

FANTASY MASTERWORKS

THE HISTORY OF THE RUNESTAFF

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The History of the Runestaff

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Fantasy Masterworks Volume 36

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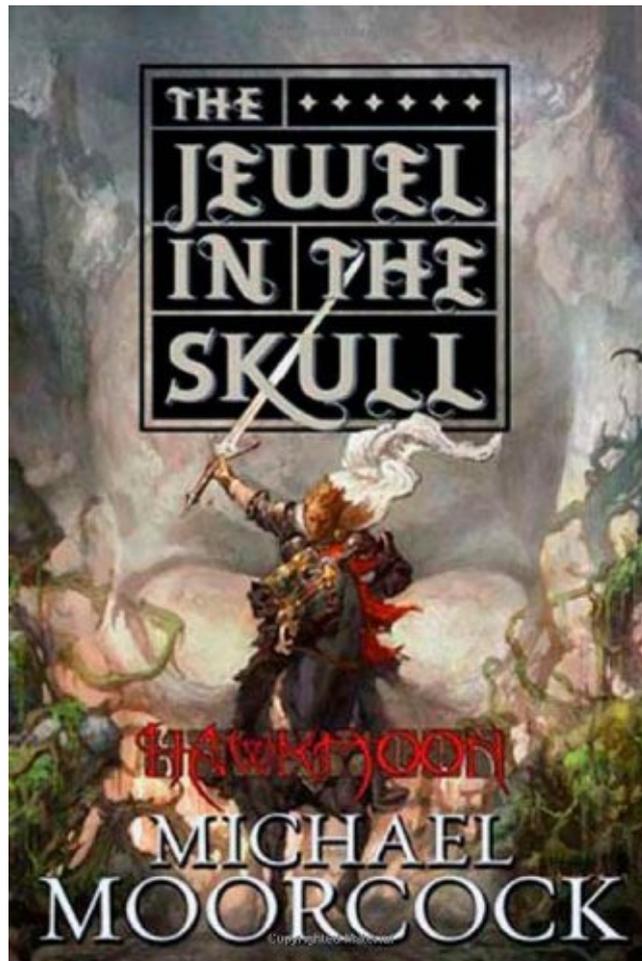
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Book One

Then the Earth grew old, its landscapes mellowing and showing signs of age, its ways becoming whimsical and strange in the manner of a man in his last years.

—The High History of the Runestaff

Chapter One - COUNT BRASS

COUNT BRASS, Lord Guardian of the Kamarg, rode out on a horned horse one morning to inspect his territories. He rode until he came to a little hill, on the top of which stood a ruin of immense age. It was the ruin of a Gothic church, and its walls of thick stone were smooth with the passing of wind and rains. Ivy clad much of it, and the ivy was of the flowering sort so that at this season purple and amber blossoms filled the dark windows, an excellent substitute for the stained glass that had once decorated them.

On his rides, Count Brass always came to the ruin. He felt a kind of fellowship with it, for, like him, it was old; like him, it had survived much turmoil, and, like him, it seemed to have been strengthened rather than weakened by the ravages of time. The hill on which the ruin stood was a waving sea of tough grass, moved by the wind. The hill was surrounded by the rich, seemingly infinite marshlands of the Kamarg—a lonely landscape populated by wild white bulls, herds of horned horses, and the giant scarlet flamingoes so large that they could easily lift a grown man.

The sky was a light gray, carrying rain, and from it shone sunlight of watery gold, touching the Count's armor of burnished brass and making it glow like flame. The Count wore a huge broadsword at his hip, and a plain helmet, also of brass, was on his head. His whole body was sheathed in heavy brass, and even his gloves and boots were of brass links sewn upon leather. The Count's body was broad, sturdy and tall, and he had a great, strong head on his shoulders, with a tanned face that might also have been molded of brass. From this head stared two steady eyes of golden brown. His heavy mustache was red, as was his hair. In the Kamarg, as well as beyond it, it was not unusual to hear the legend that the Count was, in fact, not a true man at all but a living statue in brass, a Titan, invincible and indestructible, immortal.

But those who knew Count Brass well enough knew that he was a man in every sense - a loyal friend, a terrible foe, given much to laughter yet capable of ferocious anger, a drinker of enormous capacity, a trencherman of not indiscriminate tastes, a wit, a swordsman and a horseman without par, a sage in the ways of men and history, a lover at once tender and savage. Count Brass, with his rolling, warm voice and his rich vitality, could not help but be a legend, for if the man was exceptional, then so were his deeds.

Count Brass stroked the head of his horse, rubbing his gauntlet between the sharp, spiral horns of the animal and looking to the south, where the sea and sky met far away. The horse grunted with pleasure and Count Brass smiled, leaned back in his saddle, and flicked the reins to make the horse descend the hill and head along the secret marsh path that led toward the northern towers beyond the horizon.

