

CHAPTER 1

Bad Beginning

“*N*emo, help me” came the cry again.
“Hurry, Nemo! Hurry”.

Nemo tried running faster, but heavy darkness slowed him to a crawl.

“I’m coming, I’m coming” he shouted.
“Where are you?” “What’s wrong?”

“Nemo, help me” the voice cried again.
“Hurry, Nemo! Hurry”.

Nemo ran through the darkness with outstretched arms. There was no moon to light the path, no stars to guide him. He tottered like a blind man running through a maze. Every step was marred by hidden obstacles and snares. Suddenly, Nemo’s foot caught on a root, tripping him. He fell hard, face first.

As he tried to stand, Nemo became entangled in some thick invisible web. The more he struggled to free himself the more trapped he felt. Slowly the web wrapped itself around his neck and head.

“Hurry, Nemo! Hurry” came Quasar’s desperate cry, again.

Nemo frantically pulled at the web as it tightened around his neck. He fought to free himself with all his strength. Finally, he broke the stranglehold and stood to run, but as he moved, he crashed into the side of a bolder, or a large tree. In the darkness, he couldn’t really tell. Something hard and heavy, like a rock, crashed onto his head from above. He felt wet, cold, blood flowing over his face.

Wait, Nemo said to himself, shaking the liquid from his face. *This can’t be my blood. Blood is warm.*

As he sat up, Nemo pulled a blanket from around his head and neck. It was wet and imbedded with pieces of broken pottery. His hands felt more shards scattered on the floor around him. Nemo shook his head again and opened his eyes.

He was sitting on the floor of his bedroom wrapped in his own blanket. The water pitcher from his chest-of-drawers lay broken around him. His bed was twisted and turned as if he had been fighting tigers. He had, in fact, been fighting bad dreams.

At some point in his nightmare, Nemo had fallen off the bed and crashed against the furniture that held his water pitcher. Mercifully, the painful crack on his head and the shock of cold water had been enough to wake him from the dreadful dream. It is never easy to wake up Nemo.

Nemo stood, looked around his room in disbelief, and headed into the hallway. He was unsteady going down the stairs, but by the time he reached the kitchen, the murky fog had begun to lift from his brain. Still, he could not shake an inner fear that the dream was a real call for help from his best friend, Quasar.

Quasar and Nemo had been best friends since early childhood. Nemo's family owned a large sheep ranch and the most magical hidden valley, Silverglade. They had spent days and weeks of their childhood, camping in Silverglade, grazing their sheep, and discovering some of the Seven Secrets of Silverglade.

Quasar's family also owned a large sheep ranch. It was adjacent to Nemo's ranch. Quasar had grown into a skilled rancher and shepherd with a reputation for amazing powers of healing.

He came from a long list of healers. The ‘powers’ were really ancient recipes for healing potions and medicines that had been handed down from generation to generation. Quasar was the last of his family to have the healing knowledge. All the rest had been killed, along with Nemo’s family, in the horrible Night of Fire. Both Quasar and Nemo would have died that night, too, but on a whim, they had spent the night in Silverglade. This whim had saved their lives. It also cursed them with many questions.

Finding the answer had led them into such adventures that could fill a book; several books, in fact.

That was all before Quasar and Brittany were married. Now, the nightmare and his inner fear pressed Nemo on to action. He looked around the kitchen as if he was supposed to know what to do.

Coals from last night’s fire still glowed in the stove’s firebox. Leaning down, Nemo blew gently on them and their flames danced red hot in reply. He threw kindling on the coals and moved the tea kettle onto the burner. Then, absentmindedly, he stumbled out of the kitchen door.

His ranch was silent in the early morning darkness. Cold, sunless air shocked him awake. At the trough, he pushed the pump up and down until water flowed strong and full. As water gushed into the wooden box, Nemo dunked his whole head underneath the icy flow.

Coming up for air, Nemo shook the water from his hair and shouted, "Ahh, that's more like it."

Normal thinking began to return to Nemo; at least 'normal' for Nemo in the morning. As the sunrise caressed the sky, it dawned on him that he had not seen Quasar and his bride Brittany for over three weeks.

