

# TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ENDERAL

(SUREAI)



The Butcher of Ark



## Chapter 5: Qalian

The man before me towered over me by half a head. His physique was athletic, but not heavy, his eyes pitch black and sparkling. Yet it was his smile which caught my eye. It was peculiar and crooked, and it made me believe that there was nothing that could impress this man. It was neither naïve like the smile of a child, nor was it cynical like that of an old man who had seen too much.

There he was, and both of us looked absurd: Me, a thin, ugly man, kneeling on the dead body of a giant, my hands soaked in blood, my face apathetic, my weapon lying next to my feet. He, tall, handsome, wearing elegant clothes, his arms crossed, observing me curiously.

Suddenly I broke into loud laughter. I threw my head into my neck and started to laugh, loud and resounding, the laughter of a man who was overwhelmed by the situation he found himself in so that his brain left him no other choice. I tried to get up from the body and slipped as my hands did not find any support on the blood-soaked floor. Lengthways, I fell on the corpse, feeling the warm blood on my body. *You have not eaten up, it shot through my head. Bad Jaél!*

Instead of bringing me back to reality, the nonsensical thought fueled my laughter even more. I rolled on my back, clutched my stomach and gasped for air. The man, whose name was unknown to me then, reacted in a similarly odd manner. First he rubbed his chin with his thumb and index finger and furled his eyebrows. He acted like a farmer whose sheep had started to bleat and jump around as if it had been bitten by the Black Guardian. Then, however, he started laugh as well. For me and my overwhelmed, confused mind the situation became even more absurd. I gasped for air as the laughter grew so strong that my lungs threatened to fail. Then, as hot tears ran down my cheeks, I heard a muffled sound. My sight faded to black and I lost consciousness.

I woke up with a metal taste in my mouth. My eyelids were heavy and glued shut, and my sight was blurred when I opened them.

I found myself in a forest, under a small edge at a rock surrounded by dark pine trees. Around the shelter, rain poured down. Only the fire that burned about an arm's length away kept me from feeling cold. I tried to turn my gaze so I could fully conceive my surroundings, but a biting pain exploded in the back of my head. I gasped and instinctively pressed my lips and eyelids together.

„Good evening“, I suddenly heard a voice saying nearby.

I was scared and tried again to turn my gaze, only to be punished by a more severe pain. This time, a short cry escaped my mouth. The voice next to me reacted with laughter. Then I heard someone stand up and walk over to me. Eventually, I saw a pair of boots, and someone kneeled before me.

It was the beau. He wore his chin-long hair in a small topknot which gave him the look of an Arazealean monk if it were not for the elegant clothing.

“I am sorry about the bump”, he said and smiled apologetically, “I must have exaggerated a bit.”

I looked at the man in confusion. My memories of the day before were pale and remote. The tavern ... The humiliation by the two brutes. My plan for revenge ... The stable.

The insight hit me like a beam of lightning striking an old tree on a clearing.

I had killed him. *Massacred him.*

I pressed my hands on my mouth and felt myself shivering all over. Every detail of last night's events hit me like a hammer. How the brute caught me in the act and dashed me to the ground. The



pain as he his kicked me over and over with his boots. The rising of blazing rage. The smacking sound of the dagger that penetrated his back. His bewildered face, his silent begging for mercy. My frenzy, my satisfaction, my ecstasy that grew stronger with every stab.

Without any warning, I vomited on my clothes. I coughed and gagged, and I felt tears rising in my eyes. *Slaughtered. You have slaughtered him!*, it shot through my head, again and again. I was so consumed in my thoughts that I entirely forgot about the existence of the man in front of me. Finally, when I remembered the moment when I lost my consciousness, I stared at him in disbelief.

He had not moved a bit and still kneeled in front of me. His mouth smiled, but his eyes were earnest, almost devout. What did it mean? Did he knock me down? He must have done it ... and brought me here. *But ... why?*

As if he had read the question in my eyes, he started to move. He shook his head and pointed at a small bag next to my sleeping place. I looked at him with uncertainty, and his grin widened.

„What is it? You look at me if I was Dal’Thalgard’s ghost.”

I felt my tension ease up a bit. Still, I was unable to speak a word, whereupon the man pursed his lips.

“Go have a look inside your bag ... unless you have a thing for decorating yourself with your own vomit.”

Only now I hesitantly followed his suggestion and found a large cloth that was embroidered in blue and white. I looked at him again, like a child that received something it never before had held in its hands.