The sky was darkening when he reached the first tower and saw its guardian, an armored silhouette against the skyline, keeping his vigil. Though no attack had been made on the Kamarg since Count Brass had come to replace the former, corrupt Lord Guardian, there was now a slight danger that the roaming armies, made up of those whom the Dark Empire of the west had defeated, might wander in the domain looking for towns and villages to loot. The guardian, like all his fellows, was equipped with a flame-lance of baroque design, a sword four feet long, a tamed riding flamingo tethered to one

side of the battlements, and a heliograph device to signal information to the other towers. There were other weapons in the towers, weapons the Count himself had built and installed, but the guardians knew only their method of operation; they had never seen them in action. Count Brass had assured them that they were more powerful than any weapons possessed even by the Dark Empire of Granbretan, and they believed him, though they were still a little wary of the strange machines.

The guardian turned as Count Brass approached the tower.

The man's face was almost hidden by his black iron helmet, which curved around his cheeks and over his nose. His body was swathed in a heavy leather cloak. He saluted, raising his arm high.

Count Brass raised his own arm. "Is all well, guardian?"

"All well, my lord." The guardian shifted his grip on his flame-lance and turned up the cowl of his cloak as the first drops of rain began to fall. "Save for the weather."

Count Brass laughed. "Wait for the mistral and then complain." He guided his horse away from the tower, making for the next.

The mistral was the cold, fierce wind that whipped across the Kamarg for months on end, its whistling keening a continuous sound until spring. Count Brass loved to ride through it when it was at its height, the force of it lashing at his face and turning his bronze tan to a glowing red.

Now the rain splashed down on his armor, and he reached behind his saddle for his cloak, tugging it about his shoulders and raising the hood. Everywhere through the darkening day the reeds bent in the breeze-borne rain, and there was a constant patter of water on water as the heavy drops splashed in the lagoons, sending out ceaseless ripples. Above, the clouds banked blacker, threatening to release a good-sized weight of water, and Count Brass decided he would forego the rest of his inspection until the next day and instead return to his castle at Aigues-Mortes, a good four hours' ride through the twisting marsh paths.

He sent the horse back the way they had come, knowing that the beast would find the path by instinct. As he rode, the rain fell faster, making his cloak sodden, and the night closed in rapidly until all that could be seen was the solid wall of blackness broken only by the silver traceries of rain. The horse moved more slowly but did not pause. Count Brass could smell its wet hide and promised it special treatment by the grooms when they reached Aigues-Mortes. He brushed water from its mane with his gloved hand and tried to peer ahead, but he could see only the reeds immediately around him, heard only the occasional maniacal cackle of a mallard, flapping across a lagoon pursued by a water-fox or an otter. Sometimes he thought he saw a dark shape overhead and felt the swish of a swooping flamingo making for its communal nest or recognised the squawk of a moorhen battling for its life with an owl. Once, he caught a flash of white in the darkness and listened to the blundering passage of a nearby herd of white bulls as they made for firmer land to sleep; and he noticed the sound, a little later, of a marsh-bear stalking the herd his breath whiffling and his feet making the slightest sound. He carefully padded across the quaking surface of the mud.

All these sounds were familiar to Count Brass and did not alarm him.

Even when he heard the high-pitched whinny of frightened horses and heard their hoofbeats in the distance he was not unduly perturbed until his own horse stopped dead and moved uncertainly. The horses were coming directly toward him, charging down the narrow causeway in panic. Now Count Brass could see the leading stallion, his eyes rolling in fear, his nostrils flaring and snorting.

Count Brass yelled and waved his arms, hoping to divert the stallion, but it was plainly too panicked and stricken to heed him.

There was nothing else to do. Count Brass yanked at the reins of his mount and sent it into the marsh, hoping desperately that the ground would be firm enough to hold them at least until the herd had passed. The horse stumbled into the reeds, its hooves seeking purchase in the soft mud; then it had plunged into water and Count Brass saw spray fly and felt a wave hit his face, and the horse was swimming as best it could through the cold lagoon, bravely carrying its armored burden.

The herd had soon thundered past. Count Brass puzzled over what had panicked them so, for the wild horned horses of the Kamarg were not easily disturbed. Then, as he guided his horse back toward the marsh path, there came a sound that immediately explained the commotion and sent his hand to the hilt of his sword.

It was a slithering sound, a slobbering sound; the sound of a baragoon - the marsh gibberer. Few of the monsters were left now. They had been the creations of the former Guardian who had used them to terrorize the people of the Kamarg before Count Brass came. Count Brass and his men had all but destroyed the race, but those which remained had learned to hunt by night and avoid large numbers of men at all costs.

The baragoons had once been men themselves, before they had been taken as slaves to the former Guardian's sorcerous laboratories and there transformed. Now they were monsters eight feet high and some five feet broad, bile-colored and slithering on their bellies through the marshlands, rising only to leap upon and rend their prey with their steel-hard talons.

When they did, on occasion, have the good fortune to find a man alone they would take slow and painful vengeance, delighting in eating a man's limbs before his own eyes.

As his horse regained the marsh path, Count Brass saw the the baragoon ahead, smelled its stench, and coughed on the odor. His huge broadsword was now in his hand.

The baragoon had heard him and paused.

Count Brass dismounted and stood between his horse and the monster. He gripped his broadsword with both hands and began to walk, stiff-legged in his armor of brass, toward the baragoon.

