



THE PIRATE KING

KRONUS
THE
CLAWED MENACE



*With special thanks to Allan Frewin Jones
For Linda Brignall, a great librarian*



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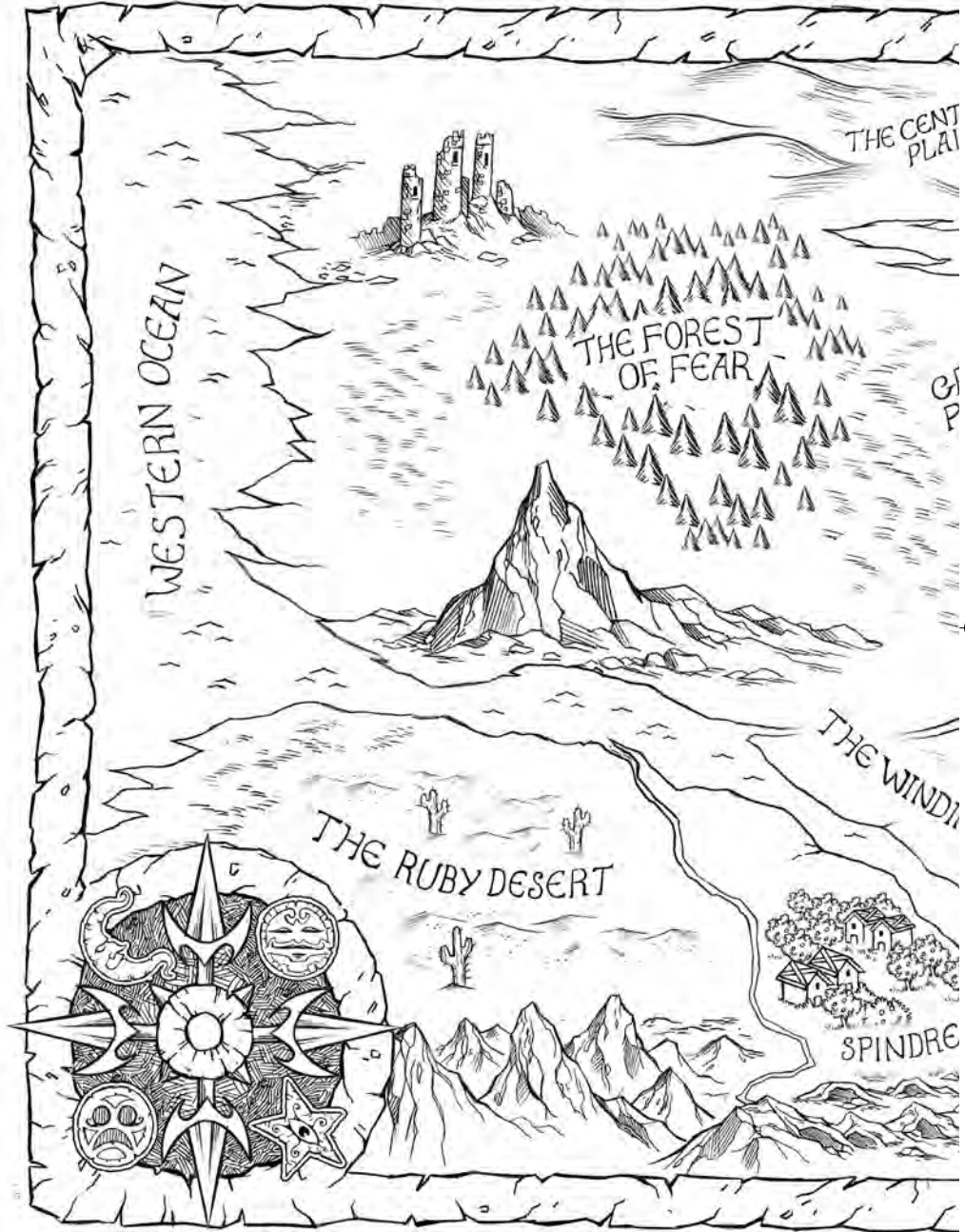


