

# TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ENDERAL

(SURREAL)



The Butcher of Ark



## Chapter 8: Masks

Three months passed by before Qalian considered me worthy of performing the ritual which made me a full-fledged Brother of the Black Libra. He asked if I really wanted to take the path now that I was aware of its true nature. The fact that I stayed was answer enough. After all, what else should I have done?

I had fled from an undefined fear, leaving my old life in order to find out where it came from. As absurd as it might sound to you – I had the feeling that I had found the right path in Qalian and the Fire. *We are born as servants of the Libra*, he told me one evening. *But it is up to us to recognize our determination.* He himself was the son of a nobleman, as he had confided to me. Although – unlike me – he remembered the first years of his life, he always had the vague feeling that he was destined to be someone different. In his mind, too, something was hidden that he was unable to explain, and he also had these fleeting moments in which this something crossed the threshold to his consciousness. His first cleansing was a crucial experience: An assassin was hired by a hostile family to seek revenge. She was disguised as a maid and had entered his rooms, but he saw through the disguise and defeated the hired murderer. The nectar of her sins was the first step for him.

He would not tell me which other obstacles had been waiting for him after this moment. I only knew that I was about to overcome one. I did not mind the uncertainty during the long wait. I learned a lot, and for the first time in my life I felt like someone special. How foolish all the people on the streets appeared to me! Full of ignorance they lived their ordinary lives, prayed to the gods and believed that abundance of the Path and godliness alone was enough to protect them from the abyss. Alas, how deluded they were! There was no



higher power to free us from the responsibility to protect us from sin. We alone decided what we gave in to and when we acted weakly.

*People do not want to carry responsibility for themselves, my friend, Qalian once told me. They never did.*

More and more I began to view the world as a game board. The stars, nature, or gods foreign to us had set the rules and now delightfully observed how mankind struggled to cope with it. Maybe they had the power to remove temptation and sin from the way of the world? I did not know. However, evil was not supposed to get the upper hand, and that was why we were who we were.

It was an elevating feeling to be a sighted man among the blind. So many times in my old life I had felt powerless, angry about how little justice I found in our world. How many times – even in my small village – I had seen a guilty, sinful man evading his just punishment because of status, prestige or gold, while a vagrant got thrown into the dungeon stealing a chicken. These events embittered me, but I thought this was simply the way of the world. The Black Libra, though, changed everything, and the thought of being part of it filled me with triumph and euphoria in a way I was unable to comprehend. Was this the reason for my anxiety? That I, Jaél Tanner's Son, had always sensed my true destiny? To bring justice to the world?

Even now, after I have realized the insanity of the Libra, I cannot answer the question. I just know that it felt *right* back then.

In contrast to what you may think, we Brothers of the Libra did not choose our victims arbitrarily. When a corrupted was responsible for too many sins, the member chosen for the killing was informed about the “mission” in a letter. I never understood how these letters always found their way regardless of the locations and circumstances. They contained only two pieces of information: a drawing and a name. The rest – collecting further information and



planning the assassination – was the chosen’s task.

Before my trial, Qalian received four such letters, and I witnessed three of the killings.

You might wonder about the casualness of how I write about it, but as I said: There is almost no circumstance that the human mind will not adapt to. And I adapted to the cleansings. They were always justified, however cruel they appeared. All the people we killed were corrupted and had managed to evade justice with wealth or cunning. But they could not evade us. The Libra was older than Enderal, the Lightborn, maybe even the tides. Nobody knew which prince, god or shapeless entity pulled the strings, and nobody knew how the chosen ones were different from the common people.

Even if I had been able to, I’d never investigated the matter. I did not care why I had met Qalian and where the strange vision had its origin.

With the fire in my blood I was not just anyone anymore. I was special.

That was exactly what I felt when I sat next to Qalian in a carriage three moons later. The time had come, I had been told. I was worthy now.

*Worthy* ... I wanted to look out of the window, but I was reminded that the glass was veiled by black cloth. No beam of light entered the cabin, only a lantern at the ceiling emitted some light.

“You’ll have to get used to this”, Qalian said. “Even I don’t know the locations of the bastions.”

“Bastions?”

“The strongholds. Their temples. There’s one on each continent, but nobody knows where they are.”