Instantly it began to gibber in a shrill, repulsive voice, raising itself up and flailing with its talons in an effort to terrify the Count. But to Count Brass the apparition was not unduly horrific; he had seen much worse in his time. However, he knew that his chances against the beast were slim, since the baragoon could see in the dark and the marsh was its natural environment. Count Brass would have to use cunning.

"Well, you ill-smelling foulness," he began in an almost jocular tone, "I am Count Brass, the enemy of your race. It was I who destroyed your evil kin and it is thanks to me that you have so few brothers and sisters these days. Do you miss them? Would you join them?"

The baragoon's gibbering shout of rage was loud but not without a hint of uncertainty. It shuffled in its bulk but did not move toward the Count.

Count Brass laughed. "Well, cowardly creation of sorcery - what's your answer?"

The monster opened its mouth and tried to frame a few words with its misshapen lips, but little emerged that could be recognized as human speech. Its eyes now did not meet Count Brass's.

With every appearance of casualness, Count Brass dug his great sword into the ground and rested his gauntleted hands upon the crosspiece. "I see you are ashamed of terrorizing the horses I protect, and I am in good humor, so I will pity you.

Go now and I'll let you live a few more days. Stay, and you die this hour."

He spoke with such assurance that the beast dropped back to the ground, though it did not retreat. The Count lifted up his sword, as if with impatience, and began to walk decisively forward. He wrinkled his nose against the stench of the monster, paused, and waved the thing away from him. "Into the swamp, into the slime where you belong. I am in a merciful mood tonight."

The baragoon's wet mouth snarled, but he still hesitated.

Count Brass frowned a little, judging his moment, for he had known the baragoon would not retreat so easily. He lifted his sword. "Will this be your fate?"

The baragoon began to rise on its hind legs, but Count Brass's timing was exactly right. He was already swinging the heavy blade into the monster's neck.

The thing struck out with both taloned hands, its gibbering cry a mixture of hatred and terror. There was a metallic squeal as the talons scored gashes in the Count's armor, sending him staggering backward. The monster's mouth opened and closed an inch from the Count's face, its huge black eyes seeming to consume him with their rage. As he staggered he tugged his sword with him. It came free. He regained his footing and struck again.

Black blood pumped from the wound, drenching the Count.

There was another terrible cry from the beast, and its hands went to its head, trying desperately to hold it in place. Then the baragoon's head flopped half off its shoulders, blood pumped again, and the body fell.

Count Brass stood stock still, panting heavily, a look of grim satisfaction upon his face. He wiped the creature's blood fastidiously from his face, smoothed his heavy mustache with the back of his hand, and congratulated himself that he appeared to have lost none of his guile or his skill. He had planned every moment of the encounter, intending from the first to kill the creature. He had kept the baragoon

bewildered until he could strike. He saw no wrong in deceiving the thing.

If he had given the monster a fair fight, it was likely that he, and not the baragoon, would now be lying headless in the mud.

Count Brass took a deep breath of the cold air and moved forward. With some effort he managed to push the dead baragoon off the path with his booted foot, sending it slithering into the marsh.

Then Count Brass remounted his horned horse and rode back to Aigues-Mortes without further incident .

Chapter Two - YISSELDA AND BOWGENTLE

COUNT BRASS had led armies in almost every famous battle of his day; he had been the power behind the thrones of half the rulers of Europe, a maker and a destroyer of kings and princes. He was master of intrigue, a man whose advice was sought in any affair involving political struggle. He had been, in truth, a mercenary; but he had been a mercenary with an ideal, and the ideal had been to sweep the continent of Europe toward unification and peace. Thus he had, from preference, leagued himself with any force he judged capable of making some contribution to this cause. Many a time he had refused the offer to rule an empire, knowing that this was an age when a man could make an empire in five years and lose it in six months, for history was still in a state of flux and would not settle in the Count's lifetime. He sought only to guide history a little in the course he thought best.

Tiring of wars, of intrigue, and even to some extent, of ideals, the old hero had eventually accepted the offer of the people of the Kamarg to become their Lord Guardian.

That ancient land of marshes and lagoons lay close to the coast of the Mediterranean. It had once been part of the nation called France, but France was now two dozen duke-doms with as many grandiose names. The Kamarg, with its wide, faded skies of orange, yellow, red, and purple, its relics of the distant past, its barely changing customs and rituals, had appealed to the old Count and he had set himself the task of making his adopted land secure.

In his travels in all the Courts of Europe he had discovered many secrets, and thus the great, gloomy towers that ringed the borders of the Kamarg now protected the territory with more potent, less recognizable weaponry than broadswords or flame-lances.

On the southern borders, the marshes gradually gave way to sea, and sometimes ships stopped at the little ports, though travelers rarely disembarked. This was because of the Kamarg's terrain. The wide landscapes were treacherous to those not familiar with them, and the marsh roads were hard to find. Also, mountain ranges flanked its three sides on land. The man wishing to head inland disembarked farther east and took a boat up the Rhone. So the Kamarg received little news from the outside world and what it did receive was usually stale.

This was one of the reasons why Count Brass had settled there. He enjoyed the sense of isolation; he had been too long involved with worldly affairs for even the most sensational news to interest him much. In his youth he had commanded armies in the wars that constantly raged across Europe. Now, however, he was tired of all conflict and refused all requests for aid or advice that reached him, no matter what inducement was offered.

