

Tree of Life

Part I



Tree of life

Part I



E. F. Daniels

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To my family, with gratitude and love



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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, not understanding 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.

Chapter 2

A Shadow Of Doubt

The Imperial university of magic rose spire-like towards the sky. A pretentious structure, the most beautiful in the city, it contained the greatest collection of knowledge and power in all of Gonriel, being home to the council leaders, a group of twelve powerful mages who ruled the vast lands as they saw fit. There had been under their ruling peace for many years, and any conflict now seemed only to reside in the council itself. Travon, the arch mage, ever tightened his grip on the other members whether they willed it or not, gaining greater control and pushing heavily toward a dictatorship under his rule. It was not to be had.

Here Thaemon took his concern over Luseph. Crimes with the use of magic were punished harshly. He was not able to speak directly to the council members, but the steward of the guild told him the matter would be looked into. However, Thaemon got the impression they thought it a small priority. He would be left to safeguard his sister and her child from harm.

Settled in a bed next to Cedrik's, Deacon lay holding the hand of his mother, who was crouched down by the bedside. Through the dark he looked at her with uncertain eyes. "I don't want to stay here," he said in a hesitant voice, almost a plea. Daenara knew he wanted to go home.

"It will be all right," she said in a weak, comfortless tone, keeping her voice hushed, so as not to wake Cedrik sleeping untroubled. "It will be all right," she repeated to Deacon more confidently. The gentle pressure from his hand crushed her inside. He looked as if he dared not move, like a child frightened of the dark. "Go to sleep now," she said, brushing back the hair from his face, but his blue eyes stayed opened, wide and unhappy; they were asking her, waiting for her to make it all better. Leaning over, she kissed his solemn cheek and tasted a salt tear on her lips, whether his or her own, she could not tell.

The following days were quiet and uneventful, but Daenara had an irrepressible urge to take Deacon and run. She told herself she was anxious for no reason, that he could not hurt them here, but she began to suffer from vague, half-forgotten dreams that left her shaken. These dreams had even begun to haunt her in her waking hours, wisps of dark visions; smoke, blood, fire. Faceless men wailed in pain and agony. Deacon cried out for her.

After those frightful images Daenara woke with a sharp breath. In the dark she became conscious of a little form lying beside her. Sometime during the night Deacon had crept into bed with her, as he often did, whether for his own comfort or hers. Only half-awake, with his arm around her, clinging to her, Daenara felt the disconcerting sense of reversed roles; of him protecting her.

"You look tired," came Rosa's voice to Daenara the following day. Rosa was the daughter of Clara's dearest friend. She had seen Daenara in the market district, pushed her way through the crowd, and came to walk at her side.

At this time of morning, the markets were flooded with people. They walked proudly and wore fine garments. As usual the city priest preached damnation at the front of the cathedral, which stood out brilliantly white in the morning sun. His dirty robes, barely more than rags, gave him more the appearance of a peasant or a drunkard than that of a holy priest.

"I do not sleep well," said Daenara, partly distracted by the priest's rantings. "I wish he would be quiet."

Rosa was a tall girl and very slender. Her narrow face gave her a pixie appearance at times, and her hair looked lightning-scorched, yet it was becoming. She chewed on the side of her cheek, gathering an idea. Then she suddenly said, "You should try the hot springs. They are very relaxing. It's what the elves bathe in, you know, all the minerals and such, very good for your skin. Or, you could go to the seer."

"Where?"

"The seer," Rosa repeated. "She can see your fate, but she is also a wonderful herbalist. She grows a variety of herbs just outside of the city. She is, shall I say, not an ordinary sort, but she is very good. My cousin Mertha once had a growth the size of a . . . well, let's just say it wasn't pleasant, and the herbal remedy did wonders for her. I'm certain she could give you something to help you sleep."

"I will consider it."

"No you won't," Rosa said, laughing. She kissed Daenara on the cheek and said, "Stay happy," as she ran off to meet a group of giggling girls.

The afternoon sun set Daenara's hair ablaze, revealing the red undertones in her warm brown hair. Undisturbed by her presence, grazing in the glade, were several placid deer and a fawn. Occasionally one would lift its head and return her gaze with docile brown eyes. The air was laden with the sweet scent of honeysuckle and spring wildflowers.

So bewitching was the sunshine and fragrance that she was freed of all troubling thoughts, and reminded of the brightness of day. Reclining on the grass, she watched with increasing joy as Deacon endeavored to catch flying insects. Not wanting the sensation to ever leave, she closed her eyes and let the feeling, along with the sunshine, sink deep into her as a kind of transfusion of warmth and life. She was not long here; then, the insidious creeping of dread came. Slowly, confusedly, she arose. She was suddenly fiercely alert. A horrid hush had befallen the woods. She was alone.

"Deacon," she called, trying to suppress the note of desperation. Repeatedly she called, her voice hollow and barely audible.

The whole world seemed to wheel round and round before coming to an abrupt halt. A black figure, standing on a small rise, silhouetted by the glare of the sun, she painfully recognized as Luseph. Deacon lay peacefully in his arms.

Stepping forward, she stumbled and fell. Pushing herself partly up, she saw that Luseph was gone. She gasped as a voice from behind came so near she could feel the hot breath on her ear.

"You cannot keep him from me!" Turning, she stared up at Luseph. His expression surprised her, for instead of hate there was grief. This was Luseph as she had known him.

"Luseph," she whimpered, penitent. His face turned cold; accusing eyes pierced her in a thousand places; and she found she was deprived of the strength to stand. He would take Deacon from her. "Give him to me," she said nervously, stretching forth her hand.

Luseph made no attempt to catch her, and she fell piteously into the cold, damp earth. Weeping in frustration, she tore at the grass. Her bowed form was shaken by the violence of her emotion.

Pain turned to fear as she raised her tear-stained face to find her husband gone and in his place a stranger. He was thin, draped in black robes, his black hair smoothed back from a stern brow. He peered down at her with eyes she had never before seen in a living man, glazed and icy, revealing nothing of a soul within, yet he seemed to burn with some intense enthusiasm, or, it could be with hate.

