

CHAPTER ONE

A FATE WORSE THAN DEATH



The morning had started peacefully, with sunlight glinting through the windows of Tom's chamber at King Hugo's palace. He was polishing the magical tokens on his shield when a pounding fist shook the door. He ran to pull it open. Aduro stood there, his face ashen and drawn.

"Terrible news!" panted Aduro.

Fear prickled at Tom. "Is it Elenna?"



Aduro shook his head and entered the room, then sank down onto a stool. His shoulders hunched. Tom had never seen him so disturbed.

“Taladon’s in danger,” said Aduro. “It may already be too late.”

“But I saw my father last night at the King’s Banquet,” Tom said.

Aduro looked at him. “Late last

night, we received word of a disturbance in the village of Shrayton," he said, "between the Forest of Fear and the Western Ocean. I asked Taladon to investigate, and used my magic to transport him there..."

Tom knew Shrayton, a quiet place where farmers and their families lived. "What kind of disturbance?" asked Tom.

"A terrible evil," muttered Aduro. "A cursed Beast – Ravira." He spoke the name in a whisper, and Tom felt as though a cold breeze had crept into the chamber. Could there really be another Beast lurking in Avantia?

"I've never heard of Ravira," he said.

Aduro wrung his hands together. "Many have not," he said. "Even former Masters of the Beasts never

heard the name – and with good reason. Ravira is the foulest, cruellest Beast to ever stalk this kingdom. But she is supposed to be contained within the Avantian underworld...”

Tom had never seen Aduro look so agitated – nor so worried. “What happened to my father?” he asked, dreading the answer.

Aduro sighed. “I know that Taladon was bitten by a Hound of Avantia – one of the men cursed to be a dog-servant to Ravira until the end of time.”

Aduro’s eyes widened and he slapped his forehead, looking past Tom and talking to himself. “Of course! Ravira must have found out a way to get her dog servants out of the underworld. My word – this is bad... This is very bad...”

Tom fought to control his emotions.
“Is my father dead?”

Aduro stood up and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Not dead, Tom. Worse.”

A noise at the door made them both turn. Elenna stood there grinning.

“Tom, you should have seen Silver chasing the ducks...” She trailed off and her smile vanished as she saw their grim faces. “What’s going on?”

“You should hear this, too,” said Aduro. “Taladon has been bitten by one of Ravira’s Hounds.” The wizard extended a finger and pointed towards the wall of the chamber where a tapestry hung. At once, the woven cloth shimmered, and in its place Tom saw a vision of his father. Taladon stood over a bed, where a

man lay curled into a ball and shivering. As Taladon reached out to touch the man's shoulder, he snapped his head around as if surprised. A pale blur leapt at Taladon, throwing him to the floor. Tom saw his father wrestle with a dog that looked twice the size of Silver. He caught the flash of glistening teeth and red eyes



before the vision faded.

“Is he all right?” Tom asked desperately.

“He lives,” said Aduro. “But in the light of tonight’s moon, Taladon will change. Unless you defeat Ravira.”

“Change?” Tom and Elenna spoke together.

Aduro gripped Tom’s shoulder more tightly, and looked into his eyes.

“Your father will become a Hound of Avantia – he will be cursed to live out the rest of eternity as a vicious dog, serving the Beast.”

From the stables across the palace courtyard, a dog howled. The sound carried through the window and seemed to hang in the air, eerie and menacing. Tom rushed to the table and snatched up his sword-belt. “We have to go at once!” he said. “I won’t

let my father meet that fate.”

“I’ll fetch my bow,” said Elenna, darting out the door.

Tom grabbed his shield and ran to the stables to saddle Storm. His faithful stallion snorted with nerves, as if sensing Tom’s anxiety. Elenna arrived breathlessly as he was leading the horse out. Silver stood obediently at her side, his tongue lolling.

Aduro was waiting for them at the gates. “I can use my magic to get you closer,” said the wizard, “but as Ravira’s power grows, my spells are less effective. You’ll be on your own in Shrayton.”

Tom placed a foot in the stirrup and swung his leg over the saddle. Elenna climbed up behind him. “Thank you,” Tom said to Aduro.

“Good luck,” said the wizard. “But

remember, Tom, this isn't only about your father. Now that Ravira is strong enough to send her Hounds to the surface, there is no telling where they will roam. They could travel anywhere. The entire kingdom is at risk."

He waved his hand and the courtyard disappeared.



Tom and Elenna found themselves on the outskirts of the Forest of Fear. Tom looked to the stars to get his bearings. "We're still half a day's ride from Shrayton!" he said. "Ravira's magic must be more powerful than Aduro realised. Faster, Storm!"

The stallion whinnied and charged off at a gallop through the fields, his hooves thundering.

“You’re pushing him too hard!” said Elenna, gripping Tom’s waist.

