



# THE INHERITANCE



## Chapter 1



In the coffers of the elf king, in Solostaran's deep chests, lay many treasures—gold plate, rings of sliding silver, necklaces from which fantasies of jewel-work hung. His walls wore tapestries whose weavers lived in the years before the Cataclysm. He trod upon floors of white marble inlaid with black, of black marble inlaid with rose, of rose marble with gray, and all the work of dwarven craftsmen who commanded the worth of a royal ransom for their fee.

In Solostaran's treasure houses lay weapons of finest steel, swords hilted with gold, the grips made from the whole of a precious stone, of emerald and ruby and sapphire and diamond. For his most glittering ceremonies, he had helms of silver, plated in gold and wondrously bejeweled. He was no poor king, Solostaran of the Qualinesti. Yet, in the estimation of Elansa Sungold, his sister-in-law, the wife of Prince Kethrenan, his brother, the most extraordinary and valuable of all the things housed in the Tower of the Sun did not belong to Solostaran himself. This treasure belonged to Elansa, and she counted nothing owned by Solostaran or his royal kin as fair or valuable.

The Risen Phoenix, wings spread, triumphant, a wonder of sapphire and silver, cherished and jealously guarded, was Elansa's, handed to her by her mother, who'd received it from her own mother, and that mother from hers. Down the misty roads of time it had come, from the dawn of the Age of Dreams to mother then to

daughter, never fallen from the kindred, never gone from the clan, bearing its magic and hope on flashing wings across the ages. A day would come when Elansa would put the treasure into her own daughter's hands.

Today, though, Elansa had no prospect of handing off the talisman as she stood in the chill darkness of the hour between night and dawn. Not even the first bird had risen to sing in the garden outside her window. Few lights shone in the city, and those that did were in the barracks beyond the orchards. The lights gleamed like fireflies, seeming to wink as the breeze stirred the naked branches between.

Elansa stood a moment, looking at those lights. She wondered where her husband was, Prince Kethrenan who was lord of all those scouts and warriors that kept their people safe. Out upon the border somewhere, far away in the cool western wood by the Straits of Algoni, or on the banks of the White-rage River, in the south near the bitter mountains . . . away with his warriors, a shining, armed presence on some border.

Elansa turned from the window. She had dressed for a journey, geared herself for riding through the forest in fine boots, warm trousers, and a flowing silk shirt. She wore her honey-colored hair over her shoulder, twined through with scarlet ribbon. Her green woolen cloak lay across her bed, the hem of it half concealing a small rosewood box. At her belt she wore a little knife, but that was no weapon, only a decoration to complete her costume. A princess abroad in her kingdom attended by twenty warriors, she would need no weapon. She needed now only one thing, and then she could leave. She needed the phoenix.

Elansa moved the rosewood box from beneath her cloak. She lifted the lid and caught her breath in wonder. The Risen Phoenix gleamed upon a bed of gray velvet. It appeared to be cut from one whole sapphire, shaped with wings wide, triumphant. Elansa, who knew the history of it, knew it hadn't been cut at all. It had been discovered, uncovered like a living thing trapped in stone. A whole sapphire shaped like a phoenix, with wings spread wide, the dwarf who'd found it had never again seen anything so wonderful, and he'd lived a long, long time. He freed it from its rocky prison, chipping away the clutching stone until the sapphire itself stood free, a phoenix risen again to life. No more had he done but polish it and hang it from a chain of silver, the links so tightly woven they ran like liquid.

He'd rid himself of it, so the story said, as quickly as he could get a good price for it. Dwarves don't like magic, not at all, and this winged sapphire beat with magic the way a heart beats with life: quietly, steadily.

Here was the sigil of Elansa's god, the Blue Phoenix whom those not elves named Habbakuk, the lord of the natural world, of the unstoppable cycle of life and death and life again. These cycles Elansa knew as well as she knew the tides of her own body. She was a woodshaper, born with the ability to know and love the very soul of the forest, to tend its health and keep it well. Legend whispered that the blood of the woodshapers had long ago mixed with that of nature spirits, and some believed that was more than folklore speaking, for it had long been the custom, seldom breached, that woodshapers would marry none outside their own clans, unwilling to dilute their ancient heritage.

Now and then, though, when the negotiations went well and enough was offered to make all parties happy, that rule bent. For a royal marriage and a seat in the places of power, Elansa's father had done the bending and given her to Prince Kethrenan. The prince and his brother the king were as pleased by the prospect of having that pure woodshaper blood come into their royal clan as though it were dower goods.

Elansa lifted the phoenix from the rosewood box. It was not large. It fit in the palm of one hand, the chain flowing over her fingers. It breathed, or seemed to, and the beat of its power was the beat of her pulse, strong and sure.