He furled his eyebrows skeptically, and I realized that my behavior probably seemed odd to him. *Does it really seem odd? After all, he was the one who had brought me here. And he knows what had happened.* Grudgingly, I crossed my legs and started to wipe away the remains of Whispertree Resin that I had consumed yesterday from my robe.

The man observed all of my movements attentively. Then he stood up and turned toward the sparkling flames. I noticed that there was something cooking over the fire. *Drink*. The bile made my mouth feel unpleasantly bitter and my throat was dry as the dunes of the Pinnacle Desert. For a moment I felt hunger, but the memories of yesterday's events made it disappear at once. The man ladled something from the kettle, and a faint wind carried a smell of sugar mint and honey to my nose. Then he turned toward me, carrying a bruised cup in each of his hands. He gave me one of them and sat down on a tree stump.

"It's only that bad the first time."

I flinched. „Pardon me ...?"

„You surely understand me."

For a moment his gaze went astray. Then he shook his head, almost unrecognizably, and turned toward me again. "But where are my manners?" He knocked his fist against his chest, a military salute that in my eyes seemed inappropriate to his person.

"I am Qalian." He looked at me expectantly, and when I did not respond, he asked: "And who are you?"

At first I was inclined to tell the man a false name, but I decided against it.

„Jaél. Jaél Tanner's Son."

The man took off his glove, reached out to me, and I shook his hand. His grip was warm and firm.

"So, Jaél. Very pleased to meet you." He smiled and looked straight into my eyes without blinking. I felt an awe of veneration running down my spine. *What a presence*. I remembered the woman who had sat next to him the other day. Now I understood why she had looked at him with such devotion.

Uneasily, I lowered my head. For a moment I envied Qalian's appearance, his demeanor and his endearing manners. Despite the



thousands of questions whirling in my head, I could not help but like the stranger. I was certainly not the first one who made this experience. He radiated a kind of venturesomeness that seemed powerful enough to tempt fate itself.

Qalian withdrew his hand and took a sip of tea.

“Well. Where do we start?”

I looked at him helplessly.

“Start ... with what?”

„The questions, of course” He smirked. “Don’t tell me you don’t have any.”

He looked at me appraisingly. “Or maybe I should start. Where do you come from, Jaél? You do not look like a man of the world.”

“I come ... from a small village”, I replied carefully. When Qalian only raised his eyebrows, I added “Fogville”.

“Fogville ... Not a very exciting place.”

Now I was the one who raised the eyebrows. “You know Fogville?”

Qalian made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “I once stopped there on a ... mission. You have a cozy tavern.” He smiled. “And a few beautiful women.”

„... Yes, of course.” *What in the name of Malphas does that guy want from me?* Yesterday he had caught me in the act. *He knows.* And now we were skirmishing with each other like two hunters who had met in a tavern over a mug of mead. I decided to make a foray, not out of courage or bravery, but because I could not bear the unsaid words anymore.

“Listen ... Qalian.” I felt a clump forming in my throat and quickly drank a sip of my tea. It was so hot that I asked myself how he had been able to drink it without burning his lips.

“How did I get here?”

Qalian smiled leniently. “I brought you here.” He seemed to notice the irritated look on my face and added: “... after I had struck you

down. Let's say ... you had problems coping with the situation."

There was a moment of silence. "I took care of the bodies."

The word hit me like a hammer, and again I felt bile rising up my gullet. This time, however, I was able to suppress the urge to vomit. As a result, I had a terrible taste on my tongue. I coughed and stared at the man with uncertain eyes. *He talks as if all of this was perfectly normal.* But it was not, damn it! I had committed a crime, and even worse than the crime itself was the manner in which I had committed it. *I am a monster! A god-forsaken monster!*

As if he had read my mind, he bent forward a bit.

"I know what you think now, Jaél. You feel guilty, don't you? You feel like a monster, or some such thing?"

I looked at him in unease. Then I turned my gaze away, which he seemed to interpret as an approval.

"Forget about that nonsense. What you did was the right thing."

A sad laughter escaped my throat. "The right thing?"

„Yes. But wait.“ He rubbed his chin with his thumb and his index finger and looked into the fire.

"Let me tell you a story. Then you will understand."

I nodded, superfluously, for he already started to narrate.

