



GRASHKOR
THE BEAST GUARD

*With special thanks to Michael Ford
To Callum Leslie*



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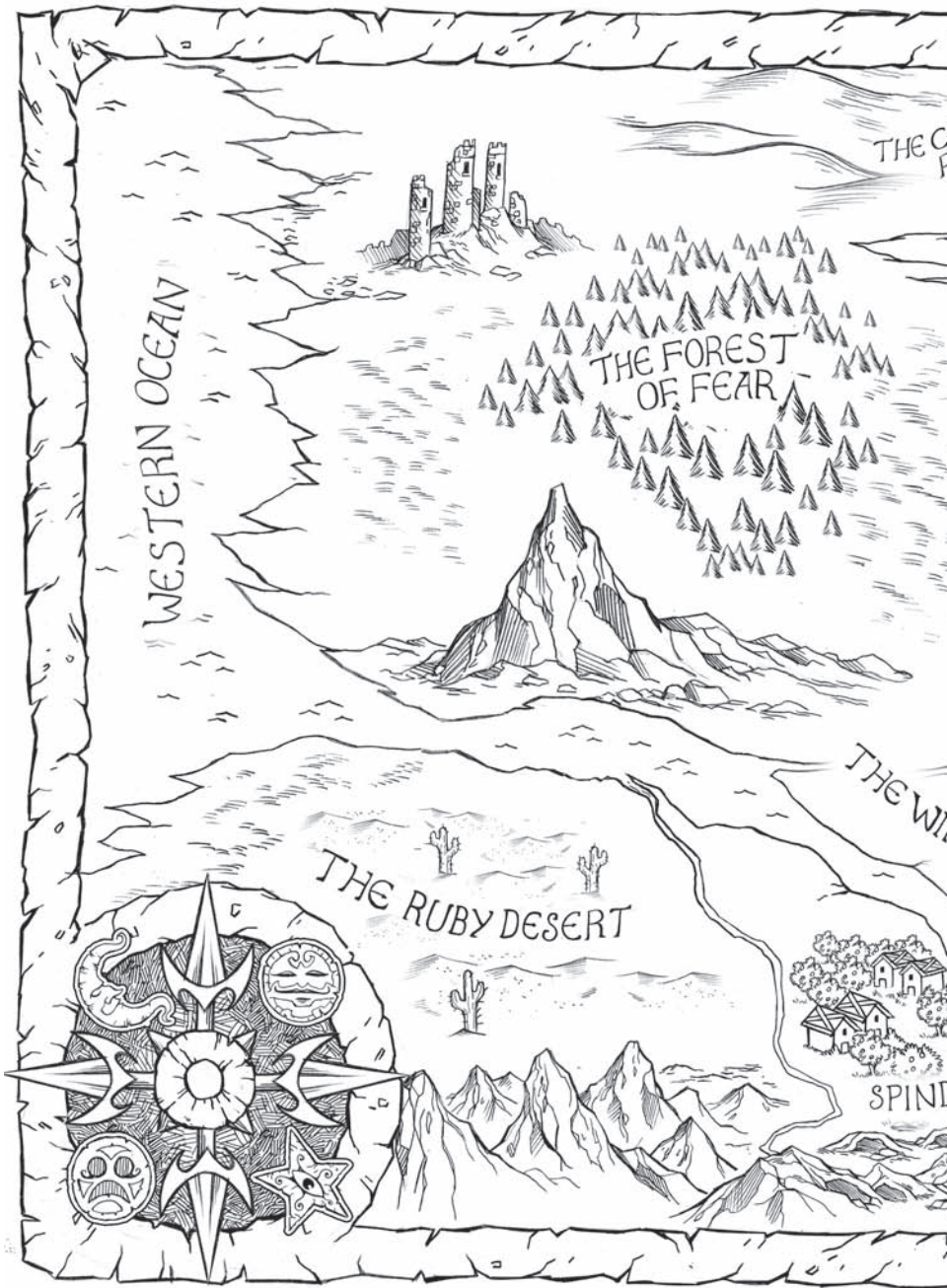
GRASHKOR
THE BEAST GUARD



