

TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ENDERAL

(SURREAL)



The Butcher of Ark

Chapter 9: The Rise

The first thing I felt was astonishment. I was not in pain, even though I clearly felt the cut at my throat. Instead, I felt a sober certainty. I had killed myself.

I closed my eyes and waited.

The pain exploded after exactly twenty-seven seconds. I tried to scream, but I only produced a choked rattle. I broke down and rolled to the side, my knees drawn to my chest like a freezing child.

After ninety-six seconds my field of vision had become a dirty, dark red colored glass pane, and my body was flagged. The red puddle underneath me had grown to man size, and I asked myself if the numerous animals that my foster father or his suppliers had killed in order to obtain their beautiful furs had felt the same. After one hundred and five seconds I felt how life melted away and a pleasant drowsiness emerged. How nice it would be to simply close the eyes and sleep, forever and ever, in peace and tranquility ... After one hundred and fifty seconds I stopped counting.

And woke up.

The first change I noticed was one that was hard to describe. Even though the room around me was superficially the same, I felt that something was wrong, like as if a deformed man tried to hide his true face beneath a mask. The other change was of a physical nature, and I noticed it when I instinctively put my right hand on my chest. My heart was not beating anymore. I examined my neck in disbelief. The cut was still there, but the stream of blood had stopped. My sight was back to normal, my mind was clear. I noticed a third change when I looked around.

The drawings had come to life. The mist in “The Washing” swirled around. Lightning made of oil paint flashed at the horizon, fading to

a milky grey after a moment. The man himself was levitating up and down like a forgotten corpse in the ocean. I was unable to understand what I saw, and my gaze passed “The First Stone” and “The First Blaze”. *The same thing.* All paintings were moving. The sunrays from „The Time of Rest” blinded me, and thick blood flowed slowly from the neck of the man in the painting of the trial. For a moment nothing happened. Then, I heard a sound like cloth being torn, and at the same time all masked faces of the painted figures looked into my direction. They all stared at me, and even though their masks at least partly covered their eyes, I felt their gaze on me like a dark power. I should have felt fear, but instead the fire began sparkling and awakening inside of me. *They don't want to harm me, it shot through my head. They want to guide me.*

I watched how the figures left their paintings. Liquid paint trickled down from them. For a moment they stood still. Then they marched lock-step towards me. Their steps made no sound. Only the trickling paint made a surreal sound that I'm unable to describe. With every step they made, the sparkling inside me intensified. They formed a circle around me and stood still. Then they all lifted their right hands and moved them to their faces. Slowly and firmly I watched the figures, eager not to miss any detail, and I felt changing emotions. I despised the thin man from “The Limbus”. How weak he was, how pathetic. Hope arose in me when I looked at the man from “The First Blaze”. The man from “The Renaissance”, the painting that I had studied first, I adored. He emitted dignity and power, such as I had never felt before. Nothing could penetrate the cold steel of his mask. He had crossed the *Limit*. He was perfect.

The fire now filled every part of my body, my arms, my legs, my chest and my loins. *You have chosen the right way,* I heard a whisper inside me. *Now let yourself go.*

I sighed, like a man who holds his lover in his arms after years of separation. Then I nodded to the oil figures.

They took off their masks, and I screamed.

[Here some pages were neatly cut from the original manuscript.]

... opened my eyes again. I was stark naked, lying on the warm stone floor of the hall, but I did not bleed anymore. At once my hand moved to my throat. The wound was gone, though the blood was still visible on my neck, my chest and the floor. Half relieved, half shocked, I opened my mouth and gasped for air. Then I lay down on the floor and stared at the ceiling. A warm, flaring feeling filled my body. I had passed the trial; I knew it as much as I knew that I was going to be haunted until the end of my days by what I had seen beneath the masks of my painted counterparts. A sound of disbelief, meant to be a laughter, left my throat.

I had made it. I had seen it.

And now I was a brother of the Libra.

A feeling of power rose inside of me as I thought this. This power was different from what the arcanists did when they let eventualities become the truth, or from what the shamans did when they connected to the ghost world with their singing. The magic of the Libra was different, pristine, *immaculate*.

I turned my head with an effort and looked at the paintings. The masked man was gone. I was not surprised.

When I stood up, I felt how a heavy tiredness had overcome me. I got dressed and picked up my dagger from the floor. The blood on its blade was still fresh. I looked at it for a long time. Then I wiped it clean at my trousers and put it into its sheath. A moment later I left the hall.

Oh how complete I felt that day.

