

TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ENDERAL

(SURREAL)



The Butcher of Ark

Chapter 7: All the Dead Souls

I do not know how long I had been away from the world of the living; yet judging by the fact that Qalian's neck still showed imprints of my fingertips, it could only have been a few minutes. The first thing that I thought when I saw him kneeling over me was that my pathetic life was over. The second thing was that Qalian – who by some unholy magic had had enough breath for laughter even after one minute of being strangled – could have let me die a thousand deaths already. Yet he had not. Instead, he kneeled and held out his right hand towards me. Without further thought I took his hand and let him raise me up. Then, I noticed a change in the room: The fetters had been removed from the two girls. Now both girls lay side by side under a heavy woolen blanket. One of them had her eyes closed. The eyes of the other one were still wide open and stared at the wall with the same dead gaze with which she had mustered Qalian and me when we had entered the room.

“Fire Palm extract”, Qalian said. “A droplet puts even a rabid boar to sleep.” For a moment a hint of grief – or was it rage? – overshadowed his gaze. “They do not want the goods to be able to resist.”

“The goods?”, I replied after a long pause, more statement than question. All of a sudden I felt unbearably stupid.

“Yes.”

I gulped. “Qalian, I ...” – I made a tired, all-embracing gesture with my right hand. “I do not understand.” I sounded broken and dull. “Not at all.”

Qalian smirked.

Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and began to explain it all to me.

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Thirty minutes later, which seemed like an eternity to me, Qalian rang the room's bell. The girls were still asleep in the wide bed, rigid and unmoving.

Qalian had given me a precious dagger before. It was of much higher quality and was easier to handle than my old iron blade. He had only nodded affirmatively in response to my insecure gaze, like a gleeman who encouraged his son before his first performance.

Now we both stood at the door, quietly. His eyes glowed, like on the evening when he had first told me about the fire. But this time, there also was something else in his gaze: anticipation.

Footsteps came closer, and I noticed how Qalian slightly bent his knees. There was a knocking at the door. Qalian rang the bell again, just as agreed upon with Konthis. The door opened slightly. *No one enters this world as a good or an evil being, despite what the Path wants to make you believe, Jaél. - At the day of our birth, our souls are nothing but empty pages, and we alone decide what will be written upon them.* Then, a head peeked through the crack of the door. A bearded man with large eyes and a bulbous nose. His eyes widened as Qalian rushed up to him. Unerringly and effortless he drove his dagger into the man's neck, up to the shaft. He broke down immediately. The sound of the man falling clumsily to the floor reminded me of the freshly pulped furs which my father had dropped on the wooden planks of our home. He uttered a protesting rattle. Qalian, on the contrary, looked as if he was frozen in place. His left eye jerked wildly rightwards, his right eye leftwards, and the corners of his mouth up and down. I remembered my first killing, the images, and the ecstasy. *The nectar of their sins.* Then he released himself from the paralysis, wiped a splatter of blood from his cheek and grinned at me. I had not moved one finger's length. ... *We write upon them?*

A dark red puddle spread from underneath the dead man's back like the petals of an opening rose. Qalian turned away and left through the door. For a moment I staggered, and then I followed him. *Figuratively speaking, yes. Only we decide which way we go in our lives: the way of sin or the way of goodness. It is not easy to go the way of good, Jaël. For the temptation to be weak lurks at every corner. She wears the garments of greed, wrath and weak will. We call these the "demons".* Qalian put his hand on the steel door of the opposing room and stood still. *Each time we give in to them, we tread the path of sin a bit further.* His lips moved and murmured something that I could not understand. *The first times we can still escape them. The more we sin, however, the worse it gets. And eventually –* The steel door started to glow, and it emitted smoke, but Qalian did not remove his hand. *– they own us.* Heat and the smell of molten metal began to fill up the entire hallway. *These demons make Tyrants. They make slavers. They make assassins. They are everywhere, and they bear different names.* Then the door with the number XIII bent in its middle like a wet piece of paper that was held upright. Qalian took his hand away, kicked the door open, and entered. *Those who have devoted themselves completely to them we call the „corrupted“. For this is what they are.*

