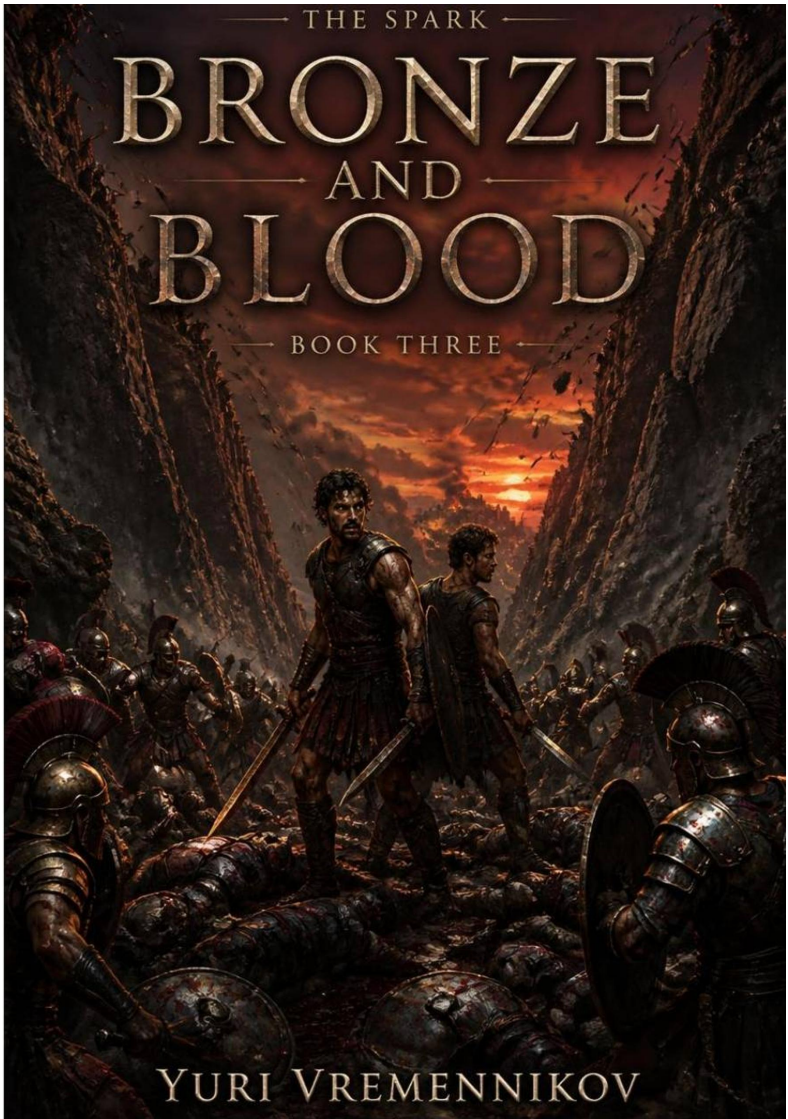

THE SPARK
BRONZE
AND
BLOOD
BOOK THREE
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Юрий Временников

Volume 3. Bronze and Blood

https://litres.ru/74748652
SelfPub; 2026

Аннотация

The world of the "Grey Lynxes" has grown: allies have appeared — steppe dwellers and northerners, trade has been established. But a new threat comes from the east — warriors in bronze armor who burn everything in their path. To survive, the brothers create a Great Union of Tribes. Arsen becomes the supreme military commander. In the decisive battle in the gorge, they manage to defeat the enemy, but victory comes at a dear price. The third book is about the price of peace, about how knowledge and unity defeat brute force, but force one to pay in blood.

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Юрий Временников
Volume 3. Bronze and Blood

Chapter 1. New Horizons

Two more years passed. Two years of peace, labor, and growth. The tribe of the "Grey Lynxes" could no longer easily be called a tribe — rather, it was a small people. One hundred and eighty people — men, women, children — lived in a fortified settlement surrounded by a high palisade, beyond which fields were green, herds grazed, fish and meat were smoked in special smokehouses.

Miron and Arsen stood on the hill from which, four years ago, they had first seen this place. Then there had been only shelters and frightened people in hides. Now — wooden houses with gabled roofs covered with turf, granaries for grain, pens for livestock, workshops. In the center rose a large communal house where they gathered for council, celebrations, and study.

"Hard to believe," Miron said, surveying the settlement. "We built this."

"Not we," Arsen corrected. "They built it. We only helped."

"Modest."

"Stating a fact."

Below, at the gates, a group of horsemen appeared. About ten men — on horses, with bows behind their backs, in leather armor. These were the nomads with whom they had concluded an alliance three years ago. Now they often came — to trade, exchange news, just to visit.

"Argamak has come," Arsen noted, peering closely. "I see his white horse."

Argamak was the chief of one of the nomadic tribes with whom the "Grey Lynxes" had the warmest relations. He often said that his people and the people of the "Grey Lynxes" were like two wings of one bird. One was strong in the steppe, the other in the forest; together no one was a threat to them.

"Let's go meet him," Miron said.

They descended from the hill and reached the gates just as the horsemen were dismounting. Argamak — a broad-shouldered man of about forty with long black hair braided into plaits — opened his arms wide.

"Or-Var! Ir-Tan!" he shouted, beaming. "Glad to see the brothers!"

"And we're glad," Arsen replied, embracing him. "What brings you here?"

"With good things. And with bad news," Argamak's face darkened. "But first — a feast. The road was long."