“Listen to what I have to say.” His voice was frightening in its lack of resonance. With a purposeful movement, he reached forward a pale hand. In abject fear and defiance, Daenara scrambled back from him, shaking her head. He paused and clasped his hands passively in front of him, yet there was something deeply threatening, deeply alarming in his forbearance.

His face, at once unfamiliar yet familiar, seemed terrible. Suddenly his eyes flared like blue lightning, and Daenara felt an intense heat ignite across her skin, causing a burning in her body which she felt would set her on fire, but it was the man who suddenly combusted into a blaze of vivid flames. She saw he was shocked and in terrible pain as his flesh was slowly consumed while he was still standing upon his feet. In desperation, mingled with some horrifying attempt toward affection, he staggered toward her, clutching at her, trying to draw her into him. She screamed. He would draw her into the flames and she would be burned alive with him. Frantically she tried to crawl away, but she was held.

In her utterly wretched state, Daenara cried out to Luseph for him to help her, but he did not come. She wondered with alarm if he could not hear her screams or whether he had left her to wallow in pain and misery.

Daenara awoke to darkness, with a vague pain as if she had really been seared. She was momentarily disorientated. A sly wind blew the curtains, and for an instant, she thought she saw a dark form hidden behind the light folds. But it was only momentary.

Close at her side a small voice mumbled indistinctly. As her thought and vision cleared, she saw Deacon at her bedside, his face dark and blurred with sleep. With trembling hands she reached out for him to come to her. Rubbing the hair from his

eyes, he crawled into bed beside her. She clung to him, rocking him, and murmuring almost fiercely, "He cannot have you."

Much later, when she was certain Deacon was asleep, she carefully slid her arm out from underneath him. She went out onto the balcony. The cool brush of night air was at once calming. Down below she could see the city guards patrolling the streets. She recalled how her home village and surrounding fields would be engulfed in darkness at night. Here, where it was always bright and always awake, she felt some sense of security. It was here she had first met Luseph, but he had been anxious to move away to someplace quiet, and so before Deacon was born they went to a small village, and were happy. A dark shadow of doubt loomed before Daenara. Staying at her brother's home indefinitely was not an option, nor was going home.

Chapter 3

Intrusion

Janet, an old friend of the family, discovered that Daenara had returned, and was anxious to see her. She wished to give Daenara her former job at the book emporium, and extended an invitation for her to dine at the elven gardens, where Janet resided. Although Daenara was hesitant at the idea of leaving Deacon—the old woman had requested she not bring the child—she was very keen to take back her position and accepted the invitation.

However, that very same day, Daenara had been troubled by dark images; every sound seemed to set her on edge like a sensitive, care-worn nerve. She attributed this anxiousness to lack of sleep and so decided, against her better judgment, to take Rosa's advice and visit the seer.

Daenara left Deacon at her brother's—she would trust him to no one else—and took a walk outside the city gates. By the river little bugs hovered over wildflowers. Ripples every now and then appeared on the surface, as fish took snaps at them. Lara Gully, a tiny slip of a woman, barely taller than her eldest child, was out gathering blossoms. Her horde of children, scattered at the riverside, created a beastly amount of noise, slapping at the water as they tried to catch fish. As Daenara paused to watch, she felt an ache of longing.

Lara's house was further down the road, but she often came up near the city gates to speak with the guards. Kahn, the broadest and possibly most dim-witted of all the guards, re-

ceived most of her attention. He had a broad grin on his face as he watched her. Occasionally she would stop to yell at the children splashing about too wildly. When they had ignored her for the last time, she hitched up her dress, much to Kahn's delight, and went into the water to drag them out by the scruffs of their necks.

She received little help from her husband, a brutish sort of man, who lived at the tavern more than he did at home. Lara didn't seem to mind, but then half of her children belonged to Kahn. Everyone but her husband seemed to know this.

Despite the commotion, sheep grazed lazily, along with several fat brown hens. They went flying in a mad fluster when Daenara walked through. To the far left of the gates was a small beaten path, which Rosa had instructed her to take. It led Daenara into a part of the woods that a shadow hung over even in the daytime.

Here was a tall, dark house, a lonesome, bodiless thing that seemed slightly crooked in structure, having a leaning appearance that if looked at for too long gave a sensation of light-headedness. It was not because the earth beneath was unstable, but because the wood itself seemed to bend and groan with life of its own. Greenish-grey smoke billowed out of the motley stone chimney, and filled the air with mysterious spices.

Daenara stepped up to the long, secretive-looking door; she raised a hand to knock, but the door opened of its own accord as if pulled by an unseen hand. The hall was dark, lit only by a single candle. A strange wind, as soft as it was foreboding, swept along the polished wood floor and rushed through her skirt. At this moment she lost courage and turned to leave, when sweeping out from a side room came a beautiful olive-complexioned woman. She wore a long billowy dress the colour of pale blue ice. It fell from her slender shoulders most exquisitely. Her dark hair was lit with highlights, as if the silver moon perpetually shone down upon it.

"Welcome," she said, her voice vacant and distant, as if it rose from the depths of water, like a spirit from the sea. She slowly turned, as if having no sense of time, and led Daenara through to a large room, which would have been horribly dark if it had not been lit by a brilliant fire in the hearth. It had a

strange mingling of old and elaborate furnishings from many different lands: fraying rugs, stone jars and mortars, quaint and ornate chests, and mysterious dark bureaus.

With a fluid gesture, the seer offered her guest a seat. In a leisurely manner she unhooked the kettle from the fire and poured a cup of tea. Each and every movement was precise and deliberate.

Once seated, the seer finally looked at Daenara, making her shift uncomfortably. There was something intensely mystical about the smoky, heavy-lidded eyes and full dark lips of the seer. The seer had an indiscernible expression but then inhaled deeply. A sudden twitch in her neck gave an odd contrast with her earlier fluidity.

She spoke in a deeper voice than she had previously, far more commanding. "What is it that you seek?"

Uncomfortable with the entire situation, Daenara said, "I want only to purchase some herbs . . . to help me sleep."

