

Black Heart

Ochmar McGristle lay in wait for his prey. He had watched this caravan route and searched for the point of greatest vulnerability. The path through the heavy forest narrowed as it made its way through a shallow valley. He knew that all the large groups had already passed and only scattered stragglers would be coming this way. It may have been a common ruse, but only because it was an effective one. As the wagon rounded a blind bend in the meandering trail, it found a fallen tree in its path. Naturally, they would suspect an ambush. Naturally they would be on guard. They eyed the woods very carefully looking for signs of trouble. There were three guards and one fat merchant on the heavily laden wagon. Two aging but sturdy horses pawed the ground uneasily. One guard, a smallish but very alert fellow in chain armor sat atop the wagon and readied his crossbow. Unable to penetrate Ochmar's camouflage, the other two men could see no sign of the expected danger. With the Merchant and the Crossbowman watching for trouble, the other two men moved toward the fallen tree to clear it from the path.

Ochmar waited, patiently, for just the right moment to spring his surprise. As the two men reached for the offending roadblock, Ochmar pulled the rope that was resting in his hand. A locking pin released. An enormous log on the short end of a lever arm fell. A sturdy rope attached to the long end and embedded with wooden splinters was ripped from the ground where it had lain buried next to the roadblock. The other end was tied firmly to a tree on the other side of the trail. The effect was instantaneous. The heavy barbed rope popped straight up out of the ground. One guard reacted by lunging backward. Still, the violently snapping line caught one foot. A barb sliced into his foot and the force of the thrashing cord hurled him into the air. He landed face first beside the startled horses. One foot mangled and stunned into incoherence, he nevertheless survived the deadly trap.

His partner was not so lucky. Not noticing the trap at all, he had grabbed the fallen tree with both hands. When the barbed rope snapped from the earth, it hit both arms across the elbows. With the firmness of his grip, and the speed of the wicked lash, both arms were ripped off at the elbow. The horrified man stood there, staring at his spurting stumps. The shock of the trauma overwhelmed him, and he collapsed in a whimpering heap to watch the last of his lifeblood flow from what used to be his hands.

With the pulling of the same rope, a precut tree was allowed to fall behind the wagon blocking off any retreat for the helpless prey. While the entire group was still stunned by the savage surprise of the rope trap, Ochmar quickly rolled to a sitting position and raised his crossbow. The guard atop the wagon had only enough time for his eyes to widen before Ochmar's bolt plunged into his skull. He fell over the back of the rather tall wagon and landed with a sickening crack as his neck shattered.

Seizing the opportunity, Ochmar leaped from concealment, dropping his crossbow and taking his well-crafted bardiche to hand. He moved his enormous frame with surprising agility and sprang into the driver's seat with the terrified merchant.

"Spare me," the fat man pleaded, "I'll give you anything you want."

Ochmar recognized the stalling tactic for what it was as the fat man reached for a hidden dagger and did not hesitate. With one clean, overhead chop, He split the man in half from top to bottom.

Ochmar leaped down from the driver's seat and walked slowly toward the recovering guard with the injured foot.

"Please sir," the man began to sob, "I've got a family. This is only a job. I swear if you release me, you'll never see me again."

Ochmar paused to let the man take in the full horror of his visage. He stood over six and a half feet tall. He was broad and muscular weighing over 280 pounds. His black greasy hair stood straight up from his head and was shaved into three strips running from front to back. His broad, pan-shaped face was

painted with stark black designs and bore an oft-broken, flattened nose. His dark, black eyes shown with an evil glee as he reveled in the fear and death of his own creation. His chin was adorned with a split and pointed, double goatee. He was clad in a suit of black leather armor, reinforced with many riveted metal strips. The enormous poleax he carried was a masterful and terrible weapon. Fully six feet long, it had a five-foot, hardwood handle and a wickedly curved, three-foot axe blade mounted to the haft at two points. He held the bardiche with one hand between the two mounting points on the shaft and the other slightly toward the butt end of the weapon.

After letting the man take in the raw savagery of his appearance, he cracked an evil grin. "I never have to see you again anyway. And, I'd hate to have a one-footed gimp coming after me for revenge."

"No, please, you don't have to kill Me." the terrified man pleaded.

