

## CHAPTER ONE

“TWO ELVEN BROTHERS STOOD ON the bank of a great river, waiting for the battle they knew would either destroy them or change the course of their lives forever. No, that’s not right,” said Gilmar. He started over. “Once there were two brothers, awaiting their destiny on the banks of the river Rift...” He stopped, shook his head, and scowled in concentration at the flapping pavilion door. The middaring heat scorched through the thick blue fabric, and Gilmar’s mind tantalized him with memories of the cool stone academe walls he had left behind. He grimaced and decided to concentrate on a topic more important than the perspiration tickling the small of his back. “Two brothers waited at the edge of the Elven Empire...”

The elf seated at the desk beside Gilmar sighed. “Be quiet.”

Gilmar ignored the command. “I’ve got it! Two brothers faced their destiny across an ancient stone bridge. An army at their backs, the enemy in front, they stood side by side. One—you, Alastair—was tall, golden hair, handsome, popular, that sort of thing. The other was a little shorter, with a handsome, oval face, and dark, wavy hair—that’s me—whose clear green eyes scanned Faeryland...”

“You aren’t handsome. It won’t change our lives. And we aren’t on the banks of the Rift.”

“Well,” Gilmar said, “we’re close enough, aren’t we?”

“Please leave. Go torment someone else. Go find Idris.”

Gilmar returned his gaze to the paper on his knee and waggled the tip of his pen against his chin while mumbling the words he had scrawled. After a while he let out a groan. “Larky, writing a story is so hard. How do you start the thing?”

“Always start with dialogue. Now leave. Go help Idris. I have things to do.”

Because of the rising temperature inside the pavilion, Gilmar decided to break his long-standing rule of never doing what his brother Alastair told him. He left, clutching his paper and reciting to himself, “Once, there were two elves...no, two elven princes...no, just two brothers...”

Gilmar wandered past the rows of small green tents, dodging elven nobles and Elwarr until he found Idris directing preparations for the invasion, looking impervious to the heat and dust. Gilmar ambled up behind the elf, perched on a convenient rock, and smoothed a dust smudge off his manuscript. “Once there were two brothers,” he read, projecting his voice to give it a dramatic quality.

Idris whirled at the sound of Gilmar’s story, spotted the reader, and groaned. “What are you doing here? Go help Alastair do...something.”

“I just *was* helping him. He sent me to find you.” Gilmar waved his hand in a careless, airy gesture he admired and practiced frequently. “He probably thought I could help you and get you to work faster.”

“Oh did he,” said Idris, a grim light growing in his eyes. “Well then, go sit behind one of the rocks at the Rift and watch for faeries.”

“Watch for faeries?” Gilmar’s voice rose in indignation. “That’s one of the most ridiculous jobs you’ve ever come up with for me.”

“You could work on your story.” Idris turned away. “It should be nice and peaceful over there. The perfect writing atmosphere.”

“Nice and peaceful,” Gilmar muttered as he slid off his rock and wandered toward the river. “Nice and peaceful. I’m sick of nice and peaceful. Two brothers went to *war*...”



Gilmar found a comfortable seat between two of the monolithic boulders lining the banks of the river Rift. He tapped his pen against his chin and frowned at the rippling water. The layer of water lilies a few feet below the surface waved an invitation, and Gilmar wished he could risk a swim beside their beckoning fronds. If only the pallia weren’t so prevalent in the Rift, ready to drag victims into the river’s unmeasured depths. Gilmar rubbed his sleeve across his forehead, then stared at the damp streak on the cloth.

Since he was supposed to be watching for faeries, Gilmar let his gaze drift across the river to the opposite shore, where the dark wall of moss-dripping trees leaned out over the water, their long shadows turning it black beneath them. Somewhere over there were the faeries. Somewhere. And tomorrow the elves would invade. Gilmar couldn’t wait for his first glimpse of the strange, powerful creatures who looked so much like elves, but were such ominous mysteries.

The breeze wound its way around the boulders before dancing to the opposite bank and setting the trees and moss swaying. As Gilmar watched the long tendrils of moss and vines in their gentle swings, a flash of shining lavender appeared for a moment under the dismal trees, zipping along

before vanishing into the darkness.

Gilmar sat up and shivered as a contracting chill raised the hairs on his arms. Even after the heat, he hated the sensation of eerie cold. “Larky,” he muttered, and retraced his way through the trees to the camp.

“Idris,” Gilmar announced, spotting the elf with a group of Emdrin in the command pavilion and interrupting their discussion. “I saw one.”

“A faery?” Idris narrowed his grey eyes in suspicion.

“Yes.”

