THE WARLOCK'S STAFF

MINOS
THE DEMON BULL
With special thanks to
Allan Frewin Jones

To Connor Swift

www.beastquest.co.uk

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Tom and Elenna are such fools! They thought their Quests were over and that my master was defeated. They were wrong! For now Malvel has the Warlock’s Staff, hewn from the Tree of Being, and all kingdoms will soon be at his mercy.

We travel the land of Seraph, to find the Eternal Flame. And when we burn the Staff in the flame, our evil magic will be unstoppable. Tom and Elenna can chase us if they wish, but they’ll find more than just Beasts lying in wait. They’re alone this time, with no wizard to help them.

I hope Tom and Elenna are ready to meet me again. I’ve been waiting a long time for my revenge.

Yours, with glee, Petra the Witch
Jenka smiled as she brought the threshing flail down onto the grain. The chaff jumped. She loved to work alongside her mother as the sun smiled down on them.

Soon they would grind the wheat to make delicious flat-breads. She paused, resting her tired muscles.

Their grass hut was nearby, and in the wide fields beyond the village, cattle grazed contentedly under the perfectly blue and cloudless Seraph sky.
Her glance moved to the great totem pole that stood in the middle of the village. It had been hewn many years ago from the trunk of an ancient tree, its roots still deep in the ground. The pole was decorated with the faces of bulls and cows, carvings created in honour of the village’s bountiful herds.

A moving figure caught her eye – a small cloaked shape gliding in from the pastures. It headed towards Minos, the most prized bull in the village. The figure stopped at the bull’s stall and leant over the fence, holding out a cupped hand.

“Look, Mama,” Jenka said, pointing to the cloaked figure. “A stranger is feeding Minos! Why aren’t they afraid of him?”

Minos was a gentle creature, but
his size made most people wary. Her mother straightened her back and stared at the stranger.

“I don’t know, Jenka,” she said, “but you should go to them. Show them the hospitality of our people. Invite them to share our dinner. Go, child. I’ll fetch our cooking pot.”

As her mother moved towards their hut, Jenka ran along the path, passing the totem pole.

But as she came closer to the cloaked figure, she felt a chill run through her. The figure craned over the fence, holding out a palm.

Jenka hesitated, uneasy now as she watched Minos lower his head and lap at the food.

“Greetings,” Jenka called. “My mother asks whether you’d like to share our midday meal. It’s
not much, but if you…”

Jenka’s voice trailed away as the stranger turned and drew back her hood. A girl stared at her. She had a sly, cunning face framed in greasy dark hair. The girl’s mouth twisted into a sneer.

“I won’t be staying that long,” she said. “It won’t be safe around here soon!”

As Jenka recoiled from the cruel voice, the girl turned and hurried away, cackling to herself. Jenka saw some of the food scattered on the ground.

She crouched to look more carefully. The food looked like pine nuts, but they glowed with an other-worldly blue sheen.

“Magic?” Jenka muttered to herself. She was about to run and fetch her
mother, when the fence rattled sharply. Looking up, Jenka saw that Minos had barged against the wooden barrier with his great horned head. Was he hungry for more of the strange food?

Jenka shivered with fear as she looked into the bull’s eyes. They had taken on the blue colour of the seeds, and they shone brilliantly.

“Be still, Minos,” Jenka called, her voice shaking as she backed away from the stall. “The girl has gone.”

Jets of steam spurted from Minos’s nostrils and he surged forwards again, snorting with sudden rage. This time the fence snapped like twigs under the force of his attack. Jenka stumbled away.

“Minos! All is well!” she cried in
fear. “Please, calm yourself!”

The bull lowered his horned head and began to rake his front hooves along the ground, preparing himself to charge.

A fearsome bellow broke from the Beast, as though he were in agony. Jenka watched in horror as the bull’s body began to swell, his black hide stretching and expanding until Minos loomed above her. As he grew, his horns lengthened and thickened. Black claws sprouted from his hooves.

Jenka tried to cry for her mother – but no sound would come from her throat.

The bull’s tail grew long and thick, lashing around a fence post like a whip and tearing it from the ground. With another bellow of
anger, Minos charged.

