

TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ENDERAL

(SURREAL)



The Butcher of Ark

Chapter 6: The Silver Cloud

One of Qalian's skills that I never learned to understand was to get by with almost no sleep. During our journey, he went to bed late after midnight, and he always managed to be awake before me, mostly long before dusk. He had a strict morning routine: It started with a half hour long prayer in a language that I did not understand. Then he practiced with his scimitar for a good hour, and a bit longer on two days of the week. After that, he took a bath, or, when there was no river or lake nearby, sprinkled some water over himself. Finally, he prepared a breakfast of cereal pulp mixed with bitter herbs, which he meditatively devoured as if all mysteries of the Pyraeans were hidden in it. I guessed he only slept a maximum of four hours per night, and I wondered how he managed to look healthy and energetic like after a bath in the waters of Inodan.

On our journey he had let me sleep, but on our first day in Ark he woke me up early in the morning. My limbs felt leaden after the night of carousing. For a moment, my sleepy gaze tried to find the water trough that I had used to wash myself every morning in Fogville. Then I realized where I was. I groaned, hove myself out of bed and looked outside. *By the right Path, how late is it?* There was no sign of the sun yet. As if he had read my thoughts, Qalian answered my question.

"Two more hours before the cock's crow, my friend. Before you say anything," – he was just about to strap his sword to his waist – "it is necessary. We have an appointment."

I wanted to answer, but only a sullen murmur left my mouth. Qalian continued.

"Meet me in an hour in front of the last house of Cloud Alley. I will wait for you there."

He left the room before I was able to reply anything. For a moment, I was baffled and kept sitting on the edge of my bed. Then, I stood up with a sigh and went over to the window. Absent-mindedly, I looked over the roofs of the sleeping city. No cloud hid the silver light of the moon, and despite the early hour, there were several people on the streets. I withdrew into myself. In fact, I felt quite well despite the headache that was a result of inebriation. I rarely thought about the events in the Red Ox anymore, but now I remembered Qalian's words: *You have felt their crimes and their guilt, and the ecstasy was the reward for your courage. It was the nectar of their sins.*

Could this be the reason why the murder left me cold? Because it was ... justified?

I thought: *Please not!*

I thought: Something good.

Uttering a cheerful and at the same time desperate sound, I shook away the thoughts. Instead, I looked at the activity below. I saw three emaciated children carrying heavy sacks along the big street that led across Ark. Directly behind them, three armored figures, most likely guards, were patrolling. Two women, one of them big and muscular, the other one slim, were pulling a wheelbarrow with a barrel and three bundles of hay into an alley that led to the rear exit of the tavern.

Full of thoughts I turned away from the window and got dressed. After I had eaten a meal in the taproom, I started on my way, feeling a mixture of curiosity and anxiousness.

I do not want to bore you with unnecessary details of my first journey through Ark, for you probably know where the street was situated. I did not know then. Only after a guard eyed me suspiciously and pointed me towards a half-decayed warehouse, I realized where I was, and that I had arrived fifteen minutes before the appointed time. Cloud Alley, as the builders of the city had

named it without any apparent reason, marked the end of the Artisan Quarter. It was the way which led to the large stone gate that every decent Upper Town citizen hoped never to enter.

It marked the entry to the Undercity.

I looked around insecurely. I knew about the Undercity from countless stories, including Qalian's. It was a place to be avoided unless one was dealing with concealers or criminals, or living in such poverty that one of the shabby huts down there was the only affordable home. Regardless of how I had imagined the contrast between the beautiful capital and the misery of the Undercity, my thoughts always included a kind of "transition" between prosperity and poverty. But there did not seem to be such a thing. Looking up, I saw the impressive Myrad tower, where wealthy travelers arrived in the city or departed to other places on the eponymous winged animals. Next to me a large waterfall came pouring down, and if I had walked up the small alley again on which I had left the winding marketplace a few minutes ago, I would have found myself in the heart of the Artisan Quarter. Irritated, I again looked at the wooden door, which was guarded by two heavily armed men. Was this door really the entrance to the other, unpleasant world?

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Qalian.

"You found it. Very well", he said. "Are you ready?"

I screwed up my eyes. I now knew that my first lesson had to do with the Undercity. But what exactly was expecting me?

"I think so. And ... what are we going to do?"

Qalian chuckled. "Quite simple, my friend." He took the knapsack from his shoulders, went down to his knees and started to search for something. Then he looked up to me again.

"We are going to have fun."

