

Strength of a Thousand Men: Chapter 1

By Renard De Fleureaux

It began five centuries after the fall of the Remeran Empire, five centuries into the Third Age. The free kingdoms of the west were blown away by a great and terrible storm, that took the form of a barbaric horde with aspirations of world domination; the Palamani Dominion. One by one, the western lands fell to the Dominion, until only four kingdoms remained; huddling together on the western edge of the continent, hoping to weather the storm.

“Please.” Roland scoffed, “Why are we all cowering before a rabble of barbarians? Is this not the Kingdom of Candaran, the direct descendant of Remera? The blood of Emperors courses through our veins!”

“Oh, really, Sir Roland? And what happens when that Imperial blood is spilled all over the halls of this castle? Just like what happened to King Theodric of Garenth and King Calder of Illias- they’re dead, and their kingdoms are both Dominion Provinces now!” the Royal Chancellor, a tired looking weasel weighed down by the several gold chains that marked his office. “We’ve bled our country dry of soldiers- we’ve barely recovered from our hard-won victory against the Kingdom of Al-Barrad. We need to negotiate- pay tribute, if necessary- anything to keep Candaran free and unmolested by these brutes. Their patrols are already harassing the villages lying on our frontier.”

The unicorn, the Knight-Champion of Candaran’s King Arnault III, smiled confidently at the assembled royal court, tossing back his blue and gold mane, strutting in his fine, shimmering armor. “My Lord Chancellor, cower and dither like an old maid if you want, but I, Sir Roland Ferumbas, am not so easily spooked.”

“Have you ever even *seen* a Palamani soldier, Sir Roland?” the Chancellor retorted, glaring at the knight. “They’re big as houses! They’re all giants! And you would have us fight, when an annual tribute will keep them at bay and our soldiers alive?”

“Giants? Chancellor, you really *are* an old maid if you listen to old wives’ tales. These reports of giants are nothing more than hysterical ravings of defeated soldiers trying to nurse their own bruised egos that they were beaten by mere savages.” Roland replied, still smirking. Stroking his blue goatee, the white unicorn approached the throne, bowing before the ancient King Arnault. “Your Majesty, give me leave to lead your armies, and I will drive back this Dominion, and win everlasting glory for Candaran!”

The King, a wizened old wolf with more grey fur than anything else, opened his eyes, blinking blearily at Roland. “Wassat you say, Sir Ronald?”

The Chancellor rolled his eyes, and leaned down to the King’s ear, “NO, YOUR MAJESTY! IT’S SIR ROLAND! HE’S ASKING FOR PERMISSION TO USE YOUR ARMIES TO BATTLE THE DOMINION!” He shouted, so the ancient canine would hear.

“Batter the cinnamon? Why does a knight need to do anything with cinnamon?” Arnault frowned.

The Chancellor sighed and patted his liege lord’s shoulder. “Never mind, your majesty. Go back to sleep.” The weasel turned his attention back to the unicorn. “Speaking in his majesty’s stead, the answer is a very blunt no, Sir Roland.”

Before the unicorn could retort, a member of Court that no one could quite recognize stepped forward. He was dressed in fine, scarlet clothes, with a black cloak draped over his shoulders and a hood concealing his face, with only the end of a canine snout sticking out. “Besides- shouldn’t such a brave knight be more than willing to take on such a quest on his own?” He raised his face, green eyes glowing from underneath his hood. “That is if, indeed, Sir Roland is a brave knight.”

“Excuse me?” Roland walked over to the man, standing somewhat taller and broader than the mysterious figure. “Who are you to question the honor and courage of the King’s Champion?”

“Oh, how foolish of me.” The canine smirked, still keeping most of his face obscured. “I did not recognize how were suggesting to boldly and courageously hide behind the King’s Army while you send boys to fight battles you’ll take credit for, m’lord.” He gave Roland a mocking bow.

Roland snorted, lowering his long, silver horn as he withdrew his fine sword, eliciting gasps from the surrounding lords and ladies, as he pointed the blade up against the figure’s neck. “You’ve got about ten seconds to think up a good apology, you wretch.”