In the evening everyone gathered around the big campfire. They roasted a ram — the nomads had brought several carcasses with them — drank mead, sang songs. Argamak told of steppe news: where the herds grazed, which tribes roamed nearby, who had had children.

But Miron and Arsen sensed he was holding something back. When it got dark and most had gone home, the three of them remained by the fire.

"Speak," Arsen said. "What's the bad news?"

Argamak frowned and stirred the coals with a stick.

"People are coming from the east," he began. "Many people. They have bronze swords and axes — yellow metal, but harder than stone. They ride horses, but not like ours — their horses are taller, faster. They burn everything in their path. Three tribes have already been destroyed."

Miron exchanged glances with his brother. Bronze. These were the very "Bronze People" they had heard about several years ago. So they were advancing westward.

"How many of them?" Arsen asked.

"A thousand, maybe more. I didn't count. But many. Very many. They're like locusts — wherever they pass, nothing remains."

"How much time do we have?"

"By rumor — six months. But our scouts noticed they're moving faster than we thought. If they continue like this — they could be here in two months, maybe sooner."

The time was short. But it was possible to prepare.

"We must gather the union," Miron said. "All the tribes that don't want to perish."

"I've already spoken with the neighbors," Argamak nodded. "Many agree. They're afraid. But they won't decide without you. You are wise, you have weapons, you have a fortress. If you become the center — we'll unite."

Arsen fell to thinking. The center of the union — that was a

responsibility. It meant that the main burden of the war would fall on them. But also a chance to survive.

"We agree," he said firmly. "Summon the chiefs. In a month, here. We'll decide."

Argamak beamed:

"I knew you wouldn't refuse. We will win. Together."

He went off to sleep, and the brothers remained by the fire.

"Do you understand what this means?" Miron asked. "If they have bronze, our bows may not pierce their armor."

"They can pierce, if the arrow is good. We must make new arrowheads — from bone, from hard stone. And we need shields to protect ourselves."

"And armor. Leather, of several layers."

"And long spears — to meet cavalry."

They talked until midnight, outlining plans. And in the morning work began in earnest.

Chick, who was now twelve, had become the chief chronicler and Miron's assistant. He wrote down everything the brothers said, sketched drawings, kept track of resources. Beside him was always Niya — she had grown into a beautiful girl with skillful hands, the best artist and potter.

"Chick," Miron said, "we need to count all the weapons. How many arrows, how many spears, how many bows."

"Already done," Chick answered, unfolding the birch bark. "Bows — forty-two. Spare strings — sixty. Arrows — about three thousand. Spears — one hundred twenty. Spear-throwers

— thirty."

"Not enough. We need more. At least five thousand arrows. Two hundred spears."

"I'll organize it," Chick nodded. "The children will help."

Vetka, who had turned fourteen, had become a seasoned warrior. He commanded a detachment of young archers — his peers, whom he had taught to shoot himself. He no longer thought of revenge — only of protection. But the memory of his father lived in him and gave him strength.

"Vetka," Arsen called him over. "Take your lads and ride with Argamak into the steppe. Find out where the enemy is, how many there are, how they're armed. Carefully, don't get drawn into a fight."

"I'll do it," Vetka answered briefly.

An hour later a detachment of ten horsemen — Vetka, his archers, and several nomads — galloped east.

Meanwhile, work was in full swing in the settlement. The smiths — there were already five of them — smelted copper and tin, made bronze. Arsen had designed new bellows that produced a stronger air flow, and the temperature in the forge rose. The bronze came out hard, ringing.

"From this you can make not only arrowheads," he said, "but swords too. Short ones, convenient for foot combat."

The first bronze sword was forged a week later. It was given to Bork — as the best warrior. Bork took the sword, weighed it in his hand, struck a tree — the blade went in deep.

"Good," he said. "With this, you're not afraid."

"We'll forge more," Arsen promised. "For everyone who goes into hand-to-hand combat."

The women, too, did not sit idle. Yara organized the sewing of armor — jackets of several layers of leather, with sewn-on bone plates. Such armor could protect against arrows and light blows.

"Try it on," she said to Tuk, putting the jacket on him.

Tuk turned, moved his shoulders — it didn't restrict him.

"A bit heavy, but bearable. You'll get used to it in battle."

Niya sewed padded under-armor — soft clothing worn under the leather to soften blows. She worked quickly and well — the adult women marveled at her skill.

"You'll be the chief seamstress," Yara joked. "You'll find a rich husband."

Niya blushed but did not abandon her work.

The month flew by unnoticed. On the appointed day the chiefs gathered at the settlement — from the forests, from the steppe, from the mountains. There were twelve of them, each with a retinue. All were received with honor, fed, given drink, and in the morning a council was held.

In the large communal house, where maps and birch-bark books hung on the walls, the chiefs seated themselves. Run opened the council:

"You know why we are here. An enemy is coming from the east — strong, cruel. If we don't unite, he will defeat us one by one. I propose creating a union of tribes and electing a common

military leader."

The chiefs began to murmur. Each wanted to be in charge.

"Why should we submit to you?" asked one, shaggy, from the mountains. "You have bows, we have strength. Let strength decide."

"Strength decides in battle," Arsen replied. "But here we need brains. We have fortifications, we have weapons, we have knowledge. If you want to survive — listen to us. If you want to perish — you can leave right now."

Silence fell. Then Argamak rose:

"I've known the brothers for four years. They have never deceived. They saved their tribe from destruction, taught us to make bows, to heal wounds. I trust them. My people will follow them."

"And mine," said another chief.

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