The seer, with those shadowy eyes, looked at Daenara, probing and searching. "There is a veil over your mind," she said, "something hidden."

It was then Daenara decided to make the most of her visit and stammered, "I have been having dreams. They come to me more like visions. I want to understand them."

The seer seemed to liven at this prospect, and she produced a small, sharp knife that had been tucked away somewhere in her dainty bosom. "Give me your hand." Daenara shrank back, protectively holding her hand as if it had already been stuck. "You may command me only to the extent in which you are willing to obey me. Now give me your hand."

The softness in her expression redeemed her sharpness, and Daenara felt compelled to obey. Squeezing shut her eyes, she held out her palm, waiting for the pain, but she felt nothing more than a little sting on the fingertip. When she reopened her eyes, a pinprick of blood showed on the tip of her finger. The seer placed a drop of it in the tea and swirled, taking care not to spill any. Then she downed the concoction.

Her eyes instantly rolled upward, and her lids fluttered closed. Daenara waited nervously as the seer's eyes darted under their lids, back and forth, as if she was dreaming. Then

the seer spoke. "You run from something." There was that strange tic again. She remained in her altered state as though searching through thoughts and memories. "A man robed in black. You feel his presence only in the blackest recesses of your mind. A man with eyes of blue flame."

Here the fire went dark in the hearth as if suddenly snuffed out by the breath of her words. Everything in the room seemed to shift, as thin light from the narrow window took over as the only source of light, and Daenara suddenly felt several presences in the room. They crowded round her; she felt them brush against her skin like a breath of ice wind. In voices that seemed nowhere and everywhere, they murmured indistinctly, but their tone conveyed fear and awe.

Daenara rose sharply to leave, but a strong hand took her wrist. The seer held her fast.

"The man you love—and the man you fear—are one and the same, and he is dark—dark and terrible. He knows the dead, and the dead know him," whispered the seer, as if she spoke from deep under water, which she could not rise above. Daenara was afraid. She knew that the seer was using a form of necromancy and that it was an illegal practice. Slowly the shadowy eyes fluttered open, and Daenara felt the strange presences slowly disperse, fading back into the walls, dark corners, and shadows. The air was once again empty.

"I have something for you," said the seer in her usual voice. She released Daenara and went into a back room. Daenara waited, holding her wrist. She glanced round the room, fearful anything spectral should come out from its hiding place.

In a moment, the seer returned, carrying two neatly wrapped tiny packages. She offered one first. "This is to help relax you. Drink it before you sleep at night." Then she placed the second package in Daenara's hand. "This is used for strong warding spells. Place it in front of your door, and no one who means you harm shall be able to enter." Daenara nodded wordlessly. For a moment she thought she saw fear in the seer's eyes.

Once she was outside, the world seemed normal again. Daenara felt as though she had come out of some strange dream. The further down the path she walked, the better she felt. The air was alive with the trilling of birds, busy in their daily ac-

tivities. Soon she could see the city walls and Lara with her children. The sight was welcoming, and Daenara hastened her step, anxious to be home.

The whole experience left her sufficiently shaken that she cancelled her prior engagement to dine with Janet. After several days passed with nothing eventful occurring, Daenara began to relax again. She had been faithfully taking the herbal remedy and at night slept well. A rose was returning to her cheek. Janet noticed this over the passing days and again extended the invitation. Rosa had the long and tiring task of convincing Daenara to go, repeatedly reassuring her.

“Even the wisest among us must be wrong sometimes.” Rose smiled as she spoke. “My mother was once told by a seer that she would come into the fond company of a singularly handsome man and would be betrothed at once.” Daenara stared blankly, not understanding. “She married my father two days later.” The last response drew a slight smile from Daenara, as she thought of the short, round baker, who, though tenderhearted, was hardly singularly handsome.

After much persuasion Daenara agreed to go to the dinner. Dressed in an elegant evening gown, her hair pinned up simply and gracefully, she gathered Deacon into her arms for the last kiss of the evening.

He was a little hesitant and distant with his mother, being unaccustomed to seeing her done up so extravagantly, and her perfume, a pungent scent of wildflowers, was unfamiliar to him. It had been a gift from Rosa. Clara took him from Daenara’s arms, trying to offer him sweets as a consolation for giving up his mother for the evening, but he flatly refused. His attention set greater value on what his mother was up to.

The door closed behind Daenara, shutting out the light and Deacon. She could hear Clara speaking reassuringly to him. Daenara hated leaving him. She felt as though she was abandoning him. In her hand she clasped the pouch of warding herbs. Gathering her dress round her legs, she squatted down at the doorway, and taking a handful of the herbs, sprinkled them across the threshold. As she did so she caught, out of the corner of her eye, a guard staring at her with an odd look of bemusement on his face. Slowly, he turned his head aside, feign-

ing disinterest in her peculiar behavior. Hurriedly she stood and surreptitiously placed the pouch in a geranium pot.

Her shoes clicked on the cobbled stones, as she made her way to the gates of the elven gardens. Two guards were posted there. Slipping them a piece of parchment that allowed her entry, she waited nervously as the large, heavy doors were cranked open. Once inside, Daenara could hardly believe only a single stone wall separated the city from this ethereal Eden. There were so many intricate hidden paths and steps that led to secret little haunts of wonder and enchantment that to look for someone here would be like playing hide-and-seek.

Evening tranquility had settled over the gardens, inviting Daenara to stroll awhile. A hushed sense of peace and harmony came over her as she drifted through an archway of marble pillars, roofed by pale blue flowers, that cascaded like a fragrant waterfall.

Laced throughout the gardens were stone and timber homes that, while somewhat humanized, were endowed with refined elven characteristics. Hidden pathways led to private courtyards, and blossoms cascaded over balconies and silver railings—their sweet scent lingering in the still evening air. Little white flowers that looked like bells arranged up a delicate stem graced the edge of a majestic pond with water flowing down from smooth rocks. The elves believed water should always be living and never allowed to stagnate.

