

TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ENDERAL

(SURREAL)



The Butcher of Ark

Chapter 4: Ashes

It must have been around two o'clock in the night when I put my plan into action. The voices from below had started to fade around midnight, but I did not want to take any unnecessary risks. I carefully stepped outside my room and looked into the hallway leading to the stairs down to the taproom. However, I quickly drew back my head when I heard muffled, heavy steps rumbling up the stairs. I closed the door behind me and listened. A woman and a man, probably drunk, judging by the irregularity of their steps. Could it be one of the two brutes? No ... his voice sounded too bright, too soft and too tired. I waited until they had passed my door and until I heard their door closing. Then I swiftly stepped into the hallway again. Now it was empty. Quietly, I went towards the stairs and peeked down to the taphall. Nothing. Even the maidservant and the host seemed to be sleeping, and only the typical smell of grease, alcohol and sweat told of the numerous guests who had indulged themselves a few hours ago. I nodded contentedly just as to confirm myself and returned to my room. An empty taproom indicated that even outside there was nobody except for a sentinel – maybe a beefy farmer's son who wanted to earn a few extra coins.

Carefully, I checked the utensils that I had concocted for my revenge, and I tied the leather pouch that contained them around my waist. Then I pulled the hood of my vagabond's gear deep into my face and congratulated myself for its purchase again. I opened the window without effort or noise and swung out the blinds that were supposed to protect the room from the cold of the night. Just a little creak. I looked down the wall. I was filled with a feeling of gratification. Indeed, I was less muscular and strong than the brutes, but I was agile and flexible instead. My hands were long and slim, perfectly fit for my purpose. Slowly I climbed out of the window and

was filled with a cozy, almost thumping warmth even though a cold wind was blowing. I felt as if I even drew power from the dull feeling inside me. I glanced down and surveyed the situation. I was lucky in two ways: first, the host had given me a room on the second floor, not the third one – and second, just a few feet below me there was the roof of a small porch that was probably sheltering the sentinel from rain. As I descended, I was luck again: The tips of my boots were only a few finger's breadth away from the roof. I inhaled deeply and loosened my grip from the window ledge. A muffled impact was audible, but it was not loud enough to raise suspicion. Now I had to be quick. Any second out here could be the moment that someone got aware of me. Quietly, I walked along the porch and descended from the edge. A gust of wind made my vagabond's garment flutter, just as if nature had decided to accentuate the scene.

The stables where the brutes had put their horses were now in front of me. The building was an unremarkable extension of the tavern, standing in the blue of the night in perfect silence. As I came closer, I heard the heavy breath of horses, the scraping of hooves and the crinkle of hay. Carefully, I pulled the heavy iron grip at the door. It opened easily. You might well ask why an open stable door did not arouse any suspicion in me. Yet I was too consumed by the blazing determination that my bold plan of revenge had created, so I sneaked inside. Only five horses were in the stable, two of them sleeping. A gray nag in a compartment next to the door glanced at me with an expression that could have been called skepticism, but it soon continued chewing the hay. It was not difficult to find the steeds of my tormentors, pitch black and muscular as they were. They stood at the very end of the horse wing, in a chamber separated by a fragile wooden door. Now the moment had come. Cautiously, I kneeled down at the compartment of the first steed, near the manger. I was unable to fight a feeling of envy as I inspected the animal

from up close. Even an amateur like me could see that it was a Scarragian Rock Stallion. For a while, I quarreled with myself. Who were these men that could afford such noble horses? And what was going to expect me if they ever got scent of the fact that I was responsible for what was going to happen to them in the morning? *Maybe all this is the first time in your life that you show courage! These two bastards have earned a lesson in humility!*

Of course ... The voice was right! I was right! To recoil now would be an act of cowardice, a shame that I did not want to live with. Indeed ... these two had earned a lesson in humility, and I was going to give it to them.

My fingers slid into the leather pouch at my side, felt out the small phial and pulled it out. Sheer Cap dust. The eponymous mushrooms usually grew in sparsely vegetated, stony landscapes, and the cliff that Fogville was situated on was exactly such an area. The application of these fungi was one of the first things that Mother Pylea had taught me when I was a novice in the village. Mixing the dry powder with Whispertree Resin resulted in a sticky pulp that considerably accelerated the healing rate if applied to an open wound. As Whispertrees grew in almost all areas of Enderal – except in the barren lands of Thalgard, the Northwind Mountains and the Pinnacle Desert – it was highly advisable to take along a phial of concentrated Sheer Cap Powder on extended journeys. The small vessel provided protection from various ailments and afflictions, first of all inflammation, to those who knew the right mixture ratio. However, the Cap's powder had another effect that was unknown to the common people: If it reached the stomach of an unfortunate fellow in an excessive concentration, it triggered something that would be best described as a “cascade of rage”. Negative feelings such as grief, hate and anger were amplified many times over. An irascible man would lose his temper even faster than usual. A gloomy, heartbroken woman would