In the west lay the island empire of Granbretan, the only nation with any real political stability, with her half-insane science and her ambitions of conquest. Having built the tall, curved bridge of silver that spanned thirty miles of sea, the empire was bent on increasing her territories by means of her black wisdom and her war machines like the brazen ornithopters that had a range of more than a hundred miles. But even the encroachment of the Dark Empire into the mainland of Europe did not greatly disturb Count Brass; it was a law of history, he believed, that such things must happen, and he saw the ultimate benefits that could result from a force, no matter how cruel, capable of uniting all the

warring states into one nation

Count Brass's philosophy was the philosophy of experience, the philosophy of a man of the world rather than a scholar, and he saw no reason to doubt it, while the Kamarg, his sole responsibility, was strong enough to resist even the full might of Granbretan,

Having nothing, himself, to fear from Granbretan, he watched with a certain remote admiration the cruel and efficient manner in which the nation spread her shadow farther and farther across Europe with every year that passed.

Across Scandia and all the nations of the north the shadow fell, along a line marked by famous cities: Parye, Munchein, Wien, Krahkov, Kerninsburg (itself a foothold in the mysterious land of Muskovia). A great semi-circle of power in the main continental land mass; a semi-circle that grew wider almost every day and must soon touch the northernmost princedoms of Italia, Magyaria, and Slavia. So Count Brass guessed, the Dark Empire's power would stretch from the Norwegian Sea to the Mediterranean, and only the Kamarg would not be under its sway. It was partly with this knowledge in mind that he had accepted the Lord Guardianship of the territory when its previous Guardian, a corrupt and spurious sorcerer from the land of the Bulgars, had been torn to pieces by the native guardian whom he had commanded.

Count Brass had made the Kamarg secure from attack from outside and from menace from within. There were few baragoons left to terrorize the people of the many small villages, and other terrors had been dealt with also.

Now the Count dwelt in his warm castle at Aigues-Mortes, enjoying the simple, rural pleasures of the land, while the people were, for the first time in many years, free from anxiety.

The castle, known as Castle Brass, had been built some centuries before on what had then been an artificial pyramid rising high above the center of the town. But now the pyramid was hidden by earth in which had been planted grass and gardens for flowers, vines, and vegetables in a series of terraces. Here there were well-kept lawns on which the children of the castle could play or adults stroll, the grape-vines that gave the best wine in the Kamarg, and farther down grew rows of harricots and patches of potatoes, cauliflowers, carrots, lettuce, and many other common vegetables, as well as more exotic ones like the giant pumpkin-tomatoes, celery trees, and sweet ambrogines. There were also fruit trees and bushes that supplied the castle through most of the seasons.

The castle was built of the same white stone as the houses of the town. It had windows of thick glass (much of it painted fancifully) and ornate towers and battlements of delicate workmanship. From its highest turrets it was possible to see most of the territory it protected, and it was so designed that when the mistral came an arrangement of vents, pulleys, and little doors could be operated and the castle would sing so that its music, like that of an organ, could be heard for miles on the wind.

The castle looked down on the red roofs of the town and at the bullring beyond, which had originally been built, it was said, many thousands of years ago by the Romanians.

Count Brass rode his weary horse up the winding road to the castle and hallooed to the guards to open

the gate. The rain was easing off, but the night was cold and the Count was eager to reach his fireside. He rode through the great iron gates and into the courtyard, where a groom took his horse.

Then he plodded up the steps, through the doors of the castle, down a short passage, and into the main hall.

There, a huge fire roared in the grate, and beside it, in deep, padded armchairs, sat his daughter Yisselda, and his old friend Bowgentle. They rose as he entered, and Yisselda stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, while Bowgentle stood by smiling.

"You look as if you could do with some hot food and a change into something warmer than armor," said Bowgentle, tugging at a bellrope. "I'll see to it."

Count Brass nodded gratefully and went to stand by the fire tugging off his helmet and placing it with a clank on the mantel. Yisselda was already kneeling at his feet, tugging at the straps of his greaves. She was a beautiful girl of nineteen, with soft rose-gold skin and fair hair that was not quite blonde and not quite auburn but of a color lovelier than both. She was dressed in a flowing gown of flaming orange that made her resemble a fire sprite as she moved with graceful swiftness to carry the greaves to the servant who now stood by with a change of clothes for her father.

Another servant helped Count Brass shed his breastplate, backplate, and other parts of his armor, and soon he was pulling on soft, loose trousers and shirt of white wool and wrapping a linen gown over that.

A small table, heavy with steaks of local beef, potatoes, salad, and a delicious thick sauce, was brought up to the fire, together with a flagon of mulled wine. Count Brass sat down with a sigh and began to eat.

Bowgentle stood by the fire watching him, while Yisselda curled up in the chair opposite and waited until he had taken the edge off his appetite.

"Well, my lord," said she with a smile, "how went the day?"

"Is all our land secure?"

Count Brass nodded with mock gravity. "It would seem so, my lady, though I was not able to visit all of the northern towers but one. The rain came on, and I decided to return home." He told them about his encounter with the baragoon.

