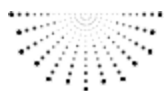




ORONTIUS,
God's
Juggler

Bea Eschen

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BEA ESCHEN

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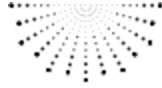
Epilogue, or the beginning of the end

Also by Bea Eschen

FOREWORD

This is a fictitious work. Names, characters, places, events and incidents are either the result of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, alive or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER ONE



Thick snowflakes fall on my feverishly hot face. Each hit makes me shiver under the melting chill. The thought that it won't be long before the white mass closes over me and buries me alive drives me insane. I look up at the grey sky through the white treetops, snow trickling from their branches with every breath of wind. The sound of the branches moving in a gust of wind reminds me of my father's last breath. I feel the icy cold penetrate me and spread through my aching body. Despite my almost paralysed consciousness, I perceive the blurred outlines of several wolves in the corner of my eye. Slowly and sneakily, the lead animal comes closer and closer without taking its eyes off me for even a second. Now the pack has surrounded me and I freeze in the hopelessness of my situation. It is silent. Spellbound, I take in every single one of their steps as the wolves come towards me. With the last of my strength, I reach into the right pocket of my robe and feel with my ice-cold fingers for the slingshot. Zacharas, the novice, had entrusted it to me before my long trek. "In case the wolves get too close to you," he had whispered to

me, looking at me as if he had guessed that might happen. Surprised, I had taken the weapon and made it disappear into my robe. We were not allowed to possess anything except the clothes we wore on our bodies – let alone a weapon!

In panic-stricken fear of a bloody and painful death, I now remember that the weapon is not in the right pocket of my robe, but in the left. In a fall, my loose robe wrapped around my body so that the pocket is now under me. Carefully I lift my arm and desperately search for its opening. I am too weak to reach into it and drop my arm into the snow.

The wolves do not miss this movement. The lead animal is only an arm's length away from me. Its breath, reeking of rotten flesh, creeps right up my nose. In a last attempt to escape a gruesome fate, I turn my head and stare directly into its eyes. Sure enough, the animal stops. While the wolves are eager to eat their next meal, I hope to have a chance to survive after all. A wild scream forms like a lump in my stomach and threatens to explode in my throat. I open my mouth tensely without taking my eyes off the eyes of this wild animal.

My scream comes from deep within my soul. I feel as if the earth trembles beneath me and the branches above me crunch. Loud, shrill and with all my strength, I let it out. It almost takes my breath away, but frees me from my numbing fear of death. The lead animal tucks its tail between its legs with great fright, puts its ears back and slinks away.

With newfound energy, I manage to pull myself up a bit. I watch the pack disappear into the darkness of the forest. The tracks in the snow remain as witness to what has just happened. Relieved, I lie back and quietly say a prayer of gratitude for the grace I have received from the Lord. As I have always done, I raise my right arm to heaven and open my hand. Does he hear me? Does he see me? The silence makes my doubt about his existence — as it has so many times before — rise again. My hand with the stub of my thumb stands out black against the grey sky.

IT IS the same hand with which I used to steal our bread, meat and vegetables at the market as a child. I pulled my cap deep into my dirt-smeared face and wrapped a scarf around my neck that was so big that my upper body was covered down to my belly button. Thank God I was never recognised as my father's son.

My movements were fast. No one could keep up with me. Even the children of crooks, witches and murderers followed me to learn a trick or two from me. The most important thing was to watch the traders at their stalls closely and know how they moved. The butcher's wife turned from time to time to her baby, who was lying in a basket behind her. The baker's wife disappeared behind the curtain to get the bread out of the fire. The vegetable farmer was a fat old man, blind in his left eye to boot. He nodded off regularly. It was at these moments that I struck. For me, these were not tricks, but simply the only way to

survive. My sack quickly filled up with supplies for the whole week.

Today I am sure that my father knew about it. But each time he pretended that my thieving sprees were normal. That could have cost us our heads!

My parents were farmers. However, our grain was always inferior. The soil was loamy, stony and hard. My father worked hard, but sadly we could not plough our field properly because our old wooden hook plough only scratched up the surface of the soil. In addition, we used an old ox as a draft animal, which was actually ripe for slaughter, but we had no means to buy a new one. When the ox got tired, it would just lie down and we had to wait for it to get up again. Even today I can remember my father spurring it. Under pressure to have the field ready in time for sowing, he would shout at it and hit its hindquarters with his stick.

Our landlord was a Count. I can't remember his name because it was difficult to pronounce and my father mockingly called him His Highness. Our Count owned pigs, which ensured his wealth. You could see it at the end of the year, after fattening, when the pigs were sold for slaughter. Every year at Christmas there was a big feast in the manor house to which the nobles from the surrounding area were invited. Pork was served, and my parents had to slaughter and process the pig. It was terrible for me to have to help with this because I had formed a bond during the time I spent with the pigs in the forest. Taking care of the pigs was part of the indentured labour we had to do to satisfy

our landlord — this Count with the difficult name — so that we could continue to live on his land.

It was my duty to drive the animals into the forest after the feast day of St. Michael, where they foraged for acorns, beechnuts, chestnuts, mushrooms and wild fruits. I had to check on them regularly, which gave me a reason to leave field work occasionally during this time. I was very happy to have these freedoms and often took stones from the field to practise juggling. Time in the forest also gave me the opportunity to rehearse other tricks I had seen wandering troupes do at church festivals in the village; climbing, balancing and doing somersaults. There was a pit lined with stones that must have once served as a storage cellar. The wooden roof lay in pieces next to it and I took two narrow slats and laid them across the pit, propping them up in the middle with stacked stones. While the pigs grunted around me, I practised balancing and fell several times into the soft leaves, which made me laugh anew each time.

