

# CHARACTER STORY: BRIGAND

I go where the gold leads and I make folks bleed. Playing to your strengths and all that. I'm not above admitting that's really all I'm good at. Thankfully when you live around these parts, this set of skills is more than enough to make a nice living.



I recall that night at a roadside inn, the torn clouds rushing past a sickly moon, tree branches whipping in the foul wind, rain coming in bursts, turning dirt roads into pools of impassable mud. A scholar on a run paid me and a few others to keep him safe as his wagon was rushing towards Aulstrad, away from the Scarred Wastelands. He expected trouble and had deep pockets, so he hired a few of us to stand between trouble and himself when the time came. Four tough bastards that have seen action in addition to the bodyguard he had with him and me.

The scholar wanted to keep going through the night, but the rain ruled that right out, so we were spending the night at a rickety old place with a wooden hedge around a few low-set wooden buildings with thatched roofs. Four of ours were standing guard just outside, wrapped in their cloaks on the edge of the inn's courtyard, hiding from the rain, making sure no stranger would disturb our employer's peace in his rooms. Me and his bodyguard were inside, away from the rain and wind, taking a wary look out the window every now and then. He was a short, lightly set man with short hair and beard stubble showing some grey. He wasn't saying much but his eyes darted around, as if kept waiting for a berk with a knife to jump out of every shadow.

The trouble didn't keep us waiting long. They rode in through the rain, jumping off the horses into the mud of the courtyard. Scale mail under their cloaks. No words, they drew steel and headed grimly for the door where the four of ours were waiting. I counted seven of them. If our friends take three or four there will be only half of them for the two of us to take. We could do it.

The rain muffles the clanging of steel and the groans of pain outside, with the familiar sound of flesh torn by weapons mixing with the similarly wet sounds of feet in the mud. I look out the window as they regroup. Still seven of them. They killed four of ours without losing a single man. "We're dead" I observe to the bodyguard. His eyes narrow as thoughts race through his mind. "Maybe not" he retorts.

Taking great care, he takes out a small vial out of a belt bag. Greyish liquid swirls inside, specks of black floating in it. "This should help" he remarks. "Got it from him" he nods towards the door where the scholar is holed up. "Distilled from some crystals he found down where he was digging". The place that he was fleeing in such a rush. Must have dug to deep, I think to myself, though I'm curious what he expects out of this liquid. A bomb of some sort? That would take out a few of them and confuse the others. Instead he carefully opens it and gulps down the liquid, just as the door leading in from the courtyard bursts open under a heavy kick.

He turns towards the sound, his sword drawn, his motion sharp and precise. He looks at me and I can see that something inside him is changed – in a way that is just... wrong. It's not that he got bigger or anything, but somehow his body seems to vibrate ever so slightly, as if unknown energy is surging through it, barely contained. He looks at me with his bloodshot eyes, and I can swear I see wispy smoke coming from them. His face cracks with a sick smile as he charges the assailants.

They have crossbows and fire off a few bolts that he dodges as he charges, his movements quick and precise. One of the bolt thuds into a wall next to me as I take out my knives – he won't be able to stop all of them. He dives under the axe swipe of the first one as the crossbowmen are taking out their melee weapons, grabs the hand of the axe man and buries his sword in his chest, positioning him as a shield against the initial counterattacks from the others. As they circle him, he yanks throwing knives from the axeman's bandolier and throws those with such force that another warrior staggers back as the knife is buried in his stomach. He spins around, weaving, hard to hit in constant motion, but one of them lands a stab with his shortsword to the bodyguard's leg. He barely notices as a broad swipe of his sword cuts open the throat of another one. One of them staggers back, away from the furious melee, loading his crossbow and raising it for a shot. I grab him from the back and end him with several quick stabs in his back. He goes limp as he collapses to the floor. Mind your surroundings, friend.

The assailants are clearly experienced fighters, but the bodyguard makes them look like children – he fights like a man possessed in a whirlwind of steel, blood splatters hitting the walls, enemies falling grasping mortal wounds. His stabs and parries are unnaturally fast and precise, every strike purposeful and brutal. I can't look away. He finishes the last one taking his head clean off with a powerful swing, too fast to block. Whatever was in that vial makes you an invincible monster. That could come in handy in my line of work.

He turns to me and that sick smile is still on his face, now covered in blood. A fair share of it is his own – a gash is opened above right eye and despite his speed his chainmail is soaking through with dark red spots in several spots. He walks back to me, nodding towards the corpse at my feet – the one out of seven that I took.

Just as he gets close his strength leaves him and he collapses – I catch him and lower him towards the floor. He convulses as he coughs up a bit of blood. He looks up at me – the wisps of smoke are gone, and his eyes seem drained of all colour. He looks satisfied as he nods to me again – acknowledging that we've done our duty. I pat him on the back. He closes his eyes, struggling to take deep breaths to recover.

It is then that I bury my knife deep in his chest. His eyes never open again as a pool of blood forms around his body. I get up, the empty vial in my hand, raising it up to look it over. I will need to know how he got one of those. He mentioned a hamlet on the edge of the Scarred Wastelands. That's where I'll head. When there are invulnerable monsters about – I will not miss a chance to become one.

For now, though, there is still work to be finished. I turn towards the door of the scholar's room and smash into it with my shoulder, breaking it off its hinges. An old man is inside, clutching a book, a look of terror on his face, as I walk towards him, knife in hand. People who want him had even deeper pockets and I always go where the gold leads.