My chronicle comes to an end, and I do not want to waste time with unnecessary narrations. Time runs faster than the ink on this paper dries, and I was greatly exhausted by the events of the last days. Reading the previous page filled me with anger. How inappropriate my descriptions were, how fragile my thoughts. I can merely hope that they will suffice.

Let me begin the final part with a correction: Contrary to the claims of some people I am no unprincipled murderer. Everything that I had written so far is truthful, no matter how bizarre it may sound. The Black Libra had chosen me, long before I knew about it. It had found me, had given me a taste of my destiny and had made me one of their own. If there was one thing the Libra was infallible about, it was this:

All of the people they killed were corrupted. They had sinned, were guilty of crimes, they were evil – name it whatever you like.

At first I assured myself about it before each killing. Later, the superficial proof I had was sufficient to me. Not once the Libra was wrong, however inconspicuous the target. They all were sinners.

So do not waste time wondering if my victims were innocent. For they were not. Rather ask yourselves: Was it right to kill them?

Back then I believed it was right. The teachings of the Libra guided me, and it was so simple: We have a choice. We decide whether we invite the demons by committing sins. *We decide to become corrupted.* We, the chosen of the Libra, punish those who are weak. Not all of them, but enough. Enough – so that the innocent ones are protected, so that fear enters the sinner's hearts, so that the world is preserved from ultimate corruption.

Today, I remember the pride that I felt when I faced Qalian and the others with a tired smile. Not many were present, maybe a dozen, maybe less. Nobody applauded or cheered, as it was unnecessary. The men and women who were present knew what I had seen and done.

Nevertheless, I was surprised when Qalian told me that it was

about time to return to Ark. I briefly shook hands with those who also had the Fire within, and then I sat in the dark interior of the coach again, confused, exhausted, but full of pride. He did not answer my question on why we had to leave so soon.

Even today many structures of the Libra are a mystery to me, and each time I ponder about them I realize how little I knew. How should I? Not even six month later I betrayed the Libra, and it was naïve to believe that the survival of the trial was all that constitutes a carrier of the Fire. No ... there was so much more. Hierarchies, rituals, stories ... none of them I would ever get to know.

Everything happened quickly in Ark. Qalian taught me the art of swordfight and the importance of regular meditation. It was not before long that I felt its effects. Each morning I felt more awake and more powerful. I smiled about the people surrounding me, their clumsiness and inertia. Everything around me seemed so clear! Only three days later Qalian gave me a sealed document in which I was ordered to kill in the name of the Libra for the first time. I would like to claim that I still remembered all of my victims, but I don't. The only memories that never fade are those of the nectar. The procedure was always the same: After receiving the victim's name, I started to research and fleshed out a plan. The Black Libra granted me all the resources I needed – gold, weapons, poison – when I asked for them in a letter that I gave to the concealed coachman. When I was alone with my victim, I killed it and consumed its memories. Then I covered my tracks. Many people admire my “perfidy” and my “cunning plans”, as I was never caught. However, I don't think of myself as particularly intelligent or sly. I seemed to have a certain talent for killing, yet I made many mistakes that could have cost my life. I was protected by the Libra.

With each killing I successfully performed, Qalian disappeared more and more from my life. He was a mentor, and his duty was fulfilled. I regretted it at first and missed his presence, but then I started to

enjoy the silence and the solitude. I had enough gold to fulfill all mundane wishes, and I was surprised how quickly wine and love for sale lost their taste to me. In the autumn of the year 6291, four months after my trial, I mostly spent my evenings alone in the room of an inn or walking through nature or the city. I took my time to observe people. How little attention I got. My inconspicuous, ugly appearance did not remind anyone of the illusionary conceptions of a hired killer: a tall and athletic man, with a hooded, concealed face and a malicious smile. I enjoyed the anonymity and the role I had to play. I considered myself a quiet wanderer and a servant of justice who wiped the corrupted ones from life like the summer wind withered leaves from the trees. My fate was not easy to bear – never again I'd be able to fulfill mundane dreams, never again I'd be able to truly love someone. Yet I was part of something without which our world had fallen into the abyss, rotten with sinful people.

The others were blinded. I saw.

I never could have guessed how soon everything was going to change.

The day started like any ordinary day. I woke up before sunrise after a dreamless sleep, and I felt pleasingly calm when I stood up. I had accommodated myself in a tavern near the city gates. The stir after my recent murder had already ceased, and nobody had asked me about my Path or my origin when I paid my room for three weeks in advance from a well-filled penny bag. My gaze wandered thoughtfully through the cozy room. It came to halt on an extinct fireplace.

