

## CHAPTER FOUR

# A QUEST



“Taladon!” Tom echoed in shock.  
“You knew my father, Your Majesty?”  
“Oh yes,” the king said, smiling.  
“One of the bravest men I have  
ever known.”

A link with his father at last! Tom felt tears pricking his eyes. The king had seen what Tom had never been able to picture. His father’s face.

“Do you know where he is now?”

Tom asked, hoping he wasn't being disrespectful.

King Hugo and Aduro exchanged glances. The lords and ladies of the king's council were all listening intently, leaning forward over the dining tables.

The king waved a hand through the air. "It was a long time ago that I knew him..." he said, lifting Tom's chin to get a better look at him. "What is your name, boy?" he asked.

"Tom," the wizard answered for him. "Your Majesty, I must speak with you and Tom alone."

King Hugo nodded to the members of the council. "You may go. Please treat Edward the page as your honoured guest."

Edward bowed and joined the lords and ladies as they left the room.

As the doors closed, the wizard

took the king to one side. Tom strained to catch their conversation as they talked in heated whispers.

At last, King Hugo beckoned to Tom. He approached nervously. What was the king going to say? Was he going to send him away?

"Tom, our land is in terrible danger," said the king. "The Dark Wizard Malvel has hunted down the ancient Beasts and somehow he has gained power over them all.

"The six Beasts have watched over Avantia and protected us from danger since the first settlers arrived," continued King Hugo, pacing the room. "Ferno the fire dragon keeps southern Avantia safe. He makes sure the water supply never dries up. The other Beasts each have their duties, too. But now they have turned against us and carry out terrible acts

of destruction in Malvel's name. Even my bravest knights cannot tame them."

"Who is Malvel?" asked Tom.

"Once he was a good man, with a good life," said King Hugo. "But his happiness did not last. He fell victim to that dreadful disease – envy."

Aduro took up the story. "He was jealous of the Master of the Beasts and his special connection with our kingdom's most powerful creatures. So he searched out forbidden knowledge – wisdom and power dating back to the Dawn of the Beasts."

Tom's mouth felt dry. "And Malvel found that knowledge?"

"Yes. The power that he gained then made him evil, and gave him the strength to break the magical bond between the Master and his Beasts. Ever since, the Master has

been imprisoned and Malvel controls the Beasts."

"What do we need to do?" Tom asked.

"Malvel's magic is powerful," Aduro said. "Our only hope is that we can find someone with the power to free the Beasts one at a time, and return them to goodness so that they can continue to protect our kingdom rather than ruin it. But," he warned, "we mustn't let our people know the Beasts really exist. These creatures can only do their work if they're left in peace. That's why we've always pretended that the Beasts are not real."

"Malvel has made the Beasts almost unstoppable," the king continued. "Ferno is burning all our crops and blocking up the rivers. And the other Beasts – a sea serpent, a mountain giant, a horse-man, a snow monster

and a flame bird – are causing floods, avalanches and chaos elsewhere. They will destroy Avandia unless we set them free from Malvel’s wicked enchantment. That is why I sent Sir Caldor to try to unlock the collar that Malvel used to charm the dragon.” He handed Tom a large golden key. “Only this will undo the lock.”

Tom slowly turned the key over in the palm of his hand. It was very big, but weighed nothing. He realised it was the key that he’d seen held in



Caldor’s scorched gauntlet. He looked back up at the king, a question in his eyes.

“The key was created by Aduro,” the king murmured, “but must be put to use by a hero. Your father once served me – now I ask you to do the same. Aduro’s magic has shown me the strength and honour within you. I’m sure you are a match for any knight in my kingdom.” He smiled. “Fate sent you here, Tom. Now I wish to send you on a secret mission...”

A shiver of excitement ran down Tom’s spine.

The king leaned forward. “Will you risk your life for the Beast Quest?”

“I will,” Tom said without hesitation. He had never been more sure of anything in his life. “Whatever it takes – I *will!*”