„Once, there was a family. Five people. A woman, her two husbands, and two children.“ He seemed to notice that I wrinkled my forehead. „And they came from Qyra. For in Qyra, they live differently, you know? There are not only couples, but also people living in larger families, called circles. Anyway ...“ He shortly paused and drank some tea. "... this family was not a lucky one. One of the husbands, called Keshan, had just lost his job on a sugar cane plantation outside Al-Rashim, the capital. The wife, who worked as a weaver with a wealthy merchant, also lost her job when the merchant experienced financial troubles. All in all the situation in Al-Rashim was troublesome. The streets were dangerous, the Meat Maggot Plague



was raging, and it was no good time for people who lived in a circle with two children and who had no Penials in their pockets. So they decided to find happiness elsewhere.”

His eyes went astray. „Towards a new world, a new life. And so“ – he turned towards me again – „they spent their very last money for a journey to Enderal. However, when they arrived in Ark they realized that life here was not at all as they had imagined. Even in the Foreign Quarter, prices were too high for them, and none of them, except for one of the husbands, spoke Endralean. Therefore, they moved to the Undercity.”

For a moment, I thought I saw melancholy in his amber eyes. “Do you know the Undercity, Jaél?”

“I ... Yes, I’ve heard of it.”

He nodded. “Well. So you know that it is not a friendly place for families. The streets are dangerous. Blackmail and murder are the order of the day. It is a slum, and the most cynical thing about it is the fact that the cavern in which it was erected lies directly underneath the Upper Quarter of Ark, where noblemen have masquerade balls and philosophize about morals and ethics.” With the last part of the sentence, rage flashed through Qalian’s eyes. It stayed there for a moment and disappeared as fast as it had arrived.

“Anyway, the small family moved into one of the shabby box-shaped homes in an alley called Canal Street. The street lived up to its name – stinking, dark and narrow. Even though it was definitely not the new beginning that the circle had envisioned, the three parents did not become discouraged. They knew about the obstacles and were determined to overcome them.

“Aside from that, their faith in Irlanda strengthened them. In their tiny house, which consisted only of one room divided by cloths, they had erected a shrine. Every evening, they prayed to their goddess, and they drew courage and strength from it. Indeed ... Things



seemed to get better when Kesahn was hired on a farm outside the walls of the city. Now, you might not understand how peculiar this was. But let me tell you that it is more likely that a Vatyr learns to read and write than that someone from the Undercity – and, to make matters worse, someone with a dark skin – finds decent and honest work with a farmer in the Heartland.

“Keshan was aware of this, for he and his circle had learned that there were people who hated them because of their origin alone. And these were not merely people from the Upper City. Even their neighbors shouted ‘shagarounds’ or ‘charcoal people’ at them on the streets. For the world is like this, my friend. People are afraid of what they do not know – families with multiple parents, Aeterna, people with black skin. All foreign things are dangerous to them.

“Yet Keshan fought even harder. Every morning he got up, long before the first cockcrow, and walked the arduous way to the farm where he worked. He returned long after the sun had set. Work was hard, but he was grateful for the opportunity to give his family, especially his two children, a better life.”

Qalian stopped, picked up a piece of firewood and threw it into the fire. Then he continued.

„But things turned out differently, of course. For among all the noble people who live in Ark, there is a ... well, a ‘faction’. It calls itself the Citadel and understands itself as a ‘bastion’ of traditional values, as they put it.

“At some point, they got wind of the charcoal man, who took away a hardworking, honest Enderalean’s job on a farm. The Citadel’s members knew what they had to do. One night, when Kesahn returned to his little house in Canal Street, he sensed that something was wrong. He was unable to put a finger on it, he just felt it like a mother felt that something had befallen her son.

“What exactly had happened, he found out when he entered his



home. All of them were dead. Both his children, Lilyea and Garral. His husband, Jashek. And his wife, Zamira. His children he found in a corner, crouched together and wrapped in a bloody cloth. They had cut Lilyea's throat and Garral's thigh artery. Jashek seemed to have fought back, as he had been stabbed several times in his chest before he was beheaded. Zamira lay flat on the table, and the blood between her legs was clear evidence of what had been done to her before she was killed. Just as Keshan wanted to cry out, he felt a burning pain in his back and fell to the ground, dead."

Qalian had narrated the last part of his story without blinking his eyes. Stunned and speechless, I looked at him. Again he returned my look without blinking.

"Tell me, Jaél, what do you think about my story? Do you like it?"

"Is it ... true?", I asked, for want of a better reply.

"Yes, it is true."

I looked at Qalian, seeking advice. *What in blazes does he expect from me?*

"That's terrible."

Qalian nodded. „Exactly. And what would you say if I told you that the two men that we have killed yesterday were members of the Citadel?"

I was petrified. "Pardon me?"

