

TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ENDERAL

(SUREAI)



The Butcher of Ark

Chapter 2: The Nameless One

Up to the present day, the origin and nature of this vision remained a mystery to me. Who was the enigmatic woman? How did she enter my thoughts? Or was it not her, but merely a spectral image of my thoughts, an embodiment of my subconscious? These were the questions that went through my head right after I awoke.

Yet I had not much time to ponder. For when I awoke, breathing heavily and soaked in sweat, I realized that something was different. Disoriented, I rose up and rubbed my burning eyes. I looked around in my room, and my bones cracked reluctantly as I turned my head left and right. *Nothing*. My surroundings seemed perfectly normal. Again, I let my gaze roam the narrow room, from the heavy wooden door, along the small wardrobe, to the scribe's desk in the right corner, on which numerous tomes and scrolls lay in disorder. Insecurely, I closed my eyes and delved into myself. No ... The repugnancy was not to be found in my surroundings. It derived from me. To be exact, it derived from a strange feeling in my stomach that was unknown to me back then. It was an uneasiness, dull and stagnant, a diffuse fear similar to the one we fear when we know that terrible or challenging things wait ahead. Notwithstanding, the feeling seemed familiar, like a gloomy truth that was suppressed in my subconscious all the years and that now found its way to my mind, like glowing coal beneath a thin layer of fissured ice that began to melt. Bewildered, I laid my hands on my stomach, in a child-like, instinctive manner. Of course, it did not help – the strange, dull feeling remained.

I rose up dizzily and looked out of the narrow window above the scribe's desk. The vision that had felt like an eternity seemed to have lasted not more than an hour in reality. Still, not a single sound from outside reached my ear, and the light was dim and pale. Only a pallid and grey cone of sunlight brightened the dance of a hundred confused dust grains in the air. In addition to my uneasiness, I was nauseous, my eyes burned and I felt weak. *Water ... I need water*. Indolently, I

walked to the trough, which was filled with fresh spring water, next to the heavy wooden door. I felt how my uneasiness became stronger, and for a moment an absurd scenario unfolded in my mind. What would I see in the mirror of the water when I bent over the trough? The deformed and decayed grimace I saw in the ruin? Or the unremarkable face of a man that lived his life ruled by coincidence and the lack of alternatives instead of free will? I fought the urge to walk away from the trough and instead went to my knees in front of it. But my fear was baseless. No festering maggots crawled from the face that stared at me in the reflection, no chapped skin revealed the flesh on the bones beneath. *Just a dream. It was just a dream.* I smiled weakly and confused about my own folly, formed my hands to a bowl and drank three deep gulps. Then I sprinkled some water on my face, rubbed it on my body, my hair, my arms and my feet. I took the brush of boar bristles and scrubbed my skin until it began to bite. Finally, I took my brown priest's robe from the cast-iron hook at the door, slipped it over and leaned wearily against the wall. I felt better but not well. I repeated the sentence several times in my thoughts. Thus, I tried to banish the remains of what I believed to be a nightmare. Yet the desired effect did not occur, for every time I closed my eyes, images of my own corpse flooded through my mind, and my uneasiness grew, as if it wanted to emphasize the meaning of the dream. I sighed and did what I always did when I contemplated – I began to pace around my room.

I remember all too well that this moment was the first time in my life that silence appeared oppressive to me. How I wished to hear the familiar creaking of cartwheels, the bright calls of the baker or the bray of a donkey ... But there was nothing, absolutely nothing to hear, not even the mournful singing of the wind that was usually omnipresent in Fogville. Along with the pale light in my chamber I felt like a part of a Tirmatrolean mourning tableau. Always the same images: the coffin ... the corpse. And the veiled woman and her words ... *Follow the fire ... End your false life.* Was there a connection between these words and

the dull feeling in my stomach? Why did I dream of such things at all? What, by the righteous path, did it mean? My countenance clouded. *False life? What a heap of nonsense.* I lived exactly the life that the Path had chosen for me. Even if, from time to time, gloomy thought came to my mind and I felt envious about the adventures who on their journeys had a rest in Fogville, it did not mean that my pious life was in any way “false”. No ... I was lucky that I did not have to live at the side of my miserable father, smearing grease on animal hides. I was even luckier not to be one of the ill-fated people who cut each other's throats for a stale piece of bread in the Undercity of Ark. I pinched my eyes. *These are the very thoughts that make path-abiding people stray from the Path. They become attracted to an insane vision of an “adventurous life” and get drawn into suffering and misery.* With a gloomy face I thought of terrible stories that from time to time reached Fogville. All the time it had been egoists and power-hungry ones who drew innocent people into ruin along with them. Eventually, I stopped. *No ... my life is exactly as it should be.*

„Is that so, Jael?”