There was, beyond the city and past the shining bridges, an illness in the forest. A blight, gray and scabby and quick to kill, had touched the elms in little Bianost, shriveling the heart of the trees, in only a matter of weeks rendering them bent and leafless.

"Send us a woodshaper," cried the people. "Send us the princess whose magic can heal."

Elansa had no magic. She was neither mage nor cleric. She had this talisman, and this the people cried for, praying for the princess to bring them the healing grace, for this was the truest virtue of the artifact. With the talisman in hand, what natural skill a woodshaper possessed was transmuted. The world became as a living being to her—earth and sky, fire and wind and water, she spoke to them as she would to kin.

Elansa closed her eyes, slipped the necklace over her head, and whispered a welcome to the god. In the courtyard of the tower, out beyond her garden, she heard the jingle of bridles, the stamping of hooves. Her escort had come. She slipped on her cloak, spoke a

word to a startled, sleepy servant in the corridor outside her suite, and went alone into the waking day.

The phoenix hung around her neck. Let the elf-king keep his fat coffers. She knew no better treasure than this stone warm against her breast. Every beat of her heart found an echo in the living magic of the stone, an easy rhythm with the phoenix, as though one beat were hers and the other magic's. Perhaps, she thought, the echo of a god's. So comfortable was that rhythm that she'd not gone as far as the courtyard before she ceased to be aware of it. She wouldn't feel it again until she stood in the presence of the trees of Bianost. There, with the magic to aid, she would touch the souls of the wounded trees, speak to their hearts, and infuse them with her own will and strength. Upon the wings of a phoenix rising, their illness would change into health.

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Wind spilled down the sky in waves, tossing the tops of the trees, coming just like the sea, tumbling and leaping. High on the cold cliff, in the borderland between the Qualinesti Forest and the Kharolis Mountains, a tall, broad-shouldered man stood, watching the wind run. Brand felt its fingers in his shaggy hair and beard. He heard the sky's voice hissing, just like the voice of the sea. He'd seen the sea, once long ago, when he was a boy of ten years. It was as far away from this bitter borderland as he'd ever been.

He stood between the kingdom of elves and the hidden kingdom of dwarves. He stood in stonelands owned by no one but buzzards and ravens, fought over by bands of outlaws. They fought for the roads, rocky

passages over which merchants had to travel when they went out from the towns and cities of Abanasinia and down to Tarsis. Humans and hill dwarves threading the byways between the kingdoms of Qualinesti and Thorbardin, they found themselves in a vast land of cruel realms whose varied borders changed like the wind. These were the windswept reaches populated by filthy goblin towns from which those heartless creatures came ravening at the first scent of prey. The goods they kept. The women and children they sold in Tarsis for slaves. The men and boys they killed. Should the merchants have the great good luck to encounter no goblins, they might find themselves beset by bands of outlaws whose numbers were made up of humans banished from towns and cities, disgraced dwarven sons cast out of their clans, and dark elves swept out of Qualinesti like storm-broken branches.

When these goblins and outlaws didn't have luckless travelers to fall upon, they fell upon each other, for they had their own feuds, and, for the most part, they were each other's worst enemy.

The dwarves in Thorbardin didn't care what went on outside their mountain. In Qualinost the elves liked to let the goblins and the outlaws keep each other in check, only coming out of their forest to scour the stonelands when the brigands became over-bold with the borders. In that way, dark little reigns rose and fell between the mountain and the forest, their histories recorded only in blood and dust. Brand had seen no few of these risings and fallings. He had written some of that dark history.

The wind dropped lower, sailing cold along the cliffs, whirling dust and the scent of rain before it. Brand hardly lifted his head to that lie. It hadn't rained

in the borderland for two turns of the two moons.

An eagle screamed in the sky, the sound like a ripping. Lower down, at the bottom of the cliff, a darkness of ravens quarreled over something. Brand kept his eye on the black-wings. It was an old habit, one he'd never broken, as old as his habit of listening behind.

He wasn't surprised when a voice deep and low said, "Someone's found dinner, eh?"

One broad-winged raven leaped up from the feast, then dropped suddenly, clawing at the eyes of a rival. Brand thought he smelled blood when the wind changed, but maybe not. He turned to the one-eyed dwarf. "What?"

"Spotted 'em," the dwarf said. He cocked his head to give his good eye the view and looked below at the raven-feast. He pitched a rock over the side at the crowd of ravens. Shrieking, they rose, and in that instant, Brand saw the white gleam of a rib cage and the blood glistening on spilled intestines. He was too far up to see whose rib cage that was and whose guts—goat or elf or dwarf, maybe even a deer wandered out of Qualinesti, or a goblin or a human like him. The ravens hung in the sky for a few moments, then settled again.