“Where?” Alastair looked up from the map he had continued to study when Gilmar entered.

“In Faeryland. On the other side of the Rift.” Gilmar selected an apple from a nearby fruit bowl, took a crunchy bite from its middle, and relished the sweet juice that had somehow stayed cool.

“They are supposed to be there,” said Alastair. “Honestly, Gilmar, must you purposely decry what little brains you possess?”

Idris gave Gilmar an exasperated smile. “Amendment of your assignment, Gilmar: ‘Watch for faeries in Elvendom.’”

With a cheerful grin to prove to himself he didn’t care, Gilmar left the tent and returned to his seat by the Rift. Sure of the loneliness and trusting the breeze not to betray him, Gilmar recited a revised edition of his story. “Once there were two brothers,” he told the lily pads. “The older one was perfect in every way, and his younger brother Gilmar couldn’t do anything right. Gilmar knew he would always be worthless.”



Gilmar had written two more pages when he first sensed it. Something was approaching him as he sat wedged between the stones. Gilmar’s pen slowed as he analyzed the feeling. Then,

with deliberation, he capped his pen, shoved it into his trousers pocket, and folded up the three pages that were his manuscript. He tugged off his boot and poked the pages into the secret pocket in the lining before pulling it back on.

He stood and inched around the rock. He could see nothing unnatural, nothing threatening. Gilmar realized how far from the camp he was, and the loneliness struck a cold lump in his stomach. The sun beat down on the rocks, casting deep shadows. Gilmar listened. The river swished in soft murmurs, and a bird flapped over his head. Both the forest around him and the trees across the Rift were still. Too still.

Gilmar's shiver was half anticipation, half apprehension. The same chill tingled over his scalp. He crept ahead, and stopped as he heard a soft slither behind him. Gilmar whirled, flattened himself against the stone, and stared back. Silence. He moved, step by step, sliding his hand over the rock, tracing its tiny hot cracks with his fingers. He had almost reached his original seat. Gilmar took a deep breath, and dashed around the curve of the stone.

He came nose to nose with a lavender-haired faery.

Gilmar froze. The faery let out a wild cry, and Gilmar's muscles jerked into movement. With his own yell echoing through the rocks to goad him, Gilmar spun and ran. He was sure the faery raced behind him, its sword ready for an efficient kill. Gilmar bolted past the trees and through the camp of green tents in a straight line for the command pavilion. The guards swished aside the tent entrance flaps, and Gilmar dove inside. He used Alastair's desk as a brace to stop his momentum and hung over it, panting.

His brother and the Emdrin glared.

"I saw one," Gilmar shouted.

"Where?" Alastair sounded skeptical.

“I met it by the rocks—it chased me back here—it tried to freeze me.”

“Nonsense. Faeries do not *try* to freeze anyone, either they do or they do not.” Alastair shot Idris a long suffering glance as the Emdrin exchanged nervous murmurings.

“Well, it was out to get me, I’m sure of that. It was spying on me from the rocks.” Gilmar went back to the fruit bowl and took a pear to soothe his nerves. “I might have *died*.”



Rinea dodged past the elven boulders, around trees, under branches, gasping in terror, clutching the neck of his lute as he held the instrument in front of him. Rinea knew the elf was behind him. He could hear its blade hissing as it tried to slash his back. The elf would kill and devour him. He just knew it. Rinea crossed the Bridge, too terrified to use a faery portal. An elven guard shouted, but Rinea didn’t bother to hide. He dove into the safety of the faery trees and peered back, ready to bolt, but his pursuer hadn’t followed him into Faeryland. Rinea tried to stop shaking, and couldn’t. He slung the lute over his shoulder and crouched down, arms around his knees, to stare through the hanging mosses at the Bridge.

“Here you are!”

Rinea jumped as the voice whooped in his ear.

“We’ve been looking for you.”

Rinea whirled as he rose to his feet. “He chased me. He tried to kill me.”

“Who did?” Rinea’s friend sobered up as he saw Rinea’s white face.

“An elf. He found me, and chased me all the way to the Bridge. I could hear his sword swishing as he tried to stab me.”

“Come to the clearing. When Sibric arrives you can report to him.” Rinea’s friend took his arm and dragged him away

through the forest.

Rinea turned to glance one last time at the Bridge through the shielding vines. "I might have *died*."



"And he came at me, and yelled, and I could see he was going to freeze me with his glare, and so I ran back around the rocks," said Gilmar to the group of dismayed Elwarr by the campfire.

"He glared at me so fiercely, and then, when I turned to run, he yelled, and I ran, and I could hear him chasing me," said Rinea, as he sat in the center of a horrified circle of faeries on the Faeryland side of the Rift.

