



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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BLADES**

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First Edition

For Natasha

Chapter 6

Armored Death

Sely woke up as he always did. First, before moving or opening his eyes, he listened carefully to his surroundings. Then he slowly opened his eyes and looked around without moving. He had followed this routine ever since a job got dicey a year ago. He was one of two guards escorting a caravan from Grantier's Rock to Tenrir. He had taken the earlier watch. The other guard, a wretch named Freris was to take the later watch. He had awakened early that morning and when he opened his eyes, he was looking into the murderous eyes of a knife-wielding orc. Sely, unarmed and bootless, tried to jump up out of bed. The orc went for the kill, trying to slash Sely's neck. Sely scrambled for a weapon and fell in a heap with his feet tangled in his blanket. The crude orc blade ripped across his face, producing the jagged scar his father had noticed the night before. Sely yelled half in surprise and half to sound the alarm. Everyone was trying to get up before an orc club smashed their heads in. As it turned out, Freris had fallen asleep. Two members of the caravan had lost their lives in the scuffle. He hated how helpless he had been - taken by surprise. So he vowed to do all he could to eliminate the possibility of being killed in his own bed. It was, of course, impossible to prepare for all situations, but as his father always said, *'only a fool fails to learn from experience'*. He had both the scar and the memory to remind him of the lessons of that morning.

Judging by the sun, he had slept later than usual. After he got dressed, he went to the main room finding it empty and quiet. He was alone in the house. The assumption was made his sister was studying at the old magi's house, and his father was out on some business of his own. That was fine with him. Sely wanted to walk around a bit and see the faces and sites

of his hometown. While he never would have admitted it, he had missed the place.

After attending to Stenner, Sely walked toward the town square. The late morning sun produced glowing shafts of honey-colored light where the forest leaves parted. Even though it was early, Sely could tell it was going to be another blistering summer day, but the trees produced a pleasant barrier to the direct sun, casting all but the town square in shade. People were up and moving about, chopping wood, and carrying water. He meandered his way through the square and the market, talking to old friends, catching up on who had been married, and discovering what old friends still lived in town. It was around midday by the time he exited the far end of the square, walking on the road he had ridden in on the night before.

Here he walked quietly among the trees and rugged homes finding the solace comfortable. Maybe his father had been right. Would it be so bad to live here? Become a bowyer and hunter like his father? He always had a strong sense of justice. Or vengeance, he admitted to himself. He felt orcs were the greatest evil in the world. At least he could say they were the worse thing he had seen. What could be nobler than facing such evil? But he wasn't as noble as he pretended to be. Sely stopped and leaned against a large tree, taking a sip from his waterskin. Yes, nobility was partially a cover up. He didn't want anyone else to suffer the same end he had seen others in the orc camps come to. That, and his recently waning hatred drove him on. He would talk to his father; try to ring out any more information he could about Blessings. Maybe something in the upcoming discussion would help him decide what he should do next.

As he raised the waterskin to his lips again, a scream reverberated through the forest. Sely wasn't sure if it was good knowledge to have, but he had firsthand knowledge of screams. Screams could be the result of surprise, fear, death, or in the case of the man's scream coming from the square, a

scream of pain. The scream was followed by a chorus of shouts and hysterical shrieking. He dropped the water and raced toward town. Familiar, pale faces blurred past him as he passed people fleeing the square. Sely grabbed a woman's arm as she scampered by. Drella, a middle-aged tailor that had lived in town since before his birth, looked at him with wide eyes.

"Let go Sely!" She wailed.

"Calm down! What's going on?"

Another scream from the square. That was a man's final scream. The scream of death.

The woman forcefully jerked her arm free. "Some creature is in the square. Galad was fighting it, but I think it killed him. Sely, come on! Run!" Drella glanced fearfully toward the square then turned to flee.

Sely spat and sprinted toward the square. Taken by surprise again, he frowned. He had awakened this morning in the safest place in the world and had left his armor, bow, and axe at home, but he never forgot his knife. He bolted onward, rounding the guard shack where Galad had been posted. The guard had not moved far. He was in the center of the square laying face down on the ground, beneath a layer of dust undoubtedly kicked up by the fleeing people. Sely moved forward slowly, each step toward Galad was deliberate. Unsuccessfully, he looked for the other half of the fight he had missed. As Sely approached, he saw Galad's left leg was gone at the knee. It was a terrible, tattered wound, as if the leg had been ripped off. Blood weakly spurted from the wound. Sely rolled the man face up and saw several of his ribs had been smashed. White knives of splintered bone stuck out from the guard's chest at chaotic angles. Sely knew there was no hope for him.

Splinters of wood exploded from the tanner's store. Sely looked up to see his father flying through the air. Maladan crashed to earth thirty paces from the store, rolling into a motionless, dirty lump. Sely ran to him and quickly, gently laid

him flat. He was no medic, but other than a knot on his head, the unconscious Maladan seemed fine. Sely heard someone coming from the tanner's shop. He turned and stood up. The man that came through the shattered door was nearly two heads taller than Sely. Covered head to toe in dark gray plate mail, Sely couldn't tell who, or what, it was. With no marks or insignias, it didn't look like anything the Caldainian military used. The helmed head looked both directions and stopped when it faced Sely. The armored giant unhooked a massive mace from his hip and began to walk casually toward Sely. A dark red liquid coated the weapon. The giant began to speak, producing a guttural series of growls that rung metallically from the shell on its head. Whatever language it spoke, it wasn't Caldainian. It sounded closer to orc-tongue, but was still not quite right. As the giant moved, it gestured with its left hand and loosely carried the mace with its right. Either the giant was so tough he could afford to be nonchalant, or it was trying to tell him something. Sely didn't care what the armored giant had to say - clearly, it had attacked Galad and his father.

