

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIERY THREAT



“We must be nearly through the forest now,” Tom called to his friend Elenna, who was walking behind him. He drew his sword and hacked at the thorny thicket barring his way. The light was thin, the grey sky barely visible through the heavy branches overhead.

“Don’t worry – I’ll make it,” Elenna assured him. She was leading Storm,

Tom's sturdy black stallion, and stopped for a moment, leaning against the horse for support. "But a rest would be good."

Her pet wolf, Silver, sank into the long grass beside her and barked.

"Hear that?" Elenna smiled. "Silver agrees with me."

But Tom shook his head. "It has taken us almost two weeks to get this far. We must keep going."

"Not many people would be in such a rush to battle a giant flame bird!" said Elenna.

Tom was exhausted, too. But with a swell of determination, he raised his blade and swiped fiercely at the undergrowth. He was on a vital quest for King Hugo of Avantia. He couldn't give up now the end was almost in sight.

His mission was to save the

kingdom from the menace of the Beasts – creatures of legend placed under an evil spell by the Dark Wizard, Malvel. Tom used to think the Beasts were just fairy stories. But now he knew there was nothing make-believe about them.

Elenna and Silver had joined Tom and Storm on the Quest, and together they had risked their lives trying to set the Beasts free from Malvel's curse. They had already faced up to a one-eyed giant and a slithering sea serpent. They had tackled a horse-man, a fire dragon and a terrifying snow monster. Now their task was to free Epos the flame bird from the dark enchantment she was under.

Tom pulled his shield from his back and used it to crush some bracken. "Let's rest for a few minutes while we check the map," he said to Elenna.

“Great!” said Elenna, slumping to the ground beside Silver.

Storm leaned over and rested his muzzle on her shoulder, snorting softly.

Tom reached into his pocket to pull out the magical map of Avantia. It had been given to them by the king’s closest adviser – Wizard Aduro.

Tom sat beside Elenna. As his finger traced over the trees, hills and lakes, the pictures rose up from the parchment, standing as tall as his thumbnail. A pulsing green line marked the path he and Elenna had taken from the ice fields of the far north to this great forest of the east.

“We’re nearly at the forest’s edge,” said Tom, with relief.

Elenna pointed to a miniature mountain on the map, just beyond the forest. “That must be a volcano.”

As she watched, tiny puffs of smoke seemed to rise up from the mountain.

“It’s supposed to be dormant,” said Tom. “Well, according to the map, that’s where we’ll find Epos.” A thrill of anticipation ran through him. “Aduro said she was the most powerful of all the Beasts.”

He frowned at the map. “Why would anyone build a village that close to a volcano – even a dormant one?”

“The soil around volcanoes is very fertile, so crops grow well,” said Elenna. “I learned that from my uncle.” She looked down at her hands. “It’s been so long since I left my village. I miss the people there.”

Tom smiled. “When we finish our Quest, I bet Aduro will take you home.”

“But what about you?” said Elenna. “Will you go back to your aunt

and uncle in Errinel?”

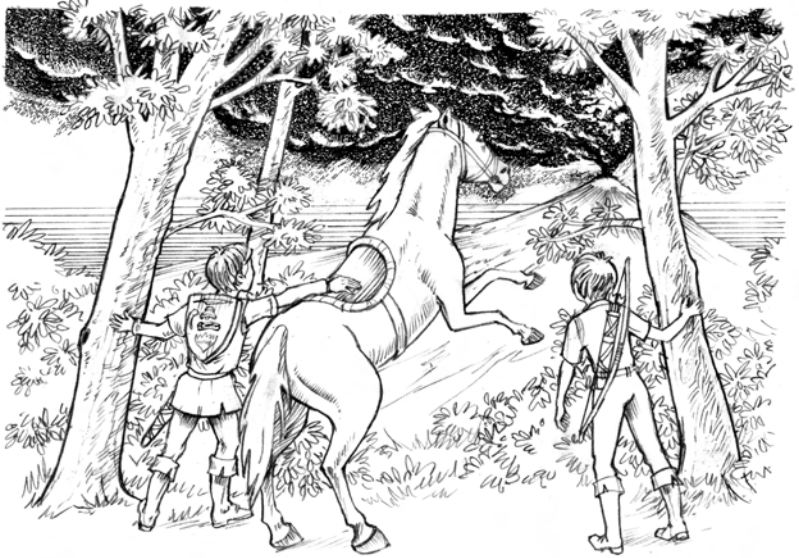
“I expect so,” said Tom, looking away. “But what I really want to do is find my father.”

Tom’s mother had died when he was born, and his father, Taladon, had disappeared soon afterwards. Tom had been raised by his aunt and uncle – but he still hoped to find his father some day. All he knew was that Taladon had served King Hugo in the past, just as Tom was doing now...

“Wait.” Tom’s nose twitched. “Can you smell...smoke?”

Elenna coughed. “Someone must have lit a fire.”

Suddenly a loud rumble sounded through the forest, and the ground beneath them shook. Storm neighed and reared up in alarm, as Tom and Elenna scrambled to their feet. Tom looked up. Through the leaves he



glimpsed clouds of dark smoke choking the sky. They were shot through with thin streaks of fire like shooting stars.

“The volcano,” Elenna gasped. “It’s going to erupt!”

“We need to find shelter,” Tom said. “That flame bird must be stirring things up!”

Then Elenna froze. “Look,” she stammered, staring straight past Tom.

Whirling round, Tom felt his heart

leap into his throat. A huge bird-like creature stood in a small clearing not far away from them. It had a sharp, jutting beak, and violet flames flickered and sparked all around it. A golden band was attached to one of its muscular legs, and the earth smoked beneath its talons. Its massive, glittering wings brushed against the nearby bushes – and set them alight.

“Epos,” Tom breathed, his fingers



tightening round his sword hilt. “We came here to find her – but she’s found us!”

The Beast’s fierce red eyes narrowed as it rose into the blazing forest. Tom saw a fireball forming from the violet flames at its feet.

Then, with a shriek of rage, Epos hurled the ball of flame – straight at Tom!