~

My doubts that the Undercity was indeed behind the large, guarded wooden door vanished a few moments after the guards had granted us entry. *They must think that we are crazy*, I thought as both wings of the door swung open. No citizen of the Upper Town went there voluntarily, for it was well-known that the Order and the Guard were virtually powerless down there. Inofficially, everyone knew about the silent agreement between the Order and the Rhalâta, the association of shady characters: You stay among yourselves, and we stay among ourselves.

Therefore, the Undercity was a town within the town, and it was much gloomier than the Ark overground with its rustic but cozy half-timbered houses, fountains and theaters. Down there, the Rhalâta controlled every aspect of life, and whoever was unfortunate enough to live there, no matter if they wanted or not, had to bow to them. Shuddering, I remembered what a traveling merchant once had told me. His story revolved around a young tradesman who only a few moons before had received the coveted badge of the Golden Sickle, which denoted him as a sound businessman. This young man wanted to take the short road to wealth, and with the help of a few lads from Ark he started to collect Glimmercap dust. Its production was more or less an official privilege of the Rhalâta, yet this fact did not keep the young man from sending the group of unsuspecting boys to a cave near the west coast to begin his own – unobtrusive, as he believed – trade with the deadly narcotic.

For almost a moon's turn business went well, and his purse was filled faster than the mugs of a popular tavern. One morning, however, when he rode to the grotto where the mushrooms were collected, he found it deserted. There was only a cart with four man-sized baskets in front of the entrance. The baskets were filled to the top with Glimmercap mushrooms, but they emitted a strange odor. When the merchant told his bodyguard to shovel the content out on the ground, different body parts rolled out of each of the baskets:

Arms, legs, torsi, heads. The heads had been cut off carefully so that there was no doubt about their owners: Five of them belonged to the unfortunate boys who had been hired by the merchant for a modest earning. Two of the heads belonged to the merchant's daughters. The eighth one was his companion's head. On her forehead, the following words had been carved in: "Sha'Rim Rhalâta" – the Rhalâta does not forget.

They let the merchant live. He was never again seen in the Golden Sickie guild house, and rumor has it that he took his own life a few months later. Thus ended the old traveling merchant's story.

And now we are here. I felt uneasy. Everything about us screamed "Upper Town" and "wealth" – our gestures, our expensive clothes, Qalian's dagger. Behind the door, stairs led down into the darkness. It took us more than fifteen minutes before we encountered signs of human life. The air was cold and humid. It smelled like ammonia, mold and wet stones. We came to the end of the long stone stairway. Wooden planks marked a path that led into a tunnel that was about thirty arm's lengths high. The first hut we passed had been built so tightly into a natural corner of the rocks that I hardly perceived it. Mighty, rusty ducts came out of the walls and disappeared into the floor, winding around the brittle pieces of wood that the house was constructed of. Chests and barrels, some of them broken, were piled up at the walls that were not bordered by the stone of the cavern.

Meanwhile, more and more inhabitants had noticed our presence. Some of them looked at us with suspicion and swiftly turned their gaze away, others bluntly stared at us. While we passed more huts, we even saw constructions with roofs in front of them, probably something like market stalls. Fish, spices, unhealthily looking bread and other wares were displayed on them. Qalian did not seem to mind the people's gazes. He accelerated his pace and disappeared behind a corner. I followed him, and what I saw took my breath away.

Before me was a vast cavern with a ceiling so high that two guard towers, on top of each other, could have fit in. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like icicles of stone. In the distance, an impressive waterfall was pouring out of the crag. Throughout the cavern, houses of dark wood were erected on platforms, connected by stairs and bridges, supported by piers and natural stone pillars. The houses became increasingly higher toward the walls of the cave, so that the scenery was reminiscent of a gigantic amphitheater. In the center, the buildings were erected on the bare stone floor. In form and appearance they differed from the houses on the platforms. I saw a stone building that, with its high roof and pointy tower, looked like a small temple. A dozen arm's lengths next to it was a multi-story building. It was also made of stone, and its windows emitted a reddish, milky glow. Numerous people were bustling about, and even though I had a good look over the round, open space that most likely was the center of the subterranean city, it was so dark that I could barely make out silhouettes. The Undercity ... a name well deserved.

A beefy man passed by and bumped into me, suddenly rousing me from my thoughts. I sighed and wiped the sweat from my forehead that had accumulated there despite the cold air. Then I looked for Qalian who had walked ahead. I found him at the foot of a stairway, beneath a leafless, crooked tree. He was talking to someone. Hastily, I went down the stairs. As I came close to them, the stranger pointed towards me, and Qalian made a placating gesture. Only when I came close, I realized that it was a woman. Her hair was short and blonde, a stark contrast to her soft face with full, red lips. However, her eyes ... I felt something glow in my stomach, protesting, angry. Her eyes were ice-cold blue, so lurid that they seemed to shine even in the faint light of the cavern. Even though they were objectively beautiful, they aroused a feeling in me which I was unable to analyse. They appeared cold.