I'll have to visit them soon, he thought and then added; *Maybe not. The one thing newlyweds need is to be left alone!*

They had been married, now, for about six months. Memories of the wedding flooded Nemo's mind. It was a thing never before seen and likely never to be seen again; a wedding with guests like Glendeux, King of the Elves; the People of Light, King Triiton of Luminus and rightful Lord of Draamor, The Lord Hiram and his sons, and so many others.

He was, of course, Quasar's best man. The joy of these memories almost caused Nemo to forget his bad dream; almost, for Nemo still felt Quasar needed help.

Nemo sat on the steps leading up to his back porch. Water dripped from his hair making a muddy pool at his feet as he tried to make sense of his dream. He did not seem to notice that the pool being formed was in the shape of a little footprint. It was only about a quarter the size of Nemo's footprint.

Groups of elves often visited the ranch in secret. They were seldom seen. Elfin parents would bring their children to see the one who had freed the kingdom from dragon fear. They likewise visited Quasar's ranch. The only evidence of their visits was the tiny footprints they left behind.

Don't be crazy, Nemo chided himself. *It was only a nightmare*. Still he could not shake the feeling of dread.

The sun was fully up now, but the light of day did nothing to lessen Nemo's fear and sense of urgency. He got up from the porch and made his way back to his bedroom to dress. He

stopped only long enough in the kitchen to make himself a mug of strong tea.

In a few minutes he found himself dressed, not for chores as he should have been, but for travel, complete with riding boots and a travel sack. This he filled with extra clothing. Then, before returning to the kitchen, Nemo walked to a great wooden chest hidden in the back of his bedroom closet. He paused before opening it.

He remembered the magical day Glendeux, King of the Elves had given him the gifts stored in this chest. Nemo took a deep breath and lifted the thick, heavy lid of the wooden chest. The lid did not open easily.

The chest was filled with a king's treasure; golden goblets, chains and medallions of solid gold, sacks filled with jewels, a small crown encrusted with diamonds, coins of gold and silver. These had been gifts from the elves, part of the dragon hoard Nemo had helped rescue. But, these were not what he was after. Carefully, he lowered the lid.

Nemo looked around the closet, just to make sure he was alone, and then felt along the edge of the chest's lid. His fingers found a latch

so small as to be easily mistaken for a knot in the wood. When pressed, it opened a lid on top of the lid, revealing a secret compartment. Within this secret section of the lid Nemo kept the three special gifts Glendux had given him.

He closed his eyes and remembered the day he had met Glendeux, King of the Elves; the People of Light, the day he and Quasar had received their gifts, the day their lives had changed forever. These memories were sweet and strong, as if it had all just happened yesterday. In his mind, Nemo could smell the sweet fragrance of the forest, taste the pure air, hear the songs and see the beautiful Kingdom of Light as he had that first day.

"This is the front door to the real world. Everything else is pale and dull by comparison." Their elfin guide, Lane Son o' Lance, had made this pronouncement as they climbed up and out of a deep mountain labyrinth and into the kingdom.

"This is the farthest southern point of the Kingdom of Elves; the People of Light. Welcome to the Kingdom," said Lane Son O' Lance. "May your light be bright."

In time, they were brought down the mountain to a meadow surrounded by huge ancient trees. There they met the King.

"May your walk be worthy, Lane Son O' Lance." The King spoke in a low musical voice. Suddenly, they realized the King was calling them forward. They walked into a circle of light that surrounded the King.

The king stepped forward and placed his hand on Nemo's shoulder. Nemo lowered his gaze and bowed his head.

The king then reached into a sack and took out a bow and a quiver of arrows.

"This is for you," said the king, handing the bow and quiver to Nemo. "The bow will always be strong, and these ten arrows will never miss their mark."

The king then reached into the sack and extracted a sword which he handed to Quasar.

"This is *Illuminatus*," said the king, awe filling his voice. "Forged while the earth was young, it will cut through anything."

The sword seemed to shine with a light of its own.

The king took more gifts from his sack.

"These cloaks are for your comfort and your safety," said the king handing a garment first to Nemo and then to Quasar. "Wear these as often as you'd like," said the king.

They were the finest garments Quasar and Nemo had ever seen. Forest green, ankle length, and hooded. These cloaks were woven by elves on looms of deep and holy power.

