

A STORM OF CLOAKS
BOOK 3

TONGUES OF SILK AND FIRE



G.H. BABAGILO

A JOURNEY IN INK

TONGUES OF SILK AND FIRE

BY
G.H. BABAGILO



Tongues of Silk and Fire

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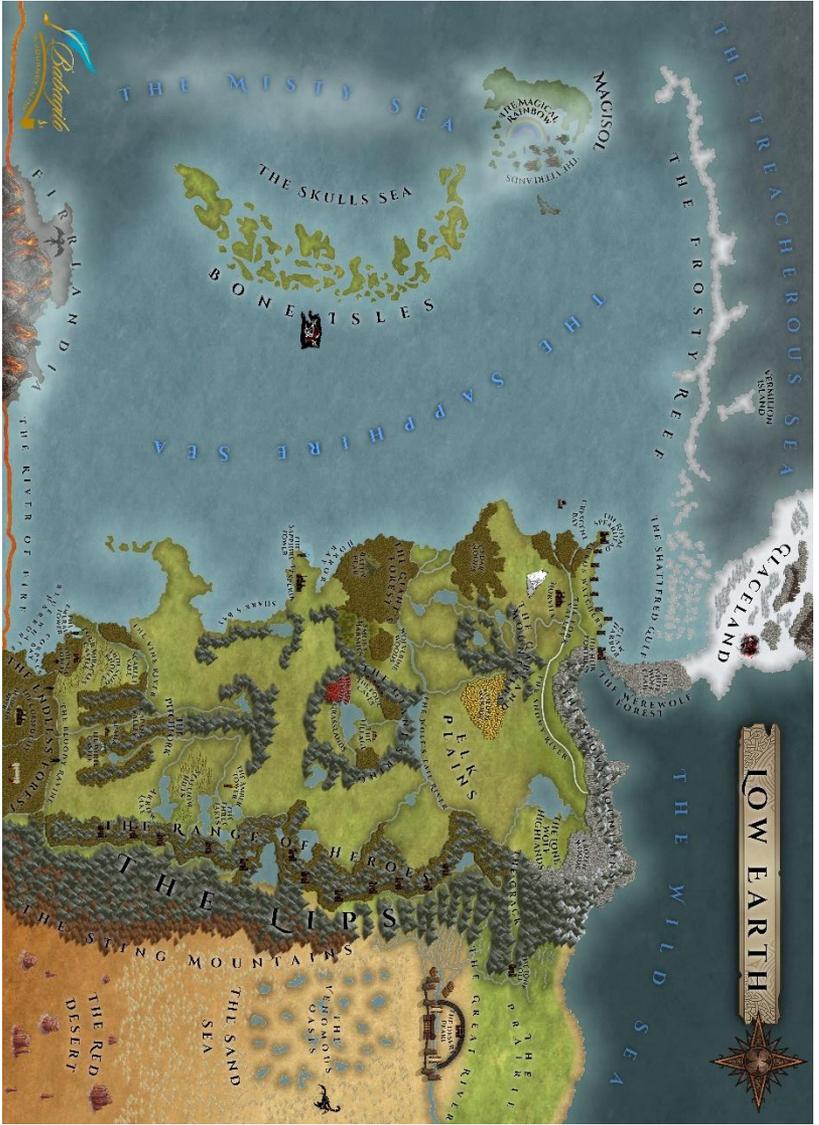
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CHAPTER 1

AROUND THE CLOAK



A purple dawn blossomed in the east as the giant eagle floated above the rolling hills. The rider gave Elmagos a glance as though to ask if he needed to stop.

The wizard ignored his gaze. Beside him, Tashunko and Niro dozed. *I should have brought the third boy home as well*, he thought, and his guilt burned him alive. After all, he had witnessed Kordos turn into a Cursed right before his very eyes.

Soon after, they soared over the Pitchfork ridges until they landed outside the White Castle on the slopes above Capana.

“All right, lads!” he said. “We have a long day in front of us, so get ready quickly. I will meet you for an early

breakfast." He slid down the rope ladder that was slung over the side of the eagle and marched through the gate.