"The two apes who now lie dead at the ground of the pond." I did not notice that he used exactly the same word for them as I did in my thoughts. "They were members of the Citadel. And they have murdered the family of the Qyranian. All for the greater good, of course." Again, there was cold rage in his eyes.

"I do not understand", I replied, even though I did.

Qalian narrowed his eyes to a slit. "Oh yes, you do. Salbor and Adreyu Mithal. They are sons of a wealthy ruler from Enderal's north, and they are murderers."

For a short, irrational moment I was flooded with triumph. *They*



*have deserved to die!* The corners of my mouth twitched. But then the images flashed before my eyes and the terrible memories returned. Memories of the joy that I had felt when I had stabbed the man, massacred him. *The blood ...*

“But I was not aware of it. Even if ...” I stopped mid-sentence and lowered my gaze. How only could I in any way describe the way I felt?

For a moment there was silence between us. Just when I wanted to ask a question, Qalian did something unexpected. Before I knew what happened to me, he was right before me, leaving only two hands’ width between our faces. I would have flinched, but something in Qalian’s gaze paralyzed me. I was unable to move, stiff as a wax figure. For an instant I was unable to notice the change in him, but then I realized it.

His eyes were blazing. First I thought that it was a reflection of the campfire, but when I saw that the fire burned behind Qalian, I knew that his eyes indeed had changed their color. They seemed like glowing coal, like a candlewick just before it is completely consumed by fire. His features had lost the joviality that was present in the past thirty minutes.

Then he began to speak, quietly, but sound and clear. The tone of his voice sent shivers down my spine.

“The scum deserved to die, Jaél. They were *corrupted*.” He made no move to explain the last word. „I was in the Red Ox because I was chosen to murder them. You had beaten me to it, and you have done me and the world a favor.”

I did not know where I took the strength from to answer, but I did, even though my words were only a whisper, like a deathbed confession.

“But I savored it.”

Disgust aroused in me once again. A dull fear, the burden of a man who knew that he had done something terrible. My shoulders



slumped and I lowered my head as if it was Malphas and not Qalian to whom I had just confessed the ecstasy during the murder.

But Qalian did not allow me to get overwhelmed. He put his right hand on my shoulder and with his left hand turned my face so that I looked directly at him. Then he spoke, slowly and clearly.

„I know, Jaél. Do you know why?“

He did not give me any time to reply.

„For you have felt what they had done. You have felt their crimes and their guilt, and the ecstasy was the reward for your courage.“ He paused. „It was the nectar of their sins.“

Then, with a short, fleeting moment, it was over. The glow in Qalian's eyes was gone. He sat back, and a look at his face made me wonder if my mind had played a trick on me. He remained silent.

After minutes of silence, I asked the crucial question, without even knowing what I really wanted to ask.

“Why?”

But Qalian understood.

“Because you are special. And because the blood that runs in your veins is the same as mine ... and as that of our brothers and sisters.”

I stared at him in a baffled way. *My mental capacity was exhausted. Brothers and sisters? I could not go any longer – my eyelids were leaden and my limbs were faint and weak.*

*Qalian seemed to notice.*

*“There is a long journey ahead of us. I will explain everything you need to know, but now go to sleep.” The glimmer that I had seen in his eyes before returned for a moment. “Dusk is nearing.”*

~

The next morning we headed towards Ark.

You might ask yourselves why I followed the strange man, and I

cannot give you a clear answer to that question. Surely, many things would have turned out differently if I had slipped off in the gray mist of the morning, but my exhaustion did not allow me to leave. Another reason for me to stay was perhaps that all the things that had happened to me in the week before seemed bizarrely familiar to me. I probably would not have left anyway, since Qalian's words had a hypnotic effect on me which I was unable to explain to myself. *It was the nectar of their sins.* A thousand questions were haunting my mind. Nevertheless, the knowledge that the murder I had committed was *a good and righteous deed* served as a straw that my plagued mind could cling to. It was a peculiar feeling to have killed a man. Young soldiers and guardsmen have colorful dreams about honor and glory. When they think about thrusting a sword into unrighteous man's chest, they believe it to be a sublime feeling. Even though the experience had been sublime for me, the aftermath was not. My state shifted between an emotionless paralysis and lightning-fast epiphanies filling me with guilt and disgust which overcame me like the autumnal floods at the coast of Myar. At these moments one wonders *if killing can be justified at all*. The more often you perform the act of killing, though, the less doubts you have. The coldness grows until the taking of a life becomes trivial.

