

Excerpt

The Traiteur's Ring

By

Jeffrey Wilson

Ben jumped to his feet and moved swiftly into the clearing, his rifle up and aimed and sweeping back and forth as he moved, his shoulders hunched forward, just as he had done a hundred times. The good and bad guys would be easy to distinguish and he moved swiftly through the orange smoke as he heard the angry screams of the Al Qaeda fighters, the older men hollering orders no doubt to the panicky teenagers they led. Ben heard a few sporadic rifle shots as the enemy fired blindly into the jungle. Then he heard the more familiar crack of the SEAL's M-4's and screams, this time not from women or children.

Ben saw a shadowy figure move towards him through the orange glow and his mind identified it as a bad guy. Without hesitation he squeezed twice with his trigger finger and watched the teenaged fighter collapse to the ground. He swept over the body and kicked the rifle away from the dead, outstretched hand and kept moving. As he cleared the smoke he moved right, conscious that he moved towards where he remembered the old man being, and continued his sweep back and forth. Two more targets ran towards him, rifles clutched uselessly in hands that pumped as they ran in a panic and he dropped them both without thought or feeling.

Ben's gut tightened as his boots splashed through a deep puddle of dark blood that stretched out from another pile of dead bodies, but he ignored the feeling and pushed on.

He heard an almost rhythmic cadence of deep, burping explosions that he knew to be Lash's sniper rifle dispatching targets that popped into view for him from his hide in the jungle.

"Five-- Coming towards you!"

Reed's voice in his earpiece. Three cracks from an M-4 and then,

"Got him."

The thatched lean-to came into view. Smoke rose innocuously from a smoldering fire. Ben made out the thin, frail body of the old man, hunched over but moving on the mat where he had met him.

*Moving and alive.*

Ben swept the area around them through the sight of his rifle. His mind screamed in protest at the number of mutilated and motionless bodies around him, but he saw no targets and moved towards the village elder. As the image became clear, Ben felt a vice grip his throat and stifled another sob.

The old man cradled a small girl no more than two years old in his lap. The girl's hands shook in what looked like a seizure and with horror, Ben saw that her head was soaked in blood from a deep machete wound that started beneath her left eye and extended across the top of her head. Little arcs of arterial bleeding sprayed out across the old man's face from the wound and he could see bleeding grey brain matter in the wide split in her head. In a state-side trauma center the wound would probably be lethal and at best there could be no meaningful recovery. Here-- well, here the girl would be gratefully dead in moments.

Ben's rifle dropped to his side and his shoulders sagged. He shuffled slowly towards the old man, the baby's body trembling in the village elder's lap like jell-o. He reached in his kit for a morphine syringe. He could at least offer comfort-- he could remove the pain. The old man's eyes remained closed and he continued to chant. His frail body swayed back and forth slowly. Ben knelt beside him in the dirt and reached out a hand to touch the man's shoulder.

*I'm glad you are here, Ben.*

The voice sounded so crystal clear in his head that his hand stopped before it reached the man's shoulder. But the man still rocked and chanted, his lips moved but not in time to the voice in his head. It felt like watching an old Japanese movie dubbed badly in English.

*We have only a moment, Ben.*

Ben dropped the morphine syringe into the dirt, his body suddenly not his own. For a moment that feeling seemed so strong he believed he might in fact be at home in his bed in Virginia Beach, his arms around Christy, the horror around him a terrible dream. He watched with surrealistic fascination as the old man stretched a thin and wrinkled hand out over the wound in the girl's head. Then the old eyes popped open and Ben felt shock at the milky white appearance of those eyes. They did not seem covered in a white film so much as filled from the inside with a swirling white smoke. The chanting stopped and the old man's jaw clenched tight. Ben's own eyes widened as the dark hand seemed suddenly engulfed in a golden light which spread out from the fingers and encircled the girl's mutilated head.

The golden light began to sparkle as if it came from a million invisible fireflies. The glow now engulfed the man's thin arm nearly to the elbow and in addition to the flickering, golden light the girl's face now seemed bathed in a faint and pulsating bluish glow.

Ben stared with a far away fascination as the light sparkled from inside the ragged and gory wound and as he watched the deeper edges of split open brain seemed to pull slowly together. As the tissue edges found each other, the bluish glow turned into a white light that emanated now from the wound itself. As he watched, the wound slowly repaired itself, the arcs of blood disappeared in a puff of light, and as the process sped up the light became so bright he raised a hand against it. The brightness felt painful in his head but he couldn't bring himself to pull his burning eyes away. Finally the golden sparkles and the white light reached a crescendo that became unbearable and he closed his eyes tightly. Dark spots and a photo negative image of the girl's open head danced in his mind's eye. He felt a momentary heat and something tight in his chest and became aware that a humming sound he had not even noticed before had suddenly stopped.