"They will keep you warm in cold and cool in heat. They will keep you dry in rain and storm. No human king or queen, of any royal house, has garments as fine as these. They will never soil or even wrinkle. And one thing more," added the king.

"If you wear them when danger is near, they will make you invisible until the danger has passed."

Quasar and Nemo eagerly put on the cloaks. They had clasps at the neck of fine tooled silver.

"Each has a pocket sewn deep within," said the king. "These contain gifts you are to share."

Nemo reached inside his cloak and pulled out a coil of thin rope. Quasar did likewise and found a soft leather pouch.

"Nemo," said the king. "Your rope will always be as long as you need it to be."

He said it so plainly that it took Nemo a moment to fully understand his meaning.

"Quasar," continued the king. "As long as you have this food pouch, you will never go hungry. In time of need, it will feed you and all who are with you."

"And now for your last gift," announced the king as he emptied the sack. Silence hung on the forest like the morning dew. All eyes were on the small wooden box that sat at the king's feet.

The king motioned to Quasar. "Open it," he commanded.

The box was small and simple, about the size of a boot. It was hinged at the back and closed in front by leather thongs. It had no markings and seemed to be made of some dull black wood. Quasar picked it up with ease. He opened it slowly and peered inside. After a moment, he looked up at the king.

"It is empty," he said humbly.

"Yes," answered Glendeux. "Its value is not in what it now holds. Its value is in what it can hold. This box is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside."

Nemo opened his eyes, blinked and gazed around the closet. It had been six months since he had last seen the gifts. After the wedding, both he and Quasar had found hiding places for the gifts. They never spoke openly about them.

From the secret compartment in the lid he removed the box that is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. Within it, he had hidden the other gifts. Slowly, he retrieved them.

Nemo held the unstrung bow and quiver in one hand. He slipped the coil of rope over his shoulder. Carefully, reverently he lifted the Elfin Cloak of Hiding to his face and deeply inhaled its fragrance.

Nemo ran his finger over the silver clasp that hung at the neck of the cloak.

“Oh *Eilaanan Tok Häfina*,” he said quietly, using its Elfin name. I hope we won’t need you”.

He spoke as if the garment were a friend, as if it could hear him.

Once back in the kitchen, Nemo tucked the box, the coil of rope and elfin cloak into his travel sack. The bow and quiver, he decided, would hang from his saddle, ready for use if needed.

He added to the sack such things as might be useful on a long trip; flint and iron to spark a fire, tea and his favorite mug. At the last moment, Nemo ran back upstairs and retrieved a small leather bag of coins and a solid gold chain and medallion. He hung the chain around his neck tucking the medallion under his shirt.

You never know, he said to himself. *Gold can be a handy thing to have.*

He closed the chest, and as a precaution, piled work clothes on top of it to help hide it.

He moved thoughtfully through the house, looking here and there for anything he might add to the travel sack.

The bag of coins he stuffed deep into the sack, the other things he packed into the box.

I think I'd better put 'Eilaanan Tok Häfina' on top, he said to himself. *That way, I can get the cloak quickly if I need it.*

Somehow, Nemo knew he would need it.

Just as he began to leave the kitchen a disturbing thought stopped him.

What am I going to tell Quasar and Brittany? he asked himself.

Nemo only shook his head slowly in answer.

What will they say if I tell them I came because I had a nightmare?

Without more thought, he grabbed the loaf of bread he had baked the night before, a tin of black tea and a small round of soft Morning Cheese.

“I’ll just tell them I brought them breakfast,” he said aloud, only half satisfied with his plan.

With practiced hands, he fed and watered his horse, saddled her, and rode off to find Quasar and Brittany. He never noticed that five sets of eyes watched his every move.

As he rode toward the main road, five elves came out from hiding. They stood relaxed and perfectly still. Their arms were extended slightly at their sides, palms up. They faced the path Nemo had just ridden. As one voice, they softly sang a song of safety and blessing.

Sulanish ä pedani toor ma beaaena.

Sulanish ä pedani sal e salenä.

Eilaanan Eilaanan illushea maggñis nôvñ

Eilaanan Eilaanan tabor navin beain sa

Sulanish ä pedani sal e salenä.

Oothar neama tan ehano tan ebano

Nemo thought for a moment he heard something, and smelled a familiar, sweet fragrance, but his mind pushed it aside. He had one thought:

Quasar needs my help.

