



THE PIRATE KING

BALISK  
THE WATER  
SNAKE



*With special thanks to Michael Ford*

*To Adam Ajayi – a hero in the making*



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ORCHARD BOOKS  
338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH  
*Orchard Books Australia*  
Level 17/207 Kent St, Sydney, NSW 2000

A Paperback Original  
First published in Great Britain in 2011

Beast Quest is a registered trademark of Beast Quest Limited  
Series created by Working Partners Limited, London

Text © Beast Quest Limited 2011  
Cover and inside illustrations by Steve Sims © Orchard Books 2011

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 40831 310 7

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain

The paper and board used in this paperback are natural recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Orchard Books is a division of Hachette Children's Books,  
an Hachette UK company

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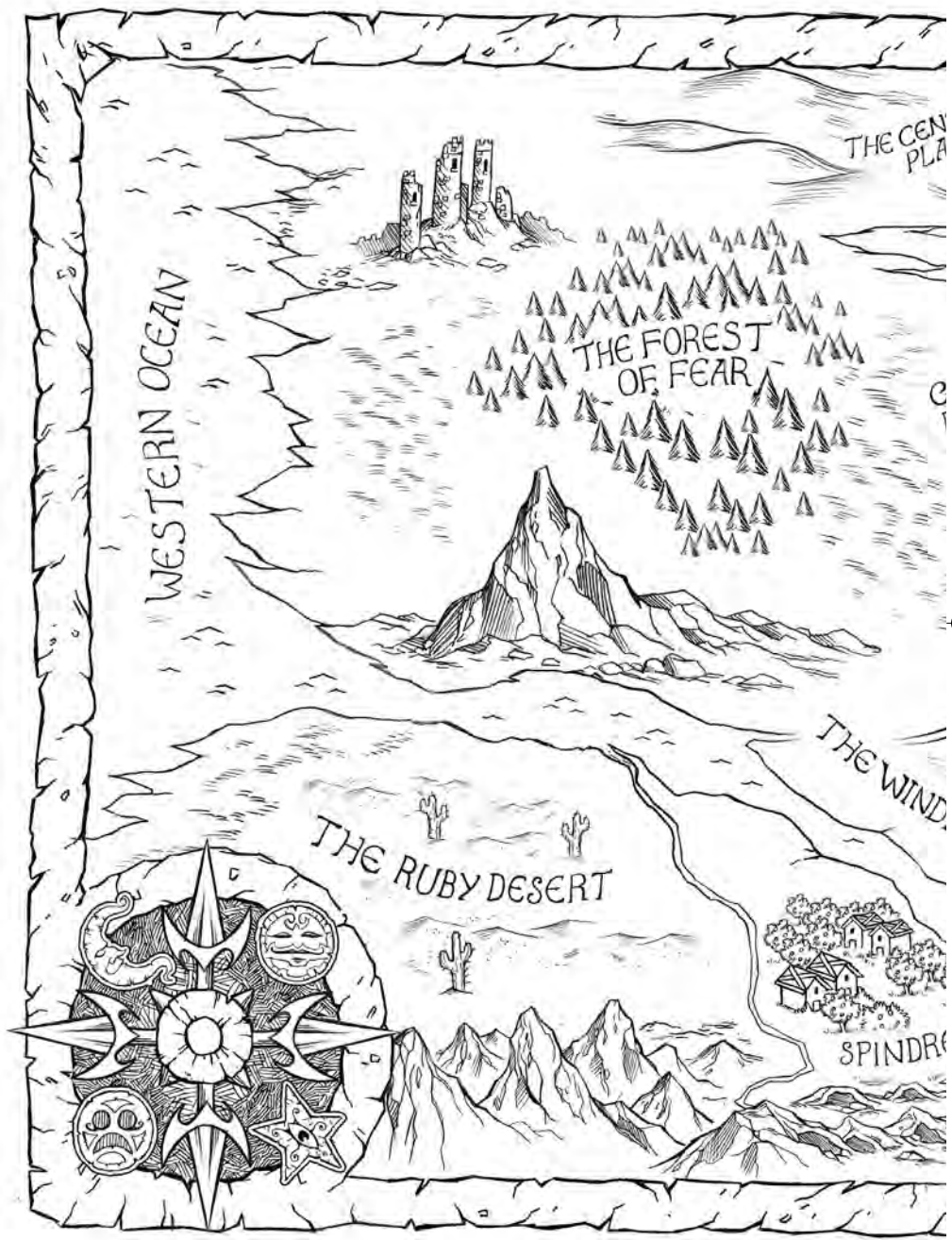


