



THE PIRATE KING

HECTON
THE
BODY-SNATCHER



With special thanks to Elizabeth Galloway

For Jake Lovegrove. Wishing you many adventures!



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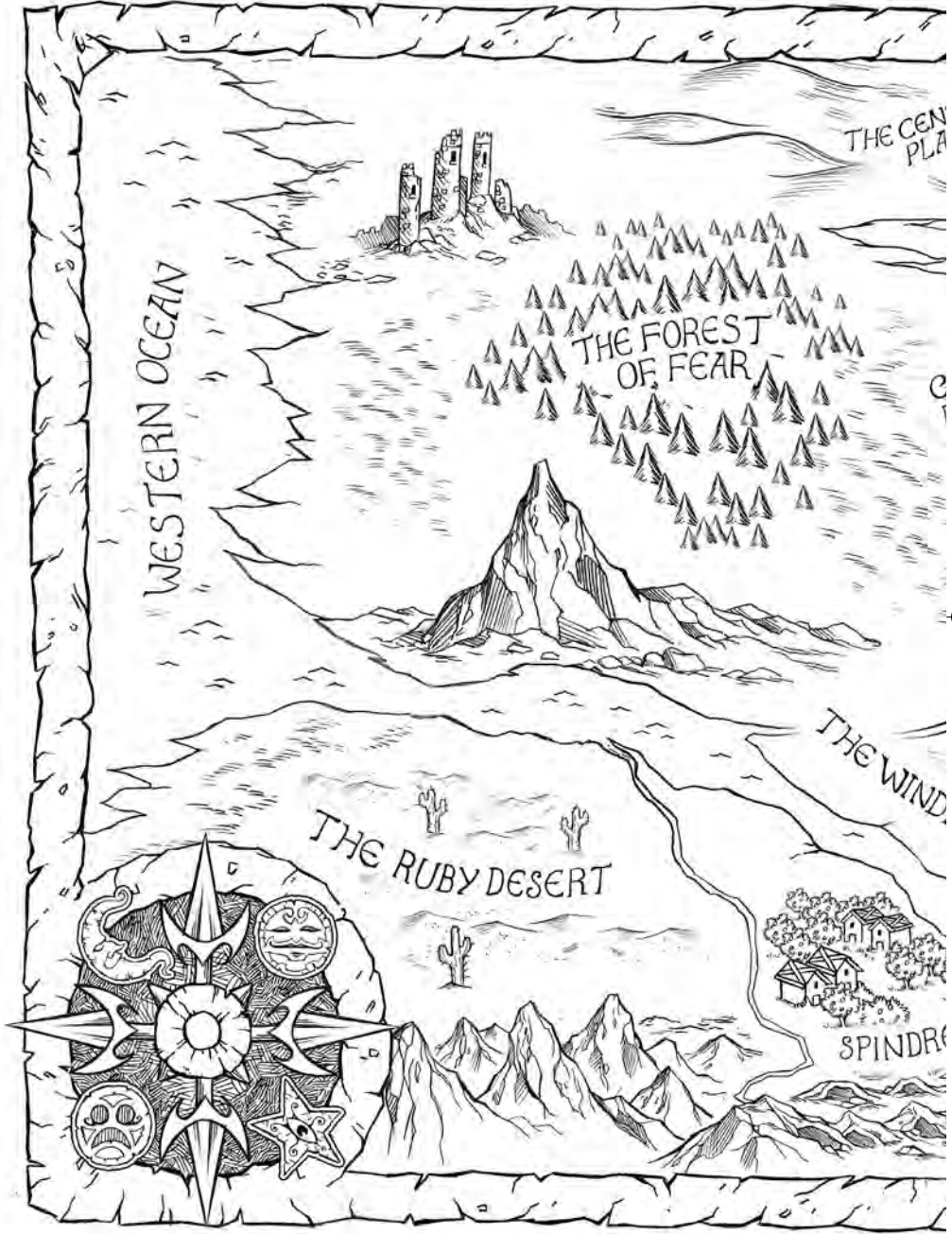


