

A STORM OF CLOAKS



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A JOURNEY IN INK

A STORM OF CLOAKS

BY
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A Storm of Cloaks, Introduction

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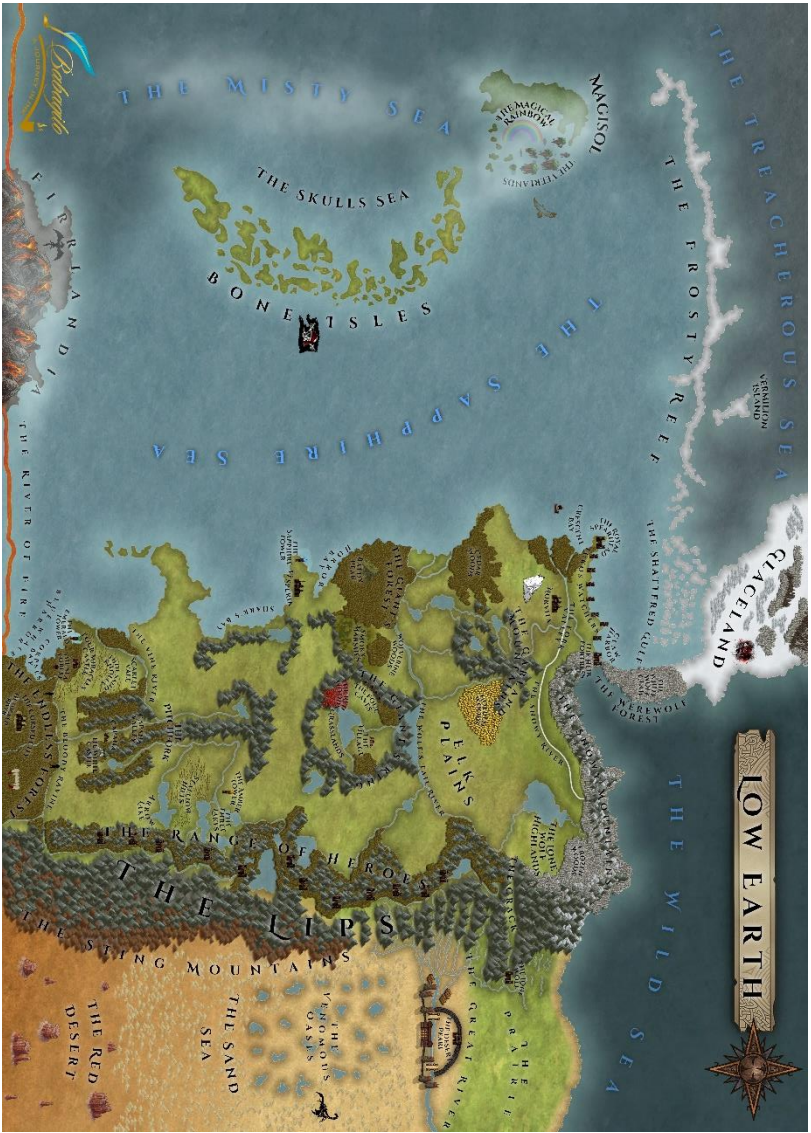
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Nine years ago...



On the most notorious ship that ever sailed the Western Sea, three pirates huddled at the bow. Tattoo, the master cook on the *Revenge of the Bastards*, gulped some fresh air together with their conversation.

"We just need a sailboat and a map, and I will show you a real treasure," said a man with a rusty beard. He guzzled from a bottle and passed it to the man beside him.

The boney man sipped quietly, a concerned expression on his face.

"I don't know, Pello," said the third man with coal-

black eyes and a nasty scar on his cheek. "I am not a deserter, but a proud Sea Bastard. I would die like one."

The rusty beard glared at his friends in disappointment. "I am a pirate, like yourself. Live free like the wind, right? But don't we pirates love gold and women and ale above all else?"

"Aye!" called the skinny one.

The black eyes nodded.

"So tell me, you fools, where are the gold and the ladies? And where is the good rum? Not this piss!" He snatched the bottle and tossed it in the ocean.

The two looked at him, dumbfounded.

"Eight years I live like that, hoping tomorrow will be different, but nothing changes. I am tired of running like a rat from island to island, from ship to ship, just so I can eat dry bread and spoiled biscuits with worms in it. I can't even recall the last time I had coins to visit the brothel." He punched his fist on the railing.

"Captain Rollo will lead us to treasure..." insisted the boney man.

Pello snorted. "Our great captain will end up like the rest of us." He glared at the horizon. "On the rope! Robin Quint has hanged more pirates than any other man." His fingers slid down his throat. "I like mine straight and breathing. What say you?"

The scarred man with black eyes frowned. "You have no boat and hardly know how to read a map. No, you are no good." He smirked and walked away. His skinny friend scrambled behind him.

Pello cursed at them. "You good-for-nothings! Numb-skulls!"

"Let them be, my friend."

The voice startled him from behind.

Pello spun around.

"Tattoo?" His voice shook. "What's your business here?"

"Did you forget who the cook is on this ship, you dung-for-brains?" He embraced the man. "If I had drunk that piss, I would've lost my wits as well. Come, I have some real rum in the galley."

"Aye aye." The pirate smiled and followed him.

Tattoo opened the green door to the galley and lit an oil lantern.

Pello stepped in and slumped on a wooden bench near a cast-iron oven.

"Smells good..." he said, his stomach gurgling like a boiling egg. He craned his neck above the black metal pot that bubbled on the stove.

"It's not ready yet," Tattoo said from the other side of the cramped galley. His hands looked for something among the boxes. "Ah, there you are."