"What does he mean?" Tashunko rubbed his sleepy eyes. "Are we leaving already?"

Like his friend, Niro had no answers.

The castle was mostly asleep when they walked into the dining area. First light glimpsed through the eastern windows, falling on their drowsy faces.

Breakfast was waiting for them on one of the tables. Elmagos was already there, and he was not alone. The young wolf gulped some tea beside him.

"Good morning..." Niro bowed with a smile, glancing at the pack near Evert's feet. Then he asked curiously, "Are you leaving soon?"

"I am going back to my rangers in the North."

"Welcome, teammates," Edelin said as she rushed into the room. She hugged both Niro and Tashunko. "You must tell me everything about Magisol. How was it? Is it really magical?"

"Soon, sister," said Evert. "They will tell you everything you need to know."

"Of course, my apologies," she said bashfully. "You

were flying the whole day and night and must be weary.”

Niro and Tashunko smiled and joined the laden table, attacking the food as if they had been starved for days. Elmagos, who was sitting on the opposite side, was staring at them through clouds of smoke.

“We will travel to the lands of Ronald Wilken, my good friend and the best winemaker in Low Earth,” he said to them as they finished eating. “His home is half a day’s journey from here. The three of you will stay there for a few months to conduct your training. By tomorrow, Evert and I will head north,” he added quietly and puffed another cloud.

“Why do you have to leave so soon?” Niro asked.

Elmagos gulped down the rest of his tea. His puffy eyes regarded the table. He’d had some sleepless nights of late.

“The recent days have opened my eyes to many of the threats and dangers Low Earth is about to face. Much work needs to be done. I will turn over every stone to get to the bottom of it all. The Royal Fleet and the king’s armies need to be ready for challenges beyond anything we have faced before. These coming months will not be easy for any of us, but I must start my investigations at

once—for the benefit of all.”

Elmagos looked at the two siblings with a concerned face.

“I must rush to Norvita,” said the wizard, “and speak with your mother at once. Her anxious letter urged me to meet her face-to-face.”

“She has been very cautious lately,” Edelin said. “Eyes follow us everywhere.”

“Zigler’s spies,” hissed Evert.

The wizard went to reach for something, but then he muttered in a concerned voice. “I can’t find her letter. I could have sworn I hid it in my pocket, but now it’s gone...”

“Elmagos,” said Niro as though he had roused from a dream. “With all the excitement of flying to the Veerlands, I failed to tell you something important. That night you all gathered in Moris’s chamber, we saw two figures climbing up to the balcony. Zigler must have sent them.”

Edelin and Evert exchanged nervous glances.

“Hmmm...actually...” The princess wore her brightest, most charming smile and gave the wizard a

lovely twinkle as she announced, "Those two had nothing to do with Zigler. It was Evert and me, trying to listen to the secret meeting."

Elmagos's pupils grew wide.

"Wow!" Tashunko gave an impressed note as he stuffed a bun full of butter into his mouth. "You sneaked like a cat. I am glad you are on our team."

Edelin was careful not to respond to Tashunko's compliment, for she noticed the lightning in the wizard's eyes.

At that moment, Elmagos gave a puff and blew it toward Tashunko. The smoke turned into a demon face at once, and the Black Tongue fell off his chair and crashed onto the floor.

"Anyone else?" the wizard thundered. "If you have more discoveries, let's be done with it here and now!"

The four youngsters turned quieter than a graveyard, exchanging terrified glances among them.

"A golden silence..." Elmagos sighed. Then he placed his hand on Evert's shoulder.

"We must reach the North before Zigler does. I am eager to hear what Queen Enya has to say." With that

said, they got to their feet, lifted their packs, and headed out of the hall.

Five riders were trotting through the castle's gate when a loud voice called from behind.

"Elmagos!"

Moris, the Warden of the South, was awkwardly running toward them like a pumpkin with turtle legs.

"Did you plan to leave without saying goodbye?" He sounded offended. "What's the rush? I thought you would stay for a few days."