Nemo rode as if in a fog. He didn't see the beautiful rising sun, the emerald trees, or even the familiar road to Quasar's ranch. He could only see the nightmare in his mind's eye.

Over and over he heard Quasar's cry for help.

"Hurry, Nemo! Hurry" came Quasar's urgent cry, echoing in his mind, again and again.

Nemo was fortunate that his horse knew the way to Quasar's ranch. After years of repeated travel, she needed no help getting there. He was also fortunate the ranches were adjacent to one another.

Even though there were miles of land between the ranch houses, this morning the distant was traveled as if it were nothing. Before Nemo even realized it, his horse had made the turn onto the gate road.

Nemo suddenly left his dream for the real-life visit he hoped would be joyful.

“Good morning Brittany” he said, practicing a casual, happy voice. “I brought you breakfast. Is Quasar in the barn?”

He kicked his horse to quicken their pace.

“Good morning you two. I hope you don’t mind an early morning visit.” He tried adding a laugh. It was flat and false.

“It’s such a beautiful morning, I thought I’d ride over and bring you breakfast. Is anyone hungry?”

Nemo groaned.

The truth is always best, he reminded himself. *I’ll just tell them about my nightmare.*

As the ranch house came into view, Nemo’s sense of foolishness grew so great that he almost turned around to go home.

When they’ve finished laughing at me, at least we can all have a nice breakfast, he thought. The thought gave him little comfort.

Without any direction from Nemo, the horse turned to go to the back of the ranch house, nearest the kitchen door and the barn. Nemo pulled the reins sharply and brought them to a stop near the front door.

“Today, we will knock on the front door” he said aloud, as if the horse needed an explanation.

Leaving the horse untied, Nemo slowly walked up the wide porch steps that lead to the front door. The wood creaked with each step. Nemo grimaced at the noise and tried doubly hard to walk silently on his toes.

He stood for what seemed like hours before knocking on the door. When it came, his knock was so weak that it barely made any noise. No one could hear it in the house.

Nemo’s horse whinnied and stamped the ground as if she was impatient with him.

“Alright,” he said aloud, as if answering his horse’s complaint.

“Good morning. I hope I didn’t wake you,” he said lightly, giving himself one last practice.

Nemo breathed deeply and banged loudly on the front door. Then he waited for what seemed a lifetime.

Nemo strained to hear any sign of movement from within the ranch house. He knocked again.

Nothing.

“They’re still asleep!” he said, looking at his horse. The horse shook his head and snorted.

“How would you know?” said Nemo.

After knocking again and hearing nothing in response, Nemo said,

“They’re probably in the kitchen and can’t hear me. I know, you wanted to go to the kitchen in the first place. Fine!”

The horse just stared at Nemo with her large brown eyes.

Nemo began walking slowly along the porch that surrounded the house. The wooden floor boards occasionally creaked in protest of his weight.

“He needs to fix that,” complained Nemo at the noise.

As he walked, Nemo carefully glanced through windows to see if he could detect any movement within. The white lace curtains Brittany had made didn’t help the view, but Nemo was sure no one was moving within the house. The horse quietly plodded along following her master around the house, never getting ahead of him or too far behind.

After what felt like forever, Nemo arrived at the kitchen door. As he was about to turn and

knock, something white caught his eye. It was less than half the size of a man, flat and almost square. It lay in the dirt a few yards from the barn door.

Nemo stared at it not yet sure what it was. The hair on the back of his neck tingled with fear.

He turned and opened the kitchen door without knocking. Poking his head inside he shouted,

“Good morning you two. I hope you don’t mind an early morning visit. It’s such a beautiful morning! I brought breakfast. Is anyone hungry?”

He closed his eyes, shook his head and sighed heavily at himself.

“Hello?” he tried again.

There was no reply.

“Quasar” he shouted loudly. “Where are you? Is everything OK? You wouldn’t believe the dream I had.”

Still, there was no response.

Nemo stepped into the kitchen.

Everything looked normal, at first. Then he noticed that the tea kettle was on the floor lying in a large spill of water. A chair was overturned and a knife lay beside it on the floor.

“Something’s very wrong” he whispered.