be suffering unbearably, leading to a full breakdown. The effect of concentrated Sheer Cap Powder mixed into a meal equaled the feelings that a trained psionic could evoke in his victims. The only difference was that the powder needed seven or eight hours to take effect. In this case, though, I welcomed the delay, as you can imagine. According to my plan, the two brutes, full of arrogance and pride, would be mounting their expensive stallions, only to be thrown to the ground by the befuddled horses in full gallop. The horses would probably be running away, leaving behind the primitives with considerable bruises or fractures – at that time I was shocked by the gratification, or rather lust, that the thought gave me.

A smile formed on my lips as I opened the phial and walked towards the sleeping horses. I did not have to search long for the trough. It contained a pap of hay, mashed apples and rancid water, most likely a meal that the splendid animals were not accustomed to, yet it was tasty enough to what their appetite. I crouched down in front of the bucket that stood at the end of the hallway between the two compartments, poured two small heaps of the powder on my hand and mixed them into the food. Then I carried the trough to the compartment, waved it around in front of the horses and murmured something I considered appropriate to smoothly wake up a warhorse. I did not have to wait long. Sluggishly, the first horse opened an eye and gave me an undefinable glance. Sleepily, it shook its head as if the mental classification of my presence meant too much effort at this late hour, fluttered its lips and dipped its head into the trough. *It is working ... Damn it, it is working!* The thrill of anticipation that had filled me when I entered the stable now mingled with a glowing feeling of triumph, and I felt more alive than ever. Strange, indeed? There I was, a young priest of about thirty winters, playing a prank on two brutes who had been bullying me. However, instead of feeling impish or cheeky I saw myself as an impersonation

of justice, as an avenging angel who contributed to the betterment of humanity with his action. Well, so the circumstances fit into each other ... And the first butterfly flew, as the veiled women would say. I was so consumed in my satisfaction that I did not perceive my surroundings. Therefore I heard the heavy steps behind me only when it was too late.

I felt a heavy paw on my shoulder. Startled, I turned my head, which was my first mistake. Now the buccaneer was able to identify my face which before was hidden in the darkness. He seemed to instantly realize what I was doing.

“You lousy swine!”, he snarled, half statement and half question. His breath, smelling of alcohol, was the last thing I heard before he clashed his right fist into my face without waiting for a response. I heard a sharp snap and felt a burning pain shooting up my head. The force of the blow threw me back so that I fell on the sparsely distributed pieces of hay on the floor. My head reverberated as if the pillars of the Sun Temple had burst asunder on it.

“Miserable son of a whore!”, I heard the buccaneer amid the noise. “You haven’t had enough, have you?” The pain made me ache and I tried to crawl forward. Instantly, I felt an exploding pain in my right side as the giant thrust his rigid leather boot in my side. “Huh? What is your problem, you piece of crap?”, he shouted, full of rage. “What is your damn problem?” Another thrust followed, now in my ribs. I heard them cracking noisily, and for a moment I was unable to breathe. I was foolish enough not to understand that the buccaneers “questions” were not questions but expressions of rage, so I held up my hand and tried to give an explanation for my presence here. As a result, his boot hit my head, and my face was dashed on the hard stone floor. I felt hot blood running down my forehead, my cheeks and my nose, and everything went black. Using the last of my strength, I crouched like a child in its mother’s womb in order to

better endure the force of his attacks. *You miserable fool*, I thought. *You damn fool! He is going to kill you, damn it, he is going to kill you!* These thoughts crossed my mind over and over while I expected his next kick.

But no kick came. I was confused and, between the blood in my eyes, tried to recognize something in the dark. The giant had turned away from me and kneeled before his horse, worriedly caressing it. The soothing words he whispered to the animal made a stark contrast to the brutish crying that had accompanied his attack. *He does not recognize me*, I thought while in pain. *He does not even recognize me as a threat.*

What happened next – and most importantly, what I felt – will be hard to put in words.

