

THE

BLACK RIVER CHRONICLES

LEVEL ONE

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To my co-author, with thanks.

– David

To the members of my first dungeon party of so very many years ago: Craig, Brad, Alex, Peter, Terry, Evan, Scott, and our esteemed master of disasters, Stephen. Thank you for the adventures and the lasting friendships.

– Michael

FOREWORD

Welcome to The Black River Chronicles.
Yes, it's a book. Yet another book, in a world that already has so many. So why this one?

We will always need heroes, and will always want to read stories about them. And heroes aren't the biggest, strongest, fastest, and best; being heroic is making the right moral choices, and pushing ahead when you're afraid and don't know what to do, and facing your own doubts and weaknesses. Being biggest, strongest, fastest, and best helps, but no one starts out that way.

So, how *do* heroes start out?

Well, fantasy stories are as old as humanity, magic being the "what if" awe and wonder factor we've talked about by firesides for centuries, that will solve our problems or spank evildoers or right terrible wrongs or bring us all joy and fun and freedom from drudgery. (Don't buy that? Well, there's a reason it's called "fantasy.") Fairytale became knightly romance became our modern written fantasy genre, and in that genre, classic works have introduced or popularized specific words (*The Lord of the Rings* giving us "ranger" in its fantasy sense, for example). In like manner, fantasy "classes," rogues and wizards and so on, have come to us from roleplaying games.

Which, along with such perennially tricky questions as to how to handle fantastic languages so a modern reader can understand what's being said, or how it is that dragons and trolls and humans in a given fantasy world can all understand each other, hands us another quandary: How do people who wander a world with weapons, making a living "adventuring" (often doing things modern real-world governments might

label “banditry” or worse), come to wear such class labels, with specific abilities or powers to match? If adventurers come from diverse backgrounds, how is it that they fit so often and so neatly into these categories some of us call “classes”?

Is there an academy somewhere, turning out rogues and rangers to meet the world’s needs?

Well, as a matter of fact, there *is*.

The Black River Academy of Swordcraft and Spellcraft.

And this is its story. Or rather, the beginning of its story. Not when it was founded or what went right or wrong back then, but rather *our* first look at it.

This is one wannabe ranger’s tale of his experiences at a place that trains adventurers before they set out into the world to have adventures. Like a driving school sending real-world folks out into the world behind the wheel of hurtling largely-metal things that all weigh more than a ton, training adventurers to a certain standard before unleashing them on the wider world, out all on their own, is a Good Idea. As in, *not* doing so is decidedly a Bad Idea, and dangerous for all concerned. And in this case, “all concerned” really means “all creatures living in the same world.”

But then again, doing so—when magic and sharp weapons and roguery are involved—can be decidedly dangerous, too.

Especially when novices don’t know what they’re doing.

And when you add deception to the mix, everything becomes more dangerous.

Especially when everything’s wrapped up together in one place: The Black River Academy. A powder-keg of ambitious students being sent on actual adventuring missions, with sometimes cantankerous tutors doing the sending.

Putting magic, danger, deception, and adventure together

means not necessarily all that much fun for anyone directly involved, but *lots* of fun for us, the readers.

And believe me, this book is a lot of fun. Surprisingly realistic fun. Enjoyable, immersive fun. “I want more” fun. And there’s a promise that this fun *will* be followed by more. At the same time, all on its own, this book tells a great tale that comes to a satisfying ending.

Magic, danger, deception, adventure...and friends. As unlikely as it seems at the beginning of the story, there’s friendship ahead. Good friends.

And you can never have too many good friends.

Ed Greenwood

Writing from The Archmage’s Chair

I

Durren had spent the entire morning being mediocre at archery.

Archery was a hard thing to be really mediocre at. It was probably easy enough to be downright bad. Three or four students certainly fell into that category: their shots peppered the outer rings of the targets, the ground before them and the straw bales beyond. One boy, lanky and amber-skinned and surely from beyond the Middlesea somewhere, had somehow managed to fire over his shoulder, nearly taking his own eye out in the process.

Durren felt sorry for them, for not every type of body was suited to the bow, and likely a couple of them would never be much better than they were now.