Yisselda listened with wide eyes while Bowgentle looked somewhat grave, his kind, ascetic face bowed and his lips pursed. The famous philosopher-poet was not always approving of his friend's exploits and seemed to think that Count Brass brought such adventures upon himself.

"You'll recollect," said Bowgentle when the Count had finished, "that I advised you this morning to travel with von Villach and some of the others." Von Villach was the Count's chief lieutenant, a loyal old soldier who had been with him through most of his earlier exploits.

Count Brass laughed up at his dour-faced friend. "Von Villach? He's getting old and slow, and it would not be a kindness to take him out in this weather!"

Bowgentle smiled a little bleakly. "He's a year or two younger than yourself, Count. ..."

"Possibly, but could he defeat a baragoon single-handed?"

"That is not the point," Bowgentle continued firmly. "If you traveled with him and a party of men-arms you would not need to encounter a baragoon at all."

Count Brass waved a hand, dismissing the discussion. "I have to keep in practice; otherwise, I might become as mori-bund as von Villach."

"You have a responsibility to the people here, Father,"

Yisselda put in quietly. "If you were killed . . ."

"I shall not be killed!" The Count smiled scornfully, as if death were something that only others suffered. In the firelight his head resembled the war mask of some ancient barbarian tribe, cast in metal, and it did seem in some way imperishable

Yisselda shrugged. She had most of her father's qualities of character, including the conviction that there was little point indulging in arguments with such stubborn folk as Count Brass. Bowgentle had once written of her in a private poem,

"She is like silk, both strong and soft," and looking at them now he noticed with quiet affection how the expression of one was reflected in the other.

Bowgentle changed the subject. "I heard today that Granbretan took the province of Koln not so many months past," he said. "Their conquests spread like a plague."

"A healthy enough plague," Count Brass replied, settling back in his chair. "At least they establish order."

"Political order, perhaps," Bowgentle said with some fire,

"but scarcely spiritual or moral. Their cruelty is without precedent. They are insane. Their souls are sick with a love for all that is evil and a hatred for all that is noble."

Count Brass stroked his mustache. "Such wickedness has existed before. Why the Bulgar sorcerer who preceded me here was quite as evil as they."

"The Bulgar was an individual. So were the Marquis of Pesht, Roldar Nikolayeff, and their kind. But they were exceptions, and in almost every case the people they led revolted against them and destroyed them in time. But the Dark Empire is a nation of such individuals, and such actions as they commit are seen as natural. In Koln their sport was to crucify every girlchild in the city, make eunuchs of the boys, and have all the adults who would save their lives perform lewd displays in the street

That is no natural cruelty, Count, and was by no means their worst. Their entertainment is to debate all humanity."

"Such stories are exaggerated, my friend. You should realize that. Why, I myself have been accused of—"

"From all I hear," Bowgentle interrupted, "the rumors are not an exaggeration of the truth but simplification. If their public activities are so terrible, what must their private delights be like?"

Yisselda shuddered. "I can't bear to think . . ."

"Exactly," Bowgentle said, turning to face her. "And few can bear to repeat what they have witnessed. The order they bring is superficial, the chaos they bring destroys men's souls."

Count Brass shrugged his broad shoulders. "Whatever they do, it is a temporary thing. The unification they force on the world is permanent, mark my words."

Bowgentle folded his arms across his black-clad chest. "The price is too heavy, Count Brass."

"No price is too heavy! What will you have? The princedoms of Europe dividing into smaller and smaller segments, war a constant factor in the life of the common man? Today few men can ever know peace of mind from cradle to grave.

Things change and change again. At least Granbretan offers consistency!"

"And terror? I cannot agree with you, my Mend."

Count Brass poured himself a goblet of wine, drank it down, and yawned a little. "You take these immediate events too seriously, Bowgentle. If you had had my experience, you would realize that all such evil soon passes, either from boredom in those concerned, or else it is destroyed by others some way. A hundred years will see Granbretan a most upright and moral nation." Count Brass winked at his daughter but she did not smile in return, seeming to agree with Bowgentle.

"Their sickness is too ingrained for a hundred years to cure it. That can be told from their appearance alone. Those jeweled beast masks that they never doff, those grotesque clothes they wear in even the most extreme heat, their stance, their way of moving - all these things show them to be what they are. They are insane by heredity, and their progeny will inherit that insanity." Bowgentle struck his hand against a mantel pillar. "Our passivity is acquiescence in their deeds.

We should—"

Count Brass rose from his chair. "We should go to our beds and sleep, my friend. Tomorrow we must appear at the bullring for the beginning of the festivities."

He nodded to Bowgentle, kissed his daughter lightly on the forehead, and left the hall.

Chapter Three - BARON MELIADUS

AT THIS SEASON, the people of the Kamarg began their great festival, the summer's work being over. Flowers covered the houses, the people wore clothes of richly embroidered silk and linen, young bulls charged through the streets at will, and the guardians paraded in all their martial finery. In the afternoons the bull contests took place in the ancient stone amphitheatre on the edge of the town.

