

A STORM OF CLOAKS
BOOK 2

A DUEL OF FEATHERS



A DUEL OF FEATHERS

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A Duel of Feathers

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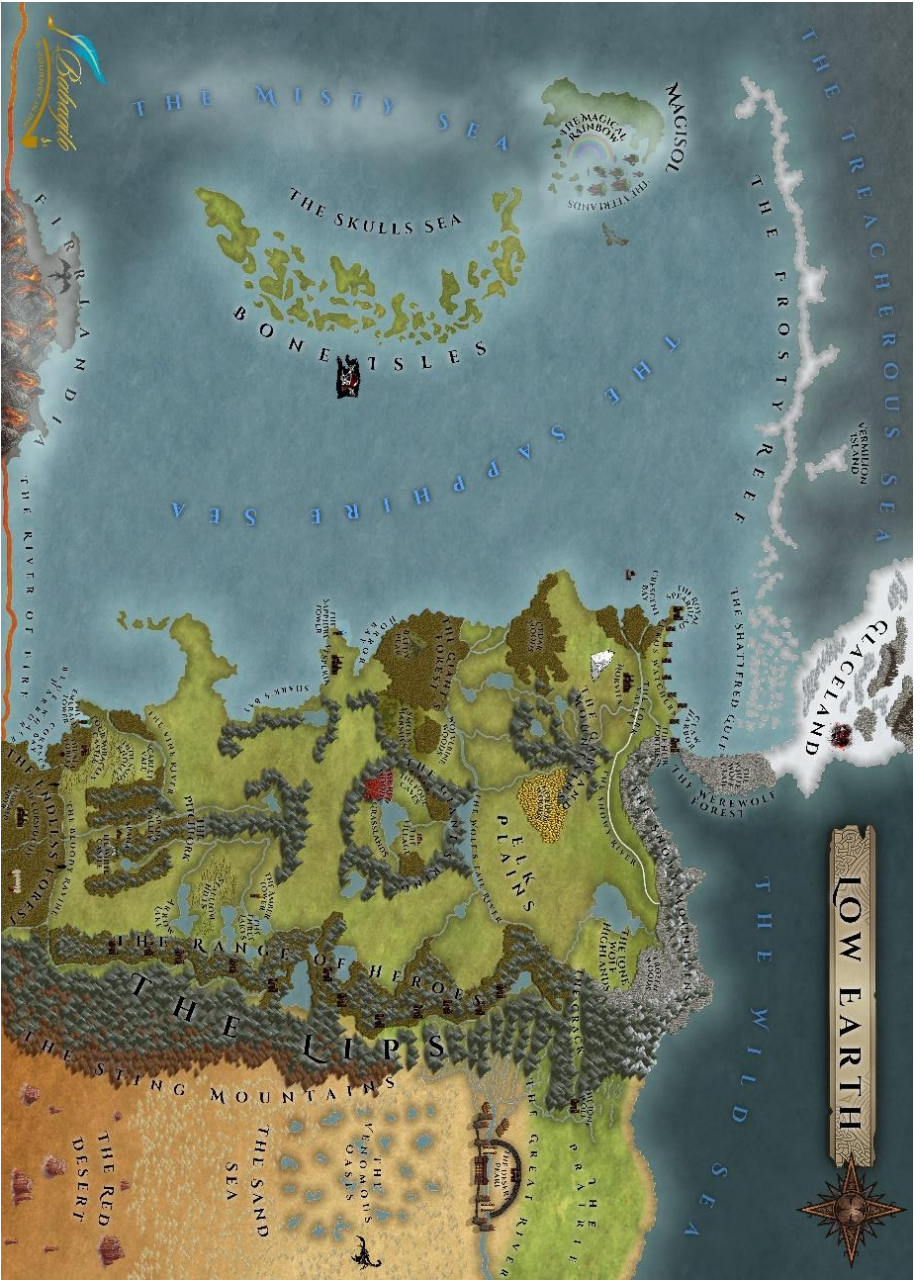
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CHAPTER 1

THE CLAW AND THE STING



Three nights had passed since the scorpions danced around his feet, and now the Lone Wolf and Kahn Rakrab crawled on the crest of the dune before the river.