Jenka threw herself aside, her whole body shaken as the enraged beast pounded past, making for the village. She scrambled to her feet, dizzy and coughing on the dust that the bull’s clawed hooves had kicked up.

Minos ploughed through the village, tearing fences apart, sending the other cattle stampeding for safety. Villagers fled in panic as the bull hurtled onwards.

Jenka let out a cry of anguish as she saw that the Beast was heading for her own hut. “Mother, get out!”

A moment later, the huge Beast plunged into the hut, smashing the woven grass walls, lifting his head to toss sheaves of the thatched roof high into the air. With a rush and a crash, the hut collapsed.
Jenka fell to her knees with a cry of despair.

Had Minos killed her mother?
CHAPTER ONE

THE TOUCH OF POISON

Tom and Elenna were riding along the edge of the forest. A gentle breeze made the leaves whisper and the branches dance. Elenna was sitting behind Tom on Storm’s broad back, and Silver the wolf trotted along at their side.

Elenna was busy restringing her bow. She was using a string from the small
harp that Aduro had left for them, along with five other magic tokens.

It wasn’t long ago that the sweet music of the harp had helped to subdue Ursus, a Beast Malvel created. Ursus had been a formidable enemy, and Tom was weary from the battle, but he knew that he would not have a chance to rest and recover.

Tom knew that the wicked wizard,
Malvel, would be busy creating formidable new Beasts to throw at them.

But he was undaunted. “We have to stop him,” he said to Elenna. “The fate of every kingdom depends on us.”

Malvel and his loathsome minion, Petra, had stolen the Warlock’s Staff from King Hugo’s castle in Avantia. They meant to hurl the ancient staff into Seraph’s Eternal Flame so that it would be burned to ash. If that happened, Malvel would have power over every kingdom, including Avantia.

“If we don’t defeat Malvel, Aduro’s death will have been for nothing,” Elenna agreed.

It wrenched at Tom’s heart to remember how the Good Wizard’s
clothes had crumpled to the ground as their old friend had vanished.

“But we do have Aduro’s magical tokens to help us.” Tom said. Tom patted Storm’s saddlebag, where they were carefully stored: a leather harness decorated with metal studs and a green jewel, a phial, a chain mail vest, a knife and a jade whistle. Those tokens would help them to conquer whatever Beasts Malvel and Petra set against them, as long as Tom could work out what they did.

They had one other thing to aid them in Seraph. Petra, had dropped a map of the kingdom – a map that would lead Tom and Elenna to the Eternal Flame.

“All we have to do,” Tom muttered, “is to defeat the Beasts that Malvel might put in our way.” He took out
the map and examined it.

“Does it still show the way forward?” Elenna asked, leaning around his shoulder to look.

“It does,” said Tom. A gleaming silver thread traced its way down off the forested plateau of Seraph and into the wide plains. The glistening path came to a halt at a tiny picture of a bull.

“A bull Beast,” Elenna said. “It will be strong.”

Tom nodded. “And created by Malvel, who knows what it will be capable of?” he said. He rolled the linen scroll up and gazed down onto the plains. “We’d better get going. The sooner we find the Beast, the sooner we can free it.”

After a while they came to the edge of the vast forest. A sudden wind
rustled the leaves and sent the branches bending and swaying.

“I don’t like the look of those clouds,” said Elenna.

Great black clouds were rolling towards them at an alarming speed. The light faded as they quickly engulfed the sun. The air blew chilly in the sudden darkness.

“A storm is coming,” agreed Tom. “A bad one.”

The wind knifed up the hill and shrieked through the forest. Silver bared his teeth and growled. Storm rolled his eyes and flicked his ears back. The forest seemed to thrash and writhe against the fierce gale.

Tom looked grimly at Elenna. “Is it just me, or does this storm feel like the work of Malvel?”

Fat drops of rain began to fall,
splashing all around them and driving into their faces. Storm planted his hooves squarely on the ground, his head lowered against the unnatural weather.

“Should we shelter in the forest?” Elenna cried, her shoulders hunched and her face wet with rain.

Tom heard the creak and groan of a falling tree. High branches flailed. A mighty oak was crashing down towards them!