
THIS IS A BRIEF SAMPLE FROM MY NOVEL SERIES WHICH I HAVE BEGUN WORK ON RECENTLY. THIS IS ALSO A WORK IN PROGRESS, SO IT WILL BE FURTHER IMPROVED IN THE FUTURE. PLEASE ENJOY.

BLADES OF CHAOS: AWAKENING

(WORKING TITLE)

CHAPTER 1

Thomas gripped the bristly plant with all his might, his feet planted firmly on the ground. He yanked with every ounce of muscle in his small body, working the stems back and forth in the earth. Gradually, the pale roots emerged from the dark soil.

With an earthy squelch, a massive white turnip flew out the ground, as Thomas fell backward from the momentum of his pull, landing soundly on his bottom. Smiling as he looked at the prize-winning turnip he just uprooted, Thomas took note of the rapid beating of his own heart. As the exhaustion from pulling the vegetable faded, he noticed the heavy drumbeat he thought was coming from his chest continued to pound in his ears despite his completed task.

Looking around for the source of the sound, he glanced at the nearby woods at the edge of the back garden. The loud thudding coming from the tree line continued to edge closer. Quickly realizing what was coming, Thomas ducked behind the garden fence as the source of the thundering footsteps charged out of the forest.

A titanic gerbil the size of a grizzly bear charged out from between the trees, tossing its head wildly as its eyes rolled back in its head. Growling and shrieking with frustration, the creature angrily pounced through the garden, rampaging over the vines and plants of the valuable vegetable crops. It thrashed ferociously, trying in vain to shake off the stowaway hitching a ride on its back.

Clinging onto the bristly fur of the gerbil's neck for dear life was a young man of about fifteen. His short, dark hair ruffled wildly in the breeze as the enormous rodent progressed to romp through the flowerbeds. As the beast sharply rounded a corner, a light flashed in the young man's eyes as he saw his opportunity. Shifting all his weight to the side of the gerbil as it drifted, he managed to flip it onto its side, sliding into a mound of dirt. Overturned, the beast lay dazed on its side, snorting.

A moment later, the young man stood up, wiped the sweat from his brow, and brushed off the dirt from his tumble into the nearby carrot patch. Looking down in disapproval at the dizzy rodent, he sighed as he began batting away at the dirt that now covered his bright red t-shirt and blue jeans.

"Maybe that will actually teach you to stay home for once," the young man grumbled to the hairy beast as he pushed it to its feet. Scrambling up from the ground, the animal was immediately engulfed in an embrace, as Thomas leapt out from behind the fence and lovingly buried his face in the rodent's fur. The gerbil, now calming from its frantic struggle, began to nibble the large turnip in the boy's hand.

"Thanks again for all your help, Saber," the boy's muffled voice came through the fur he was currently nuzzling. "I'm sorry you have to do this every time Snuggles runs off."

"It's not really your fault," Saber said as he brushed off the last of the dirt coating his posterior. "With a Giga-Gerbil as big as him, I'm surprised he doesn't run off more often to go rooting through the forest for food."

"Sounds like Snuggles is back," remarked a middle-aged woman in an apron as she emerged from the backdoor of the nearby house. Stepping into the garden, she dropped a handful of silver coins on top of a storage barrel. "You have my thanks for doing this again, Saber."

"Just keep a closer watch, and make sure the big guy has enough food to get by from now on, Marianne," Saber advised as he patted the rodent on its snout. "If he runs short, he'll be more inclined to run off into the woods again."

"Okay, Thomas and I are going to look after him more carefully now," Marianne replied as she began undoing the damage that had been done to the garden. "It's just that you're never quite sure when he's going to sneak out, you know? In any case, that's all we'll be needing you for today. You can take the coins I left on that barrel and go now."

"No problem, let me know if you need me in the future for anything else," Saber said as he walked over to claim the coins. "Do you mind if I ask you a question, though? Why don't you just rely on The Glaive to handle matters like this, just like everyone else around here?"

"Why? Are you trying to say you don't like handling this kind of work?"

"Not at all, far from it. I'm flattered you keep relying on me. I'm only asking because I'm curious."

"Well, for one, I highly doubt 'Retrieving a Pet Giga-Gerbil' is a job worth any of those guild members who choose to deal with dangerous tasks, and go off on matters of life and death every day. In fact, a tussle with Snuggles would probably be too easy for them. I'd probably get charged more than I make in a week's worth of sales to just post a job to the message board and pray someone picks it up."