The truly excellent pupils he watched with more interest. They were a boy and a girl, with nothing apparently in common except that their poise and aim were practically flawless. Practically, but not quite: the girl had a tendency to loose an instant too early, while the boy drew to the left and downward. They were exceptional, but Durren felt satisfied that in a straight match he could have beaten them both.

Instead, he'd spent the morning being mediocre, to the best

of his ability. Mostly he placed his shots in the middle ring, sometimes straying towards the outer when that grew too boring—or when he became worried that his consistency would draw the attention of today's tutor, a tall and sharp-eyed woman named Tallowbyne. By the time noon drew near, the urge to try for a perfect bull's-eye was making the backs of Durren's hands itch. He felt as though that black-dyed circle was mocking him.

Just as he had convinced himself that one extraordinary shot would be mistaken for an accident—he might even make a joke of it, pretend to have astonished himself—there came a fearful clanging from the Old Tower. A dozen different bells hung there, used on their own to signal the hours and sometimes in combination for special messages. Durren had never before heard them all ringing together.

“Wait where you are,” Tallowbyne instructed, when two dozen sets of enquiring eyes turned her way.

So Durren slung his bow over one shoulder and waited, gaze roving the courtyard, at once curious and nervous to see what could justify such an unusual measure.

The main courtyard of the Black River Academy for Swordcraft and Spellcraft, an enormous space confined by the rambling outer walls on two sides and by the academy buildings on the remaining two, was divided unequally between the four classes. The region here in the crook of the walls belonged to the rangers, the walls extending outward to allow them distance to really test their archery skills. The fighters, to the left, had a large, collapsible arena and a row of training dummies made from wood and straw. The wizards' area was similar, with targets set on poles, some of them disconcertingly person-shaped. The principal difference was that their section was

often on fire; Durren suspected it was no coincidence that the well lay in that quadrant. Lastly, the farthest corner belonged in theory to the rogues. In practice, it was usually empty—or else the rogues were even better at sneaking than anyone dared guess.

In the three months Durren had spent at the academy, he'd never seen the four regions used at the same time—perhaps to avoid the risk of a stray fireball incinerating some poor fighter, or a misfired arrow picking out a wizard standing too near the edge of their allotted area. Yet, now, students were filing in from three directions, one group arriving from the main entrance and the others from side doors at the end of either wing. There were the fighters, showing off to each other and everyone else, a mass of bulging muscles and vacant expressions. There were the wizards in their loose-fitting robes, clumsily carrying staves almost as tall as themselves. There were the rogues, looking sheepish to be out in the open like this, trying always to edge away from each other. If Durren had had to guess, he'd have said that every first level student at Black River was out there, all together in one place for the first time.

The very centre of the courtyard was given over to a stepped platform. Durren had wondered on his first day what it was there for, and had since given the question no more thought. Now he understood—for ascending the steps on the far side was a familiar figure. Head Tutor Adocine Borgnin had spoken to Durren just once, when he'd first arrived at the academy, and Durren had found him grave and intimidating. Now, upon the stage, Borgnin cut an imposing figure.

He was dressed simply but well, in a cape of darkest grey, boots that reached almost to the knee, and a tunic of black felt, the slashed sleeves of which revealed a crimson lining beneath.

His hair and beard were both trimmed short, the latter in a spike beneath his chin. Durren would have struggled to judge the Head Tutor's age, and only from rumour did he know that Borgnin was the second youngest Head Tutor the academy had ever had.

Borgnin cleared his throat, a sound like the cracking of a whip. "New students of Black River," he said, "you have been here for three months now, and as such it's time that you began the next stage in your education. All of you have proved a certain aptitude in your chosen classes.

"However, to be a good ranger, wizard, fighter or rogue is not merely to be capable alone. Often in life you will be called upon to work with others whose abilities differ from but complement your own. Fail to do so and you'll be of no use to anyone, not even yourselves. Therefore, today you will join a party, and henceforward you will undertake expeditions with that party...beginning the moment you leave this courtyard."

At that, the gathered students, who had stayed politely quiet until then, let out a collective murmur. Durren, however, remained silent. He felt that if he opened his mouth even slightly he might choke. A coldness had begun in his heart and chilled him all the way down to his fingertips. How could no one have told him about this? But then the tutors never told you anything, and the higher level students barely acknowledged those less capable than themselves.