I remember how I suddenly felt the leather sheath of my iron dagger. I had considered it to be smart to keep it disguised, and I carried it with me simply because I had forgotten to leave it in my room in the tavern. Everything happened faster than I was able to think – instinctively, bestially. Anyone who had received a well-trained, hard blow on his nose knows how painful it was. However, my experience of pain vanished in an instant, and I felt how the dull feeling in my stomach, the feeling that at the beginning of my failed act of vengeance had become determination and anticipation, began to transform. If a feeling had a form, it changed after my last thoughts were thought. *Degenerate bastard*, it shot through my mind. *First you humiliate me without reason, in front of all the people, and now you dare to spoil my revenge?* The anger in my stomach started to smolder, and in a matter of seconds my body was soaked in sweat. I trembled. *He was going to pay for this, the subhuman, the worthless piece of filth that considered himself above the law only because of his bloated upper arms and his physique. Indeed ... Some people did not deserve a place on this world.* Quietly, bristling with rage, I drew my dagger. My arm was strangely twisted

by the kicks, but I ignored the pain, it did not exist anymore. There was only me and my enemy. And then I was there. With a force I did not think my slim arms were capable of I drove the dagger into the brute's back. Surprised and stunned, the gorilla gasped and turned around. Now there was no hint of malice and mocking in his eyes. Instead, I saw bewilderment, as if what was about to happen did not belong to the realm of possibility. Then it changed to plain, bestial rage. He grabbed my throat with both his hands and lifted me so that I dangled like a convict from the gallows. Unconcernedly, the dagger stuck in his back as if it had been there from the day of his birth. I felt how he tried to choke me, but the instant I saw the man's eyes I knew that his time was numbered. It burned inside of me, an archaic, destructive force, and a mixture of rage, euphoria and a flush of victory ran through my veins, my mind and every part of my body. With full force I kicked the tip of my boot between his legs. Instantly, the man uttered a terrified cry, unclamped the hands around my neck and sank down. I did not hesitate for a second. Quickly, I grabbed dagger in his back and pulled it out vigorously, only to stab him again in a different place. This time I felt resistance, so I changed the angle of the weapon and turned it jerkily. The man roared, and now his voice did not sound human anymore. Weak and disoriented he tried to fall backwards and thus throw himself on me, but it was in vain. *You dare to evade your punishment?*, the voice in my head ranted. *After all you did to me you dare to resist me? Huh?!* One more time I hit him with my dagger, and this time I drove it into his thigh. Again he staggered, gasping unintelligible words. This time he did not try to fight back. Instead, he sank to his knees and started to whimper. *He wants me to stop!*, it shot through my head, and an insane, triumphant grin filled my face. *This piece of crap seriously wants mercy!* However, I did not grant him mercy. Instead, I threw myself upon him and knocked him down to the floor. Now I kneeled over him, and

for a short, quirky moment I realized that a stranger who at this very moment had watched our silhouettes must have considered us a couple in love play. A laugh left my throat, and another, louder one. The way he was laying there! The big, remorseless giant looked at me with delirious eyes full of fear like a boy who was about to receive a well-deserved spanking from his father. His steed did not seem to be concerned at all. "Please ... please not!", he whispered, and blood gushed out of his mouth.

What happened then will be hard to put in words. First, I was overcome by a wave of demonic joy and broke out in manic laughter. I threw my head backwards and laughed loud and ringing. An ecstatic frenzy swept through my bones, my veins, my body. By the Black Guardian, I felt alive! I felt if I had lived with a veil over my eyes that was now torn away, as if I had considered a shadow on the wall for the thing that had cast it. Like a priest who killed a sacrificial lamb, I grabbed the dagger with both my hands, held it above my head and drove it into the brute's chest. In the very instant when the poignant sound of steel penetrating flesh occurred, something happened that changed my life forever. For a short moment I became the man who I killed. Indeed, I became him and stayed myself at the same time, as paradoxical as it may sound to you. First, a wave of unknown images *memories* swept across my mind. I saw the brute, having the blood of a Scarragian man on his hands; I saw him in a dark room, holding a black piece of cloth, weeping; I saw him together with his chum – it was his brother – in a large stone hall, standing in a circle of people who held each other's hands. Each of the images appeared with the force of a striking hammer, and with every new image the tingle increased, the flaming delight in my body intensified and the obsession that controlled my actions grew and became more consuming. *Feed me*, the dark part of my self cried, louder and stronger with each image that appeared to me. *Feed me with his flames!*

