

CHAPTER ONE

THE TERRIBLE TRUTH

How could I have been a fool for so long?

Tom gazed at the face staring back at him. The tilt of the nose, the strength burning in those eyes... Tom saw these things in his own face whenever he saw his reflection.

“Freya, you... you’re... my mother!” he gasped. The woman standing before him said nothing.

Tom searched her face for a sign of emotion. Nothing. He hesitantly stepped forwards and reached out to show her his right hand. Krabb, the Sea Monster had wounded him during the first Beast Quest in Gwildor, and his hand had become dangerously infected with green poison. Now, he was free of pain – thanks to a single drop of blood from Freya.

“Is that what Velmal’s riddle meant?” asked a voice behind him.

Looking over his shoulder, Tom could see Elenna rubbing her temple and shakily walking over to him. She’d been knocked out by Freya’s sword, but now she’d regained consciousness.

Tom turned back to Freya, remembering Velmal’s taunting riddle:

*“Ichor Ofkin, Kin ichor,
Red to red, life from death.”*

Freya was Tom’s kin – and her red blood had saved him from certain death.

Silver ran over, placing his body between Elenna and Freya, growling a warning. The woman’s lips curled in an icy smile.

Tom gave a nervous laugh. “Don’t worry, Silver,” he said, trying to calm the wolf despite his own anxiety. He had so many questions. Why had Freya left after Tom was born? Why was he told that she had died? How could he help her escape Velmal? And had she...? Tom felt his chest tighten with emotion. Had his mother ever thought about him?

Thunder clapped in Tom’s ears and a flash of purple light sent him

and Elenna reeling back. Bracing his feet, Tom heaved his shield round to protect them both. Silver kept close to Elenna's legs and Tom heard a distant whinny from Storm. *He's far back enough to be safe,* Tom told himself.

Velmal appeared in a haze of purple mist, hovering high in the air to one side of Freya. With menacing slowness, he lowered himself to the ground until his feet touched down in a small cloud of purple dust.

Evil had arrived.

The wizard's face was stony; his eyes sparkled with contempt.

"The answer is no," Velmal said in a voice that made Tom's skin prickle with dread.

"The answer to what?" Tom asked, shifting his shield higher on his arm. Velmal was carrying his staff with the

two axe heads fixed into it. Their blades shone.

"No, she never thought about you," Velmal said. Tom couldn't help his glance darting to Freya's face, but she had lowered her head so that Tom could no longer see the expression in her eyes.

a/w: The evil Velmal appears in a cloud of smoke with his two-headed axe.

Velmal laughed. "Don't bother," he goaded. "You won't see any love there."

"Liar!" Tom shouted.

Velmal strode forwards, heaving his staff into the air. His robes rippled and his long hair whipped against his shoulders.

Stand your ground, Tom told himself. But he knew that one strike from that staff would break his shield in two. Velmal peered into Tom's face, as if he was trying to read what was behind his eyes. Then he gave a shrug and turned his back, walking over towards Freya, whose face was still lowered.-

"Freya's heart is riddled with evil," the wizard continued. "She was corrupted before I found her. She doesn't want to return to good. She doesn't want *you*."

Velmal conjured up a fresh cloud of purple dust and, slowly, he and Freya rose into the air. Tom lunged forwards, trying to reach his mother but in a flash of light, the two of them disappeared.

Then another vision appeared – a shimmering cloud floated towards them. Tom unsheathed his sword and trained the tip on whatever new menace had arrived. But as a figure stepped forwards, Tom allowed his sword to fall by his side.

"Aduro!" Elenna cried, as the wizard's face creased in a grin. Beside the wizard stood a second man with broad shoulders and a familiar, kind face.

"Father," Tom said.

"I'm sorry, Tom," Taladon said. "Sorry that you've found out this way."

“We came as quickly as we could,” said Aduro, waving a hand to clear the last wisps of cloud. “I sensed Freya’s secret had been revealed to you. You’ve had a shock, Tom. Can you still face the Quest?”

“We’ll understand if it’s too much,” Taladon added.

a/w: Aduro and Taladon appear.

Tom turned to gaze out over Gwildor. The sky was the same brilliant blue as it had always been and the fields rippled with emerald green. This was the most beautiful kingdom Tom had ever seen – and the one most in need of a hero.

He turned back to face his friends. Elenna was watching him closely.

Tom felt determination tingling in his body. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Nothing will make me give up on this Quest.” Storm trotted over and Tom rested a hand on the stallion’s neck. Elenna whistled for Silver.

“Well?” she asked. “When do we start?”

“Right now,” he replied, swinging himself into Storm’s saddle. Elenna scrambled up behind him and he led the stallion over to Aduro and

Taladon. Aduro watched them, smiling, but Tom noticed Taladon give a frown.

“We’ll have a lot to talk about,” he said. “And, one day, I will answer any question you have. But, for now... The Quest must always come first.”

“I know my responsibilities, Father,” Tom replied. “When the time comes, I want no more lies.”

Taladon’s gaze fell to the ground and Tom suddenly realised how wretched his father must be feeling. Taladon looked up. His deep brown eyes brimmed with tears.

“The life you gave me sent me on these adventures,” Tom said gently, trying to reassure his father. “I wouldn’t change that for the world. But I must know the truth...”

someday...” He dug his heels into Storm’s sides and the stallion leapt off.

“To the Quest!” Tom cried out, raising a fist into the air.

a/w: Tom and Elenna ride off on Storm with Tom’s fist raised in the air.