"You may be right. Something like this would be a Copper-Rank Quest at most, and those don't seem to be at the top of the wish list for the guild."

"Regardless of how the guild feels, it's still well out of my price range. You're willing to do it for a much lower price. Considering how often we have incidents like this, it's not surprising I choose to rely on your steel instead."

“Well, I’m happy to be of service. Speaking of which, I probably need to go practice with my steel for tomorrow, so I should get going. Let me know next time the rodent needs some counseling with me.”

As Marianne and Thomas waved goodbye, Saber made his way out of the farmers’ garden and onto the cobblestone streets leading to town. As usual, the pathway was clogged with citizens coming home from job shifts that end in late afternoon, but Saber skillfully made his way through blockades and crowds like a single leaf flowing through a stream packed with boulders. As he made his way to the center of town, ignoring the busy markets and armorers’ stalls, Saber set his sights on the tall thatch roofed building across the road from town hall. Effortlessly squeezing through the wall of townsfolk standing in a long line between the apothecary on one end of the street and the tome library on the other, he arrived at the building he had been beelining for, the headquarters of Spiral Town’s mercenary guild, the Gilded Glaive.

Saber budged through the great iron double doors and into dark and damp great hall. As it had every day of the three years he had been coming here, the stench of Brown-Briar mead from the dining hall was the first to greet him as he stepped in. Gagging at sickly sweet alcoholic fumes, he ducked into the next room to escape into slightly fresher air.

“Excuse me, little boy,” the receptionist stationed at the right side of the entry called out as he stumbled into the room, “this area is for licensed guild members only. I need to ask you to come back with an adult or...” her voice trailed off as she recognized him.

Shaking the last of the dizziness from the mead smell away, Saber looked over to the receptionist, who sheepishly grinned and turned her eyes downward to the paperwork on her desk.

“Sorry, Mr. Aether,” she said to him as she fumbled for a feather pen and started writing in the bound journal on her desk. “I didn’t recognize you without your regular attire. Please, come in.”

“It’s cool,” Saber grumbled, making his face blank so she wouldn’t know how offended he was at being called a “little boy.” He made his way quickly to the floor-to-ceiling group of bulletin boards lining the back wall of the room.

Dimly lit by a chandelier fashioned from the antlers and bones of assorted creatures and monsters, the walls of the hall were covered with rows of mounted weapons and shield plaques, broken occasionally by a portrait of some adventurer from the guild’s history. What little light there was from overhead was mostly blocked by the second level catwalk, which ran around the perimeter of the huge room. The weathered floor of the room was covered with wooden chairs and tables, many occupied by mercenaries engrossed in conversation. These warriors-for-hire were clad in a variety of different garb, and carried a vast assortment of weaponry. The motley group ranged from muscular barbarians in steel helmets wearing great axes clipped to their sides, slim rangers in light armor carrying a bow and quiver on their backs, and robed mages with floating tomes conjured out of thin air.

However, Saber ignored them all. Eyes fixed on the bulletin boards lining the back wall, he marched directly to his destination. Each board had perhaps one or two notes attached to it, save for the one on the far left labeled “COPPER-RANK QUESTS.” This board was completely covered in notes, some were even

posted straight onto the wall around the board, or had even fallen to the ground around the crowded board, without anyone bothering to pick them up. Hundreds upon hundreds of requests from townsfolk and villagers with problems they could not solve on their own, yet deemed too trivial for most guild members, so unlikely to be answered here.

One particular note that had fallen to the floor caught Saber's attention:

GILDED GLAIVE COPPER-RANK QUEST

CATEGORY: PHYSICAL LABOR

REWARD: 15 SILVER COINS

CLIENT: Klein Gutzman, Spiral Town Smithy

PARTY SIZE: 1-2

DETAILS:

I just need an extra hand around the forge for a few tasks my assistant and I need an extra set of hands for. No one we know enjoys the heat, so I had to place a job here to have any hope of hiring someone to help us out.

The date on this note indicated that had been first posted three weeks ago, and now lay forgotten on the floor. Saber sighed and picked up the note, tucking it into his pocket. He then eyed the board next to the grotesque mass of ignored pleas for help, which was the real reason for his visit to the Gilded Glaive today.