With shaking hands and sweat all over my body I pulled the dagger out of the dead body of the giant, only to drive it into his chest one more time, three times stronger than before. Again a wave of images filled my mind in the very moment the dagger hit him, revealing themselves to me with the rhythm of an adrenalin-fueled heartbeat. Every new image bestowed an rise of ecstasy upon me. I uttered a noise that was meant to be a sigh of pleasure, but it left my mouth as a manic, demonic croak. By the righteous way, I experienced a feeling of rapture like never before. *I am alive!*, my thoughts cried while I lifted the blade for the next blow. *I live and I JUDGE!* The blade dashed down again and pierced the lifeless flesh that lay below me. Memories. Ecstasy. His red lifeblood was in my face, hot and sticky, but I did not care, no, I cared about nothing at all for I would *JUDGE, KILL, PUNISH! HIM FOR HIS SINS, STAB FOR STAB, MEMORY FOR MEMORY, UNTIL NOTHING REMAINED OF HIM, NOTHING BUT COLD, LIFELESS ASHES!!*

Even now, almost a year later, I feel my palms grow moist and my breath accelerate when I recall this memory; the ink becomes darker and the quill breaks. But you will not be able to understand my feelings as a damned being from a non-rational point of view; there are numerous reasons for this. The first reason is that it is very likely you are disgusted by my account. You are right, for I describe a barbaric act in an almost celebratory manner. However, it is the only way to make you understand my thoughts to some extent at least. The second reason however, which is attributable to the first, is the one that weighs most:

There are things you can only truly understand if you experience them yourself. Among them are sex, the ecstasy of pain during a deadly fight, and, not least, the end of life itself, death. How exquisitely we could reason upon the latter, creating explanatory models for its nature – emanating from the Path, the chants of the monks from Arazeal or a philosopher's mind –, yet in the end it will make

no difference, we will truly comprehend it in the moment we face it ourselves. The ecstasy that had got hold of my body like the Blue Death got hold of a wild magician's mind was all of the above and none of it. It was the fire. It filled me up and burned in every part of my body. All my limbs felt boiling hot, and my heart beat insanely within my chest. What I had done seemed to me morbidly wonderful, lofty ... even stimulating and, in a perverted manner, sexual. I did not believe for a second that I did anything wrong, no, there was no right or wrong, there was only me and the driving force inside of me, originating from somewhere apart from gods, demons and the laws of this world. I was judge, my will was my sword, and the man the convict. There was nothing more. All of my movements were instinctive, archaic, pure. What I did was nothing more than the consequences of intricate circumstances. Just like a wolf that tears apart a lamb, I did only what I, Jaél Tanner's Son, had to do in this moment.

At least until the fire expired.

How late might it have been? The cock's crow had not sounded yet, but a few birds chirped in the dense forest next to the fields of wheat. One of the steeds was still sleeping, defying the laws of sound. The other one just scraped its hooves impatiently on the hey-covereed ground. I had not moved a bit after my final stab. The man who some hours ago had mocked me lay below me, battered and disfigured, and the dark blood on my hands had started to dry. Unmoving and rigid as a wax doll, I kneeled above my work. At one point I had felt something like a "zenith". As mentioned earlier, I had felt more burning and ecstatic with every stab. The flames inside me had grown, grown and grown. Then I felt as if an enormous, infernal pillar of flames shot up from my stomach to my eyes, blazing, hot, searing.

After that, my reason started to return. Less and less I thought with the diffuse voice in my mind, more and more I became Jaél Tanner's Son again, born in Fogville, a pathless priest ... and murderer.

I realized what I had done, but like a warrior after a nerve-racking battle, my mind and body were too weak, and I was unable to think straight. So I dropped the dagger, put my head back, closed my eyes and listened to the silence. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Half an hour. Only when I heard steps nearing the stable, I broke free from my rigor, but I was unable to act accordingly. *A good boy wipes off the dirt from his plate*, shot through my head all of a sudden. Slowly I turned my gaze. It was the buccaneer's chum.

For a short moment the fire started to glow inside me again, and I smiled an almost indulgent smile at the man who stared at the carnage in disbelief. Then it disappeared, too tired, too weak, sated. The brute's hand started to move towards his sword, slowly and lethargically.

Suddenly he broke down with a choked, dead groan. I blinked, too apathetic to fully comprehend what just happened. A dark shape, veiled in shadows, stood still like a statue behind the collapsed body at the entrance. Then it started to move and approached me. The silver beam of a moon that was almost defeated by the sun shed light on the face of the figure.

It was the beau.

Some steps in front of me he halted and stemmed his hands against his hips. He appeared to me like a docker who examined the payload that had to be carried from the ship to the wharf in hours of hard work. Then he smiled, engaging, perceptive and scornful.

"You actually have it", he spoke in a pleasant baritone, fascinated.

"What?"

The beau laughed.

"Well, what?!" He paused and for a moment seemed to look right through me. Then his eyes met mine again, and I perceived in them a curious change that I was unable to comprehend at that time.

"The fire."