

OLOFF THE PIRATE SERIES

21. Stronghold of the Pirates



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STRONGHOLD OF THE PIRATES

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SUMMARY

In the jewel-rich land of Sarovia, a storm of political intrigue is brewing. Regent Burgrave Gustav von Strasheim, a man of iron will and ambition, stands poised to seize the throne currently held by the young King Lodewyk. But a treacherous attack in the English Channel throws everything into chaos. The royal yacht, carrying Lodewyk and his beautiful sister, Princess Arthenia, is ambushed by ruthless pirates, leaving no survivors... or so it seems.

Baron Rupert Hesslein, the king's loyal bodyguard, miraculously escapes the carnage. Haunted by the dying words of a friend, Rupert embarks on a perilous quest to uncover the truth behind the attack and rescue the missing royals. His desperate search leads him to the notorious Captain Oloff van Wagenaar, a man shrouded in legend and whispered to be both a pirate and a scourge of the seas. Their alliance thrusts them into a world of double-crosses, sword fights, and desperate gambles. The closer they get to the truth, the more dangerous their path becomes, for Sarovia is riddled with spies, and someone within the inner circle will stop at nothing to secure the Burgrave's victory.

Amidst the clash of steel and the shadow of pirate strongholds, an unlikely spark ignites. A forbidden attraction simmers between Rupert and the resolute Arthenia. But their loyalty and dedication to the King is never more paramount. The truth is that Arthenia has a role to play that has been hidden from her all this time. The fate of Sarovia hangs in the balance, but will Oloff and Rupert expose the truth, or will the scheming regent succeed in plunging the kingdom into eternal darkness? With time running out, one question remains. Can they trust those closest to them, or are they unknowingly walking into the Stronghold of the Pirates?

EXTRACT

When Henning stuck his head in through a window and called Oloff, Oloff pushed the officer inch by inch against the back wall of the room. Right outside the window stood Oloff's horse. Henning, who was holding it, was already in the saddle of his. Further on, at the gate of the backyard, Sias and Heidi were waiting.

Oloff smiled. Only his eyes remained cold and warning. Then he put his finger to his lips in a half-mischievous gesture to silence the officer. Agilely, he jumped onto the windowsill, and only now did he push his sword back into its sheath. In his left hand, he now had a pistol that was aimed at the officer.

And then, with a clatter of horses' hooves, they raced across the yard and out into the street. At a frantic pace, Heidi led them along side streets until they reached the outskirts of the city and rode westward into the evening dusk.

She was grateful for the darkness that was descending upon them, as she could not keep the anger and disappointment out of her gaze. Everything had been so carefully planned, it was so simple. Gustav had sent her a personal note to congratulate her on her decision to come with Oloff. He had assured her that they would deal with Van Wagenaar and his two henchmen inconspicuously and without any fuss. Nobody should ever even know of their disappearance. But, for safety's sake, he had advised her to wait in her room until everything was over, and now she was with Oloff again, and he was at liberty, and she now perhaps had to accompany him, who knew how long and where to.

21. STRONGHOLD OF THE PIRATES

Chapter 1

His hand still on the gilded doorknob, Burgrave Gustav von Strasheim hesitated for a moment before entering the room. His six-foot stature appeared even grander in the ceremonial attire, the Austrian helmet with its multi-colored plumes, the long jacket with tassels on the shoulders, the embroidered breeches that disappeared into knee-high fine leather boots. Numerous medals and colored ribbons adorned his chest.

His face was almost expressionless, yet there was something aggressive in his gaze. A tenacious willpower emanated from his posture. His lips were straight and firm beneath the massive black mustache, and the single frameless glass over his one eye was clamped a little tighter than usual.

“Mister Bizerta?” he said-asked, as the door closed behind him, and as if on a sudden impulse, strode over the luxurious carpet towards the gleaming, hand-carved desk.

