

CHAPTER ONE

A NEW BEAST



Tom and Elenna rode Storm down the mountain path. Though they had left the snowfields behind, and the hillsides were covered with heather and gorse bushes, snow and ice still gathered in the hollows.

Tom was sitting behind Elenna. His injured hand still throbbed with pain, and he couldn't hold the reins to guide the stallion through the

treacherous patches of ice. So far, they had freed four Gwildorian Beasts from the spell of the evil wizard Velmal. The first Beast, Krabb, had caused Tom's injury with one of his giant pincers, and the green poison had been spreading through his hand ever since. But Tom had not let this stop him, and he and Elenna had managed to free Hawkite, Rokk, and Koldo as well.

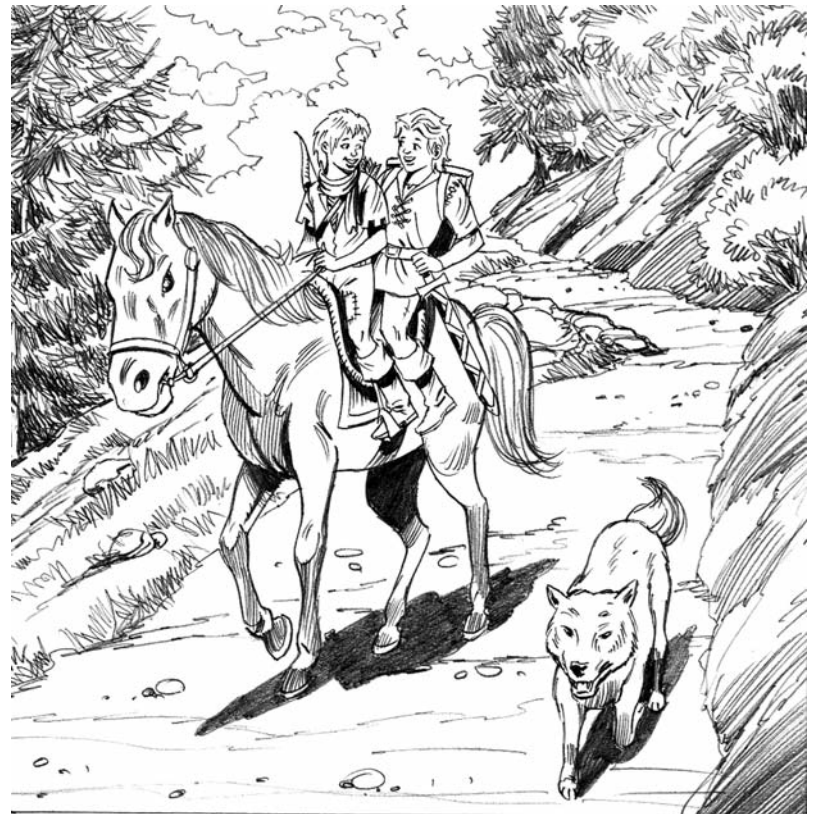
Tom tried not to think about the threat Velmal had made after the battle with Koldo, the arctic warrior.

*"The next Quest will be your last,"* Velmal had said. *"None of you will leave Gwildor alive."*

Tom straightened his back and rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. *While there's blood in my veins, I'll go on fighting Velmal.*

Elenna glanced back at him, her eyes sparkling. "Are you ready for the next challenge?" she asked, almost as if she guessed what he had been thinking.

"Ready," he grinned. *Maybe I can help Freya, too,* he added to himself. *I must free her from Velmal's evil.*



Tom felt a strange connection to Freya, Mistress of the Beasts, but he couldn't understand why. Velmal's spell had made her almost as evil as the dark wizard himself.

The sun shone brightly from a pale blue sky. Its dazzling rays reflected from a patch of ice, so that Tom and Elenna had to squint their eyes against the glare.

"Everything's so much brighter here in Gwildor, compared to our home in Avantia," Elenna said. "Even Silver has to watch where he's putting his paws."

The glare made Tom's eyes water, and he had to blink to see the wolf padding carefully forward, his snout raised alertly to sniff out the track. Raising a hand to wipe his stinging eyes, Tom bit back a cry of pain as his

salty tears trickled onto his poisoned wound. His hand was red and swollen, and it hurt to move it. Tom was so grateful that Elenna had not noticed how bad it was. So far.

*I can't let anything stop me on this Quest, he thought. Not even an injured hand.*

Gradually the path became less steep, giving way to broad grasslands. A warm, gentle wind welcomed Tom and Elenna as the plains of Gwildor opened out in front of them. The long grasses shone golden and rolled like the waves of the sea, dancing in the breeze.

Elenna slid down from Storm's back. "It's so beautiful!"

