

TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ENDERAL

(SUREAI)



The Butcher of Ark

Chapter 3: First Steps

The first days of my journey were an almost spiritual, yet not entirely pleasant experience. I felt as if I had lived my whole life wearing a veil over my eyes. The greater the distance to the bare cliff became, the more surreal the thought seemed to me that I had lived there for twenty-eight years ... as a priest. It almost seemed to me as if it had merely been a dream.

After all, who was I?

I was unable to find a satisfying answer to that question. If I did not end my foolish journey and return immediately, in the eyes of the Holy Order I would be a heretic, a pathless one, someone who had strayed from his way. The fact that I belonged to the cleric was only of minor concern. When I thought of Malphas and his 101 verses, doubt and bitterness intersected my feeling of liberation like a mental sword. Yet it felt the same when I thought about returning. The dull feeling in my stomach lurked inside of me. When on the second day of my journey I tried to take a few steps back to Fogville, the very same terrible panic arose that had led to the breakdown in my chamber. No ... The only way that I could take now was the one leading through my suppressed memories, away from my false life. I had not the slightest idea where to start looking for the lost fragments of my childhood. I had only been two years old when Gilmon had found me. What could have happened to shape my life to such an extent? I had only one clue to find answers: the ominous words of the veiled woman. To trust these words was as foolish and irrational as trusting a Qyranian bone reader, but I had no choice.

Follow the fire ...

I halted for a moment and wiped the sweat off my forehead. After I had descended from the Fogville cliff, I had taken a small path along

the coast. Now I was at the border to the Heartland. Ark was about eleven days' march away, but I intended to use my last pennies to pay a Myrad flight to the capital. The overgrown streets leading through the Endralean forests were too dangerous. At the moment I wandered on a halfway paved path between colorful meadows. The sound of birds was in the air, and the sun was burning on the back of my neck. *You are insane, Jaél – simply insane*, I thought, as I looked back. Indeed, what I did was contradicting everything the holy verses had taught me. Only about seven turns of the moon ago I had accompanied a small group of boys and girls of appropriate age through their consecration. I remembered how a smart, red-haired Aeterna girl spoke to me during one of the preparation lessons. Her hair was fine and straight, as it was usual with the pointy-eared race. "What if I did not want to become a tailoress?", she had asked me after I had explained the importance of their upcoming namesday's ceremony to the children.

"What is your name, young girl?", I answered smilingly.

The determined look had not vanished from her eyes. "Syléna, Father. My name is Syléna."

"Syléna – very well. Let me give you a small riddle. Or rather, let me give you all a small riddle." She had furrowed her eyebrows and looked at me sceptically, more like a grown woman than a young girl. "Imagine yourselves as brave explorers. It is your holy mission, personally assigned to you by the holy leader of the Order, to discover new land far off the Skarrag isles ... just as the first pioneers did in Enderal." The helpless or bored looks in the faces of the children had been replaced by curiosity. Only Syléa still looked at me with determination and skepticism. "However," I said pointedly, raising my index finger, "a great disaster happens to you." I paused momentarily.

"A thunderstorm. After only half the way, your galley is torn by a

severe tempest. You are lucky as none of you is hurt, but you find yourselves on a wild, deserted island. There is nothing but thickets, cold sand and wreckage around you.” With the exception of Syléa, all of them were drawn into my tale at that time.

“You all know that if you want to survive, you need to act – at once. For not only bitter cold and hunger could be your doom. You can hear a threatening growl from afar, a sound that only a wild Vatyr can bring forth.” As I mentioned the hideous, goat-like creatures which usually live in dark and moist caves, some of the children uttered noises of disgust. “So you start collecting wood and building a camp. But soon you realize that some of you are better qualified for certain tasks than others. Ralof, for example, can carry twice as much wood as Syléna because of his strong physique. You, Gilma, are a gifted markswoman, because your father allowed you to practice with the straw dolls in the guard house at an early age. Now – who should keep the first watch and who should go looking for firewood?” All children agreed that Ralof was supposed to carry the wood and Gilma to keep the watch. The game went on until all tasks were assigned to the “pioneers” according to their physical and mental conditions.