Nemo slowly backed out of the kitchen and walked down the back porch steps. He started to move toward the white thing lying near the barn, then stopped and walked quickly to his horse.

Had he thought of it, he might have opened his sack and put on the Elfin Cloak of Hiding. If there really was danger nearby, it would have made him invisible. But he did not think of it.

Nemo reached up to his saddle and untied his bow and quiver of arrows. He had used the king’s coil of rope to tie them. Its knot all but slipped off the saddle at his touch.

Nemo put his arm through the coil and draped it over his shoulder. He hung the quiver over his head and down his back. Then, in one graceful movement, he strung the bow and held it with an arrow at the ready.

His horse whinnied and stamped the ground.

“Shhh,” Nemo whispered. “We need to be quiet.”

As if she understood, the horse became perfectly still.

Slowly, carefully looking from left to right, Nemo moved toward the white thing lying in the dirt. When he was within three yards of it he stopped and stared. Suddenly, he ran to it and kneeling, picked it up.

“Brittany, what has happened?” he cried.

He lifted the white cloth near to his face and inspected it carefully.

In his hands he held Brittany’s favorite apron. She had worn it every morning since she and Quasar had returned from their honeymoon.

“Brittany, what has happened?” he asked again. There was a little blood on the apron.

Nemo gently put it back down and stood. He fitted arrow to string and tested the bow by pulling the arrow halfway to his cheek.

“I’m ready for anything,” he assured himself.

Nemo looked toward the house and the kitchen door. Everything was quiet. He scanned the gate road and the ranchlands beyond. There was no movement or telltale cloud of dust.

Slowly, Nemo turned his attention to the barn door. For the first time he noticed it was unlatched and slightly ajar.

Quasar would never leave his barn door open, thought Nemo. "Something's very wrong" he whispered to himself.

Slowly and silently, as the elves had taught him, Nemo moved to the barn door. Without a sound or any sign of movement, Nemo peered into the barn for an instant and then quickly pulled his head back out.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember what he had seen in that instant.

The barn was dark and still. Small beams of morning light pierced though a few cracks in the barn wall. A cow stood patiently within her stall. The stalls further in may or may not have been empty; it was too dark to tell.

Nemo poked his head in for a better look.
Nothing.

He opened the door just enough to squeeze into the barn. No matter how he tried, it still squeaked loudly. He stood motionless just inside the barn with the door to his back, arrow at the ready.

Slowly, Nemo panned the barn from right to left. His bow moved in sync with his head. A slight movement at his right caught his eye. He quickly pulled the arrow and took aim.

A chicken quietly walked out from the shadows, stopping to scratch for the occasional bit of grain or bug that would make up her breakfast.

Nemo relaxed the bow and took a deep breath. As he did, his glance moved upward and then froze.

Something was hanging high up from the barn's rafters. In the darkness it was hard to tell what it was, but Nemo knew it should not be there.

Without moving his eyes, Nemo lifted his left foot and pushed backwards to open the barn door. As the door swung fully open light streamed into the barn.

Nemo took a step or two into the barn, trying to make sense of what he could see hanging from the rafters.

"No!" he said aloud.

He took another step into the barn, trying to get a better view.

Suddenly, though his mind fought against the image, he knew what he was seeing.

"No, it can't be," he cried.

Dropping his bow and quiver Nemo ran to the center of the barn and looked up. There was no mistaking it.

Hanging by a rope tied to his hands, was Quasar. His arms were stretched painfully above his head, shoulders pulled out of joint. Blood oozed from his ears. His eyes were black and blue and swollen shut. His mouth was stuffed with a bloody rag.

“Quasar,” shouted Nemo. “Quasar, I came as quickly as I could.”

There was no change in Quasar, no response, no movement, no sign of life.

“Quasar, who did this?” screamed Nemo.

He slumped to his knees on the floor of the barn.

“Quasar, you can’t be dead! You can’t be dead,” cried Nemo.



The dull pain in her head grew as she fully regained consciousness. The dank, stale air was almost too much for her to bear.

“Ohhh” she cried out loud.

As she tried to move, pain shot from her wrists up through her arms and exploded into her brain.

Now I remember, she thought, as the pain cleared her mind.

“Quasar, help me!” she tried to scream.