I yawned and rubbed my eyes. *When will it happen again?* The snow lay high on the trees, but it started melting in the sun. *Soon there will be spring*, I thought, and I became melancholic. I imagined children running across blooming meadows, and the craftsmen of Ark gathering below the green oak trees in the tavern garden. For the first time after a long time I wished for company.

I meditated, ignited a fire and had a sparse meal. It was not before I left the room to have a walk that I noticed the paper with a red slipknot that lay under the gap of my door. I recognized it instantly: It came from the Black Libra. With a joyful feeling of anticipation that I welcomed after my gloominess I went to my knees, took the parchment and opened it. I read it letter by letter and repeated it after I had finished. Then I threw it into the fire. When the document turned to ashes I was filled with an uneasiness that I can't explain until today. It was different from the dull anxiety from my past life that I had chased away and that, as I had noticed, always appeared when I questioned my own deeds – but it had the same color nevertheless. I ignored it, ignited a candle and sat down at the small wooden table at the window to come up with a plan.

Three days later I left the inn on a newly bought horse. Spring was closing in, but the days were still short, and I planned to return to Ark before darkness, which I did. I gave my horse to the stable-lad of the highly frequented tavern, threw him a penny and made my way to the taproom.

Back in my room I arranged the tools for the upcoming cleansing on the bed, like a cutler at his market stall. My target – a young man – was easy prey, I could feel it, and so I had free choice. I decided to take my long dagger that I had used to help Qalian in the brothel. Then I pondered my plan. A short time before midnight I left the “Dancing Nomad”.

The night was starry and relatively warm. Melting snow fell down from the roofs with a dull noise. According to the document, I could find my target in a noble house of one of the most expensive streets in town. *It's always the rich who see themselves above everything*, I bitterly thought when I approached the door to the Noble Quarter. I showed my papers to the guards and they let me in with a nod. *If only they knew*. Not before long, I arrived at my destination. Like all houses in the Noble Quarter, it was impressive. It was surrounded by

high walls, and a stone arch surrounded the gate. The portcullis was closed, but behind it, an alley leading to the entrance of the big house was visible. Two towers at the eastern and western side of the abode made it look like a castle. In my former life the thoughts of the costs of such a luxurious building would have brought me down to my knees, but now I only mustered it coldly. I could not see any guards, but a flickering light in the gatehouse indicated that it was occupied. *I had to count on that.* I walked around the estate twice. At the back it was protected by the King's Rock, at its side there were two other noble's houses. At the west side of the wall, just a few arm's lengths from where it merged with the rock, I found what I was searching for. *Finally.* My stomach tingled, and the ash began to glow.

The place that I had chosen for my plan was a nice bench at the shore of the Malphas River which rippled sublimely through the nocturnal scenery. From there I had a clear view through the gate to the estate of the sinner. It was cold, but I was not freezing. A grey-haired man and a young woman passed by and smiled to me. I smiled back.

Then the alley leading to the estate burst into flames with a loud thunder. A cold shudder went down my spine and my forehead began to sweat.

The reactions which I had counted on came quickly. First, the couple noticed the fire. The young woman uttered a shrill cry and clung herself to her lover. Shortly thereafter I heard the sound of boots on cobblestones coming closer. The scent of smoke filled the air, and I was unable to fight a silent smile. Then I, too, made a frightened face and ran away, in panic, as it seemed. But unlike the others I did not run away from the estate or towards it. I contentedly noticed that the doors were wide open. Two guards stepped outside. Another guard stepped out of the gatehouse, helplessly looking at the other guards and the burning trees that

illuminated the night like torches on a funeral march. No one noticed that the fire did not spread. I had no intention to cause a large-scale fire as I did not want innocent people to get hurt. I was only interested in the man who was going to die tonight.

I freed my face from the fake panicking expression in the moment I entered the darkness of the side street next to the estate. I slowed down my pace and took an iron hook from my pocket.

I stopped at a part of the wall I had chosen for my plan. It was three times my height, but it was old and fissured. I checked for hollow parts and pulled myself up with the help of my hook. Then I lay flat on the top of the wall and analyzed the situation. The trees were still burning bright, and the porter had opened the gate. Just as I was looking down, two guards ran through the open gate, but they stopped and looked around helplessly. The porter shouted something at them which I couldn't understand. Four more people, most likely of the staff, had left the building and joined the two guards. *Perfect.* I slipped down the wall and hid behind a bush. Now was the time.

I closed my eyes again and listened to the blaze inside of me. It was content, and felt, just like myself, the nearing nectar. "Soon", I murmured. Then I turned my gaze at the hedge that had been planted directly in front of the house. I felt a greedy, affirmative tingling. I tensed my muscles and felt *it* shooting up my body, through my ribs, my neck and my skull, out of my eyes. I gasped and reeled for a moment. For a moment nothing happened. Then the hedges began to burn.