Finally Daenara arrived at Janet's immaculate dwelling. It was charming and elegant. Growing up the walls were thick, woody tendrils, adorning the stone with purple, pendulous blossoms. In the front door were two long narrow windows, with ornate wrought iron climbing up the glass like flowering vines. An exceedingly well-dressed man, with a stiff neck and proud tilt of his head, admitted Daenara with a rehearsed greeting.

Inside was not quite what she had expected. It was a fine home, the sort anyone should be proud of, furnished with deep colored woods and rich reds, but she had somehow expected it to be more elvish and less human. Being in such a stately home, Daenara felt an uneasiness and a need to put on a certain pretense of propriety. Quietly she walked down the hall, observing the elaborate hanging tapestries. Through a large archway, she

saw into the dining alcove. A long table was set elegantly for two. She was on the verge of clearing her throat when Janet came sweeping out from the kitchen. In her hands she carried a long, silver platter, upon which was a succulent cut of meat on a bed of fragrant herbs.

The elderly, prominently-featured woman greeted Daenara with keen pleasure. She had silvery hair, like finespun cobweb, taken up into a becoming roll and fastened with a pretty jewel. Apart from the servants, Janet was all alone in the big house and was happy to have company. She enjoyed being the hostess, pouring out wine and serving dinner in a well-bred manner. The evening progressed delightfully, but Daenara was persistently distracted by strange, intangible feelings that made her grow restless.

Back at the house Clara sat in the dwelling-room, quietly knitting. Thaemon had put the children to bed and had just sat down in his favorite chair with a cup of bitter coffee when a sharp knock was heard at the front door. Thaemon had barely opened it when a group of men barged their way through as though they were expected. At the unexpected intrusion, Clara stood with a sharp exclamation of surprise.

The men were all dressed in matching robes and equipped with swords. Thaemon immediately identified them as Imperial Guardians, an elite group of magic-users, also trained in the use of weapons. They were utilized by the council to enforce laws and investigate crimes related to magic. Pulling his wife protectively to his side, Thaemon asked, "What is the meaning of all this?"

He directed his demand at the tall man with shoulders squared in a militant posture, who appeared to be the commander of the group. His name was Aéoden. He approached Thaemon with the same patronizing politeness he would a regular civilian, while several of the other men dashed upstairs.

"My children are up there!" Thaemon said, starting forward, but his path was barred. Frustrated and helpless, he returned to his wife's side. She looked at him with a pleading expression, for him to do something, but he was as helpless as she.

* * *

Janet was chattering away happily, not yet realizing her words were unheard. A strong feeling had possessed Daenara, as if something terrible were taking place. "Are you all right, dear?" Janet inquired, pouring wine from a silver carafe. Daenara rose from her seat in a feverish manner. Hurriedly, she thanked her hostess for the lovely evening, and insisting she was not feeling well, excused herself. Full of an intangible fear that something evil was about to befall her son, Daenara began to run.

At the house, it was not long before the men came downstairs and stated that the child was gone. Thaemon's face darkened, and he suddenly tore up the stairs, with such a fierceness it would have taken several men to stop him if they had tried. Bursting into Cedrik's room, he felt his heart stand still. He saw that Deacon's bed was empty. Cedrik stood, dazed and afraid, in the middle of the room. Without a beat missed, Thaemon collected up his son, then his daughter too, who had wandered into the hallway, abruptly awakened.

When Thaemon had placed his children in the care of their mother, he accosted Aéoden, and demanded the situation be explained. Here the front door suddenly flung open, and Daenara flew hectically inside. She stopped dead. She was surrounded by strangers and saw Clara huddled up with only two children. Thaemon stood at her side looking tortured. Daenara felt the hot blood rush to her head and rapidly drain again and would have collapsed if not for the strong arms of the guard who stood nearest.

Chapter 4

The Quest

A cup of tea was untouched, growing cold at Daenara's elbow. She sat listlessly, with spent grief. Her brother, crouched down by her legs, had a pained expression of failure and anguish. After some standard comforting words, and a solemn promise that her son would be retrieved, Aéoden and his men were making their exit when Daenara unexpectedly caught their attention with a sharp intake of breath. An expression of shock struck her features, as if she stared at something only her eyes had power to see. Thaemon clutched her hand, his fretful words lost. Presently her eyes, veiled with tears, blinked back from vacancy and turned sharply upon him.

"I saw him," she said. Her face drained of colour and in a quivering voice, she went on to describe the structure and surrounding area in her vision.

"Cheviot Priory," one of the men said. "That's in Terroni, south of here."

The men had all appeared the same to Daenara when she first set frantic eyes upon them, but she saw now this one was different. He was tall and slender, with fair hair that was rather long, a graceful mouth, and a strangely delicate complexion that a woman might envy. But there was a greater difference in him even than his lighter skin and finer features. There was a distinct difference in his bearing and movements, a graceful efficiency. When he turned his eyes on Daenara, she faltered to see how blue they were and how exceedingly clear. She could not mistake he was elven, and heard him addressed as Éomus.

Another man close to Aéoden, in terms of rank, suggested they should bring her along, with the explanation she could be useful in their efforts, considering her ability and close association to the innocent. Aéoden, after musing a moment, addressed Daenara directly. "Are you certain of what you saw?" She nodded but was in a great deal of confusion, having little knowledge in the ways of magic. "Your vision, can you determine present or future?"

"No."

"It's all right." Aéoden turned to one of his men. "If what she saw was accurate," he said hesitantly, uncertain as to whether he was dealing with a gifted woman or a distraught mother; "then it means he's most likely still in that region. He won't risk evanescing again. Go quickly, then return and tell me what you discover."

The man, like vanishing wind, was gone from their sight. Aéoden stood waiting, without any betrayal of anxious anticipation. He was, however, anxious, knowing it was risky for his friend to evanesce alone. It was impossible to know who might sense the location of the individual transporting. After many minutes the man returned. Unfortunately he hadn't encountered the necromancer believed responsible so was not able to intercept him. There were, however, sufficient signs to know Daenara had been accurate, and he informed Aéoden the necromancer had continued on further south.

