

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST CHALLENGE

Tom could barely stay upright in his saddle as Storm picked his way down the mountain path. The Quests in Gwildor were tougher than anything he'd faced before and the battle with the last beast, Rokk, had drained him of strength.

His hand throbbed with pain. Ever since the beast, Krabb, had injured

him with his giant pincers, poison had been travelling up Tom's hand. Now he gripped the reins with his left hand and cradled the injured right one against his side. He looked round at Elenna, hoping she wouldn't notice.

I don't want her to worry, thought Tom. They were still only halfway through their Gwildorian mission. There were three more Beasts to free from Velmal.

Suddenly, a shower of stones scattered from beneath Silver's feet and the wolf yelped. Crying out, Elenna slipped down from the saddle. Her pet was licking his paw, and Tom saw blood on the path.

"Is he all right?" Tom asked.

Elenna wrapped her arms around Silver's neck.

"I think so," she said. Gently, she lifted the wolf's foot and inspected his paw. "It doesn't look like more than a scratch."

When Elenna remounted, Silver was on his feet again, tongue lolling and looking anxious to get going. Elenna peered ahead down the rocky path.

"Maybe we should look at the amulet's map?" she said.

Tom took the silver amulet from around his neck, and held it in front of him. A piece of blue enamel sparkled in its centre. The amulet was formed of the six pieces he'd gathered from his Quests in the Forbidden Land. A map on the back of the amulet was guiding Tom through Gwildor.

Tom turned the amulet over. Two

roads branched across the north of Gwildor, where the land was white with snow and frozen lakes. One road led to the shape of a man. Tom peered closely and saw that the man's limbs were made not of flesh and bone, but ice. A name appeared in spidery script: *Koldo*.

The other road led to a nearby destination, and a tiny picture of a set of scales. That's where they would head first. In each of his Quests, the amulet had led him to a magical item that helped with the mission.

"What use is a set of scales?" asked Elenna, looking over his shoulder.

"Who knows?" Tom replied. "But I trust the amulet."

They rode along the track through the Gwildorian landscape. Like everything in Gwildor, the colours

seemed too brilliant to believe: luscious grasses greener than any in Avantia, plants of every colour in the rainbow. It was hard to believe Gwildor was suffering under the wicked spells of the evil Wizard Velmal.

They reached the edge of a forest. Tom could barely see beyond the first few trees. The trunks and dense tangles of vines grew close together. Shreds of mist coiled around the tops of trees. No sounds came from inside the forest. There were no chattering bird calls or howling monkeys. Not even the rustle of leaves. The air seemed stagnant and deadly.

"Maybe we should go round the forest," said Elenna.

Tom checked the map, and shook his head. "The forest's too big," he

said. "We don't have time."

Tom had another reason for wanting to go through the forest: it would give him a chance to practise using his sword. Now that his right hand was in so much pain, he'd need to use his left hand for any sword fighting.

He hacked through the vines and branches that blocked their path, experimenting with the different thrusts and slashes that seemed so easy with his right hand. Everything felt unnatural and clumsy, and it wasn't long before his shoulder burned with the effort. He was breathing hard.

"Are you all right?" asked Elenna.

Tom chopped a stubborn fern, and winced. He could see daylight ahead. "We're almost there."

a/w: Tom and Elenna are in a dense forest. Tom is hacking through the vines with his left hand as his right is injured. He's finding it difficult and he looks out of breath. Elenna looks concerned.

Elenna put a hand on his forearm.

"Tom," she said, "you don't have to pretend. I can see you're in pain. Why not let me take over for a while?"

Tom lowered his head, feeling shame burn his cheeks.

"I can't give in," he said. "If I can't cut down a few vines, how can we ever face Koldo?"

“Just as long as you know I’m here to help,” said Elenna.

Tom thanked his friend, and decided to swap hands. He gripped the sword hilt with his right hand. The muscles felt stiff.

By the time they reached the edge of the forest, Tom was dripping with sweat. A cold wind whipped Tom’s breath away. Spread out before them were the Icy Plains, gleaming pale

dps a/w: Tom, Elenna, Storm and Silver stand on this side looking out on to the icy plains. There are small areas of grass and ice shapes that have been blown by the winds. It looks beautiful but harsh and dangerous.

blue and white as far as Tom could see. Areas of grass were scattered like small islands amidst the snow, and stacks of ice rose in towers above the ground, whittled into shapes by the freezing gales. There was no horizon. The land seemed to blend into the sky.

“It’s beautiful!” Elenna exclaimed.

Beautiful, Tom thought, and deadly too.