I startled. *What in blazes ...?* Irritated, I moved around, trying to find the voice's origin. Nothing ... I was alone. But then where did this voice come from? I must have had imagined it. It had come to that – I heard voices! *This dream is driving me insane.* Angry about myself, I started to move again. Yet after only two steps, the voice sounded again in my thoughts – and along with it, the dull feeling in my stomach burned like fresh blaze in the wind. Images and feelings rose in my consciousness, heavy and pressing, but familiar at the same time. This time the voice spoke with a mixture of mourning and mockery.

„How much longer do you want to close your eyes to the truth? What needs to happen to make you finally understand?”

This time I actually tumbled backwards when I heard the voice. Not so much because of the words but because of the feeling it triggered in me. Thoughts flew in my mind, and they were not only thoughts about the scenes of my dream. I saw myself, lying on my bed, soaked

in sweat, shivering. I saw myself, gloomily staring afar while Mater Pyléa was reading out the Path to me. Along with these thoughts came a crawling uneasiness, a feeling of loneliness and fear. Instinctively, I pressed both hands against my stomach. *By the righteous Path ... I am losing my mind! Damn it, I am actually losing my mind!* I turned around fast like lightning and hastened to my desk, upon which lay an open, leather-bound folio. It was a handwritten transcription of the Path that I had just started before the festivities of the Star Summer Night. For five decades now it had been possible to reproduce written works in an almost magical manner – thanks to the strange, press-like construction of a cunning Starling researcher (it was called “letterpress” due to the mechanics of the machine). The manual transcription, however, was still considered a sign of spiritual commitment. It had something meditative about it, it was calming, and that was what I needed to banish the rising panic in my stomach. Hastily, I adjusted my chair, opened the inkwell and took the quill. “Work frees the mind”, I told myself. *I was encouraged by the fact that the barrage of strange images and the feeling that came along with them had decreased. It had been a dream, nothing more. A frightening dream, indeed, but a dream nonetheless. Yes ... Concentrating, writing a few pages, reciting a verse – and the spook will be gone. Nothing will remind me of the disfigured body in the coffin of you, and tomorrow I will be able to continue my meaningless life. Indeed, it will be business as usual, and then, one day, I will die in peace, without having seen the truth at all, an insignificant, pale number among thousands, and no one, no one will ever remember you, Jaél Tanner's son, the Nameless One, and*” Only now I realized that sweat was pouring down my forehead and that I was clenching the quill so hard that my hand began to hurt. The sentences that I had written down were scrawly and full of mistakes. I dropped the quill and gasped. *Witchcraft. This is witchcraft!* I slammed the book shut, closed my eyes and started to clear my mind as Mater Pyléa had taught me. *Breathe, Jaél. Breathe.* My entire body trembled, and my pulse hammered in my wrists. Without any doubt, the voice came from within me. It was

part of my thoughts, yet still so unfamiliar, threatening and lurking. *"It is futile, Jaël",* the voice suddenly whispered. *"You cannot escape destiny. End your false life, end it here and now and follow the fire."* There was a moment of silence. *"Or else you will die."*

As the last word faded in my mind, fear exploded inside me. It shot up my spine and made its way through my body, to my heart, to my fingertips, to my skull, right into my brain. The feeling it released was terrible. Again and again the horrid images from my dream appeared along with the strange memories of seemingly random moments of my life. I saw myself pacing between the benches of the temple, without orientation. I saw myself preparing a corpse for its last journey, according to Endraelean tradition, weeping. I saw myself, lying sweating in my bed, breathing heavily and my eyes wide open. However, it were not the images that made the situation so unbearable ... It was the feeling that covered everything like a leaden, grey cloud, almost driving me crazy. I felt a mixture of fear and panic, bitter loneliness and desolation. I felt like standing in front of a pitch black abyss, lost and without identity. I felt ... alone.

It might be hard for you to comprehend the description, but maybe it helps you understand the mechanism of the human mind. If something terrible happens to someone – such as the death of a loved one –, our mind reacts with a kind of shock. Merely part of what we actually should feel is allowed to enter the immediate mind. The rest will be banished into the depths of our unconsciousness, buried like an unloved, dangerous secret. Only after the mind has somewhat recovered, the banished pieces of memory will be unearthed, piece by piece, so that we can deal with them and finish the mourning process. If, however, for some reason this reworking will not take place, the memories will decay and fester until they are noticed: We feel gloomy, have panic attacks or entirely lose the ability to feel emotions. Though it is possible to live under such conditions until one dies, the buried memories take away a huge part of our vital energy, or, in the worst case, drive us to strange deeds.