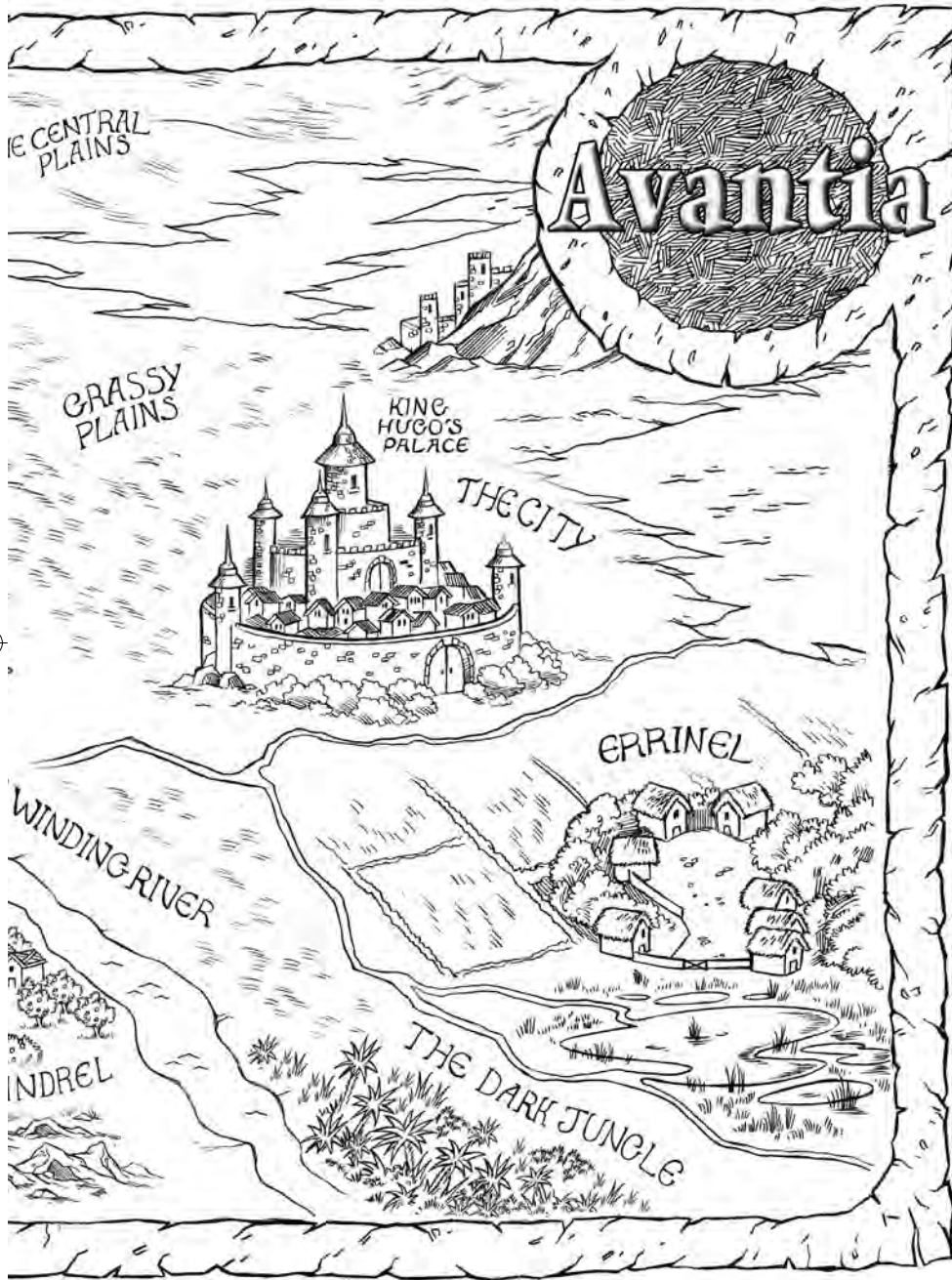
HECTON THE BODY-SNATCHER



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



Sandric the Tree Dweller grabbed the vine rope that hung outside his family's hut, and swung through the Vanished Woodland. He gave a shout of exhilaration as he let go of the vine, caught hold of another, and whipped past a group of startled women sewing bark tunics. The woodland was hidden in a secret valley of Avantia, a fold in the earth tucked into the foot of the volcano. Few visitors ever came across the

Tree Dwellers. Their huts, bridges and vines, all suspended high in the canopy, had remained undisturbed for generations. Sandric had never seen anyone from outside his own tribe. He swung through the Vanished Woodland. The vine rope swept upwards in a steep arc and he let go, flinging his arms above his head. He soared like a bird above the tops of the trees, the grey slopes of the volcano looming ahead, then dropped down into the green canopy.

Branches snapped and splintered as Sandric swung among the tree tops. When he reached the glade at the centre of the Vanished Woodland, he seized a ladder woven from creepers. He scrambled up it, crawled onto a thick branch, and gasped. There it was – a tree unlike any he'd seen before.

It was enormous, its twisting branches stretched high above the canopy. The leaves were fresh and a waxy green. He gazed down the broad column of the trunk, and saw that the soil around its base was loose. The tree must have thrust, fully formed, from the ground.

But why has it come here? he wondered. A large, grey flake drifted onto the back of his hand. He sniffed it. It smelt of flame and smoke.