I nodded. “If I were a spy, I’d be able to blow the cover.”



"You wouldn't", Qalian responded. The Black Libra can't be shattered, as much as a forbidden thought can't be erased. You can prohibit it by law, you can burn writings about it, but it will never vanish. This trial is not about your loyalty", he continued. "If you weren't loyal, I would have killed you long ago."

"What is it about then?"

"About limits." He paused a moment, as if he was ordering his words. "You may believe that you have already crossed them, but you haven't. Deep inside" – he pointed between my eyes with his index finger – "they still exist."

"We who have fully committed ourselves to the Libra, we are different than other people, Jaél."

I nodded. "The fire."

"Yes, the fire. But don't be mistaken – you don't know all about it. You have been guided by its force, you feel its voice inside of you, and you have tasted the sins of the obsessed ones. However, this is only a part of what constitutes a true servant of the Libra."

My stomach itched as if the *fire* approved of Qalians words. His words resounded in my mind. I felt that there were still miles between me and my comrade – and mentor. Aside from the obvious – his skillful killing and his confidence – there was more that I was not able to explain. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it was something in his *gaze*, something in the way he looked at the world."Lucid" was the word that came to my mind.

"And what exactly is it?", I finally asked.

"Boundlessness", he replied. "Total commitment."

When he saw my confused face, he smiled. "It is what you have been searching for all your life without finding it. It is what we all strive for, but only few are destined to experience it." He leaned back and crossed his legs. "And you have the opportunity to be one of them."

I did not respond as I knew Qalian would not – *could not* – tell me more.



About an hour later we arrived. The mummied coachman, who had wordlessly picked us up in the evening, opened the door, holding a piece of black cloth in his right hand. I was unable to recognize anything other than the clear light of the stars outside. Qalian took the cloth with both hands.

“I am sorry, but this is necessary.”

I realized what he was about to do and did not resist. The cloth slipped quietly over my head, and everything became pitch black. Then Qalian took my hand and guided me outside. I heard a crunching sound when I started to walk. *Snow.*

“Come”, I heard my comrade’s voice, and I felt a slight pull on my left arm.

I followed him.

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After about half an hour I entered the Endralaeen Bastion of the Libra for the first time. The echoes of our footsteps indicated that we had entered a kind of cave. A few moments later the sound of several other voices mingled with ours. I was told to sit down. My blindfold was removed, but I was ordered not to open my eyes before I heard the ring of a bell. “Watch closely”, Qalian had whispered before the voices and footsteps faded away and a large door was shut.

Dutifully I kept my eyes closed. A bright ringing sounded.

I was in a large, round room with high walls and a dome-shaped ceiling which appeared to me like the interior of a chapel. It was empty except for numerous candlesticks with crimson flames and a symmetrical column of high and precisely spaced pillars leading to the other side. Only at second glance I noticed the painting on the walls.

The painting was different to what I was used to from Endralaeen



temples. It not depict saints or the twelve stages of the Pioneers' journey. It was divided into nine different pictures. I turned my head to the left to examine the picture next to me.

It showed an athletic man standing on an uneven stone road leading up a hill. He was naked except for a loincloth. The environment was barren and tundra-like, grandly lit by the bright and clear moonlight. The man had averted his gaze from the moon. He wore a simple steel mask. It has no ornamentation, only two narrow slits for the eyes, yet something about it fascinated me in a manner I was unable to describe. It appeared to be ... impeccable. Every muscle of the man's body was tightened. He reached both his hands out to the sky, as if he was expecting a divine blessing. I stared at the picture for an endless moment. It emitted something that could be described as an aura, and it made me feel joy and anxiety. Only minutes later I noticed a small writing at the lower corner of the painting. I squinted my eyes to read it. *The Renaissance*.

I kept my gaze on the picture for a few more moments, frowned and turned away. The painting was fascinating, but I had to perform a trial, even though I was not yet aware of its nature. So I turned my gaze ahead again and waited.

However, nothing happened. I started to feel uneasy. What was expected from me? I looked uncertainly behind me – the steel door was closed. *Maybe I am supposed to prove patience*, I tried to calm my thoughts. I lowered my gaze again and tried to meditate as Qalian had taught me. Five minutes passed. Ten. Nothing.

