

CHAPTER 1

Home Again

"Fire and ice, fire and ice," said Quasar aloud. "What a way to die."

Thoughts of last night's dragon fire and the ice cold pond that had saved their lives filled Quasar's mind. The fact that they had survived a dragon attack was wonder enough, but to then find their horses was mystery upon wonder. And, not only had they found their horses alive and ready to ride, they had also found Nemo's dog Blade and the sheep he had left alone in Silverglade.

What are the odds, thought Quasar.

It was the kind of thing about which legends are made. It was the kind of thing about which books are written. The kind of thing parents tell their children on long rainy nights. It was mystery enough for a life time.

Quasar smiled as he repeated, "Fire and ice, fire and ice. What a way to die."

Quasar looked around for Nemo. He was still working the sheep.

"It sure beats dying of boredom," said Quasar. He shouted to get Nemo's attention.

"You've been at this forever," complained Quasar. "Let your men care for the sheep. Come with me and get some rest."

Nemo didn't answer. Quasar knew he wouldn't answer or rest. Not yet. Not until he had finished.

"Well then," he continued, "At least let me help you."

Still, no answer. He wasn't finished yet.

Quasar watched his friend lovingly check each sheep for injury. Nemo's hands skillfully probed their wool, gently surveying the soft skin for any cut or burn. His eyes scanned each sheep for any sign of damage. Even though he was exhausted, Nemo would not turn the sheep over to his hired helpers until he had personally examined each one.

Quasar understood. Nemo would withhold nothing while tending the sheep he loved. It was this special, self-sacrificial care that earned both Quasar and Nemo such highly prized flocks. It was also responsible for giving them a reputation for being the finest shepherds ever known in the village and beyond.

It was simple, really. They were the best because they loved the most; a love made manifest by hard work. Love without doing is empty. This they had learned from Grandmother Tata. Love and hard work were part of their heritage, part of life.

Quasar sat on a nearby stone wall and looked around. Like Silverglade, Nemo's ranch lands were prized, admired, and coveted. They were unsurpassed by anything between the village and the sea. But it had not always been so. Quasar closed his eyes and remembered the story he had heard Grandmother Tata tell a hundred times.

When Nemo's family first settled in the area this land was dry and useless. Even though it was flat, a valuable thing for farmers and ranchers, it was also plagued by an overabundance of rocks. No one claimed the land.

Being poor and landless, Nemo's family lived and worked in the village. Nemo's grandfather, Romm, was the youngest of five sons. Like his brothers, he worked hard. But he was especially ambitious. He saw this land, not as it was, but as it could be. Romm decided to claim this unowned land. It took him three years to save the few coins needed for the claim tax.

"Why do it now?" asked Romm's mother.

"You should wait," suggested his father.

"You have no extra money for supplies or tools."

"I cannot wait," Romm answered. "You both know Sasha?" he asked, his voice sharply edged.

"The shepherd's son?" asked his mother.

"Yes, we know him," said his father. "He is a good lad. He is your friend."

"He wants to make a claim on the land, too," said Romm quietly.

Romm's parents looked at one another. His mother shook her head slowly. "Is not a good friend worth more than poor land?" she asked, a frown signaling her opinion.

"It is the only free land within a two-week ride from here. I cannot stay in the village. If I do not get the land now, I will have to move away." And so it was decided.

The villagers laughed at him when Romm claimed the rocky land. Four times in the past this land had been claimed. Each time the would-be owners had failed. The enemy was time.

Once a claim was made, the law gave the owner only three years to prove the claim. He had

to build a home, work the land, and pay a second claim tax. If he failed, if he could not live on the land and pay the second tax; he forfeited everything.

Romm worked hard. He knew that the soil was rich. He could see what the land might become. His brothers and parents were proud of him. They helped all they could. Romm wisely chose to build on the same spot as the last man who had tried and failed.

"It is bad luck," his father declared, when he saw the place chosen by his son.

"No, Father," answered Romm respectfully. "It is good thinking. The land is already cleared here. Timber is already cut. And I can plant in the field that was already started. The sod there is young and thin. It will be easier to plow." Romm looked to his father for approval.

He shook his head and stood silently for a moment. Then, raising his eyes slowly he said, "It is your land, son. It is your choice." He paused; a slight smile escaped from his taut lips, and then continued, "I will help you all I can."