"Moreover," continued Borgnin, "you will be staying in the parties decided today until you all have levelled up. The crucial word in that sentence is *all*. From here onwards, the four of you will level up together, or else you never will. A single failure will hold back their entire party."

This time, the murmur was more of a collective gasp. The

unfairness of what Borgnin had said was appalling. Half of those in Durren's own class were only days away from being awarded their second level, and Durren had no doubt that the same would be true for the other classes. And unlike level one, level two actually *meant* something; it was an acknowledgement that you understood at least the basics of your trade.

For many, that promise would have been the only thing making these tough first weeks bearable: all that had kept them going from early morning exercises through to late night study, sustained them during endless, tiresome lectures, let them endure the ceaseless criticism of tutors. Now here they were, being told that any one of their fellow students could halt their progress for good. Worse, everyone knew that if you failed to level up in your first six months then automatic expulsion would await. Expulsion, through no fault of your own! Durren could read the thought in so many of the gathered faces, written in a mixture of shock and horror.

Borgnin cleared his throat once more. "Your parties," he said, "have already been determined, based on your performance until now and what circumstances your tutors feel will best allow your skills to flourish. These assignments are not open to debate. You may not trade party members, and you will be expected to behave towards your new companions with respect. You will have no leaders; all decisions are to be made by mutual consent. That is all. The allocations will now begin."

With that, Borgnin spun on his heel, and was striding off towards the academy buildings while the import of his last words was still sinking in.

Another, older tutor took his place, a woman Durren didn't recognise, though her stark black clothing and obvious discomfort at being in public implied that she was part of the

rogues' class. She had a scroll in her hands, and without preamble she began to read. "Party one to consist of, from the wizards, Nirma Faxis, from the fighters, Dunt Brevin, from the rogues, Elias di Torkender, from the rangers, Lyra Escafleur. Come forward and join your party mentor."

Durren noticed then that a stocky man was waiting at the base of the platform, and that nearby a queue of other men and women had formed, some of whom he dimly recognised as yet more faculty members: professors, assistants, instructors, librarians and even a couple he'd seen working in the kitchens. Clearly, whatever being a party mentor involved, it was a task requiring every available hand.

Durren watched as the chosen four hurried over from their separate quadrants. Lyra Escafleur was the girl who'd been excelling at archery all morning, and she marched off with quiet confidence to join her new companions, all of whom looked just as capable. Then the stocky man led them away in the direction of the buildings, and the tutor moved to the next entry on her list.

Thus the morning progressed. The rogue tutor read a set of names, the selected four gathered to meet with their mentor, and then together they trooped off towards the academy. The process was a slow one and seemed to go on forever.

What most bothered Durren, however, was that there appeared to be a clear logic to the order in which his classmates were being summoned. The best students had gone first, and then the better ones, and now the remainder consisted of the deeply average and the basically hopeless. Did his tutors really have such a low opinion of his abilities? Could his attempts to not draw attention have misfired this badly?

The names had long since begun to blur together, so that

Durren was barely listening by the time his was finally called. Flustered, he found himself repeating in his mind what the tutor had said, even as he hurried forward: “Party eighteen to consist of, from the wizards, Areinelimus Ironheart Thundertree, from the fighters, Hule Tremick, from the rogues, Tia Locke, from the rangers, Durren Flintrand. Come forward and join your party mentor.”

Durren tried to gain a discreet first view of these three that he was doomed to be spending so much time with. He saw the wizard girl first, the one with the extravagantly long name—and nearly had to stifle a laugh, for he couldn't have imagined anyone less well-suited to it. Areinelimus Thundertree was a dwarf, one of the few Durren had seen, and, though he was only of moderate height, her head wouldn't have reached to his chest. The overall impression wasn't improved by the glasses she wore, the lenses of which were so thick that he wondered how she could see through them at all. She was round of face and body, and her robe was at least a size too large, its shapelessness suggesting that Thundertree had tried to adjust the garment herself, with no knowledge of sewing or even of what clothes were meant to look like.

Nearing the stage, Durren turned his attention to the other two members of their prospective party. Approaching from his left was the fighter, Hule Tremick. Hule looked entirely typical of his class. He was at least a head taller than Durren, and suitably broad. His pinched eyes and flattened nose suggested a lifetime of failing to dodge punches, while his belligerent expression implied a fondness for throwing them without good reason. His only distinguishing feature was that his close-cropped hair was so pale as to be almost white.

