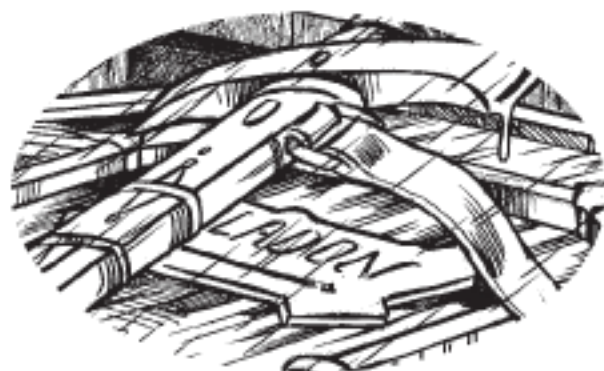


CHAPTER ONE

A FINAL PARTING



The Golden Armour had never felt so heavy.

Tom's shoulders sagged beneath the weight of the metal pieces, and the driving rain rattled off the breastplate like a thousand hurled stones. Under the lead-grey sky, the gold had no gleam.

Before him stood an ornate wagon pulled by two horses in ceremonial

tassels. The clouds had opened just as the funeral ended and Taladon's coffin was being loaded inside. Now, most of the mourners had left the Palace Garden to return to their duties. Tom stood with Elenna and his mother, Freya, on either side of him. King Hugo had remained as well, wearing his ceremonial armour. Aduro waited with them, his waterlogged robe dragging in the dirt.

On Tom's arm, his shield hummed, sending vibrations up to his shoulder. The tokens of the Six Good Beasts were flowing with their grief, and it only added to Tom's misery.

Elenna put a hand on his shoulder. "The Armour suits you," she said, with a sad smile.

Tom tried to smile back, but couldn't. He'd worn the Armour

before he'd learned his father was still alive. And since that time, he'd dreamed of wearing it again. But he'd always known that could never happen while Taladon was Master of the Beasts. Now it felt like a weight he could hardly bear.

"I miss him," said Tom.

Elenna nodded.

She's lost both her parents, thought Tom. She knows how it feels.

Freya stepped forward and held out a sword and scabbard in both hands. "We all miss Taladon," she said. "But we must be strong. Here – a warrior takes his sword with him."

Tom understood. He took the sword, walked slowly to the wagon, and placed the sheathed blade on top of the coffin.

"Bear him carefully to the Tombs,"



said King Hugo to the driver. The King's voice cracked. Taladon and Hugo had been friends since before Tom was born.

The wagon creaked off as the horses plodded over the soggy ground, their heads bobbing. Tom watched it move slowly towards the city gates. From there it would travel to the Gallery of Tombs, the resting place of every Master of the Beasts since the first, Tanner.

One day, a tomb will be opened for me, too, thought Tom.

He felt a hand slide onto his shoulder and squeeze. Freya was staring intently at him.

“I have to go now,” she said.
“Gwildor needs me.”

Tom nodded – he’d always known his mother would one day return to her duties as Gwildor’s Mistress of the Beasts. They embraced, and as he looked over Freya’s shoulder, he saw that Aduro had already conjured a portal to take her home. It shimmered in the air like a mirage.

Freya pulled away from him.
“You’re the Master of the Beasts now,” she said. “I know you’ll make me proud.”

With two steps she reached the portal. With the third she was gone.

The blurred air stilled once more.

For years Tom had believed both his parents were dead. Then, through many Quests, he'd found them both again, and discovered each was a brave warrior sworn to defend their kingdoms. Now one was lost forever, and the other would be risking her life far away.

Tom had never felt so alone.

King Hugo stepped towards him. Rain streaked down his face and beard.

"Your father was the bravest man I ever met," he said. "Avantia owes him a debt that cannot be measured in gold or precious stones."

The King's words stirred the embers of Tom's pride, and he found himself standing straighter beneath the heavy armour.

“I mean to carry on his duties with honour and courage,” he said. “I’m ready to take on a new Quest.”

Aduro gave a thin smile.

“Of course you want to take your mind off things,” he said, “but there are no Quests to undertake. Malvel is dead, his evil scoured from the kingdom. Why don’t you enjoy a well-earned—”

A scream of creaking wood interrupted the Wizard’s words and Tom felt a pain lance up his arm.

“Tom!” gasped Elenna. “Your shield!”

Tom held the shield close to his chest and looked at the surface. Epos’s talon was glowing scarlet, pulling against the rain-soaked wood with a grinding sound as if trying to break free.

“The Flame Bird must be in danger!” said Tom.

Aduro quickly touched two fingers to the talon and his lips moved in a silent spell. Red light burst from the shield, forming into an orb as tall as Tom. In the midst of the sphere an image appeared. Tom, Elenna and their companions stared.

“Stonewin!” Elenna gasped.

Tom made out the shape of the volcano’s black, lava-scarred slopes, wreathed in thick cloud. As they watched, a dark shape burst through the cloud. Tom recognised the red-brown feathers and golden beak of Epos the Flame Bird. But on the Beast’s back knelt a tall woman with gleaming red hair. She wore a black leather cloak, patched together with steel clasps and pins, which fluttered

in the wind. Dozens of metal bracelets dangled from her wrists and jewelled rings glittered on her fingers.

“Who is that?” asked Tom.

Aduro’s face was pale. He stepped forward towards the image, hands shaking. “It can’t be...” he muttered.

The woman clutched a long metal staff in one hand, but in the other she held a dagger with a strange curved



blade. Lifting it above her head, she plunged it into Epos's back. The Flame Bird screeched so loudly Tom's knees felt weak and he had to clamp shut his eyes.

"No!" he cried.

When he could open his eyes to see again, the good Beast was veering wildly in the sky as the evil rider drew out the blade. With perfect balance, she held a vial in her other hand, and let drops of blood drip into the open mouth. She slipped the vial into her robe. Then, grinning wickedly, she tipped sideways, somersaulting off the Flame Bird's back and landing on the mountain slope.

Epos swooped away, screeching wildly, but seemingly unhurt. The woman slipped the dagger into a

scabbard at her waist, then lifted the metal staff towards the sky. Tom saw her green eyes glint with malice.

“What’s she doing?” muttered Elenna.

Lightning forked above Stonewin, and for a fraction of a heartbeat Tom saw it strike the staff. The image of the metal rod, sizzling with pure white light, was etched into his brain. When the brightness died, the woman had gone. Only a few tendrils of spiralling smoke remained.

The red orb shrank and died away, leaving them all watching the driving rain.