"I could feel my hair standing on end from his freezing rays," said Gilmar.

"His blade nearly cut my hair," said Rinea. "I even had to hold my lute in front of me to keep him from grabbing it."

Gilmar added, "I wouldn't be surprised if he had his sword ready for the kill."

"I barely made it across the Bridge." Rinea nodded at the gasps of horror around him. "He even grabbed my ankles."

"He grabbed my arm, and I had to shake him off." Gilmar relished the shudder that ran through the elves.

Rinea drained the ambrosia from his glass. "He tripped me, and I kicked him in the stomach to get him to let me go."

Gilmar grimaced in self-pity. "Besides, I could hear him shouting to his companions to hurry and cut me off. There must have been lots more faeries behind the boulders."

Rinea quivered. "He had a whole group of elves waiting on their side of the Bridge, and they almost cornered me."

Alastair shook his head as he strode past Gilmar's attentive group of shaken Elwarr. "Gilmar, stop exaggerating. You said there was only one faery."

Sibric had entered the mushroom glade, unnoticed, and now sat on one of the mushrooms after shooing its occupant off. “Rinea, I understand you nearly *died*, but what did you see when you spied on their camp? That was what you were supposed to do, remember? Spy on the camp.”

“But Alastair.” Gilmar followed his brother down the rows of tents and into the pavilion. “How do you know there weren’t more? That’s why we’re taking over Faeryland, to remove the faery threat.”

“Gilmar, go to bed.” Alastair waved his brother away. “I don’t have any time to listen to the twentieth, enlarged edition of your glimpse of a faery.”

Rinea sipped at his second glass of ambrosia. “I think they’re really going to invade us this time. They have so many weapons—lots of swords and knives and daggers and bows and arrows.”

“I know they have weapons, Rinea. How many were there?” Sibric leaned forward.

Rinea, still pale, blurted, “An army.”



“Can’t I? Can’t I, *please*, Alastair?”

“No.”

“Why? Why not? You never let me do anything.”

“For one excellent reason. You don’t know how to swordfight.”

“I do too. I—”

“Gilmar, you were expelled from school for playing around and shirking your lessons. You spent a longer time than I care to remember lolling around home, doing nothing but get in trouble. You were inflicted on me for the duration of this assignment, and you are going to do as I say.”

“Not fair. I want to be in the battle, in the front line.”



“We are trying to kill as few faeries as possible. The faeries might not have the same view in mind. You will stay off the Bridge and watch.”

“Stay off the Bridge, too? Why do you always pick on me? It isn’t fair.”

“Half the danger of taking the Bridge is the Rift. I don’t want you falling in. We’d never recover you.”

“I won’t fall in. I *promise*.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Gilmar, but you won’t have a chance to fall in, because you are not going to be in the action, and that is final.”



The army positioning on the elven side of the Bridge was worthy of Elvendom. Alastair nodded his satisfaction as he studied his elves in the clear pre-daring glow, then took his place beside his horse as the silent Elwarr marched into their formations. He turned and frowned at the dark forest on the far side of the Bridge, watching for any resistance the faeries might bring. He noted that the swaying trees shuddered more than the slight breeze warranted. The concealing curtains of moss and vines shifted in the shadows cast by the trees’ immense foliage.

The stirring near the Faeryland side of the Bridge intensified, and forms began appearing to line themselves in the darkness beneath the trees. Alastair spotted glints in the shadows as faery hair and clothes and weapons caught the river’s reflections.

“Peaceful takeover,” muttered an Emdrin, pausing beside the crown prince. “The faeries may not be bloodthirsty, but one would have to be an idiot to think they won’t defend their country.”

Alastair nodded to him, tight-lipped.

Idris stepped up to take the Emdrin's place by Alastair.

"Where is Gilmar?" Alastair murmured to his friend.

Idris looked at him, surprised. "I thought he's supposed to be here with you, so you can send him to the rear."

Alastair sighed. Younger brothers were appalling. Especially charming scamps of ones like Gilmar. "I expect he will materialize after the battle, with some wild tale to account for himself."

"After the battle? Gilmar?" Idris sounded incredulous. "I just hope his wild tale won't be told by his bloody body being found where he had no business being."

"You're feeling morbid." Alastair scanned his Elwarr, glad their formations were ready to proceed over the Bridge. "Don't be concerned about him. He is aware what trouble he would be in if he disobeyed my orders and got himself killed." Alastair gave Idris a momentary smile.

"Speaking of morbid...here." Idris pulled a folded piece of worn paper from inside his tunic and handed it to Alastair. Without a glance, Alastair slid it inside his own jerkin.