Quickly she discovered that her mouth was stuffed with dirty rags. They tasted of blood and barnyard dirt.

A coarse bag was tied around her head making it impossible for her to see anything. It was almost equally impossible to breath. Her hands were tied tightly behind her back.

“Quasar” she cried.

Tears flowed down Brittany’s beautiful face, now soiled and bruised.

“This has got to be a nightmare,” she said to herself. *“I’ll wake up any minute.”*

But it wasn’t and she didn’t. In time, she realized it was no dream.

By lying very still and breathing slowly and deeply, the pain in Brittany’s head began to subside. She learned that if she didn’t fight against the ropes, her wrists wouldn’t hurt either. In this way, she began to regain her strength and her will to live.

What is that noise? she suddenly asked herself.

“A horse,” she said, answering her own question. “That’s the sound of a horse pulling a wagon”

Suddenly, she realized she was riding in the back of a wagon surrounded by various sacks and boxes that were piled around and on top of her.

“Now I remember,” she sighed. “Oh Quasar,” she cried. “You shouldn’t have tried to fight them. There were just too many.”

Flashes of memory shot through Brittany’s mind. She had barely heard footsteps on the porch before the men came crashing into the kitchen.

“At least I hit one of them real good with the tea kettle,” she said smiling to herself. It hurt to smile.

She remembered seeing the man go down, and then screaming for Quasar. She saw at least seven of them in the kitchen. The first thing she remembered was their smell. They reeked of a combination of sweat, strong drink and spicy perfume.

They were big men, all with long oily black hair and strange tattoos on their faces; patterns of dots and dashes made with blue ink.

As they dragged Brittany into the yard, she saw at least five more. She fought hard, but the three that held her were more than strong enough to keep her from escaping. They roughly pulled her hands behind her back and tried to tie them.

“That’s when I bit *The Stupid One*,” she said, slightly satisfied.

The Stupid One, as she named him, slapped her again and again in response to being bit. He continued without mercy, until one who seemed to be the leader yelled for him to stop.

“Idiot,” the leader cried. “Don’t you remember who she is for?”

The Stupid One stopped the abuse, but again pulled her arms behind her back with a vengeance. He tied them so tightly that her fingers lost their feeling.

“Rhala’nn does not tolerate his women being damaged. Any mark you have made on her had better be healed by the time we get home or you will pay with pain.”

The Stupid One loosened the ropes on Brittany’s wrists just a little.

I don't know who this Rhala'nn is thought Brittany as she remembered the details of her kidnaping. *But I am certainly NOT one of his women!*

Her thoughts quickly returned to the last time she saw Quasar.

Quasar had come running from the barn when he heard Brittany's screams. The last thing she remembered was five or six men ganging up on Quasar. He fought wildly and for a while it looked like he could prevail. Finally, the leader tired of the sport and casually walked over to help his men.

He knocked Quasar to the ground with a big club. The others kicked Quasar again and again.

"Stop. Stop!" Brittany cried.

Rough hands stuffed rags into her mouth and covered her head with a bag.

The last thing she saw was Quasar lying bloody and motionless.



How long Nemo remained collapsed on the barn floor, mourning for Quasar, he will

never know, but it was the creak of the barn door that finally got his attention.

Hearing the noise behind him, he opened his eyes and slowly lifted his head. As he did, he was shocked to see three shadows moving up and over the ground where he was kneeling. There was no doubt that someone was standing in the light that was coming through the open barn door; three ‘someones’ to be exact.

Moving only his eyes, Nemo glanced to his left and to his right.

Great! he said to himself as he saw the bow and quiver laying out of reach to his right.

At least you could be wearing the cloak he silently chided himself.

The shadows stopped moving.

“Why would you be needing the cloak?” came a bright, familiar voice.

“The danger’s past. They’ve been gone for at least an hour, I think.”

Nemo jumped up at the voice, and spun around.

Standing in the bright sunlight and framed by the open barn door stood the last person Nemo would ever expect to see, and two others whom he had never seen before.

“Lane Son O’Lancel!” shouted Nemo.

He ran to the elf and hugged him tightly; knocking a feathered cap from the elf’s head.

“And who else would it be?” replied the elf. His smile brightened the entire barn.