“The Fire Mountain is awake,” he muttered.

He raised himself up on his branch and peered over the treetops. In the distance a dark cloud hung on the horizon, over the volcano. Orange flames sparked from the crater and the cloud billowed and grew, moving towards the Vanished Woodland.



More flakes of ash fluttered around him, catching on his tunic and clinging to the leaves and branches.

Sandric slid down the ladder and grabbed the vine. He swooped back among the huts, yelling, “Orange Heat! The Fire Mountain is angry!”

The other Tree Dwellers scattered, running and leaping from branch to branch to shelter inside their huts. Tendrils of smoke coiled around the trees. Sandric coughed as the acrid fumes filled his lungs. He lost his grip and slithered down the vine, almost to the ground.

A huge figure stepped out from the smoke. He had the body of a man, thickset and muscular, but with green flesh. His cloak seemed to be made from feathers and fur. It billowed out as the figure drew nearer, and



Sandric saw a fox's brush on one shoulder, a crushed rabbit on the front, and a crow dangling from the bottom. A hollowed-out bull's head formed a hood, with curled horns gleaming.



It's made from dead creatures, Sandric realised. Sweat trickled down his back.

The Beast gave a roar so loud that it seemed to shudder through Sandric. He pulled the cloak more tightly around him, and to Sandric's horror the half-rotten bodies groaned, their eyes rolling back in their heads as their gruesome stitching stretched.

Sandric was shaking so violently he could barely grip the vine. He scrambled up, his hands and feet slipping. But when he glanced to the ground, the Beast's black eyes were fixed on him, the green skin of his face contorted into a smile. In one hand he held a trident, its three points glittering through the smoke, and in the other a net fringed with metal barbs.

The Beast gave a furious hiss and

something snared around Sandric, tangling his limbs so he couldn't climb. It was the net. Sandric looked down to see the creature yank the long cord attached to the net, dragging him off the vine. He fell in a crumpled heap on the woodland floor.

"No one can help you now," the Beast mocked him, his voice deeper than the groan of a collapsing tree. "Hecton is here."

The Beast strode towards him. Sandric tried to scramble away, but with a snarl Hecton raised his trident and hurled it at him. The three blades pierced his hand, pinning Sandric to the ground. He cried out as his flesh sang with pain and blood bubbled around the three puncture wounds.

Hecton gripped the edges of his

cloak, spreading it wide, and leapt up. As the Beast flew through the air, Sandric saw more dead bodies suspended from the lining of his cloak – stoats, weasels, toads, their eyes blinking – and realised what this Beast was.

A body snatcher...

The ground shuddered as Hecton landed in a crouch over Sandric. He straddled Sandric's torso, his fists pressed into the ground either side of Sandric's head. Hecton grinned, and a trickle of yellow drool splattered onto Sandric's forehead. The Beast opened his mouth wide and a green mist wafted out, coiling around Sandric's arms and legs. The bull's head hood of his cloak fell back, revealing a writhing mass of worms instead of hair. They



wriggled free, landing on Sandric and burrowing into his flesh.

“Spare me—” Sandric started to scream. But as the mist wound down his throat, tiredness swept over him, making his eyelids droop. He stopped struggling. With a sucking noise, his body lifted into the cloak, his limbs fitting among the rotten flesh of the other creatures.

Hecton, Sandric thought. My master.



CHAPTER ONE

FLIGHT THROUGH
THE FOG

Tom narrowed his eyes against the grey fog. Through the mist, he could see Tagus the Horse-Man cantering away across Avantia's Grassy Plains.

"Farewell!" Tom called. "And thank you."

Tagus had helped Tom and Elenna defeat Koron – an evil Beast in the thrall of Sanpao the Pirate King. Tom

shuddered as he remembered Koron's deadly claws and stinging tail; Tagus had helped them defeat him.

The fog rolled in waves, weaving around Tom and Elenna's legs and making Storm and Blizzard, their two horses, whinny uneasily.

Elenna licked her finger and held it in the air. "Look," she said, showing it to Tom. It was covered in a thin coating of grit. "This isn't ordinary fog."

A distant rumble shuddered through the ground and to the east a column of orange light shot up, dazzling against the dim sky. There was an explosive roar, and a shower of grey flakes fell around them, clinging to their tunics and dusting the horses' coats. Tom coughed, wiping the dust from his eyes.

“The volcano at Stonewin is erupting,” he said. “This isn’t fog – it’s volcanic ash.”

There was another rumble, like a clap of thunder deep within the earth. Storm reared up on his hind legs, neighing with alarm.