Their eyes met and locked for an instant. In that moment, the father accepted his son's vision and took it as his own.

By the second year they had built a solid house and barn, and had cleared a small field for growing crops. But it was not enough. Romm needed to sell the crop to pay the claim tax and prove the land. But he also needed the crop to feed himself through the winter. At the end of the second winter there was nothing left to sell. Romm had only one desperate year left to earn the money.

Early that spring, Sasha came to visit. It was not unusual. Sasha had been one of the most faithful of the friends who came offering help. He had spent much time building the house and planting crops. He never mentioned that he, too, had wanted to claim this land. Now, with the warmth of spring, Sasha brought five baby lambs and six gold coins. He also brought an idea.

"You must work with your head to get ahead," Sasha announced firmly. "Use these to prove the claim," he said handing the coins to Romm.

Sasha's smile sparkled as brightly as the gold. Romm's mouth opened mutely in wonder. He stared at the money in his hand. It was more than he needed.

Suspicion began worming its lethal way into his heart. A dark voice within began to surface. *What cunning is this? What does he really want?* Romm looked at his friend, eyes hard and ungrateful.

Sasha knelt, nuzzling the lambs. His mind raced. He had never expected anything but a joyful response. This was not as he had hoped.

Sasha looked up and met Romm's severe eyes with as open and honest a face as ever graced a man. He continued simply, "Take the gold as a gift. When the land is fully yours, sell me half in exchange for these five lambs. You can even have them now, in good faith."

Sasha smiled, waiting for a response. He stood and handed a squiggling ball of wool to Romm. Romm scratched the lamb's underbelly as it bleated to be released. Yet still he could not speak.

His pride battled against his common sense. *This is not what you planned,* said the dark inner voice. *You need all of the land. You can still do it by yourself.* It was a lie, but self-deceit is the easiest of all lies to believe.

If you don't accept this offer," whispered his honest self, *you will lose the land. He has always been a good and honest friend. Trust him.*

Pride again began to rail against the thought. *Just work harder. You can do it. You can't really trust anyone.*

Wisdom countered, *If Sasha wanted to, he could wait a few months and claim the land when you fail. The inner voice grew louder. His offer is good, generous. Don't be stupid. Take it!*

Wisdom prevailed.

Romm looked at his field, his house, his barn, and then at the lamb in his hands. He released her and she ran kicking to join the others. He then looked into Sasha's friendly eyes and smiled.

"Half of something is better than all of nothing," he said quietly. "There is enough land for both of us. You have already worked almost as much as me."

Sasha stood and roared in laughter. "Done," he shouted, slapping Romm on the back.

"Done!" wheezed Romm in return.

And so, Sasha and Romm did together what neither could have done alone. Those five lambs began the flock that now numbered in the thousands. Romm kept the upper land, including Silverglade. He sold the land along the river to

Sasha. This land now belonged to Quasar, for Sasha was Quasar's grandfather.

Hard work and planning transformed wastelands into fertile fields. In time, both Sasha and Romm married and were blessed with children. Their children carried on the tradition of good, hard work. Over the years the families cleared rocks from acre upon acre, using them to build stone fences. The fences protected the land from erosion and the sheep from wild animals and thieves. Now, for miles in all directions, the fences marked sections of rich green pastureland. Each section was made large enough to house one hundred sheep. That made it easier to graze, count and care for the sheep. *Work with your head to get ahead* became more than just the family motto; it became a way a life.

Through careful and skilled engineering, Romm managed to reroute the river. From it, he dug several waterways. Water was all that was needed to turn the dry barren land into useful green pastures.

As time flowed, Sasha and Romm grew old and passed the land to their eldest sons. In time, these became the fathers of Quasar and Nemo, and were later killed by the dragon's fire.

Quasar opened his eyes and looked around at the old stone walls, the pastures, the sheep. This was good land; theirs was a good life. He and Nemo still worked hard, but hard work is part of life. Looking toward Nemo, Quasar noticed that he had examined most of the one hundred sheep that had come back from Silverglade and his men were now leading them away.

Quasar searched through his bags for the leather flask he always carried. It was one of the few possessions to survive the fire that killed his family. He had found it in the cellar under his burned ranch house. It had belonged to Sasha, and was old even when he was a boy. Quasar kept the flask full of linseed oil. There are a thousand uses for the precious oil. Soon, Quasar knew, Nemo would be ready to accept his help. He wanted to be ready.