“Nemo, Lord of Silverglade and dragon-slayer” said Lane rather formally. “I would like to introduce my sons.”

The elf proudly motioned to the two elves that stood to his right.

The young elves moved their right hands over their hearts, in elfin fashion, and bowed deeply; then they spoke,

“I am Oak Son O’Lane” said the one standing nearest his father.

“I am Ash Son O’Lane” said the other.

They both sounded and looked exactly alike.

“We’re twins” they said together, laughing, and then they bowed deeply again.

Twins they were, both with bright green eyes, fair skin and golden blond hair that was thick, wavy, and hung just above their shoulders.

“Don’t you think we should be helping Quasar?” asked Lane with a nod toward the rafters. “I think he’s hung there long enough”.

“Do you think he is alive?” ask Nemo, expecting the worse.

“Alive he is” answered the elf, looking up. “But just barely. He stands at the edge of the other side. It will take strong elfin healing to bring him back.”

With scarcely a nod from his father, Oak immediately turned and ran from the barn.

“Your rope would be helpful”, said Lane, plainly.

“Yes, yes of course” answered Nemo.

He pickup up the coil from where he had dropped it and handed it to the elf.

“Is this the one from the king?” asked the elf, taking the rope in both hands. He gazed in wonder at it as he spoke.

Nemo nodded.

Lane Son O’Lance handed Ash the rope and glanced up to where Quasar hung. Without a word, Ash bounded up the barn walls. In a flash, he was sitting atop the beam on which Quasar was tied.

Nemo stood and stared mutely. He had never seen anyone, elfin, human, or anything else, climb straight up a wall.

Lane smiled broadly at the expression on Nemo's face.

"He's a particularly good climber", laughed Lane.

Without instruction or comment from his father, Ash tied the rope over and around Quasar's arms and shoulders. When satisfied, he looped the rope over the top of the rafter, and then threw it to his father.

Lane caught the rope and said to Nemo, "Would you like to do the honors?"

Everything was moving much too fast for Nemo. When he didn't answer, Lane said, "Very well then, may I use your bow?"

Nemo nodded silently.

Lane picked up the bow and an arrow.

"Here now", he said handing the rope to Nemo. "Hang on to this tightly, and don't let him drop." Lane spoke loudly and slowly, trying to make sure Nemo understood.

"Are you ready?" Lane asked as he put arrow to string.

Nemo nodded. But he really didn't understand.

The bow was much too big for the elf, but nonetheless, he prepared to shoot.

Ash scampered down from above as quickly as he had ascended.

Lane smoothly pulled back the string and took aim at the rope that tied Quasar to the rafter.

Ash grabbed the end of the rope that hung behind Nemo.

At the last moment, Nemo came to his senses and wrapped the rope twice around his hand. He planted both feet firmly on the floor, leaned back until the rope was tight, and nodded again that he was ready. This time he was.

The arrow flew fast and true, sticking into the rafter above Quasar's head. The razor sharp tip severed the rope that tied Quasar to the wood. He fell, but was quickly caught by the elfin rope.

Lane put down the bow and grabbed the rope adding his strength to the task. Slowly, the three of them lowered Quasar to the ground. He landed as softly as possible.

Nemo, Lane and Ash ran to Quasar to see if he still lived. It looked bad. Dried blood was caked in his ears. His face was pale and his eyes were swollen shut.

Nemo quickly removed the rags that were stuffed in Quasar's mouth. He held his hand

lightly against Quasar's mouth, trying to detect the slightest breath.

Nemo just shook his head.

Just then, Oak ran into the barn, carrying a wondrous crystal orb hanging from a stick that was wrapped in tooled silver. The lamp gave off a strange blue light.

"Just in time! I knew you could do it" announced Lane. "Thank you Oak."

The young elf blushed slightly at his father's praise. He walked to Lane and handed him the stick and orb.

Lane stared affectionately into the crystal. The light seemed to pulsate and change hues; blue to green to yellow and back to blue.

"Nebeth-el," whispered Lane. "We need your help. He needs your healing."

Suddenly, a tone started vibrating from within the orb. As the sound raised and lowered in pitch, the light coming from the orb ebbed and flowed in brightness, too.