From a settee with upholstery and oak armrests, a slender but broad-shouldered man stood up. His attire was almost inappropriate amidst the calm opulence of the furniture and tapestry in the room. Even in this era of extravagant dress for men, his clothes were too bright and sharp. But it was the color of his face that first drew attention. It was pale yellow, although none of his features were those of an Oriental. His eyes sat close together beneath a broad, but flat forehead. His lips had a permanent downturn, lending his face a bitter cast. His eyes were cold, yet vibrant with cunning.

“At your service,” he replied in a relaxed, conversational tone. His voice was hoarse like that of a crow. “I presume you are Burgrave Gustav.”

“That is, I,” replied Von Strasheim. The deep bass of his voice tended to emphasize his superiority.

With a slight, half-mocking bow, Bizerta unceremoniously sat down again. He crossed his legs.

“At your service,” was all he repeated.

The Burgrave cleared his throat. It was as if he was suddenly searching for words. He walked halfway around the desk.

“Mister Bizerta, your profession is that of a pirate.”

Bizerta clicked his tongue. He tilted his head slightly, glancing around the room as if deep in thought, then pursed his lips.

“Yes,” he remarked rather philosophically, “my profession might perhaps be so designated.”

“It would be best if we called things by their right names,” the Burgrave interjected with a slight haughtiness.

“Now, now, Your Excellency,” said Bizerta, and despite the title with which he addressed the other, he spoke like someone negotiating with a businessman. “I am Susa Bizerta, the pirate. They call me the Yellow Dragon. I also know that you, Burgrave Gustav von Strasheim, are regent of Sarovia. I have found out a few things about your country, Your Excellency. It is a treasure-rich little jewel. For years, various great powers have been vying for possession of the few rich acres of which you consist. There are constant political intrigues going on. Coup d’etat follows coup d’etat. I accept that much of it is rather underhanded. Therefore, Susa Bizerta appears on the scene.” And again, the mocking bow. “Let me then hear what you expect of me, Your Excellency. Shall we start with the price, my services, my time, financially speaking, are particularly valuable.”

The Burgrave had not interrupted him. He had let him finish speaking. Now he cleared his throat again.

“You are right, Mister Bizerta,” he then began, in the same tone as before, attempting not to stoop to the other’s level. “I want to make a proposal.”

“I am listening.”

“I am going to give you full details about a ship that will sail in the English Channel tomorrow around midday. I will pay you to attack and plunder that ship, and then send it to the depths.”

“What is the loot worth?”

“A royal fortune. I speak of the luxury yacht of the king of Sarovia.”

Bizerta’s eyes gleamed. Now professional interest could be read on his face.

“Indeed, a coup d’etat,” he said, as one who was slightly out of breath.

“What are the conditions, Your Excellency?”

“Very simple. No one must escape. Everyone, every mortal on board,

must be imprisoned along with the ship.”

Bizerta shrugged his shoulders. He made a gesture with his hands like someone who had expected a rather difficult task and now felt that he had gotten off lightly.

“And the price?” he then asked.

“Your attitude has half encouraged me,” replied the Burgrave with a cough, “to assume that the loot will be sufficient reward.”

“How do I know that I’m not perhaps sticking my head in a noose?”

“But good heavens, man!” the Burgrave burst out. “I thought you had enough intelligence not to even consider such a thing. Am I not perhaps the one who is taking the greatest risk by entering into such a negotiation with you?”

“Are no warships escorting the yacht?” asked Bizerta calmly, as if the Burgrave’s risks did not really interest him.

“There will be one, approximately twelve cannons. Up to about ten miles outside the mouth of the Thames, a few British warships will accompany them, just a formality. Then they will turn around. For a full hour, the royal yacht will be accompanied only by one ship. Then two others will rejoin them for the last leg of the journey to the coast of France. During that hour, you must strike.”

“Simple.” The Yellow Dragon stood up. “What did you say, Your Excellency, is the price? When and how is it paid?”

As if he had once again thought that the other might have forgotten the matter, the Burgrave turned around, and with a half-impatient gesture, opened a drawer of the desk. He brought out two leather pouches. They looked heavy, and there was the clinking of coins as he dropped them onto the polished surface.