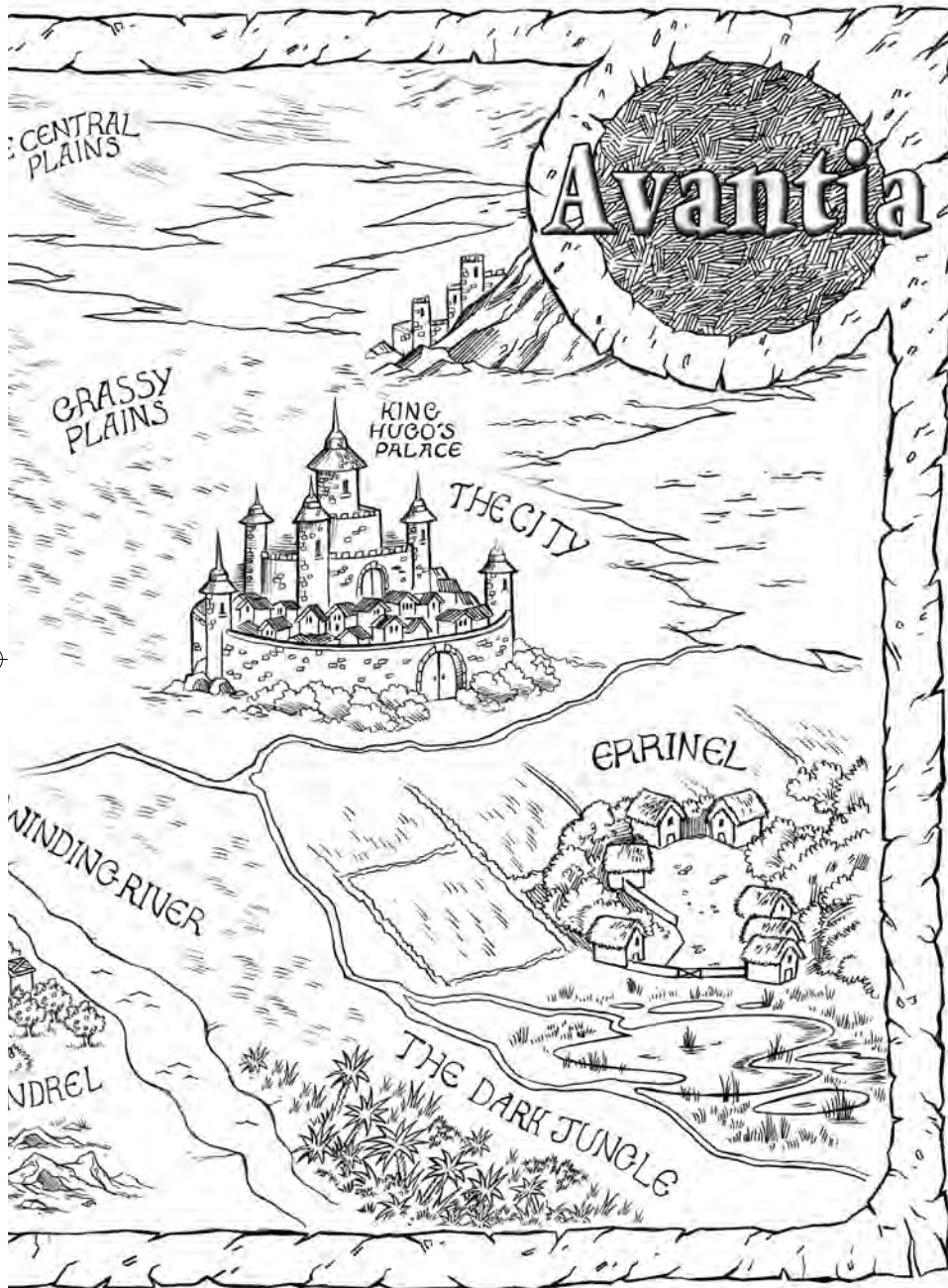
KRONUS THE CLAWED MENACE



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



“Pull!”

Abel sat on a wooden seat at the front of the caravan, urging the harnessed moose onwards across the Icy Plains. The creature snorted its wide nostrils and dug in its hooves, hauling the wooden caravan through the endless snow.

“Yes! Work! That’s the way.”

Abel glanced at his father, who was riding alongside the caravan. He sat on a mighty moose with antlers that





spread like the branches of a tree. Abel guided the caravan over a treacherous patch of ice, his father nodding with approval at his skill.

Ahead of them, the line of creaking and groaning caravans stretched away in a dark, winding column through the snow. The tribe was seeking to trade its furs and skins for enough dried and smoked food to see it through the severe winter, when hunting became impossible.

Abel's father stared back the way they had come, and a frown passed over his weathered face.