I felt my stomach rumble and called myself a fool because I had not eaten anything before our hasty departure. *Just stretching my legs – I'm sure nobody would mind*. My knees crackled as I stood up. My calves tickled from sitting still. Carefully and slowly I walked through the room, as if my observers would be offended by any sudden movement. I hoped for deliverance from the uncertainty by a strange, mysterious voice or the appearance of another person.



It was in vain. Two hours passed, and not even a grain of dust seemed to have moved in the sacral hall. Only then I realized that nobody was going to show up. Whatever this trial was about, I was expected to act on my own. *But what was I supposed to do?* I was certain that the way to passing the test did not lead through the door behind me. So I tried to find a hidden clue in the room.

I started to feel helpless. What was this? Some test of my willpower? *Such a nonsense*, I thought angrily. I suppressed the urge to walk back to the door and knock. *What are they going to do with those who did not pass the test?* I had an idea, but I was not eager to know more about it. *Qalian should have warned me*, I thought bitterly. *Or he should at least have ...*

*Watch closely.*

I halted. Had it been a clue? But about what? The room was empty. But ... *the paintings*. Of course – how could I have been so blind? I had regarded the pictures as mere decoration. How could the key to this trial be hidden in them?

Hastily I turned around and stopped in front of the picture right of the door. *If the paintings are connected and the left picture showing the man – The Renaissance – is the last one, than this must be the first one.* I observed the painting with uncertainty. It also showed a man, naked, looking at the spectator. He wore a mask, like the man in the Renaissance, and even though he was less athletic, he seemed to be the same person. The mask, however, was different. It was made from thin, skin-colored cloth, and it appeared to me rather like a second skin, tight and fissured like the skin of a dying old man. I averted my gaze with a feeling of disgust that I could not explain and examined the rest of the picture. At first I thought that the reflective surface on which the man stood was a floor of polished stone, but then I realized that it was still water. The area around the man was filled with wafts of mist, and only a few pine trees, drifting in the water in a surreal way, filled the scenery. *What is this supposed*



to mean? For a moment I adored the painter's artful brush stroke. The pictures were made with oil paint, yet they seemed strangely alive. How many artists in the world had such an expertise? Not many, I guessed. There were letters on this picture as well. *The Limbus*. I frowned. Arcanists called the state of derangement after overstraining one's mental capacities the Limbus. I pondered about the word, shook my head and went to the second picture.

The pictures were skillfully interwoven with each other. The second picture emerged from the mist in the first painting and depicted the heaven from a bird's view. The clouds were like rising smoke, drowned in sanguine light by the pale red horizon. In the middle there was the silhouette of a man: he hung from the sky on silken threads, like a sun god's puppet, and his mouth was wide open, as if he uttered a cry. This picture was also titled enigmatically: *The Washing*. The name triggered a memory in me. Hadn't I read about a ritual with this name? Yes ... I confirmed my own thought, *the nomadic journey of the Qyranians, when they head off to find the Red Mountain. Before they leave, they must perform a symbolic cleansing in one of their holy rivers, allegedly to discard their former self*. A new beginning, so to say, a spiritual cleansing. Could this be the meaning of the picture?

I looked around quickly. I was still alone. The next picture, which was similarly interwoven with the one before, showed the naked man, covered with dirt and soaked in water, dragging himself to the coast, probably coming from the mist-shrouded sea. Its title was *The First Stone*. The sun shone on the man's body, and its light was also the foundation for the next picture, which aroused shame in me. It showed the stranded man, who now looked more athletic and well-fed than in the last picture, making love to a woman. His skin glazed, soaked in sweat, and splatters of blood sparkled on his chest. He wore a mask of cloth, beneath which a diabolical grin could be seen. The woman with whom the man had intercourse had turned



her back to him. She was stylized in an unconventional way. Her long plaited hair flew down her back like a torrent of black pearls, and two horns emerged from her forehead. Her face was unrecognizable. The couple's environment resembled a butchery. Puddles of blood dazzled on the floor, and a corpse lay to the man's feet. I kneeled down and read the title of the picture: *The First Blaze*.

Only when I read the last word, it fell like scales from my eyes.