Back then, however, this way of thinking was unfamiliar to me. When in the light of the setting sun Qalian offered me a bowl of hot, steaming oatmeal and blood-red wild berries, I was overcome with nausea even before I ate a spoonful of it. Did I notice a hint of guilty conscience in Qalian's eyes – or was it amusement? I did not know.

While we packed our belongings I asked him about the meaning of yesterday's testimony once again. He only shook his head and told me that meaning of the "fire" could not be learned by conversation alone, such as swimming could not be learned by reading treatises about the consistency of water.



And so the both of us, as different as day and night, headed towards the legendary capital. He was well dressed, handsome and always confidently smiling. I was dressed in worn-out clothes, had a hooked nose and the puzzled look of a man who had no idea what was happening to him. The first two days of our journey were terrible. I barely ate, and most of the time I thought I could see blood on my hands or hear human death cries among the singing of the birds. Even the silence did not calm me down. *Please, not.*

But on the third day things started to get better, and for the first time since I had met Qalian, I did not feel the weakening nausea every time I halted and allowed my thoughts to wander. Of course my state of mind was far from joyful, but in an odd way, I felt better than after my departure from Fogville. There was a simple reason for this: The fear was gone from my stomach. Or, in better words: I felt as if I had appeased it, like a wild animal that just had a good meal, knowing that there was more to come. *I am on the right way.* How strange these words sounded in my mind. But yet I felt alright. As if I had glimpsed a light on the horizon, a light I should have been following all my life.

My sense of guilt began to diminish as well. Even though there was no way for me to verify Qalian's story, I knew that it was right. The arrogant faces, the vile voices – these two men had been *evil. Corrupted.* And there would have been more victims after Keshan's family. The more time I spent thinking such things, the more truthful they rang in my mind.

While we were wandering, Qalian told me a lot of other things. Great deals of it were stories from his past. I now knew that he came from Nehrim, a fact that explained his subtle accent. He grew up in Cahbaet, the capital of the Northrealm. Just as the Middlerealm, it was under the rule of chancellor Barateon, but Qalian assumed that a civil war between the northern separatists and the chancellor was

imminent within the next ten years. His migration to Enderal had many reasons, and with a look that was rejecting, yet not harsh, he indicated that I was not ready to know about these chapters of his past.

After a week's march we arrived in Ark.

I do not wish to spoil ink with descriptions. I am sure that the capital of Enderal is well-known to you, and you might imagine how overwhelmed I was by its sight. We first saw it from a small mountain ledge, and I spent minutes watching the city bathing in the light of the setting sun.

"Impressive, isn't it?", I heard a voice next to me. It was Qalian.

I murmured something without turning my gaze. He gave off a laugh.

„Indulge! Sometimes, the first time is the best time”, he said and sat down at the edge of the cliff, a chasm of about four hundred arms length's depth. I looked at him and saw that he had closed his eyes and let the evening sun shine on his face. Again, I felt envy rising. If a young woman had come up the hill, she would have considered him to be the hero of a bard's song. But at the same time I knew that Qalian did not show off. He simply enjoyed the view, the moment and the sunlight – an ability I had not developed in my life.

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It was already dark when we showed our papers to the city guards and asked for entrance. We pretended to be merchants from Arazeal who had to put in at the harbor of Duneville due to the unfavorable weather. After checking the papers quickly, the guardswoman allowed us to pass. When the heavy gates shut behind us and the portcullis came down with a loud noise, any remaining thoughts about a return to my old life as a priest vanished.



We made stop at a tavern called “The Dancing Nomad”. Qalian opened his bulging purse and invited me to a stew of sugar beets, dark bread and very expensive beer from Cahbaet. This time we did not talk much. Instead, we listened to the music of a beautiful, red-haired bard whose dark voice was in stark contrast to her fragile physique. She sang traditional tunes such as “The Song of the Aged Man”, the “Pathless Wanderer” or “The Maid in the Silver Glow”. I looked down in unease as Qalian started to sing along to the last song in full voice. Only when I noticed that people did not object his good, but not brilliant singing, but started to join in, my ungrounded shame faded away and I felt increasingly comfortable.

We stayed in the taproom until late. When only five other guests were with us, I asked the question that had been burning on my lips.

“What now?” I spoke quietly, dazed by alcohol and the loudness of the past hours.

Qalians gaze met mine, and he did not lower it until I directed mine towards the ground in unease. I heard Qalian emitting a sound that could have been a muffled laughter as well as a sigh.

“Now we are going to sleep like logs. And tomorrow” – his eyes sparkled for a moment – “the first lesson awaits you.”

I had no idea what his words meant.

“The first lesson?”

He smiled.