The hooded figure chuckled, holding up his hands. “More examples of your bravery, sir knight? Attacking an unarmed opponent?” those green eyes seemed to be taunting Sir Roland more than his words, “I merely suggest that you take up this... grand quest for yourself.”

“That’s actually a commendable idea.” The chancellor said, calling both the knight and his challenger back to the throne. “Sir Roland? If you want to so badly ascertain the Palamani threat first hand, take your squire, and go to these villages. You can rally the local militia to help defend our lands and push back these Dominion patrols, and then report back here with what you’ve discovered. Is this a decent compromise?”

Roland knickered, tossing his mane back again for the delight of the Court’s ladies, who whispered conspiratorially to one another as their eyes fluttered coquettishly towards the knight. “Very well.” Roland said, “I accept this quest- what do you have to say about my honor now, you-”

He turned around to face the canine, but the mysterious figure had vanished.

“Where’d he go? Who saw him leave?” Roland demanded of an oblivious assortment of lords that had no answer for him. “What, are we just letting anyone into the throne room these days?” Throwing his arms up in defeat, he stormed out of the throne room. “Next time I’m in

here, it'll be filled with those Palamani savages the way things are going." He muttered to himself.

In the courtyard of Arnault's castle, Roland was overseeing the preparations for his journey. His charger, a massive black-coated war horse, was being fitted with armor, and his personal blue and gold standard was being draped over the great beast. A pack horse was being loaded with all the supplies he would need... but the palfrey for his squire remained riderless.

Frowning, Roland barked at the stablehands, "Where's my squire? Is the King's Champion really expected to ride out without a squire?"

As if on cue, a young raccoon jogged up to the knight.

"H-here... here, m'lord!" he huffed. He was dressed in Roland's livery, but he looked far more suited for the robes of the clergy or the magi- his arms were slender with no definition, and he was well-fed, if his small potbelly was any indication.

Roland arched an eyebrow, "And just who are you, lad?"

"Conner- Conner, sir. M'lord." He quickly bowed, "I'm your new squire!"

"What."

"I- well. They were at the college and they asked..."

"The college? Who's they?" Roland demanded.

"The... the Chancellor's men! They said they wanted someone educated to help you- said you'd need it."

The unicorn rolled his eyes, "Have you ever held a sword?"

"Uh...well, I mean. A butter knife. It's basically the same thing, right?"

"A lance, then?"

"Not... exactly..."

"Bow and arrow?"

"Er. Well, there was this one time-"

"Stop." Roland held up his hand to silence the raccoon. "Lad, I appreciate your... fervor. But if you've never even held a weapon, I don't think you're going to be of much use to me."

"Sir Roland, please! I can help. I'm very good at languages- so I can talk to the Palamani if we run into them- and I can do... this!" He started moving his hands in intricate motions, as blue ether followed his finger tips. Roland immediately brought his gauntleted hand down on Conner's wrist.

"Magic tricks aren't going to help me." The unicorn said bluntly.

Conner's face fell. "But- Sir Roland, please. I could really be someone big- I just need someone to give me a chance."

Roland chewed on that, "I take it there aren't any alternatives?"

"Well... no, sir. Most went off with the army. I'm it."

Roland swung himself on to his charger, sighing. "Get on the palfrey."

"What- seriously?" Conner's face lit up.

"Get on before I change my mind."

"Oh- m'lord, you won't regret this... truly, you- woah!" Conner, in his excitement, swung himself up on the palfrey, only to slide off the other side.

"I'm alright!" he said, climbing back on the horse.

"Gods give me strength." Roland muttered, as he and Conner rode out of the gate.

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The journey out to the Kingdom's frontier was uneventful. Moving further east, closer to the old ruins of Remera, led Roland and Conner back on to the roads that the Ancients had left, and most bandits were too superstitious to plunder the ruins, afraid of curses and ghosts that haunted the former Empire. It was quiet- or, at least, it would be, if Conner wasn't a wellspring for Ancient Remeran trivia. Roland endured the raccoon's prattling on about Emperor Whatshisface and the Battle of Whogivesadamn, all the way to the edges of Candaran, where the borders of Garenth used to lie, and, just beyond the mountains, now lay the Palamani Dominion.