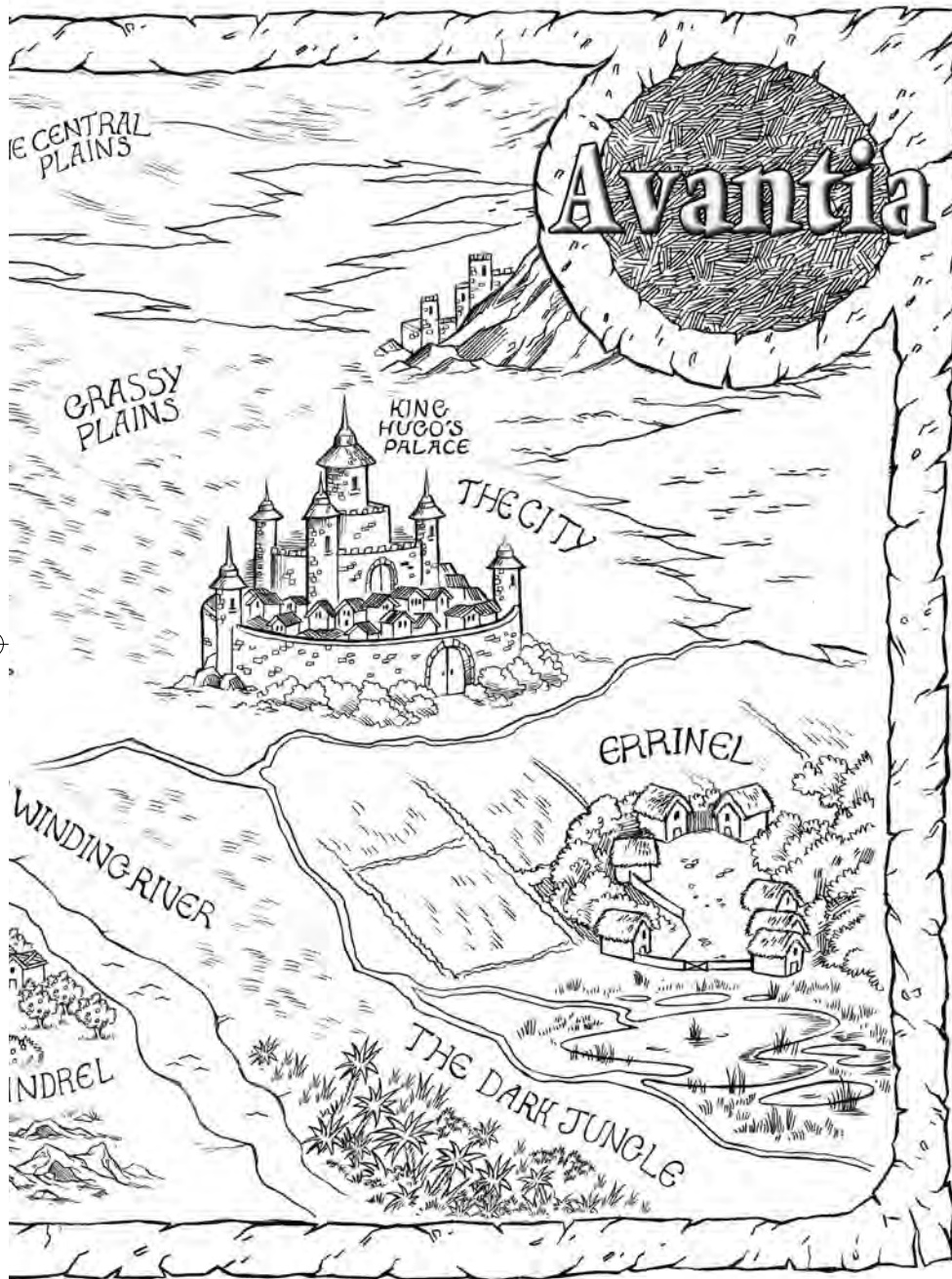
# BALISK THE WATER SNAKE



BY ADAM BLADE











*Tremble, warriors of Avantia, for a new enemy stalks your land!*

*I am Sanpao, the Pirate King of Makai!  
My ship brings me to your shores to claim  
an ancient magic more powerful than  
any you've encountered before. No one  
can stand in my way, especially not that  
pathetic boy, Tom, or his friends. Even  
Aduro cannot help you this time. My  
pirate band will pillage and burn without  
mercy, and my Beasts will be more than  
a match for any hero in Avantia.*

*Pirates! Batten down the hatches and  
raise the sails. We come to conquer and  
destroy!*

*Sanpao, the Pirate King*





## PROLOGUE



The sun beat down on across Leo's back. The old fisherman let the oars drop from his hands and he stood up. As the sea swell lifted and lowered his little boat, he gazed back to the east. He searched for any sign of the Avantian coast, but the sea stretched all the way to the horizon.

*Further out than I've ever been,* he thought grimly.

He turned west, squinting into the sun. The air was hot and eerily still;



the sail hung limply from the mast.  
If the wind didn't pick up soon, he'd  
be drifting all night.

But that was the least of Leo's  
worries. He picked up his flask and  
poured the last few drops of water  
into his mouth.

His empty catch-basket seemed to  
mock him from the front of the boat.

"I don't even have a good catch to  
show for my day's fishing!" he  
grumbled.

For years the coastal waters had  
teemed with fish, but in the last few  
days the shoals had all but vanished.

*It's almost as if the fish are hiding from  
something,* he thought with a shiver  
of fear.

Leo sat down heavily on the rowing  
bench, ready to take up the oars  
again in his blistered hands. His





niece, Elenna, would start to worry if he wasn't back by sunset.

