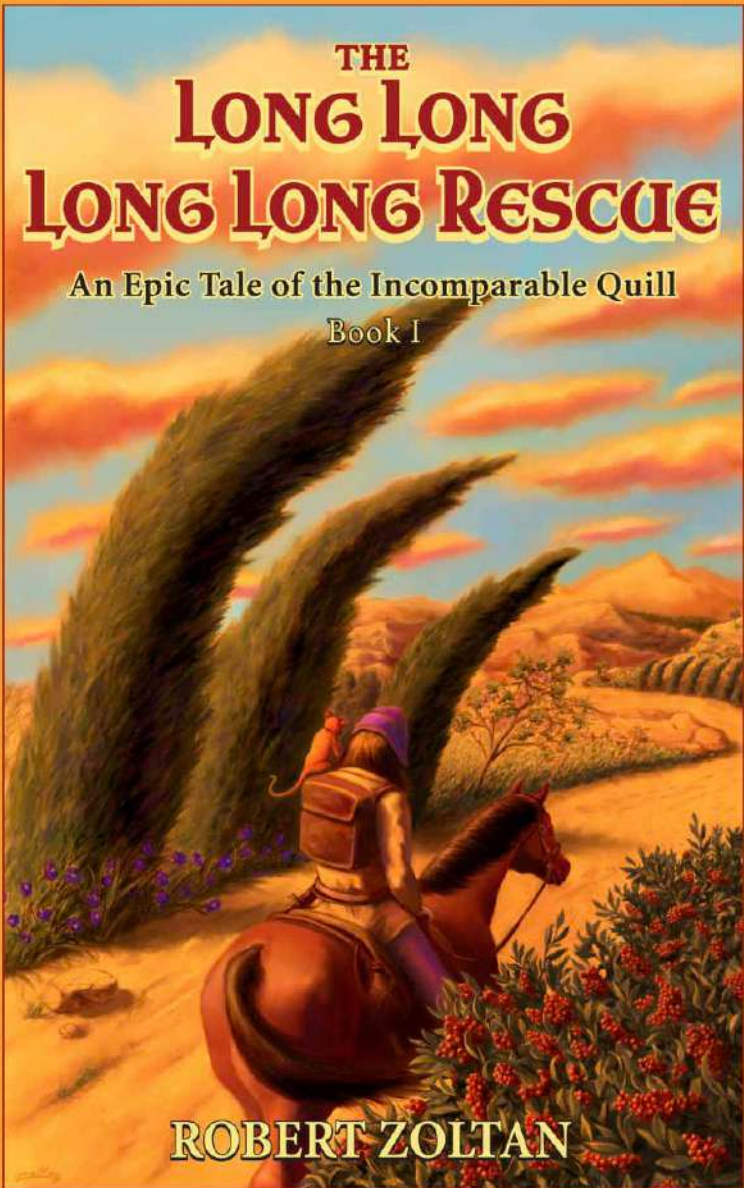


THE LONG LONG LONG LONG RESCUE

An Epic Tale of the Incomparable Quill

Book I



ROBERT ZOLTAN

THE LONG LONG LONG LONG RESCUE

AN EPIC TALE OF
THE INCOMPARABLE QUILL

BOOK I

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

ROBERT ZOLTAN



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NOTE: Full color versions of additional paintings of the story can be found at www.dreamtowermedia.com/Quill

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For Ally and Liz, a fairy tale.

AUTHOR APOLOGY

As the author of this tale, I can only hold myself responsible for its contents (and perhaps my editor, and my mother and father who forced me into this awkward situation called life, and the great authors I read that influenced a weak mind and ambitious ego into thinking that I could somehow follow, or at least stumble in their footsteps).

I would like to apologize beforehand that the book is far less than one thousand pages long, which I hear is the accepted length of a modest novel nowadays (or, five pounds, as I hear publishers are now weighing novel manuscripts and returning them to the author if found too light). I would like to apologize that there is very little killing in the story. I would like to apologize if I dare assume the reader has intelligence and imagination and I did not explain away every mystery with the equivalent of a technical manual. I would like to apologize if I occasionally seem to be saying something mystical or deep about existence, for I do not claim to understand the meaning of life, feeling rather startled as I do on most days to find I even exist.

And lastly, I would like to apologize for this pretentious, unnecessary introduction disguised as an apology.

And now, without further ado, turning a blind eye to all of its flaws and failings, I now introduce to you the greatest comedy fantasy tale ever told (at least until the second book is released): The Long Long Long Long Rescue.