As for their fourth member, Durren only saw her at the last

moment. Her face was sharp-featured, her eyes the pale grey of an overcast sky. There was something almost feline about them, just as the slight point to her ears made Durren think of a cat's. Her skin was of a darker grey that merged imperceptibly with her cloak—for she was dressed entirely in black, a particularly dense shade that made following her movements difficult. Of the three of them, she was the only one who looked like she might be more than capable in her trade of choice. She was also the first dun-elf Durren had seen and, for all he knew, perhaps the only one north of the Middlesea. Certainly, her kind were not a common sight these days.

Feeling those pallid eyes of hers flick his way, Durren glanced aside quickly, realising too late that he'd been staring. He found himself looking instead at a squat, sagging man not much taller than the dwarf girl, who frowned back as though he'd been waiting for hours rather than minutes. As the four of them formed a line, he introduced himself with, "I'm your mentor, Colwyn Dremm. Hurry up now!"

With that, Dremm was away, marching towards one of the smaller doorways that let off the courtyard. Durren found himself hurrying to keep up, this time taking care to keep his gaze fixed on nothing. It was beginning to sink in that he'd be spending a great deal of time with these people, and that it might not be the best idea to make too early a bad impression.

Beyond the door, Dremm led the way through a series of unfamiliar passages, in a wing of the vast building Durren had never had cause to explore. The embossing on the walls, a simple design of an inverted sword against a red background, implied that this section belonged to the fighters.

Durren felt as though they must have walked half the length of the courtyard outside by the time Dremm halted to

open another door. The room on the far side appeared to be some sort of huge storage cupboard. Three walls were lined with shelves, the one to the left crammed with rucksacks and the others busy with such a range of objects that Durren could hardly begin to take them all in.

“Take a pack appropriate to your class,” Dremm said. “Don't worry, they're all the same. And you may select one item each. Choose wisely, because you won't be allowed to change your mind until you've levelled up.”

Now that Durren looked, he realised that the rucksacks were divided into four categories, each section marked with a class crest. Those intended for the rangers were more easily identified, however, by the laden quivers sewn into their left side.

Durren hoisted one down as instructed, and then turned his attention to the remaining shelves. They were covered from top to bottom in bric-a-brac, with objects of every size and shape competing for space. There were already a great many gaps in evidence, where previous party members had seized what Durren assumed to have been the choicest items. Still, more than enough remained to make the possibility of choosing seem all but impossible.

Durren's gaze fell on a wooden pole, nearly double his own height. Chopped into three, it would have kept the wizard girl in staves for life. What its actual function was supposed to be, though, Durren had no idea, and its sheer uselessness appealed to him. How were you even meant to carry it?

Reluctantly he forced himself to consider other possibilities: a set of glass jars containing some murky substance, a white cloth sash, a miniature kettle, a stone the size and shape of Durren's flattened palm that glowed with its own

dim light. None of them appealed. Then, turning his attention to the highest shelf, he saw something that immediately called out to him: a coil of thick and sturdy-looking rope.

"I'll take this," he decided, stretching to his full height to lift it down. Only as he did so did he discover that the angle had hidden the coil's true dimensions from view; the rope was so long that it would probably have stretched from the courtyard to the tip of the Old Tower, and appropriately heavy. Durren almost considered changing his mind, but the rules likely prohibited indecisiveness, and even if they didn't, he'd have been too embarrassed.

The rogue girl—Tia, that was her name—had made her choice almost immediately. Now, Durren realised that she was glaring at him, though whether because he'd taken so long or because she disapproved of his selection he had no way to guess.

"You never know when a good length of rope will come in useful," he pointed out defensively.

Her answer was to give the slightest of shrugs—as if to suggest that nothing he did, no matter how stupid, could possibly concern her—and to turn her back on him.

Durren had been the last to pick, he realised, for their mentor was watching him as well. Seeing that his decision was made, Dremm stalked off again, back into the passage, and Durren was left trying to stuff the rope into his too-small pack without at the same time tripping over his own feet.

Dremm led them up one staircase and then another, and Durren noticed that the embossed designs upon the stonework had changed. Now they represented a staff with an orb atop and stylised lightning bolts spitting out across a yellow backdrop; evidently they'd passed into the region of the