On the edge of a large bed sat a man with an aristocratic, lean face. I recognized him; he had waited with us in the parlor. Before him kneeled a young boy whose age I did not want to guess. I spare you the details of the cruelty I had to witness. I was overwhelmed by the situation anyway, so I was not able to comprehend what was going on. I can only say that the sight of the man who had his mouth wide open in fright made my stomach tingle warmly. I felt how my heartbeat accelerated and my blood started to heat up in my veins. *They are the ones who are responsible for the evil in our world, the ones who are too weak to withstand the temptation, to resist the demons. It is because of them that there is war, suffering and death. We, Jaël, we are exceptional. For we were born with a destiny, and –* without hesitating for

a second, Qalian went towards the bed, pushed the boy aside with his boot and plunged his dagger slantingly into the man's neck – *the fire is running in our veins*. A fountain of blood shot up, and this time, death did not occur quietly.

The man emitted a terrible scream and clenched both hands at his wound. For a few seconds, Qalian looked at the scene and smiled. Then he grabbed the dying man and lifted him up with a force I would not have imagined despite Qalian's athletics. *The fire*. The man's stertorous cries grew louder. Through Qalian's garment I could see how his upper arms tensed up. Then he squeezed. The blood flew down his sleeves like a torrent, and I felt a veil of heat forming around him. *We do not know why we of all people were chosen, or where the force that leads us stems from, but we know one thing: We are here to protect the world, and to cleanse it.* Against all logic I felt a euphoric joy when I saw the man die. My stomach tingled and my knees grew soft. *We judge him*, shot through my head. *We judge him for his sins!*

My fingers clenched the dagger. My breath was fast and panting. Every muscle of my body was prepared to act. The man's cries had become more quiet and breathy while Qalian's garment was now fully soaked with blood. For a moment I was nauseous and felt bile rising up to my mouth. *This is insanity! This is murder!*, a voice inside of me screamed, loud and clear, my old myself. But at the same time it was pathetic and weak, and it was wrong. *So ... it is our task to ... murder all of those who have given in to the demons?* For anyone who made use of the services of this place deserved to die. They did it at the expense of young, innocent souls who had the misfortune to be too poor, too insignificant – or simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. The owners of the brothel had kidnapped them, drugged them, and now offered them to those who were wealthy and ruthless enough to put their needs above ethics. *They were sinners. Seized by demons.* Alerted yells were audible from the hallway, and a few moments later there was the sound of steps. *They*

are coming ... and they want to stop us. The thought occurred to me with an almost indifferent serenity. I felt – I knew – that they would not have the hint of a chance. When the first person appeared at the door, Qalian released the man's neck. He did not cry anymore and collapsed quietly on the floor. *Not all of them ... there are too many.* But those whose death the fire orders. Slowly and almost casually, Qalian turned towards me. The humanity I had seen in his eyes a few moments before was now entirely gone. *And this is the only reason for our existence, Jaël. We are the ones standing between mankind and its utter corruption, the depravity that solely results from man's weakness.* His face was soaked in blood. Red drops flew down his cheeks. Some of them got caught by his beard while others trickled from his chin like morning dew from the beads of red Malphas Flowers. The glow in his jet black eyes could not be denied even by the most pious, priestly part of my mind anymore. The image that I still have before my eyes even today had at its center one feature of the man that could have arisen from a mad god's mind: his grin. *And this is exactly why we are here, Jaël. These people have devoted themselves to sin. They are corrupted, and only their death is going to –* You probably have the insane face of the Evil Mage from the theater plays before your inner eye, but you are wrong. If it had not been for the blood, the dead body and the shivering boy, the smile could have been that of a boy who was about to earn a penny in an honest manner. There was no sense of guilt in his face, no bloodlust; only bliss. Indeed ... he looked at me as if his deed had been the most natural thing in the world. *And he was right,* I thought when I looked at him. *For what we had done and what we were about to do was righteous.* Every corner of this place was corrupted, and so were the people making use of its services. And here we were – to *purify their souls.*

A shrill cry interrupted my trance. I heard how a sword was being drawn from its scabbard, and when I turned around I saw the one who wielded it storm towards me. I was surprised that by no means

I felt nervous or overwhelmed. In fact, it felt as if time stood still. Every move of the man, every twitch of his muscles, the up and down of his chest when he breathed I observed with a clarity I had never experienced before. I noticed how the grip of my hand hardened around the hilt of my dagger with almost stoical calmness. The fire swell, and the heat was growing inside of me. Then my legs moved in a way that I had not believed to be possible before. I braced my thighs and bent my knees lightly. At the same moment, an impulse went through my body and I leaped forward like a predator. I tensed up the muscles in my right shoulder and turned my hip to the right and forward, which made my straightened right arm thrust forward like the bolt of a Pyraean ballista. My dagger drove deeply into the man's heart. *I cleanse him, shot through my head. A tingling exploded in my stomach and in my loins. The world stopped turning. I felt my spirit rise, far above, far away from my body, into blackness, into the light, I am free, I see him, I see them, his deeds, his sins, brighter and brighter, I see them, I -*

- am one with his mind.

