



MORTAXE
THE SKELETON
WARRIOR

With special thanks to Michael Ford

For Kieran Barzey



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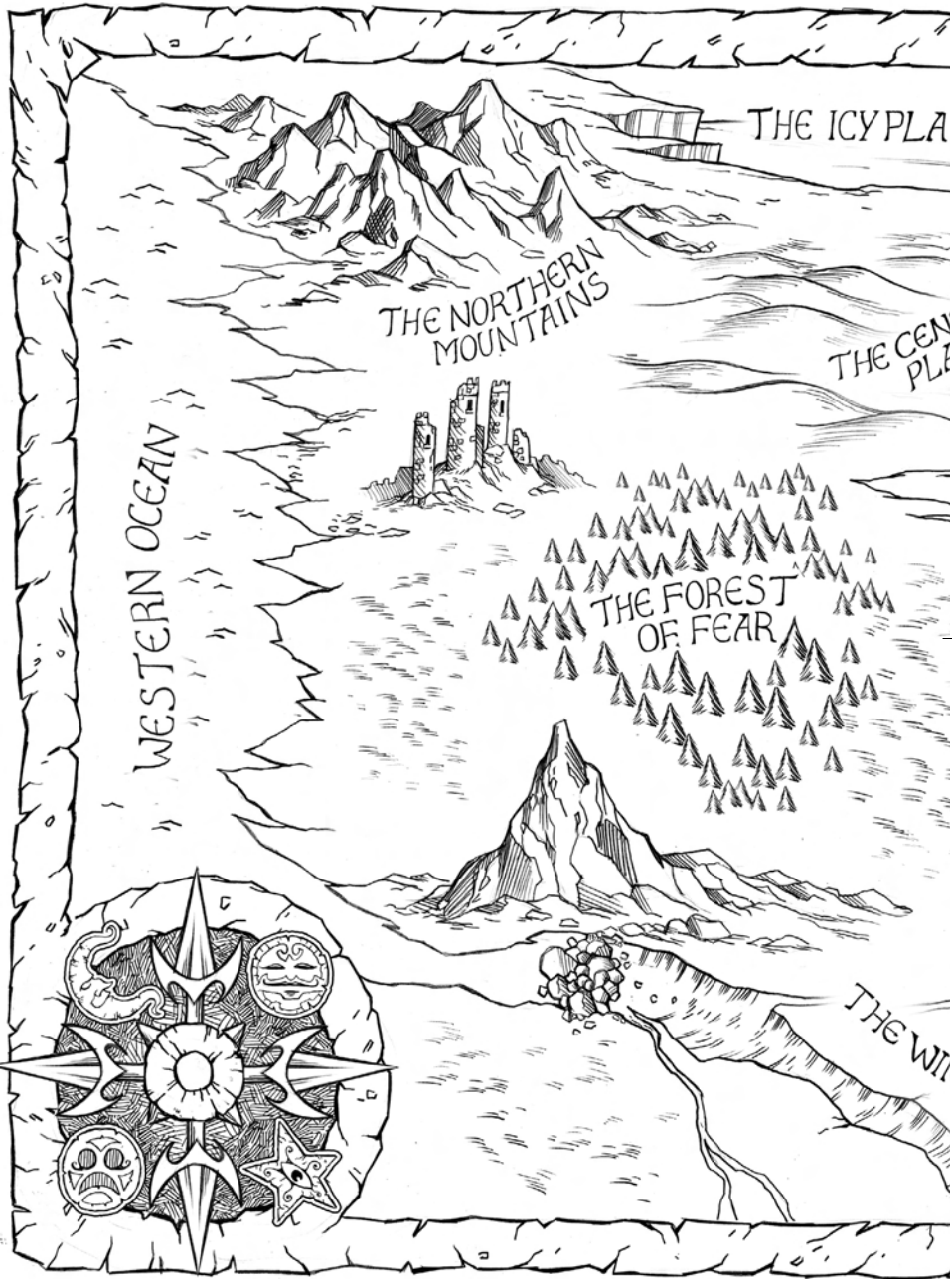
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THE SKELETON
WARRIOR