Sincerely,
Robert Zoltan
Silver Lake, California
February, 2020

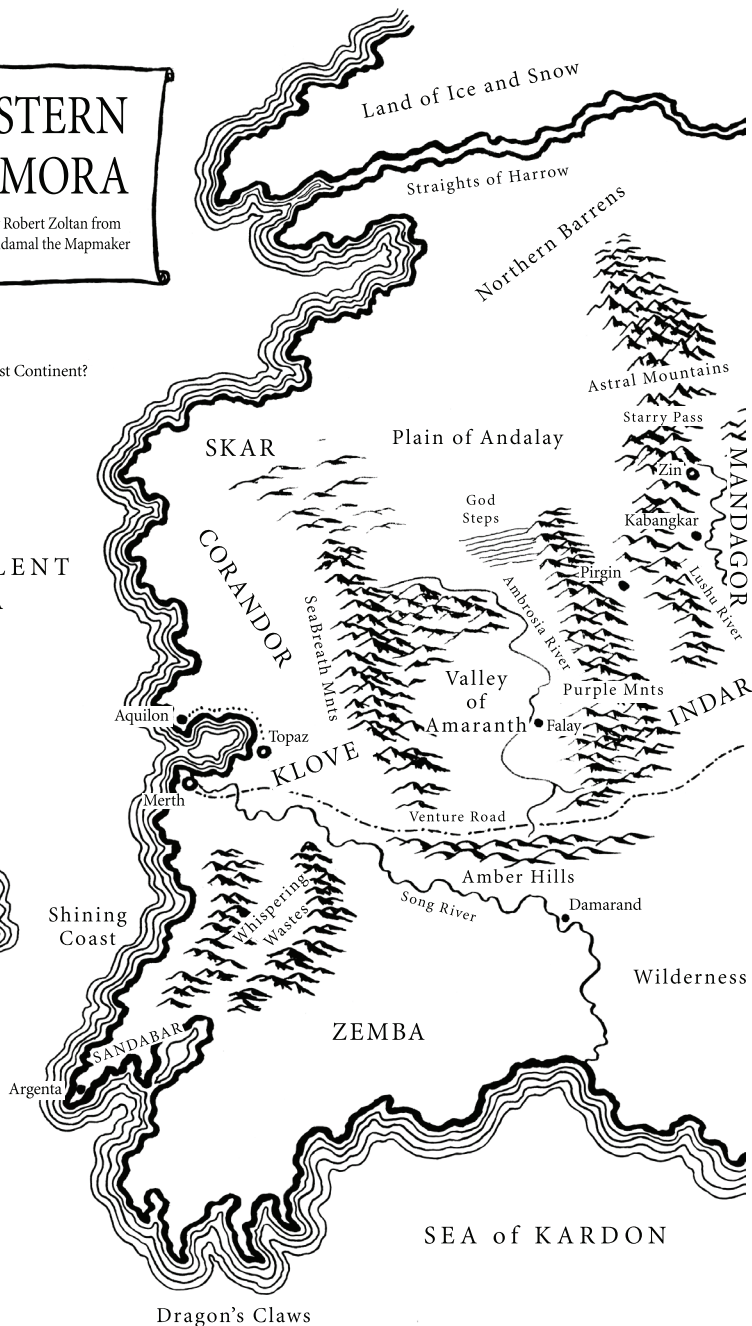
WESTERN PLEMORA

Prepared by Robert Zoltan from
a map by Randamal the Mapmaker

← To the Lost Continent?

SUCCULENT
SEA

UNFETTERED
ISLES



**THE LONG LONG
LONG LONG
RESCUE**

**AN EPIC TALE OF
THE INCOMPARABLE QUILL**

BOOK I

Castle Caliago

One pleasant spring morning, Quantillion Quill was hanging one thousand feet up off the side of a granite cliff from a small, undernourished branch of ivy. Rather surprisingly, the ivy was as distressed as Quill about the situation.

“Let me go!” cried the ivy, quivering in fear. “Must we both die because of your clumsiness?”

Quill might have been startled enough by a talking plant to lose his hold had he not been the target of obscene insults by a pigeon moments before. His cap and leather jerkin still had traces of the foul projectiles it had dropped upon him after releasing its vocal tirade. The pigeon and the plant proved the rumor true: the wizard Caliago had a penchant for granting animation or voice to that which naturally lacked it.

Ignoring the protesting plant, Quill addressed his companion who was perched on a ledge above him. It was a small monkey doll that had been animated not by Caliago, but by the doll’s former master, the late great sorcerer, Morbis the Mysticator.

“Chaba! Do something!” pleaded Quill. He felt the branch give way another inch. He gasped, and again sought a foothold, but could find no purchase.