The man who I am killing stands before me, as a boy. We are in a dark alley, I hear screams. The boy kicks another child, again and again, until the child's face is but a shapeless lump. The body does not flinch anymore. The hand clutches a loaf of bread. *His first sin.*

Lightning flashes through my mind, and I find myself inside another memory.

This time he is a young man, sparsely bearded, but already scarred. He talks to another figure which is nodding approvingly. The right hand of the obsessed man grabs a knife and thrusts it deeply into the other's heart. Before his victim touches the ground, his left hand swiftly separates its purse from the belt. He runs away. *The demons*

are inside of him, I realize with lucid clarity. *He has allowed them to enter.*
Another flash.

The obsessed man stands before me as an adult. I look directly into his face, but he does not see me. I do not have to make any effort to notice the demons hiding behind the void of his eyes. They laugh maliciously, for they know about their triumph. *They own him*, I realize. *He is lost.* The man prostrates and talks to a young street-walker. With his right hand, he plays with a penny; he turns and flips it in front of her eyes like a prestidigitator on a fairground. I want to help her, want to tell her to run, but I can't. The girl agrees and starts to follow him. He knocks her down and drags her into a dark cellar. I recognize the building. My sight blurs, and I feel the connection waning. A flash, then darkness.

I see my mundane self, close to the body of the one I have killed. For a moment there is perfect silence. Nothing moves. No sound, no thought. I behold the man's face, distorted with pain, and a touch of melancholy sneaks into my thoughts. *He is a slave to his sins. He does not know what he does.*

But he had a choice. He could have chosen the righteous path, but he chose sin. He chose the *demons*. And they have devoured him. I look at my dagger, sticking deeply in his body. A fountain of blood emerges from the wound, but it stands still in the air, a piece of scarlet red, unmoving ice. There is no hope for him anymore, I realize.

I have saved him.

Then, with a loud thunder, I am back inside my physical body. The fire devours me like a storm devours a small boat on the sea. It fills my veins with ecstasy, with liquid lava, and I burn like the sun. A mad laughter emerges from my throat, my mouth moves manically; I flinch like under the command of an insane puppeteer. *I taste his sins!*, I realize, and the thought heavily amplifies my excitement.

Then the rapture fades away, as fast as it had risen.

Even though it was a strong experience, this act of killing had not been half as intense as the first one. The reason seemed obvious to me: While the sins of the brute that I killed in the Red Ox had been a rapid stream, the sins of the guard were but a trickle. I blink to remove the red veil on my eyes. I look in the man's face. His head leans on my shoulder, and my left hand rests on his back as if I was comforting a friend. He gives me a pleading look and rattles. Then his vital spirits fade away and he glides to the ground with a tired sigh.

It was not before the ruby red puddle reached my feet that I awoke from my trance. I was strangely moved, and my glance jumped between the dagger in my hands and the dead body. Only a hint of the tingling in my stomach was left. Everything had happened in a split second – the attack of the guard, my targeted thrust and the rapture. I looked at Qalian who still stood next to the dead man's body. He gave me a satisfied nod and wiped his dagger on the bedsheet. Then he approached the apathetic boy who was crouching at the wall. Even though his eyes were wide open, I noticed the same void that rested in the eyes of the two girls Qalian had “ordered” for us. My comrade knelt before the boy, put his bloody hand on his shoulder and whispered something to him. When the boy looked at him uncomprehendingly, Qalian repeated his words with a fuller voice. Then the boy nodded and crawled underneath the bed.

“You’re keeping up well”, Qalian said eventually.

I wanted to respond, but I failed. The aftertaste of the rapture was too powerful. Now I realized that my knees and hands were shaking.