"What is it, father?" Abel asked.

"A blizzard's coming," he growled.

A fist of unease clenched in the pit of Abel's stomach. He stood up and stared over the caravan. Behind them, the sky was a menacing swirl





of grey and white.

His father dug his heels into the moose's flanks and it cantered up the column of caravans. "Make haste!" he called. "We must seek shelter!"

People turned to look, their faces grim as they saw the approaching blizzard.

Abel sat down, gripping the reins and flicking them. "Faster!" he called.

His moose lifted its head and let out a frightened bellow. Other nearby moose were tossing their antlers, eyes rolling, their hooves stamping.

They've been through blizzards before, Abel thought anxiously. It's as if they sense something else is coming... something worse...

A scream of terror almost stopped his heart. He turned, crying out in horror as he saw an enormous bird





swooping out of the sky, wings spread, claws stretched, head thrust forwards on a long neck. It was black, its massive body dark and shining as though the feathers were coated with oil.

It was more hideous than any scavenger bird he had ever seen. And huge! The creature's head was bald, save for tufts of white feathers behind its blazing eyes. As it swooped down, enormous claws raked across the top of a caravan, tipping it onto its side and throwing the passengers into the snow with cries and screams.

Abel leaped from his moving caravan, landing in the snow and running to help the people who had been hurt. He saw the bird come down on the overturned caravan, its talons crushing the wooden





panels, its head jerking downwards, tearing at the canvas awning.

The other moose scattered, dragging the caravans behind them. Goods and people fell into the snow. Frightened voices cried out. The bird



rose on its sweeping wings and a dreadful stench wafted to Abel on the rushing winds of the coming blizzard.

The bird swooped again, snapping up a fleeing man in its beak. It shook him and tossed him into the air. Screaming, the man plunged down and lay unmoving in the snow.

The bird let out a heart-stopping cry and turned towards Abel, fixing him with its evil eyes. It rose, almost blotting out the seething sky as it hung in the air above him.

“Abel!” He was snapped out of his horrified trance by his father’s urgent cry. “Go, boy. Save yourself!”

He had never heard such dread in his father’s voice, and he obeyed.

He ran, the deep snow dragging at his feet. Anguish filled his heart at the thought of leaving his father





behind. He did not know where he was heading. He just needed to get away from the dreadful bird.

He felt the stinking wind strike his back as the bird hovered over him. He heard its skull-shredding cries. He fell, tripping in the snow, but he was on his feet again in an instant. He half-turned towards the bird, his arms raised to try to protect himself. At that moment, with a swirl of snow, the blizzard hit, the ferocious winds sweeping around Abel and almost knocking him down.

The bird's eyes glowed, burning with a fierce red fire. Beams of blinding light burst from them.

The twin beams blasted into Abel's face, filling his vision with scorching pain. Abel clutched at his eyes and collapsed, writhing in the snow.

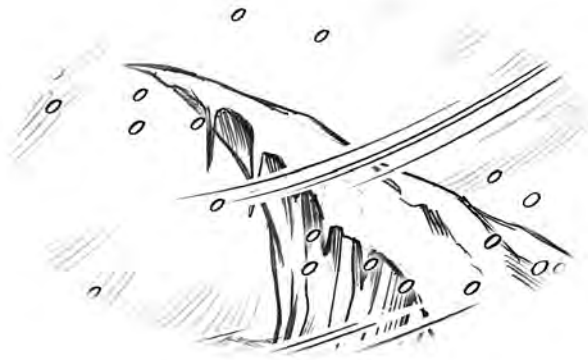






CHAPTER ONE

FROZEN DEATH



Tom reined Storm to a halt and stared out over the frozen landscape. Elenna rode up to his side on her white mare, Blizzard, given to her by a horse whisperer after their battle against the evil Beast, Koron. The breath of the two horses hung like fog in the air. Blizzard tossed her mane, snorting and stamping, as though she didn't like the look of





what lay in front of them. Elenna shivered, peering ahead.

They had reached the edge of Avantia's Icy Plains.

Tom's breath gusted in white clouds as he leaned forwards and patted Storm's neck. "The temperature's dropping fast," he said.

"Will the Tree still show itself on the map after what happened last time?" Elenna asked.

Tom frowned. He knew why she was anxious. He and Elenna had sworn to protect the mystical Tree of Being from the Pirate King Sanpao and his evil crew.