"There are so many of them, and we don't have Daintsy." Rinea shuddered as he watched the elves gathering in daunting rows on the far side of the Bridge. "We're doomed," he told Sibrich as the faery neared him.

"Please, Rinea. Daintsy's force field served its turn. Now all the rest of you, stand your ground. Don't retreat until I tell you you can." Sibrich marched to the front of the massive gathering of faeries. "Follow my directions, everyone."

"Will we...will I have to...to...kill an elf?" Rinea shuddered and turned green.

Sibrich sent him a testy glance. "They are attacking us, with

intent to kill and conquer. Would you rather defend your country, Rinea, or see it fall into their hands? And for goodness sake stop wandering around clutching that lute and get a proper weapon.” Sibric turned and gestured at the elven army. “King Fizzibo is depending on us,” he shouted to the faeries. “Faeryland depends on us. So don’t retreat unless I tell you to.”

Sibric trotted away. Rinea eased himself to the back of the milling group of faeries and searched for his friends. He found Gareth and Rindil practicing their swordplay, their slim blades drawing sparks of sun as they whipped together. Areca perched nearby on a stump, his long golden hair draping his shoulders as he leaned over his lap and tied a new grip to his dagger. Fen grinned at Rinea in sympathy from the branch above Areca’s head before doing a back flip to land on the ground behind the tree. Fen took a step to give Rinea a swift slap on the shoulder.

Rinea didn’t bother trying to hide his mood. “Have any of you considered,” he said. They all stopped their preparations to gaze at him in interest. “Any of us could die in the battle,” he finished.

“Really?” Gareth opened his eyes in mock amazement.

“I don’t think we will,” said Fen.

“We might.” Areca held up his blade to eye the handle critically. “Do you like purple, or should I make it blue?”

“Trust Rinea to say something heartening like that,” said Rindil.

“Well, we could.” Rinea sat on the grass. His knees shook too much to support him. He hugged his lute, comforted by the protective gesture. “We probably will. I feel sick.”



The air sparkled. Alastair could almost taste the texture, like bubbling Tristelli wine, as he took the deep breath that helped

him gain perspective before a battle. Sparkle was the perfect word to describe the air's clean, clear texture. The moisture blown across the river by the breeze dampened the hair on his forehead, and he brushed back the wet strands. Today just helped prove his theory that, nine times out of ten, the day of a battle was more suitable for a festival. Alastair nodded to Idris, and they swung into their saddles. Alastair guided his stallion to the front of his ranks. Mizar sensed the tension in the air and pranced in place, snorting with eagerness.

Alastair led the Elwarr onto the Bridge, feeling the hostility radiating from the faeries he knew were waiting at the other end. He caught Idris's nervous glance at him from where Idris rode by the first ranks of foot soldiers. Alastair touched the pocket where he had put Idris's paper, and smiled, eyebrows raised. Idris didn't look reassured.



The shadowbeam looked on as the elves paced across the Bridge. It chortled at the thought of the battle it would witness. Its master was kind—its master sent the shadowbeam on errands that coincided with exciting battles. Its master was so good to it.

“Blood, blood, lots of blood.” The shadowbeam scanned the ranks of elves, eager to spot one in particular.

There it was. The elf the shadowbeam had been sent to kill. Swaggering in the very front row. The shadowbeam could recognize the elf without trouble. Underneath the elegant sweeps of the traditional Elwarr helmet it could see the lower half of the face it had studied in its master's pool.

Now the faeries rushed from their forest with yells of more fear than rage. They sent their freezing glare faeries onto the Bridge first. The shadowbeam cackled as the elves brought up their polished shields and deflected the faery rays. The

freezing glare was one of the few offensive powers the faeries had. Now that the elves had thwarted it, the faeries would be reduced to hand-to-hand combat. The shadowbeam watched in glee. It got to witness the bloody consequences of the fact that the faeries, for the first time in untold centuries, couldn't find one of their kind with a force field to guard the Bridge.

The shadowbeam itself had seen the last faery with that gift. Dainty, pretty and lively, had lived by the Bridge from the day she was born to the day she died, keeping out unwanted intruders. The shadowbeam guessed the faeries would do anything for her gift right now, and it wished it had time to torment them with the fact that they were helpless. It watched the faeries charge the elves in a desperate sally to drive them back, swords waving and archers using their precision to decrease the elven ranks.

Taking advantage of the confusion as the two lines met in the middle of the Bridge, the shadowbeam left its perch high in a faery tree and floated through the air to the now deserted gloom beneath the trees on the Faeryland side of the Rift. It waited, eager for the bloodshed to intensify.