He held the reins tightly, pulling back to jump Storm over a small brook. He twisted in the saddle to see Silver leap as well, a few paces behind.

“I have no choice,” he yelled. “If we don’t get there before nightfall...”

Storm’s powerful legs carried them onwards. As they rode, an awful vision from the chamber leapt up in Tom’s mind: the terrifying glimpse he’d had of Ravira’s Hound. How many were there? Perhaps the whole village had been bitten!

The air blasted through his tunic, as Tom watched the glowing orange orb of the Avantian sun sink ever lower.

Finally they burst onto a muddy track marked with other hoofprints.

“This must be the way,” said Elenna.



Tom spied trails of smoke from distant chimneys to the north, and took one hand from the rein to slap Storm's muscular neck.

"You're doing well, boy!" he told his stallion. "We're nearly there!"

Still he didn't let up the gallop. Tom remembered how Aduro had spoken the Beast's name with real fear. *If Ravira rules over all the Hounds, he thought, she must be a powerful adversary. Perhaps the deadliest yet.*

A shape appeared on the horizon, and Tom let Storm sink back to a

canter, so that he could draw his sword. But the figure was just a boy, standing beside a gatepost on the edge of a village and shielding his eyes from the setting sun. Tom sheathed his blade again and slowed to a trot. Storm's flanks heaved with exhaustion, and even Silver's head was lowered as he caught his breath.

"Are you Tom?" asked the boy.
"Thank goodness!" He looked back over his shoulder.

Tom frowned. "How do you know my name?"

The boy seemed taken aback, and even a little afraid. "Taladon told me to expect a boy and girl on a black horse." He looked nervously at Silver.
"And a grey wolf. I'm Jacob."

Tom leapt down from the saddle.
"Where's my father?" he asked.



Jacob pointed towards a group of low buildings. “We helped the wounded warrior to the old stable-block,” he said. “It’s a little way from the rest of village. Follow me.”

They dismounted and followed the boy to the stables. A couple of hundred paces away, the village houses squatted like shadows in the dusk light. Apart from the trails of smoke, Shrayton seemed eerily quiet. The last of the sun’s rays seeped away, and Tom made out the dim orb of the moon across to the east.

At the stable door, Fleetfoot, his father's stallion, stood patiently waiting. Tom had never seen this noble horse without his father by its side. He pushed down the rising panic in his chest and stroked the stallion's long nose. "There, there, boy. We're here now."

Elenna squeezed Tom's arm. "Come on. Let's find your father."

"Quick! Inside!" Jacob hissed, hurrying them around the side of the stable. He pointed towards the village, where a crowd of people carrying torches had emerged.

"We mean them no harm," whispered Elenna.

"They patrol the streets looking for people who've been bitten," said Jacob. "They don't know he's here."

The boy's hand trembled as he

pushed against the stable door. It swung open with a creak. Silver whined and Elenna ruffled his neck. "Wait here," she told her wolf.

The air was thick with the smell of straw. The roof had partially collapsed and moonlight hung in pale shafts. Towards the back of the stable stood the remains of a brick chimney, and a dark figure lay curled against it. Tom recognised Taladon's hunched form, breathing quickly in shallow pants. "Father?"

As he moved closer, the moonlight caught the glint of chains, snaking from shackles at Taladon's wrists to metal hoops embedded in the bricks. Anger flared in Tom's heart. He shot a glance at Jacob. "What have you done to him?" he asked. "Why have you locked him up?"

“I wouldn’t go closer if I were you,” said Jacob, cringing against the wall.

Tom caught a movement in the corner of his eye.

“Look out!” Elenna cried.

Tom spun around and saw his father spring from the ground towards him, suddenly illuminated in the moonlight. The chains rattled and pulled tight as Taladon’s hands clawed the air. Tom fell back and gasped with horror. Taladon’s face was twisted with rage, his eyes bloodshot and full of hate. His teeth seemed sharper, trailing drool over his filthy tunic. The strong fingers that grasped and flexed towards Tom ended in long yellow nails.

Then Taladon uttered a strange growl and collapsed to his knees. His energy seemed to have evaporated,



leaving him a crumpled figure on the stable floor. Thick hair coated the back of his neck. *That wasn't there before*, Tom thought. When Taladon looked up at him again, his eyes were red-rimmed and watery. He panted with exhaustion and hastily pulled at the cuffs of his tunic to hide the curls of hair that sprouted there.

“What’s happened to you?” Tom asked, hearing the quiver in his voice.

“You shouldn’t have come,” Taladon croaked. “It’s too late.”

CHAPTER TWO

VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED



Tom struggled to his feet with Elenna's help. His legs felt weak, and his stomach twisted. He glimpsed the wound on Taladon's upper thigh, where his trousers were torn open with tooth-marks and caked brown with dried blood. His father retreated back to the bricks in jerking movements, dragging his chains with him.