The seats of the amphitheater were of granite, arranged in tiers. Close to the steep wall of the ring itself, on the south side, was a covered area consisting of carved pillars and a red slate roof. This was hung with curtains of dark brown and scarlet. Within it sat Count Brass; his daughter, Yisseldor, Bowgentle, and old von Villach.

From their box, Count Brass and his companions could see almost the whole of the amphitheater as it began to fill, could hear the excited conversation and the thumps and snorts of the bulls behind the barricades.

Soon a fanfare sounded from the group of six guardians in plumed helmets and sky-blue cloaks on the far side of the amphitheater. Their bronze trumpets echoed the noise of the bulls and the cheering of the crowd. Count Brass stepped forward.

The cheering grew louder as he appeared, smiling to the crowd and raising his hand in greeting. When the din had quieted, he began the traditional speech that would open the festival.

"Ancient people of the Kamarg who were preserved by Fate from the blight of the Tragic Millennium, you who were given life, celebrate life today. You, whose ancestors were saved by the fierce mistral that cleansed the skies of the poisons that brought others death and malformation, give thanks in this festival for the coming of the Life Wind!"

Again the cheering broke out, and the fanfare blew for a second time. Then into the ring broke twelve huge bulls. They stampeded round and round the arena, tails high, horns gleaming, nostrils dilated and red eyes shining. These were the prime fighting bulls of the Kamarg, trained the year through for the performance today, when they would be, matched against unarmed men who would try to snatch the several garlands that had been wound around their throats and horns.

Next, mounted guardians galloped out, waving to the crowd and herded the bulls back into the enclosure under the amphitheater.

When with some difficulty, the guardians had got every bull into the enclosure, out rode the master of ceremonies, clad in a rainbow cloak, broad-brimmed hat of bright blue, and a golden megaphone through which he would announce the first contest.

Amplified by both the megaphone and the walls of the amphitheater, the man's voice almost resembled the great roar of an angry bull. He announced first the name of the bull - Cornerouge Aigues-Mortes, owned by Pons Yachar, the famous bull breeder - and then the name of the principal toreador, Mahtan Just of Aries. The master of ceremonies wheeled his horse about and disappeared.

Almost at once, Cornerouge appeared from below the amphitheater, his huge horns digging at the air, the scarlet ribbons that decorated them flying in the strong breeze.

Cornerouge was a huge bull, standing over five feet high.

His tail lashed from side to side like a lion's; his red eyes glared at the shouting crowd that honored him. Flowers were thrown into the ring and fell on his broad white back. He turned swiftly, pawing the dust of the arena, trampling the flowers.

Then, lightly, unostentatiously, a slight, stocky figure appeared, dressed in a black cloak lined with scarlet silk, tight black doublet and trousers decorated with gold, knee-high boots of black leather embellished with silver. His face was swarthy, young, alert. He doffed his wide-brimmed hat to the crowd, pirouetted, and faced Cornerouge. Though barely twenty, Mahtan Just had already distinguished himself in three previous festivals. Now the women threw flowers and he gallantly acknowledged them, blowing kisses as he advanced toward the snorting bull and drew off his cloak in a graceful movement, displaying the red lining to Cornerouge, who took a few dancing steps forward, snorted again, and lowered his horns.

The bull charged.

Mahtan Just stepped aside and one hand reached out to pluck a ribbon from Cornerouge's horn. The crowd cheered and stamped. The bull turned speedily and charged again.

Again Just stepped aside at the last possible moment, and again he plucked a ribbon. He held both trophies in his white teeth, and he grinned first at the bull, then at the crowd.

The first two ribbons, high on the bull's horns, were comparatively easy to win, and Just, knowing this, had won them almost casually. Now the lower ribbons must be taken from the horns, and this was much more dangerous.

Count Brass leaned forward in his box, staring admiringly at the toreador. Yisselda smiled. "Isn't he wonderful, Father?"

Like a dancer!"

"Aye, dancing with death," Bowgentle said with what amounted to self-mocking severity.

Old von Villach leaned back in his seat, appearing bored with the spectacle. It might simply have been that his eyes were not what they had once been and he did not want to admit it.

Now the bull was stampeding straight at Mahtan Just, who stood in its path with his hands on his hips; his cloak dropped in the dust. As the bull was almost upon him, Just leaped high into the air, his body grazing the horns, and somersaulted over Cornerouge, who dug his hooves into the dust and snorted in puzzlement before turning his head at Just's laughing shout from behind him.

But before the bull could turn his body, Just had jumped again, this time onto the back and, as the bull bucked madly beneath him, turned his attention to hanging on to one horn and disentangling a ribbon.

from the other. Just was soon dis-lodged, flung down to the ground, but he displayed another ribbon with his waving hand, rolled over, and just managed to get to his feet as the bull charged at him.

A tremendous noise broke out from the crowd as it clapped, shouted, and flung a veritable ocean of bright blooms into the ring. Just was now running lightly around the arena, pursued by the bull.

He paused, as if in deliberation, turned gradually on his heel, and seemed surprised to see the bull almost upon him.

Now Just jumped again, but a horn caught his coat and ripped it, sending him off balance. One hand came down on the bull's back, and he vaulted to the ground but fell badly and rolled as the bull charged.

Just scrambled away, still in control of himself but unable to rise. The bull's head dipped, a horn lashed at the body.

