



Dimension-hopping  
heroes battle to save  
a world under attack.

# Thousand Blades

by Mike Boxberger

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Mike Boxberger



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## Chapter 6

### The Crinsia

Captain Amb Larinissa stood at the main entrance of Lardross Arena watching his subordinates battle for the Crinsia Championship. This year was an interesting match up. On one side was Sidrain. He was of average height and had a strong, ropy body like he was made of vipers. His aggression combined with his use of pole arms made him a dangerous opponent. Circling across from him was Haniven. Haniven preferred the sword and shield and leaned on his great strength over speed and skill. Both combatants were armed with the fine wooden practice weapons used during the Crinsia. While real weapons were forbidden, real armor was perfectly legal.

The clacking of their weapons was barely audible above the ravenous applauding of the throng. Every seat in the structure was occupied, which, Amb had come to understand, meant there were over three thousand people in the building. The arena's oblong shape, and huge, domed roof, was dwarven in design. While the elliptical shape made ranged and mounted events easier, it made a single, one-on-one battle, like this one, seem small. Another exchange between the combatants caused another roar. Amb snorted in dismissal within his helm.

Amb personally believed Haniven would be victorious. Sidrain had won the championship last year, and once a few years before that. Haniven was new to this level of competition, and he was hungrier. However, Haniven was having difficulty dealing with the reach of Sidrain's spear. Per the tournament rules, the men would battle until one yielded, was disarmed, or rendered unconscious. Haniven had already lost his shield, and Sidrain was backing him up with a series of thrust attacks. As the men battled past Amb, his

colossal height and massive build made them look like two children playing war in the street.

Amb scanned the cheering crowd. Caldain's finest filled the seats; council members, politicians, the wealthy and influential lifted sparkling goblets in full-throated support of their favorites. In the center of the arena at perfect viewing level, was the royal box, where the King, Prince, Princess, and most trusted advisors clapped politely at the action. Amb was familiar with the King's family and advisors; but there was an unknown addition to the King's entourage. The newcomer was a thin man wearing horribly plain dark grey robes, a dull blot surrounded by garish dresses and flashy jewelry. If the man were actively serving wine, Amb would have mistaken him for an underdressed servant. The man's blue eyes were not watching the battle, but were focused on him. A slight smirk of haughtiness tweaked the corners of his mouth.

Amb's lip curled in disdain beneath his helm. Why were the powerful putting on this show for such weaklings? Why did the King surround himself with these soulless peacocks?

Amb remembered his own adventures in the Crinsia. The Crinsia, the elven word for crucible, was a weeklong tournament that allowed the Royal High Guardsmen to battle for rank, status, and bragging rights. The guardsmen engaged in one on one battles, spear throwing, archery, and horse combat. The champion had the option, though usually waived, to battle the captain for leadership of the Royal Guard - and then only if the winner had previously passed all the exhaustive exams covering history, strategy, and tactics. Amb refocused on the combatants. Sidrain was skillfully twirling his spear to deflect a series of attacks. Amb mentally noted both men had passed all the exams for leadership. But he had no doubt - none would challenge him for leadership. He had only been Captain for a decade, and there was an informal grace period of two or three decades that most Captains enjoyed before being challenged. Not to mention, his run through the Crinsia had to remain fresh on the minds of his men.

In his first Crinsia, he had smashed all opposition. It became clear despite his size, he was faster than anyone expected. He displayed pinpoint accuracy in his attacks using skill honed from both real combat and years of practice. He also employed a crushing, inhuman physical power, his Blessing. To a man, no one could stand the power with which Amb attacked. The few that managed to get a hit on him only seemed to enrage him, and his attacks intensified. In his first year in the guard, he won the Crinsia. A task no newcomer had ever come close to completing before. But, he could not battle for leadership. Passing the examinations was a requirement he hadn't yet met. If he was to gain respect, he had to be patient. He had to study, watch, and learn.

Patience was not one of Amb strong points. He poured over histories and combat texts, burning their information into his mind. In his second year, he passed all the examinations. He won the Crinsia the next two years and on his third victory, he challenged and soundly defeated the serving captain, a general from the south named Flurento. Having met all the criteria, he accepted the position of Captain, becoming at once the youngest Captain ever and the one to achieve the rank with the fewest years in the guard.

As Captain Amb presided over the Crinsia, making decisions and organizing the action, but not participating. Thus, a semblance of true competition had reentered the Crinsia.

Amb was snapped from his musings by a cacophony erupting from the crowd. Sidrain was standing, triumphantly, over a shocked, unarmed Haniven. Amb snorted in dismissal within his helm. So he had been wrong. Next was the part Amb despised. He picked up the finely carved oak box at his feet, and lifting it above his head, walked to the arena center. He found himself annoyed that the cheering died off as he reached his destination. In years past, he had been forced to quiet the throng before speaking. His waning popularity among the self-important was of little concern.

Amb stopped at the center of the arena and gestured for Sidrain to join him. The sweat soaked young man proudly trotted over.

Forcing his smile from his face, Sidrain saluted and stood at attention. Amb returned the salute and looked to the King above.

"Your Majesty and honored guests, I present to you your Crinsia Grand Champion, Sergeant Sidrain Beltross!"

The crowd erupted in adulation. Begrudgingly, Amb wanted the young man to have his moment. He leaned toward him and yelled loud enough for him to hear.

"At ease Sergeant. Give them what they want."

The smile popped back onto Sidrain's face and he waved enthusiastically at them. The young man, with his natural charisma and rough good looks, played to the crowd as they fed off each other's energy. Amb watched Sidrain's eyes move over the crowd, but lingered, as had happened to so many champions before, on Princess Elia. The Princess was undoubtedly beautiful. With waist long golden hair and eyes of clearest blue, Amb had heard more than one of his men declare his efforts in the arena were solely to gain her eye. Sidrain acknowledged the entire audience, not stopping until he had spun a slow circle and waved at each section. Finally, the clapping subsided to a low rumble.

"Attention!"

Sidrain snapped to attention as Amb raised his hand to the crowd. When silence ruled, he opened and removed from the box a gleaming gold medal affixed to a bright blue ribbon. With mock delicacy, he placed the stocky medal around Sidrain's neck.

Speaking loudly, Amb addressed Sidrain and the crowd as one.

"Grand Champion, as is tradition, you may challenge me for the title of Captain should you choose to do so. Is this your desire?"

"Yes." Sidrain looked straight ahead with a look of steely determination mixed with respect. Gasps and excited whispers flitted up from the spectators, followed by an intense silence.

"What?" Amb growled under his breath. Sidrain glanced at him, and then flicked his eyes forward. Amb had never been so shocked; insulted. Did this worm see himself as capable of challenging him? So few Captains had ever been challenged so soon after claiming the

position themselves. That was usually reserved for those that abused their power or were otherwise unfit for leadership. The plates in his gauntlets squealed as they bent in his fists.

Amb suddenly felt the weighty silence in the arena. He spoke in controlled tones.

“The Grand Champion has spoken! Tomorrow he and I will battle for the title of Captain!”

The masses exploded anew into energetic ovation.

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