“What would you suggest?” asked Chaba, who spoke with the voice of a man, though his cloth lips never moved, just as he watched Quill hang on for dear life, though his button eyes never blinked.

"Something!" replied Quill. "Anything!"

"A meaningless life ending in a meaningless death!" cried the vine. "Oh, bitter fate!"

"As you know," replied Chaba, "my arms can lift no more than a heavy tome, such as that formidable collection of palaverous poems by Lord Tinoron. With the amount you have been consuming, coupled with your sedentary lifestyle of late, it would take a dozen of me to—"

"Are you saying I am *fat*?" asked Quill, his vanity momentarily trumping his instinct for survival.

"You weigh more than is necessary. If you did not, you would have succeeded in the small leap you attempted. Interestingly enough, if you fall, according to my former master Morbis, you will fall at the same rate no matter your weight."

"Chaba!" cried Quill.

"One moment," said Chaba.

"That is all I have left!" complained Quill.

Chaba leapt to another rock for a different perspective. A moment later, he spoke. "Below to your left is a small ledge, obstructed from your present view."

"To my left?" asked Quill, for Chaba seemed to be staring to Quill's right, though it was not always easy to tell with those button eyes.

"Oh. My apologies," said Chaba. "I meant, of course, your right."

Quill growled.

"It is beyond the reach of your outstretched foot," said Chaba. "But if you are able to gain leverage and push off from the rock, it is a mere two feet away, the smallest of leaps. At least, for a lean man."

Quill felt the vine further give way.

"Fare thee well, cold cruel world!" cried the suffering plant.

Quill released the vine just as it tore from the cliff, pushed off from the rock with his hands and left foot, and launched himself to the right as far as he could. He fell several feet before his boots

impacted a surface. Unable to keep his center of gravity near enough to the cliff, he felt himself teetering backward. He reached his hands forward and felt one of them grasped by Chaba's cloth hand. The monkey doll's strength was just sufficient to tilt his balance forward again. Quill flattened himself against the nearly vertical face, pressing tightly to the stone like an infant clasped to its mother's bosom.

The fading cries of the vine could be heard as it fell to the foot of the mountain far below.

"Murderer! Murderer!"

Quill closed his eyes and savored the sensation of solid rock under his feet. He took several grateful breaths of sweet mountain air.

"Thank you, Chaba," said Quill.

"I risked little," said Chaba. "The fall would merely have inconvenienced me."

"Nevertheless." Quill began to climb again, and Chaba returned to his usual perch atop Quill's backpack.

"However," added Quill, "if I may be permitted one criticism..."

"No power in the world could stop you," interjected Chaba.

"In the future, please give careful consideration before advising me on directions. The choice of usage between the word right or left is not a mere stylistic consideration."

"I was thinking of the theater," said Chaba.

"What?"

"You know. Stage right and stage left."

Quill shook his head. "At times you are as cogent as a great sage, able to reason and summon up arcane knowledge as if accessing a vast hidden library. At other times, you seem to have the mental power of a doorstep. Your mind is a complete mystery to me."

"And to me as well," replied Chaba. "Such is this strange half-life to which I am cursed. One moment lucid and discerning, nearly recalling some vital memory from the past, the next lost in a miasma of the mind. I do not know if I am capable of going

mad, but were I to dwell on my plight, I would certainly find out. Once the right hand familiar to Morbis the Mysticator, the greatest sorcerer in Plemora, I am now a mere sidekick to an underachieving mercenary...”

Quill sighed and blocked out the sound of Chaba’s voice, having heard this speech many times before. He focused on the promised reward of a large bag of gold for the rescue of the Princess Dianara, daughter of King Kaloon of Malbriza, a small but wealthy kingdom far to the east of Quill’s western coastal city of Aquilon. Moreover, the King had all but promised his daughter’s hand in marriage, and her father was not the only one to claim that Dianara was the most beautiful girl in the realm. Quill had always longed to marry into money, but his vanity would never allow him to marry any but the most pulchritudinous heiress. This was his opportunity.

Quill’s choice of an approach up the treacherous cliff face behind the castle was not out of a desire for thrills or heroics, for he had little taste for either. The steep ascent had seemed a safer alternative than a frontal assault and the increased possibility of an encounter with the princess’s kidnapper, the infamous wizard, Caliago. During his career, Quill had made many difficult climbs—treasure-topped towers, fortified city walls, the trellises of married women’s balconies—but he had directly faced few sorcerers, especially of Caliago’s dire reputation.