Before I was able to consider the voice that sounded inside me again, Qalian started to speak.

“Jaél, may I introduce you ...?” He pointed at the young women with his open hand, his palm directed upwards. “This is Yaléna.”

I tried to respond, but I failed.

Yaléna examined me shortly, from head to toe, and then turned her gaze away from me.

“He seems to be going to pee his pants. Are you absolutely sure? It’s not too late yet.”

Qalian smiled charmingly and nodded. “I am. And you can trust him, you have my word.”

The woman bit her lips and furrowed her eyebrows. Then she returned Qalian’s nod.

“Very well. Let’s go.”

We started to move. Maybe it was only my imagination, but I had the impression that the number of hateful looks around us had increased. The air and the darkness in the cavern suddenly felt even heavier. Qalian looked at me over his shoulder. There was no trace of fear or uneasiness in his eyes. In a certain way they even gleamed with anticipation. But why? I was aware of the fact that there were many shifty people around here. Yet why seemed Qalian and our guide to be so familiar with each other?

Our destination was a dark alley directly next to the multi-story house with the red windows. A sign at the entrance identified it as “The Silver Cloud”. Determinedly, the woman stepped into the dark, and we followed her. There was absolute darkness in the shadows of the buildings, and my uneasiness grew when I saw that our guide, at the end of the alley, walked into an even smaller one. *This is a labyrinth, and a damn dangerous one.* There were no people, only heaps of rubbish and puddles of feces. There were only two encounters. – First, we saw two men warming themselves at a campfire. As Yaléna saw the fire from afar, she accelerated her steps

and kicked one of the men at his head with full force. He uttered a choked cry and fell down, while the other man, terrified, tried to raise himself up against the wall. Yaléna did not allow him to. She bent towards him, holding her face close to the face of the beggar, and murmured something about “open fire”, “alley” and “the siblings”. Then she dashed him to the ground and told us to move on. Our second encounter with human beings in this dark, subterranean maze was with a figure that was draped in sheets, leaning on the wall of a house. I barely recognized her because of her veiling. As I passed by, however, she grabbed my thigh with her bony fingers. I uttered a cry and turned around. She removed a sheet that was covering her head, revealing a face hardly older than my own, but covered by festering, pulsating ulcers. *Meat maggots*. She whispered something which sounded like a craving plea, but only a guttural, rattling noise left her mouth. Jerkily, I withdrew my leg from her claw and hurried after Qalian and Yaléna.

When we finally arrived after what felt like an eternity, I was exhausted as if I had been briskly wandering for a day. I feared never to get rid of the disgusting odor that stuck on me.

Yaléna halted at a thick steel door and knocked twice. A few moments later a hatch opened and two eyes under bushy brows looked outside. As they recognized our leader, I heard the noise of a creaky latch, and the door opened. The door guard was an unremarkable man with croppy hair who reminded me of myself in an unpleasant manner. He looked at us appraisingly, but his gestures showed that he was Yaléna’s subordinate. With relief I noticed that the building, unlike I expected because of its exterior, was clean, and lit by several candlesticks on the walls. There was even a slight scent of lavender in the air, which after the omnipresent odor of feces during the last hours seemed to me like the smell of Irlanda’s hair.

Without any conversation, Qalian and I were guided along a narrow corridor with numerous closed doors. Despite the dim light

that came forth from underneath them, they seemed oppressive to me, like holding cell doors. At the end of the corridor, Yaléna opened another door.

The room in front of us was impressive. It was decorated with fine furniture and pillows, and a chandelier at the ceiling emitted soft orange light. There was a haze in the air, and as I was looking over the low tables that were surrounded by hassocks, I realized where the scent of lavender came from. Altogether, there were seats for about two dozen people, but except for us, the door guard and Yaléna only three other guests sat separately at the tables, drinking wine and smoking water pipes. Soothing harp music came from a corner of the room that was hidden from my view. I started to feel more comfortable again. Maybe this was indeed just a smokers tavern? *Perhaps an exclusive place for even more exclusive customers.* Why the exclusive customers should take the troublesome way through the alleys just to smoke a few pipes of Peaceweed with a lavender scent, I could not tell. I pursed my lips and looked helplessly at Qalian. He only smiled contentedly and slightly nodded towards me.