Ahead, the countless lights of the Desert Pearl glowed like golden stars. Behind them, a sea of black riders, dark as the night, stood still on their horses. Only their spearheads glinted under the crescent moon.

Suddenly, a figure raced uphill and fell in beside them.

“My lord,” he said, gasping for air. “The towers on the southern bank wall are all taken.”

The man pointed toward the river. Along the mighty wall, red lights flickered in the pointy towers. Roy’s eyes

wandered to the most significant location: the gatehouse. Four lanterns were lit above. Underneath, a burning torch swung.

Roy smiled at Rakrab. "The southern gate is yours," he said.

"I did not come for a gate, my lord," the Kahn said. He seemed annoyed.

Roy nodded. *Rakrab is right*, he thought. *Only half of the job was done.*

Two wooden bridges crossed the Great River and served as the only passage for an army to reach the Desert Pearl from the south. Now they could enter the southern bridge gate and gallop on the bridge, only to be blocked by the northern bridge gate.

"What about the city?" the scorpion asked the messenger anxiously.

"All night, the people have been celebrating the upcoming crowning of their lord. Wine flowed in the streets and halls, leaving none sober. Most of the wall sentries were dozing when we slit their throats."

"Where is Prince Zigler?" asked Roy.

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“He left after midnight. He rides to the Lone Wolf Fortress as we speak.”

An hour passed, and the tension grew in the eyes of Rakrab and his men.

“It’s two hours before dawn!” He punched the sand with his fist. “We can’t wait any longer.”

Roy stared with impatient eyes at the messenger beside him, who just nodded.

“No sign yet from the northern bridge.”

“What is taking them so long? Everything might be in peril,” Roy hissed. Right as he stood up, three golden torches appeared by the gatehouse. That was the signal they were waiting for: the northern gate was open.

Roy’s eyes sparkled like the stars over his head.

“Rakrab, your time has come to claim a precious jewel.”

Lord Roy Fogel sighed in relief. He delivered what he had promised. The gates into the city were open, and the bridges were clear.

The king of scorpions jumped to his feet, stretched his hands toward the dark sky, and mumbled a short prayer in his native language.

Then he nodded to his commanders and embraced Roy with all his might.

“Tomorrow, brother, we will drink wine in Jed’s Castle.”

“First, take the city, Kahn,” Roy said with a cautious tone. “Good luck!”

In whispers, the captains spread the news and prepared the men. Minutes later, the land was covered in black as the riders raced downhill toward the opened gate of the city known as the Desert Pearl. The riders rushed across the long wooden bridge that spanned the Great River, pouring in through the northern entrance. No battle cries, no shouts, only 5,000 spears on horseback, the hooves beating on the earth like mighty drums.

Each captain fulfilled his task and conquered his mark, while the scorpion Kahn galloped to the Jewel in the Pearl: the central keep.

A pink dawn broke in the East, and the scattered clouds above the horizon were painted the color of blood. Waiting on a hill of sand outside the city, Lord Fogel squinted his eyes toward the north.

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One by one, scorpion banners unfurled on numerous towers and roofs. But when Roy's eyes landed at the lofty keep and saw the Gray Wolf banner no more, he smiled at last.

Victory.

At once, he mounted his horse and raced down the bridge into the city. Desert warriors hurried through streets and buildings, searching for hidden enemies.

Roy rushed through the courtyard, across the bloody steps, and into the Great Hall.

The place where he had dined not more than a week ago was packed with the corpses of Jed Lukos's soldiers. Rakrab's warriors were all around, stepping in puddles of blood.

"Fogel!" A call came from his left, and he recognized the clear voice. Rakrab strode to him with arms open, kissed him on his cheeks, and grinned. The stench of sweat, blood, and death was glued to him.

"Can you believe it? The city was taken in less than two hours. We took them by surprise, like real scorpions."

“A tremendous triumph, Kahn!” Roy announced.
“People will talk about it for ages.”

“You were the one who delivered it, as promised. I won’t forget it, my friend. My people will sing songs about you.”

“Please, your grace, let all the tales of triumph and fame skip my name. It’s much better that way.”