BY ADAM BLADE





Avantia

LAINS

CENTRAL
PLAINS

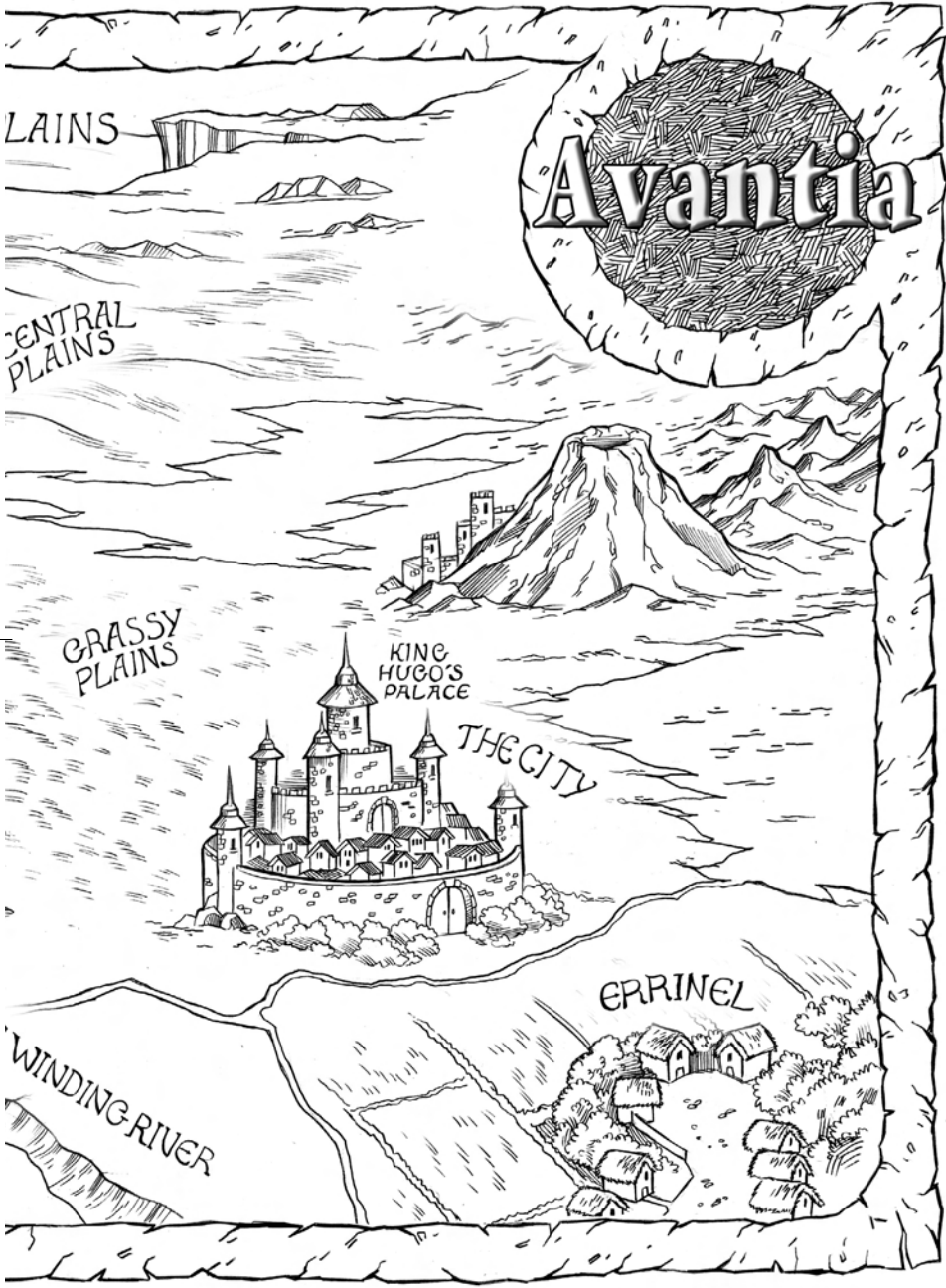
GRASSY
PLAINS

KING
HUGO'S
PALACE

THE CITY

ERRINEZ

WINDING RIVER





THE CALM BEFORE
THE STORM



It's been an honour for Silver and I to be with Tom on his Quests – together, we've never failed. We've just arrived at King Hugo's palace, resting before the next challenge. But our enemies do not rest!

Even as we enjoy a kingdom at peace, dark magic gathers. Tom is about to be tested like never before. Can he defeat an evil twice as strong as any other we've met? And will Avantia survive an attack from the six who are meant to protect it?

