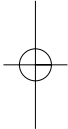
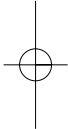


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CHAPTER ONE

A NEW VENTURE



“I wish I had arrows that replaced themselves,” said Elenna. “That would be much easier.”

Tom watched Elenna as she sat on the ground, whittling arrow shafts from pine twigs. The tip of her tongue poked out of her mouth as she frowned with concentration. Tom grinned, before turning to look out across the lush plains of Gwildor.

Tom had never heard of this kingdom until the good wizard Aduro had told him that six new Beasts needed rescuing from the curse of Velmal. Thinking about the wizard and his evil magic made Tom reach out a protective hand to his horse, Storm. Beside the stallion, Elenna's wolf Silver sat on his haunches, keenly watching his mistress work.

*a/w: Elenna is sitting on the ground whittling arrows from pine, tongue out with concentration. She is on the plains of Gwildor. Silver is sitting nearby watching her.*

"Can I help?" Tom asked.

Elenna smiled up at him. "It took me years to learn how to whittle like this," she said, teasing. "You may be Avantia's Master of the Beasts, but it's best to leave this to me."

"My father is Master of the Beasts now," he reminded her. "I'm back to being Tom."

Pride flooded his chest as he remembered the Quest that had saved his father, Taladon, from being trapped as a ghost. Tom had needed to find all six pieces of the Amulet of Avantia that now hung around his neck.

Tom held up the Amulet. On one side, brilliant blue enamel gleamed in the centre. On the other was etched an intricate map of the kingdom of Gwildor, directing them on their travels. With each new Quest, the

map guided Tom and Elenna to the location of the next Beast, and to a prize that would help him conquer each new foe. Against Krabb, master of the sea, he had used a magic pearl that allowed him to breathe underwater. Against Hawkite, arrow of the air, he'd found an enchanted ring that made him appear invisible when he stood still.

The prizes had been invaluable in his Quest so far. But they did not belong to him. They belonged to Freya, Gwildor's Mistress of the Beasts.

"What's wrong?" Elenna asked. "You're frowning."

"I was just thinking about Freya," he replied. "She was this kingdom's champion, and Velmal made her evil. She told me she doesn't want to be good again. I don't understand it."

Elenna lined up her new arrows in her quiver, before flinging it over her shoulder. She stood up. "That's Velmal's dark magic talking. Once we complete this Quest, maybe Freya will become good again."

"I hope so," said Tom. "Gwildor is Avandia's twin kingdom. If it falls into darkness, then..." He couldn't bring himself to say it. The thought of evil spreading across the ocean to Avandia was too dreadful to think about.

"Tom!" said Elenna, pointing at the Amulet in Tom's hand. It pulsed with a blue light.

Tom held it up. Elenna stood behind him, looking over his shoulder. The map showed two roads running side-by-side to a mountainous region in north Gwildor. At the end of the first path was a tiny image of a pair of

gloves. At the end of the other was a pair of towering mountains. Beneath them was some swirly writing.

“Rokk,” Elenna read aloud. “The next Beast’s name.”

“Yes, but where is he?” Tom mused. There was no picture of a Beast on the map.

*a/w: Tom, with Elenna looking over his shoulder, is studying the glowing amulet.*

Elenna shrugged. “Lurking in the mountains?” she suggested. “Maybe he has a cave up there? I wonder what kind of Beast he is?”

Tom checked Storm’s saddle. “It doesn’t matter,” he told her. “We have to find the gloves first. We can worry about the Beast later.”

Tom climbed into the saddle. “Ready?” he asked, offering Elenna a hand.

His friend pulled herself up behind him. “I’m always ready,” she said, with a laugh. Tom felt her arms wrap around his waist as Storm set off at a trot.

Tom gripped the reins tightly, but felt a sudden twinge of pain in his right hand. Glancing down, he saw that the skin was still tinged green from Krabb’s bite on an earlier

Quest. Worse, the green poison had traveled further up his arm. Tom pulled on Storm's reins, bringing the stallion to a stop.

"What's wrong?" Elenna asked.

"I'm just tired from the last Quest," Tom said, giving Elenna a white lie. He didn't want her to worry. "Would you mind taking the reins?"

Elenna playfully poked him in the ribs as they swapped places. "Don't fall asleep back there," she teased.

"You've got the map, after all!"

"I won't," Tom said, climbing into the saddle behind her. He tried to ignore the hollow feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach. The truth was, his hand was hurting so much that he'd had trouble keeping a tight grip on the reins.

As Storm cantered forwards, a

question swirled around Tom's mind, refusing to go away. *What happens if I can't hold my sword anymore?* he thought. If Tom couldn't fight, the Beast Quest would be over.