The shadowbeam wanted to stay to witness the battle, but the knowledge that it was being watched intruded into its consciousness. It lifted its dark face to the sky as it sensed its master's eyes. No time to wait. Get on with the job. The shadowbeam heaved an invisible sigh—even though it knew its master didn't appreciate sighs from servants—and scanned the elven army again for its object. At least there wasn't as much gore as the shadowbeam had seen in the past when armies of this size met, so it wouldn't be too deprived. It realized in disgust that the elves were fighting to stun or disable their opponents rather than kill them. The faeries for their part weren't much better. Most of them seemed to be afraid of

killing an elf.

The shadowbeam hissed with joy. Its kind were never too squeamish to kill. It hissed again and twisted its face into a leer as it glided onto the Bridge behind the faeries.



Gilmar braced as the first shouting faery slashed its sword in wild abandon and charged at him. Gilmar remembered all the sword lessons he had shirked before being expelled from the academe, and wished he could remember more than the basic idea: Swing his sword at the enemy.

Gilmar jerked his blade up to stop the other's blow and waited for the faery's next move. The faery stared in loathing at his sword for a long second, then sighed and brought the weapon up for a half-hearted stab. Gilmar deflected it just as another faery charged past and bumped him.

"Oops, sorry," the green-haired faery gasped over her shoulder. She stopped near Gilmar and swung several quick blows at the helmets of various Elwarr, with absolutely no results whatsoever. After a nervous giggle at the fact that her blade bounced off, she turned and ran to the back of the faery army.

Gilmar watched her, open-mouthed.

When he remembered the faery he was supposed to be fighting, Gilmar whirled. His opponent was leaning on his sword while fiddling with the leather grip of a dagger.

"Sorry. I didn't tie it very well and it's coming off," said the faery. He looked up and grinned. "Now I'm ready."

He stuck the dagger in his belt and pointed his sword at Gilmar.

"It's a nice grip." Gilmar wondered why he felt compelled to make polite conversation. He gave a hefty swing, and the faery blocked it.

“Thanks,” said the faery. “I only made it this morning.” He made another stab that Gilmar stopped.

“I like the purple.” Gilmar jabbed at the faery’s stomach, and the faery dodged to one side.

“Thanks again.” The faery took a swing. Gilmar blocked him.

A plump faery ran past and shouted, “Areca, stop being friendly, and fight. Kill him.”

“That’s Sibric,” said the faery, looking guilty. “He’s right, though. You’re invading us.” The faery stuck out his jaw and poked his blade at Gilmar.

“I’m awfully sorry, but it’s not my fault,” Gilmar retorted. A sudden surge of faeries rushing to the attack broke between Gilmar and his adversary.

“My name’s Areca,” the faery shouted over their heads, with an abrupt change back to friendliness. “See you later.” He brandished his sword in a cheerful wave before vanishing from Gilmar’s view.

“No wonder Alastair likes fighting so much.” Gilmar let the Elwarr run past him as they pushed the faeries back. “It’s such a chance to make new friends.”

Gilmar shoved his way toward the front line, and noticed a lavender-haired faery crouched at the side of the Bridge. The faery clutched a lute to his chest in a vague gesture of defense, and retched when Gilmar approached.

Gilmar knelt beside him. “Are you all right?”

The faery shook his head, moaned, turned green, leaned over the side of the Bridge, and vomited. Gilmar grabbed the faery’s heaving shoulders and pulled him back just before the faery overbalanced into the Rift.

Gilmar held out the small, jeweled flask that was a normal part of every Elwarr’s equipment. The faery took a small sip,

moaned again, and stared into Gilmar's face, his deep purple eyes showing his terror. He frowned.

"Hello," said Gilmar.

"You're the elf who chased me," said the faery, now looking horror-stricken.

"Wait...you're the faery who chased *me*." Gilmar rocked back on his heels.

They stared at each other for a long moment. Gilmar couldn't believe it when he sensed a grin welling within him. It broke out onto his face, and turned into a chuckle, just as the faery chortled. They both began to laugh until they were doubled over, their heads almost touching. Gilmar didn't know what was so funny, but something obviously was.

"I'm Gilmar." He pulled off his helmet.

The faery, looking much less green, brushed his lavender hair off his forehead and grinned back. "My name is Rinea. You weren't actually going to kill me, were you?"

Gilmar opened his mouth to reply, and something smashed into his side. He lost his breath and his balance, grabbed for the stone edge of the Bridge, and found himself staring down into the swirling green water.

The lily pads waved. Beckoned.

Whatever it was gave him another vicious shove, and Gilmar, already unbalanced, tipped over the edge of the Bridge.