Ochmar grinned, looked at the helpless man and said, "I know," as he swung his bardiche though the guard's skull.

The life of a bandit had come easily to Ochmar. Thanks to his abusive-drunkard of a father, he became a skilled woodsman, and a cold-blooded killer. Roddy McGristle had been a miserable and bitter man. Overcome with the shame of some past defeat, he had retired to the wilderness of the Western-Heartland with one eye and a three-legged dog. Ochmar's mother had been an unfortunate girl abducted by Roddy from the caravan town of Soubar. She and her young son were victimized and beaten frequently by the bitter ex-woodsman. Roddy took Ochmar on hunting trips with the promise the he would die if his mother tried to escape. Therefore, despite his father's hatred of him, Ochmar learned the ways of the wilderness. When the boy was ten years old, Roddy finally killed the frightened girl who had been his mother. Ochmar was beaten severely and forced to bury the mangled corpse of the woman who had given him life.

As he pushed his mother's corpse into a shallow grave, strange events were happening nearby. Not far away, on the Boareskyr Bridge, a rogue named Cyric killed the god of Murder. As Bhaal's dark divine essence scattered across the land, Ochmar felt a strange power sweep through him. All at once, the hatred Ochmar felt for his father took the form of a homicidal compulsion. The boy had no wish to resist the murderous urge. That night when his father passed out from drinking, as he often did, he took up his father's great axe, Bleeder, and chopped off the miserable old man's head. To his surprise, the torrent of blood did not revolt him. Murder seemed a natural part of him; it was in him to the bone.

Ochmar gathered the things he might need to survive and headed for the town of Soubar. He lived on the streets for a while. He was a bully and a thug even then. Few people took pity on the orphaned boy because he was overly large and rather ugly. He took what he needed to survive or he lived off the land.

At the age of fourteen, a weapon smith who thought that his growing bulk would be well suited to the forge took him in. While Ochmar was clever, and picked up the skills of the trade easily, he could not imagine a life forging things for others. He wished to serve no one but himself and have whatever he wanted. When he was seventeen, He helped his master to forge a fantastic bardiche for a traveling mercenary. Ochmar hated to think of his greatest creation in the hands of someone else. Ochmar stole the weapon from his master's shop and left Soubar behind.

With no friends and no money, Ochmar quickly learned to draw upon the skills he had been given. Living off the land and taking what he wanted. The area around the small caravan town proved to be rich pickings for a bandit with the brains and the guts to take advantage of it.

One day, while evading a posse, Ochmar fled into the dangerous Forest of Wyrms, a forest with the infamous distinction of being home to a great number of green dragons. Ochmar had found the reputation to be true, but greatly exaggerated. While he'd seen signs of dragons in some parts of the wood, he'd fortunately never seen one himself.

On this particular trip, he came across the ruins of an elven village high in the ancient trees. In its day, it had been stunningly beautiful. Now the flowing elven architecture that blended so seamlessly with the trees it was built in had fallen into disrepair from long years of abandonment. Recognizing the value of the location as an easily defensible hideout, Ochmar set about the task of exploring the village and making it his home.

After a few tendays of repair work and fortification, Ochmar finally got one of the treetop homes into livable condition. One day, while working on a particularly devious trap for unwanted guests, Ochmar saw the quiet graceful form of an elf walking on the forest floor. Ochmar had never seen an elf before, so he watched a while to sate his curiosity.

This elf had apparently once lived in this village for he instantly found the secret stair that had taken Ochmar most of a day to locate. Ochmar watched as this somber-looking elf explored his new home. Seeing nothing of great value in the elf's possession, Ochmar decided not to kill him just yet though he thought he probably would later. After a good bit of observation, Ochmar decided to show himself. With a crossbow aimed and ready, he called out to the intruder.

"Hey, Elf, what're ya doin' in my tree?"

Startled, the elf drew two swords and turned to face his inquisitor.

Ochmar repeated, "what're ya doin' in my tree?"

The elf replied, "I am Lanier, and this was once my home."

"Well, it's my home now." retorted the massive bandit. He then asked, "Did you come from Soubar?"

"No, I have no affiliation with that town. Might I inquire your name?"