“Have a seat”, Yaléna said, and she pointed at an empty table in a corner. Then she silently moved away behind a curtain, and the door guard went back to the entrance.

I wanted to say something, but Qalian indicated me to wait. We sat down. Furtively, I looked around and mustered the other guests. Two men, one of them young, the other one old, and an old woman who wore her hair in a bun. Judging by their clothes, they all were wealthy, like ourselves. None of them took notice of us. Qalian took one of the candles on our table and held it underneath the pot of the water pipe. Then he leaned back – our pillows lay next to a wall – and yawned cheerfully. He observed the water pipe with a merry and relaxed gaze. In the pot, bubbles began to emerge slowly. For a while, I did the same as him; then I decided to break the silence.

“Qalian ...”

He cut off my words with a gesture and shook his head, almost leniently. “Just relax, my friend.” With one hand, he touched the pot of the water pipe. “Relax.”

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We waited more than thirty minutes before a chubby man with a friendly smile approached us. He introduced himself as Konthis.

The first thing I noticed was that the left sleeve of his expensive looking, burgundy garment hung limply down. He was one-armed. As he put out his right hand in greeting, I noticed several shimmering rings on his meaty fingers. A surprisingly pleasant smell reached my nose, originating from his perfume. It was spicy and sweet.

“Please excuse the delay“, he started the conversation with a dark, bassy voice that did not match his appearance. “We have many customers today. May I have a seat?”

Qalian answered in the affirmative to the pleasantries, and Konthis sat down opposite to us. For a while, none of us said anything, and I felt how Konthis’s dark, perceptive eyes mustered me. Then he nodded contentedly.

“Well then. Formalities first.“ He took a folded parchment out of his garment, opened it and studied it shortly.

“Jarimôn Bathila, 46 winters old, merchant. And ... ah, you come from Arazeal? Gosh! May I say that your Endralean is very good!”

The question seemed to refer to Qalian. He smiled.

“Skill comes with practice, I guess.“

Konthis nodded. “Indeed, it does. And then there is ... Jaél Thalás. Arazealan as well.“

I nodded and tried to smile as charmingly as Qalian.

“Very well.“ He folded the parchment again and leaned slightly

forward. "Then we begin. Agreed?"

Qalian blew out the smoke upwards from a corner of his mouth. Like all consumers of Peaceweed, he had slightly misty eyes, but he nevertheless seemed to have a clear mind.

"Please", he replied.

"For completeness, let me once again explain the rules and the procedure of your visit, which will hopefully not be your last." His voice was friendly, but I could sense a certain sharpness in it. "As soon as you have paid the rest, a servant will ..."

"We have to pay before we receive the services?" Qalian seemed to be indignant.

"Thus are the rules, Mysir. I am sorry", Konthis replied without lowering his gaze.

Qalian looked sourly at the burly man, yet he made an affirmative gesture.

Konthis smiled. "Well now, a servant will give you a sign and then accompany you to your chambers." He looked at the parchment again. "Or rather, your chamber. The girls will be waiting there. Whatever happens next will be up to you."

The girls? A shudder went down my spine, and I gave Qalian a nervous gaze.

Konthis had noticed my gaze. "Are you well, Mysir?", he asked.

Before I could answer, Qalian spoke: "He is just a little excited." He looked at me reprovingly. "It is his first time."

Konthis frowned. "Well, I understand."

As soon as you are done, ring the bell on the nightstand, wait a few moments, then ring again, and someone will take care about ... – he seemed to struggle for a word – "... the rest. And that would be it." He let his gaze wander between Qalian and me. "Are there any more questions from your side?"

Qalian had a question: "I assume we will leave this place the same way we came in?"

“Yes. Yaléna will accompany you outside.”

My comrade muttered sullenly. “I see. And you can guarantee for our ... anonymity?”

Konthis gave a short laugh. “We can guarantee that nobody except for our attendants will have seen you arrive and leave this place. And you can be certain that our other guests have no interest in talking about your presence. I think I do not need to explain why.”

Qalian shortly rubbed his chin with his thumb and index finger. He seemed to think. Then he nodded and put out his strong hand to Konthis.

“Accepted. We have a deal.”

Konthis smiled happily. First, he shook Qalian’s hand, then mine. His handshake was strong and firm. Afterwards, Qalian took a small, bulging purse from his coat and emptied it on the table.

“Fifteen gold coins. You can count if you like.”