“Well. But now something bothersome happens: Ralof feels exploited and does not want to collect any more firewood.” The said boy looked indignantly at me, but I calmed him with a gesture of my hand. “Of course he behaves like this only in my story. By all means, he does not want to go looking for firewood anymore. He says he wants to keep watch with Gilma, even though all of you know that he would not be able to hit a blind, paralyzed Troll with his bow. Now my question to you is this: What would be best for all of you? If Ralof came to reason or if he from now on kept watch and Gilma collected the wood instead?” The children voted unanimously for the first choice.

“Very well. Only this way you will be able to defy Vatyrs, hunger and cold on the inhospitable island until a galley arrives and brings you back to Enderal. This is the essence of what the Holy Scripture teaches us: Unity and strength can only emerge in a community that serves the welfare of all and not only of an individual. Malphas himself chooses our divine tasks, for who else knows our strengths and weaknesses better than the one who gives our mothers the gift of fertility each moon? With a satisfied smile my gaze wandered back to the one who initially had asked the question.

“And that, dear Syléna, is the answer to your question. Even if you have doubts about the path that Malphas is soon going to choose for you, defy them as you defy a disease, for only a people united in flesh and mind will be able to prevail eternally.” The children’s answer was rapt silence. Syléna, however, had not lost her skeptical look after I had told my story that was inspired by the first verse of the Path.

The Path ... Had I ever believed in it? I did not know. It was what Mother Pylea had told me. It was what I was supposed to believe. If even I, an educated man with access to so much knowledge, was able to discover the decayed memories of childhood only after a vision ... what about other people? Do they all live a ... false life? But if, it shot through my head, the Path is indeed a lie ... what ... what then guides us? This heretic thought kept me busy until the sun set.

Not before the sun had disappeared almost entirely behind the horizon I recognized signs of human life on the trail again. Like the four days before, I had been wandering through pines and cypresses, encountering no human soul. But now a giant field of wheat lay before me, and in the middle of it stood a windmill high as a tower. Its wheel turned slowly in the evening wind and a mixture of dusty earth, moss and freshly cut grass was in the air. For a moment the rustic beauty of the sight made me forget my aching legs and the

dull feeling in my stomach. *People.*

Despite my fatigue I accelerated my steps and soon came to a paved road that was winding between the hills which were overgrown with wheat. After a short while I found what I had been looking for: a shelter. It was full night now, and the orange light that was streaming out of the windows of the old, ivy-covered farmhouse promised protection and rest. A smile lightened up my face and I sighed in relief without noticing it. During the last nights I had rested in small caverns which my back, which was used to my soft bed, did not approve of. *A warm meal ...* Suddenly, two horses in full gallop dashed past me. Reflexively, I jumped to the side, and the flank of one of the horses barely missed me. I uttered a scared cry and stumbled as I tried to regain my balance. I landed in the dust with a muffled thud. *What in blazes!?* Indignantly I looked at the two riders who came to a halt in front of me. They both were very tall and wore solid leather garments, just like hunters. Their horses were black, indicating an expensive breed. Angrily I watched them dismounting, throwing a penny to a slender boy who probably was the stable lad, and disappearing into the tavern. Even then, I hated complacent and crude people. Did these two apes even realize that they almost had run me down? *Probably not. And if they did, they would not even look at you.* My lips shrank to a thin line. *Damn primitives.*

But my mind was too exhausted to allow any more angry thoughts. So I shrugged resignedly, picked up my staff from the ground and went to the farmhouse. An overwhelming scent of freshly baked bread filled the air, and my anger was gone. One last time I looked at the tavern sign that was shaking in the wind. *The Red Ox.* This is where I was going to spend the first “civilized” night of my new life.

When I entered the tavern I could hear a pleasant mixture of voices, clanking goblets and crackling fire. The cold left my limbs immediately and my mouth was watering. During my long march,

I had only eaten some pieces of my bread and a few handful of whisperweed, so I was hungry. The tavern was well-frequented which explained the empty streets outside. I assumed that it served as some kind of meeting point for the local farmers. There was space for about thirty souls in the room, and almost all of the chairs, stools and benches were occupied. Torches lit the room and cast dancing shadows of the guests at the walls. I mustered the people. Next to the entrance a tired looking man extensively studied a yellowed picture book called "The Merry Aeterna Damsel". Its saucy images looked as if they were not exclusively drawn for ethnologists. A bearded bard tuned his lute on a shamefully tiny pedestal. He was probably preparing to sing his next song which would be devoured by the noise around him. Just in front of me sat an enviable attractive, well-dressed man who talked to a woman whose countenance showed utter devotion. I estimated him to be thirty-five winters old. His hair was jet-black, his face was masculine yet delicate, and he wore a three-day stubble. Unwittingly, I distorted my mouth. *Certainly he is a one of the prigs from the upper city. One of those who shag around and waste their inheritance.* When I had finished the thought, the beau noticed my staring. For a moment he looked at me with sparkling eyes and smiled, fetching and narcissistic at the same time. Then he turned back to his admirer. The other guests were travelers and farmers of all sorts, man and woman, young and old, tall and short. I felt misplaced, like a northman on a Qyranian bazar, strange and uneasy among the rough people to which I did not belong.