As the tentacles of fear were raging in me, I realized that these terrible feelings were exactly such decomposing memories. They had been there forever, lurking shadows beneath a shield of glass. I had noticed them in short moments, small and insignificant. Sometimes in the deepest night, when I awoke from a nightmare, soaked in sweat, unable to grasp only one image of the dream. Sometimes in small fissures of my thought that haunted me while I performed perfectly normal tasks. Then, for a tiny moment, I was filled with a misty and grey loneliness, and I felt as if I was an observer of myself, the spectator of a hypocritical, bigoted play. *My false life.* I lived a lie, a desperate effort of my mind to cover something in me that could not be covered – a secret, something that I had suppressed and that could not be held at bay anymore. Now it had broken free, and it remorselessly showed me what would happen if I did not start to search the truth: Death. *You are dying.*

Yet some among you might know that insights and actions are very opposing things. Even though the voice had forced me to look at it – and I *had* looked at it –, I did not want to accept it. I uttered a guttural cry, wiped my writing utensils from the desk and knocked down my stool. I hit the wall of my chamber with my bare fist, ignoring the burning pain that crawled up my arm. I wanted to banish the feeling inside me, somehow, so that I could get my old life back. But my resistance was in vain, and each second that passed amplified the panic that constricted my throat and drowned me like a remorseless flood. Only when my breath was but a weak gasp, I sank down to the floor with my back against the wall, my face buried in my hands, exhausted. *It is futile.* I felt the salt of my tears burning on my cheeks and began to sob like a child. “What shall I do? By Malphas, what shall I do?” I uttered. My voice sounded shaky and miserable.

For a while, nothing happened. Then I heard the voice again in my thoughts, tender, melancholic.

„You already know the answer, Jaël ... She told you what to do.“

This time, the voice did not aggravate my loneliness. No, for a moment

I almost felt secure, and it was the moment I made my decision. Yes ... she was right. I knew what I had to do. I knew it and I had always known it, yet like a fledgling soldier who did not understand that the tales about glorious wars were only tales *until he lost his leg I had to see my own death in order to understand.*

I had to begin searching for the buried truth. At that moment it was obscure to me what the veiled woman had meant by talking about the “Fire”. Was the fire a symbol for the truth? The truth behind the feeling of emptiness and loneliness that I had learned to suppress and that could not be suppressed anymore?

The newborn man who later became known as the “Butcher of Ark” did not yet know that he would soon get the answer to this question.

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My memories of the hours right after my decision are only vague. It would be wrong to assume that the oppressive feeling in my stomach vanished after I had gained insight into its nature. No, it was still there, and each time when I had doubts while I was packing my belongings, it grew stronger and more present, like a master who was determined to keep a weak-minded student on the right path by using reprimand and sharp words. Yet I felt a determination that I had never felt in my life before. Indeed I felt a spirit of ... optimism, as absurd as it might sound after what had happened to me.

After I had collected all my belongings, I left the temple, which had been my home for more than a decade. One last time I looked back into its awe-inspiring interior. There it stood, Malphas’ stone statue, clad in a massive steel harness, determinedly looking ahead. In his left hand the statue held a replica of broken chains, and the right hand pointed forward, showing the way, proudly and full of power. One last time I closed my eyes and smelled the omnipresent mixture of incense, lavender and roses, a scent that used to give me a feeling of comfort. – Now it unpleasantly tickled in my nose and reminded me of the ointment that the inhabitants of the Isles of Kilé used to embalm their dead. I swallowed heavily and closed the door behind

me.

The contents of the package that hung on my shoulder was scarce: a loaf of considerably fresh Enderalean bread, a waterskin, my scratchy cotton blanket, a sachet of pennies and the holy 101 verses, which I decided to take along after a moment of hesitation. The book felt heavy, and its leather binding seemed rough and ... well, sticky. Nonetheless, my attachment to the lightborn whose holy word was the spiritual compass for any devout Enderalean and who was the only companion in my lonesome life so far, except for Mater Pylea, was too deep. One thing was clear to me: Wherever my journey would lead me, I needed food and decent clothing. My priest's robes were too heavy and cumbersome, and they would be too warm in the summer. Also, they seemed like a burden to me, completely inappropriate for the task ahead. Even though every traveler – except for brigands – would treat me with respect, the robes were a symbol for my old life as a priest.

So I had to go to the marketplace and find a trader who would sell his wares despite the holy day. It felt strange to see the place that usually was full of people being so empty and quiet. Only a dog noticed my presence, and a few chickens which by their owner had been perched in a corral surrounded by an alcove of the weak town wall. Meanwhile, the sun had risen, but the many gray clouds did not allow much light to shine down on the city. It was going to rain.