"It certainly is," Tom said, jumping down to Elenna's side. "But we can't stand here all day. We must find the

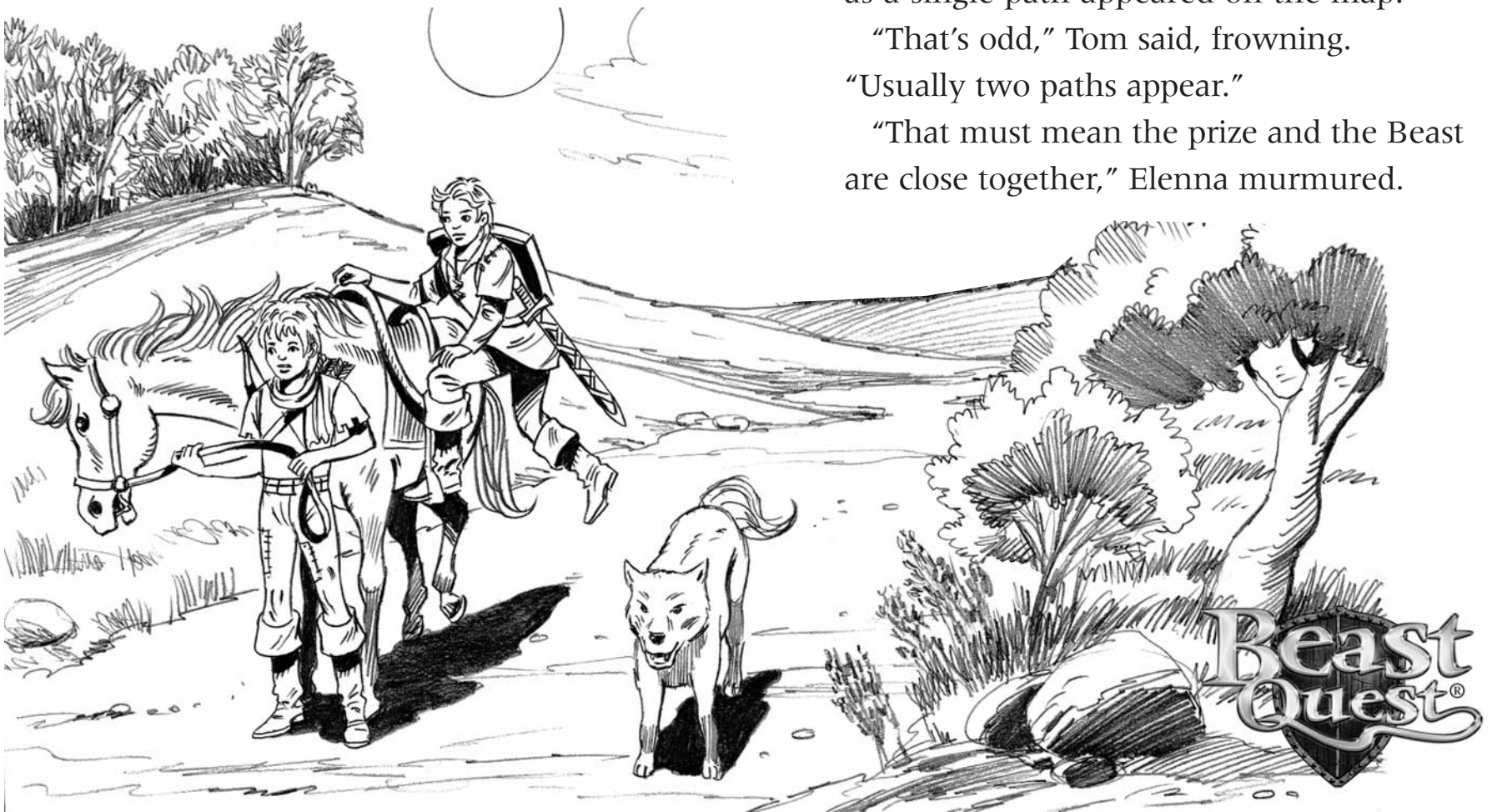
next Beast, and the prize that will help us free it.”

Elenna nodded, her face set in determination. “You’re right. There’s no time to lose.”

Tom pulled the Amulet of Avantia from around his neck and turned it over to reveal the map of Gwildor etched into the metal. With Elenna peering over his shoulder, he watched as a single path appeared on the map.

“That’s odd,” Tom said, frowning. “Usually two paths appear.”

“That must mean the prize and the Beast are close together,” Elenna murmured.



Tom examined the amulet more closely. A cold prickle of uneasiness crept down his spine as he spotted the name of the Beast etched at the end of the path.

“Trema...” he murmured. *I wonder what form you will take...*

He gazed out across the plain in the direction the map was telling them to go. Shading his forehead with one hand, he screwed up his eyes against the sunlight, wishing that he still had the keen sight that he had won from the golden armour of Avantia.

“Looks like houses over there,” he said. “I’m surprised Velmal will let us go near more people. Not after we freed the Beast the villagers had captured, and turned him back to being good again. That’s not part of Velmal’s plan!”

Elenna laughed. “Indeed. I don’t suppose he wants his people to know that there’s a hero in his kingdom!”

Tom couldn’t share his friend’s laughter. His uneasiness deepened as he thought about what was waiting for them on the plains. This could be the deadliest mission of all.

*But we won’t turn back,* he told himself. *Whatever the dangers are, we’ll face them together.*

Tom took a last look at the map and hung the amulet around his neck again. “We have to go where the map leads,” he said. “And there’s no time to waste!”