I sighed and smiled, as if I were congratulating myself. If the hedges had started to burn as suddenly as the trees, a trained eye could have noticed the magic behind the events. It still seemed unusual, but not like witchcraft.

A young man was the first one to notice the apparent spreading of the fire. He reacted with a quite unmanly cry. In the meantime, some guards had approached. They were pulling a fire cart behind

them – one of the Starling inventions that I never learned to understand. By constantly turning a crank it could be used to shoot a straight beam of water from a bronze barrel of water. Its appearance made me hurry up. The inhabitants who had been indecisive before now fled along the brightly burning alley toward the gate. I rushed silently to the side of the house and pressed myself against the wall. I looked for a delivery door at the back of the house. Every big estate had one of these so that sacks of flour, meat and vegetables for the kitchen didn't have to be carried through the front door. While I was sneaking along the wall, I heard how the water from the fire cart fizzled into the cold night. *I need to hurry up*, I thought, but without any of the nervousness or panic that I had felt in my earlier life. I put my hand on the lock, conjured the fire and watched it melt away. Then I carefully opened the door and went inside. The storeroom smelled like salted meat, onions and alcohol, and after some time I had found a suitable hiding place between three chests.

I smiled, took a deep breath and extinguished the fire. It was only a matter of patience now.

I estimated that the time was three hours after midnight when I decided to begin. My plan was perfect. Everyone had acted just as I had foreseen – I knew it even though only a few noises told me what was happening.

As expected, the panic had cooled down when the fire slowly began to diminish. I smiled, imagining the faces of the guards when they realized that the flames on the treetops did not perish, no matter how much water they poured at them. *They could have tried to extinguish it until the Black Guardian awakes*, I thought. Only after my order the flames began to retreat, slow and reluctant like a wolf

being forced to leave an animal it had killed on a clearing without savoring its meat. After three hours all the voices outside were gone. Then the door opened and closed several times, and after some angry shouts of a man – definitely my target – there was silence. *Without any doubt he would be looking for someone to blame tomorrow,* I thought bitterly. *And he would find someone.*

I brought the document before my mind's eye. Mitumial Dal'Joul, twenty-four winters old. *And a murderer.* Even though the records of the Black Libra claimed that the demons had taken possession of him only a few moons ago, they had caused more damage with him than with others in an entire lifetime. He had sinned three times, and each time he got away unatoned. Young Dal'Joul, whose father had died this year, was considered impulsive and irascible - traits that had gotten any young man of lower status into trouble soon. Yet his father, a wealthy clothier who, according to rumors, had simply earned his noble title by mercantile success, had used his contacts to protect him from any consequences. *It's a shame,* I thought. *Perhaps it hadn't been too late back then.* The first murder had been committed in late summer. He had strangled a room maiden in his chamber after abusing her. The murder was pinned on one of his servants. The second murder was committed, in the same manner, in a brothel. The body of a young whore was found in the sewers. The third murder was the result of a tavern brawl. Young Dal'Joul had an argument with the innkeeper whom he blamed to have insulted his dead father. In the middle of the conflict Mitumial drew a knife and stabbed the innkeeper in full sight of the guests. Even though he'd be called to testify to the Tribunal, the result was obvious. How easy it is to turn the world if a few witnesses' tongues can be oiled with gold. Maybe the Tribunal would sentence him sooner or later, after the demons in him had caused dozens of victims. *But that's something the Libra was going to prevent.* I stood up and began to move silently.

Nobody noticed me as I sneaked through the kitchen and the atrium, up the stairs, along the hallway, decorated with old, fine harnesses, toward the chamber of the man I intended to kill. As melting the lock would have resulted in unpleasant smells, I took a lockpick from my pocket, tricked the mechanism and entered. Many times I ask myself what would have happened if I'd been more aware of my surroundings. Would I have noticed the detail that I painfully became aware of minutes later, with blood-soaked hands and a heart, tired yet racing as a result of the strange, revealing nectar? Maybe things would have taken a different course. Maybe not.