"If not for your superb speech, my friend, I would. But you have shown us all that time is of the essence. The fight is coming to us, and we must not wait."

"Well, I hope your next visit will be much longer." He grinned at the wizard and the boys. At last, he turned at Edelin and Evert. "Warm regards to your mother, and do keep your father healthy."

He turned back to the castle, but then he stopped short.

"Elmagos, I almost forgot..." Moris turned to him with a sly smile. "A tiny bird sang in my ear that Zigler and his company are planning to set sail from Blue Whale

Harbor.”

Elmagos’s face froze. Never before had King Wilfred or his son sailed all the way home from the South. Usually, they would travel on horse to Vesperia and sail north from there. Both of them despised the ocean and its unexpected storms; the wolves always preferred the touch of solid ground.

Moris’s news took him by surprise. His plan to take the first ship from Blue Whale was blocked. Now the only way to get to the queen before Zigler’s arrival was to gallop to Shark’s Bay and sail north from there.

This serpent must have guessed about our meeting, he thought. Perhaps he knows about the letter. A heatwave ran through his chest.

“I don’t think you have a choice now except to travel to one of the northern ports,” Moris said as if he had read his mind. He stared at the wizard’s horse. “You must be swift, my friend.”

Without a word, Elmagos spurred his beast out of the White Castle.

The steep road took the riders all the way down to

Capana Valley. Vibrant fields awakened them, and their hearts rose like the morning sun.

The scents of marble and rocks remained behind as moist soil, fresh greens, and blooming flowers took over.

On their left, the capital city was coming to life as the morning arrived. Wagons and horsemen were passing through the gates, and long columns of farmers marched to work the land.

They crossed the valley from east to west, and the sun heated their skulls like boiled eggs. By the time they reached Capana's western ridge, they were sweating like pigs and ready for a short break.

"About a quarter of a mile on this trail," Elmagos pointed a sweaty hand to a narrow path that wound among shrubs and trees, "there is a small lake and a shady bunch of oaks. We shall rest there."

He had barely finished his sentence when two horses bolted from behind and raced past, leaving a whirl of dust behind them.

Tashunko and Niro couldn't stand the heat anymore. When they approached the pond, they galloped full speed ahead and flew happily into the refreshing water.

Elmagos and the siblings arrived a minute later. At

once, they exploded into gales of laughter, hardly keeping themselves on their saddles.

Two boys were screaming and running out of the murky water, stumbling with panic. As though it wasn't enough, their beasts circled around them, kicking their hind legs frantically.

Niro raced toward Elmagos but seemed to lose control of his body. His knees almost touched his chest as he ran. Then, he jumped and rolled on the earth, sending his hands backward to remove something.

It looked like he had grown a tail. A thin black rope was attached to his behind, moving up and down with each step he took.

"Elmagossssss!" He screamed like he was giving birth. "Get it off me, please!"

Elmagos, who was enjoying the show, drew his new wand. A sudden spark whizzed and struck the black tail, sending it high in the air. It landed with a *thud* next to them.

Edelin and Evert's jaws dropped to the ground as the black rope slithered through the grass and went back into the pond. It was a water snake.

Tashunko, who sped toward them, had no tail affixed

to his bottom. Nevertheless, he was gasping like a racehorse and braying like a donkey.

“Elmagos, there are nasty creatures in there!” He patted his aching body, showing the red bites. “They bit me!”

“Stop whining like two babies, unless you wish to become the new joke among the Ghosts!” the wizard snarled. At once, the two snapped to attention like warrior statues.

“These little water snakes are not poisonous,” the wizard explained. “Farmers raise them in this pond and use them for hunting the rodents that spoil their crops.”

Niro gaped at him, rubbing his painful behind like a whipped dog.

“You knew there were snakes here? Why didn’t you warn us?”

“And miss this show? Not for the greatest fortune in the world.” Elmagos roared again, and they all joined him.

Moments later, Niro and Tashunko were sprawling on the opened grassy area, drying themselves under the sun and tending to their wounds.



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