"Spotted them," said the dwarf, "and I reckon we'll be seeing them tomorrow or the next day, heading right along the edge of the forest, the whole crowd out for a ride."

Brand grunted. "Where are they now?"

The dwarf skinned his teeth in a cool grin. "Aday out from the city. 'Nother day or two, we'll see 'em riding along the edge of the forest. We'll do best to wait till they're right in the shadow of the wood, just where the ground rears up and the stones all have names."



Brand squinted away north and west. He imagined he could see them, the shining line, like a thin snake winding through the forest: elves.

"All right," he said, "how much gouging are the goblins doing on the deal?"

"Right to the bone." The dwarf snorted. "Greedy bastards. They want the whole field to loot. I told 'em you have a taking to do. Told 'em it's personal. They keep out of our way, they can have the rest. And I told 'em they could have their headman's son back, all his parts still on him and mostly working, if it all goes the way you want. Good as a standing army, one squealing goblin whose da might want him back."

"You told them they'd get him back?"

The dwarf's smile was as cold to see as the high wind was to feel. "Told 'em what you said, Brand. Every word."

Brand clapped the dwarf on the shoulder. "Good enough, Char." Beyond the ravens squabbling, out past the stony stream run nearly dry, the wind rolled across the tops of the trees, and the trees began to bend their heads.

"Smell the rain?" Char said. He squinted up at the iron sky.

Brand didn't answer. He turned his back on the forest and went away across the cliff. He found a winding way down on steps not made by dwarf or human or even stinking elves. When he was full of dwarf spirits, Char liked to say gods made these strong stone steps. Brand had no patience for that prate. He knew better. Wind and rain and storm made those steps.

Down on the flats again, Brand looked west, across the puny stream that had once been a river. Stagger

Stream they called it now, those who lived in the borderland. Years before a rockfall had blocked the river at the headwater, and only a skimp of water came down after that. Not much of that, either, since the last time it rained. Across the puny water lay the Notch, a wedge that seemed to be cut out of Qualinesti. It hadn't been. Trees simply refused to grow there, probably because there was too much stone. A farm had been there, and people had called it the Notch. Not "Notch Farm" or any name like that. Just the Notch. A man had cleared the stones and made a house and fences. He'd scraped the earth and found soil enough to grow food for his family. His goats had eaten the tough grass springing up at the edge of the wood. Sometimes, when the bold mood was on them, the farmer and his sons took deer from the forest, or game birds.

That was a time ago. Now the stone house and fences were toppled. Qualinesti had swallowed the farm. Not the forest, not that. The kingdom had claimed it, and the elves had snatched the land and not made any pretense about asking. Too close to their borders, they'd said, a troop of shining warriors in mail and bright helms. The tallest of them, the leader who had eyes that narrowed to slits when he was thinking, whom his soldiers addressed as a prince, tilted his head as though the farmer and his family stood so far below him it was hard to see them. He'd spoken in Common, pronouncing the words as though they were too coarse to pass royal lips. "Go on. Get out of here." And when the farmer and his kin stood their ground, the elf had ordered his soldiers to get rid of them.

Hooting and laughing, the elves had chased them, pricking their heels with the glinting steel of their lances

until they'd driven them away into the stony foothills. Most of the family had died that winter.

Looking into the Notch, Brand bared his teeth in a wolfish grin. Sometimes, over the rim of the jug of dwarf spirits, he'd say to Char, "That place, the Notch, used to be a little fastness of stone. Not big enough, though, and no one could defend it. The ground's too flat. Me, I like the high ground. You can hold high ground forever."

Char would laugh, passing the jug or taking it back. "Are you on that horse again? Talking about holding the high ground and turning yourself into King Brand, the terror of all the goblin towns around? Ain't the goblins you got to worry about. Them elves are the ones. Whatever place you hold, they'll just run you out of there." He belched and wiped his mouth on a greasy sleeve. "Ain't like it hasn't happened before."

Brand didn't care what Char thought. He had a plan. "It just needs a chance, and I'll know it when it comes. I have the patience to wait. Don't you worry about that."

He did, indeed, have the patience. He'd had it for a long time, carried it through long winters and short summers, through fleet springtimes and aching autumns. When he had nothing else—not food or shelter and only ravens to quarrel with—he had patience. Only days after one of those conversations over the jug, his long patience had been rewarded. He'd heard a little word drifting out of the forest to help him recognize his chance.

Looking into the Notch, into Qualinesti beyond, Brand believed that before long, the balance of power

would shift in the borderland. It would tip in his favor, and the tipping would be sweeter than anyone might think, sweeter even than one-eyed Char might imagine, and the dwarf knew more of Brand's tale than most.