It was two weeks into their travels that Roland led his squire into a small forest, where their map indicated the village of Rockford lay. As the trees thinned, however, Roland could spot smoke on the horizon.

"Damn." The knight swore, before turning to Conner. "Stay here with the horses."

The raccoon's ears folded, "But I-"

"No! That's an order." Roland said sharply, before he gripped his sword. "Hand me my shield."

Conner sighed, passing the unicorn his equipment. "Your helmet, m'lord?"

"Helmet? Please." Roland flipped his mane back, the blue-gold hair falling into thick, luxurious curls. "It'd take forever to get my hair back to how I like it."

Roland passed through the trees, and to his horror, Rockford was no more. The entire village was a burnt husk; the fires still dying down. He rushed forward, "Hello! Is anyone here! I'm a Knight of Candaran, I'm here to help!"

Silence.

Roland moved further into the village, going to the now-abandoned square. There was no blood, no sign of struggle that he could see... was it the Palamani? He expected far more carnage from them.

"Hellooo!" he bellowed. Again, not a sound but the crackling of fire and the hiss of smoke.

"Over here!" a voice, at last, called out, just around the corner.

"Don't worry, I'm Sir Roland, the King's Champion, and I'm here to- oof!" Roland ran into what he thought was a wall- but it was far too furry to be a wall.

Looking up, and up, Roland came face to face with the biggest horse he had ever seen, folding his arms and smirking down at him. A clydesdale of a man, he towered over the unicorn, with arms nearly thick as Roland's waist, and a chest with pecs bigger than his shield. He was dressed in sparse, utilitarian, but still well-made armor, with bronze colored pauldrons sitting atop wide shoulders and a breastplate that barely held in his chest and nothing else, leaving his abdomen bare. Shin guards and leather wraps around his hands and hooves were the only other armaments on the horse, with a thick, scarlet kilt wrapped around his waist. The wind temporarily knocked out of him, all Roland could do was stare up.

"Well, well- hey, boss! Get over here, we got ourselves a Royal Champion!" the horse called out.

"This better be good, soldier, or I'll-" a bear, somehow even bigger than the horse, lumbered on to the scene, practically making the ground around him shake as he took his big, stomping steps. He leered down at the unicorn, smiling toothily. "A Champion, eh? Looks mighty scrawny to me..." He said, palming his fists. His biceps tensed, already bigger than Roland's head alone, never mind the rest of his arm.

"Hey- hey! I am Sir Roland, I've won six tournaments, unseated twenty knights, and beat a dozen in fair combat." The unicorn's voice grew shaky, but he still stood his ground.

"Oh, do you hear that, boss?" the horse folded his arms looking down. "He's a tourney knight... probably never even seen a real battle."

"I have so to!" Roland turned, "I was an aide to General Thierry at-"

The bear burst out laughing, "An aide? You're nothing more than a fancy errand boy, aint'cha?" He hit Roland's shield, sending the unicorn stumbling back.

"We're real soldiers, Sir Champion." The horse rolled his shoulders, letting the muscle ripple.

"And we earned our titles." The bear flexed an arm, his bicep swelling until it jostled his ham-like forearm and jostled his pauldron. He puffed up his chest, until his breastplate audibly creaked against his strength. "Through real combat. You-"

The bear easily side-stepped Roland's charge, as the unicorn made a thrust with his sword. With faster reflexes than Roland would have expected, the bear swerved around and grabbed Roland blade and snatched it out of the unicorn's hand.

"You're not even worth a real fight." The bear grunted, until he bended the sword into a knot, tossing it on the ground.

"That- that was a gift from King Arnault!" Roland fell to his knees in shock picking up his twisted sword.

The bear tore off some of the straps around his wrists, wrapping it around the open wound on his palm. "King Arnault has shit swordsmiths, then."

"You- what witchcraft is this? Who are you?" Roland demanded.

The bear and horse loomed over him, muscles tensing and thick hands grabbing him and yanking him back to his feet.

"We're Palamani, little man. And you're coming with us."