After another hour of cautious and meticulous climbing, Quill reached the top. He paused for several deep breaths of the crisp cool air, and then snuck a peek over the final rock that blocked his view. His eyes widened in surprise. He had expected to be confronted by an outer wall, a maze, a barricade, armed sentries, or at least an incontinent old watchdog. What he had not expected was this.

A path of stones wound through a carefully manicured lawn toward the back entrance of the castle. Magnolia, birch, oak and apple trees provided shade, while roses, tulips and daffodils created a mosaic of color and perfume. The immaculate garden

was presently unattended, except by birds, bees and butterflies that flitted among the flowers and trees. Quill expected saccharine harp music to break out at any moment.

"Idyllic," said Chaba, rather unnecessarily.

"Yes," said Quill. "A lovely place to be killed. Be on guard."

Quill was impressed by his first close-up view of the castle. It was a ten-story-tall stone edifice, built with a touch of elegance while still retaining an economy of line and a sense of its practical purpose—to house human beings. He spotted an open window on the second floor, and moved from tree to bush, keeping to the soft lawn where his boots would make little noise. A short dash brought him to the cover of an apple tree only a few yards away from the window.

"I am puzzled," said Quill. "Caliago seems unconcerned with intruders, especially considering that he recently abducted a member of the Malbrizan royal family. I find this sign foreboding instead of encouraging."

"His power and reputation are great," said Chaba, "though nowhere near the equal of my former master, Morbis."

Quill rolled his eyes. "Of course not. But still. Not even a guard?"

"He has no need of them."

"Why not?" asked Quill. Then he realized the voice was not Chaba's.

The apple tree spoke again in singsong tones. "You'll see!"

Quill made a sour face. "Again? I feel as if I am in the middle of some trite children's story."

"Hey, friend," said the apple tree in conspiratorial tones.

Quill sighed. "What, *Mr. Apple Tree*?"

"You need a boost?"

"What?"

"A boost. To the window. Aren't you trying to get into the castle?" asked the apple tree. With a rustle and a creak, a branch swayed closer to the second-story window.

"You would help me?" asked Quill.

"Why not?" replied the apple tree. "I may offer appealing fruit on the outside, but inside, I'm rotten to the core."

Quill clambered up the tree and crawled along the thick branch. Chaba hid in the backpack. Quill was now near enough to the window so that he would have to make only a short jump over and down to reach the sill.

"I thank you," said Quill, and leapt off the branch.

"Don't mention it," said the apple tree, and pulled back its branch just as Quill pushed off with his legs.

Instead of landing on the ledge, Quill dropped straight out into mid-air, then down nearly fifteen feet to land in a hedge of rose bushes. He stifled his groans as the thorns slashed and poked at his flesh and tore at his clothes. The apple tree, a nearby magnolia, and several birds burst into riotous laughter. The rose bush was less amused.

"Get off us, you filthy baboon!" it cried, amid a flurry of profanity delivered in a snobbish, cultured accent.

Quill dragged himself from the bushes on his hands and knees. He pulled out a couple of thorns, groaning and grimacing in pain, and then gave the apple tree a savage stare.

"Had I but an axe..." he growled.

"Then you'd be a filthy baboon with an axe!" cried the rose bush.

"Aw, come on, friend," said the apple tree. "It was just a joke. I didn't mean for you to get hurt. Climb on up again, and I'll make sure you get safely to the window."

The magnolia tree and the birds broke out into laughter again. Quill ignored them and drew his sword. He went to the apple tree and found a limb of decent thickness.

"Hey, now wait a minute!" said the apple tree.

With a couple of slashes, Quill chopped it off.

"You bastard!" cried the maimed apple tree.

He trimmed the smaller limbs from the ten-foot branch.

"Quill," said Chaba from inside his pack, "might I suggest—"

"Let me be," said Quill, burning with the energy of his anger. "I know what I am doing."

When he finished, Quill walked about fifty feet from the castle. Then he turned, ran toward it, jammed the branch into the foot of the wall, and vaulted himself up toward the window.

It almost worked. Just as Quill was reaching for the window ledge, the branch snapped, and he fell head first straight into the middle of the rose bush again. His doubled pain was doubled again by his humiliation and the laughter of the trees and birds. The rose bush was now beside itself, and could manage nothing but unintelligible screams.

“Quill, if I might,” said Chaba.

Quill grunted.

Chaba continued. “Toss me up to the window with the length of rope here in the pack. I will secure it and you can ascend.”

Quill felt even more the fool after hearing the obvious solution. Chaba seemed to realize this and was, for a change, supportive.