"No Nebeth-el, he is elfin-friend" said Lane, as if correcting some comment from the starlet, followed by, "*Eilaanan amii maggnis*," to make sure she understood. Then he added, "He is Quasar, dragon-slayer."

Immediately, the light grew brighter and changed to a warm golden hue.

While his father was dealing with the temperamental starlet, Ash moved quietly to Quasar and knelt beside him.

Ash used his hands to dig a shallow hole in the dirt next to Quasar. He took a pouch from his belt and extracted dried leaves from it. He crushed the leaves and dropped them into the hole. Then, taking a small crystal vial from the pouch he poured some of its contents into the dirt and mixed it with the leaves, making a muddy paste.

The vial was not mere crystal. It was carved from a single diamond and contained a rare elfin healing elixir.

Ash Son O' Lane tasted the muddy paste, thought for a moment and then added more leaves. When satisfied, he dripped some of the liquid from the vial directly into Quasar's ears, and wiped off the dried blood as best he could.

Ash then scooped the muddy paste into his little hands, spoke a word or two in Elfin, and gently packed Quasar's ears with the paste.

"What are you doing?" cried Nemo, alarmed to see the young elf packing mud into Quasar's ears.

"It is the only thing that will help," answered Lane, in defense of his son.

"Ash is already a gifted healer," added Oak with a smile so bright it could light up the dark side of the moon.

"If your friend is to live, we must act quickly, said Lane, with some urgency in his voice.

It is a blessing Oak was able to bring a starlet," he said, looking at the crystal orb.

The light coming from the orb became tinged in red and a new, angry, vibration could be felt as well as heard.

"And not just any starlet," Lane was quick to add. "This is Nebeth-el, a most remarkable starlet; a beautiful starlet and a powerful one, too."

The vibration became more like the purr of a contented cat rather than an angry growl, and the golden light returned without the red tint.

Lane brought the crystal lamp closer to Quasar. The light grew brighter. Quasar lay still, his skin a sickly greyish white.

"Nebeth-el, please," whispered Lane to the light, "will you help the dragon-slayer?"

In a moment there came from the orb a sound unlike any Nemo had ever heard. It was quiet, beautiful, and powerful.

The tone resonated throughout the barn. Golden light fell from the orb like snowflakes and a fragrance filled the barn making it smell clean and fresh like a forest after a spring rain.

Still, Quasar did not move.

Ash took his diamond vial and carefully poured a single drop between Quasars lips.

Slowly, a slight blush brightened his lips and spread down his chin and neck. The color then arose in Quasar's cheeks.

"It is working," declared Ash, as he stepped back from Quasar.

Lane brought the orb even closer. The light became so bright that it was painful for Nemo to watch. He squinted and shielded his eyes with his hand.

Ash and Oak stood with their arms at their sides, palms up, and began to sing softly. Though they sang in Elfinmuse, Nemo could tell they did not sing in unison. Each used his own

words and each sang his own notes, but together they formed an astounding harmony.

Suddenly, Quasar moaned.

"You see," smiled Lane. "He lives!"

Quasar's body shuddered and he took a long deep breath. Without further warning, his eyes fluttered open.

Lane stepped back, holding Nebeth-el as high in the air as he could. Her light bathed Quasar in healing warmth. Nemo bent down near his friend.

"Are you all right?" whispered Nemo, a frown of worry creasing his face.

Quasar tried to focus his eyes on the voice. Slowly, his vision returned.

"Who are you?" asked Quasar slowly. He stared blankly into the face of his best friend.

Nemo was so shocked that he moved back a step or two and made no reply.

"Don't you remember me?" asked Nemo, trying hard to stay calm and to not feel hurt.

Quasar just stared at him and frowned.

"Do you know your name?" asked Lane coming closer.

As Quasar shifted his gaze from Nemo to Lane, his eyes grew very large, but he said nothing.

"Do you know where you are?" asked Lane.

Quasar rubbed his eyes, but again, made no reply.

"Do you know what happened?" continued Lane.

Quasar looked from Lane to Nemo and then up at the rafters in the barn. He slowly sat up and proceeded to look intently all around the barn, stopping his gaze for just a moment, on Oak and Ash.

Quasar again moved his gaze to the rafters. His eyes grew wide and wild in alarm.

Suddenly, he cried out, "Brittany!"