Ben opened his eyes and looked into the smiling face of the cooing little girl, her skin soft and healthy across her unmarked head. Her eyes sparkled up at him and her mouth smiled.

"Gah, Dah eh!" she said.

Ben smiled back. The old man's hands were slack and grey across her chest. He moaned and Ben tore his fascinated eyes from the healed little girl to look at him. A huge, deep gash ran from beneath the old man's left eye up across his head, bloody gray brain matter exposed in the wound. As Ben reached for him blue light exploded from the

wound and the lethal gash disappeared. Then the eyes opened and the man smiled at him, the eyes clear, brown and full of youth.

*You see, Ben?*

*Yes.*

*That is the power of the Seer's mind's eye. It is a power we share, Ben. You are a seer, too, just like your Grandmother.*

*A Traiteur?*

*If you like. But it is much more than a healer. You will see. You will come to know.*

*How?*

The elder smiled a brown toothed smile at him, but didn't answer. The little girl cooed and squirmed in his lap. Then the old man looked for a moment in the direction the bullet came from.

The high velocity round from the Al Qaeda AK-47 tore out the old man's throat in an explosion of dark muscle and skin, bright red blood, and white cartilage. He collapsed backwards into the dirt, his arms spread wide.

Ben heard himself scream and then raised his rifle instinctively to his shoulder and swept it in the direction the old man had looked. Just as he locked on target, the Al Qaeda fighter arched his back and collapsed and the sound of Reed's rifle crack reached his ears. Ben dropped his rifle and scrambled frantically to the old man's side. His right hand fumbled in his cargo pocket for his medical blow out kit but as he bent over the elder, the old man grabbed his wrists with surprising strength, and pulled them up

between them. Ben's right hand came up without the battle dressings he had fumbled for and he struggled against the vice like grip.

The old man's lips were already blue and dark bloody bubbles formed and popped from the obscene and impossibly large hole in his throat. The face had begun to turn gray and Ben saw an ocean of blood begin to form like a halo around the old man's head. The ashen lips didn't move but the words came anyway.

*The Ashe is in you. It is in you, Ben, not the ring.*

"What are you talking about," Ben cried out, his eyes rimmed with tears and his vision blurred. "What does that mean?" He felt his fingers tingle with numbness under the incredibly strong grip,

*The power was always there, Ben. Just as your grandmother knew it was. The power is you, not the ring. The ring can organize it. The ring can focus it. But the power is in you.*

Ben felt the grip on his right hand relax and looked down as the old man reached over to the third finger of his own weathered right hand. He spun the black, shiny ring off of the middle finger and then grasped Ben's right hand again. The wrinkled old hands fumbled for a moment, and then slipped the dark ring effortlessly onto Ben's middle finger.

*The power is already in you. Use it to help us. Help our people.*

Ben felt warmth spread up his right arm, but then realized it must be the feeling coming back into his arm as the old man's hand let go of him and fell into the dirt. He looked at the wrinkled old face where the sometimes white and usually young eyes now looked dry and stared upward at nothing.

No gold light.

No fireflies.

Just a dead, very old man with his throat shot out.

The crackle in his ear from his earpiece startled him for a moment, but then brought him back to where he was.

“Lead-- Clear.”

“Two-- Clear.”

Ben scanned quickly around and saw nothing but dead bodies and dissipating orange smoke. He keyed his mike with his left hand and his eyes fell on his right middle finger.

“Three, clear,” he said. The ring had turned a grayish bone color somehow. Ben was certain it had been a deep and shiny black only moments ago. He touched it with his left hand and it felt smooth and warm. For a moment he believed it might be vibrating softly.

“Four-- Clear,” he heard in his earpiece and in the air around him. He looked up and saw Reed who looked down at him with clouded eyes. “You okay, bro?”

“Five-- Clear,” he heard Auger’s strained voice in his earpiece.

Ben cleared his throat.

“Yeah,” he managed to choke out.

He heard a soft cooing and saw the little girl who smiled and reached out to him. Tears filled his eyes and he reached for her, scooped her into his arms and held her against his neck. He rose with her and turned to his best friend.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” he said.

