphere of that cursed house. It has been a burden to come here with this most unnatural misfortune. Whole days and nights I have considered what should be done, but there was nothing save confiding in you. Next to our mother you stand as my most faithful, truest friend."

She had spoken with such nervous energy that now the false strength went from her utterly. She sank down into a chair and closed her eyes. Thaemon leaned forward, gently took her hand, and kissed it. Her tears overflowed, and she wept in silence for some minutes.

Thaemon watched her.

"Do you know what the letter was in relation to?" he questioned at last, "or who it was from?"

Daenara shook her head.

Thaemon insisted she stay with him until the matter was sorted. Gratefully, she consented, though she didn't know what he meant by "sorting" the matter, and feared he didn't know himself.