My eyes widened. *Fifteen gold coins?! What a fortune! One gold coin was worth one thousand pennies! One thousand pennies ...* Enough to buy a decent house or a warhorse of the finest breed. My head was spinning as I thought of the things one could purchase for a sum fifteen times higher than that. Yet Qalian kept a straight face while he was looking at the shimmering gold. Did these riches come from the treasuries of Qalian’s mysterious “brothers and sisters”? They probably did. I uneasily turned my gaze from the coins and looked at our host, who was looking at them contentedly.

“It will not be necessary.” He waved his hand and a lanky boy who wore a red garment came in from between two curtains. His head was bowed in humility. As he had reached our table, Konthis only pointed towards the coins. He collected them swiftly and silently and carried them away. After he had disappeared behind the curtains, Konthis spoke again.

“Well then. Indulge yourselves!”

Qalian smiled and blew out a cloud of smoke. “Thank you.”

Without further words, Konthis stood up and left. After only five minutes the curtains opened again and the slim boy indicated us to follow him.

Qalian nodded shortly and took a last draw on the pipe. I noticed uneasily that he had almost smoked two full pots of Peaceweed; an amount that could put a cocky, unexperienced bachelor to a comatose slumber for several hours. Qalian, however, did not seem to be tired. His eyes had a milky shimmer characteristic of Peaceweed consumers, and all his movements were calm, but also I saw the strange, intimidating glimmer in his eyes that I had noticed on that evening when he told me about the “nectar of sins”.

We raised and walked through the room towards the boy. Even when we stood directly before him, he did not look up but still bowed his head towards the ground. He turned around, and we followed him to the long corridor that opened behind the curtains. Similar to the hallway which led from the entrance area to the parlor, every eight arm's lengths there were heavy steel doors at both sides. Each door had a number above its arch, written on a wickedly expensive-looking golden badge. We stopped in front of door number XVI. Silently, the boy removed a heavy key from from a large ring and thrust it into Qalian's hand. Then he bowed shortly, turned around and left. Qalian played with the key like a prestidigitator and then inserted it into the lock.

The door opened without noise.

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The room was ample and luxurious. A chandelier emitted candlelight which was colored by a red paper screen. A pompous canopy bed stood in the middle, and the air strongly smelled of roses and lavender. Even before I noticed the two bound girls, a cold shudder went down my spine as I entered the room behind Qalian and the

heavy door snapped shut. And before Qalian could inform me about the services this place provided, the pieces came together and formed a coherent, terrible whole. I looked around, overwhelmed. My gaze jumped between the different, unambiguous elements of room XVI. The bound girls on the bed, stark naked, their eyes undoubtedly clouded by a narcotic. The box on a small table, containing angular kernels, which I instantly identified as those of holly berries. Even a bakerwoman from Old Lower Aranath knew about their aphrodisiac effect. Finally, the utensils hanging on the walls.

“Do you like it?“, Qalian asked. He had sat down on a sprawling arrangement of burgundy hassocks. He was barely an arm’s length away from the bound girls on the bed, yet he did not look at them at all. In the corners of his mouth I still saw the smile that never seemed to cease. We are going to have some fun.

Monster, I thought, bewildered. Without a word I attacked Qalian. With a loud cry I jumped forward, launched myself on him and started to strangle him. Qalian seemed not to have expected it, and for a moment I thought I had the upper hand. Then, however, he started to laugh – or he tried to. The result was a choking rattle. Full of rage, I increased the pressure, while my face turned into a hateful grimace. But Qalian just kept on laughing. His eyes were gleaming of joy and amusement. If I had watched the scene without being part of it myself I probably would have considered it a fake, an exhibition fight. He made no effort to free himself from my grasp. *You miserable bastard! You damned piece of dirt!* I pressed harder. I felt the stubbles of Qalian’s beard pricking my fingers as I squeezed his warm flesh. Yet nothing happened. Qalian still laughed, and only after sixty seconds I realized that any normal human being should have been unconscious by now. Yet it did not happen. Nothing happened at all. After a while Qalian’s laughter broke off, but not because I had killed him. His face, which had not even turned red, began to show the expression of blissful serenity again. Suddenly I felt helpless and

ridiculous. I had never seen Qalian fight, but since the day we had met, I had felt the aura of power which surrounded him like a veil of heat surrounded an open fire. He was dangerous. I took fright. *He could kill me*, shot through my head. Once, twice, again and again, like a gloomy drum roll. *He could kill me!*

“But I won’t”, Qalian said. His lips did not move a bit.

Then he put his right hand on my chest, and one second later I was thrown back as if a cannonball had hit me. I hit the stone floor hard and lost consciousness.