The Pirate King was tracking the Tree of Being – and Sanpao had six ferocious Beasts at his command. He controlled the Beasts by using the main mast of his ship, which was cut





from the magical Tree of Being.

Tom and Elenna had managed to defeat four of these Beasts so far, but Tom was in no doubt that the wicked pirate would call up another deadly foe when their paths crossed again. The Tree had mystical powers that could open portals into other worlds. The pirates wanted to use these portals to pillage and loot. *But I need the Tree for something much more important*, Tom thought. Only through its portals could they hope to rescue Elenna's wolf, Silver, and Tom's trapped mother, Freya. Both of them had been left behind in the land of Tavania, after their last Quest was completed.

But the Tree wasn't easy to find. It appeared and disappeared across the landscapes of Avantia, shooting up





out of the ground for a time and then sliding back into the earth without warning. It had been very sickly and weak when Tom and Elenna had first seen it, but it had grown gradually stronger as their Quest continued.

Tom shivered again at the memory of the Tree's last disappearance. Instead of sinking into the ground, it had vanished with a crack of green lightning.

Was the Tree destroyed? Tom wondered. There was only one way to find out. Tom reached into his saddlebag and drew out the map made from the Tree's precious bark.

"If the Tree still exists, the map will show us," Tom said.

Before Tom could unroll it, a gust of icy air came whipping across the Icy Plains. He narrowed his eyes as it



snapped their clothes and clawed at their faces and limbs. The two horses braced themselves, their heads down, their manes and tails flying.

“Take the map,” Tom called against the howl of the wind. He handed it to Elenna, lifting his shield as a buffer to shelter behind.





They huddled together as the wind whipped past them. Six tokens were embedded on the outer face of the shield. One of them was a bell from Nanook the Snow Monster, a Good Beast they had met on their very first Quest. The bell would protect them from the worst of the cold.

Elenna unrolled the map and Tom leaned in closer. Its inner skin was etched with fine lines that followed the contours of the landscape that surrounded them. The Icy Plains were clearly visible, and at the centre they saw the faint outline of the Tree of Being.

“The Tree is there!” gasped Elenna.
“But it’s very pale,” Tom pointed out.

“It’s getting clearer,” said Elenna as the lines darkened.

The Tree has survived, thought Tom,





grinning. *We can still rescue Silver and my mother.*

“The tree is just above Nanook’s cave,” he said. “Perhaps we’ll see her again.”

“I hope so,” said Elenna.

“We should move quickly,” said Tom. “Sanpao will be heading towards the Tree, too.”

Fighting the vicious wind, Tom and Elenna rode into the Icy Plains. The frosty grass soon disappeared under a thick blanket of snow. Fresh white drifts lay all around them. The sky was heavy with iron-grey clouds, threatening more snowfall.

“I wish we had some thicker clothes,” Elenna groaned, drawing her cloak closer around her shoulders.

Storm and Blizzard lifted their hooves high as they picked their way



through the drifts, but when they came to a place where the snow was even deeper, Tom could see that the two horses were struggling.





“We have to dismount,” he said.
“Storm and Blizzard will find the going easier without our weight on them.”

He jumped down into the snow, sinking to his shins. The drifts were light and powdery, and crunched under his feet. Elenna dropped from the saddle, keeping hold of Blizzard’s reins as she plodded along at Tom’s side.

They struggled on. Tom’s boots were soaked through and the cold numbed his feet as he turned to see how Storm was faring. The gallant horse’s muzzle was coated with ice crystals. Tom reached up to brush the ice away, but as he did so, his foot came up against something and he fell headlong with a cry.

“Tom! Are you alright?” Elenna





called, helping him up.

“I’m fine,” he gasped, stooping and clearing the snow away with both hands. “I tripped on something.”

Elenna knelt at his side and together they used their hands to scoop the snow away. They dug deeper, their hands becoming numb, their arms straining with the effort. They revealed a brown hump.

“Is it a rock?” Elenna asked.

“I think it’s an animal!” said Tom, seeing a brown pelt.

They worked faster to clear the snow.

Tom could see fur, each hair frozen stiff. Heavy branching antlers. Glassy eyes staring lifelessly.

“It’s a moose!” Tom exclaimed. He saw a leather harness strapped to the body of the dead creature. “This was





a working animal,” he said with sudden urgency. “Quickly! We need to find whatever it was harnessed to – there might be people still alive!”