They started that same night. Daenara was given her own horse and could ride well. She was quiet and obedient and did not prove to be a taxing addition to their party. Her visions, which seemed to have lain dormant most of her life, would force themselves on her at will and often were hazy and abstract, so that she could not clearly see the underlying meaning. She was by degrees learning to leave herself receptive to them, and was able to focus with greater clarity on the images before her. She seemed open to every psychic breeze, and felt the effect of every wind upon her. At times she had to shut her mind or the visions would drive her mad.

By the emergence of the pale crest of the moon, a camp had been set up. The men were all very proficient and went about their business effectively, leaving Daenara to stand about without offering much assistance. Very soon a fire was made, and a hot meal was had virtually in silence. Daenara's gaze was fixed on the dancing flame. Without her husband, without her child, the sense of loss was heavy on her. Infrequently she lifted her gaze to pass across the brave men who would reunite her with her son.

There was another besides the Elf who stood out plainly against the rest. He was a ghastly looking man and wore dark robes very different from the others, without the addition of armour or weapons. His skin was sallow and sickly. She would have felt sorry for this emaciated husk of a man if not for the evil that pervaded him. She could detect the hollowness of his nature at once and wondered why he would be on this assignment. He stood in private counsel with Thedred, the man who had first suggested Daenara come along.

"There is a veil over her mind," said Goran, incapable of speaking above a whisper. "I cannot read her. Someone, might we guess who, has placed a very good ward upon her mind. However, her fortunate ability and her relation to the child suggests quite plainly she is indeed of Riven blood."

"Perhaps you should make certain," Thedred said. His attitude was that of a man who had a dreadful task but reluctantly accepted it as a necessary evil.

Daenara found it difficult to refrain from shuddering when Goran's attention turned upon her, forcing her to avert her eyes.

"What is it that keeps you two muttering over there?" Aéo-den asked with a touch of reproach, noting that their secretiveness bothered the woman. The two men had evidently finished their counsel and after their addresser's reproof, rejoined the camp. Thedred had the look of one deeply troubled, which in turn troubled Daenara. She wondered what they were keeping from her.

"Do not surrender yourself to despair," came a quiet voice, with a pure and graceful accent. Having seen she was distressed, Éomus took a seat at her side. He did not place a hand on her, but his very presence was caressive and soothing. "So long as

this ill fate befalls you, we shall be at your side." His gracious words were full of authority. His eyes held hers with sincere affection. Éomus was eminently handsome, every feature graced by purity and knowledge. His eyes were strange and beautiful, and something besides the moon lit them. Elven eyes are transparent, and what one truly sees in them is the light of their soul.

"Will no one explain to me what my son's place is in all of this?" Daenara finally asked quietly.

"Deacon is a Riven," Aéoden said. "Were you aware?"

"No. I don't understand."

"Rivens are a feared race, although mostly considered non-existent now, being so few in number. They're an ensorcelled race, prone to magical abilities, much like yourself. We originally supposed that it was Luseph himself that was Riven, but I suspect now perhaps it is you that provides the blood that flows through your son's veins."

"It is because of this he was taken?" Daenara asked, having no idea she and her son were of this particular race. She suspected it was her elusive father whom should be thanked for this unknown and unique heritage. "Why did he not take me instead?"

"There are many reasons," said Aéoden; "Your mind might make the process that he intends more difficult than needs be. Perhaps the blood they need for their black ritual must be male. There are too many considerations to mention."

"His blood?" Daenara said with alarm. "Do they mean to take his life?" Aéoden gave her an uncertain look, and her face became pale as death. She could feel the fear enveloping her like a noxious atmosphere, taking all her air, suffocating her.

"I know too little in the ways of necromancy to say," said Aéoden, with a sobriety that did not ease any of her fears.

"It shall not come to that," said Éomus, who had been quietly sitting at her side all the while with a grieved expression.

"Luseph would never let them . . ." she said but could not finish, striving to stifle herself with her hand, which was covering her mouth.

"There is time yet," said Goran irritably. "Luseph must wait for his masters to deem the correct moment, before he proceeds.

Our knowledge of their attempt was the only thing that forced them into sooner action, and not all blood rituals involve death. It is a delicate process. I assure you he will await his moment.”

Daenara kept herself as collected as possible, so that she might further be informed. “And what does he hope to gain by this?”

Aéoden drew breath as though he had much to say. “Luseph was a scholar of magic at the university, and a former Guardian, years ago; I knew him well. His whole life was devoted to necromancy. He would shut himself up in his room for days and afterwards would be strange.

“He spoke of disembodied voices that would speak to him incessantly, making him peculiar and unapproachable; which probably explains why he left the order. When the arch mage suddenly banned necromancy, for reasons we were never told, Luseph was ruined. He had returned to his room and everything, everything down to the last scrap of parchment, had been taken and burned. His life’s work all gone. He, along with many other necromancers, left the university. It was rumoured they relocated somewhere hidden so they could continue their studies, and even more disturbing rumours were that they had a plan to overthrow Travon. They hadn’t been taken seriously until a source came to us, and we were informed they had discovered a Riven.”

Aéoden remained quiet and allowed Daenara to process all that he was telling her. “I still don’t understand; how is Deacon to help them?” she asked with an impatience induced by fear.

“Riven blood contains certain imbuing qualities,” said Aéoden. “And it is our belief they will be using this trait to restore a man who was long ago vanquished from this earth, a man who is the embodiment of purgatory. He could be vanquished but not killed. For many years he has been incarcerated in a city that burns eternally. Travon bound his power so that he could never escape, but if his strength was to be restored, he could break bounds and be brought back into existence. He would kill Travon.”

Late that night Daenara lay alone in her tent, her mind in turmoil. She had been bereaved when she had left Luseph, as if she had lost him to death, for the man she once knew no longer existed. Now upon hearing all Aéoden said, she began to doubt whether she had ever really known him. She had always depended on Luseph to have the strong arms that would protect her. Now, not only was she without his comforting embrace, but he was in fact the hand against her. Any remorse or fear of doing him an injustice vanished. The feeling of isolation overcame her, and she began to weep. The surrounding darkness seemed to be inhaled with every sob, till she felt she would drown in darkness.