He kneeled on the floor, grabbed a promising-looking bottle, and strode to the stove.

"I assume you wouldn't mind a goat stew?" He

winked and handed Pello a glass of the dark-brown rum.

"Goat stew?"

"Aye, from Captain Rollo's pot." Tattoo beamed at him. "Only for my true shipmate. He raised a glass in a toast. "For your new adventures..."

Pello drew the cup to his cracked lips, hesitating. Then he sipped it. A true rum, not like the crap he drank. His eyes fell on the baldheaded man.

"What adventures, Tattoo?" He swallowed the rest as though it had a pebble in it.

"Gold, women, ale!" smiled the cook.

Pello's eyes moved like a frightened dog, realizing the cook had overheard the conversation.

"I will always be a pirate," Pello spoke, his voice quite nervous.

"And so you will. Don't you worry, shipmate, your secret is sealed with me. Now let's eat before someone else comes."

Tattoo carried two wooden bowls of stew and gave one to his friend. Soon enough the rusty-bearded pirate was dipping chunks of dry bread into the steaming bowl.

"Very good... Really good..." he muttered to himself. The cook poured him another glass and Pello drained it at once. He seemed calm now.

"You know, Tattoo, there is a treasure out there..."

Gong! Gong! sounded the bell, followed by the shouts of men. Racing feet pounded over their heads. The two glanced at each other, bolted to the stairs, and hurried on deck.

The *Revenge of the Bastards* had turned into a beehive. Sailors climbed up and down the masts, some pulling ropes and others unfurling the sails. Captain Rollo marched from his cabin at the stern to the bowsprit and gazed to the south.

Admiring eyes followed him, and the crew gathered around him in silence.

"What do you see?" he bellowed, his voice still hoarse

from the early-morning hours.

The watcher on the crow's nest at the top of the mainmast answered.

"A ship, captain. Flying a gray banner of the Misty Gods."

"A priests' ship," muttered Rollo. "The Royal Navy must be nearby."

"She is alone, captain," the man shouted down from the crow's nest. "No other sail in the distance."

Something was quite strange. Never before had a priestly vessel traveled without protection. Rollo glared in her direction and squinted. "It might be another of Quint's traps. Prepare for battle!"

Soon enough, all men stood ready in their positions while the *Revenge* sailed full speed to meet its new prey.

Not a half an hour later, the holy vessel furled its sails and swayed in place, waiting for the hunter to come. Rollo ordered the *Revenge* to slow down while he suspiciously

eyed the other ship.

Priests in gray cloaks were standing on the deck. One held a swinging chain with a jar at the bottom, scattering smoke. They waved at the pirates.

"Lower a boat!" Rollo ordered the men behind him. "Pello, Tattoo, you are coming with me," he said, then he summoned two other sailors to join them.

"What if it's a trap, captain?" asked a bastard hanging from the foremast. Rollo ignored him. They descended into the skiff and rowed.

When they reached the priests' ship, the gray-cloaked men lowered a ladder and the plunderers climbed aboard.

A white-haired priest with a smooth smile welcomed them.

"May the gods of the Misty Sea bless your soul, Captain Rollo."

The notorious pirate stared at him with cold eyes. "How do you know me, old man?"

"All recognize the red sail, as well as the most frightening banner on the high seas." He pointed to a white skull with a golden crown biting a blade covered with blood.

Rollo nodded with a smile. "Where is your company hiding? Where are Quint's ships?"

The priests exchanged surprised glances. "No navy ships protect us, captain. Robin Quint is no longer the head of the Royal Fleet, but the most wanted man in Low Earth. Even more than you. The rumors from the North says he killed Prince Owain, the elder son of King Wilfred, and the heir to the throne."

Rollo's jaws dropped to the floor. His bitter enemy was now an outlaw...

Moments later, he looked at the stunned pirates and roared with laughter. They joined him at once, for it was the best news they had received in years.

"The legendary Quint is running like a rat now," he chuckled. "We should offer him a place in our ranks, eh?" He burst out laughing again.

Tattoo smiled. Four years he had known the captain, and he never recalled seeing him so blissful. His eyes sparkled like black diamonds.

"It is indeed a blessed day, priest," said Rollo at last. "Yet you must offer us more than just good news."

"Of course, captain." The old man bowed. He motioned to two of the gray cloaks behind him. They fetched a small chest, placed it near Rollo's feet, and opened the lid.

Gold coins glinted under the morning sun, and the smile on the pirates' faces stretched their cheeks.

"The Royal Fleet, under its new leadership, has denied our safety. We shall pay tribute to the master of the Sapphire Sea, Captain Rollo, anytime we sail in his territory on our way to the Misty Sea."

A broad grin curled on the captain's face. "And so you shall, priest."

"What are all of these?" Tattoo surveyed the many barrels on board, roaming around them.

"These are our gifts for the gods, sir," answered the holy man pleasantly. He gave a swift, stern glance at the priest beside him. "Brother Grim, where are your manners? Bring cups and pour wine for our honorable guests."

The man rushed to a container behind him and served glasses of wine to the strangers. They all drank, except Tattoo.

"All these wonderful gifts go to the gods of the Misty Sea?" He pointed at the barrels. "What about the Sea Bastards' gods? I think they should feast as well." With a sudden motion, he pulled a knife and pricked the wooden barrel near his feet.

"No!" the priest called out, infuriated. Tattoo set his cup under the gushing dark red liquid.

"This is indeed godly drink," Tattoo muttered as he appraised the rich color. He sipped it. No grape taste, neither sour nor sweet. He puzzled over the drink in his hand. "What the hell is it?"

The pirates near him gazed at the scarlet liquid