"My name is a dangerous thing to know, but if you're not going to Soubar I'll tell you. Though it will probably get you killed someday." The big man lowered his crossbow. "I'm Ochmar, and the less that means to you the longer you might live."

"The name means nothing to me except for a stranger well met." The elf replied lowering his swords.

Perhaps Ochmar was lonely, or perhaps an ounce of charity had somehow gotten into his heart, but he and the elf became fast friends. Lanier showed him secrets of the elven ruins, and Ochmar designed traps and escape routes to defend their new home.

Though he often let people think otherwise, Ochmar had a very sharp intellect. He combined his father's woodcraft and paranoia with his mentor's technical craftsmanship and found that he could devise devious and deadly traps for unwanted guests.

Few people ventured into the Forest of Wyrms. The large population of green dragons and yaun-ti tended to keep people away. Therefore, for those who could survive its peril, it made a great hiding place.

Ochmar littered the forest around his home with deadly traps of all manner of construction. Some were pit traps with sharpened spikes in the bottom. Others were snares to drag a man up by his feet to hang high above the ground. He devised a few traps that would release a massive swinging log to sweep the path and crush anyone in its way. In a few places he would combine all of these elements into one horrendous trap. In the tree fort itself, he built drop away walkways that would send the unwary plummeting to the forest floor.

Only he and Lanier knew all of the safe paths through the village. Anyone else would be tempting death to enter the pair's new home. Despite this unbelievable security precaution, Ochmar also installed several zip-lines from the treetop buildings out into the forest below. No protection is perfect, and only a fool would not plan his escape. Ochmar was no fool.

Lanier was often melancholy for the loss of his people, though mildly amused by his new friend's defensive paranoia. Lanier never knew who or what had destroyed his home so many years before. One hundred and twenty years ago, Lanier was just a boy. Early on he had exhibited great skill with the sword. Lanier's father believed the young elf had the makings of a great Bladesinger in him. The Bladesingers are the legendary champions of the elven people, great warrior wizards who defend the elven lands from all enemies. This tiny village, then called Earteilion, had no Bladesinger to teach the boy the skills he would need. Therefore, Lanier was sent away to Evereska to apprentice with the great Bladesinger, Grael Trivinoa. Learning the Bladesong is a process of many decades of hard study. Lanier devoted himself to the study of the sword learning the fluid musical rhythms of the Bladesong.

The years rolled by and ever so slowly, as is the way with elves the young elven boy grew into an elven man. While Lanier easily picked up the intricacies of the sword, the art of wizardry constantly eluded his understanding and soon became of little interest to him. At some point, many decades after Lanier left his childhood home; word came to Evereska of the fall of Earteilion. None knew when it had happened or who had destroyed the village. The only thing that was known was that most of the structures were destroyed and no survivors were found. Lanier wished to rush out right then to avenge his fallen people, but his mentor and now foster father, Grael forbade it. He demanded that Lanier complete his training before running off to face unknown evils capable of killing entire villages. Reluctantly, Lanier conceded to this logic and completed his Bladesong training. And so, more than a century after leaving his now vanished home, Lanier set out to discover who had killed his family and his people.

Although Ochmar enjoyed Lanier's company, he knew that the elf would have no stomach for the bloodthirsty work of banditry. Ochmar never mentioned his raids to Lanier. And Lanier, sensing that he was better off not knowing, did not ask where Ochmar acquired the money and supplies for their home.

During his time on the streets of Soubar, Ochmar had become acquainted with many of the town's thieves and pickpockets. Although not a likeable person, Ochmar had a reputation as an effective leader. It was for this reason that a spoiled merchant's son named Ashen agreed to aid Ochmar in a theft. Ochmar was a good bandit, but sometimes a job requires an extra set of hands. Ashen was a tall, handsome, and proud young man. He was a reasonably good thief and had a strange gift of mental powers. Despite his rather impressive talents, Ashen was not a clever man. Ochmar was easily able to manipulate the young thief. Using Ashen's contacts, Ochmar was able to discover that a wizard from a nearby town had just completed an enchanted sword for the guard captain of Soubar. The wizard's son was to deliver the blade personally to the guard captain, a man by the name of Lord Faircloth. Ochmar and Ashen set up an ambush a few miles outside of Soubar to claim the valuable blade for themselves.