Yes, Jaél ... *This is a development*, it shot through my head. *A transformation.*

I had no idea whether it was by chance or by design that the man in the first painting walked through layers of fog. But there was no doubt: It was me, before the vision had occurred to me, when I lived in the grey drabness which I called my home and was always aware that my life lagged behind my true determination – in “limbus”. The “Washing” was nothing short of the vision that had torn me out of this life, the “First Stone” was my escape from Fogville. *And the “First Blaze” – a cold shudder went down my spine – was my first killing.*

I looked at the next picture. It showed the man, sitting in front of a withered fountain, inside a temple courtyard which was overgrown with tendrils. Instead of the cloth mask he now wore a mask of razor-thin metal, but his face was still visible underneath. At his side sat a woman with red fiery hair. The picture was titled *The Companion*, and I instantly understood its meaning. Even though Qalian was not a woman, and our first conversation did not take place in a beautiful ruin, it was without any doubt Qalian who saved me from the chaos which I experienced after my first encounter with the Fire. *For none of this is coincidental.* Did Qalian know that I was a potential Brother, that the Fire was running through my veins? His curious gaze when I had entered the tavern suggested that this was the case. *If the previous paintings show my development, then the following ones might help me through this trial!*

Quickened by the thought I continued the examination. I suspected



what the next picture would show, and my expectations were fulfilled. Its title was *The Rain of Flames*, and it showed the unknown man and the red-haired women on a battlefield. His mask now appeared to be more sturdy, and a gloomy heaven, full of foreboding clouds and only perforated by three dying beams of sunlight added a cataclysmical atmosphere to the image. The man and the woman stood back to back. The woman's face expressed lust and pugnacity. Bodies, covered in blood, with asymmetrical and browless faces, were scattered across the ground. The image symbolized without any doubt the incident in the Undercity, Qalian's lecture. The next painting showed the woman, stretching out her hand to the man. If I had not known the images before, I would probably have considered it gaudy. *The Time of Rest*. My heart was pounding. The parallels between the pictures and my previous experiences had ended here. After the "Time of Rest", which in a way described my "apprenticeship" with Qalian, I had been taken to the trial. The solution to the riddle had to be in the next two wall paintings. My eyes grew heavy and I started to shiver slightly as I looked at the next picture that had been hidden in the shadows of the pillars. *The Present*.

The man was inside a circular room. His face was still covered by a steel mask, but in the candlelight of the hall it was clearly visible that the metal was not *perfect*. No ... The man's face was still quite recognizable beneath, and it looked *weak*. I felt a surge of disgust rising inside me that I could not explain. The naked man kneeled in the middle of the large hall, his sickly and elegiac face turned toward the ceiling of the painting, his arms weakly hanging down at his sides. His body was smooth and shining, his skin covered with brown stains. *What ...?*

With the realization came panic.

I stared at the painting. At first I could not believe what my eyes saw. When I took a closer look my doubts were erased by the



accurate brush marks. I had deceived myself with my first glance.

The stains covering the man's body were not brown, but red. They were not made of mud or grime, but of blood.

A horizontal cut had opened the man's throat, and blood flew down. Now I noticed the small item next to the left of him which had undoubtedly slipped from his faint hand – a dagger.

Instinctively I turned away my gaze and stepped back. *No*, I thought. *No*. No further reflections were necessary to comprehend the painting's message. I was expected to kill myself.

It is hard to tell what I felt at that moment. I was most hesitant to strip myself naked like my oil-paint alter ego, but after a minute of pondering I did. I had to. By no means I wanted to kneel down in the middle of the room, like a believer expecting a blessing, but I did. Never in my life had I felt more anxiety. I lifted my dagger to my throat. My inner ear heard a disgusting, tearing sound, fueled by the memory of my first killing. No ... no man in his right mind would have used the knife on himself, with shaking hands, closed eyes, his body drenched in cold sweat, his eyes closed like a child who tries to wake from a nightmare. However, a man in his right mind would not have followed the vision. A man in his right mind would have accepted the punishment in the stable, wandering off with a few bruises and ruptures. And no man in his right mind was chosen by the Black Libra.

I closed my eyes and clenched my shaking hand around the hilt of the weapon. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to wake up from this ludicrous nightmare, to let the cold steel fall to the ground, to stand up and escape, somehow ...

Boundlessness ...

I sliced.