“Your idea with the branch was sound, but unnecessarily complex and dramatic. It was the first solution offered by your mind, which was understandably overcome with frustration and anger. If, in fact, the branch had not snapped, it would have been an exploit for a heroic tale. Ignore the idiotic inhabitants of this garden from a children’s nightmare, toss me through the window, and we shall rescue the princess in short order.”

Quill gave a nod of assent, and slipped his pack off. Chaba already had a short length of rope in hand. Quill tossed him up and got him through on the first try. A few moments later, Chaba reappeared on the sill and dropped the rope down to Quill. Quill, making sure to trample a few roses again in the process, grabbed the rope and was through the window in seconds.

He was standing at the end of a long empty hall. Like the outside, the inside was well kept, immaculate in fact. Quill held his arm out to Chaba, and the doll leapt on and scurried up to perch on his shoulder like a real monkey.

Quill then proceeded down the blue and gold patterned runner rug that ran the length of the hallway. He stopped when he came to a door, squatted down, and put his ear near the keyhole.

He heard nothing. He peeked through the keyhole but saw only darkness. He tried the doorknob. It was locked.

He stopped at the next door and did the same, with the same result. Glancing down the hallway, he counted at least a dozen more doors.

"It could take hours to stealthily search the entire castle," said Quill.

"When in doubt, ask directions," suggested Chaba.

Quill nodded, and continued on till he reached a staircase. He started up, then stopped, and took two steps back down when he noticed a portrait hung on the wall nearby. It depicted a man of later middle age. The picture gave the impression that the artist had made a valiant but vain attempt to paint an unattractive subject in a flattering light. The man's skin had a sickly pallor. His chin was so strong as to give the appearance of an unhealthy underbite, his nose was curved in precisely the wrong manner, his hair hung ambiguously and irresponsibly to one side of his large head. One glossy black eye stared straight ahead like a vulture, while the other seemed to look slightly askew, as if captivated by some scene in another dimension.

"This can only be the wizard Caliago," said Quill.

"Why so?" asked Chaba.

"No one else would choose to hang such a subject in their home," said Quill. "And yet...ah!" Quill pointed at the signature in the corner. "I thought I recognized the artist's hand. Even the superlative Tantuan could not do justice to this face."

Chaba nodded. "A most unfortunate arrangement of features. The artist must remain blameless in this case."

"Agreed," said Quill. "One cannot polish a turd."

Quill started up the stairs again, and then paused. "Did you growl, Chaba?"

"I thought that was your stomach," said Chaba.

Quill remained still and listened, but heard nothing. He shrugged. "Probably only the castle settling."

Quill snuck up the carpeted steps to the next floor, and peeked

out. He saw a plain hallway similar to the one below. But here, a servant was scrubbing the stone walls with a washcloth, which he periodically dipped into a bucket on the floor beside him. The bald man was whistling an unmusical tune as he worked. This made it much easier for Quill to creep up on him unawares.

The servant dropped the soapy cloth as Quill clamped his hand over the man's mouth and held the blade of a dagger to his throat.

"Make a move or a sound and it will be your last," said Quill. "Do you understand?"

The man remained silent and still.

"I *said*, do you understand?" repeated Quill, with more intensity.

"I must point out, on behalf of this terrified gentleman," said Chaba, "that you told him to make no movement or sound."

"And?" asked Quill, irritated by Chaba's interruption.

"Thus, he cannot signal assent to your request," said Chaba.

"Ah," said Quill. "I see your point." He directed his attention back to the servant. "You may speak quietly in response to my queries and requests."

The servant whispered something.

"I cannot hear you," said Quill. "Speak louder than a whisper, but quieter than normal volume."

"I understand," said the servant in a quavering voice.

"Excellent," said Quill. "Tell me, where is the Princess Dianara being held? And do not lie, my good man, for your life is in the hands of Quill the Merciless."

Chaba was unable to cover his mouth in time to prevent a short snigger. He turned it quickly into a cough. "Forgive my allergies," said Chaba.

Quill sighed. "Well?"

The servant stuttered a reply. "I believe she is dwelling on the top floor, in the last bedchamber to the right of the stairs."

"Regular right or stage right?" asked Chaba.

"Chaba, shut up," said Quill. "And how many men guard the princess?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Zoltan is a Los Angeles-based author of literary and speculative fiction, and author of the Rogues of Merth Series. He was a semi-finalist in the 2019 Writers of the Future Award contest. His work has been praised by Rich Horton (Editor of The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy), Locus Magazine, Cirsova Magazine, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly, Black Gate Magazine, and Tangent Online Review Magazine. Robert is also an award-winning songwriter, composer and music producer, audiobook drama producer, voice actor, graphic designer, illustrator, and host of Literary Wonder & Adventure Show podcast.