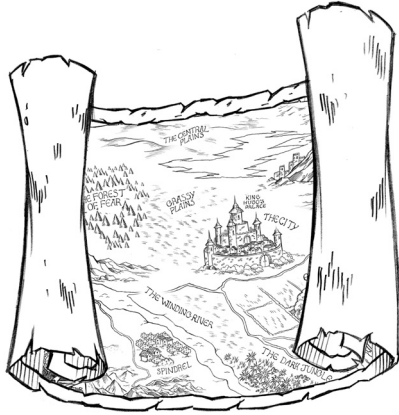


CHAPTER ONE

HOMeward BOUND



“At last!” gasped Tom as he pushed past a branch and found himself gazing out over open countryside.

“Thank goodness!” said Elenna from behind him. “I was beginning to think the Dark Jungle went on for ever.”

They stepped out into the cool of the late afternoon, exhausted and glad to be free of the dark, sultry heat.

Ahead of them, the land sloped downwards in grassy terraces to a wide, winding river that rushed through deep stony banks.

Tom took one final glance back into the sinister jungle, thinking about his battle with Claw, the giant monkey, and remembering how he had just managed to snatch the golden chainmail from the evil Beast.

Silver, Elenna's faithful wolf, and Storm, Tom's noble stallion, emerged from the jungle, too. Silver bounded and barked joyfully, and Storm neighed and pranced.

"They're glad to be out in the open," Elenna said. "Can we camp for the night down by the river? I could catch us some fish for our supper."

Tom looked thoughtfully at her and sighed.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

“I was thinking about Aduro,” he replied. “I’m worried about what Malvel might have done to him.”

The Dark Wizard had kidnapped their friend and protector, the good Wizard Aduro. Malvel had appeared to them in a vision after Tom’s defeat of Claw, showing them torn strips of Aduro’s red cloak. Was the good wizard even still alive?

But whatever fate had befallen Aduro, Tom knew that he still had to fulfil his Quest and unite the six parts of the golden armour that Malvel had stolen and scattered across the kingdom. Aduro had told them it was the only way they could rescue him. Unless they succeeded, Avandia would never be safe from the six evil Beasts set loose by Malvel.

The friends and their two animal companions made their way to the

river. A valley brought them down to a shingled beach.

Tom watched as Elenna waded into the water with an arrow fixed to her bow. After a long wait, she fired the arrow, and a moment later was splashing her way up to the shore with a large salmon. She left it on a rock and went back to catch some more.

Silver sniffed the fish but shook his big shaggy head and trotted off. Tom guessed that he was on the prowl for something he'd find a bit tastier. Storm was grazing contentedly on some long grass.

Tom felt tired and homesick as he looked at the racing river, thinking how different it was from the wide, still lake beside his home village of Errinel. He had not seen it for a long time now.

He shook himself and started to gather wood. Then he lit a fire. He made two tripods of sturdy twigs and skewered the salmon on another twig to hang it above the flames. Soon Elenna came back with two more fish.

The twilight deepened as the fish cooked, and, as they ate, Tom told Elenna about his home. "The lake is as clear as crystal," he said. "On hot summer evenings everyone goes to the lake's shore to eat, play music and watch the sunset."

"It sounds lovely," Elenna said through a mouthful of salmon.

"People say that the water has healing properties," Tom continued, gazing at the darkening sky. "The water has to be collected as the sun sets." He laughed. "It's just a legend," he said. "I don't suppose it's true."

"It's a nice story, all the same,"

Elenna said. “And after all that we’ve seen, who knows what’s true and what isn’t? Most people think the Beasts are a myth, but we know they’re not.”

After they had finished their meal, Tom and Elenna went to check on their companions. Silver was lying with his head between his paws, snoring softly. Storm stood close by, dozing peacefully.

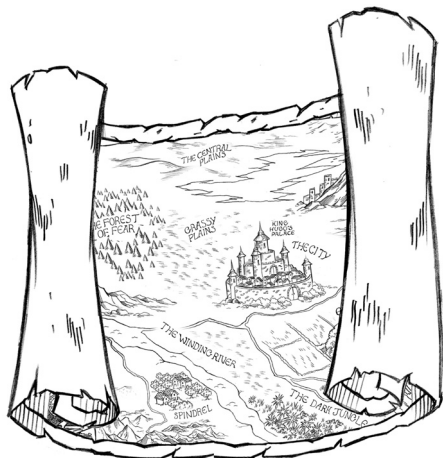
The two friends found a place to spread their bedrolls for the night. The pieces of armour that Tom had already recovered were by his side. The golden helmet, forged into the shape of an eagle’s head, gleamed softly in the glowing starlight. He reached out and touched the chainmail vest, wondering about the Master of the Beasts who had worn it before him. Then he thought of his own father, Taladon the Swift, who had undertaken a Beast Quest

of his own many years ago, but had disappeared. "I wish I had known him," he thought drowsily. He hoped that one day they might be reunited.



The next day dawned bright and warm, the sun rising in a clear blue sky. Tom unrolled the magical map of Avantia that Aduro had given him when his adventures first began.

As he studied it, the map came to life. Meadow grasses moved in the wind and the tiny mountains were cold to the touch. The forests and rivers, villages and castles were all miniature versions of



the real landscape of Avantia.

A glowing red path usually appeared on the map, showing Tom where to find his next challenge, but for the moment there was no sign of it.

“There!” exclaimed Elenna after they had been staring at the map for a little while.

A tiny point of golden light was glowing on the map. As Tom and Elenna peered, it pulsed and grew larger until they could make out the shape of a golden breastplate.

“It’s the next piece of armour!” Elenna said.

Tom let out a cry of delight. “Yes!” he gasped. “And look where it is!” He pointed to a wide, clear lake set in rich farmlands. Beside the lake nestled a small village. “It’s Errinel, my home! You’ll be able to meet Uncle Henry and Aunt Maria who

brought me up.” Tom felt his eyes fill with tears. “I haven’t seen them since I started the Quests,” he said.

A large muzzle snuffled close to his ear. It was Silver, his eyes bright with understanding. Tom turned with a grin. Storm was close by, pawing at the shingle with a hoof.

“You can’t hide your feelings from us!” Elenna said with a laugh. “We know how much you want to go home! Come on – let’s pack up camp and get going.”

“Yes!” Tom laughed. “And no stopping till we get to Errinel!”

But his laughter soon faded as he thought of his Quest and the dangers that lay ahead. He had to get to Errinel quickly – but what kind of Beast would be waiting there for them?

And what harm had it already done to his home and his family?