Chapter 5

Quest Continues

Daenara's mind was impregnable, Goran had discovered irritably. Without her knowledge he tried on several occasions to break the barriers and find the true source of her ability, but the protection charm was impervious. Goran thought Luseph had put the concealing spell on her, but it had been done by a man with whom he was entirely unfamiliar. When she was first born, before her father left, he had given her this single parting gift, as much for her protection as his own. It was not good for Rivens to make their presence known in a world that was against them.

After his many failed attempts, Goran believed he was weakened because he was already convinced of her heritage and wasn't using enough effort, but then his determination not to be outdone by a charm made him exert all his efforts, and still he failed. He had become so put-out that he almost decided to simply lie to Thedred, who had been so insistent that he know for certain.

Thedred was a good man, but had almost a fanatical devotion to the arch mage. He would do Travon's bidding in the good faith that Travon knew what was best for the collective masses. The individual did not matter. Gonriel's great lands were proof of Travon's competence. Thedred was, however, considerably uncomfortable with the task he had been assigned. He quailed inwardly when he thought of it. He had been instructed to dispense with both mother and child. The arch mage was determined to wipe out every last Riven that walked the earth.

The sky was bright and clear. The spring weather had began to grow pleasantly warm. The land was open around them with green rolling meadows, and the sun shone bright upon them, but the sun could not warm Daenara's face. Leading their horses by foot, the travellers slackened their pace a moment for brief repose. Éomus led his beautiful white horse by Daenara's sturdy brown mount. Neither said a word to one another, but Éomus's presence was always a great comfort.

Behind Daenara, several horses back, Goran's sallow eyes were fixed intently on her with an expression of sheer determination. Goran had come very near to giving up, when at last he broke through. He had done so, so unexpectedly that he gasped when he suddenly came upon the intimate recesses of her mind—seeing images and memories that flicked through his own mind in rapid succession. The memories were all, of course, useless to him, and he pushed them aside irritably. They were not what he needed to see.

Feeling a sharp pain, Daenara suddenly clutched her head. He hadn't been in her mind long, but long enough to gain the information he needed. The subconscious mind holds a vast resource of knowledge. It knows intimately the nature of one's own being, down to the very last cell. Rivens' magical energies are interwoven with the lifeforce that infuses each and every one of their cells. It is the source of their strength, which is why mages of other races simply cannot muster the same power and energy levels of which a Riven is capable.

When the sudden headache had passed, Daenara glanced back at Goran as though she sensed he had been tampering with her. His gaze remained flat and arrogant, though his mouth slowly peeled back into something akin to a smile. A sickening sensation grew in her stomach; the sight of him always left her with a feeling of abhorrence. She turned her eyes front again and saw Éomus was looking at her. His expressions were so subtle it was often difficult to determine what he was thinking, but always did he look on her with kindness, and he took pains to make certain she was comfortable.

"Are you well?" asked Éomus, seeing that her complexion had waned. She nodded wordlessly, her gaze directed up-

ward as though she were listening. The breeze carried dull and mournful moans that resolved themselves into wails and shrill cries. They were faint and barely audible, as though heard from a great distance. Daenara did not know any animal that could have produced such chilling, torture-laden wails.

She had heard them periodically over the past days, but mostly felt them. The men had said nothing, and she wasn't certain if they even heard them or whether it was in her mind. "Something comes for us," she said to Éomus, fearfully. "I don't know what it is—but it comes to us with malice."

"Wreavers. They have been tracking us for days."

"Wreavers?" she asked, responding to the concern she felt within Éomus.

"Necromantic monsters," said one of the Guardians, with a look of loathing. "They walk like men, but they're soulless beasts, brutal and mindless. A single scratch is all that is required to spread their vile poison coursing through your body. Even the meanest among us could not bear the pain. Men have been known to cut their own throats to escape it."

Later that afternoon, by a cool stream, the travelling party wet their lips and rested on its grassy banks. Daenara crouched down by Aéoden who was washing his hot-red face. "Who is that man?" she asked him quietly, looking at the sickly man who drank from a water bag painfully slowly, not taking more than the most meagre sips.

"Goran." Aéoden almost spat. "He's one of the necromancers that stayed true to Travon, or rather feared to go against him. Now he sets his talents on worming his way into people's minds like the treacherous little maggot he is. Both mind manipulation and prying are illegal practises, except when we utilize them for investigation. He's often very useful, which is why that unfortunate creature accompanies us. Should he bother you, tell me, and I will see that he repents it."

Aéoden continued to wash his face and neck, drenching his hair entirely. Daenara rose to her feet. "It's growing warmer," she said. A soft wind brushed her face and softened her strained features.

"It's going to become more so," Aéoden told her. "The tracks we've been following have persistently led south toward the Surian desert.

"No," Daenara corrected with such blatancy as to cause Aéoden to pause midway and look up at her with curiosity. Wiping the water from his eyes he rose to full height, looking at her. "I see snow," she said absently, her eyes lightly closed. "Mountains laden with snow and frost—and rising taller than the rest, a great mountain, and a dark structure obscured in its mists."

Aéoden rubbed his brow frustratedly. "Are you certain?" Without waiting for a response, he said, addressing no one in particular, "We have been deceived; we are going the wrong way." He impatiently took the reins of his horse.

He had come to trust Daenara's visions. She had warned him of dangers and guided him and the men safely through unknown and treacherous terrain. They had been deceived; the tracks had been false. Necromancers have many deceiving powers, such as illusion, and can make things appear as they are not, even to a trained eye.

"Let us proceed now. We have lost too much time." Aéoden said.

"In which direction are we to go?" asked one of the men.

"The only mountains to have snow this time of year are in the realm of Illésmore," said Éomus, assisting Daenara to mount.

Aéoden nodded. "We go north," he said, settling himself in the saddle. In an attempt to make up for lost time, they had not taken a break in many hours and rode into the night over dark fields with only the stars to light their path. They eventually set up camp in a dark wood. An unfortunate boar on a spit had become dinner for the evening. As she partook of something to eat, Daenara found her attention again drawn to Goran and Thedred, even though the two now sat apart and seemed to speak little.