Eventually, I reached my destination, a small and cozy store. The house walls were overgrown with ivy which framed even the milky windows beneath the crooked roof. A handcart full of barrels and crates stood before the entrance as if it had been abandoned by its owner during work, which was likely considering the smell of alcohol, gunpowder and fried meat in the air. Garlands which would have shined in all colors if enough sunlight had been present hung limply between the houses. Several times I heard a crunch when I walked over some broken jugs. The sign next to the heavy door identified the shop as „Carvai's Sundries“.

I knocked, and I knocked again after a few moments that passed without any reaction. After the third time I heard the sound of scuffling steps, and an aged Starling with clean-shaven face and a sharp nose opened the door. His tired look told me that he had intended to run off the unwanted customer before he recognized me. The dark circles under his eyes made me assume that he had vigorously been celebrating Star Summer Night as well. For a moment the sight seemed bizarre to me, even familiar, as if I had experienced it many times before. However, the feeling was gone at the moment he started to speak. "Well ... Father?" he said in a worn out voice. He looked nervously at the embroidered emblem on my robe which showed a stylized eye and a sword. "Can I help you?" I tried to smile. "Indeed you can, by showing me your wares. May I enter?" I was surprised how confident and friendly my voice sounded. For a moment the Starling named Carvai looked at me insecurely. Like all Starlings he was small and wiry, had frizzy hair and a pointy nose. Carvai was a path-abiding man. Every week he and his many children visited the three masses, which was also the reason why I had chosen his store to buy clothes for my ludicrous journey. His respect for the clergy was great, so he would not ask questions. Carvai scratched his nose and gave me a sleepy and confused look. In his eyes I saw the question why by the righteous Path a village priest visited a store that early in the morning. But he nodded devotedly, stepped aside and asked me to enter.

Other than the dire landscape around Fogville, his house had a rustic and cozy feel. The fireplace in the large room at the end of the hall was crackling, and for a moment I saw a young girl peeking through a door at the end of the stairs next to the entrance. I envied the Starling child and her siblings. Their father had given them a home and a feeling of security that I never had with Gilmon. When Pylea had taken me under her wings, it had already been too late.

The wooden walls looked solid yet old, and the large fur of a coast stalker hung at the left side. Reluctantly I took a step forward and almost stumbled over one of the many shoes on the floor. I heard how

the door behind me snapped shut and Carvai cleared his throat.

„This way, Father“, he said and walked towards the large sales room from which I had heard the crackle of the fire. It was an amazing sight. Behind the wooden counter, which separated the seller's realm from the customer's, numerous items, chests, boxes and pieces of furniture were piled up. Huge bookshelves along the walls were filled with dusty folios, scrolls, crystals and caskets. The store looked insignificant from outside, but I could not fight the feeling that some precious antiquities could be found here.

„Well ... What exactly do you need, Father?“ the Starling finally asked. For a moment I could not answer. *What did I actually need?* I wanted to embark on a journey to find the mysterious woman from my dream, and a feeling told me that it might not end in Enderal.

„Well ...“, I started. „Everything you need for an extended journey.“ The Starling furrowed his eyebrows. „A journey? To where?“ He faltered for a moment. „If you don't mind the question.“

„I am traveling ... to Ark“, I improvised. The later he would tell anyone about my getaway, the better. „The High Priest asks for us.“ That seemed to satisfy him.

„I understand ...“, he said and lifted the hatch in the counter. „I am all the more honored by your visit in my store.“ I nodded and smiled and let him walk me through his wares.

About half an hour later I was relieved of 102 pennies. I had purchased a sturdy knapsack, a good pair of boots, a hooded traveler's cowl and an old iron dagger, which I did not know how to use. Carvai had also sold me a traveler's staff that he said was favored by pilgrims who visit the seven wayshrines. „It is perfect for repelling insects“, he had told me trustworthily. As a farewell, I had blessed him and left with a priestly smile. I got food for my journey in the tavern. The Matris, defying his lack of sleep, was diligently cleaning up the remains of the festivities. He gave me a confused look, but after some explanation about my plans he sold me for a good price a loaf of tasty bread, dried fruit and a tub of pickled whisperweed, which was popular among travelers

because of its durability. He also asked for my priestly blessing, which I gave him with a strange feeling. The holy act felt so wrong like never before, and the ceremony seemed not like routine, but like a lie to me. The guardsman Yleas was the last person I met before I walked down the hill where Fogville was situated. He was too sleepy to ask for my destination. Obediently, he opened the wooden gate and wished me to walk blessed. As I left Fogville behind, I was flooded by a feeling of melancholy relief. Within a few hours I had ended my life that the veiled woman had described as „false“. Nobody would notice my absence until late in the day.