Sely put his hand on his knife and crouched as the giant approached. He had never fought such a heavily armored opponent. However, all that protection had to come a price. Sely would be faster, more mobile than this metal brute. He had seen plate before and estimated with his strength, he could pierce it with his thick blade.

As soon as the giant was five paces away, Sely yelled, drew his knife, and lunged. Driving his shoulder into the giant's chest, he knocked it backward with a metallic crash. The giant's mace bounced out of its hand and spun into the dirt, well out of reach. Sely smiled. Whoever this was, they were pretty green. Sely straddled the giant's waist and with another yell, brought his knife down into the center of its broad chest. There was an ear-splitting twang. Sely barely moved his head in time as his blade snapped off and went whizzing dangerously through the air. Several wispy strands of Sely's

hair whirled in the air in front of his face. Only a small dent in the breastplate rewarded his attack.

Sely quickly overcame the surprise of the broken knife, and with all his strength, smashed the broken knife blade into the side of the giant's helm, knocking it off. Sely drew back for another attack, but paused at the face the helm had been hiding. He was now looking into the eyes of a hideous monster. Mottled dark green skin covered a thick-browed skull. Yellow fangs stuck through its mouth in unpleasant slants. Its bulbous eyes, the color of putrid swamp water, were wide with surprise. While it was not on Sely's schedule to battle a giant frog today, he always liked a good fight.

Recovering quickly, Sely struck again, smashing the broken knife blade into the side of the creature's face. "Picked on the wrong man, jack-lout. Now you die."

Sely struck again. Then a third time. With each blow, the creature's face transitioned from shock into anger. Sely had superior position, and any one of the attacks he was making would kill a normal man, but he was barely breaking this thing's skin. Only a tiny trickle of blood marked his efforts. *Why was this toad even wearing armor with skin like this?*

Sely was suddenly struck on the side of the head and sent flying off the creature, eating a mouthful of soft dirt. Dizzy, he leapt to his feet, stumbled, then fell hard on his backside. It took him a moment to reorient himself and locate his opponent. The creature was standing up and replacing the helm on its head. Apparently, it had found its helm with a free hand and smashed it into the side of Sely's head. The spinning was subsiding and Sely shook his head. The side of his face felt warm and wet. He quickly touched the area and confirmed he was bleeding. *We're even now.* Luckily, the wound didn't seem too bad. Now the creature was speaking in harsher, angrier tones. With his knife now useless, he grabbed the only thing he could see, a sharp piece of wood from the tanner's shattered door.

One of the reasons Sely enjoyed combat was he always won. Orcs were stupid and used inferior weapons and armor. Their only real advantage was their numbers. They were stronger than most gairei, but Sely's recently explained strength and endurance made him superior in those categories as well. Now Sely was in a new situation. He was the weaker combatant. Not as well armed as his opponent, but perhaps he was smarter.

Whatever this thing was, it was not nearly as tenacious as an orc. It was way too chatty. A quick glance toward his father made Sely's throat tighten. The man had not moved. The creature turned its back and began to walk towards its lost weapon. That wasn't something Sely could allow at this point. He ran toward the giant. Maybe if he struck it in the knee, where the armor was weaker at the joint, he could cripple it? It was worth a shot.

Sely closed quickly, but not quick enough. He got there right as the creature picked up the mace. Sely broke the wood shard on the back of the creature's knee with no effect. The creature swung its mace in a wide arc. Sely instinctively brought his arms up to defend. His body exploded in immense pain. Something blinded him and his wind left him as he flew through the air, smashing through the front railing of the smith's shop.

Sely closed his eyes and tried to focus. He had been in many battles and thought he could control pain well, but this was too much. His side was on fire; parts of him were broken. It took what seemed like minutes, but Sely could finally breathe again. His breath came in small, painful wheezes. He swore he could hear his bones grinding inside with each labored breath. He couldn't see well, something was in his eyes. He moved to wipe his face and saw his left arm dangled unnaturally at his forearm. Sely bellowed.

Fear and anger fueled Sely's spinning mind. He had always heard death was fickle; that it followed its own schedule. Maybe he would see his mother again in Paradise.

He was vaguely aware the creature was talking again. He couldn't understand a word, but arrogance hung on every word.

He looked around and saw his legs buried under pile of broken railing. His mind told him to stand and fight, but his body wouldn't move. His vision was blurring more by the moment; like looking through an early morning haze. A splinter-laced pool of his blood slowly spread from his crumpled body.

A huge shadow blotted out the sun. Sely squinted up through one eye and saw what had to be the creature standing over him, mace in hand. Sely drew a ragged breath that tortured his ribs.

"Better make it count toad," he spat.

At least he wasn't going to be killed by an orc. The creature slowly raised the mace with both hands, high overhead.

Suddenly the world exploded in a flash. A thunderclap deafened Sely. Blue-white light blinded him as the creature cried in agony. His body at its limit, with the smell of burnt flesh in his nostrils, Sely gave into darkness.



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