

CHAPTER ONE

A HERO'S RETURN

“Hold tight, Elenna!” Tom cried. His friend wrapped her arms tightly round Tom’s waist.

He dug his heels into Storm’s side; the black stallion thundered along the road. But however hard they tried, they couldn’t catch the chestnut horse galloping ahead of them.

“You win!” Tom gasped, as the two horses flashed one after the other past a single pine tree standing at a bend in the road.

He slowed Storm to a walk and glanced over his shoulder to see Elenna flushed with excitement. “They don’t call your father Taladon the Swift for nothing!” she exclaimed with a broad grin.

“You ride well, Tom.” Taladon’s eyes shone with approval. He patted the glossy neck of his chestnut stallion. “There aren’t many horses who could keep up with Fleetfoot.”

Bright sunlight shone down on the green hills of Avantia. Tom’s heart swelled with happiness as he urged Storm to a trot again, and gazed at the white road winding ahead.

“I can’t wait to see Uncle Henry’s

face when we get to Errinel,” he said to his father. “He’ll never expect to find you on his doorstep!”

Taladon smiled. “It’s all thanks to you,” he said.

Tom’s father had been missing for many years, imprisoned in the dungeons of the evil sorcerer, Malvel. He had finally escaped when Tom weakened Malvel’s magic by defeating him three times. But Taladon had been doomed to exist only as a ghost until Tom recovered the six pieces of the Amulet of Avantia. And in the struggle for the final piece, Tom had wounded Malvel, banishing him from the kingdom.

Tom could hardly believe that his father was riding with him now, fit and strong again, his face glowing with life.

Storm tossed his head, his bridle jingling as he let out a whinny of approval. Silver, Elenna's grey wolf, joined in with a joyful howl as he bounded along beside the horses.

Taladon rode in silence, but Tom saw a shadow of anxiety pass over his face. *What is he thinking?* Tom wondered. *Surely Malvel is too weak to do us any more harm?*

A moment later Taladon was smiling again. "I hope Maria has made some of her lamb stew," he said. "I haven't tasted it for years."

Tom shook off his fears. Maybe he had just imagined his father's worried look. "I'm sure she'll make it for you," he said. "And we'll be all together as a family at last!"



Tom's heart fluttered with excitement as he jumped down from Storm and knocked on the door of Uncle Henry's cottage. The sun was going down; smoke curled up from the chimney, and the sound of hammering came from his uncle's forge next door.

Tom exchanged a delighted grin with Elenna and his father as they waited on the doorstep. *All my Beast Quests were worth it, just for this!* he thought.

Footsteps approached the door and it was flung open. Aunt Maria stood in the doorway. "Taladon!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide with shock. "Is it really you?"

"It really is," Taladon replied with a smile. "It's good to see you again, Maria."

Aunt Maria stepped forward and drew Taladon into a hug. “What happened to you?” she asked. “Where have you been? Why didn’t you *tell* us?”

a/w: Tom, Elenna, Storm, Silver and Taladon have arrived at Uncle Henry’s cottage. Aunt Maria has answered the door and looks delighted to see them. She hugs Taladon.

Taladon drew back gently, smiling down at her. "It's a long story."

"Tom! Elenna!" Tears welled up in Aunt Maria's eyes. "You're safe! I never dared hope we'd be all together again."

"It's thanks to Tom." Taladon gave Tom a warm, affectionate look. "He's a real hero."

"I couldn't have done it without Elenna," Tom said, feeling himself go red with embarrassment.

"I'm proud of you both," Aunt Maria said. "You'll want to see Henry," she added to Taladon. "He's in the forge."

"We'll go over there now," said Taladon. "Come on, Tom, Elenna."

"I'll stay and help settle Silver and the horses," Elenna said quickly. Tom guessed she wanted to give him and

his father some time alone with Uncle Henry.

Tom led the way along the path from the cottage to the forge. As he pushed open the door, he felt a surge of heat from the fire that always burnt there. The flames glowed with a fierce red light.

The sound of hammering stopped. Tom saw Uncle Henry standing in front of his anvil, a hammer in one hand and tongs holding a half-forged horseshoe in the other.

“There’s someone here to see you,” Tom said. He stepped inside and stood back to let his father follow.

Henry’s mouth gaped wide and his eyes welled with tears. “Taladon!” he gasped.

“Hello, brother,” Taladon said.
The hammer and the horseshoe

clanged on the stone floor of the forge as Henry flung them aside and ran to embrace his brother. "I can't believe it!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were dead."

a/w: Tom and Taladon are in the hot forge. Uncle Henry has dropped his tongs, horseshoe and hammer in shock.

“I was as good as dead.” Taladon drew back from his brother and stood with his hands on Henry’s shoulders. “But thanks to Tom, I’m as strong as ever. And now I’m home.”

“It’s wonderful to have you here. And you too, Tom.” Uncle Henry gave Tom a hug. “Let’s go and eat.”

Back at the cottage, Tom and the others found his aunt and Elenna in the kitchen. Aunt Maria was stirring a large iron pot over the fire. Tom helped Elenna to set out pewter plates on the table.

Taladon sniffed the air. “Is that lamb stew I smell?”

Aunt Maria looked up from her cooking, a broad smile on her face. “I remembered it was your favourite! But you’ll have to wait a while. I wasn’t expecting guests.”

She added some chopped onions to the pot. “We’ll have to hold a feast in your honour, Taladon,” she said.

“There’s no need for that,” Taladon protested.

“Nonsense!” Aunt Maria gave the pot another vigorous stir. “The whole of Errinel should know how much you have done for Avantia. What better excuse could we have for a feast? We’ll invite the whole village.”

*a/w: Back in the cottage in the kitchen.
Maria and Taladon from waist-up.
Maria is enthusiastically stirring the pot
of stew.*

The sun was going down. Elenna finished setting the table while Tom lit the lamps. When the meal was ready, everyone sat down in front of steaming bowls.

Tom glanced round the table at the faces of the people who meant so much to him. *I never dared to hope we would all be sitting round a table like this*, he thought. Raising his cup, he added aloud, "I can't remember the last time I felt this happy!"



A loud crash woke Tom. He sat bolt upright, for a moment unsure where he was. Then he recognised his old bedroom in the attic of his uncle and aunt's cottage. Pale dawn light was seeping through the shutters.

a/w: Tom in bed in the attic room. He's sitting upright as he hears a loud crash. The dawn light streams through the shutters at the window.

At the opposite side of the room, Elenna pushed back her blankets. "What was that?" she asked, her voice heavy with sleep.

"I don't know." Tom jumped up and dragged on his tunic. "We'd better go and find out."

Silver, who had been sleeping at the bottom of Elenna's bed, dashed out after them. Taladon joined them

as they clattered down the stairs. In the passage below, Uncle Henry and Aunt Maria were already up; Henry was unbolting the outer door of the cottage.

Tom led the way as everyone poured outside. Nothing stirred as he glanced around.

Then his gaze fell on the forge. "Look at that!" he gasped.

The rays of the rising sun showed a huge, splintered hole in the door of the forge. It looked as if something had kicked its way inside.

Tom's stomach churned. *What made that hole?* he asked himself. *And is it still lurking inside the forge?*

*a/w to continue under opposite page too:
Everyone has gone outside of the cottage
as the sun is coming up. They can see a
huge splintered hole in the door of the
forge. Everyone looks concerned.*