BY ADAM BLADE



ORCHARD



CENTRAL
PLAINS

Avantia

GRASSY
PLAINS

KING
HUGO'S
PALACE

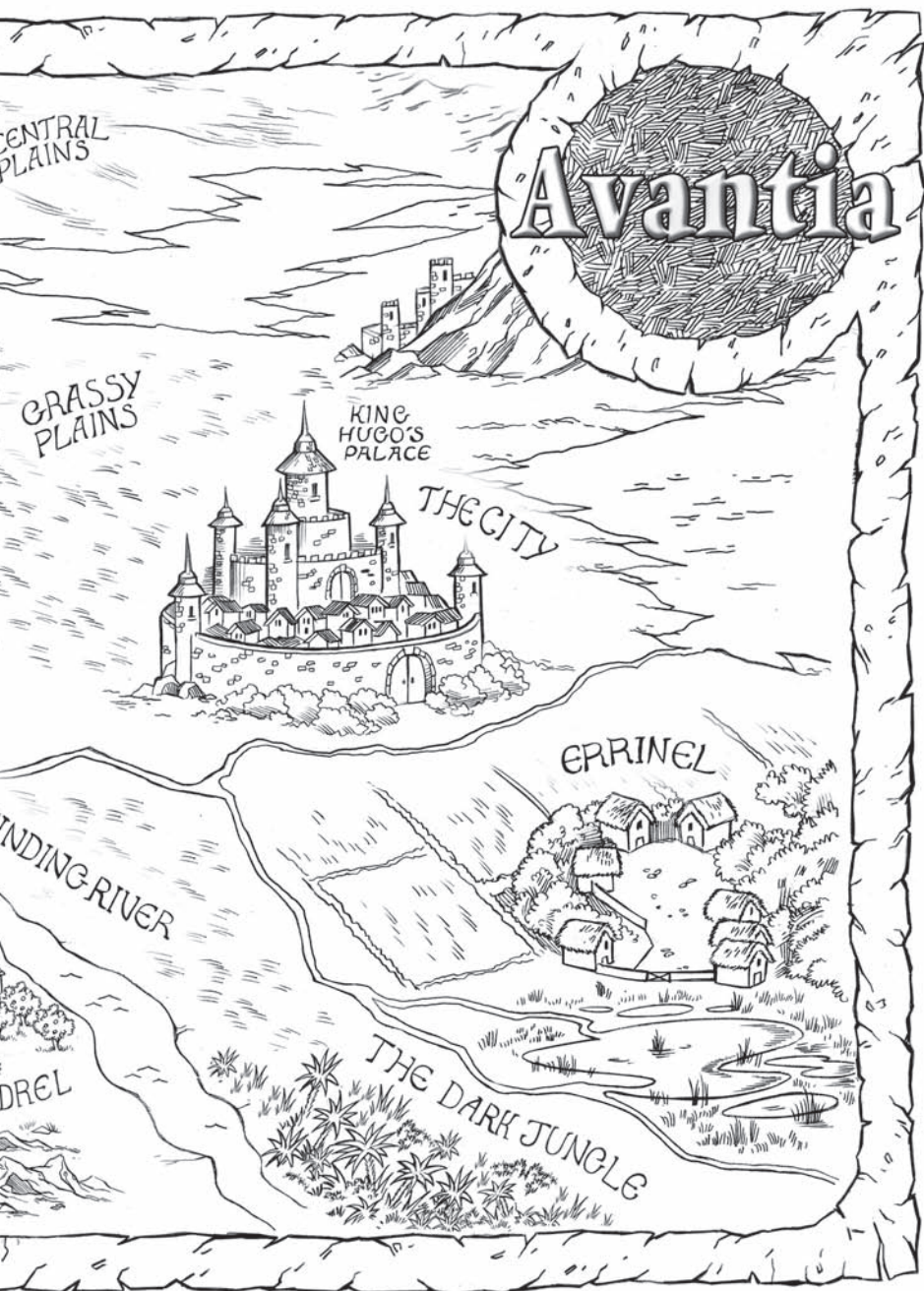
THE CITY

EPRINEL

INDING RIVER

DREL

THE DARK JUNGLE



STORY ONE



Where am I? Silver, where are you?

My head hurts and my mouth is dry. When I rub my eyes clear, I can see...nothing. Just darkness and gloom. I can feel a dank, dirty stone floor beneath me, and damp stone walls around me.

I'm in some kind of cell!

I'm starting to remember what happened... I remember my journey, down the long road. The highwaymen... Then my mind goes blank, and I remember nothing else. But I know who's responsible – that Evil Wizard!

I don't know how long I can last here or what dangers lie beyond the locked door. Does Tom even know I'm here? He's my only hope now.

Death may await me, but I won't cower before it. I will stay strong.

Elenna



CHAPTER ONE

LURKING DANGER



The two youths drew their swords and edged towards Tom. The one on the left was taller. He bore a scar on his chin, and sweat dripped from his brow.

His companion, a squat young man, grinned. "We've got him now, Harris," he said.

As the youth lunged, Tom deflected the blow with a low block of his

sword, and darted around him. The attacker plunged head-first into a horse trough, carried by his momentum. He came up again, spluttering. Tom faced the second youth, adjusting the shield on his arm.

The taller opponent lowered his wooden sword and burst out laughing.



“I think the boy’s got you, Roger!” he said, pointing to his sodden companion.

Tom smiled too. Roger did look funny, with his hair dripping wet and his mouth agape. “I think maybe that’s enough practice for today,” Tom said. “Roger, you need to work on your balance and footwork. Harris, make sure you keep your shield tight to your body. A blade could slip through.”

Both cadets nodded and walked away. Tom rested his wooden practice sword in the equipment rack and retrieved his belt and scabbard.

Across the Palace courtyard, Captain Harkman was taking another group of trainee soldiers through an advance-and-retreat drill.