“Easy, boy,” Tom soothed his faithful stallion. To Elenna, he said, “If only I had my jewelled belt, I could ask Epos to let us know what’s happening. I hope she’s alright,” he added. The volcano was the Flame-Bird’s home.

Tom had won his magical belt many Quests ago. It was studded with jewels that afforded him special powers; the red jewel gave him the ability to understand the Beasts. But Sanpao had placed Aduro, the Good Wizard of Avantia, under an evil

enchantment and Aduro had magicked the jewelled belt around Sanpao's waist, giving the Pirate King its powers. In its place, the wizard had given Tom a length of hide knotted across his waist. Tom had slotted the fang left by Koron inside it; after he defeated each of Sanpao's Beasts, it left behind a token. Each token had a mysterious power, but could only be used once.

Elenna opened Storm's saddlebag and pulled out a rolled-up map. It was made from the bark of the Tree of Being. The Tree was a magical gateway to all realms, and Sanpao and his pirate crew were determined to capture it. Possession of the Tree would allow them to loot and pillage wherever they pleased. It was Tom's Quest to stop this happening, but he

and Elenna had other reasons to defeat the pirates, too; Tom's mother, Freya, and Elenna's beloved pet wolf, Silver, were trapped in the strange land of Tavana. The Tree of Being could create a portal to this other kingdom, and was their only hope of rescuing them.

Tom unfurled the map. The outline of the kingdom was etched into the bark. Tom's glance scanned the familiar landscape, where he and Elenna had shared so many adventures.

"Elenna, look at this." He jabbed a finger at the picture of a wooded valley, tucked beside the volcano. He read the lettering printed below the image. *'The Vanished Woodland.'*

"I've never heard of it before," said Elenna. "We've travelled all over

Avantia, but there are still places we haven't seen."

The tiny outline of the Tree of Being appeared at the centre of the woodland picture. The Tree didn't grow in one fixed place, but moved around so it would be safe from attack. It sprang from the ground, fully formed, before disappearing into the earth once more. Tom and Elenna had to travel quickly to each new



location to reach it before the pirates.

“So that’s where we need to go,” said Tom.

“And where we’ll meet the next Beast,” Elenna added.

Tom nodded. After they defeated Koron, Sanpao had warned that the next Beast they faced would be the most terrible yet.

Tom returned the map to Storm’s saddlebag.

The stallion tossed his head, flicking away ash. Tom patted his flank before hoisting himself on to his back.

Elenna climbed on to Blizzard. The snow-white mare had been given to her by Abraham the Horse-Whisperer, who they’d rescued from Sanpau’s thrall. Blizzard shied away from the tumbling ash, whinnying fearfully. Elenna leaned low over her, stroking

her mane as she murmured reassuring words.

“She’s getting used to you,” Tom grinned as Blizzard calmed down.

“Silver will be jealous.”

Elenna looked down at the ground. Tom felt a tug of guilt.

“You’ll see him again,” he promised. “We’ll defeat Sanpao and get Silver and my mother back.”

They cantered northwest across the Grassy Plains. The nearer they got to the volcano, the thicker the ash hung in the air. It was becoming warmer, too; Tom could feel the dust sticking to his damp skin. Elenna’s face was streaked with grime, like she’d fallen into a pile of cinders. A puff of flakes swirled around them, and Tom spluttered as they filled his lungs.

“Pull your collar up,” called Elenna,

yanking her own over her nose and mouth. Tom did the same, and found he could breathe more easily. They reached into Storm's saddlebags, taking out the blankets they slept in at night. They draped them over the noses of their horses and secured them in the bridles.

They galloped through the rippling expanse of grass, soaring over ditches and wading through streams. They had been travelling for almost a full day when the ground became firmer, and the horses' hooves clattered over rocks and pebbles. Looming through the ash was a distant village.

"I know this place," Tom called across to Elenna. "We're north of the Forest of Fear."

He raised a hand above his eyes, squinting. He could make out

half-collapsed buildings. Plumes of smoke billowed from them, mingling with the ash in the sky.

“What happened?” Elenna wondered.

They drew closer and saw a column of people pouring out of the village. Men and women were carrying bundles on their backs. They could hear the sobs and cries of children as their parents hurried them along. A shout rose up from among the villagers:

“Look – they’ve come to help us! Over here! Please help.”

The people rushed towards them through the ash and thronged about Storm and Blizzard, their faces pale and their eyes wide with terror.

A bearded man stepped up to Tom. “Our village has been ransacked by

a— Oh, it was terrible!” The man broke down, sobbing.

Tom felt sure he knew who had harmed these people. There was only one group of men capable of such evil in Avantia.

“Pirates,” Tom muttered. “Elenna, this is all down to Sanpao’s men!”