Hastily, I went to the counter which was placed underneath a lower part of the ceiling and behind which various barrels and liquors were lined up. I was just about to speak as I noticed the two clumsy figures who were sitting on the high stools. *The two apes.* Now I had time to muster them. One of them wore a full beard and two strange earrings which gave him the appearance of a buccaneer. His

chum had no beard, but he also had a chin that could shatter walls made of Northwind stone. For a moment I felt the urge to grab the mug in front of me and pour beer into their faces. However, the idea vanished when the two noticed me. Unwittingly, I duck my head as they gave me an amused look and turned their attention back to their stew. *They have not even recognized me.* With a slight nod of my head I summoned the barmaid who was cleaning mugs behind the counter. She came closer, sized me up and gave me an amused look. “Matris? What may I get you?” she said with a rough voice. *At least she has the decency to address me as an urban citizen.* I tried not to show my inner turmoil.

“A glass of goat’s milk, please.”

I was trying to sound masculine and confident, but my voice, coarse and untrained after four days of silence, was a pitiful croak. The reactions could not have been more intense had I asked for the crown jewels of the Golden Queen. While the barmaid only smiled and shook her head in sympathy, the two primitives next to me broke out laughing heavily. “Goat’s milk”, one of them roared, padding his comrade’s shoulder. “He wants a glass of goat’s milk!” I stared at the giant with a mixture of irritation and defiance. I probably could have avoided the further events of the evening if I had not responded. Even though numerous snappy answers wandered around in my head, the one I finally gave them, my arms crossed in front of my chest, was pathetic.

“Yes, goat’s milk”, I said with a shaking voice. “Do you have a problem with it?” This seemed to intensify the amusement of the apes. This time their laughter was so loud that even the bearded bard stopped playing the lute and, as many other guests, turned his insulted yet curious gaze toward the counter. After they had finished laughing and padding each other’s shoulders affirmatively, the buccaneer spoke to me. “By no means, Matris!” he said with

a sympathetic face. "It's just ... Unfortunately, the tavern is out of goat's milk." He paused for a while, grinning. "Maybe you want to try the harlot's inn in the bathhouse of Ark." This time they almost burst with laughter. I felt fierce anger arise in me. Never since I had become a priest I was treated with such disrespect. Never! "I will do that when I visit you next time in the apes' compound."

I froze up. The snappish response had come from my mouth faster than I was thinking, and I had the feeling that the cheerful atmosphere around the two churls faded away. From the corner of my eye I saw that almost half of the guests followed the events apprehensively. *You damn idiot. You damn, miserable idiot.* For a moment, the eyes of the buccaneer and his chum narrowed to a slit. Then the visible anger left their faces and was replaced by a livid feistiness.

"Well, well", he finally started, now with an obviously vicious voice. "So you are a real badass." I wanted to take a step backwards, but the buccaneer had grabbed my wrist with his strong right hand. His grip was hard and firm and his fingers were crude and full of calluses. I felt cold sweat breaking out all over my body. I realized that the man was primitive but dangerous. Half-heartedly, I tried to escape his grip – a convulsion that the two men ignored completely. "I ... I am sorry", I stuttered helplessly. I had just finished my sentence when the gorilla pressed his hand on my mouth. He pointedly glanced at his chum, who sneered even more. "I like brave people. But you seem to be exhausted from your long journey." I saw how the other man pushed something to him on the counter. "So how about a little refreshment?"