Falling back on his favored technique, Ochmar laid a trap for the unwary group of travelers. As the group of five, the wizard's son and four guards, reached the right spot, Ochmar pulled tight a rope mounted about seven feet off the ground. All of the riders, but one, were violently jerked from their horses. The last guard in line ducked down holding tight to his horse's neck to avoid the trap. The four dazed and winded men that were unhorsed found that it was difficult to find a footing to get to their feet. The reason for this difficulty became quite apparent when Ashen hurled a flaming torch into their midst, igniting the puddle of flammable lamp oil that they were sitting in.

The flames erupted violently sending a shock wave out that was felt by the two bandits. The screams emanating from within the inferno were gut wrenching. Ochmar gave a hearty laugh and jumped to his feet turning his deadly crossbow on the still mounted man who'd escaped the blaze. The man had just wheeled his horse around to witness the horrific scene playing out before him. Though he was a caravan guard, he'd never been involved in a real fight before. He never dreamed that such tragedy could actually

happen to him. And in that one terrifying moment, he wanted nothing more than to run as fast and as far as he could.

Ochmar, expecting the guard to charge him aimed right for his center mass. At just that moment, the guard turned his horse, just enough to take the speeding bolt through the arm instead of the chest. Ochmar wanted to reload and fire again, but one of the burning figures emerged from the flames behind him. Feeling the heat increasing behind him, Ochmar dropped to the ground, picked up his bardiche and rolled to his feet, facing the walking bon fire in front of him. There was no way to tell which person it was, only that they were mad with pain and wielding the very sword that he had hoped to capture. Knowing he could not reach the escaping guard, he signaled Ashen to cut him off while he dealt with the burning man in front of him. This was the very reason he had brought Ashen into this fight. In an instant of concentration, the young thief vanished into thin air with a slight popping sound as the air rushed in to fill the void.

Ochmar was confident of his ability to defeat the already injured man in front of him. He started circling to feel out his opponent's speed and strength. Already, the flames were dying down but it was obvious that this man would die from his wounds. As a shrewd warrior, Ochmar knew that there is nothing as dangerous as a man with nothing to lose is. Thinking he saw the way to win this battle, Ochmar drew back for a massive side ways chop. Seeing an opening to strike, the doomed man wielding that marvelously crafted short sword stepped inside the apparent reach of Ochmar's enormous weapon to plunge the blade into Ochmar's gut. With a speed that thoroughly surprised the burnt man, Ochmar reversed his grip and spun the massive poleax around as easily as if it were a quarterstaff. In two quick and fluid motions, he disarmed the man and reversed again for a high lateral swing that took the man's head right off his shoulders.

Ashen's encounter did not go quite as smoothly. The young man popped back into existence on the trail in front of the fleeing guard. Again drawing on his mental powers, he attacked the man's mind with a wave of crushing force designed to stun the man into unconsciousness. That part worked just fine. The stricken man slumped over the saddle, but his horse never stopped running. Before Ashen could react to his error, the charging horse slammed right into him. Luckily, he was flung aside rather than trampled over, but his head struck a protruding tree root and the world faded to blackness.

After claiming the prized sword and dispatching the twitching, burning figures lying on the ground, Ochmar began searching the bodies for other valuables. He found a couple hundred gold pieces and some well-crafted weapons, but nothing exceptional. Soon he began to wonder what could be taking Ashen so long in returning. After all, the man could travel instantly. Becoming somewhat concerned; Ochmar took to the woods with his ill-gotten loot and began to move up the trail in a parallel course. It did not take long to find his incompetent accomplice moaning groggily on the ground. Guessing that the guard had escaped, Ochmar was furious. This was no petty theft or anonymous banditry. A wizard's son was dead and a lord's property was stolen and this incompetent fool had let a witness escape. There would be repercussions for this.

For a moment Ochmar considered killing the man where he lay. However, he would need all the help he could get in the trials to come, and now that he had been seen, Ashen could never go back home. The big man awakened the fool with a hard slap across the face. He lifted him effortlessly off the ground by his neck and growled, "Ye damned fool, now the whole garrison will be comin' after our hides, not to mention a wizard ridin' with 'em".