Quasar ran his fingers lightly over the old leather. The flask was beautifully tooled with pictures and names of wild roots and herbs useful in healing. Some of the inscriptions were a mystery to him, being written in an unknown script. Most of the writings, however, could be read or at least interpreted. They sparked in Quasar an interest in

science and a hunger for knowledge of the healing arts.

His mother had been a healer. Quasar often remembered her pouring oil from the flask, mixing herbs and powders, caring for the sick and injured. Even now, the smell of certain potions would conjure up for him powerful memories of her.

After the ranch fire Quasar committed himself to mastering the healing arts. He had worked diligently, learning all he could. Now, some thought of him almost as a wizard. He wasn't. He was just skilled at remembering symptoms and remedies. It was a skill that came from hard work. More than once Quasar had journeyed long roads just for a chance to speak with an old traveling healer. Some whom he met knew less than he did. All whom he met were careful with what they shared. But the effort was worth it. Several times Quasar had been entrusted with a rare secret, but always first, he had to prove himself skilled enough to be worthy.

Once he met a strange old man, bent and gnarled with age. He was no ordinary healer. The man tested him and probed him with questions. In this, Quasar surpassed his own limits. After three

days and nights of experiments, tests, and discussions, the man offered to apprentice young Quasar.

"You shall know power beyond your wildest imaginings," the man had promised after staring long into Quasar's eyes. It was exciting.

"Very few have ever heard this offer," he added sharply when Quasar failed to respond.

The man waited for Quasar to speak. Something deep within the boy kept him silent. The tension between the two grew thick.

Finally the man said, "You have twenty-four hours to decide." His tone had darkened.

After mumbling and puttering in the laboratory, the old man left Quasar alone. He had a large leather-bound book which he carefully locked in a chest after each use. This time, however, the man carelessly left it on the workbench. Or at least it seemed careless.

Quasar looked at the book. *He never actually told me not to read it*, thought Quasar.

A lie can be so close to the truth.

Quasar ignored the warnings of his inner self. He wanted to see the book more than he wanted to be honorable, more than he wanted to be true, more

than anything. The thought of the book consumed him.

Quickly, carefully Quasar moved to the door and listened, making sure the man was gone. His heart pounding wildly Quasar slowly approached the table on which the book lay. He looked around making doubly sure no one could see him.

If you have to sneak around to do it, it can't be good, said a voice in his head. It was one of the things his father had tried to teach him.

Quasar ignored the words of his father.

This is different, he said to himself, and in believing his own lie, committed himself to do what he knew was wrong.

His hands trembled as he slowly opened the book. Its cover was old and heavy. He cringed at the sound of the book's hinges. As he opened it, a strange musty smell assaulted his nostrils. His fingers tingled as he turned to the first page.

On it was a beautifully ornate picture of a young woman standing near a gnarled black tree. Quasar stared at her expression. Something in her eyes disturbed him. It was as if she was about to do something she knew was wrong. Quasar caught a glimpse of himself in the reflection of a small mirror

that lay on the cluttered table. His expression was exactly the same. He glanced back at the picture before turning the page. Quasar never noticed the serpent coiled within the branches of the tree.

The book contained page after page of formulas, instructions, and diagrams. Quasar read all he could. He tried to memorize all that he saw.

Turning to a well worn section, Quasar stared in wonder. It was full of symbols like those on the old flask. Suddenly, he heard shuffled footsteps outside. He didn't have time to learn the mystery of the flask, but he had learned other things.

There was power here, real power. Quasar could feel it. He wanted it. Yet, something about the man made his flesh crawl. Something about the power, the man and the book made him feel dirty. A battle raged within. Quickly, Quasar closed the book. His fingers burned, almost painfully, as he released it and moved to the opposite side of the room.

The old man entered and went straight to the book. Tenderly he fingered its cover, then, struggling with its weight, picked it up, shuffled to the chest and locked it away. He never said a word.

He never even looked at Quasar. Mumbling to himself, the bent old man left the room.

After spending a sleepless night, Quasar arose to meet the dawn. Facing the rising sun, he prayed for wisdom. Bathed in the light of a new day, he remembered the sweet spirit of his mother and the pure integrity of his father. He knew they would not have liked this man. He did not like the man. He did not like the book. The battle ended as he made up his mind. Quasar packed his things and left, tactfully declining the offer of apprenticeship.