“You can count if you wish.”

“I am satisfied,” said Susa Bizerta. “I will...”

The door opened. In the doorway stood a neatly built young man. He too was wearing a richly embroidered and embellished velvet and satin robe.

“Oh.” His voice was polite and deeply refined. “Excuse me, Your Highness. But I have been looking for you everywhere. The guests are about to depart. Your presence is required at His Majesty’s side.”

The Burgrave, as well as Susa Bizerta, regarded the young man almost

like two scoundrels caught in the act. The Burgrave cleared his throat vigorously.

“Yes, yes, of course, Baron. I’ll come immediately.”

With a small bow, the Baron left the room. Only once did his eyes flicker towards the Yellow Dragon.

“That man will be on board the royal yacht tomorrow,” said the Burgrave coolly. “Now that he has seen us together here, you will realize the necessity that he must be one of the first to die tomorrow. I was foolish,” he said half to himself. “I should have closed the door.” He rang a bell on the desk. “Remember that Sarovia has a rather strong navy, Mister Bizerta.” The threat in his voice was strong. “Do your work well.”

“It will be a pleasure, Your Excellency.” Bizerta once again made the mocking bow and then turned to a man in a dark cloak who had entered the room. While they left through a side door, the Burgrave straightened his jacket slightly and walked out the door through which the Baron had just looked in.

By way of the passage, he reached the top of a spiral staircase. Below in a large hall stood a multitude of the dignitaries of the royal court of England. Their jewels and medals glittered in the light of the silver candelabras. The ball at the Sarovian Embassy in London had just come to an end. After all the honors and receptions that the visitors from Sarovia had received on their state visit, this reception was their farewell gesture as they would return to their country the next day.

Close to the foot of the stairs stood His Majesty, ten-year-old Lodewyk of Sarovia. His small face was framed by long, blond locks. His posture was proud, but it was all too clear that the official duties that had kept him busy for the past fourteen days had exhausted his strength. Next to him stood Her Royal Highness, Princess Arthenia. Her slender beauty had won many a heart in England. Her dark hair was natural and styled high on her head. She possessed the formal aloofness of years of practice in her royal role, but her smile was soft and endearing.

The regent, Burgrave Gustav von Strasheim, joined them. With a slight bow to the royal couple, he turned to the first of the guests who were taking their leave. A handshake, a smile and a friendly word to each, and slowly the crowd moved past them.

Diagonally behind the young king stood his personal bodyguard and secretary, Baron Rupert Hesslein. The young nobleman's gaze was softly directed towards his sovereign. He knew how tired the young lad was. With admiration, he watched the willpower with which the boy hid his feelings. But shortly before the Burgrave had arrived, he had seen the two blue eyes look up at the beautiful Arthenia. He had seen the light squeeze of her hand on the king's shoulder. He knew how deeply attached they were to each other, and he also knew that his life belonged to them, not only because it was his duty, but because Baron Hesslein loved the Princess with all his heart and soul.

Now there was a worried look in his eyes when Von Strasheim joined them. Up there in the study, he had seen the stranger with the Burgrave. He did not know the man at all. However, it had not escaped him that Von Strasheim had not felt entirely at ease when he was caught there.

And the Baron knew all too well about the intrigue, the constant scheming that was going on among the nobility of Sarovia. Von Strasheim could count on the support of at least half of the court. The small country, which had long been a pawn of larger powers, had a divided population. The king was of French descent, and like Rupert, the inhabitants of West Sarovia would stand by him. However, the population of East Sarovia desired that the House of Von Strasheim become the rulers, and they supported the Burgrave in holding the scepter for himself. Yet there was no honest and open way in which the crown could be moved. And the Baron had known for a long time that the Burgrave was devising all kinds of ways to achieve this by dishonest and underhanded means.

When the last of the guests had departed, the Burgrave bowed to the young king and the Princess. He wished them a good night's rest.

"Your Majesty has acquitted himself of his duties like a true sovereign," the Burgrave complimented young Lodewyk.