My *brother* seemed to be amused by that. He shook his head leniently, stood up and peeked into the hallway.

“The other guards will come in dozens”, he said without a trace of uneasiness. If we had been robbers, murderers or brigands who had raided an inn for base motives, something like “get ready” or “stay close in the fight” would have followed. But he said nothing, for the silence that surrounded us like a veil of heat the flames told us all we needed to know. Indeed, the fire steered me, and with it inside me I was going to save all the dead souls that inhabited this place, visitors and operators alike. Konthis, Yaléna, the woman in the parlor. – They all had given in to the demons, and it did not matter if they had done so for all their life or just one time too often.

I nodded at Qalian. The words blazing at me from his eyes were unmistakable.

Fulfill your duty.

~

I remember only fragments of what happened during the next minutes – or hours? How many people did we kill? Two dozen? Three? I do not know anymore. Most of my memories concentrated on the rapture. The enemies fell under my thrusts like in the old legends of the Ash Peoples. I escaped their pitiful attempts of defense with ease, and before I realized myself what happened, my blade sunk deeply into their flesh and I savored their sins. I remember how I had looked in a mirror during the fight. My face was soaked in blood, my garment was red like a Qyranian sunrise, and my eyes glowed with mania that I only knew from fairy tales. I was not surprised by the fact that some of the guards tried to flee when they saw us. But it was in vain: None of the corrupted ones left the brothel alive.

One killing I remember particularly well: When we had arrived on the second floor, we surprised a man who tried to unlock a balcony door. As he noticed us, he fell on his knees and begged for mercy.

Qalian grabbed the man at his collar and dragged him to an adjacent room. A Half-Aeterna of about 16 winters lay on the bed. She was stark naked, and her limbs were tied to the bedposts. The chains were so tight that bloody, blue calluses had formed at her wrists and ankles. With remarkable sobriety I noticed that the girl must once have been very pretty. Her hair was an ocean of brown, strong curls, and her face was of a delicate, fragile beauty as it could only be found with those of Aeterna blood. However, she had been disfigured. Deep wounds covered her back like furrows on a freshly-plowed field, numerous bruises were blooming on her thighs and arms. All injuries were fresh, indicating that she had been mistreated this very morning. Qalian grabbed the old man's neck and forced him to look at her while he whispered words into his ear. He broke out in tears, asked for mercy, spoke about his family, the Path and the righteous way. I had to laugh. Facing death, everyone regretted their deeds – that became clear to me after my third killing. Even if we had wanted to forgive them, we would not have been able to. Whoever had sinned once would sin again; the demons would look to that.

That was what Qalian told the man, but he remained stubborn and undiscerning, assured that he would do repentance. Eventually, I ended the tragedy. In contrast to my previous killings which I had performed with my dagger, I instinctively reached for the cat of nine tails that the man had used to torture his slave. He struggled and winced, but Qalian gripped him tightly until I had strangled him. The taste of his sins was stale. Corruption. Fraud. He was a bad man, a bad father, and the act of torture he had performed today and which had cost him a considerable amount of gold had been the first of its kind. When he eventually collapsed in front of me, a beautifully embroidered leather purse fell out of his garment. Its content was distributed on the floor next to my blood-smeared boots. I was about to turn away when I noticed a shimmering,

golden item – a brooch on which a bear's head was finely engraved. A family crest. Bewildered, I showed my finding to Qalian: we had killed a nobleman. What would the repercussions be for us? His answer was the one that he frequently gave me, regardless of the question: a smile.

Yaléna, the cold-eyed beauty, was the one who had defended herself in the best way. Instead of trying to escape like the others, she ambushed us in the hallway. The fight between her and Qalian lasted a good minute, but considering the easiness with which he blocked her attacks I assumed that he only let it happen for amusement. When the woman's concentration wavered for a split second, Qalian had already deeply driven his dagger into her abdomen. She broke down with a gasp, vainly trying to keep the dark blood from pouring out of the wound. She opened her mouth in an effort to say something, but she never got the chance to do so: With a massive, targeted blow he separated her head from her torso. For a moment, he squinted as his face was flooded with bliss, and the heat in the room increased to a degree that even I could barely stand.

Less than five minutes later Konthis uttered his final cry, too. As the others, he begged for mercy, vowed betterment, promised us gold and women.

A moment later we had escaped from the shadows of the Undercity.