As the guild's least busy time on the day right before a big event, now was a better time than any to find the best pick of guild missions. Upon the adjacent board labeled "IRON-RANK QUESTS" was tacked one lone note. He stepped up to the board and grabbed the note for a better look:

GILDED GLAIVE IRON-RANK QUEST

CATEGORY: BEAST SLAYING

REWARD: 300 SILVER COINS

CLIENT: Peter Zentos, 734 Bramble Rd, Capville

PARTY SIZE: 1 or More

DETAILS:

I need assistance dealing a great Dread Centipede that keeps showing up in my backyard. My wife can't go out to do the laundry due to her fear of an attack. She told me to kill it, but I'm just as helpless as she is. Bonus pay if the task is accomplished with my wife believing I killed it myself.

Saber couldn't believe it. This was the perfect job for him. Shooting a shifty glance over his shoulder, he scanned the room for the other three copper-ranked guild members, or someone of higher rank that

might be interested in taking on the mission. All the other mercenaries were busy chatting or enjoying a pint of ale. The only other guild members securing jobs at the moment was a party of four already at the checkout counter. Discreetly stuffing the note into his pocket alongside the previous note, he crept over behind the party of four, waiting for them to finish registering for their quest.

Abruptly, the party in front of him finished their business and walked off, leaving him a straight path to the clerk. Hope began to ignite in Saber's heart: at long last, the moment had finally come! He eagerly stepped up to the checkout desk, holding out the Iron-Rank Quest Note and his Copper-Colored ID Card to the woman behind the counter.

"Just a moment please," the clerk mumbled as she finished writing something out on the sheet of parchment in front of her.

Saber felt as if a ticking-time bomb inside of him switched on. If this clerk couldn't register him for the Iron-Rank Quest fast enough...

"Sorry to keep you waiting," the clerk said as she dipped her feather pen back in the inkwell on her desk. "What can I do for you?"

"Did this lady really just ask me that?" Saber thought to himself. *"As if anyone ever had different reason for being in this line!"*

"I'd like to register for this quest please," he declared, pushing out the note and card clutched in his hand across the desk.

"Sir, this is an Iron-Rank Quest," the clerk objected while comparing the two items he held out in front of her. "As a Copper-Rank, you are only eligible for Copper-Rank Quests until-

"I've already completed the other fifty Copper-Rank Quests I need as before I can get promoted," he interjected. "If you look up my name in that catalog in front of you, you can already see I've done more than enough Copper Quests to earn a shot at my first Iron-Rank one."

"Just a moment," the clerk mumbled, taking the two items. She turned to a thick ledger to the side of her paperwork thumbed quickly to the index. Turning to the section for quest records, she finally located the right page. Rubbing her eyes for a moment, she compared the information on the card and ledger, then turned back to Saber. "Well, you most certainly have done your fair share. With ninety-nine of those Copper quests, it's a wonder you haven't been promoted yet."

"Yes, I'm very well aware," Saber muttered, doing his best to hold back a venomous rebuke. "How about we go ahead and register me for that Iron Quest, then?" he asked in a voice he hoped approached polite respect.

"Just a moment," the clerk said as she handed Saber back his ID card. "Can I not interest you in registering for a Copper-Rank Quest first?" Saber knew she was thinking of the over-crowded board of Copper quests.

“Do you really want me to hit a hundred?” Saber groaned. “Just *please* register me for that quest already.”

“It’ll take longer to get you registered for the Iron-Rank Quest. Besides, I’m sure you’re aware of the surplus of Copper-Rank Quests we have right now. Are you not interested in even one?”

“Well, I did pick up one just a moment ago. If it will help, I’ll go ahead and register for this one as well.”

Saber pulled the note for the Copper-Rank Quest out of his pocket and handed it to the clerk. Adjusting her spectacles, she looked over the note, then dipped her quill into the inkwell again before scratching out notes on the journal.

“Okay then,” the clerk declared as she continued to write. “I’ll go ahead and get you cleared on this one, and then we can move onto the other-”

“The Copper one can wait!” Saber sputtered as he quickly scanned the entrance for any more mercenaries who might be on the hunt for a well-paid job. “Please register me for the Iron Quest first!”

