

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE MYSTERIOUS FIRE



Tom stared hard at his enemy.

“Surrender, villain!” he cried.

“Surrender, or taste my blade!”

He gave the sack of hay a firm blow with the poker. “That’s you taken care of,” he announced. “One day I’ll be the finest swordsman in all Avantia. Even better than my father, Taladon the Swift!”

Tom felt the ache in his heart that always came when he thought about his father. The uncle and aunt who had brought Tom up since he was a baby never spoke about him or why he had left Tom to their care after Tom's mother had died.

He shoved the poker back into his pack. "One day I'll know the truth," he swore.

As Tom walked back to the village, a sharp smell caught at the back of his throat.

"Smoke!" he thought.

He stopped and looked around. Through the trees to his left, he could hear a faint crackling as a wave of warm air hit him.

*Fire!*

Tom pushed his way through the trees and burst into a field. The golden wheat had been burned to

black stubble and a veil of smoke hung in the air. Tom stared in horror. How had this happened?

He looked up and blinked. For a second he thought he saw a dark shape moving towards the hills in the distance. But then the sky was empty again.

An angry voice called out. "Who's there?"

Through the smoke, Tom saw a figure stamping round the edge of the field.

"Did you come through the woods?" the man demanded. "Did you see who did this?"

Tom shook his head. "I didn't see a soul!"

"There's evil at work here," said the farmer, his eyes flashing. "Go and tell your uncle what's happened. Our village of Errinel is cursed – and

maybe all of us with it!"

Tom turned and ran as fast as he could, stumbling over the blackened tree roots.



Tom burst into the village square, gasping for breath. It was full of villagers. What were they all doing here? It wasn't market day. They were shouting and waving their hands at his uncle, who was standing on a bench at the edge of the square.



"Fire in the fields! What next?" one man shouted.

"The troubles get worse each day!" called another villager.

"The Beasts have turned evil!"

Tom knew that Avantia was said to be protected by six Beasts, including a fire dragon, but no one was sure if they really existed.

"Have you seen the river?" a woman asked. "It's so low we will soon run out of drinking water."

"We're cursed," an old man wailed.

"I don't believe in curses," said Tom's uncle firmly. "But our village needs help. One of us must go to the king and request his aid."

Tom stepped forward. "I'll go to the palace."

The villagers laughed. "Send a boy on such a mission? Ha!"

“The king would laugh at us for sending a child.”

Tom’s uncle spoke quietly. “No, Tom. You’re too young. I’m head of the village. I’ll go.”

Suddenly a small boy, smeared in soot, pushed through the crowd. “Help!” he gasped. “Please help! Our barn is on fire!”

“Men! Bring your pails to the river now!” Tom’s uncle roared to the crowd. “The rest of you bring spades to the barn – if we can’t quench the fire we’ll bury it. Quickly!”

Tom looked at his uncle as the men rushed to obey. “The village needs you here as its leader, Uncle Henry,” he said. “Please let me go instead.”

Tom’s uncle turned to face him, his face serious. “I suppose I have to let you out into the world sooner or later,” he said. He stared into the

distance. “Perhaps it’s meant to be...” He shook himself and turned back to Tom. “Yes, you must go to the king. And there is no time to waste – you will have to leave first thing tomorrow!”