Droplets of blood sparkled in the sunlight, and the crowd moaned with a mixture of pity and bloodlust.

"Father!" Yisselda's hand gripped Count Brass's arm.

"He'll be killed. Help him!"

Count Brass shook his head, although his body had moved involuntarily toward the ring. "It is his own affair. It is what he risks."

Just's body was now tossed high into the air, arms and legs loose like a rag doll's. Into the ring came the mounted guardians with long lances to goad the bull away from his victim.

But the bull refused to move, standing over Just's still body as a predatory cat might stand over the body of its prey.

Count Brass leaped over the side of the ring almost before he realized what he was doing. He ran forward in his armor of brass, ran at the bull like a metal giant.

The riders pulled their horses aside as Count Brass flung his body at the bull's head, grasping the horns in his great hands.

Veins stood out on his ruddy face as he pushed the bull gradually back.

Then the head moved, and Count Brass's feet left the ground, but his hands kept their grip and he shifted his weight to one side, bearing the bull's head back so that gradually it seemed to bow.

There was silence everywhere. From the box, Yisselda, Bowgentle, and von Villach leaned forward with their faces pale.

All in the amphitheater were tense as Count Brass slowly exerted his strength.

Cornerouge's knees shook. He snorted and bellowed and his body bucked. But Count Brass, shaking

with the effort of holding the horns, did not relent. His mustache and hair seemed to bristle, the muscles on his neck bulged and turned red, but gradually the bull weakened, and then slowly it fell on its knees.

Men ran forward to drag the wounded Just from the ring, but still the crowd was silent.

Then, with a great wrench, Count Brass flung Cornerouge over on his side.

The bull lay still, acknowledging its master, acknowledging that it was without question beaten.

Count Brass stepped back and the bull did not move, simply looked up at him through glazed, puzzled eyes, its tail shifting slightly in the dust, its huge chest rising and falling.

Now the cheering began.

Now the cheering rose in volume so that it seemed the whole world would hear it.

Now the crowd rose to its feet and hailed their Lord Guardian with unprecedented acclaim as Mahtan Just staggered forward clutching at his wound and gripped Count Brass's arm for a moment in gratitude.

And in the box Yisselda wept with pride and relief, and unabashed, Bowgentle wiped tears from his own eyes. Only von Villach did not weep, but his head nodded in grim approval of his master's feat.

Count Brass walked back toward the box, smiling up at his daughter and his friends. He gripped the wall and hauled himself back to his place. He laughed with rich enjoyment and waved at the crowd as they cheered him.

Then he raised his hand and addressed them as the cheering died.

"Do not give me the ovation - give it to Mahtan Just. He won the trophies. See" - he opened his palms and displayed them-"I have nothing!" There was laughter. "Let the festival continue." Count Brass sat down.

Bowgentle had recovered his composure. He leaned toward Count Brass. "So, my friend, do you still say you prefer to remain uninvolved in the struggle of others?"

Count Brass smiled at him. "You are indefatigable, Bowgentle. This surely, was a local affair, was it not?"

"If your dreams of a united continent are still with you then the affairs of Europe are local affairs," Bowgentle stroked his chin. "Are they not?"

Count Brass's expression became serious for an instant.

"Perhaps . . ." he began, but then shook his head and laughed. "Oh, insidious Bowgentle, you still manage to confound me from time to time!"

But later, when they left the box and made their way back to the castle, Count Brass was frowning.

As Count Brass and his retinue rode into the castle courtyard, a man-at-arms ran forward, his pointing arm indicating an ornate carriage and a group of black, plumed stallions with saddles of unfamiliar workmanship, which the grooms were at that moment removing.

"Sire," the man-at-arms breathed, "there have come visitors to our castle while you were at the arena. Noble visitors, though I know not if you'll welcome them."

Count Brass looked hard at the carriage. It was of beaten metal, of dark gold, steel, and copper, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, silver, and onyx. It was fashioned to resemble the body of a grotesque beast with its legs extending into claws, which clutched the wheel shafts. Its head was reptilian, with ruby eyes, hollowed out from above to form a seat for the coach-man. On the doors was an elaborate coat of arms displaying many quarterings in which were strange-looking animals weapons, and symbols of a mysterious but disturbing nature.

Count Brass recognized the design of the carriage and the coat of arms. The first was the workmanship of the mad smiths of Granbretan; the second was the coat of arms of one of that nation's most powerful and infamous nobles.

"It is Baron Meliadus of Kroiden," Count Brass said as he dismounted. "What business could bring such a great lord to our little rural province?" He spoke with some irony, but he seemed disturbed. He glanced at Bowgentle as the philosopher poet came and stood beside him.

"We will treat him courteously, Bowgentle," said the Count warningly. "We will show him all Castle Brass's hospitality.

We have no quarrel with the Lords of Granbretan."

"Not at this moment, perhaps," said Bowgentle, speaking with evident restraint.

With Yisselda and von Villach behind them, Count Brass and Bowgentle ascended the steps and entered the hall, where they found Baron Meliadus waiting for them alone.