Later he discovered that the man practiced the black arts. Quasar never heard his name, but he did hear that the man could harm more than he could heal. After that, Quasar worked very hard to forget all that he had read in the forbidden book. Sometimes, late at night, he would remember the woman and the black tree. It was never a pleasant memory. He wished he had never touched the book.

A sudden noise ended his daydreams. Nearby, a young boy was bringing a stubborn ram to Nemo. Quasar jumped off of the stone wall. It was time to go to work.

"Janson," called Quasar to the young man. "When you are done there, please bring me a bowl."

The boy ran quickly to help. He, and all the young shepherds, were always eager to learn new secrets from Quasar. After all, knowledge of healing might one day save a life.

While he waited for the bowl, Quasar took some dried herbs and spices from a small pouch. Carefully, he surveyed the top of the wall and dislodged two flat stones. These he used to grind the herbs and spices into powder. He also added some mold and roots gathered fresh from the pasture itself.

"Did you see the sky last night?" asked Janson as he returned with the bowl. "It was full of fire! Some even thought it was the end of the world."

It was almost the end of the world for me, thought Quasar, but he said nothing. The boy handed him the bowl.

"I told them I thought it was a battle."

The boy had forgotten all about learning medicinal arts and science.

"Did you know there was a large army camped near town?" Janson continued excitedly.

"I'll wager a year's earnings that army met another in battle. I've heard that some armies use large machines to throw fire and stones. Some say there are weapons that shoot great iron balls with a flash of fire and the sound of thunder. That's what I think it was last night. Oh, I wish I could have seen it close up."

Janson finally took a breath.

Without comment, Quasar poured some oil into the bowl, and began mixing it with the powder. When it was ready, Quasar stood and began walking toward Nemo. Janson followed.

I never thought about the night sky, thought Quasar, his mind racing.

He stopped suddenly and turned to Janson. Looking down at the boy, he continued the silent monologue in his mind.

If the local boys saw the fire fight, then surely the battle with the dragon was also seen in town, and in the Lord Hiram's camp.

Quasar's silent stare made Janson feel uneasy.

"Janson, are you free to do something for me?" asked Quasar slowly, laboring with many thoughts at once.

"Yes, sir," replied Janson, excitement rising in his voice.

"You are right that there is an army camped near town, but it did not do battle last night. At least, I hope not. If I am right, we may be visited by messengers from that army."

"Really?" interrupted Janson.

"I want you to go the hilltop near Whiterock and climb the tallest tree you can," continued Quasar, making plans as he spoke. "Keep watch on the road from town until sundown."

Janson stared at Quasar. This was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him. Quasar paused before continuing.

"If you see anyone coming from town on the King's Highway, look to see if they carry a flag with twin black hawks."

"Twin black hawks?" whispered the boy, his voice tense with suspense.

"Yes," said Quasar patiently. "If they do, note the color of the flag and count the riders. When you are sure, come faster than gossip and find me or your master Nemo. Stop for no one else and tell no one else. Do you understand?"

Janson's eyes were opened wide in amazement. His mouth hung slightly open. He stood silent and motionless, stunned, as visions of flags, battle and glory swirled in his head. Quasar's gaze brought young Janson to his senses.

"Yes, yes I understand," he said. "I will watch from the highest tree. As soon as I see them, I will find you and tell you how many horsemen and the color of their flags. What about the foot soldiers? Do you want me to count the foot soldiers, too?" Janson was almost drunk with excitement.

"There will be no foot soldiers," Quasar explained calmly. "There may be no more than two or three horseman. But keep watch carefully. I want to be prepared if they come."

"I will not fail you, Quasar." Janson began running toward the road. "I knew there was a battle," he said to himself. "The others said 'No', but I knew." Janson was talking out loud. "Wait till I tell them about this."

"Janson!" shouted Quasar.

"Sir?" The young boy turned toward Quasar.

"Go to the stables. Tell whoever is there that I said you can use a horse."

"A horse! I get to ride a horse?" cried Janson. "Thank you, sir. I will take good care of it." The boy was ecstatic. Janson was a good rider, but too poor to have his own horse.

"I'm sure you will," answered Quasar. "And, please, would you also make sure my horse and Nemo's have been well cared for? They had a hard time last night."

"Yes, sir," answered Janson.