Rakrab measured him for an instant and laughed.
“As you wish, nameless lord. Now let’s have a drink before you head back to the cold.

And so the two toasted and sipped a fine wine, until Roy departed at last. That evening he reached the Lone Wolf Fortress just to be told Zigler had left early and was heading to the Den of Wolves.

There is no rest with this man, always on the move, thought Roy. By daybreak, he galloped through the Crack with a small entourage of his loyal men.

A couple of days later, they arrived at Norvita, the capital city.

The roads were crammed with people carrying banners of northern houses. It was late morning when

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Lord Fogel approached the Den, the battlefield of politics. It was the place where northern highborns slashed each other with their tongues rather than swords.

The house of nobles was a circular structure, supported by grand pillars. At the top of each one sat a wolf's head, its muzzle slightly open to expose deadly fangs. Above these wolves rested a domed ceiling made of beams and glass.

Not many men paid attention to Roy and his company. Their banner was unfamiliar to most: a gray wolf, standing over the Crack, holding a shield, staring at the rising sun.

Roy listened to the murmurs of the crowd as he walked.

"They say King Wilfred Lukos is dead," a lady's voice whispered.

"I heard they are about to declare war on the pirates," said a man with certainty.

"No! Not the pirates," his friend objected. "The White Wolves of Glaceland. They are our biggest problem."

“I hope there will be no new taxes,” grumbled another. “We barely feed ourselves as it is.”

Roy heard many more musings and speculations, yet nothing was close to the real thing.

Before Roy, Zigler, and their entourage had traveled to the Great River, Roy had ordered his men to close the Lone Wolf Gate. He knew no news was coming to the Northern Kingdom from the East, and that was entirely by their own design.

The lords of the North had asked to be summoned for a significant announcement, and it seemed that no one really knew the purpose of the meeting.

Dozens of royal guards stood on the white marble steps in front of the buzzing multitudes. They were cloaked in white and gold, with the gray wolf decorating their polished steel breastplates.

Roy stepped forward. His men bore wooden chests behind him.

“Welcome, Lord Fogel,” a young commander greeted him, scanning the rest of the faces. “Apologies, sir, but only nobles may enter the Den. That is the law.”

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“Oh, trust me, my friend. These are highborn they carry.” Roy glanced at the cases and nodded at his men to move forward, dismissing the officer’s complaints.

Across the foyer he hastened. Two more sentinels pushed open giant pine doors as Roy marched into the chamber of the wolves.

Below him, the lords were seated in a wide half-circle that descended to a central floor. Facing them stood a man in a ring surrounded by gigantic ivory claws. It was the mouth of the chamber.

He spoke with vigor. Behind the main speaking floor, Prince Zigler sat on the royal platform. His eyes were intent on the man speaking in front of him.

“Prince, you asked us to send more coin so you can protect the shoreline and defend the sea,” the speaker was saying loudly, addressing the entire hall of assembled lords. “Year after year we did just that, yet our enemies attack us still. How can we ask our subjects for more burden when you fail them time and again?”

Zigler’s eyes pierced him as murmurs of agreements ran up through the half-circle of seats. It was Lord Walt Darcy who spoke, and Roy recalled him to be one of Jed Lukos’s most fervent supporters.

Sensing the wind of the Den at his tail, Darcy resumed with a stronger tone.

“In the last years, our noble brothers on the northern and western shores have suffered such losses that none can recall since the Gray Wolf came to rule the lands. With all due respect, you failed us, Prince. We all know King Lukos is quite ill, including our bitter foes. The time has come to call the true royal heir back from exile. Jed Lukos, lord of the Great River, is the last seed of the Gray Wolf. His riches will aid us in building a mighty army and fleet that will lead us to victory, not defeat.”

At that moment, Zigler’s supporters roused from their seats, shouting and waving their hands. Others shouted in return and backed Lord Darcy. The rest sat quietly, studying the unfolding scene carefully, ready to endorse the winning side.

That was the precise moment that Roy stormed down the long steps that split the half-circle and reached the speaking floor.

Voices softened and astonished faces followed Roy and his men. Once they reached the floor, they set the heavy wooden cases on the ground.

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