WE DID NOT HAVE a happy home. My mother had had several miscarriages and was always sad. My only sibling who was born alive died of measles in his third year. I was the only child of my parents who survived childhood. That's why they were always very concerned about me.

Last winter, my mother suddenly fell ill. One day she did not get up in the morning. She was lying on her straw sack and staring ahead. I went to her and spoke to her: "Mother, what is wrong with you? Why don't you get up today?"

But she did not react. She just lay there staring at the ceiling. Suddenly she coughed and spat up blood. I felt a shock in my limbs. What was I supposed to do? "Mother, what's wrong with you?" I cried in horror and panic.

Instead of answering me, she moaned softly and then a gurgling sound came out of her mouth. I stood paralysed in front of her and was no longer able to think. What was wrong with her? I realised that she must be seriously ill. Father! I remembered my father. He had always had advice when something had happened. He always knew what to do. I had to get him. No sooner had I finished this thought than I rushed out the door. "Father, father, quickly!" I shouted into the open. I couldn't see him, but nevertheless I continued to shout: "Father, come quickly, mother is ill!"

He came out of the stable, with a handful of food for the old ox. "Orontius, what are you shouting about?"

"Please, father, you must come quickly to mother, she is spitting up blood. Hurry, father, I'm afraid for mother!"

When my father and I returned to her straw bed, my mother had spat up more blood. It was running down her neck from her mouth. My father quickly went to her, touched her and was startled. What was wrong with my mother? Then my father put his hand on her forehead. After a few moments, which seemed like an eternity, he said to me:

"She has a high fever. " He thought for a moment. "Orontius, get some cold water and a cloth. Dip it in cold water and put it on her forehead. I'll go and fetch a surgeon, perhaps he can help her. Pray to God that she will get well again."

No sooner had he said this than he left us again. Now I was alone with my mother and did not understand what was happening. My thoughts were racing. Prayer! My father had told me to pray. I knelt down. "Dear God in heaven, please make my mother get well again. We need her. Please God ..." Suddenly I remembered my father's other words. I got up to rush to the well and fetch fresh cold water. There was a bowl on the table, I took it with me. When I returned to my mother with the water, I placed a cloth soaked in water on her forehead, just as my father had said. I touched her with my fingertips. She was literally glowing. My worries grew.

"Mother, say something, mother, please!" Once again, she spat blood. Now it was almost black. I fetched a second rag and struggled with God. Why had he let my mother get so sick? Didn't he realise that we needed her? I didn't waste a single thought on the possibility of my mother dying. She had always been there for me as long as I could remember. Why should that suddenly change? That was almost impossible for me. My mother could not die.

Suddenly she moaned again. I took the cloth from her forehead. It had become really hot. I quickly dipped it into cold water, wrung it out and put it back on her forehead. With the second cloth, I washed the blood from her mouth and neck, which had already collected under her head.

Time passed — where was my father? Mother was getting worse and worse. I was afraid for her. Shared experiences from the past flashed through my mind. Only she and I. I didn't even notice that I began to cry. Only when I tasted the salty liquid did I become aware of my

tears and quickly wiped them from my face with both hands. My fear for my mother remained. And again, she spat blood. Once again, I changed the cloth on her forehead. How many times had I done this? I couldn't remember. And again, I wiped the blood from her face.

Finally, the door opened. My father came in with a man I didn't know. He nodded briefly at me. Then he looked down at my mother. He had to be the surgeon. No one spoke a word. Again, my mother spat blood, which this time also looked almost black. Then the man said quietly:

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do for her."

I thought I had not heard him correctly. In desperation I said to him: "But you must be able to help her somehow. You are a surgeon. There must be something that can help my mother."

"No, I can't help her, even surgeons are sometimes powerless!" he replied in a hard voice, looking at me sternly.

"What kind of surgeon are you if you can't help her!" I exclaimed excitedly.

"Orontius," my father admonished me, "don't be disrespectful."

I lowered my head. Tears stood in my eyes. I heard the surgeon leave. My father stroked my head with one hand. Then he also left the house.

My mother was going to die, this thought crept into my consciousness. I still couldn't believe what that meant for me and my father. Once again, my mother spat blood. Oh my God, where did all this blood come from? I washed it off her face and neck again. Suddenly I hated the surgeon. He

hadn't even bothered to examine my mother. He could have got his fingers dirty with her blood. What a stupid man, he wasn't a surgeon but rather a cattle doctor.

My mother was going to die? No, that was not possible, that was not allowed. "God, you can't let my mother die!" I cried out to him in desperation. "What kind of God are you if you take my mother from me!" I could no longer hold back my tears. Why didn't father stay? Didn't he want to stand by her when she was already dying? And again blood that I had to wipe away. The water was already red and the cloth could no longer be washed out. How was I supposed to wash all the blood off my mother's face?

My thoughts were racing. While I was getting fresh water and a clean cloth, I got even angrier at the surgeon. If he had still been here, I would certainly have punched him in the face. He could have tried a little harder. Why didn't my father want to help her die? My confusion was great, and yet I felt relieved because I could now be alone with her. For the last few minutes, or was it even hours, I had my mother all to myself. I did everything I could for her. But I also became more and more aware that my mother would soon no longer be there for us.

When she fell asleep forever, I held her hand with my left and stroked her gently with my right. As I did so, I hoped that she would wake up again. Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, I saw her soul fluttering away in my mind's eye. The butterfly had beautiful colourful wings, it was graceful and as if it wanted to show me a dance, it flew around in circles once more before it finally disappeared. I then gave up my hope that my mother would