“Please be patient, sir,” the clerk said as she seemed to write a tad slower. “I can only do one thing at a time.”

Saber’s heart began to race. This is the closest he had ever been to finally getting the coveted promotion to Iron-Rank Guild Member, but there was still plenty of time for things to go wrong. Hoping feverishly that this would finally be his chance to move forward in life, he silently prayed for things to go his way this time.

Then, the answer that the world decided to give him strutted into the room.

“Why, HELLO all of you beautiful people!”

A tall young man in shiny blue armor with enamel and gold trim called out to no one in particular as he entered the hall. Saber’s gut jumped in his chest when he saw the man. There was no mistaking that greasy red hair, sapphire colored heavy armor and loud, theatrical voice announcing the presence of the village idiot. It was Franco Belouise, one of the Guild members Saber despised the most.

BACK STORY ON WHY SABER HATES FRANCO HERE?

“Isn’t it just a lovely day on the eve of the Spiral Sword Festival?” Franco called out as he sloppily fell onto a bench between two female mercenaries, who both looked rather annoyed by his intrusion. His movements were somewhat slow and awkward; it was obvious he had been drinking a bit, or more than a bit, no doubt drinking up most of the money from his last-completed quest.

Saber continued to furtively steal glances at Franco as the clerk leisurely filled out his registration for the quest. Occasionally, Franco would turn his head to the mercenary on the far side of the bench to display the back of his head, which harbored his most proud feature, a disgusting rattail. This was a hairstyle so

hideous, every time Saber saw it, he had to use every fiber in his body to resist the longing to yank it as hard as he could in hopes of tearing it off.

Despite the urge to march over there and deal with Franco's verminous hair, Saber firmly stood in front of the clerk, trying his best to keep a close eye on the blue-armored buffoon, at the same time trying not being detected himself.

There were many reasons why Saber didn't like Franco, but the most prominent was Franco had already cheated him out of getting promoted to an Iron-Rank Guild member three times, and the stars seemed to be lining up for it to happen again a fourth time. The most insulting part of all this was that although Franco had first joined the Gilded Glaive after Saber, he was now two ranks higher than Saber. For nearly two years now, Saber had been unable to fulfil the promotion requirement of completing an Iron-Rank Quest, mostly due to Franco's scheming ways. A gesture of kindness on Saber's part made all this possible, proving that no good deed goes unpunished. Saber had allowed Franco to take the first Iron-Rank Quest he had procured for himself, foolishly believing he was helping someone who was less fortunate than himself. In return for that kindness, Franco later stole away two more opportunities for Saber to become promoted, and that number would soon be three if he didn't get signed up for the one that was within his grasp now.

After the sixth or seventh time the female mercenaries turned their backs on him, Franco got up from the bench and walked in Saber's general direction. Saber held his breath, feeling as if even the sound of his breathing would alert Franco to his presence. Fortunately, he seemed to pay Saber no mind and instead rambled over to the bulletin board labeled: "BRONZE-RANK QUESTS." He took a moment to peek at the one note remaining on it.

Saber sighed in relief, and turned back to the clerk hissing: "Listen, I am this close to finally being promoted from Copper-Rank. If you don't hurry up and register me for that Iron-Quest, the *rat* over there is going to seize my opportunity. He's invoked the Seniority Clause to stop me from getting my promotion twice before, and knowing him, he won't hesitate to do it again this time. If you have any sensibility, sign me up for the Iron-Rank Quest as quickly as as you can."

"Well, I'm done registering you for the Copper-Quest now, so here's your proof of registration," the clerk said as she handed him a small card with details of the Copper-Rank Quest which were now his responsibility, which Saber stuffed into his pocket. "Now then, you said you wanted to register for the Iron-Rank quest so you can be promoted?"

"Yes!" Saber growled under his breath. "Just *please* do it now before the opportunity--"

"Opportunities are a wonderful thing, aren't they Saber?" Franco declared as he lurched over to the desk and stood beside him, a smarmy smile on his face that made Saber want to paint the walls with his lunch. "So, what are you up to today?"

"Oh, you know the usual," Saber shrugged, shifting his body to obscure Franco's view of the clerk's desk. "Just taking up a Copper Quest since I can't do anything else around here."