They’re already getting good, Tom

thought, as the young men huddled close, protecting each other's flanks with their shields. It had only been a few days since the fresh batch of cadets had gathered. Recruitment orders had gone out, and boys had come from all over the villages of the kingdom, proud to enlist in King Hugo's army. The training was hard work, but for the moment they were having fun. Soon the training with real weapons would begin.

I just hope they never have to put their skills into practice, Tom thought.

But Tom knew the future was uncertain.

A month ago, King Hugo had led his most experienced soldiers out to the eastern frontier. Beyond the Forbidden Land, they'd faced a Barbarian invasion. Tom had offered

to go too, but the King had shaken his head.

“I need you to stay and train the army reserves,” he’d said, “just in case the Barbarians break through.”

Tom had nodded, disappointed but also ready to do his duty. There was no shortage of other threats in Avantia. Tom cast a glance towards a section of the outer wall that was being repaired. Somehow the young witch Petra had cast a spell to blast her way out of the Palace dungeon. She’d been held there since they’d returned from their last Quest in the Kingdom of Seraph. With Petra on the loose, the kingdom was not safe. Guided by her twisted magic, Evil Beasts might strike at any moment.

Tom saw a boy rushing across the yard carrying several quivers full of

arrows over his shoulder. A group of archers waited beside a straw-stuffed sack-figure target and one girl was bending her bow with strong arms.

“Keep practising,” Tom called, “and you’ll be a match for Elenna one day!”

The girl archer smiled at him. *Elenna would be able to put an arrow through the figure’s eye from fifty paces,* Tom thought.

He missed his friend. She’d wanted to fight in the east too, but King Hugo had ordered that she remain in Avantia in case danger struck. She’d set out for her Uncle Leo’s house in the southwest two days ago. *She’ll almost be there by now,* Tom thought.

He headed towards the Palace to visit Aduro. The Good Wizard was monitoring events at the frontier

with his magic ball. Tom heard the patter of feet behind him. He turned to find a red-cheeked boy clutching two wooden swords.

“What can I do for you, Sebastian?” Tom asked.

“I’ve been practising my block and roll,” the boy replied.

Tom grinned. Sebastian was his star pupil, much better at duelling than most boys twice his size.

“Show me, then,” said Tom, reaching out and taking the other sword.

Sebastian stood at guard, his sword outstretched. Tom stabbed. With a deft side-step, the boy knocked Tom’s sword aside, and turned right around on his heel. His sword-arm flicked round too, and Tom ducked beneath the blow. “Excellent!” Tom said.

Sebastian lunged and Tom had to be quick to step and block. Their blades rattled together. He pushed the boy's blade down and tried to swipe over the top, but Sebastian leant back and the blade swished harmlessly where his chest had been. Tom took advantage and stepped forwards while Sebastian was off-balance. With the lightest of pushes, Sebastian fell on his backside.

"You sacrificed your balance to avoid the blow," Tom said. "Always move your feet rather than your body when you dodge."

Sebastian arched his back, flicked up his legs and leapt to his feet without using his hands. He advanced on Tom with a series of quick slashes, driving Tom back.

He's quick! Tom thought, defending



the blows and looking for an opening. From the corner of his eye, he noticed that Captain Harkman's recruits had stopped training to watch. So had the archers and some horse-riders.

"The boy's good!" called Roger.

Tom managed to stop Sebastian's advance with a low jab that whistled past the boy's knee. They circled each

other, both breathing heavily.

“You’re getting better,” Tom said.
“Ready to carry on?”

Sebastian nodded, and Tom tossed his sword into his left hand, confusing his opponent. He gave two diagonal swipes, forcing Sebastian to retreat. The crowd parted to make way. Tom swapped hands again, feinting twice to the left. Sebastian dropped his guard awkwardly.

Squelch!

Sebastian’s right foot slid out from underneath him and he fell to the ground – he’d slipped in a pile of horse manure. Tom placed his wooden blade softly against the boy’s neck.

The crowd cheered and clapped as Sebastian looked in dismay at his foot.

“Urgh!” he said. “You only beat me because I slipped!”

“Always be aware of your surroundings,” Tom said, offering a hand to help Sebastian up. The boy took it with a grin.

Tom remembered when he’d played at being a soldier, back at his Uncle Henry’s house. He’d spent every evening with his wooden sword, pretending to fight enemies of the kingdom. That seemed like another lifetime.

“I’ll keep training,” said Sebastian.

“If you do, you’ll be a great warrior one day,” said Tom.

As Sebastian dusted himself off, his brow creased into a frown and his eyes flicked to something behind Tom.

Tom turned to see a grey dog

hobbling through the castle entrance.

No – not a dog!

“Silver!” Tom gasped.

“It’s Elenna’s wolf!” someone in the crowd muttered.

When Silver’s eyes fell on Tom, he let out a weak howl and scampered over. Tom crouched to meet him, and as the wolf approached, Tom saw a black mark scorched across his side, a patch of hair burnt away. Silver



whined as Tom's fingers traced the wound. "It's all right, boy," he said.

Fear spread through Tom's chest, mirrored in the anxious eyes of those who crowded round. Silver's injuries weren't serious.

But where is Elenna? Tom thought.