Goran had lost interest in her entirely, while Thedred had his eyes always upon her—always with the same dreadful look of remorse—eyes always slightly averted as though he could not bear her gaze. His face was heavy with some burden. His

haunted glances made her deeply uncomfortable. He, at times, gave her the feeling he wanted to get her alone with him, where she would not have the safety of the other men. His strange attitude pressed against her already weary soul and made Daenara feel as though she would wilt with the pain of it. Her arms ached to hold Deacon, to feel his warm little body against her own. She feared that he was afraid and alone.

Not far from Daenara, another's heart was aching for hers and had a great desire to soothe her. He stood with his shoulder against a tall tree, never far from her. He settled kind, pale eyes on her with grave interest. He could see that she grew paler and fainter with each passing day, but the absence of bloom on her cheek did not diminish her beauty in Éomus's eyes. Her loveliness was of the earth, warm and natural. The soft glow of the fire touched her face, bringing warmth back into it.

Presently, a hand gently rested on Daenara's shoulder. It was the whitest as well as the lightest ever to have been laid on her. She looked up into the face of Éomus. He smiled down on her with the look of promised alleviation, and she felt herself soften at his touch.

"This will all soon be at an end," he said, and the calm intensity of his voice held her with a sense of assurance. "You will again, very soon, behold him and take him into your arms. This is all just a terrible dream from which you are soon to wake." A deep frown creased his otherwise smooth brow. "I pledge my life on it." The moment he removed himself from her side, it was as though a light had been extinguished, leaving her in darkness.

Later, when the men were settling into their tents, Daenara noticed Éomus vanished deeper into the woods as quietly as the breeze passing. She had in fact noticed that every evening, wherever they might be, Éomus would silently steal away to be on his own for a time. She followed him this evening, treading softly through the moonlit trees. The soft sound of rushing water came to her ear and led her to where water flowed down from rocks and collected in a pool of shimmering water. Éomus stood at its edge. The moonlight outlined his slim well-proportioned figure.

She could hear him speaking softly in a language that was of the earth, the trees, and the wind. The words flowed from his graceful lips reverently as though in prayer, though his face was not down-bent but raised to the night sky. His luminous features were smooth without any sign of care. The meaning of his words eluded her but were nevertheless healing. Without making her presence known, she listened long to him. Her face rested upon her hand as she leaned against a tree. The lilting, melodious words filled her with a deep sense of calm.

“Does it bring you comfort?” he asked quietly. The unexpected address brought her back with a slight start. She believed that the trees must whisper to him, for she fancied she had made no sound. Yet still he knew she was there.

“Yes,” she said in a half-whisper, feeling somewhat ashamed. It was after all his personal moment. Perhaps he wished to keep it for himself, but his expression when he turned toward her was of pure tenderness.

“It is an invocation requesting strength and guidance,” he said.

Amid this deep quiet Daenara felt an unspeakable anguish arise within her heart. Until now she had borne the despair with unfaltering courage. Tears gathered in her eyes. “I cannot let my son die.” Her voice was scarcely a whisper.

“It will not be a grief you will have to bear,” he soothed. He extended a slender hand toward her. “Come to me.”

The moment her hand was laid in his, she was drawn gently into his embrace. Not the finest silks nor satins could compare to the feel of his touch. Caressing her lovely hair, words were spoken from his lips in a melodious tongue. Daenara looked into the pale eyes with their unfathomable depths and felt a hushed sense of peace. Éomus lowered his face and let his words fall on her lips, kissing her deeply as if he meant to take upon himself all of her sorrow. In the moonlight they stood serenely radiant, with their heads bent together.

Chapter 6

Luseph

Far in the northern lands of Gonriel, a bitter everlasting winter had gripped the lands. It was a wild and formidable terrain, with harsh winds and jagged mountains, covered in frost and snow, peeking up through thick fog. Rising from this cluster of mountains was an isolated mountain, on whose summit was a dark spire-like temple. Within that terrible structure things half-living, half-dead, and entirely unholy, walked its halls.

Luseph's study was a large, comfortable room, where rows of books, thickly bound in leather, lined an impressive case. Thick rugs were splayed across the stone floors, along with richly carved furniture that carried with them a forlorn smell of things ancient and forgotten. Luseph stood by a fire that burned steadily in a gaping fireplace, with his hands clasped behind his back. He was dressed in fine black robes, with a high stiff collar that fit tightly and neatly against his white throat. A man with cunning eyes came to stand at his side.

"You did not bring his mother," Luseph said, in a tone that did not seek to disguise his displeasure.

"It turned out to be an impossible task. And my first priority was the boy, as you instructed," he reminded Luseph with a shade of patronization, which quickly died as the latter turned on him. For a moment the man was uncertain, but Luseph's attention was soon drawn to the small boy curled fast asleep in a leather chair.

For a long time he looked at Deacon. No expression of tenderness showed on his features, yet still he looked, as one might look on a precious item. Presently, Deacon awoke from this unnatural slumber and seemed afraid. Luseph stepped forward. He knew Deacon looked on him without recognition; his face was hardly his own. The sleepless nights and strange dealings with the dead, had all sufficed to dissolve any likeness to his former self.

“Do you know who I am?” asked Luseph and beckoned the trembling and bewildered child get down and come to him, but Deacon shrank away. Luseph did not endeavour to comfort him but knelt down, placing a hand on each armrest either side of him, as though to box in the fretful little fox. “Do you know me?” he repeated. His eyes shone like moonlit ice.

Deacon recoiled against the backrest as though he could sink into it and escape.

“I’ll tell you now. You are my son, and you are going to assist in making the world a grand place.” Rising to his feet, Luseph lifted Deacon from his seat and set him down. “Let me look at you,” he said, taking a seat and drawing Deacon to stand before him. Gently, he pushed back the dark hair from the sullen face, and the blue eyes, timid and wet, lifted to examine the examiner.