Ashen began to stammer his apologies, but Ochmar silenced him with another slap to the side of the head. After ensuring that he hadn't killed the fool, he threw him over his shoulder and began making his way to the tree fort, covering his tracks as he went.

Chapter 2

The next few weeks were tense. Ochmar and Ashen lay low, waiting for the expected backlash from the bungled raid. Each day, Ochmar would scout around looking for signs of the posses that he knew were looking for him. Each day it seemed that the searchers got closer, but as time wore on the hunting parties shrunk in size. Originally, fifty men had been mobilized. Now Ochmar guessed their numbers at closer to ten.

He had almost begun to think they would give up the chase when he heard one of his traps spring in the early hours of morning. Immediately Ochmar leaped out of bed and threw on his armor. He gathered up his weapons and gear and headed for the highest lookout point in the tree fort. There he found Lanier already scanning the forest floor for signs of trouble.

“There are two parties of men advancing on our position.” The elf stated in his usual, unemotional voice. “One group in the east has been delayed by the dead fall trap,” he said with a slight smirk, “and will soon run into the spiked pit. The other approaches from the North and will run themselves into that hellish contraption of yours.”

Ochmar knew he had picked a good ally in Lanier. Even if he didn’t have the heart of a bandit, he had good warrior’s instincts and a misguided sense of loyalty that would come in quite handy. Ochmar opened a crate and began loading the ten crossbows he kept there for just such emergencies.

Meanwhile, on the forest floor to the north, a group of five of the lord’s guards was about to learn about hell. The first thing he heard was a light twang. The squad sergeant looked down just in time to see a snare tighten around his left ankle before he was flung into the air. The force was tremendous and he thought it might have broken his leg, but he soon found that he was relatively unharmed, dangling and bouncing eight feet off the trail about fifteen feet ahead of where he’d been snatched.

The relieved man laughed to himself. After his moment of fear he marveled that a bloodthirsty outlaw would set such a benign trap. When he had composed himself a little, he barked to his stunned men, “Don’t just stand there, get over here and cut me down.” Coming out of their shock, the men immediately moved forward to cut down their leader. The first three had almost reached him when the ground fell away beneath them. The dangling sergeant and the last of the guards watched in horror as the three men plunged twenty feet down, to be impaled on four-foot-long wooden stakes. There was no doubt that all three men had died on impact. Their punctured bodies were suspended in grotesque poses upon the sharpened spikes. The last guard on the ground was too stunned and horrified for words. A strangled, gurgling whimper began to issue from his mouth.

The sergeant dangling helplessly above his dead men was the first to come back to his senses. “Gerrol,” he said in as calm a voice as he could muster. When he got no response he spoke more forcefully, “Damn it Soldier, listen to me.” This got the young trooper’s attention and he finally looked up. “Gerrol, I need you to come around the other side of this pit and get me down,” the sergeant said in a calm but firm voice.

“No,” whimpered the soldier, “that’s just what he wants us to do. We’re all gonna die.”

“Get a hold of yourself, soldier.” The sergeant screamed. “You and me can still get out of here alive if you listen to me. If you come around to this side of the pit you can reach me. Then we’ll both get out of here.”

This seemed to give the soldier some hope and he carefully began skirting around the pit, carefully checking the ground as he went. At last he made it back onto the trail on the other side of the pit. Standing right on the edge of the pit, the soldier could reach his sergeant’s hand. When he had a firm grip, the sergeant said, “good, now, Gerrol, just pull me down and cut this rope.” Gerrol gulped a few times, but

braced his feet and pulled his sergeant toward the edge of the pit. To the surprise of both men, the rope suddenly dropped about a foot and then stopped. There was a creaking and a rustling of leaves in the forest canopy. Gerrol looked all around and then spun to the back just too late to avoid the massive spiked log swinging down from the tree tops. The trooper was smashed and swept clear to the other side of the deadly pit. The sergeant was left grasping at the empty air where the last of his men and his last hope of rescue had been. He dangled there a moment wondering how he would meet his end. He didn't wait long. When the bloody log reached it's apex on the other side of the pit, the last loop of rope dropped out of the snare line and the sergeant dropped almost level with the ground. He had nowhere to go when the log came back down, still carrying Gerrol's shattered corpse to smash into his stomach and crush the life from his body.