"And, Janson, one more thing"

"Yes, sir?"

"I will be staying at Nemo's ranch today. If you do see anyone from the army, come find me there."

"Yes, sir, at Nemo's ranch," said Janson as he ran toward the stables.

Quasar turned and started looking for Nemo. He definitely did not like being called, "sir."

"Your timing is perfect, as usual," called Nemo when he saw his friend. He had just finished checking the last sheep.

"Only seventeen are injured, and none of those injuries are bad; mostly minor burns and some cuts. They are over there."

Nemo pointed to a hastily erected pen containing seventeen sheep. None looked badly harmed.

"It is better then I could have hoped. It is a miracle, nothing less than a miracle," said Nemo with a smile.

Quasar gave the bowl of oil to Nemo as they walked to the pen. They began anointing the sheep's cuts and burns with oil. The spices and oil would help heal the burns and prevent infection. They also rubbed the unction around the sheep's eyes and snouts and poured it on their heads. The scent from the herbs would keep flies away. That, too, would keep the wounds clean and also help the sheep stay calm and comfortable.

"If that dragon wanted sheep, they would all be dead," whispered Quasar. He could barely bring himself to speak the words. "She didn't want them, she wanted us."

Nemo stopped working for a moment, looked up and nodded slowly to his friend.

"The miracle is that we are alive," continued Quasar. "Come on. Let's get some rest. I think we are going to need it."

Nemo agreed, but only after he had finished treating all seventeen sheep.

Quasar and Nemo arrived at the main house exhausted. Having eaten a welcomed meal in the field with the workers, they now both longed for warmth and sleep, even though it was still morning.

The main house was large and comfortable. Its thick stone walls kept out the winter cold. It even had real glass windows, which let in the heat and light of the sun, but kept out the chill. Quasar and Nemo ached for warmth. Their hands burned with cold as they stood before the hot kitchen stove.

The house was heated by small stoves and large fireplaces. Nemo had salvaged the stoves from the burned shell of his father's ranch-house. Nemo's mother had not liked the cold, so his father installed small stoves in each bedroom. This was a rare luxury, especially in light of the fact that there were five bedrooms upstairs and three downstairs.

When Romm originally built it, the downstairs portion of the house was heated by only one large fireplace. It was located in the Great Room, as it was now called. When Nemo's father enlarged the house, he added two new wings, each with its own fireplace. Again it was a luxury and a

tribute to the love Nemo's father had for his wife. He built the wings as a gift celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary.

One wing contained two guest bedrooms and a parlor. The other wing contained the maid's quarters and workrooms dedicated to various tasks, like sewing and weaving. After the house was destroyed, Nemo rebuilt it exactly as it had been. It was a way to remember and honor his family.

The house was big and beautiful, too big for Nemo alone. He rarely went upstairs; in fact, he lived mainly in the guest wing. The second guest bedroom was reserved for Quasar. Except for the kitchen and the Great Room, the rest of the house was mostly unused.

After warming up in the kitchen, Quasar and Nemo went to their bedrooms and collapsed. Sleep came immediately.

Color Key to the House of Hiram:

Rank in family	Name	Color	Duties	Married - Wife name
Father	Hiram	Pure White – aka – The Service of Light	Head of the House of Hiram	Married - Elisa
1 st son	Falcon	Blood Red – aka – The Talons	Elite Warrior Corps	Married - Cilantra
2 nd son	Tulmar	Fire Orange	Armor, Weapons, Metallurgy	Married - Blanche
3 rd son	Shank	Bright Yellow	Archers, long bows & cross bows	Married - Kami
4 th son	Kyler	Shimmering Silver	Cavalry and Lancers	
1 st daughter	Casandra	none	Help Queen Elisa at Court, engaged to Prince Aalon	
5 th son	Herald	Sky Blue	Flag-men, signal-men, messenger birds	
6 th son	Norrom	Dark Blue	Navy, shipping, transportation (land & sea)	
7 th son	Ram	Deep Purple	Machines of War, Catapults, Ramps, Cannon	
8 th son	Vine	Wine	Supplies, Food, Drink and Logistics	
9 th son	Reed	Forest Green – aka – Green Eyes	Guards, Sentries, Spys, and Internal Security	
10 th son	Gannon	Striped	Sciences, Medicines, History and Arts	

Lord Hiram's Camp layout