With his last word he removed his hand from my mouth, quickly grabbed the bowl and poured its content over my head. It was stew, and if the encounter had occurred a few minutes earlier, the broth would probably have scalded my skin. Nevertheless, I was covered in hot, sticky slime. I was shocked and I gasped for air so that some of

the broth got into my windpipe. I broke down and panted, coughing out the liquid. The meaty brew dripped down my hair, and some of it found its way into my garment, running down my spine. I heard roaring laughter around me. I was certain that most of it came from the buccaneer and his chum, but some of those who had watched the events before were laughing now as well. I felt how my stomach cramped and shame rose up in me. There I was, broken down, coughing stew, the laughing stock. I had an impulse to jump up and grab the buccaneer's throat, but my reason suppressed it instantly. I was deeply humiliated, but I had no death wish. So I tried to raise myself up in a controlled and dignified manner and removed pieces of meat from my clothes. Indeed, my indifference and serenity would be enough of a lesson for the two brutes. I gathered all my priestly courage and turned around. They looked at me, amused and challenging. *They want me to keep acting defiantly*, I thought. *They want me to keep provoking them*. I did not stand the slightest chance against any of them in close combat, that was for sure. After all, I had as much knowledge about brawls as a troll about hair care. *Just leave, Jaél. Leave and swallow down you damn pride*. I peered at the crowd. Most of the guests had returned to their meals or conversations. Only a few of them still looked at me expectantly, among them the black-haired beau. Nobody seemed to despise the impudence of the two men at all. Abruptly I realized what had protected me from events like this my entire life: My priest's robe. It had been the only reason why the other boys had stopped mocking me after my consecration. And probably it was the only reason why everyone lowered their heads devoutly or at least had the decency not to pour stew on me when I entered a tavern! *You are a nobody, Jaél. Without your priest's robe you are just another common man, neither big nor slim, neither old nor young, neither ugly nor handsome. Meaningless*. For a brief moment I felt the urge to draw the priest's brooch, which I had not had the heart to leave behind, from my bag. Oh, how they would

look at me, the primitives. They would begin to recite the Prayer of the Path with eyes widened by fear, asking me for forgiveness. *They would respect me what you represent, yes, they would bow their head in reverence because they fear the power of the Holy Order.* Of course they would. To disregard a priest of the Path was a capital crime, and only a fool would risk such a punishment ...

No. To reveal myself as a priest would not only mean to rely on the authority of others, but also to return to my false life. I already felt my stomach contracting warningly.

I had to comply. So I took a deep breath and swallowed my fervent shame. Ignoring the mocking glances of the buccaneers, I silently gave the barmaid a sign that I wanted a room for the night. I had no desire for a meal anymore, even less in the presence of those who had witnessed my humiliation. The barmaid nodded pitifully and told an old man, who sat quietly at the counter and looked undefinably at me, to show me the way. In silence, I followed the old man up to the room. Only when I stood in front of the room's door, I felt how the malice of the brutes, which cut like a sword in my back, began to wane. I gave the old man five pennies and he handed me the key, a burning candle and a cloth for cleaning, which was probably meant as a benevolent gesture, but only intensified my shame. I turned around silently, entered my chamber and locked the door behind me. Then my anger overcame me like a flood. Without taking notice of the bed, I went to the window and stared into the rain. I uttered a suppressed shout, closed my eyes and clawed both my hands into the window ledge. By the black Guardian, I was angry! Of course the rational part of me knew that I had got off cheaply. – In other, rougher taverns people left a brawl with a broken arm or worse. However, I was unwilling to accept the events and put them aside. Did these men have no respect? This kind of scum deserved to be hanged, flayed and skinned, like brigands and marauders, preferably in public. My jaw cramped and I noticed how the feeling in my

stomach had started to change. The dull feeling of insecurity had transformed into a flaming rage, paired with an iron determination. *I will not begin my new life in disgrace.* I opened my eyes again and looked at the candle that the innkeeper had given to me. The flame burned and crackled, and in a strange way its fire strengthened my determination. I wanted to teach the two apes a lesson, even if it was the last thing I did in my life. But how? *What can I do except for preaching, reading books and mixing herbs?*

I halted. Yes ... Now I was almost grateful that the two disrespectful primitives had crossed my way, right here and right now. A malicious grin bloomed on my lips, and I turned my gaze back to the window. For a short moment I marveled about the man who looked at me from the silent glass. His pale blue eyes looked like burning ice, a contradiction that seemed to be as natural to him as the fire of the sun in autumn twilight. He did not resemble the cringing priest anymore who had given the blessing to washwomen only a week ago. Yes, the man emitted something like ... power. Determination. *Fire.*