"It is under your guidance, Uncle Gustav," replied Lodewyk. "It is your good training that has made it possible."

Arthenia smiled tenderly at the correctness of her little brother's speech. The Burgrave clicked his heels together and bowed again.

"The royal yacht departs rather early tomorrow morning. After a good night's rest, you will have a further peaceful day on board. All

arrangements for your safety have been made.” He turned his dark gaze to the Baron. The eyeglass was tightly squeezed beneath his eyebrows. “Moreover, friend Rupert is at hand to watch over you. Goodnight.”

Rupert Hesslein escorted the pair to their rooms. He felt uneasy. It was as if a premonition of disaster had entered him. He could not give any explanation for it, but there were just too many factors that made him uneasy.

Only when silence had fallen in the Embassy did he summon four of the royal bodyguards. He knew that they were men he could rely on, and he placed them on guard in front of Lodewyk’s room door. Thereafter, he dozed off a few times, but he was still tired and disturbed when he woke up the following morning and began with the preparations for the return journey to Sarovia. Everything went smoothly, however, and from all sides they received friendliness and expressions of goodwill. There was an upbeat mood on board the royal sailing yacht as the stately boat sailed away from the quay, and the thousands of spectators on shore cheered them spontaneously and loudly. The ladies and gentlemen of the court who had accompanied the royal couple chatted pleasantly and looked forward to their return to Sarovia. Nowhere could the Baron discern any sign of tension that indicated the existence of a plot.

An hour later, they were sailing on the open sea. Ahead of the sailing yacht was the accompanying warship of the Sarovian fleet. Diagonally behind on both sides, two large ships of the British fleet were sailing. They were about ten miles south of the mouth of the Thames, and the English coast was still clearly visible on the right, when the two British warships fired a salute and returned to London. This gesture sent a sudden constriction around Rupert Hesslein’s heart. He had just been rebuking himself for his wandering thoughts and his suspicion, and now he felt displeased with himself that a new fear was taking hold of him when only the royal yacht and the single warship remained on the wide sea.

Hardly had he shaken the thoughts off when he saw the sails of two large ships from the direction of the coast bearing down on them. Suddenly, completely convinced that a sinister disaster awaited them, he hurried to the company deck and joined the captain of the yacht.

“It seems to me that those two ships are speeding towards us,” he aired his opinion.

“Quite possibly their course intersects ours, Your Highness,” replied the captain with a slight frown at the other’s concern.

“What kind of ships are they?” Rupert inquired, still tense.

“Most likely merchant vessels, Your Highness.”

Rupert did not want to inform the captain of his anxiety. How should he explain his unfounded fear? It all stemmed from the background of intrigue and strife that prevailed at the court of Sarovia.

He walked to the stern castle and the state cabins. Lodewyk was resting on the daybed. Princess Arthenia was reading comfortably and relaxed among the cushions of the large bay window. They had chosen not to have company.

Rupert inquired whether they needed anything. Arthenia’s soft gaze rested in his for a moment, and he felt the warm glow in his cheeks. She assured him that they had everything to their comfort.

When he walked back across the middle deck, a cannon thundered diagonally in front of them and a projectile splashed a short mile ahead of the bow of the Sarovian warship. As if the resounding blow was the confirmation of all his suspicions, Rupert Hesslein stormed to the company deck.

“What has happened, captain?!” he called out hoarsely.

“I don’t know.” The officer still sounded quite calm, as if he did not really suspect any foul play. “Possibly they have a message for us.”

“But why a cannon projectile, captain?” Rupert persisted.

“We will soon hear.” He had a pair of binoculars in front of his eyes and was watching the two ships intently. “I do not know them,” he then said. “They are not displaying a known flag.”

Hesslein’s heart was pounding restlessly. There loomed again in his mind’s eye the pale yellow face of the man he had seen with the Burgrave last night. As if something compelled him to do so, he looked around and a shiver went through his body. He grabbed the captain by the arm.

“Look behind us, captain!”

Even before the officer could follow his gaze and see the third ship that was speeding towards the royal yacht from the opposite direction,