“That sounds fine,” Franco said, his breath carrying the stench of Brown-Briar Mead to Saber’s nostrils, causing him to gag a little. “You wouldn’t happen to know if there are any quests available for a Bronze-Rank mercenary, would you?”

“There’s one over on the board there that your brain seemed to ignore pretty well since you decided to come over and talk to me. There is also a plethora of Copper-Rank ones... why don’t you take one of them?”

“You know as well as I do that a Copper-Rank Quest would barely even pay for dinner at a Burger Lord.” Franco turned toward the clerk and asked: “Hey Miss, are there any more Iron or Bronze quests available?”

“Saber here’s trying to register for the last Iron-Rank Quest we have at the moment,” she absent-mindedly stated as she dug through some file folders pertaining to promotions. “But there is a Bronze-Rank quest over there on the quest board if you’re interested.”

His face growing hot, Saber felt a burning desire to slap the clerk almost stronger than that of wanting to rip Franco’s rattail off. His heart sank as Franco turned back to him and gave him that all-too-familiar smile that said: ‘we are friends, so I can take whatever I want from you, right?’

“Saber, buddy,” Franco said while patting him on the shoulder with a dirty hand. “Could you do me a favor and let me take this one? I really need the money to make ends-“

“Oh, come ON!” Saber snarled while clenching his fist hard enough to break his fingers. “You say this every time when you try to mooch something from someone. Why can’t you just take the Bronze Quest over there? It probably pays more, and you have the ability to take it, while someone like me who is trying so desperately to get their promotion can’t.”

“True,” Franco agreed while slicking back his greasy red hair. “However, that quest would require me to deal with a Forest Troll in order to complete it, and I don’t think I’m quite up for that as of now. I’ve been feeling pretty weak in my right arm whenever it comes to thrusting my lance, you see,” he said, massaging his right arm to demonstrate its weakness.

“Well, dealing with a Dread Centipede isn’t going to be a walk in the park for your arm either,” Saber argued. “Besides, I figure someone like you should know all about trolls, since you’re certainly acting like one right now.”

“Now, now. There’s no need to be insulting. Listen, I can’t take down a troll, and I’ve got to make my money somehow.”

“You’d probably have a lot more money if you didn’t blow half of your mercenary earnings in the pubs.” Managing a pleading look, Saber continued. “Look, Copper-Rank quests aren’t getting me anywhere even close to wealthy enough, and I already run a few odd jobs here and there around town. With all of that, I barely make enough money to get by, and I’m not anywhere even close enough to moving out of Hector’s house. Do you really want to take this rare opportunity for a promotion away from me yet again?”

“It won’t hurt too much right? You seem to be making enough from... What was it again? Wrestling giant hamsters?” He laughed, and once again turned to the clerk: “Hey Miss, I’m a Bronze-Rank mercenary and I’d like to invoke the seniority clause-”

“Fine, fine, FINE!!” Saber shouted, drawing the whole room’s attention to the scene of his utter defeat at the hands of the seniority clause yet again. “Go ahead, take my shot at getting promoted away from me for the fourth time! I’m going to pray that the vile mead that you’re obviously going to spend that quest money on gets watered down!:

In a fit of temper, Saber seized a blank sheet of parchment from the clerk’s desk, crumpled it into a wad, and threw it to the ground in an overdramatic fashion... then he picked it up and stuffed it into his pocket.

“I might be angry and irrational right now, but I really needed to throw something, and no way in hell am I going to litter! I hate littering almost as much as I hate your stupid hair!” Done with his shouting, Saber stormed out of the room and into the main hall as he left behind a confused Franco who was examining his greasy hair with concern.

Once again, Saber gagged on the smell of the alcohol coming from the tavern as he furiously kicked open the great iron doors to the Guild. He stepped outside to the front porch, letting the doors slam behind him, and took a few deep breaths to calm down. A moment later, he noticed the throbbing pain in the big toe of his right foot, the one he used to kick open the iron doors. He lifted and held his knee against his chest, and while clenching his injured foot in his hands, tried to hop over on his left foot to a column to rest his foot and recover. However, the left foot rolled, shifting his weight onto the ankle, causing him to fall over and topple down the stairs of the Guild’s front porch, painfully landing him face first onto the cobblestone street below.

“Thanks world. I hate you, too,” the weak whimper came from the cobbled street, where a humiliated Saber lay with his face smashed against the stones.