The Baron was almost as tall as Count Brass. He was dressed all in gleaming black and dark blue. Even his jeweled animal mask, which covered the whole of his head like a helmet, was of some strange black metal with deep blue sapphires for eyes. The mask was cast in the form of a snarling wolf, with needle-sharp teeth in the open jaws. Standing in the shadows of the hall, his black cloak covering much of his black armor, Baron Meliadus might have been one of the mythical beast-gods that were still worshipped in the lands beyond the Middle Sea. As they entered, he reached up with black-gauntleted hands and removed the mask, revealing a white, heavy face with a well-trimmed black beard and mustache. His hair, too, was black and thick, and his eyes were a pale, strange blue. The Baron was apparently unarmed, perhaps as an indication that he came in peace. He bowed low and spoke in a deep, musical voice.

"Greetings, famous Count Brass, and forgive this sudden intrusion. I sent messengers ahead, but they arrived too late to reach you before you left. I am the Baron Meliadus of Kroiden, Grand Constable

the Order of the Wolf, First Chieftain of the Armies under our great King-Emperor, Huon. ..."

Count Brass inclined his head. "I know of your great deeds, Baron Meliadus, and recognized your arms on your carriage. Be welcome. The Castle Brass is yours for as long as you wish to stay. Our fare is simple, I fear, in comparison with the richness I have heard may be sampled at the board of even the lowliest citizen of that mighty Empire of Granbretan, but that, too, is yours."

Baron Meliadus smiled. "Your courtliness and hospitality put those of Granbretan to shame, mighty hero. I thank you."

Count Brass introduced his daughter, and the Baron advanced to bow low and kiss her hand, evidently impressed by her beauty. To Bowgentle he was courteous, showing familiarity with the poet-philosopher's writings, but in reply Bowgentle's voice shook with the effort of remaining polite. With von Villach, Baron Meliadus reminded him of several famous battles in which the old warrior had distinguished himself, and von Villach was visibly pleased.

For all the fine manners and elaborately embellished statements, there was a certain tension in the hall. Bowgentle was the first to make his excuses, and shortly afterward Yisselda and von Villach discreetly left to let Baron Meliadus discuss whatever business had brought him to Castle Brass. Baron Meliadus's eyes lingered just a little while on the girl as she passed out of the hall.

Wine and refreshments were brought, and the two men settled themselves in heavy, carved armchairs.

Baron Meliadus looked over the brim of his wine cup at Count Brass. "You are a man of the world, my lord," he said.

"Indeed, you are that in every sense. So you will appreciate that my visit is fostered by more than a desire to enjoy the sights of this pretty province."

Count Brass smiled a little, liking the Baron for his frankness. "Quite so," he agreed, "though for my part, it is an honor to meet so famous a peer of the great King Huon."

"That feeling is shared by myself toward you," Baron Meliadus replied. "You are without doubt the most famous hero in Europe, perhaps the most famous in her history. It is almost alarming to find you are made of flesh, after all, and not metal." He laughed, and Count Brass joined in the laughter.

"I've had my share of luck," Count Brass said. "And fate has been kind to me in seeming to collaborate with my judgment."

Who is to say whether the age we live in is good for me, or I am good for that age?"

"Your philosophy rivals that of your friend Sir Bowgentle,"

said Baron Meliadus, "and supports what I have heard of your wisdom and judgment. We in Granbretan pride ourselves on our own abilities in that direction, but we could learn from you, I believe."

"I have only details," Count Brass told him, "but you have the talent to see the general scheme." He tried to guess from Meliadus's face what the man was leading toward, but the face remained bland.

"It is the details we need," Baron Meliadus said, "if our general ambitions are to be realized as swiftly as we should like."

Now Count Brass understood why Baron Meliadus was here, but he did not reveal that; he only looked a little puzzled and politely poured more wine for his guest.

"We have a destiny to rule all Europe," Baron Meliadus said.

"That seems to be your destiny," Count Brass agreed. "And I support, in principle, such an ambition."

"I am glad, Count Brass. We are often misrepresented, and our enemies are many, spreading calumnies across the globe, it sometimes seems."

"I am not interested in the truth or falsehood of those rumors," Count Brass told him. "It is only your general activities I believe in."

"You would not, then, oppose the spread of our Empire?"

Baron Meliadus looked at him carefully.

"Only," Count Brass smiled, "in particular. In the particular case of this land I protect, the Kamarg."

"You would welcome, then, the security of a treaty of peace between us?"

"I see no need for one. I have the security of my towers."

"Hmmm . . ." Baron Meliadus glanced at the floor.

"Is that why you came, my lord Baron? To propose a peace treaty? To propose an alliance, even?"

"Of sorts," nodded the Baron. "An alliance of sorts."

"I would not oppose or support you in most senses," Count Brass told him. "I would oppose you only if you attacked my lands. I support you only in my attitude that a unifying force is needed in Europe at this time."

Baron Meliadus thought for a moment before speaking.

"And if that unification were threatened?" he said at length.

Count Brass laughed. "I do not believe it can be. There is none powerful enough to withstand Granbretan now."

Baron Meliadus pursed his lips. "You are right in believing that. Our list of victories becomes almost a bore to us. But the more we conquer, the thinner we spread our forces. If we knew the Courts of

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