*Poor Elenna*, he thought as he rowed. *A girl like that shouldn't be stuck at home*. Her bow and arrow had hung on her bedroom wall ever since she'd returned from her latest adventures with Tom.

*Whoosh!* A large wave slapped against the side of the hull, rocking the boat. Leo jolted in his seat and turned.

"A ship!" he mumbled.

A huge vessel carved through the dark blue waves. She sat high in the water. Three masts rose from the deck. The one in the centre seemed more roughly hewn than the others, and was slightly bent, almost like the branch of some huge tree. But the strangest sight was the blood-red



sails. They billowed, filling with wind, driving the ship onwards. Leo frowned. *But there's no breeze*, he thought.

A single flag trailed and whipped from the odd, central mast. On a black background, it showed what looked like the outline of a Beast's skull, with horns and long, crooked



teeth. *Is it some sort of warship?* Leo wondered. The vessel didn't look like anything in King Hugo's small navy that he had seen before.

Leo waved his arms wildly and shouted, "Over here! Please, help me!"

Even though the ship was still some fifty boat-lengths away, his own craft suddenly lurched. He tripped over, landing on his knees with a cry, and clung to the edge of his vessel. Leo didn't understand – the swell wasn't bad enough to knock him from his feet...

He stared into the water. There was something down there!

A dark shadow, bigger than any shark, drifted beneath the boat with menacing silence.

Leo scrambled to the other side of

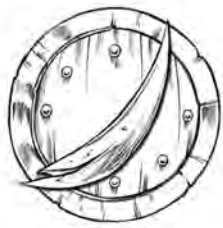
his ship, just as the creature broke the surface. He fought the scream that rose in his throat as he saw the snake-like body. Glittering and muscular, the Beast rolled out of the water, sunlight scattering off its silver scales.

Rising up, the monster faced Leo with a head almost as big as his boat. Horns jutted from the head in all directions, and its yellow eyes narrowed to slits. The Beast rose higher still, blocking out the sun. With a hiss, it shot towards Leo.