“Do you still not know me?” Luseph asked in a softer tone, and taking the little hand in his own, placed it to his cheek, all the while looking intently into Deacon’s face to detect any sign of recognition. There was none. And Deacon again began to grow fretful. Luseph rose sharply, letting Deacon’s hand drop as though he had lost all interest in his existence. He moved to the window, where he stood, silent, with his back towards them.

“Shall I have him placed somewhere for the time being?” asked the man.

“No. He stays with me,” Luseph said, in a way that left no room for discussion. With a slight incline of his head the man left father and child alone. Deacon retreated to the leather chair. A prepared tray of food had been set on a side table. At his heavy writing table Luseph sat silent in his deep seriousness. Fixed intently on nothing, his grey eyes looked frozen, directed

at his son. The only sign that his mind was working was the slow rubbing of his fingers. From under bent brows he could see that Deacon trembled.

Though he appeared indifferent and was cold, very cold, Luseph was not bad-tempered toward the child, and the child was not ill-natured. However, under the circumstances, Deacon kept Luseph in a constant state of disquiet, refusing to eat and fretting for his mother. In his worked-up state he often used a form of speech that was mostly incomprehensible to Luseph, which frequently resulted in one cursing and the other crying.

Forsaking his chair Deacon uttered a teary and miserable appeal to see his mother. Luseph pinched the bridge of his nose. Since Deacon had awakened he had proved a tiresome creature. "Cease whining!" Luseph said with an impatience amounting nearly to anger. His outburst subdued, but did not cease, Deacon's misery; the brave little chest heaved a dignifying sigh. Coming to crouch down at his level, Luseph stretched out a hand, dragged the boy roughly between his knees, and embraced him sternly.

"Hush, now," Luseph said with curbed ferocity and rose with Deacon gathered up into his arms. The father that remained in him had a strong desire to comfort the child. For many minutes he held Deacon till he felt the fearful, rigid body finally succumb to exhaustion and slip into a heavy sleep.

In Luseph's bedchamber was a sturdy dark wood bed, its red silken covers embroidered intricately with gold thread. A tray of half-melted candles emitted the feeblest light. Luseph slept in a chair, while Deacon was tucked into the large empty bed. The door was securely fastened, so there was no fear of him breaking bounds, but Luseph's repose did not long last before he sat up wearied. His fist pressed to his lips, he watched, silently, the child who slept in his bed.

Luseph was regretful of the life Deacon should have had and remembered with bitter clarity his own miserable childhood. He thought of his family that spat at the mere mention of magic and any thought of him studying it. It was for this very reason Luseph had moved to the Imperial city; to further his education in the ways of magic, and the moment he did so, he had lost his family.

His own brother had beaten him. He thought of his sister and how the only affection he could expect from her was a hard slap. His father would do everything but foam at the mouth should even the slightest mention of magic be uttered under his roof.

His mother alone understood him, but even she failed him—she perhaps most of all, for even with her understanding, she still turned her back on him. She was not willing to risk the sacrifice of her husband and other children for his sake. And so it was through bitter tears that she impressed on him that should he walk out that door, he should not bother to return.

He left without turning back, a boy of not quite sixteen. He had no family, but he had a home, the university, and so it was for many years until Travon had destroyed all he had worked for.

Luseph recalled a conversation he had with his Necromaster and the futile frustration he felt. In the dim musky room Luseph had stood before the old mage with the full face of youth and determined eyes; under his robes was a strong young body, and sheathed at his waist was a long sword. The contrast between the young mage and the frail older mage—with his bony hands and sallow skin—was considerable.

Luseph bore his gaze with a rigid dignity but inwardly shrivelled under the disapproving stare. The withered eyes sneered at his bronzed skin as though it were a brand of inferiority. The old man did not believe one could achieve his full potential while dividing his time between magic and weapons.

“Arch mage Travon is a powerful man who has many loyal to him. It would not be a fight we would win,” he had finally said to Luseph, who came to him in distress in regard to banning necromancy.

“Ah, I see,” said Luseph, hostile. “It is not respect you show, but fear.”

The Necromaster had responded cruelly, which ferocity Luseph bore with unflinching courage. After this he left the university and tried to live a normal life, which he achieved with Daenara for several happy years, until the Necromaster sent him a letter informing him of their location, and what they intended—Travon’s downfall.

Having grown uncomfortable in his chair, Luseph moved to stand by the narrow window. Beyond his reflection was a stretch of night. His thoughts went to Daenara. He knew how desperate she would be and desired that she should be here with him. Her touch he longed for, yet he knew it would be difficult to make her understand. There was much pain and suffering for both of them yet.

In his study the following day, Luseph stood before the fireplace, lost in thought. He forgot for the moment the silent little presence that occupied the room with him. Presently, a young man entered the study. Preston was his apprentice. He was a youth of not more than sixteen years of age, though with his untainted self-assurance and arrogant disposition he appeared much older. Luseph treated the youth often harshly, though, at times, with the kind of pride that a father might have for a son, and Preston was eager to please Luseph.

"You require of me?" asked Preston, taking little notice of Deacon.

Luseph said, "Take the child. He's in your care."

Preston's eyes turned onto Deacon with undisguised aversion; for a considerable length both regarded one another with uncertainty.

"Take him, you idle boy!" Luseph spoke with a measure of sternness. "I have warned you."

Preston's straight shoulders seemed to fall slightly, as if he was unimpressed with the task. With great reluctance he took Deacon by the hand and led him out.

Into a small dark room Preston took him. It was a storage room of sorts but hadn't been used for a long time. It smelled of stone and dust and of daylight trapped too long. "You're going to have to entertain yourself," said Preston, lighting a small candle, which served only to cast haunting shadows on the empty walls. "You can sit there." Preston indicated the only chair in the room.

He started for the door, when Deacon commenced pleading and crying again. "Quiet! Your mother isn't here, you snively little nursling. If you were more of a lad and less of a lass, I would give you a flogging," he said, lifting Deacon up under

the arms and plonking him down on the chair. "Now sit there, Misery."

Preston then closed and locked the door behind him, paying no heed to the muffled sobs from the other side.