The weak light of a moonless sky shone upon the mournful scenery before me. A big, misplaced canopy bed with rumpled sheets stood at the front end of the room. Books that had fallen from shelves lay on the floor, and a scimitar, presumably intended as a piece of decoration, had been rammed into an expensive-looking table like in a tasteless still life. I wrinkled my nose and tried to imagine what the whore who was killed by the young nobleman had felt. Did she sense her destiny as she entered the room in which every corner, the empty bottles of wine and the carelessly tossed clothes screamed negligence? *Presumably she did.* I imagined how she tried to play down her uneasiness with a girlish giggle. I looked at the bed on which the demoniac slept. He panted clumsily, his legs were spread and his hands sprawled out like a squire. There he had taken what he wanted from the girl. Did he already start to strangle her then? Did she still try to stay calm? When did her screams of lust become real, fearful ones? I bit my lower lip and shook my head, trying to get rid of these unpleasant thoughts. I was going to know what had happened sufficiently enough, whether Dal'Joul wanted it or not. And I was going to *enjoy* it.

I drew my dagger from its sheath. It slipped out almost noiselessly, like a snake approaching its prey. I looked at my victim with a

mixture of pity and contempt. Regardless of his twenty-four years Mitumial Dal'Joul had the tender features of a boy. A scarce beard grew on his chin and his cheeks were smooth. His naked chest was covered with red spots and his shoulders were small and lankly. To a certain extent he reminded me of my former self, except for the obtrusive smell of sweat and alcohol. "The demons are inside of you", I said unconsciously.

I open my leather bag and removed a black, thick cloth from it. Then I sat down next to him at the edge of the bed. In the shadows I probably looked like a mother singing her child to sleep. I laughed shortly to which Dal'Joul reacted with a protesting sigh, but he did not wake up. Then he rolled to the side, moved his knees to his chest and crossed his arms like a child. I shook my head. If I hadn't known about the fragile man's deeds I would have considered him a pitiable, spoiled noble's son. But he wasn't one of these. He had given himself to the demons, not just once, but many times, and others had to pay the price for his lack of willpower. Therefore the Black Libra had sentenced him to death. I took a moment to ponder about how the killing was going to feel like. Then I grabbed Dal'Joul's neck with my right hand, pressed his head against the pillow and pushed a gag in his mouth with my left hand.

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The man opened his eyes at once. I tensed my muscles, expecting him to try to push me back. Yet nothing happened. I felt his almost scarily regular breath on my nose, as if he had expected to wake up with a gag in his mouth. His grey-blue eyes were wide open, and he looked at me with horror. *With horror? Or ... with resignation to fate?* I had planned to stab him at once in his chest with the dagger I had placed on my leg, quickly, without ado. Yet there was something in his eyes that irritated me, and I was unable to name it. For a

moment we both remained in the strange position. Then Mitumial Dal'Joul, murderer of three innocent people, started to cry. What first was a shimmer on his reddened eyes soon filled the corners, and the tears began beading down his cheeks. A choked sobbing was audible through the gag. I looked at him in irritation. I was used to demoniacs starting to cry or begging for mercy when they were facing their punishment. But it was fear which I saw in my victim's eyes, and their tears were a result of the instinct of self-preservation. His sobbing, his look, his tears, however ... something was different about them. They seemed ... sad. Devastated. *What if he was innocent?*, it shot through my head. *What if the Libra was wrong?* Why, no. Even in the tavern at the Farmer's Coast I had found two people who had been able to tell me about his deeds. To doubt the sentence of the Libra was betrayal. Betrayal of myself, of the Libra, *of your destiny.*

I tightened the grip around his neck. There was still no reaction. *He resigns. He knows that there is no rescue from his possession, and he gives in to his fate.* For a moment time seemed to stand still. Everything happened with an otherworldly clarity, as if there existed nothing except for me and the man I was about to kill. I thought I could *hear* the movement of his teary eyes in their sockets.

Do it. Fulfill your duty.

With a cry that could have been an expression of anger as well as of helplessness, I took my hand from the gag, grabbed my dagger and rammed it deeply into my victim's chest. His eyes widened, glowing with relief, which caused a wave of rage inside me. *Regret!*, it flashed in my mind full of anger. *Regret your weakness!* I removed the blade from his chest, hauled off and stabbed him again, this time a tiny bit underneath his larynx. I felt resistance and pushed harder. Now Mitumial Dal'Joul uttered a choked cry, but still he did not try to defend himself. Irritated, I extracted my dagger and stared at him. His head had sunk to the side, and the gag had fallen out of his

mouth. It seemed that he wanted to say something, but only a rattle left his mouth. „Why?“, I uttered, to him as well as to myself. „Why don't you regret?“ He did not answer. The life slipped from his body, I could feel it. *His sins*, it shot through my head. *If I lose him now, I won't be able to see them.* For the last time, I lifted my blade and rammed it into his neck. This time, a fountain of blood spurted against me, but while the warm liquid on my skin usually caused a triumphant feeling in me, I did not feel anything. Then the fire seized me, and I plunged into the black.