Leo dived into the water to escape being crushed to death, and heard the crunch as his fishing boat was smashed into splinters. Under the water's surface, he saw the wreckage of his boat sinking. Panic drove the air from his lungs. His heart thudded

in terror. The Beast was coming for him, twisting through the water, mouth gaping to reveal deadly fangs. Was this the last thing Leo would ever see?







## CHAPTER ONE

# A WAITING GAME



Tom threw aside his blanket. He stared out through the open window onto a rectangle of night sky.

“It’s no use,” he whispered.

In the next chamber, he could hear Uncle Henry snoring softly. Tom had tried everything – counting through every Beast he’d ever fought, lying on his front, on his side, flipping onto





his back. He'd even tried sleeping on the bare floorboards, to remind himself of the many nights spent in the wilderness on his Quests. Nothing worked – he couldn't get to sleep.

“And nothing will work while my mother's lost in a strange land,” he muttered.

In some ways, the last Quest in Tavana had been successful. He and Elenna had restored six Beasts to their rightful homes and he'd managed to bring the Evil Wizard Malvel back to Avantia, where he was now imprisoned in King Hugo's dungeon.

*It wasn't worth it,* Tom thought, his frustration mounting. They'd left his mother, Freya, in Tavana, and Elenna's wolf, Silver – a loyal companion on so many Quests.





*How am I supposed to sleep when I've abandoned them?*

Tom walked to the window and gazed out. He was sure that Elenna felt the same.

Following their return, the Good Wizard Aduro had told them to go back to their homes – Tom to his aunt and uncle in Errinel, and Elenna to her uncle Leo, a fisherman on the western shore. Aduro had said he'd wanted them both to recuperate after their latest adventures, and that he would do his best to find a way to bring the others home. But Tom couldn't just sit around waiting.

"I have to do something!" he said.

He picked up his shield and sword. He began a series of drills, attacking and backing off from imaginary foes and remembered Beasts: he lunged,





thrust and sliced; he ducked, weaved, and leapt; all in determined silence so he wouldn't wake his aunt and uncle.

Soon sweat began to prick across his skin. Maybe if he could tire himself out, he'd at last be able to get some sleep.

Suddenly, the wall in front of him seemed to shimmer, the rough stone melting and blurring. Tom gripped his sword tighter, ready to meet the intruder, and lifted his shield with its six tokens across his body. A shape appeared, vague at first, then growing solid. Tom recognised the floppy cone of Aduro's hat and lowered his shield as the Good Wizard took on his familiar shape.

Aduro peeled away from the wall, and stood in the room with Tom.





Only the slight golden haze  
surrounding the wizard's form told  
Tom this was only a vision.

“Do you have news of my



mother?” Tom asked immediately.

Aduro shook his head. “You must have patience, Tom.”

Tom knew in his heart that the wizard was right, but this did not soothe his restlessness.

“Is there nothing I can do to help?” he asked.

“Not at the moment,” said Aduro. “I have sent Taladon in search of something called the Tree of Being. It may have the power to open a portal into Tavanaia.”

Tom’s heart lifted. “Where is this Tree?”

“Nobody knows for sure,” said Aduro. “Legend tells us that the tree doesn’t remain in one place, it’s forever moving about our kingdom.”

It didn’t sound like any tree Tom had ever heard of. “Where is my





father now? I'll go with him."

"This is not your Quest, Tom,"  
said Aduro.

"But two warriors are stronger  
than—"

Aduro raised a hand. "Freya is dear  
to Taladon, too," he said. "You must  
let him fight alone."

Before Tom could protest further,  
the vision of Aduro melted into the  
stone wall and Tom found himself  
alone again.

A rustle outside made his skin  
tingle. He heard the sound of a twig  
splintering underfoot. Could it be an  
intruder? Or a fox maybe, after his  
aunt's chickens?

Tom crept to the window. He heard  
the snap of a bow-string, then –  
*whoosh!* An arrow thudded into the  
wooden window frame.