Only my friend has the answers. He may not be the hero you think he is...

Keep reading, if you think your heart is as strong as mine.

Your friend, Elenna



CHAPTER ONE

A HERO'S RETURN



Tom crossed the floor of his bedchamber in King Hugo's castle, pulling at the white ruff of his collar. He looked at himself in the mirror. The clothes had been left on the bed, ready for the King's birthday banquet in the evening: the flowing red robe, embroidered with golden thread, was fastened with a lace collar under his

chin. A servant had asked him to try the outfit on and check it fitted.

“I don’t know how anyone can wear this stuff!” he grumbled to himself.

They’d even given him a pair of pointed slippers, sparkling with tiny silver bells that tinkled when he moved. *Please don’t let there be dancing!* Tom thought.

He sighed and straightened the robe. This was the price he had to pay for being a guest of the King. He should be honoured, really – King Hugo didn’t invite everyone to his birthday celebrations.

Tom glanced at the embossed wooden chest that sat in a corner of the room. It had been many days since he’d last opened the heavy lid. The chest contained his prized

possessions – everything he would need on a Beast Quest: his sword, his enchanted shield, and the jewelled belt.

Tom heard footsteps pounding up the stairs outside. There was a hurried knock at the door.

“Tom, let me in. Quickly!”

He recognised Elenna’s voice at once.

“Just a moment,” he said, unfastening the buttons down the front of his robe and trying to pull off one of his shoes at the same time.

The door flew open.

“Just look what they’ve done to me!” Elenna raged.

Her face was pale with anger. She wore a yellow dress, shimmering with silk, lace and fine netting. The material was swathed around her



upper body, but the lower half swelled outwards in a great puff that cascaded to the floor. A sparkling tiara sat on top of her head, and the only sign of the friend he knew so well was her short, spiky hair. Tom

had to bite his lip to stop himself bursting into laughter.

He stepped aside to give Elenna room as she tried to squeeze herself through the narrow doorway. The dress's folds brushed each side of the frame. Tom tried to disguise his chuckling with a cough.

"I don't know what you think is so funny," said Elenna, grinning as well now. "You look like a conjuror in that outfit."

Tom lifted a foot and shook his toes to make the bells jingle. "No chance of sneaking up on a Beast in these, is there?"

Elenna huffed and tried to pat down her skirts. "You'd think they might have let us off considering the number of times we've saved the kingdom!"

“It’s only for one night,” said Tom.
“And it is the King’s birthday.”

“I suppose so,” grumbled Elenna.

Suddenly, a loud explosion sounded outside. Tom rushed to the window, with Elenna at his side.

“What was that?” he gasped. Was someone attacking the castle?

In the crisp morning air, the palace grounds looked still. There was no smoke, no shouting. Then another explosion. This time a point of red light burst above the turrets of the castle, showering a cascade of rainbow colours.

“Fireworks!” said Tom, feeling his panic seep away.

“Look!” said Elenna, pointing.

Down beneath the light display was Aduro, standing on a patch of bare ground. He was wearing his

ceremonial robes – a purple cloak sparkling with silver stars. He took a cylindrical object from a box.

“He must be preparing for the big show after the banquet,” Tom said. He opened a window, and leaned out, whistling loudly with two fingers in his mouth. Aduro turned towards them and waved.

But before Aduro could send another firework into the sky, a louder explosion ripped through the air, rattling the window in its casement. Tom felt the rumble through his body. The whole chamber was shaking, and Elenna gripped his arm. “That didn’t sound like a firework,” she said nervously.

Tom waited for the rumbling to stop. Elenna was right. This was something else. Something bad.



Aduro had turned and was looking towards the west. Tom followed his gaze. Above the western walls, plumes of black smoke were rising into the clear blue sky. The Good Wizard started to run, cloak billowing out behind him. But he wasn't heading towards the explosion.

"He's going towards the stables..."
Elenna muttered.

A familiar feeling of dread tightened in Tom's gut.

"Come on," he said "Let's find out what's going on."

Elenna did the same with the tiara. A deep frown was etched across her forehead.

"I'll get changed and meet you downstairs," she said.

Tom nodded as he pulled the red robe over his head. He knelt down beside the wooden chest, unfastened the padlock and flung open the lid. As soon as the sword hilt was in his hand, he felt better. He took out his shield as well.

It looked like he wouldn't be dancing after all.

